

# Logics of Choice and Equivocations of the Absolute<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: We are interested, here, in the criteria of the “crucial choice” set out in *The Immanence of Truths* between the ontology of consistent multiples and that of inconsistent multiples (between Gödel and Cohen). After having set out what seem to be the aporias of such a choice since Being and Event, we attempt to identify a possible answer to this question by turning to the notion of the Absolute as Badiou first thematizes it in *The Immanence of Truths*. This interpretation then leads us to hypothesize a possible “neoplatonic turn” in his philosophy.

Keywords: Badiou, The Immanence of Truths, choice, Absolute, neoplatonism

*The Immanence of Truths*<sup>2</sup> takes at its centre a position: “the work against waste”. This involves the establishment of a choice of two terms and no more: “the formula of my happiness,” said Nietzsche, “a yea, a nay, a straight line, *goal...*”.<sup>3</sup> To reach - in a confused situation, be it philosophical or political - the understanding of a choice - simple, upon which rests the whole affair - is without a doubt one of the most difficult things, and the mark of a victory of thought. Nietzsche, the thinker of Dionysian multiplicities, or Badiou, the thinker of mathematical multiplicities, both, alike, know it: resolving the excess of a dark age which seems to assault you from everywhere and nowhere into a remainderless alternative, extracting an “either/or” from a tangle of obscure virtualities, is at once the most complex and the most liberatory task. For, whether I win or lose myself in the attempt, something is restored to me; I stop struggling in quicksand, and can henceforth, at the very least, *decide* on a path, be it formidably uncertain.

To constitute a duality, which is a dual, is something other than to think in a binary way. The latter begins from two terms which are supposed to explain all things - thus the purified principles of good and evil in whatever Manicheism - and that thus carry on from the start sheltered from the complexity that it always-already explains by its initially posited doublet. Thinking duality, on the contrary, seeks simplicity over complexity, through its traversal being accepted before it is crossed, the result of which is an alternative which is open to our decision-making, rather than a theoretical pair in which all is always-already resolved. This is why *The Immanence of Truths*, but also the whole of the *Being and Event* trilogy, is open for the reader as a monumental undertaking of the difficult quest for choice, even more difficult, perhaps, than to reveal itself as simple at the end of the journey. And - one knows it - this choice is ultimately made, for Badiou, in the following way: either there is an ontology of the *non-constructible*, that of the infinitisation of works by their index, or there is an ontology of the *constructible*, that of the ideological recovery of works, and therefore that of their finitization which

reduces them to their waste products. Put otherwise, within set theory, either there is the path of Cohen, or that of Gödel.

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Here, we want to attempt the explanation of this choice. But to explain a choice can mean two things: on the one hand, explaining the selection of one of the terms of the choice, and on the other hand, explaining how the terms of the choice themselves have been constituted. I've emphasised the fact that the quest of the dual choice - "a yes, a no" - already assumes a form of success for a philosophy. This is why I would like, firstly, to linger on that which, for me, constitutes the most problematic aspect of *The Immanence of Truths*: namely, the decisions that allow Badiou to gradually, even very gradually, to establish the two terms of his final alternative: constructible and non-constructible ontologies.

In this regard, the interest of the third volume of *Being and Event* consists of the fact that, in coming thirty years after the first volume of 1988, it offers us a remarkable deepening of the field about the hesitations that have punctured Badiou's progress since his masterwork, in particular in the elaboration of what he names the "crucial choice", between Cohen and Gödel.<sup>4</sup> These errances regarding the constitution of choice merit questioning, since Badiou does not ever, to my knowledge, explain them, leaving to our own questioning the reasons as to why he made these decisions, or returned to them at particular times in his career. However, as we will see, it is the deep relationship of philosophy to ontology that is at stake in the understanding, or misunderstanding, of these equivocations.

### The Six Steps of Metaontology

We know that the "ray of light" from which the whole of Badiou's project springs consists of the statement that: "mathematics *is* ontology".<sup>5</sup>

This statement on ontology is itself philosophical, and not ontological.

Philosophy, as we know, is a "meta-ontology", and this has two primary meanings. In the first place, philosophy states the *that there is*, and *where* there is of ontology, not in itself, but nowhere else than in mathematics.

Mathematicians are "unaware ontologists", and cannot, at least as mathematicians, state the "there is" that is inherent within their own formulations. Ontology thus requires an attestation of itself from the outside of itself that is philosophy - powerless to produce it, and yet alone in the ability to point to where it is found. In the second place, philosophy is responsible for deploying the meta-ontological discourse (made up of inconsistent multiples, of intervention, of fidelity, and of generic truth) inherent in the axiomatics which express being in our era: namely, for

us, contemporaries, the set theoretical axiomatics (ZFC) of the non-constructible.

In these two operations, philosophy is “bordered” by mathematics, which curbs any possible arbitrariness in its decisions. With regard to the first decision, to maintain that ontology takes place in mathematics itself is a hypothesis that can be justified by the old acquaintance of this discipline with the rational exigence of philosophy - particularly in its Platonic foundation and Cartesian refoundation. And above all, the identification “mathematics=ontology” can be justified in the final resort not by a principle from which it derives, but, in the manner of an axiom, by the fruitfulness of its philosophical results - as the *Being and Event* trilogy attests well. In the second place, once it is determined that the true ontology of our time proceeds from the non-constructible axiom, the philosopher leaves the initiative for the production of truths to the theory selected as thought of being, and thus controls his own conceptualisations by the strong constraint of the formulae that he must transpose into the meta-ontological sphere. Here, the philosopher is orientated, step by step, by the axioms and theories of the mathematician. In these two cases, the theses are debatable, as ever, but the justifications are firmly posited.

On the other hand, from one to the other of these two theoretical gestures - that of the initial “there is” of ontology, and that of the final transcription of the non-constructible in meta-ontological concepts - we find a series of intermediary decisions concerning the construction of the terms of the crucial choice, for which the logic appears much more opaquely once the stages of their elaboration have been reconstructed. During these intermediary phases, a multiplicity of operations are, in effect, carried out, as we have said, to limit the final choice to two ontologies and no more, and, on the other hand, to determine, from this choice, what the superior ontology is between the constructible and non-constructible. However, these operations of the philosopher do not offer us in any clear way the criteria which may have guided their implementation, as we will see, and even less so regarding their reversal in this or that moment in Badiou’s evolution.

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How did Badiou arrive at the point that the decisive choice of his philosophy reduces itself to two ontologies, and not one more? Just as it is philosophy that decrees the identity “mathematics=ontology”, so too we discover that it is philosophy - and not mathematics - which permits Badiou to arrive at this ultimate duality of the crucial choice, and this, through a series of decisions that are anything but linear. During his long peregrination, which began with *Being and Event*, Badiou, in effect, had to

determine if, for his era, ontology was solely located in set theory, or if it could not also be present in another theory, this time logico-mathematical, namely, category theory. However, Badiou has for a long time hesitated on this question, considering across many years, between the writing of *Being and Event* and that of *Logics of Worlds*,<sup>6</sup> whether category theory can be thought as a rival ontology to set theory.

