

Depending on Inconsistency: Badiou's Answer to the "Guiding Question of All Contemporary Philosophy"

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*Sur les inconsistances
Sappuyer.*

Our question concerns the relation between what *is* and what *happens*, between being and event. It involves, in turn: a presumption, a rivalry, an implication, a parenthesis, a comparison, a formulation, a solution, an example, an interruption, and a consequence.¹

The **presumption** concerns the ontological primacy of the one or the multiple. Is the unit (*a* thing, a body, an entity, an identity, ...) the fundamental category of being? A philosophy that says yes to this question will agree with Leibniz, that what is not a being, or *one* being, is not a proper being at all. Such a philosophy will adopt among its central concerns the distinction, identification, and definition of individual entities or beings. It will be careful to supervise the appropriate means of representing such individuals, of discerning their characteristic features and guarding against their misrepresentation. It will seek to delimit, for each class of individuals, legitimate from illegitimate methods of description or analysis. Such, we might say, is the spontaneous philosophy of most contemporary work in cultural and literary studies—work marked by the effort to map complex identities or itineraries, to cultivate more sensitive forms of recognition and representation, more nuanced appreciations of context and perspective, and so on.

What about the alternative? What if multiplicity rather than unity is primary? Plato foresees the obvious consequence in his *Parmenides*: if the one is not, then any given instance of being must figure as "lacking oneness," as "limitless multiplicity."² Disqualification of the one will require, as a matter of course, that the multiple itself be thought as "without-one" [*sans-un*], as without constituent units or elements. Such

multiplicity will have to be thought in terms of a “process of limitless self-differentiation.” It will figure as “intrinsic self-dissemination” (TW 42). After Plato, this is what Lucretius anticipates with his vision of a boundless, inexhaustible scattering of space, “without limit in every direction.”³ Badiou accepts this radical disorientation of being as the exclusive ontological dimension of his philosophy.

If then the one can be said to be at all, it will only be as the derivative *result* of an operation performed upon this multiplicity. Rather than primary or constituent, every one should rather be thought in terms of a more fundamental making-one, a “one-ing” or one-ifying. Every unit is just the unifying of a multiplicity that is itself non-unified.

All contemporary philosophy worthy of the name, Badiou maintains, concurs in this decision to presume the “radical originality of the multiple.”⁴

The **rivalry** that arises at this point is with Heidegger. Badiou recognizes the importance of Heidegger’s attempt to depose the one (i.e., the entity, or individual beings) in favor of an exposure to being withdrawn from its identification as being-this or being-that, from its reduction to *quidditas*. He shares Heidegger’s desire to break with metaphysics insofar as metaphysics can be defined as “the commandeering of being by the one,” the subordination of being to the “normative function [of] ... the one as unifying unity.”⁵ The reign of metaphysics involves the oblivion of being insofar as this preoccupation with the discerning of individual beings conceals and then erases “the initial or inaugural movement of the disclosure of being.” So far so good. But Heidegger then goes on to link the metaphysical rule of the one to “darkening of the world,” a darkening he further associates with “the flight of the gods, the destruction of the Earth, the vulgarization of man, the preponderance of the mediocre.”⁶ Heidegger’s solution, of course, is to call for a return of the Gods, for the re-sacralization of the Earth, for the poetic illumination of language and man. Heidegger’s solution, in other words, involves the renewal of means whereby we might cultivate the fragile *experience* of being as other-than-one. Badiou rejects this solution *in toto*.

The question then is whether the link between being and the one can be broken in a non-Heideggerian way, and the answer will depend on whether it is possible to conceive of being in such a way as to subtract it entirely from the domain of experience. Badiou insists that any alternative, i.e., any effort to think being in terms of a kind of experience or intuition—for instance, Deleuze’s effort to think being as creative energy or vitality—will inevitably return being to the dominion of the one. A properly subtractive ontology, therefore, must proceed in line with the assumption that being conceived as multiple rather than one (i.e., being withdrawn from any reference to the one, from any notion of either a constituent unit or immanent limit) will by the same token remain inaccessible to all inspection, observation, or definition. Pure multiplicity must have no immanent limit or predicate other than multiplicity as such, since “such a constraint would confirm the power of the one as the foundation for the multiple itself” (TW 41). Because it exceeds any possible “envelope,” because there is nothing that can gather it together as *a* being (let alone as *an* object) or as an instance of any distinguishable predicate or concept, pure multiplicity can never figure as the object of experience. Multiplicity figures as in-

discernible pure and simple. (More, it must figure as *infinitely* multiple and thus in a sense as infinitely indiscernible—“since there is no immanent limit anchored in the one that could determine multiplicity as such, there is no originary principle of finitude” and infinity is simply “another name for multiplicity as such” [TW 45]).

Which means: insofar as we can speak of it at all, insofar as it can be the “object” of discourse, the being of multiplicity can figure only as the object of a pure implication. Inaccessible to any procedure that might discern or identify it, multiple being *is* only insofar as its being is *implied*.

