

Forging Identities and Respecting Otherness: Lévinas, Badiou, and the Ethics of Commitment

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In recent years, a rise in interest in the practical implications of Lévinas's work, especially with regard to the political, has coincided with a vigorous attack on Lévinas's work, and indeed on the dominant themes within contemporary ethics, by one of the important new voices in French philosophy, Alain Badiou.¹ While the significance of Lévinas's ethics of the other in contemporary ethical discourse is undeniable, the question of the practical implications of Lévinas's theory remains the site of a pressing philosophical debate. How can Lévinas's ethical category of the absolute Other be applied in practical situations? Is it even ethically or politically helpful to do so? Though Lévinas never develops answers to such questions, he seems confident that his metaethical insights can be translated into practical guidance. Badiou shares no such confidence, arguing instead that the ethics of the other cannot offer any substantial practical ethics because it is unable to formulate a positive conception of the Good. This essay takes up this debate by attempting to think the tension between the ethical imperative that, on account of the finitude of our perspective, we must be open to having our ideas, causes, and projects called into question by others *and* the practical necessity that effective social and political activity requires wholehearted commitment or fidelity to ideas, causes, or projects amidst adversity. To this end, I will examine the practical ethical possibilities in Lévinas's and Badiou's thought, using Badiou's critique of Lévinas as a means of indicating the practical limits of Lévinas's thought, while also considering a Lévinasian response to Badiou so as to indicate the ethical limits of Badiou's thought.

Before I begin the analysis it is important to point out that this tension is not merely a permutation of the debate between ethics of the good and ethics of the right, at least not as traditionally conceived. Both Lévinas and Badiou think that subjects are constituted by a heteronomous summons issuing from a particular experience, of the Other or the event, which then demands a certain sort of response, responsibility or fidelity. Consequently, Lévinas and Badiou can both be read as peculiar kinds of deontologists. It is only on the level of practical ethics that a divergence emerges between Lévinas's favoring of imperatives and rights and Badiou's advocacy of the Good. However, even this divergence is mitigated by Lévinas's claims that responsibility is, for the subject, the

experience of the Good and Badiou's endorsement of reformulated Lacanian ethical maxims such as "Keep going!" and "Never forget what you have encountered."² Rather than being a restaging of the debate between the good and the right, the relationship between the ethics of Lévinas and Badiou more closely resembles that between the ethics of Kant and Hegel. In an echo of Hegel's criticism of Kant's formalism, Badiou is concerned, as we will see, that the ethics of Lévinas (as well as Kant) is unable to provide significant determinate content. However, in his attempt to overcome this deficiency, Badiou's ethical theory, as I will show, is unable to provide adequate criteria to distinguish a good fidelity from an evil one, just as Hegel's was unable to provide adequate criteria to distinguish a good *Sittlichkeit* from an evil one. But whereas Hegel erred on the side of conservatism, Badiou errs on the side of revolutionary activism.

In addition to raising the question of ethical content, this essay attempts to raise what I take to be the closely related question of the ethics of commitment. In Lévinas we see an ethical sensitivity and urgency that perpetually unsettles good conscience, the reminder of which seems to remain a crucial part of any appropriate response to the atrocities and horror of the last century, not to mention the crimes and violences that are currently perpetrated and allowed with good conscience in the names of justice, freedom, and economic development. However, the hypercritical perpetual unsettling of good conscience undercuts the possibility of commitment as the notion of "commitment in bad conscience" seems to be a contradiction in terms. By contrast, Badiou offers a vigorous and compelling defense of fidelity, but despite his best efforts he is, in my view, unable to distinguish consistently a legitimate fidelity-inspiring event from the situations that give rise to all manner of violence. By focusing a mutually critical conversation between Lévinas and Badiou on the question of the ethics of commitment, it is my hope not to uncover the secret to safe, assured ethical commitment, but rather to acknowledge the tension in such a manner that opens and perhaps even inspires the willingness to risk commitment for the sake of others.

Lévinas and the Ethics of the Other

The ethical imperative found in Lévinas's work that we must be open to having our ideas, causes, and projects called into question by others is tied to the critical posture Lévinas takes up toward what he sees as the dominant elements within the philosophical tradition. Consequently, I will begin with a review of this posture, which will open onto the question of

whether, from a Lévinasian perspective, any significant practical ethics or social program can be generated that would warrant the sort of whole-hearted commitment necessary for effective action.

While Lévinas directs his criticism of elements of the philosophical tradition toward a myriad of thinkers, his most sustained critique is of the thought of his two former mentors, Husserl and Heidegger. Despite his criticisms, Lévinas remained throughout his writings deeply influenced by phenomenology, considering himself always a phenomenologist in spirit if not in letter. This distinction for Lévinas is rooted in his belief that Husserl's writings contain a number of "fertile ambiguities," which out of fidelity to phenomenology require further investigation. Thus, while Lévinas lauds Husserl for returning overly-intellectual philosophy to the rich and diverse world of concrete experience, repeatedly noting the importance for Husserl of non-theoretical affective and evaluative intentionalities, Lévinas argues that Husserl still harbors an intellectualist bias, giving preference to theoretical intentionalities over non-theoretical intentionalities. Lévinas sees this preference in the early Husserl's interpretation of Brentano's claim that every intentionality either is or is founded on a representation, and in the later Husserl's linkage of objectivity to the positing of a doxic thesis.

In criticizing Husserl's tendency toward a theoretical bias, Lévinas concurs with Heidegger's concern that Husserl does not appreciate the full significance of the way in which the theoretical attitude is rooted in our concerned dealings with the world, a world that we first and foremost "live from." Heidegger's subsequent thought, which attempts to describe the ways in which subjectivity is in its very being conditioned by the world, is often regarded as a decisive movement away from the conception of the subject as an autonomous knower, a break which Heidegger himself was eager to claim. However, contrary to this interpretation, Lévinas sees in Heidegger's work not only the repetition of a bias for theory and an autonomous subject, but also its exaltation.³ This bias is evident, Lévinas claims, in the priority Heidegger gives to Being, an impersonal, neuter, universal term, over particular, personal existents, in the identification of the personal with mine-ness (*Jemeinigkeit*), and in the claim that entities are concerned to me only insofar as it is disclosed in my understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*), which though neither solely nor primarily cognitive refers all entities to Dasein's existential mode of being-able-to, that is, of having its own possibilities.

The biases for which Lévinas criticizes Husserl and Heidegger are not unique to phenomenology but, Lévinas thinks, are recurrent throughout the philosophical tradition.⁴ On Lévinas's account, philosophy is born on Greek soil as a reaction against the exposure "to all violences" of

tyrannical opinion made possible by a culture of mythical and monistic immersion in which souls are held to "participate in one another."⁵ Against the violence of participation, philosophy offers shelter to the individual by inventing the idea of the same and the idea of freedom so as to assert the separateness and impenetrability of the self. Philosophy thus arises as an attempt to protect the individual, to carve out a space in which the individual can be at home with itself, even autochthonous, the measure of all it encounters. Because this movement sets up the self-same individual as the point of reference for all interaction with the world, Lévinas refers to this pattern of thought as the philosophy of the Same. Though Lévinas regards this historical movement as an advance, making clear that he does not advocate a regression, he is nonetheless wary of the uncritical assumption of the individual, autonomous self as the standard of all truth, which he thinks is prevalent in the history of philosophy. Lévinas holds that this bias shows up, for example, in the tendencies to regard existence as self-justifying, to see freedom as more basic than justice, to dissolve the particularity of others in universal, graspable principles, to shun the possibility of revelation, and to think of economics in terms of possession. In addition to Husserl and Heidegger, Lévinas criticizes, explicitly or more frequently implicitly, the internal monologue conception of reason (singling out in particular Socrates's theory of recollection and maieutics and the Cartesian *cogito*), Hobbes's war of all against all, Spinoza's *conatus essendi*, Leibniz's monads without windows, Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, Hegel's attempt at totalizing thinking, Merleau-Ponty's description of man as an "I can," Sartre's uncritical elevation of freedom, and what Derrida will call the "metaphysics of presence."

Despite the critical tone he adopts when referring to the philosophical tradition, Lévinas regularly points to exceptional moments that indicate a possibility other than the philosophy of the Same. Lévinas's two prime examples of this possibility are Plato's notion of the Good beyond Being and the formal structure of Descartes's idea of the infinite. Both of these are, for Lévinas, instances in which the self and its capabilities are no longer the measure of the encounter and, what is more, even find themselves called into question and measured by that which is encountered. In being displaced from its role as first principle, the would-be autonomous ego no longer finds its existence to be self-justifying, its freedom to be primary, or its self to be inviolable. Lévinas takes as his main task the attempt to think the possibility of this radical interruption, a possibility he believes is actualized in the encounter of an Other.

In the encounter of an Other, by which Lévinas means primarily if not exclusively a human Other, the Other overflows any cognition I can have

of her. The "face of the Other" is the phrase Lévinas uses to denote the manner in which the Other presents herself to me, exceeding all attempts at thematization. This excess of signification in the face points to a meaningfulness that is not determined by my meaning-giving activity (*Sinngebung*), as Husserl would have it, nor by the Other's relation to a totality, as Hegel would have it, nor by the Other's disclosure within my *Seinsverständnis*, as Heidegger would have it. Instead, Lévinas claims that the face of the Other has significance *kath'auto*, in itself. As Lévinas describes it, the excess of signification in the face of the Other does not merely indicate the inadequacy of my representational faculties, but even contests the right with which I presume to employ them at all. The face of the Other exhibits an "ethical resistance," which calls into question my "economy," that is, the cognitive and practical structures I impose on the world in order to be at home in it. On account of this ethical resistance, my freedom, through which I construct my economy, "instead of being justified ... feels itself to be arbitrary and violent."⁶ However, amidst the disruption of my economy, the face of the Other also indicates the very locus of my subjectivity. As Lévinas asserts, "the presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it."⁷ This investiture liberates my freedom from the arbitrariness of my own economy by revealing to it the root of my subjectivity, namely, responsibility for the Other. Prior even to my concerned dealings with the world, this responsibility constitutes my subjectivity by identifying me as uniquely obligated to the Other with unlimited and inescapable responsibility.