This approach has taken diverse forms. Thus (particularly in the context of his university seminar held in the 1990s at Paris VIII), set theory was thought as a specific ontology, close to those of Bergson and Deleuze: “The ontology prescribed by category theory”, he then wrote, “determines being as act, relation, movement.”<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless during this same period category theory was more readily considered as an “onto-logics”, which is to say a logic of diverse thinkable ontologies. But this last option was not itself without ambiguity; for this logic of ontologies was situated within the heritage of this or that determined ontology: the Aristotelian equivocality of being, or the Leibnizian plurality of possible worlds.<sup>8</sup>

Next, Badiou, in *Logics of Worlds*, completely reverses these theses, this time to make category theory a logic of appearance, and no longer a thought of being; no longer a logic of thinkable ontologies, but a logic expelled from all ontology and reduced to being-there, which is to say, to phenomena. A logic certainly mathematized; but he will then say,<sup>9</sup> a mathematized logic does not cease to be a logic and nothing but a logic, just as a mathematized physics does not cease to be a physics and nothing but a physics. Categories - a rival ontological moment of set theory, and proposed as such as ultimate choice of the philosopher as the (at least eventual) thought of being - have been excluded from ontology, at the same time as mathematics. Sure, they have been “with honours”: for Badiou, in *Logics of Worlds*, has constructed for them a sumptuous Baroque palace which seemed entirely devoted to their glory - but this palace is also a gilded cage. For those who knew what their former status was, knew that their reign over the logic of appearances resulted, in truth, from their long fall from the Heaven of being qua being. Categories found themselves dismissed from ontology, but with the manners in which one would for an eminence sacked by an apparent promotion. In this case, the choice is thus simplified by an operation of *placing*: the categories were “placed” in the field of appearance, and thus dis-placed, dislodged from their claim to say being. In this way, we no longer had to choose between category and set theory to know where true ontology was: it now resided firmly only in the multiplicities of the standard model.

But on the other hand, in set theory itself, ontology posited as truth - another simplification has taken place. Indeed, in *Being and Event*,<sup>10</sup> Badiou distinguishes *three* possible orientations of the thought of being - and not two - between which it is a matter of choosing: the constructible of Gödel, the generic of Cohen, and also the “doctrine of large cardinals”

- a doctrine which he places in opposition, along with the constructible option, to Cohen's generic approach. At that time, Badiou characterized large cardinal theory the ontology of "classical metaphysics", thence the ontology of "communist eschatology".<sup>11</sup>

In 1988, Badiou considered that the doctrine of large cardinals was merely a doomed attempt to demonstrate the continuum hypothesis: that is, the hypothesis according to which the infinite cardinal of real numbers must come "just after" the cardinal of natural numbers. According to him, this attempt consists of going right "to the prodigality [of infinities]", to try to construct a set of such power that it would arrange below itself the sequence of infinities which would belong to it according to an order as univocal as that of the finite in relation to the first infinite (that of the natural numbers).<sup>12</sup> The proliferation of infinities within this theory, which will be the continued object of praise in *The Immanence of Truths*, precisely for its immanentist scope (the doctrines of finitude being fundamentally always complicit in a dull religiosity), was previously considered nothing but a "logic of transcendence".<sup>13</sup> This logic aimed to abolish the errancy of Being (the de-relation of infinite numbers) in favour of an absolute order, fundamentally divine, no less constraining and mutilating, with regard to generic truths, than the positivist and grammarian orientation of the axiom of constructability.

However, in *The Immanence of Truths*, such triplicity of orientations within set theory has become duality, no longer, this time, by an operation of placement (as for category theory), but by an operation of alliance. One of the most astonishing novelties of this final volume of the trilogy rests on the fact that Badiou has associated, in the same ontology, the non-constructible and the large cardinals, in the form that the clash of orientations no longer contains more than that of Gödel and that of Cohen, augmented by the hierarchy of the most powerful cardinals.<sup>14</sup>

Long-time reader of Badiou that I am, I have never found a trace of any rigorous reasons for which this latest [work] has, in a spectacular fashion, reversed his claims about categories, or the large cardinals. One thing is sure: this cannot be because the mathematical theories at play - the contestants for ontology - had been in the meanwhile modified. If Badiou's positions are, each time, supported by determined reasons, we are hardly enlightened as to what may have determined his changes of position, particularly in the progressive constitution of the dual choice. In *The Immanence of Truths*, Badiou claims the "maximal principle" - which does not reject the existence of a set except for the logical reason of contradiction - because this principle is favourable to the proliferation of grand cardinals whose movement he espouses. But why did this same maximal principle not, in this case, justify, since *Being and Event*, adherence to this theory which was then rejected, in spite of his will to go straight to the "prodigality of being in infinite presentations"?<sup>15</sup> Similarly,

in 2006, in *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou refuses to make the logical theory of categories an ontology - since, as we have said, for him, this is a logics and not a mathematics. But the fact that category theory is fundamentally a logic was not unknown to Badiou before 2006, and this did not stop him from making of it an ontology - perhaps, since it acted as a logic, a logic of possible ontologies, overlooking set theory, which temporarily became one thought of being amongst other equal possibilities.

These reversals give the impression that Badiou, to progress towards his ultimate theses, had used opportunist reasons rather than being really constrained by the mobilised formalisms. In other words, over time, we discover that the philosopher, far from being the simple recipient of mathematical ontology, can according to the moment, accept or reject from the thought of being vast swathes of the theories he has engaged. From which, the persistent impression that Badiou is not so much determined in his decisions by the mathematics given to him by his era, than he is decisive with regard to that which, ultimately, he wishes to promote.

He himself seems to agree, in *The Immanence of Truths*, that his decision, concerning in particular the rejection of categorical claims, succeeds from subjective conviction more than from the mathematical field. Badiou records that the category theorists, like John L. Bell, refuse to consider set theory as “absolute”; other theories, particularly dominated by non-classical logic, can equally be legitimate candidates for the title of the “true” set theory. Bell notably argues, to demonstrate its functional “indetermination”, for the incapacity of the standard model to resolve the continuum problem. Yet, in response, Badiou says he “believes” that set theory will one day demonstrate that the continuum hypothesis is false. But, to substantiate this faith in the resolutive capacity of standard theory to the title of true ontology, he cannot do any better than to mobilize, in the mathematical field, the *proposals* (and not the theorems) of the mathematician Hugh Woodin, in favour of the future absoluteness of this theory. Remarks that are no more than “prophecies” - according to Badiou’s own terms - and not scientific conjecture. And, which, what is more, Woodin now seems to have abandoned...<sup>16</sup>

If philosophy delegates the care of ontology to mathematics, this delegation in no way means that it ceases to be active in this field. For Badiou, for reasons that wish to be philosophical - albeit as yet indeterminate - has de facto multiplied his verdicts on ontology. Let us, indeed, recapitulate the results of our analysis:

1. Philosophy, and philosophy alone, decides whether ontology exists or not.
2. Philosophy, and philosophy alone, decides on the place where ontology unfolds -- in mathematics instead of, for example, in poetry.

3. Philosophy decides in which part of the mathematics of its time there is ontology -- in set theory instead of in category theory.
4. Philosophy, equally, decides how many orientations are legitimate within set theory, between which the choice must be made -- two orientations and not three, as the large cardinals ultimately ally themselves with the non-constructible.
5. Finally, philosophy, always and again philosophy alone, decides which of the two remaining ontologies it must choose -- that of the non-constructible instead of the constructible.
6. It is only then, this time together with the mathematical theory that it has identified, that philosophy “co-produces” the concepts inherent to the axioms chosen as the thought of being.

These six steps of meta-ontology cannot be reduced to the same “logic”. As I have said, the two first do not raise any specific problems: philosophy is within its rights to postulate that mathematics is ontology, and to evaluate the consequences of the validity of this hypothesis. The final step, as we have seen, also has a coherence that guarantees its legitimacy -- the philosopher is “orientated” in his successive contentions by his chosen mathematical theory.

It is theses 3 and 4 - with their restriction to two of the terms of the choice between ontologies - which raise the question of the knowledge upon which criteria the philosopher can decide, within the proposed mathematics, what are or are not legitimate ontologies. Yet one cannot overestimate the importance of these intermediate decisions which allow the number of pretenders to ontology to be pruned down, for they have a double influence on the final choice:

- a) Reducing the finalists to a couple allows a choice that, being rarified, is “mechanically” more favourable to the non-constructible than if the terms would be multiplied, since it would be necessary to reject each of these pretenders from the running for as many different reasons.
- b) One of the terms of the final choice, specifically, the one selected, sees its own nature modified, since the axiom of non-constructability is added to one of its ancient rivals (the large cardinals).