This is the critical step taken by Badiou’s ontology: it articulates the fundamental being of being in terms of a purely **implicative** structure. Although anticipated up to a point by Plato and Lucretius (among others), Badiou claims that the only rigorous version of such a structure is the one developed by axiomatic set theory in the wake of Georg Cantor’s pioneering achievements in transfinite mathematics. Only strictly axiomatic thought makes it possible to think multiplicity without ever conceiving of it as a sort of object or referent that might then be defined, represented, experienced, intuited, and so on. “The most crucial requirement for a subtractive ontology is that its explicit presentation take the form of the axiom,” because only axiomatic thought can posit purely undefined terms and then prescribe the set of procedures or connections that might manipulate them in an internally consistent way; such manipulation exhausts all that can be said of or about these terms. The implication of an axiom can *never* become the object of a possible experience (however problematic or unsettling the nature of such experience). Only axiomatic thought, in other words, can fully subtract the entire dimension of experience or interpretation and thus “tear itself from everything that still ties it to the commonplace, to generality, which is the root of its own metaphysical temptation” (TW 44–45).

What the axioms of set theory prescribe are precisely the steps whereby, at the most abstract level of thought, any given unit or one is determined as the result of an operation which proceeds “upon” a multiplicity that is itself without-one and withdrawn from all presentation or exposure. When I count out any indifferent collection of things as so many units or “ones,” I perform an operation that “one-ifies” or treats-as-one each resultant unit. Badiou’s most basic ontological premise is that every conceivable “situation” can be considered as a collection or rather *collecting* in this sense.

Before going any further it might be worth, **parenthetically**, briefly recalling the basic features of the ontology that Badiou develops on this rudimentary basis. The key idea, we know, is that in any given collection or set, every element that counts as one unit for that set is the *result* of its being collected as one or its being put-into-one. The process that collects or counts as one the elements that belong to a numerical situation (say the situation made up of ordinary whole numbers), of course, is nothing other than the process of counting as such: this is the process determined by the basic axioms of set theory. In other situations (i.e., in situations that contain something other than merely ontological, or mathematical, elements), the process that makes-one or “structures” whatever belongs to the situation is as variable as these elements themselves. The elements that belong to the set of students, or employees, or citizens, for example, are structured by the processes and

criteria that define these groups and distinguish them from non-students, from the unemployed, from unauthorized immigrants, etc. Ontology *per se* has nothing to say about the nature of such empirical processes. But it's clear that each of the units thus collected or presented in such a set counts in the same way, precisely as one among ones. Presentation itself is always perfectly egalitarian. Insofar as it belongs to or is a member of the set, each element counts as one and no more than one.

Egalitarian presentation, however, is in every set supplemented by the re-presentation of each element, organized in such a way as to guarantee a dominant, hierarchical *order* to the structure of the set. This meta-structure is what Badiou calls the "state" of a situation. In our set of students, for instance, each counts as one in terms of his or her presentation in a classroom, but the configuration of the education system will also ensure that each student can be ranked in terms of aptitude or achievement. Some employees, likewise, will be more valuable or more productive (or more deferential) than others. In any human or historical situation, the meta-structure will be organized in such a way as to secure the stability and dominance of its ruling group, or class. An obvious example would be the set of property-owners: as far as the prevailing order of the situation is concerned, though each proprietor will be presented as one equal member of the situation, in terms of how much they own some proprietors will literally "count" more than others. Members who own the smallest discernible amount of property will count least of all.

Now in any situation made up of individual entities of this sort, what is primary is of course the definition of the unit or entity involved; insofar as we are concerned with being-this or being-that (being a student, being an employee, ...) the one prevails over the multiple. Heidegger understood this perfectly well. The great effort of Badiou's ontology is thus to ensure that when we consider only being-*as-being*, i.e., being abstracted from the definition of any entity, being withdrawn from every ontic form of this or that, then what is primary is not any sort of discernible unit but rather pure, oneless multiplicity. The task peculiar to ontology involves not the presentation of students or citizens but the presentation of presentation itself. In other words, when we count out instances of counting itself, when we count not "a student" but an abstract "one" as such, then we must either say that such ones might be the primary units of being or else that they simply figure as the result of an operation performed on some other, more fundamental multiple being. The axiomatization of set theory in the first decades of the twentieth century confirmed that only the second option can provide a coherent foundation for the basic operations of mathematics, and it's this confirmation that conditions Badiou's decision that the only truly contemporary (i.e., post-Cantorian) ontology must be an ontology of the multiple rather than the one.

We can return now to the *implied* status of this multiplicity. Just as a situation made up of students presents nothing other than students, so too a situation that counts out numbers or units will present nothing other than units. Badiou accepts this part of Leibniz's principle: although the one is not primary, all that is ever presented in any situation are units that count as one for that situation. All that can be presented (and thus experienced, observed, described, ...) in any situation are the elements that it discerns or counts as one. Since "nothing is presented that is not

counted [as one] ..., so from the inside of a situation, it is impossible to apprehend an inconsistency inaccessible to the count" (EE 65). If every such one is a result of an operation, however, it follows that the material upon which this operation operates must itself be not-one. By defining any one as the *result* of a counting-for-one we imply that "something" that it is itself not one was thereby counted, or oneified. And since we accept that only these results (or ones) can be presented in the situation, we must also accept that nothing of this "something" can ever be presented (or experienced, observed, ...).⁷ All we can say is that our most basic ontological operation, the operation whereby we present any abstract unit or one, implies that what is thus made-one, or presented, is itself not-one and without-one, without immanent limit or boundary, and thus infinitely multiple.

Perhaps the most distinctive and unusual feature of Badiou's ontology, **compared** with those of his contemporaries, is the rigor with which he maintains this strictly implicative condition. