

NOTES ON *ETHICS*

PREFACE TO ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Hallward's Translator's Introduction is brilliant, as we've come to expect from him. But let's stick to what Badiou writes, beginning with the Preface to the English translation, written in April 2000, looking back on the writing of the French text in 1993, some five years after EE.

B writes that the book had two sources: "fury" at the ethics / human rights talk at the time, and the need to draw some of the practical / ethical consequences of EE. Hence the two parts of the book: the critical attack (which includes a defense of Lacan, Althusser, and Foucault, the "anti-humanists" of the 60s) and the positive development of an "ethic of truths."

On the ideological front, B has no regrets about the polemical aspect of his "pamphlet," and he even ups the ante in his language: "'democratic' totalitarianism," "servile way of thinking," "miserable moralism," etc. He targets the so-called liberal interventionism of the 90s and demands the dissolution of NATO and of the ICC.

On the theoretical front, he notes that his thought has continued to evolve; he lists four points, concerning situation, event, subject, and truth, which he will develop in *Logiques des mondes* (LM). Each point concerns the development of a logic of appearing (of a situation) which complements the ontology of situations in EE.

1. A *situation* cannot be seen as just a multiple [a set], but we have to think the "network of relations it sustains." This is the distinction of the being of the situation (ontology) and its appearing (its "logic"), as set forth in LM.
2. The naming of the *event* cannot be seen as the only source of the effects of the event on the situation. Rather, the event itself is "implicative," that is to say, the event enables the detachment of, and determination of the value of, a previously undecidable statement that subsists once the event disappears.
3. The *subject* cannot be simply the subject faithful to the event. Rather, an event opens a "subjective space" in which negative, reactive subjects take place.
4. A *truth* cannot be considered solely in its being as a generic multiplicity invisible to the encyclopedia of knowledge internal to the situation. Rather, we have to consider how truths are involved in logical transformations, that is, how truths appear.

INTRODUCTION

B gives a little history of philosophy sketch and then says that the contemporary use of "ethics" is really just a way of regulating commentary on current events, a regulation that is more and more institutionalized, and thus directs practice (most explicitly in military intervention in the name of ethic of human rights). He then forecasts the polemical and positive parts of the book.

CHAPTER 1: DOES MAN EXIST?

B is certainly a gifted *provocateur*, and he's at his best in this aspect here. He begins by noting the return to a notion of a universal human subject gifted with natural rights; he links this discourse to the collapse of revolutionary Marxism and allied progressive engagement. Without a guiding vision or rallying point for a politics of "collective liberation," many intellectuals buy into the basic principles (the social ontology) of liberal parliamentary capitalism: the individual human subject and its negative liberty, i.e., freedom from "government interference."

The chapter has 4 subsections, on the "death of man" anti-humanism of the 60s; the foundations of modern ethics of human rights (EHR); on B's ontology of humanity; and on B's own principles opposing those of the EHR.

1. Anti-humanism. EHR is a violent reaction against the thought of the 60s, as seen by considering Foucault, Althusser, and Lacan, each of whom, precisely by their "anti-humanism," were able to be militants of situations. It's the EHR discourse that is abstract and "compatible with the self-satisfied egoism of the affluent West."
2. Foundations of EHR. If this weren't an admittedly polemical pamphlet, you could say B is letting himself set up a straw man with his portrait of the "average" neo-Kantian EHR position. In any case, B boils down the position to four points:
 - a. A general human subject, with two subsequent points
 - i. Evil done to this subject is universally identifiable (i.e., w/o need for detailed examination of the situation)
 - ii. The subject is two-fold
 1. A passive, pathetic and suffering subject
 2. An active determining subject of judgment who identifies evil done to the passive, suffering subject.
 - b. Politics is subordinated to ethics, that is, to the judgment of the observing subject.
 - c. We identify the good by means of evil; IOW, evil is primary and good is secondary.