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But it is step 5 that is at the heart of our interest, that which structures the whole of *The Immanence of Truths*: that is, the choice of the infinite work over that of its finite waste. For the suspicion concerning the meta-ontological steps which have constituted the terms of the crucial choice have repercussions for the stage [étape] of choice itself: if we do not understand exactly why the choice comprises only two terms - and precisely the two terms that we know - we risk not understanding even more exactly what determines, for Badiou, the choice of one of the terms (Cohen) over the other (Gödel).

Understand that the problem that persists in arising for us concerns the means of philosophy as meta-ontology. Badiouian philosophy deals with equally coherent mathematical theories, but does not cease to operate from selections which ultimately result in the selection of selecting the theory of inconsistent multiples. The final step is the only one which explicitly gives to the reader the exercise of choice that has been proposed to them: all of the anterior steps have deployed selections and groupings for which the logic has remained sibylline, such that the choice "freely given" to us boils down to two options. But the final choice itself, once given as a strict alternative, obviously does not present its two terms in a neutral manner: Badiouian philosophy once more intervenes to justify the selection of the way it regards to be superior. But, this time, the "reasons" for which one theory is chosen by philosophy over another as the true name of ontology ought to be given to us; perhaps we will better understand what allows Badiou to eliminate or select what is worth, for him, the thinking of being at the heart of the mathematics of his times. We are now in apparently known territory: as, in 1988, Badiou presents several ontologies conceivable for the time (two, and no longer three), and indicates why each must lead us to adopt one amongst them. But our prior analyses of the implicit decisions already at work in this final choice demands we focus all our attention, perhaps our suspicion, on that which might seem obvious.

However, it seems that Badiouian philosophy, when looked at closely, does not de facto possess any resource of its own to motivate, by itself, a decision in favour of one or the other of the two ontologies put in opposition. On the one hand, as was the case with prior selections, it is evidently impossible to rely on mathematics itself to prefer the theory that is the true ontology - and, besides, this is what guarantees the choice as such, the freedom of the decision proceeding from the fact that there is no demonstration which necessarily allows one over the other of the theories to be invalidated. But that the choice is free does not prevent that it should be determined by an exigency that makes of it something other than a gratuitous or arbitrary decision.

To approach what could, here, be the type of reason sought for, let us proceed by elimination. In the first place, the choice cannot in any way be considered a wager that is of the same nature as that which is summoned by an event. One may indeed have the temptation to consider that the crucial choice denotes an undecidable wager, comparable to that which an artist or a politician, for example, might have to make when faced with a break whose meaning must be decided as either a true revolution or merely a simulacrum of an event. This analogy is untenable, since it involves choosing - or refusing - an ontology which allows to think, precisely, the possibility of an event in general, as that which opens onto an infinite truth (of which being is a generic multiple). It would be circular to wager via a so-called event in favour or against the truth of an ontology that allows to think the event as purveyor of truth. Philosophy, for Badiou, as we know, thinks the event, but it does not think *according to* the event, because it does not produce truth, and therefore does not have the means - contrary to science, art, love, or politics - to engage with a decision of such a nature between consistent and inconsistent multiples. This is, doubtless, a convenient illusion of step 5: we think it is obvious because we have the tendency to “overlay” on this the wager of the event, as if philosophy is a truth procedure. But if philosophy can think the ontology of eventual choice, it cannot think, according to the same model, the choice in favour of such an ontology, and this simple observation forces us to look elsewhere for the criteria of this “meta-choice” made by meta-ontology.

Can we then defend the decision in favour of the ontology of inconsistent multiples by the fruitfulness of its consequences, in taking for our model step 2? The meta-ontological axiom, as we recall, holds that mathematics is ontology, and is indeed judged by the resultant theoretical gains. Admittedly, this latter decision is linked to the interest of meta-ontology in general, which is to say the power of the mathematical elucidation of the *two* conflicting ontologies inherent to an age of the history of being. But it is tempting to see the same type of logic at work in the crucial choice of one between them, as Badiou openly insists on the much more *interesting* character of the chosen option. He thus highlights that the mathematicians themselves, including Gödel himself, largely prefer the non-constructible to the constructible universe, even though the latter is more simple and more convenient.<sup>17</sup> It is a truism to highlight that a risky and uncertain universe is preferable to researchers to a universe that is policed and overly predictable. We recognise in the mathematician’s choice of the non-constructible the decision-making process that we can find in all domains of thought. A decision that, in sum, pits the audacious against the partisans of the clear and assured existing order. Yet this type of choice - through the risk encouraged, and the creative interest - seems each time to bring us back to the thinker of the alternative from whom we began, namely, Nietzsche.

In fact, striking for a reader, one can find many Nietzschean resonances in the prose of Badiou's final volume, particularly in the passages on recovery:<sup>18</sup> praise of what is new in the face of the conservatism of the dominant discourse, consisting in its entirety of well-known ideological debris of the present order, and aims to make us believe that nothing authentic can happen; the struggle between the two ontologies presented as that of invention and disorder against sanity thirsting for calm clarity; the recurrent appeal, as I have said, to that which is interesting, risky, uncertain.

Thus it must be said that if the struggling ontologies are equally rational, that it is not reason, but life, a certain form of great health, which must choose between the opposing rationalities. More precisely, one could say that, for Badiou, the struggle becomes one between *two forms of truth*: truth as objectivity, promoted in particular by positivism - on the side of the constructible - and generic truth, made of events and militant fidelity, on the side of the non-constructible. Nietzsche certainly rejects the primacy of the truth in favour of that of life, but one could say that Badiou's Nietzscheanism, like that of the author of *Beyond Good and Evil*, consists in choosing the most dangerous form of truth for life itself: generic truth opposed to objective truth. In fact, how could "the" truth determine the philosopher's choice, given that his choice must concern the *type* of truth engaged by two ontologies? To speak of the "true ontology", as I have done, is an abuse of language, for the truth is present in the two ontologies, whether objective or generic. The philosopher selects an ontology in which *a certain sort* of truth looms before our eyes. From this we can understand that as in Nietzsche the choice is based on a certain agreement with "one" truth at the uppermost intensity of existence - the richest life determining the regime of truth that best agrees with it.

Could we be, ourselves, satisfied with this solution, which would ultimately make of Badiouism a "Nietzscheanism of militant truth"? No. Undoubtedly not. This third attempt to clarify Badiou's crucial choice once again fails to unravel the enigma of his deep logic. Why? Because if Nietzscheanism inserts itself in the heart of the choice between the ontologies, all Badiou's theses will be counteracted, and, essentially, abolished. Badiou does not cease to maintain that he is not only a philosopher of truth, but also that the truth, moreover, is devoid of sense. In this way he takes a position against all the thinkings of sense, as much hermeneutics - which goes from Heidegger to Ricoeur - as vitalism and its qualitative multiplicities - which goes from Nietzsche, specifically, to Deleuze. What is more, Nietzsche is clearly thought of by him as an antiphilosopher.<sup>19</sup> To try to understand the crucial choice as a sort of mix between a vitalist criterion and determined by the senses, understood as orientation of life - and a truth maintained, but as result of a choice determined by an other criteria than truth, would be to destroy the whole enterprise of his philosophy and to deliver him into the hands of the

one who amongst his contemporaries remains his favoured adversary - Deleuze.

### A Persistent Suture?

It is important to understand the fundamental problem posed by this uncertainty of the meta-ontological criterion of crucial choice. It's that the real risk in this case is not, for Badiou, to be accused here of a simply subjective arbitrariness of decisions made, but more of a hidden, or denied, logic at work behind them. For what do we most readily suspect in Badiou, if it is not that his philosophy is entirely determined, under the guise of an austere submission to the matheme, by his political engagement? Yet this suspicion would find the means, here, of its precise formulation, by uncovering unsaid or unexplained operations at the source of its crucial choice, and more again by the reduction of its terms to one of the two. Manoeuvres that I've previously intentionally described through an elementary "Machiavellian" lexis: the overturning of alliances between generic and large cardinal theory, or exile beyond ontology disguised as celebration, in the case of category theory. With, at the end of the process, the promotion of the appropriate ontology - generic, inconsistent - which appears as the sought-after justification of a political militant. If the criterion of the choice is neither philosophical truth, nor scientific objectivity, nor the intensity of life - it is that it is quite simply the emancipation of communist politics.