Given this infinite ethical obligation to the other, it is fitting at this point to ask what one ought to do to enact this obligation. What practical, concrete ethical guidance does Lévinas have to offer? This question has received scant serious attention in the secondary literature, including the recent work on the political implications of Lévinas's thought, not least because Lévinas himself devotes very little time to it. However, another reason for the paucity of reflection on this question is that some readers of Lévinas do not think it warrants serious reflection since it can be easily answered, for better or for worse, on the basis of the principles Lévinas develops. Friendly readers will say that we must listen to and respect the Other, while unfriendly readers will say that Lévinas tells us we must give up everything we own and make ourselves a hostage to every Other we encounter. Yet the answer to this question cannot be so easy, as Lévinas himself readily points out. When asked in an interview about his practical ethics, Lévinas's responded: "My task does not consist in constructing ethics.... One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme."⁸ A

practical ethics cannot be read off from Lévinas's texts because it is not written there. Indeed, if we read his account of the ethical relation as a phenomenological account, then we must take it to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, regarding the ethical relation, as he instructs us to, as the root of consciousness rather than a "particularly recommendable" variety of consciousness."⁹ Interpreting Lévinas's thought in this way is consistent with his claim that it does not endorse a specific practical ethics, potentially leaving the door open to a variety of ethical theories.

However, some critics argue that far from leaving the door open to a variety of ethical theories, Lévinas actually slams the door on any viable ethical theory. While among these readers some regard Lévinas's apparent inability to construct an ethics as a postmodern virtue, others regard it as a fatal flaw that renders Lévinas's writings useless for practical ethical issues. How could one figure out how to respond to an other that is wholly other? If all thematization is violent, how can one even think ethically about practical ethical issues? How can one act for the good of another if one's conception of the good is being continually called into question by the Other? The view that it is impossible to generate an effective practical ethics out of the work of Lévinas, and more generally out of the framework of the ethics of otherness, is forcefully presented by Badiou in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. It is to this work that we will now turn.

Badiou's Critique of the Ethics of Otherness

In *Ethics*, Badiou argues that contemporary ethical theories, including the Lévinasian-inspired ethics of otherness, amount to little more than moral nihilism because of their inability to establish a positive conception of the Good. In contrast to these theories Badiou presents his own "ethic of truths." In this section and the next, I will show the ways in which Badiou's criticisms of contemporary ethics can be brought to bear upon Lévinas's position, following which I will develop Badiou's new "ethics of truth," considering a Lévinasian counter-criticism.

Badiou offers a number of separable arguments against both Lévinas's thought and any possible ethics of otherness or ethics of difference. Against Lévinas's ethical project, Badiou argues that it is inextricable from religion, so that the Other is Other only because it represents or reveals the Altogether-Other, a thinly veiled reference to God, according to Badiou. This leads Badiou to conclude that Lévinas has neither a philosophy nor even a theology (which is still too Greek) but only an antiphilosophical ethics as "pious discourse."¹⁰ When one attempts to gut Lévinas's project of its religious backing, Badiou claims that all that

remains is the naive, if not aggressively asserted, call to respect differences. Yet the proponents of this call manifestly respect only those differences which, like them, respect differences, that is, which share in their *identity* as respecters of difference. Such persons have no respect for others who do not share the ideal of tolerance or whose cultural background includes ideals at odds with their own (e.g., Islamic fundamentalists). This self-contradiction is so blatant that Badiou thinks the only surprising thing is how widely it is ignored.

Since even the attempt to respect differences cannot help but to lapse into identitarian thought, Badiou argues that ethics ought to focus not on the differences of the Other but on the establishment of identities of the Same. Such a task, which Badiou regards as the proper task of philosophy, is much more difficult than the attempt to acknowledge otherness since, he claims, every situation contains numerous differences. Alterity cannot be the basis for ethics, not because it is a figment of Lévinas's imagination but because it is the "banal reality of every situation."¹¹ Thus, contemporary ethics' choice of cultural differences as the paradigm of alterity is simply the elevation of one type of difference over others, and is owing to the merely historical fact that cross-cultural experiences have become easily accessible. What is needed is not an affirmation of difference, which is always there anyway, nor the exaltation of one type of difference, but the formation of identities which are more significant than the differences. Only in this way can a positive conception of the Good be established.

By way of clarifying the force this argument has against Lévinas's thought, we do well to notice which of these criticisms do not directly attach to Lévinas's writing. First, Lévinas explicitly acknowledges the way in which his writings create identities even as he claims that such identities cannot be fully ethically legitimated. Rather than fall prey to contradiction, Lévinas carves out a more logically sophisticated position, denying the synchronicity of a saying with its said while also acknowledging the ethical necessity of unsaying and resaying every said, which though ethically necessary also necessarily betrays its saying. It is in connection with this decoupling of the Saying from the Said that Lévinas approvingly notes the inevitability of the return of skepticism, despite its refutations, to trouble philosophy. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that Lévinas is not denying the importance of philosophy, but rather its primacy, so that Badiou's accusation that Lévinas's writings are merely "pious discourse" misses the mark. As Lévinas repeatedly points out, his denial of the primacy of philosophy places him *within* a certain philosophical tradition that includes themes from the works of Plato, Pascal, Descartes, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Far from renouncing

philosophy, Lévinas proposes a crucial role for philosophy as the "wisdom of love."¹² Finally, while Badiou regards cultural or other phenomenal differences as the paradigms of alterity, Lévinas attempts to locate alterity elsewhere (as Badiou readily acknowledges¹³). Consequently, Lévinas does not claim that the primary ethical imperative is to respect cultural or other empirical differences. While this clarification gets Lévinas off the hook for defending the ethics of respecting cultural differences, it puts him even more firmly on the hook to articulate positive, practical ethical obligations. What is the practical import of infinite alterity if not some theory of respecting differences?