- d. Human rights are rights to non-Evil: rights not to be mistreated in re:
 - i. Life (murder)
 - ii. Body (starvation, torture)
 - iii. Cultural identity (humiliation of women and minorities).

This doctrine seems self-evident (18th C moral sentiment theory identified sympathy / empathy; we've always known tyranny to be cruel), but it really only hides the current reality: self-interest, lack of emancipatory politics, ethnic conflict, unrestrained competition.

- 3. Ontology of humanity: "living animal or immortal singularity." Here B's provocation is at its most extreme: ethics defines man as a victim, or at least, as he who recognizes everyone as a potential victim. [But is this so? Doesn't the "capabilities" approach of Sen and Nussbaum provide a positive foundation of EHR, that is, everyone has the right to be supported in the development of positive capacities? What's wrong isn't victimization per se; what's wrong is not supporting development of positive capacities.] In any case, B lists three reasons to reject the victim ontology.
 - a. Victimhood equates man with his "animal substructure," to the level of "living organism" pure and simple.

[I must admit that I rolled my eyes at this point. I mean there are good reasons anti-Platonism appeals to so many people, and this abjection of the "animal" is one of them. Also, Bichat's negative definition of life as that which resists death is hardly the last word in biophilosophy, just as victimization is not the only basis of EHR. Just as the capabilities approach is positive, don't we have positive concepts of life in the neo-autopoiesis of Thompson and DiPaolo – adding "adaptivity" to the admittedly negative overtones of first order autopoiesis as conservation of organization across change brought about by structural coupling.]

B writes that what distinguishes humanity from other organisms is the capacity to resist torture and degradation.

[Technically speaking, B conflates torture and degradation in the camps. The horrors of the camps came from beatings, exposure to cold, semi-starvation, overwork, and exposure to the disdain {not a strong enough word} of the guards. But resisting such long-term abuse is not the same as facing intense torture. It depends on what you consider resistance in these cases, but as far as I can tell, the consensus is that modern scientific torture simply cannot be resisted "in the long run," so that everyone can be broken.]

What resistance to the worst shows is that what distinguishes "Man" from other living beings is that he is "an immortal," that is, he is an immortal "in the instant in which he

affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances expose him" (12). Based on the testimony of this resistance "we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal ... for truths important or secondary" (12; B's italics).

[There really is a lot to say here. What is the status of this "knowledge"? What is the relation of "knowledge" here to "knowledge" in situations and to events and truths? Also, do people only become immortals by holding out for truths in Badiou's restricted sense? This could be partially what B is after in LM and the reactive subject. But let's say someone resists degradation or even, ex hypothesi, sustained intense torture? Couldn't that resistance be done in the name of a restrictive, evil, non-truth, like Nazism?]

B's next point is strong: in the realities of TV advertising for NGOs, we see a preponderance of Third World victims and First World saviors. Doesn't liberal intervention require a "contempt" for the situation, including the victims?

- b. If you make Evil as imposition of suffering primary (and thus the Good as the removal of suffering and the safeguarding from suffering, that is, you make the Good into negative liberty), then the attempt to establish a collective, positive notion of the Good becomes the source of Evil (the liberal critique of slippery slope to totalitarianism in every notion of the collective Good). Thus "ethics" becomes a "stodgy conservatism," forbidding any "broad, positive vision of possibilities" (14). [I'm not sure this is true, viz., the positivity of the capabilities approach.] B continues: Man as immortal is sustained by non-being, by thinking beyond the situation [big Sartrean echoes here].
 - c. By its negative and apriori structure, ethics cannot think the singularity of situations. [This is very much what Deleuze says against EHR.] B then talks about the clinical situation, the demand to treat the person here and now, as opposed to "responsible" budgetary considerations. [Big Platonic echo: a doctor is a doctor only insofar as he or she treats patients; insofar as he or she acts according to budgetary considerations, he or she is a functionary or employee. Cf the analysis of the shepherd in the *Republic*.]
4. B's principles:
- a. Man is to be identified with affirmative thought, singular truths of which he is capable, by the Immortal in him.
 - b. Good must be made primary to Evil.
 - c. Humanity is rooted in thinking in situations; there is no "ethics in general"; there are only ethics of processes in situations.