We would then be faced with an ideological illusion, as the true logic of things, as in a camera obscura, would be reversed: politics would covertly choose the ontology which, supposedly by the virtue of its rationality alone, would give in return its seal of approval to the militantism from which it, in truth, originated. Concealed within the chess-playing automaton of philosophy, we find the "hunchbacked dwarf" of politics, the true source of the functioning of the whole dispositive.<sup>20</sup>

But on a more serious note, perhaps, this problem would ruin one of Badiou's most fundamental requirements: namely to liberate philosophy from the era of sutures that, according to him, has dominated it since the 19th Century. We know that the suture consists in philosophy "delegating" its operations to one of the four truth procedures (love, art, science, politics), and that as a consequence it "is carried out in the element of its own suppression to the great benefit of that procedure".<sup>21</sup>

However, the most complex form of suture, and perhaps the most decisive when it comes to self-emancipation for Badiou, is that of Marxism. The most complex, because it does not engage one, but two truth procedures: science and politics. Marx and his heirs, "dependents on the dominant positivist suture", indeed believed they could raise revolutionary politics to the status of science. Whence the fact that Marxism as known two articulations of the suture: the domination of

politics over science, whose name is “Stalin” and his claims to legislate on “genetics, linguistics, or relativistic physics”; and, conversely, the domination of science over politics, in Althusser’s attempt to renew historical and dialectical materialism - with the nevertheless deleterious effect of delegating politics to the apparatus of the French Communist Party (PCF), which would break asunder in May ‘68.<sup>22</sup>

What, then, is at stake here is Badiou’s claim to desuture philosophy, and more specifically, to liberate it, from the Marxist articulation of the two sutures through science and politics. It must even be said that if the prior suspicions are confirmed, Badiou would be replicating the most retrograde form, the “Stalinist”, of the political domination over science. Naturally Badiou’s current thought is entirely opposed to Stalinism as the achievement of the politics of emancipation in the form of the Party-State. But he has retrospectively defined the Maoism to which he adhered in “the red years” as a politics marked by historical ambiguity, which is to say, a “partially intra-Stalinist attempt to emancipate itself from Stalinism” - which results, he adds, in “its intrinsic contradiction”.<sup>23</sup>

The question ultimately boils down to this: has Badiou really overcome, through his philosophy of the event, the contradiction of his initial Maoism - an antistalinist Stalinism - or has he done nothing except, voluntarily or not, and in any case in an occulted way, to transpose it into such a philosophy?

### Three Gigantomachies

Before attempting a reply to this difficulty, we are tasked to place it in a broader perspective. To grasp the amplitude of the problem we can show what distinguishes the Badiouian crucial choice from other apparently similar fundamental philosophical alternatives, present in the work of the philosophers he considers himself to be disciple or inheritor.

We started with the alternative between Gödel and Cohen. What are these the names of? For that which, if we start from the standard axiom of sets, does not produce contradiction, whether we support that all sets are constructible - what Gödel has demonstrated - or if we conversely assume that non-constructible sets exist - which is what Cohen, this time, demonstrated twenty years later.

Badiou’s inaugural statement - “mathematics is ontology” - does not mean that mathematics provides, according to eras and in particular our own, true ontology and nothing else. Rather, it means that the great ontological conflicts of an era, even if they are addressed by the philosophers, can only be rigorously formulated in mathematics. Said otherwise, mathematics is the only rigorous formulation of gigantomancies.

Gigantomachy, as we know, refers to the myth of the struggle between the giants against the gods that Plato, in the *Sophist* (246a),

through the voice of the Stranger, reinterprets as a struggle between giants. More precisely, between two giants, which is to say, two forms of thought which clash in a timeless way, so to speak: those of the “Sons of the Earth”, who affirm that all existing reality is a body (*soma*), and those of the “Friends of Forms”, who affirm the ideal being (*eidos*) of these same realities. But a fundamental difference exists between Plato’s gigantomachy and what takes place in Badiou. This is that Plato, as a philosopher who accords himself the capacity to produce truths, refuses the one and the other of the positions of the fighting giants, and attempts a synthesis of each by extorting from both sides an agreement on one truth supported by their adversary. The Sons of the Earth, materialists - the “Somatists” - must admit that alongside bodies always in motion, rest must also exist; the Friends of Forms, “idealists”, must recognise that alongside the rest of the Forms, motion must also exist. From this, a third position results - that of the Stranger, who makes of being a power to act and to suffer (246a-249d).

But Badiou, evidently, cannot proceed thus: for if, as a philosopher, he were to produce an ontology which surpasses both that of Gödel and that of Cohen, he accords to philosophy the capacity to produce a truth, in this instance, ontological. His philosophy therefore does not fight the giants by putting itself in the place of the gods (which is essentially Plato’s position), it chooses one of the giants over the other, knowing that there are no gods to subjugate either of them. Philosophy no longer produces the terms of its ultimate choice, but builds the reasons to choose one of the terms forged outside of it. It hierarchises the true without forging it any more.

Philosophy is therefore, in terms of ontology, of the order of intervention and not of production - which can also be put in this way: it does not have an object, but conditions. But these denominations return us to a second version of the gigantomachy, that of Althusser, from whom we know Badiou inherits this substitution of a relation of condition for a relation of object - at least for the relation of philosophy to science.

With Althusser, indeed, as with Plato, the struggle that traverses history is, according to evidently different modalities, that of materialism and idealism, which has become the confrontation between science and ideology.<sup>24</sup> For Althusser, philosophy, at least after the turning-point of its own “Self-criticism” [*auto-critique*], produces no knowledge and therefore *a fortiori* no metaphysical knowledge which can replace the sciences. The sciences are not even an object whose truth conditions are reflected by philosophy: philosophy “intervenes” only to trace a line of demarcation between an idealism always looking to appropriate science from an ideological perspective - ultimately relating to class interests and their practice - and a materialism, which shares with all science the category “objectivity”. It is this trans-historical struggle between idealism and

materialism that incessantly reproduces itself in philosophy, in different ways according to the era, but according to a history that is only relative to that of the sciences. Nothing thus happens in philosophy except the repetition of its outline of the empty space that it draws between the two ever the same adversaries.<sup>25</sup>

Here again Badiou cannot subscribe to this version of the gigantomachy: certainly Althusser's thought, like his own, enjoins philosophy not to produce a truth that comes from itself - Plato's version of the struggle of the giants - but to choose between the two protagonists who confront each other outside of it. However, by the very determination of the struggling adversaries, Althusser already offers to the philosopher, little though he merits his name, the criterion of choice: for what philosopher would openly choose ideology and its idealistic illusion and not science and its objectivity? But Badiou enjoins us to choose between two thoughts of the multiple which one as much as the other belong to the queen of the sciences, mathematics. What is more, in *The Immanence of Truths*, ideology is thought by means of a logic of covering over the work of the infinite by the finite which is based rigorously on constructivist axiomatics.<sup>26</sup> Upon which, ideology, in a very paradoxical way for an Althusserian, becomes a part of science: but the part of it that the "crucial" choice enjoins us to reject. Certainly there is, in Althusser, a possible science of ideology - for the science of History is just as much the science of the effect of ideology in history. But if ideology is the object of science, it is not in this latter part of science, any more than a myth can transform itself into a scientific statement to have become the object of mythology.