Badiou's final argument is that contemporary ethics, through its failure to articulate a positive good, amounts to moral nihilism which functions only to maintain the status quo. Badiou presents three ways in which contemporary ethics sanctions and affirms the status quo: (1) by charging any attempt to articulate a positive good with being violent and exclusionary, contemporary ethics undercuts the possibility of interpreting events as other than the inevitable outcome of economic necessity, thus encouraging resignation to the status quo; (2) by limiting inquiry to the ethics of consensus, so as to respect the other, contemporary ethics serves the prevailing ideology by excluding emancipatory and revolutionary action against the status quo; (3) by affirming the values of us tolerant, materially independent liberals over and against those elsewhere who are either intolerant or materially dependent, contemporary ethics encourages a cultural haughtiness and self-assuredness in its focus on helping and reforming those we deem needy.

This argument raises a number of legitimate concerns for the development of a practical ethics from a Lévinasian standpoint. First, Lévinas's concern that all thematization is violent and exclusionary does seem to undercut the possibility of articulating a positive conception of the Good that could inspire committed, ongoing ethical and social action, especially amidst adversity. Second, though Lévinas himself does not advocate an ethics of consensus and is at times critical of dialogical philosophy, mobilizing his theme of dialogue in order to develop an ethics in this direction has been proposed by some of his readers.¹⁴ If developed in this direction, Badiou's concern that such a position would exclude the possibility of emancipatory action would need to be considered. Badiou's third concern is, at least in theory, inapplicable to Lévinas's project insofar as Lévinas underscores the importance of being open to the critique of the other, thereby disturbing any self-assuredness. Indeed the problem for Lévinas, as I see it, is his inability to provide a legitimate grounding for any degree of self-assuredness in our actions.

Lévinasians will undoubtedly and rightly respond at this point that Lévinas does indicate the necessity of thematization, practical deliberation, and even identity formation, all of which are demanded by the presence of the third party in the face of the other and the subsequent necessity of the political. Lévinas consistently introduces his notion of the third party with the commonplace observation that there is never only one Other, but always many Others, and thus multiple infinite responsibilities. Consequently, the third party provokes a crisis for my finite ability to respond in the face of these multiple infinite responsibilities. Though occasionally Lévinas employs narrative in describing the third party, thereby giving the impression of a chronological sequence in which the third party arrives on the scene some time after the Other, Lévinas consistently insists that the encounter of the Other is always already the encounter of the third. He writes: "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other.... [T]he epiphany of the face ... attests the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me."¹⁵ I am called to respond concretely to the Other, but also to all the Others. According to Lévinas, it is the resultant conflict of these responsibilities that first calls forth comparison, thematization, and adjudication, what Lévinas calls the realm of the political.

The need to determine the most responsible concrete response in the face of many obligating Others requires rationality, dialogue, evaluative norms, and practical means. Though Lévinas uses the term "political" to refer to the domain of these tools, he is thinking not merely of the governmental but of any social structure or institution including normative morality, speculative rationality, history, culture, commerce, and the state, in short anything that informs one's economy (in Lévinas's sense of the term).¹⁶ Thus, in order to respond to the Others' call to ethical action, a call that disrupts our economy, we must respond from the resources of our economy.

This point has been explored by some readers of Lévinas in order to develop a Lévinasian politics with regard to questions of government and the State. To this end, Robert Bernasconi points out: "it is precisely within the context of political society—and not in an ethical realm abstracted from it—that Lévinasian ethics has its impact."¹⁷ Along with Bernasconi, Howard Caygill, Simon Critchley, and Jacques Derrida have also pursued this theme.¹⁸ However, with the possible exception of Derrida, these thinkers employ Lévinas's account of the third primarily to consider structures that are political in the narrow sense of the term. Yet since the third is always already present, every response to an Other is on the level of the "political," a conclusion that gets lost in the distance between Lévinas's use of the term "political" and its common usage. In

order to recover this implication, it is therefore crucial to keep in mind that for Lévinas the political refers to the whole sphere of social mediation including rationality, normative morality, culture, and political and economic institutions.

Despite the necessity of the political, the political is still insufficient to grasp the infinite Other. Thus, while the ethical and the political are manifest in the face of the Other as a "double discourse,"¹⁹ there is nonetheless a discontinuity or "hiatus" between them. This discontinuity renders impossible any attempt to derive a political form from the ethical relation or the ethical relation from a political form, as well as any attempt to achieve a higher perspective from which to reconcile the ethical and the political. Instead, just as the Other disrupts my *chez soi*, so the ethical must always disrupt the political. The attempt to articulate this interruption gives rise to what Lévinas calls "prophetic" speech, critique that breaks with the status quo or established ontologies for the sake of the Other.

While this negative moment of critique undoubtedly echoes throughout Lévinas's writings, what is in doubt is how we ought to go about doing the positive work of thematization, comparison, and adjudication on the level of the political in a way that is faithful, as far as possible, to the ethical relation. Decisions must be made. Others, though they must be listened to, cannot always be trusted, just as I myself cannot always be trusted. The call to self-critique is clear but negative, insufficient to found practical deliberation. The necessity of the political is clear but vague, insufficient to identify concrete needs or adjudicate between conflicting demands. Even if we set aside the question of the phenomenological legitimacy of the notion of the third party, we do well to ask what sort of positive ethical articulations the practical deliberation opened up by the third could occasion.