CHAPTER 2: DOES THE OTHER EXIST?

This chapter has seven short sections.

1. Levinas: ethics as submission to alterity is first philosophy.
2. But the "right to cultural difference" or "multiculturalism" or an ethic of recognition of alterity has nothing to do with Levinas.
3. Levinas is really an anti-philosopher, a theologian: the "other" can only be "the immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other." Thus, for Levinas, "there can be no ethics w/o God the ineffable."
4. If we bracket the theology, we're left with "a pious discourse w/o piety, a spiritual supplement for incompetent governments, and a cultural sociology." What we see is respect for difference, except when it's really different. So you can be different just as long as your difference is compatible with expanding liberal parliamentary capitalism, in other words, as long as it fits within the identity of the "West."
5. B's axiom is that instead of respecting differences, we have to recognize the Same. Everything is infinitely different from everything else, since being is multiplicity, and all elements of situations are multiples of multiples. So all differences are on the same level qua difference.
6. So all the hoo-hah about cultural differences misses the point. It's merely a "tourist's fascination" for diversity of customs. [B is indeed a gifted polemicist / pamphleteer!] So genuine thought has to be oriented not to the mere being of differences, but to truths as "the coming-to-be of what is not yet." You don't get anywhere in the analysis of situations [to find their void] by concerning yourself with cultural differences and the alterity of the other.
7. Differences are what is; the Same is what comes to be as the result of a truth, which is the same for all. Our capacity to be Immortal is our capacity for truth, that is, our capacity for love, science, art and politics. The only genuine ethics is that of truth processes, which bring singular yet universal truths into the world. Singular in that they only originate through naming the void of a concrete situation, yet universal in that they aim at the generic of situations, which everyone can share.

CHAPTER 3: ETHICS AS A FIGURE OF NIHILISM

This chapter didn't do much for me. It's just beating a dead horse and / or an attempt at a *tour de force*. Let's just move to what B has to say in his own name.

CHAPTER 4: THE ETHIC OF TRUTHS

Four sections here.

1. Being, event, truth, subject. A human animal can be called upon to become a subject, that is, can be called upon to devote his / her resources to "enable the passing of a truth along its path." The subject has the animal as its sole foundation, but the event as supplement to the situation is necessary; the event "compels us to decide a *new way of being*" (41; B's italics).

The decision here is to be faithful to the event, that is, to think the situation from the perspective of the event; but since the situation is normality and the event is supplementary, the subject must invent a new way of being and acting in the situation. So a truth is the process of fidelity to the event.

A truth is an "immanent break" because it only happens in the situation, but it breaks with the situation (the event is nothing to the situation [generic being is not counted]). So truths are transversal or heterogeneous to the knowledges of the situation.

The truth processes induce a subject [B's twisting of Althusser's notion of interpellation]. The subject is not the psychological ego, the reflexive Cartesian subject, or the Kantian transcendental subject.

2. Formal definition of the ethic of a truth = principle which enables the continuation of a truth process. Expansion: that which lends consistency to the presence of "some-one" in the composition of the subject induced by the truth process.
 - a. "Some-one" = a human animal with its capacities as it is called upon by the event to take part in the truth process. IOW, it's the "raw material" for a subject. The some-one is both himself and in excess of himself. He didn't know he was capable of entering into the truth process, of becoming a subject.
 - b. Consistency is the engagement of the conatus (pursuit of interest to conserve the self) of the some-one with the induced subject of the post-evental truth process. You have to be faithful to the fidelity called for by the event, and this can only be the singular fidelity of this some-one, the use of its animal traits as material for the truth process. ["From each according to his abilities."]