Of the three gigantomachies that we have isolated, it is thus Badiou's that is the most enigmatic, since for him the crucial choice cannot be supported either by philosophy's capacity to produce its truth itself according to its own dialectic, as in Plato, nor by a configuration of the terms of the choice, within which one of them (science) is, so to say, by itself the sign of its truth, as in Althusser. We find summarized here the principle of our aporia: philosophy, in Badiou, does not produce any truth capable of justifying his choice while giving an eminently rational truth to each of the two terms between which the choice is made. The challenge is to derive the nature of the thought which is nevertheless capable of discriminating between paths, beyond these obstacles, and without returning to eliminated propositions. By which detour not yet taken must the forking of the good Titan pass?

By, as we shall see, the detour of the Absolute.



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We would now like to demonstrate that there indeed exists a way to read in Badiou something other than a “sublimated” contradiction of his political engagement. And this passes by what is said about the Absolute in *The Immanence of Truths*. But in truth it is not so much this Absolute itself what will allow us to respond - or to sketch out a response - to our difficulties, as much, paradoxically, as a new aporia encountered upon this occasion.

### Being in Nothingness

It is in *The Immanence of Truths* that Badiou, for first time in a central way, approaches the question of the Absolute. What, for him, is the Absolute? The place [*lieu*], he says, where all the possible forms of being “reside” - thus “all” the sets of ZFC theory. Following mathematics convention, he names it “V” - suggesting that the letter just as well symbolizes the V of “Vérités” (Truths) as the V of “Vacuum”.<sup>27</sup> Why this latter term, coupled with that of Truth? Because there is a paradox of the Badiouian Absolute: it identifies itself with that which, in its own ontology, *cannot be*. Because V, supposed to contain all sets, cannot be a set. It is a fundamental result of set theory that a set of all sets cannot exist, since such a hypothesis results in a contradiction.<sup>28</sup> This is the reason why, in Badiou’s prose, V does not cease to produce precautions and even, as I will demonstrate, embarrassment.

When I said earlier that V contains “all” sets, this should be understood with inverted commas - since no such totality of sets exists. As a matter of fact, this would, in this case, be a set, which cannot be. I also said that V “contains” sets - but inverted commas should also be placed around the verb “to contain”. For a set can only be contained (belong as an element of or be included as a part) by another set. Since V is not a set, no set is an element of V, and no set is a part of it. And yet V is indeed the absolute “place” “in” which all sets must be. One thus says that V is the strict class of “all sets”: a class being a collection of sets having the same property, and a *strict class* designating a class which is not a set - because, as a set, it would be contradictory.

All these precautions do not prevent the impression of being confronted with a philosophical antimony, produced by the identification of the Absolute with V. For Badiou goes so far as to argue that the Absolute *is not* - not being a set - and that the Absolute *must be*, since it is that in which all that is (the multiples) must reside. From a strictly mathematical point of view, the problem can certainly be resolved by the use of formal symbols allowing V to be treated “as if” it were a set. This is an expedient form of writing which has been established to pose no risk to theory.<sup>29</sup> But for the meta-ontologist, things do not seem so sure. For V becomes much more than a simple sign in his discourse: it passes



- through the philosopher's decision - into the sphere of being qua being, of which it reveals itself to be the absolute referent at the same time as it contradicts its consistency. The Absolute is at once pure nothingness - an empty inconsistency - and a nothing "in" which, however, all the forms of being, further than ad infinitum, proliferate.

How does Badiou tackle this situation, unprecedented in his trilogy, since he had never before as directly identified the nothingness of the Whole with the eminence of the Absolute? He seems, in fact, to clearly accept both sides of the matter. On the one hand, of course, he reminds us that since *V* is not a set, one cannot say that it "is" in the proper sense of the term, since all his ontology maintains that to be is to be a set. But on the other hand, he just as resolutely defends that one must deduce from this that *V* is nothing but a being of language, a fiction, a sign to which nothing corresponds. However, if *V* is not, and if *V* is nothing more than a fiction, how can we think its ontological status?

Clearly, this is no simple matter. Thus, evoking the infinite quantities which are construed in the theory of large cardinals, by successive approximations of *V*, Badiou writes: "Infinity is thought of as the approaching figure of the Absolute, ultimately identified with Nothingness or with the unthinkable itself".<sup>30</sup> Put otherwise, the most significant infinities, the most "gorged with being", if we might say so, soar toward the ultimate summit of the Absolute that contains them all - but which itself is nothing but Nothingness. All being, as gigantic as desired, seems engulfed in a place that is nothing, yet nevertheless subsists in this nothing. All the thinkable is held within the unthinkable. The path of approximation to the Absolute-Nothingness by the large cardinals is then compared, by its hierarchical progression which goes from one monumental infinity to another even more monumental one, to the hierarchy of angels who approach ever more closely without ever reaching God, and it concludes in Badiou by an unexpected appeal to mysticism: "[...] mysticism expresses in poetry the experienced forms of ecstatic self-annihilation to which the hierarchy of angels points. This is the reason why Rilke was right to write that "every angel is terrifying": it is indeed a degree of being that measures our proximity to nothingness".<sup>31</sup> *V* is Nothingness, but one cannot say that it is not - it is unthinkable, but constitutes the term of a thought ready to annihilate itself in it. Such an appeal by Badiou to mystical annihilation, which exacerbates rather than resolves the antinomy under consideration, obviously leaves the reader more perplexed than enlightened.

Previously, Badiou also attempted to understand the status of *V* by analogy with the Platonic Idea of the Good: "Plato would say that *V* is the Idea of form (of the multiple) as such, and therefore the Idea of an idea. Note that "the Idea of the Good", which for him was indeed the Idea of the ideas, was not, for Plato, an idea. Much in the same way that *V*, which

contains the thought of all the possible forms of the pure multiple, is not itself such a form.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, to account for V, which seems to be, in one sense, and not to be, in another, Badiou refers to the Platonic Idea of the Good, which is an Idea, in one sense (since it is called the “Idea” of the Good), but is also, in another sense, not an Idea. Here, we seem to be explaining an obscure mode of being by another mode of being which, notoriously, is no less so. And since at the same time Badiou takes somewhat of a distance to this analogy - as he says that the Platonic thesis is no more than “a little” like his own - he adds the fuzziness of his own comparison to the opacity of the terms compared.

A third aspect of his analyses of the Absolute shows the difficulty which Badiou seems to encounter with this question. As I have said, he critiques the thesis which reduces the reality of V to that of a sign as being a linguistic thesis, a part of contemporary relativism. But Badiou himself does not stop calling on linguistic artifice to speak of V. He writes that sets are “metaphorically” in V;<sup>33</sup> that we “symbolically” use the language ZFC to see that V is “the union” of all levels  $V_\alpha$  which hierarchise sets;<sup>34</sup> that the formula “x belongs to V” is “flawed” or purely “analogous”.<sup>35</sup> Metaphor, analogy, symbol - equally poetic figures, or rhetorical ones, typical of the language uses of postmodernity to derealize the reference. To which is added, as we have seen, a systematic use of inverted commas to excuse the incorrect and yet inevitable use - “necessary and impossible”, Derrida would say - of expressions like V “is”, V “belongs to”, etc.

We get the impression that we cannot speak of V - in ontology, in at least - except in catachreses, that is, figurative expressions without literal equivalents: thus the “leaf” of paper, inevitable vegetal metaphor. Yet this is typical of one of the possible versions of “linguistic relativism” as Badiou understands and critiques it: that of a language which is originally figured without universal, or underlying literal, signification. A thesis precisely defended by the young Nietzsche in his course on rhetoric of winter 1972-73<sup>36</sup> with a view to dissolve all ideas of truth.

Regarding these difficulties, Badiou seems unjust to himself when he says that he has participated in this linguistic relativism by arguing in the past that V is nothing but a being of language.<sup>37</sup> The Badiou of *Being and Event*, the “1988-Badiou”, seems to me to have done nothing of the sort. He simply maintained, with consistency in respect to his ontology, that a class, not being a set, could not be in any way. And he even seemed to rejoice in this, for authentically materialist reasons. I cite: “Just as the set of all ordinals cannot exist - which is said: Nature does not exist - nor can the set of all cardinals exist, the absolutely infinite Infinity, the infinity of all intrinsically thinkable infinities - which is said, this time: God does not exist.”<sup>38</sup> V, in 1988, for Badiou, is thus God. And in fact, in 2018, V is not far from being so again, for Badiou who thinks analogously to the God-Nothingness of mystics and angelology. The “1988-Badiou” could thus argue, in response to the criticisms of his contemporary double,

the “2018-Badiou”, that the alliance with the grand cardinals, an option burdened with “classical metaphysics” and a still “eschatological” communism, has logically produced this rehabilitation of a God now existing and annihilated at one and the same time.