Lévinas and Badiou on Human Rights

In some of Lévinas's later writings his answer to this question appears to be a theory of human rights. The roots for the development of such a theory can be found in the commands that Lévinas attributes to the face of the other. Lévinas claims that the face says "Thou shall not commit murder," "Thou shall not leave me here to die alone," and "Thou shall not usurp my place in the sun." As has been pointed out elsewhere, and in consistency with Lévinas's claim that his task does not consist in constructing ethics, these imperatives should not be interpreted as first principles of a metaphysics of morals.²⁰ They are better understood as attempts to articulate the ethical demands the Other places on the

subject. Lévinas expands these practical commands of the face into a theory of human rights, praising societies that admit "alongside the written law—human rights as a parallel institution."²¹ Lévinas interprets the admission of human rights as a confession and reminder that society's laws do not attain to justice, that legislation is always unfinished, always open to better legislation.²² However, human rights, for Lévinas, are not rooted in a priori rationality or universal self-interest, but in the call of the Other. As such, human rights are not established to limit the freedom of others in order to protect the self but are established in order to flesh out my responsibility to others, in order to delimit the demands for practical response. A sympathetic reader of Lévinas might argue that in his account of human rights Lévinas does indeed give us a practical ethical theory constructed on the basis of the face of the Other.²³

However, in addition to his critique of the ethics of otherness, Badiou also presents a critique of the content of human rights theory as unable to effect positive, practical change. Badiou locates the roots of the contemporary ethical discourse on rights in Kant's theorizing of the a priori, and thus empirically and situationally independent, formal ethical laws that identify moral offenses and can be legislated politically. This conception of ethics carries with it four "presuppositions" with which Badiou is particularly concerned: (1) the positing of a general subject that both suffers and recognizes suffering; (2) the subordination of politics to ethics; (3) the derivation of the Good from the Evil, rather than vice versa; and (4) the identification of human rights as rights to non-Evil. While such a theory has, Badiou acknowledges, a great deal of initial plausibility, especially given the evident human rights abuses of the last century, it fails to articulate a conception of the Good sufficiently powerful enough to sustain practical ethical action.

Such a theory, Badiou thinks, defines man primarily as "*the being who is capable of recognizing himself as a victim*."²⁴ Badiou finds this definition inadequate for three reasons. First, the conception of man as victim presupposes the equation of the subject with humanity's animal nature, the biology of needs, pain, and mortality. However, sometimes experiences of extreme victimization, such as prison camp torture, reveal the capacity to remain resilient amidst victimization. Such experiences point to a conception of subjects as more than merely the passive recipient of beatings or the agent capable of recognizing this. Second, to echo an argument we have already seen, since ethics is defined on the basis of evil, every attempt to define a positive good is accused of being a violent totalitarian nightmare. Thus is suspicion and condemnation cast on any attempt to articulate and work toward a determinate good. Third, the a priori determination of ethics allows for discourses on the needs of

humanity in general, giving rise to institutions to manage these needs, while failing to engage particular situations as such. Thus ethically responsible action becomes the provenance of bureaucratic administrators rather than particular individuals, rather than me. Finally, Badiou argues that contemporary ethics is further nihilistic in its understanding of human beings as merely biological creatures so that "the only thing that can really happen to someone is death."²⁵

While these arguments are not directly aimed at Lévinas, some can be applied to Lévinas's project and the human rights ethics he seems to develop from it. Of course, Lévinas does not define the human subject as that being which can be, or recognizes itself as, a victim, but rather as that being which is invested with responsibility yet which can victimize others. Lévinas's primary concern is not that subjects can suffer but that I, as a subject, can cause suffering. When it comes to characterizing the Other, however, Lévinas does depict the Other as the one who can suffer, the victim of violence. Arguably, any practical ethics developed from Lévinas's writings still interprets the human in terms of its capacity for victimization. Indeed, does Lévinas not, in an inversion of Heidegger's being-toward-death, link my responsibility with the possibility of the death of the Other? Does Lévinas's theory of human rights not differ from others only by relocating the possibility of victimization from the self to the other?

In addition to this problem of content, the inseparability for Lévinas of any positive theory from the need for "endless critique"—every Said must be unsaid—significantly limits its practical efficacy, especially when confronted by dissenting others.²⁶ What response can Lévinas give to those who object to the application of human rights theory in non-Western contexts? How can Lévinas regard the use of human rights theory in the evaluation of such contexts despite the objections of some "others" within those contexts as anything but the violent imposition of "our" standards, a reduction of the Other to the Same? Does not the priority of the critique of the Other foreclose the possibility of commitment to such a practical ethical standard? Even in a turn to human rights theory, Lévinas is unable to overcome the perpetual bad conscience initiated by the encounter with the other to make possible the kind of commitment to positive ethical and political projects necessary for effective action? Indeed, the fact that Lévinas's discussion of the political in *Otherwise than Being* is sandwiched between an account of prophetic speech and an acknowledgement of a kinship between Lévinas's project and skepticism should not inspire much hope for reflective, positive commitment.