Ethics involves the intersection of the principle of interests and the subjective principle.

3. Experience of ethical consistency (= a phenomenology of the ethic of truths).
 - a. Ethical consistency is "disinterested interest." Of course militant subjects are "interested" in the truth processes to which they belong, but these are not animal interests, but are interests in that which is in excess of me. So the question is how can I

continue to exceed myself, to think, to be the Immortal? [Aristotelian / Platonic echoes here of the divine nature of active nous threatened by fatigue of the body.]

- b. Being seized by fidelity to an event has nothing to do with communication of opinion, so "communicative ethics" can't be at stake here. The ethic of truths is an ethic of the Real, the ethic of the encounter that has transfixed you and called you beyond yourself.
4. Is this asceticism? In one sense, you don't have to renounce anything when called to be the subject of a truth process: it calls you to "unequaled intensities of existence" (53). But ethical consistency is not about pure seizure; you have to regulate things in order to continue, to be faithful to fidelity. So the question of renunciation is undecidable.
- a. Ethics of truths appears asocial in its break with opinion. But you have to establish a truth in its situation, so that means you have to engage with "the social game."
 - b. On the other hand, there's only one "some-one," that is, only one raw material for the subject and for the animal in its social game. Now every representation of "myself" is a fictional unity of an infinite multiplicity, and it can be that the unity is organized by the subject / Immortal, and not by the socialized animal.

[I got a little lost in the dialectics here; I suspect B is reworking parts of the *Théorie du sujet* here. I think the main point is that you can't ever really tell for sure whether you're pursuing a truth or just trying to get ahead in the world (trying to get laid; trying to get an award; trying to grab the microphone), so you can't ever do away with the need for courage in pursuing what seems to be calling you.]

CHAPTER 5: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

This is the longest chapter in the book, with the following structure:

- A. Life, truths, and the Good
- B. On the existence of Evil
- C. Return to the event, fidelity and truth
- D. Outline of a Theory of Evil
 - a. Simulacrum and terror (event)
 - b. Betrayal (fidelity)
 - c. The unnameable (truth)

Taking it point by point, then:

- A. Life, truths, and the Good. The human animal, as such, is "beneath Good and Evil." The emergence of the good exclusively concerns truth processes, which means that the Good has to disrupt life, and if ethics is the consistency of a truth process, then the Good is what enables the continuation of the disruption of life. So insofar as I am called into subjectivity, I measure myself beyond the ordinary measure of success, that is, by how I can be consistent in the truth process, how I can continue in disrupting life and social life. Since life and success and interest are beneath Good and Evil, you can only have Evil in relation to truth, as an "unruly effect of the power of truth."
- B. Evil is a dimension of a truth process, not something that can be recognized by of a consensus of opinion as producing victims qua suffering human animals.

First, we have to do away with the notion of "radical evil," as exemplified by the Nazi extermination of the European Jews. This is caught in a paradox: it's beyond measure, yet constantly invoked. Of course the Nazis committed a terrible state crime; and we have to acknowledge its singularity, not lump it in with Stalinism in the category of "totalitarianism."

But the way to do this is not to use it as the example of radical evil, but to think the "singularity of Nazism as a political sequence" (64). Nazism was a concrete political situation which used the category of "Jew" to name the outside in comparison with which the interiority of the German community could be constructed.

Now "Nazi politics was not a truth process" but by being represented as such it seized the German situation [this is what B will develop shortly as the "simulacrum" of truth].

B ends the subsection by listing general principles that recap what has gone before. The important one is the final one: an ethic of truths as consistency of fidelity to fidelity is what tries to ward off the Evil that can come about with the perversion of a truth process.