But “2018-Badiou” would certainly also have some things to respond to his double of yesteryear: for the Absolute has now become, as he demonstrates in detail, the condition of the thinkability of the index of the work. The index is in fact the mark in the work of its relation to the Absolute. It is the index, supernumerary to the always finite elements of the work, that attests that this belongs to the dynamics of a truth process, and thus guarantees it will resist the recovery which seeks to reduce all novelty to opinions of an era. It corresponds, for example, to that which makes a novel a great text, even as this grandeur is nowhere to be found in any of its parts.<sup>39</sup>

It is the “non empirical” element of the work which lets it escape from all relativist judgement, and allows it to be resuscitated in other forms, from era to era, in the manner of the ancient tragedy of the 17th century, or Archimedean mathematics in the moment of the discovery of infinitesimal calculus. As a consequence, if the Absolute is nothing but a being of language, a fiction, then the index would become one in its turn, and the work ever reduced to its empirical part, the sum of textual or pictorial facts, for example, which would have no more value than any other cultural fact.

As we have said, we are dealing with an antinomy of the Absolute: we fall into trouble when we say it is, and we fall just as much into trouble when we say that it is not. And as for saying anything else about it than it is or it is not, *The Immanence of Truths* certainly attempts, by a succession of analogies and by an accumulation of stylistic precautions, to do so - but all this without really managing to overcome the aporia.

In fact, we have the feeling that, however large, the range of theoretical instruments called upon by Badiou does not contain any with the potential to get us out of this matter. In this respect, this evokes, in his latest book, the importance for his thought of paraconsistent logic, which allows to conceive of a logic compatible with contradictions.<sup>40</sup> Could we not conceive, using this logic, that the Absolute can at the same time be and not be? No, because set theory requires, in an imperative fashion, the use of classical logic. Badiou also mentions the dialectic of *The Sophist*, who tries to think of the being of non-being. Is this not a possible Platonic way of thinking the being of Nothingness that is the absolute V? Once again, no, for the dialectic of *The Sophist* leads to the category of the Other and not of the Absolute - and what is more, Badiou himself critiques its insufficiency.<sup>41</sup> V is, but not in the manner of a set. Could we not, then - third attempt - mobilize Aristotle’s statement: “Being is said in many ways” - and claim: a strict class “is”, but in a different sense from the set? But

notwithstanding the strangeness of finally submitting Badiou's Absolute to one of Aristotle's theses - his longstanding adversary - this does not resolve the fundamental problem at all, namely: what can the mode of being of V be, that which is at once Nothingness and the Place [*Lieu*] of all things? We are faced with a radical ontological opposition that Aristotle himself never envisaged resolving thought the equivocity of being.

Finally, we cannot get out of this matter by pointing out that the "empty" set does not pose a meta-ontological problem to Badiou, the Vacuum of absolute Place would have no reason to pose anything more to him. The two cases are not related: that one set contains nothing poses no ontological difficulty, because it is a set that by that fact, exists. That a nothing "contains" all sets is, on the contrary, the source of all the preceding difficulties. Badiou cannot but be aware of this evident difference: proof of this is that he never seeks to mobilize the case of the empty set to clarify the case of V.<sup>42</sup>

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We have decidedly reached an impasse. But it seems to us that, this time, it is possible to make this second aporia bear fruit, so as to make of it a response to the first one we encountered: that of the possible resources of philosophy as meta-ontology. Let us try to demonstrate this by introducing more clarity into these questions through the very confrontation of these two difficulties.

### **Towards a Neoplatonism of the Multiple**

A section of *The Immanence of Truths* is called "The Reprisal of Parmenides"; one could very well write it in another way: "The Reprisal of *Parmenides*".<sup>43</sup> In this Platonic dialogue, after having challenged Socrates' theory of forms, the Eleatic philosopher deploys all his virtuosity to expose the aporias of the One. In particular, Parmenides exposes those aporias that result from the hypothesis "the One is", and equally for the contrary hypothesis: "the One is not". In *Being and Event*, Badiou already started from this Parmenidean dialectic and its "turnstiles", to cut the Gordian knot of its impasses by maintaining firmly that the One is not - that all multiples are inconsistent, which is to say constituted in turn of multiples. But it is as if thirty years later he rediscovered the aporias of *Parmenides* this time no longer applied to the One, but to V. One could conceive of a dialogue no longer opposing the old Parmenides to the young Socrates, but the 1988-Badiou to the 2018-Badiou, both discussing the aporias of being and of non-being proper to the strict class V: if V is, that which is not a set can be, which is absurd, recalls 1988-Badiou; if V is not, the index is not, and the work is not, which is just as absurd, retorts 2018-Badiou. The

hypotheses “V is” or “V is not” lead to aporia - just like the hypotheses on the One in the *Parmenides*.

Yet the *Parmenides* plays a decisive role in a well-known philosophical tradition. This philosophical trend, which takes the aporias of *Parmenides* to represent Platonism, is Neoplatonism. That Neoplatonism, in particular from Plotinus to Proclus (thus between the third and fifth century), reinvented the legacy of Plato starting from the aporias of the One, and, attempting to resolve them in a manner that was, it seems, completely opposed to the Badiouian way. To put it vulgarly, if the One, for Proclus or his master Syrianus, routs all forms of predication - if nothing can be said without falling into aporia - it is not because it is a chimera - a being of language - but because it is the unsayable condition of rational discourse - of that which Plato named *dianoia*. The Neoplatonists identify the One with the Good of the *Republic* - as Badiou, as we have seen, in a hesitant manner, himself attempts to do for V - but in saying clearly according to themselves that the Good, no more than the One, is not an Idea, since the Idea is sayable and belongs (like multiples for Badiou) to the realm of being. For Socrates says of the Good that it is beyond being, *epekeina tès ousias* (*Republic* 6, 509b) - therefore, in the interpretation coming from Plotinus, beyond the Ideas accessible to the *nous* by dialectical ascent.

The Neoplatonists therefore seem to develop a reflection on the One in which is the germ of Badiou's thinking on V: of the One, as of V, one cannot say if it is or is not without falling into aporia; and the One, as V, is not a linguistic fiction but a condition of the thought of being. This is something for this reason that strikes me as vertiginous in Badiou's trajectory: he seems, indeed, *to have traversed the full history of ancient Platonism* in thirty years - one thousand years from Plato to the last Neoplatonists, from a triumphant theory of Ideas to a reflection on the condition of this theory, which escapes the usual laws of philosophical discourse. But while ancient Platonism realises itself in the aporias of the One, Badiou begins again from the One, which he negates, to arrive at the aporias of V. These thus echo the Neoplatonic aporias, but in the context of contemporary mathematics - which is made of the void and infinity and no longer of the Monad of the Greeks, understood as the elementary unity of number.<sup>44</sup>

I thus posit as a hypothesis that the later Badiou tends, not intentionally but by the constraints of his system, to a form of “Neobadiouianism of V”. I am not saying that the theses are the same except in a change of object - from the One to V. Badiou, for example, claims to say, according to him, things about the absolute referential that is V: it is immobile, it is non-atomic, etc.<sup>45</sup> But I believe that, on being, he encounters a difficulty of the same kind as that with which the Neoplatonists were confronted: V seems beyond being and non-being, like the One is beyond discourse on *eidos*. In this way, V raises the question

of the type of thinking that can reach it, since ontology, or meta-ontology, manifestly, are clearly not fully capable of so doing.