Badiou's "Ethics of Truth"

The model of ethics as bad conscience and perpetual disruption by the Other is rejected by Badiou in favor of a model that makes possible the wholehearted commitment, or fidelity, to ideas, causes, or projects amid adversity which is necessary for effective ethical and political activity. In order to retain this possibility, Badiou turns away from the attempt to ground ethics in an abstract universal, such as human rights or the Other, and espouses instead an ethics that encourages each person to be faithful to the particular situation in which she finds herself. The above-cited example of a person who remains committed to her cause despite being subjected to torture is useful as an entry-point for understanding Badiou's conception of ethics and in particular the ethical subject. For while Badiou thinks that an ethical subject is always rooted in an animal substrate governed by the law of *conatus essendi*, Spinoza's perseverance in being, he locates subjectivity precisely in the "fidelity" to an "event" regardless of the implications for one's perseverance in being. While the *conatus essendi* of the torture victim, her very mortality, yearns to give in to the torturer's demands, she persists as a subject, and in Badiou's terminology as an "immortal," only by remaining resolutely committed to her cause, assuming that her cause is a legitimate one (more on this qualification shortly). Badiou's conception of the subject is formally similar to Lévinas's insofar as they are both that which exceeds and can oppose one's *conatus*. However, whereas for Lévinas ethical subjectivity is a sort of transcendental structuring, a condition for the possibility of the conscious, self-interested human, for Badiou subjectivity is added onto the conscious, self-interested human as a superstructure, albeit a practically effective one.

A further formal similarity is to be found in the fact that for both Badiou and Lévinas subjectivity is induced heteronomously by a singular experience, though Badiou's account of the nature of this experience departs significantly from Lévinas's account of the encounter with the Other. Prior to the inducement of the subject, Badiou thinks that we live, as human animals, in a world of multiplicity and opinion (the allusion to Plato is intentional here), and indeed in a world where the multiplicity is organized according to the opinions of the reigning ideology (the allusion to Marx is intentional). For Badiou, subjectivity can only be realized in the overcoming of the economy of the status quo, a movement initiated by an historical occurrence that resists recuperation into the existing organization of multiplicities. Badiou calls such an occurrence an "event." As such, an event opens new possibilities for thinking and living henceforth closed off by the reigning ideology. As examples of such events,

Badiou mentions "the French revolution of 1792, the meeting of Héloïse and Abélard, Galileo's creation of physics, Haydn's invention of the classical musical style," as well as the resurrection of Christ, which Badiou regards as a fabulous, rather than an historical, event.²⁷ The first four correspond to the four possible subjective types that Badiou identifies, namely, the political, the amorous, the scientific, and the artistic.²⁸ As Simon Critchley points out, events are only recognized as such, that is, as events, by their subjects.²⁹ From the standpoint of the prevailing ideology, the alleged event will be regarded, if it is regarded at all, as an aberration or corruption of "what is," as heresy, apostasy, or insurgency.

While an event is only recognized as such by its subject, a subject only exists as such through the recognition of and commitment to an event. Badiou calls this commitment "fidelity." Recognition of and commitment to an event means embracing the new possibilities opened up by the event and attempting to reorganize the multiplicity, both practically and theoretically (which Badiou reminds us is always just a particular type of praxis) on the basis of these new possibilities. Fidelity to an event progressively reorganizes the subject's comportment to the world and thus to the particular situations in which she finds herself. Badiou designates the working out of the reorganization of the multiplicity as a "truth-process." Fidelity to an event, to be the subject of such a truth-process, is an ongoing struggle, as perhaps the choice of the torture victim as an example is meant to illustrate, and this doubly so. Not only must the torture victim resist her own conatus, the interests of her biological being, but she must also resist the powers that be, the ideological perspective that labels her fidelity apostasy and pressures her to renounce it. By persisting in a truth-process, Badiou argues, a subject establishes truths which the "knowledges" of the status quo know nothing about, and indeed truths that are universally relevant. For Badiou, the hallmark of truth is, as it has always been, to be true for all, that is, to be universal. Instead of a mere affirmation of difference, truth is formed only by forging identities that render the differences insignificant. Since multiplicity is "what there is," the sameness of these truths is "what comes to be," an indifference to the differences that "are." These truths are not, however, general truths that, like Kant's general morality, govern all experience, but rather are truths unique to their realm of experience, to the subjective type which bears the truth (political, amorous, scientific, artistic). On account of the diversity of these realms, Badiou claims that there is no ethics in general, but only an ethics of science, an ethics of politics, etc.

Conceiving of ethics in terms of fidelity to an event opens the possibility for subjects to articulate, as part of the truth-process, a

positive conception of the Good that treats humans as more than mere biological creatures. Evil is only definable subsequent to this conception of the Good, though formally it can be characterized as a corruption, in one of three forms, of the fidelity to an event. According to Badiou, the three ways fidelity can go wrong are simulacrum (or terror), betrayal, and disaster. Simulacrum or terror happens when a person or group draws inspiration from a genuine event, but instead of being faithful to that which is universal in the event, and thus capable of establishing a legitimate truth-process, commits itself to particular features of its situation. Because the practical reorganization spurred by commitment to a simulacrum is not addressed to everyone, Badiou believes that it inevitably leads to the violence of terror. Badiou's main example, indeed it seems his paradigm, of commitment to a simulacrum is the German National Socialist movement. According to Badiou, Nazism drew inspiration from genuine political events, the revolutions of 1792 and 1917, but instead of being faithful to what was universal in those events, committed itself to particular features of its situation, namely, the flourishing of a particular group of people over and against other groups. The terror that resulted from this corrupt fidelity is well known. Normatively, we must remember that for Badiou commitment to simulacrum is not evil because it results in terror, but rather results in terror because it is evil, that is, a corruption of the fidelity that could have been.