- C. The three major dimensions of a truth process are event, fidelity, and truth. The event is a supplement to a situation; fidelity is the process that investigates the situation from the perspective of the event; and truth is the generic multiplicity constructed by the fidelity process. Each one of these dimensions has ontological characteristics.
 - a. The event is both situated and supplementary. The void is that which sutures the event to the situation. The void is at the heart of the situation, it is the foundation of its being. [this is the null-set in ZF axiomatic; remember that "ontology is a situation"; it is the presentation of presentation, and what makes that possible, what grounds the ontological situation, is the null-set.]

B proposes the Haydn event as supplementing baroque music; or the proletariat, as named by Marx, as the void that supplements the 19th century industrial capitalist situation. [In the US today, it might be "illegal alien": it's the foundation of society in

that all the official categories of "citizenry" revolve around it as what can never be counted.] So all events name the void of the situation.

- b. Fidelity: the vulnerability of disinterested interest to becoming pure animal interest means we need an ethic of truths. [Still not sure I get all that's at stake here.]
- c. A truth punches a hole in knowledges; it "forces" knowledges. That is, it forces a reworking of the encyclopedia and the codes of communication of a situation. But then in this way, once revolutionary truths are institutionalized and put to work in new situations. B had earlier talked about this return of truths as normalized and situated knowledges in terms of the myth of the cave in Plato's *Republic*.

Each of these dimensions has a potential for evil: event and simulacrum / terror; fidelity and betrayal; truth and disaster. These are laid out in the final subsection of this chapter.

D. Outline of a Theory of Evil

- a. Simulacrum and terror. The event is a trace; in so far as it names the void of a situation, its being is to disappear. But the Nazis named a plenitude, the substance of the German Volk. The void of a situation, as lacking all particularity, is addressed to everyone; by contrast, the German naming of the substance of the Volk is precisely a criterion for inclusion / exclusion. Thus the naming of a plenitude is the simulacrum of an event.

To be faithful to such a simulacrum means you have make a void around the substance (rather than naming the void at the foundation of a situation). So the Jew is the name of the void that by surrounding the German Volk, allowed the naming of it as substance.

Now of course "Jew" qua Nazi category has no referent; it can only be understand in the singularity of the Nazi political sequence. But here we see the mimicry of a truth process, insofar as a truth process has to name its enemies as those who profit from the situation.

But the enemy of a truth process is the substance of the situation, the community, which is precisely what the Nazis strove to protect.

There's yet another difference: being named enemy of a truth process doesn't mean you can't ever be reached by that truth process, since everyone is addressed in their generic humanity. In the most classical terms, B says we oppose the opinions of our adversaries, but not their "person."

But to create the void of a simulacrum, you really have to kill people, so terror is always part of the simulacrum process.

- b. Betrayal means giving up on your fidelity to a truth process and taking back up the logic of the situation. But this always means you have to deny you ever were an Immortal, so you're denying the becoming-subject you once were part of.
- c. The unnameable is the auto-limitation of the truth process, the refusal to name everything in the situation from the perspective of the event. Now in addition to the language of the situation, the language of opinion and knowledge, there is a subject-language, the language enabling the inscription of a truth. Now the language of the situation is unlimited: it can and does name everything in the situation, but this doesn't amount to much. [I'm not sure I follow here.]

But a subject language can come to want to replace opinions, and this is dangerous. Truths need to be able to preserve the duplicity of interests (disinterested interest and animal interest); truths need to preserve the animal that is the support of the Immortal.

B draws some paradoxical consequences here. The Good is only Good to the extent it doesn't seek to make the world good. So the power of a truth is a kind of powerlessness.

It's not that we can't have opinions about unnameable; it's only the unnameable for the subject language; it is the symbol of the Real of the situation, of its life w/o truth.

[This is a little gnomic, I'm afraid. But the political example is clear: when you name the community, you bring about a disaster. This is tied up with the substantialization of the void in the simulacrum analysis, I think.]

CONCLUSION

This is just a straightforward recap of the book.