Admittedly, Neoplatonism rarely has a good reputation with the materialists - but after all, up until Badiou, Platonism did not either. The reason for this is because Neoplatonism is considered as the philosophy *par excellence* of transcendence, even as a “mysticism”, that claims to detach itself from *logos*. I would like, not to cancel but at the least to attenuate this bad reputation, to show that it would not be so absurd for Badiouism to take an analogous route.

The history of Neoplatonism is primarily interesting because of its successive adversaries.<sup>46</sup> Platonism, in the form of the Ancient Academy, had to defend Plato’s works against the critiques of Aristotle, then against the Stoics - two theoretical adversaries listed by Badiou, who considers Stoicism in particular to be the thought “always suited to subjectivity submitted to passive finitude”.<sup>47</sup> In this first period, a struggle of the Idea against its traditional adversaries thus unfolds. Nevertheless, in the First Century BCE, opposition arose against the New Academy, Plato’s own School, which had in the meantime converted to probabilism, a sort of skepticism tempered by the search for judgements that, if not true, were plausible. The partisans of the Idea now had the Academy itself against them, which had returned to a philosophy of the probable, and claimed to follow a Socrates who knew nothing except that he knew nothing. There was then in reaction the wish to consider Plato as disciple of Pythagoras - to re-idealise him, in some way, by emphasising the mathematical lineage of his philosophy. But it is much later that Plotinus would produce the long-lasting gesture of Neoplatonism, by supporting that the One is beyond being. From then on, and very quickly, this “philosophy became a scientific theology, with the second part of *Parmenides* becoming the exposition [...]”.<sup>48</sup> Writing in the wake of this gesture, Proclus, several centuries later, fought against rhetorical or “neo-sophistic” interpretations of *Parmenides*, which made of it a purely argumentative exercise without ontological content: according to these readings the dialogues were simply practice to refute all forms of thesis, using an approach which was not without its similarities to Scepticism. It was once again in support of the metaphysical range of Platonism that Proclus, following Plotinus, made of *Parmenides* a way to think the One beyond being.

Aristotle, the Stoics, the “renegade” Platonists who became partisans of a simple thought of probability, the sophists, the Sceptics. We can see by this reconstruction, be it brief, that whilst they did not agree with Badiou on the theses of the non-being of the One, the Neoplatonists broadly did share with him the same adversaries. Their fierce defence in favour of the speculative scope of the Master, in a context marked by multiple attempts at dissolution is, I believe, in profound consonance with the struggles of the Badiouian trilogy.



We might object that any reconciliation of Badiou with the Neoplatonists would lead him to fall into a thinking of transcendence, which would be outrageous, just look at the title of *The Immanence of Truths*. But what must be understood concerns the term transcendence, which harbours a profound equivocation. For I believe he understands it primarily in two very distinct ways, unduly confused, notably by Nietzsche: religious transcendence, and philosophical transcendence. I call “religious” the transcendence where all initiative of Revelation, of the infinite God to the finite, human, subject returns to God alone. Thus in Christianity it is God, and he alone, who decides to confer grace upon a chosen one - and that is why the chosen one cannot “merit” this grace, by virtue, or any sort of asceticism: Paul knows his road to Damascus while persecuting the first Christians. Before being chosen, the chosen one does not need to raise himself towards God nor attempt to understand him, even less prove his existence: without any preparation required he receives the refulgent grace of a transcendence which remains unfathomable in its nature, and absolutely imperative with respect to what it reveals. Philosophical transcendence is utterly different: it first of all depends on the discipline of the subject and not, or not only, on the action upon him of the Principle which he attempts to attain. What is more, this discipline is anchored from the outset to a conceptual approach. But it is precisely by the most demanding exercise of the *logos* that the philosopher concludes by acceding to a condition of that *logos* that cannot belong to the rationality that it makes possible. It is not the dazzlement of grace, nor indeed the poetic mysticism of Rilke - who, as evoked by Badiou, seems to be furthest from his philosophy than this ascent by *logos* beyond *logos*. Philosophical transcendence refers to the rigorous work of the concept, up to the non-conceptual encounter with the condition of the concept. In what form does this encounter occur? Well, according to Syrianus, followed by his student Proclus: in the form of an *experience*. An experience which one can without a doubt call mystical - an experience of fusion with the One - but which is above all *non-empirical*.<sup>49</sup>

However, if we remove the dimension in this encounter of the fusion with the One, we find a very important aspect of the encounter with the Absolute in Badiou - this is to say, the index of the work, understood as work of truth. Admittedly, Badiou says that there is no experience of the Absolute, but this is a rejection of ordinary, empirical, experience: the Absolute, he says, “is radically non-empirical”.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, I believe that there is in Badiou a *non-empirical experience* of the Absolute, about which he regularly speaks in his book, and which must precisely precede, as its condition, all exercise of the *logos*. A significant example is when he mentions a visit to a museum filled with “daubs and turkeys” of Seventeenth Century Dutch art, amongst which one or two masterpieces shine out. This is an experience anyone can have, without

needing to be an expert of the painting of this period, and which renders futile all attempts to reduce a work of genius to its cultural context.<sup>51</sup> This experience reveals that the Absolute can impose itself on you before all knowledge, and therefore *before all discourse*: for it is, not the result of a knowledge of the work, but the condition from which any desire to deepen this knowledge proceeds. The Absolute, here, does not, as in Plotinus, complete an ascent of the concept beyond itself: it initiates the start of a philosophical desire for infinite works without however participating in its reactivation with a view to producing new truths. The philosopher's course through the Dutch exhibition of the seventeenth century is not the same as that, in 1906, of Picasso in the ethnographical museum of the Trocadéro, amidst African masks in which the eternal truth would be actualized anew in the origins of Cubism. The philosophical stroll, contrary to that of the painter, is sterile: but it offers to the ignorant as it does to the learned the ante-theoretical realization that certain, rare, chunks of experience, contain infinitely more than their empirical finitude.

I can now return to my initial question: what guided Badiou in his constitution of the crucial choice, in two terms and no more, between Cohen and Gödel - between the work which resists all recovery, and the waste destined to be buried in the archive of the obsolete and unknown? In my view, this is indeed an experience that the philosopher can have when confronted with truths, be they political or scientific, amorous or artistic. But an experience which is *neither that of a fact, nor that of an event*. It is an experience, rather, of the index of works. Yet, if this experience is not empirical (does not concern a fact), neither is it eventual. The philosopher is not someone who must necessarily have experienced an event: he is someone who, "coldly", maintains that there are truths, and therefore *there have been* events, without tiring of attesting to their existence by the non-empirical trace of the index. He navigates between all the truth procedures, and for this reason prepares everyone for the future reception, always possible albeit unforeseeable, for future events - what Badiou calls "corrupting the youth".

The experience of the index is therefore, indeed, a resource *internal* to philosophy. But this experience, in another way, is no stranger to ontology. The index is indeed part of ontology: mathematics is sufficient to deal with it, albeit at the cost of a highly complex theory of infinities, as *The Immanence of Truths* endeavours to demonstrate. But where does philosophical experience itself, through which the index presents itself, situate itself? I believe that it resides *precisely in the necessary ontological aporia of the Absolute*, itself indispensable to the being of the index. For this aporia discloses the ontological and non-ontological character of V, which one cannot say is nor say is not, and which in this way is graspable as *condition* of saying being without its own involvement. To put it otherwise: the truth procedures (love, art, science,



politics) advance according to the rhythm of the event and the patient work of faithful investigations to attest to them in the situation. But the philosopher, he, who does not have to traverse these events in the field of their own thought, assembles them through *retrospective* experience of the truths that *have-taken-place*. Non-empirical experiences of their index, which, as experiences and not as discourse, condition the very birth of the logos without belonging to it. And this experience, although outside of being [*hors-être*] (outside of the concept [*hors concept*]), is not without relation to being, because it consists of the only adequate mode of access to the Absolute: not being, nor non-being, because it is anterior to finite or infinite sets, and makes them possible as their Place of unfolding.