The second way in which a fidelity can be corrupted, betrayal, occurs when a subject succumbs to the pressures of her animal nature or the resistance of the powers that be and gives up on the truth which she bears. Badiou thinks that such betrayal happens not merely as a "letting go" of the event, but rather as a denial of the event as such, a denial that the fidelity was ever more than delusion, infatuation, or foolishness. Disaster, the third mode of corruption of fidelity, occurs when a subject mistakes a moment of the truth-process for the final, fixed reality, the permanence of which must be enforced. The absolutization of a mere moment hijacks the truth-process and inclines the subject to violent totalitarianism. In this way disaster bears an obvious resemblance to Lévinas's account of totalizing thinking and practices, though whereas for Lévinas totalization is unethical because it commits violence against others, for Badiou it commits violence against others because it is unethical, that is, a corruption of fidelity. Genuine fidelity must remain committed to the ongoing truth-process to which it gives rise, a truth-process that is rooted in what is universal in the event and thus open to all.

What are we to make of Badiou's account of ethics in light of the apparent failure of Lévinasian ethics to establish the possibility of

genuine commitment to positive, practical ethical and political activity? Badiou gives us an account that champions fidelity as the difficult task of remaining committed to the truth-processes opened up by the events that constitute us as subjects. In contrast to the encounter with the Other as described by Lévinas, Badiou's events not only disrupt the status quo and one's conatus, but also initiate a truth-process, marking out a direction in which we ought to move, with positive content for which we ought vigorously to work. It is on account of this truth-process that Badiou's account provides what Lévinas's could not, namely, the possibility for wholehearted commitment to positive, practical ethical and political activity.

However, a problem still remains for Badiou. For, in my view, Badiou's account does not adequately distinguish genuine events and fidelities from false ones. Though betrayal and disaster, the second and third possibilities for the corruption of fidelities, offer important insights into ethical irresponsibility, Badiou's account of simulacrum fails to distinguish true events from false ones. Badiou's claim that genuine events and the truth-processes to which they give rise must be universal, that is, open to all, is neither consistent with his project nor practically helpful. For within his ontology of the multiple, to what could "universal" possibly refer? It cannot refer to the possible assent of all subjects since subjects do not pre-exist their inducement by the event. It cannot correspond to some real state of affairs since multiple multiplicities are all there is. In another formulation aimed at articulating the same characteristic, Badiou specifies that an event must name the "central void" in a situation.³⁰ Yet when taken together with his claim that multiple multiplicities are "what there is," one wonders how centrality could be defined, let alone recognized as such.³¹

Even if we set aside the ontological difficulties, Badiou's universality criterion, like the Kantian universality test it curiously echoes, is incapable of accurately distinguishing genuine ethical truth-processes from false ones. On the one hand, the universality requirement excludes too much, that is, it is not sophisticated enough to acknowledge the practical necessity of some exclusions. For example, a revolution that fights for popular political representation may appear at first glance to have "universal address," but in practice must always draw limits that exclude certain groups, such as non-citizens and children, from voting. On the other hand, the universality requirement does not exclude enough; it yields some false positives. Indeed, drug addiction has a formal structure akin to Badiou's account of subjectivity in which the event of first trying a particular hard drug is experienced as opening possibilities previously foreclosed. Fidelity to such an event entails

restructuring theoretical and practical habits in a way that devalues one's conatus. The "universalization" test does not help here as it seems that this way of living could be addressed to everyone. To take a political example, upon the event of seeing a dead rat on the subway tracks, I could with universal address begin a political movement to encourage the flourishing of rat populations in urban areas, a marginalized group subject to public extermination efforts that is, if anything is, on the edge of the void. Yet such a movement is, I would think, hardly ethically warranted. Is there not a rather significant ethical difference between the attempt to exterminate a group of persons deemed a contagion by the powers that be and the attempt to exterminate a group of rats similarly regarded?³²

Finally, in an argument that I take to be very much in the style of Lévinas, does not Badiou's universality requirement indicate that there is already at work within his text a fundamental concern for others? For why must a truth-process be open to all? If humans are nothing more than self-interested animals with the possible superimposition of a subject that is merely a vehicle "to enable the passing of a truth along its path,"³³ why should it matter whether the truth-process is open to all? Why if a particular human is impeding the unfolding of a truth-process must we, in Badiou's words, fight only against his opinions and "not against his *person*"?³⁴ Do not these questions indicate some kind of basic value to humans, even if only as potential bearers of truth-processes?

Conclusion

In the space remaining I would like to suggest briefly a way of bringing the insights of Lévinas and Badiou together, which, though it might not make the difficult work of responsibility any easier or less risky, might at least underscore both its ethical necessity and practical possibility. We have seen that Badiou's critique of Lévinas can be read as an indication of the practical limits of Lévinas's thought, while a Lévinasian counter-criticism of Badiou's theory indicates the ethical limits of Badiou's thought. Thus, I would like to suggest that if Lévinas's theory is to be practically effective, his notion of infinite responsibility to the other must be disburdened of the notion of the infinite alterity of the other and his emphasis on the need for ongoing critique must be supplemented by Badiou's theory of fidelity to an event as a truth-process. By rejecting the infinite alterity of the other, we can allow that situations in which our fundamental responsibility to others is revealed and reactivated contain, like Badiou's notion of the event, some positive content, making possible the articulation of our responsibilities in new ways that run counter to

that status quo and mark out new directions in which we ought to work. While our articulation of these new possibilities is never complete nor infallible, and must be subject to ongoing critique, recognizing these articulations as a truth-process allows for the sort of wholehearted commitment necessary for effective social and political action.

Recasting Badiou's account of the event within Lévinas's account of responsibility means that truly ethical events are only those that reactivate a fundamental responsibility for others. It also reminds us that though truth-processes have a legitimacy grounded in the event, making them worthy of our commitment, no truth-process can take into account our responsibilities to every other. We must not forget Lévinas's insight that thinking and practices are totalitarian not because they fail to account for every other—since all thinking and practices fail to account for every other—but because they deny their failure, hiding it behind claims, for example, to logical or practical necessity, divine will, the unfolding of Absolute Spirit, the call of destiny, or perhaps even their place within a truth-process. Only through humble, wholehearted commitment will we be able to forge the identities necessary, both ethically and practically, to respect and care for others.

The question for us as ethical subjects is how do we respond to the events of our day that recall our infinite responsibility—to September 11, to sex slavery in southeast Asia, to genocide in the Sudan, to illegal immigrants in our neighborhoods, etc. Are we willing to allow our responsibility to be reactivated or do we shrug off such happenings with cynicism, apathy, or ignorance? Are we willing to commit wholeheartedly to the truth-processes these events open up with the new possibilities for thought and action they occasion, or do we fit them into our ready-made dogmatisms, be they of the Marxist, liberal, or conservative varieties? It is our practical responses to situations such as these that reveal our fidelity, or lack thereof, to the responsibility with which we are invested.

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Notes

1. As examples of the interest in the practical implications of Lévinas's thought within the last three years, see Bettina Bergo, *Lévinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Lévinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), Howard Caygill, *Lévinas and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2002), William Paul

Simmons, *Anarchy and Justice* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003), and Elisabeth Thomas, *Emmanuel Lévinas: Ethics, Justice and the Human beyond Being* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For Badiou's most sustained critique of Lévinas see *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001).

2. This theme is present throughout Lévinas's later writings and seems to be a development of his earlier discussions of Desire and investiture; see especially *Otherwise than Being*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 11, 15; and *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. J. Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 134–5. Badiou's imperatives are from *Ethics*, 52.

3. When Lévinas refers to Heidegger's thought, he is thinking primarily of *Being and Time*. Lévinas generally dismissed Heidegger's later work as neither phenomenological nor compelling.

4. Though Lévinas occasionally speaks of the philosophical tradition in an undifferentiated way, he is nonetheless sensitive to its diversity and even associates his work with what he regards as certain minority elements within the tradition. By so doing, he is able to refer to his work as an attempt to revitalize certain neglected aspects of the tradition rather than as an effort to overcome it or announce its conclusion.

5. For this account see "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 48. For a clear and insightful development of Lévinas's critique of participation, see John Caruana's "Lévinas's Critique of the Sacred," *International Philosophical Quarterly* (December 2002).

6. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 84.

7. *Ibid.*, 88.

8. *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 90.

9. "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," 58.

10. *Ethics*, 23. It should be noted that "anti-philosophy" is a technical term for Badiou, though one that I do not have the space to develop here.

11. *Ibid.*, 25.
12. *Otherwise than Being*, 162.
13. *Ethics*, 20.
14. See, for example, Steven Hendley's *From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2000). For Lévinas's critique of dialogical philosophy, see for example "Dialogue: Self-consciousness and Proximity of the Neighbor," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. B. Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
15. *Totality and Infinity*, 213; see *Otherwise than Being*, 157–8.
16. *Otherwise than Being*, 161; see "Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas" in *Face to Face with Lévinas*, trans. Richard Kearney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 29–30.
17. Bernasconi, "The Third Party: Lévinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30:1 (January 1999), 80.
18. Caygill, *Lévinas and the Political*; Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992); and Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
19. *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
20. Merold Westphal, "Lévinas and the 'Logic' of Solidarity," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20–21 (1998), 312.
21. "The Paradox of Morality," trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Lévinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988), 177. For this development see "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other" in *Outside the Subject*, trans. M. B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) and "The Rights of the Other Man" in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. M. B. Smith (New York: Columbia, 1999).
22. "The Paradox of Morality," 177–8; see "The Other, Utopia, Justice," *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 229–30.

23. For a full explication of the way in which Lévinas's theory of rights differs from traditional theories of rights, see Burggraeve's *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, Chapters 2 and 3.
24. *Ethics*, 10.
25. *Ibid.*, 35.
26. *Otherwise than Being*, 44.
27. The former list is from *Ethics*, 41, and the latter is developed throughout *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
28. Some readers of Badiou have suggested that religion might comprise a fifth realm for ethics, and indeed it is difficult to understand which subjective type fits Badiou's example of St. Paul committed to the event of Christ's resurrection without the religious. See, for example, Simon Critchley's "Demanding Approval: On the Ethics of Alain Badiou," *Radical Philosophy* 100 (March–April 2000), 21.
29. Critchley, "Demanding approval," 22.
30. *Ethics*, 72; also see 68–9.
31. For a different and more extended articulation of what I take to be essentially the same objection, see Critchley's "Demanding Approval," 23.
32. This is not to say that rats or other non-human living things are ethically insignificant, but merely to tease out an inadequacy in Badiou's account. The account of responsibility presented here will require further supplementation to account for our responsibilities to the environment.
33. *Ethics*, 40.
34. *Ibid.*, 76.