This experience of the index could therefore clear the Badiouian philosopher from the suspicion of arbitrariness or of political suture, because it is indeed an experience of the thing itself: namely, that there is *manifestly* something of the Absolute - past masterpieces that truth procedures could eternally re-actualize. And from that, neither category theory, nor the axiomatic of the constructible, nor a non-constructible separated from the theory of large cardinals, can deliver its full ontology. There would therefore be in this thought, at the end of its course, something of a form of transcendence, but philosophical and not religious. For although the grasping of the generic (more exactly: of its *there is*) precedes discourse, it is indissociable from a patient discipline of past truths which will make it ever more exacting as to the detection of future truths. The philosopher starts out from this manifestation of ancient truths, which he collects without ever being chosen.

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It may well be that there is in Badiou a non-empirical experience of V as condition of the concept, just as there existed in his forerunners a non-empirical experience of the One as condition of *logos*. If this were the case, Platonism, in the *Being and Event* trilogy, would very well have known, as we have supposed, a second complete cycle of existence after that of ancient Neoplatonism - from the Idea to its non-discursive and even non-ideal Condition. A cycle summarized in a unique work which has passed from the multiple of being to the Vacuum of truths. A Neoplatonism of the multiple that experiments with and celebrates the infra-conceptual Void of past splendours, to rise up towards the contemplation of all eternally incomplete works, from fallow loves to the communism of the Idea.

Translated by Heather H. Yeung

- 1 Author's Note: this article is from a conference of the 1st October 2018 at the Théâtre de la Commune (Aubervilliers) at the time of the study days on the *Immanence of Truths* (Journées d'études sur *L'immanence des vérités*).
- 2 Badiou 2022 (Badiou 2018). Translator's Note: all references insofar as such translations exist are first given to the English versions of a work, with QM's reference to the French version of a work preceding parenthetically; any discrepancies arising from translation salient to the argument of this essay are duly noted.
- 3 Nietzsche 1911: 9 (Nietzsche 1974: § 44).
- 4 Badiou 2022: p.232 (Badiou 2018: p.262).
- 5 Badiou 2005: p.4 (Badiou 1988: p.10).
- 6 Badiou 2006 (Badiou 2008a).
- 7 My tr. (HY): "L'ontologie prescrite par la théorie des catégories, détermine l'être comme acte, rapport, mouvement." Badiou 1994: p.4. QM's note continues: Page 8 indicates an explicit reconciliation with the ontology of Bergson and Deleuze with regard to the notion of categorical identity, thought as an "interruption of movement" (morphism of a term to itself). A version of this course has also been published as Badiou 2024.(Tr. note: another (English) version as Badiou 2014)
- 8 Cf. Badiou 1995. Here, Badiou affirms that "if set theory is an ontological decision, topos theory is a logical description of possible ontologies [...]" (p.76, HY tr.). However this "logic", he adds, "is limited to philosophical options of either the Aristotelian or Leibnizian type" (p.73, HY tr.).
- 9 Badiou 2011: p.176.
- 10 Badiou 2005: pp.281-285 (Badiou 1988: pp.311-315). Meditation 27.
- 11 "All of classical metaphysics conspires for [this orientation], even in the mode of communist eschatology" Badiou 2005: p.284. (Badiou 1988: p.314).
- 12 Badiou 2005: p.283. (Badiou 1988: pp. 313-314).
- 13 Badiou 2005: p.283. (Badiou 1988: p. 313).
- 14 Cf. Badiou 2022: pp. 238-236 (Badiou 2018: pp. 257-277).
- 15 Badiou 2005: p.283 (Badiou 1988: p.313).
- 16 Badiou 2022: pp. 66-68 (Badiou 2018: pp. 67-70).
- 17 Badiou 2022: p.232 (Badiou 2018: p. 262).
- 18 Cf. Badiou 2022 (Badiou 2018), Section 3, chapters C8, C9, and C10.
- 19 Cf. the seminar of 1992-1993: Badiou 2015 (forthcoming Badiou 2026).
- 20 This is to trace Walter Benjamin's first aphorism in "On the Concept of History", where the chess player is historical materialism, and the dwarf theology. Benjamin 2003: p.389 (Benjamin 2000: 427-428).
- 21 Badiou 1999: p.61 (Badiou 1989: pp.41)
- 22 Ibid, pp.63-65 (pp.42-44).
- 23 Badiou 1996: p.6. HY tr.
- 24 Cf. Althusser 1971 (Althusser 1968).
- 25 See also: Althusser 1990: 75-78 (Althusser 1967: pp.15-19); and 'Elements of Self Criticism' in Althusser 1976: pp. 105-150 (the titular section of Althusser 1972).
- 26 Badiou 2022 (2018): Section II.
- 27 Badiou 2022: 43 (2018: p.40)
- 28 This demonstration is recapitulated in the three volumes of the trilogy: Badiou 2005: 275-277 (1988: pp.304-306), 2008a: 109-111 (2006: pp. 119-121), 2022: pp.60-63 (2018: pp.59-60).
- 29 Badiou 2022: pp.261-262 (2018: pp.296-297).
- 30 Badiou 2022: p.252 (2018: pp.284-5).
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Badiou 2022: p.61 (2018: p.60).
- 33 Badiou 2022: p.43 (2018: p.40).
- 34 Badiou 2022: pp.61-62 (2018: p.61)
- 35 Badiou 2022: p.258 (2018: p.292).
- 36 Nietzsche 1989 (Nietzsche 2008).
- 37 QM footnote: "Dans le contexte du "relativisme langagier" qui a marqué l'entrée du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le relativisme culturel, on a pu dire que V n'était qu'une fiction un être du langage. J'ai moi-même flirté avec cette facilité" [In the context of the "linguistic turn" that marked the 20th century's entrance into cultural relativism, it was suggested that V was nothing but a fiction, a being of language. I myself sometimes flirted with that facile characterization]. Badiou 2022 p.43 (2018: p.40). Tr. note: QM modifies "tournant langagier" to "relativisme langagier" here.
- 38 Badiou 2005: p.277 (1988: pp.305-306).
- 39 Badiou 2022: p.452 (2018: p. 517). On the definition of the index: ibid pp.451-452 (p.516).
- 40 Cf. Badiou 2022: p.115-119 (2018: pp.124-130), "[From the dialectic of the Same and the Other to] the theory of the three types of negation".
- 41 Badiou 2022 pp.109-110 (2018: pp.118-119)
- 42 Badiou 2005 (1988): Meditations 4 and 5.
- 43 Tr. n.: translation modified from Badiou 2022, which renders Badiou 2018 "La revanche du Parménide" as "Parmenides' Revenge" (p.405) which neater translation nonetheless obviates the aspects of *revanche* QM quietly mobilizes here - as reprisal, requital, vindication, or rematch, as much as of eye-for-an-eye vengeance.
- 44 Badiou 2008b: pp.7-8 (1990: pp.17-18)
- 45 Badiou 2022: pp.39-40 (2018: pp. 36-37).
- 46 On this history, see, for example Brisson preface to Fauquier 2018: pp.11-14.
- 47 Badiou 2022: p.39 (Badiou 2018: 36) Tr. note: I have translated QM here ("adéquate depuis toujours à la subjectivité soumise à la finitude passive"), which corresponds in Badiou 2018 to "la résignation stoïcienne, laquelle, depuis toujours, est la subjectivité adéquate à la finitude", rendered in Badiou 2022 as: "stoic resignation, which has always been the subjectivity that corresponds to finitude".
- 48 My tr (HY). Brisson preface to Fauquier 2018: 12.
- 49 Fauquier 2018: pp.179-180.

50 Badiou 2022 p.40 (2018: 37).

51 My tr (HY). Badiou 2022: p.96 translates “[de] croûtes et de navets” (Badiou 2018: p.103), colourful pejorative words for dud artworks, as “second and third-rate paintings”.

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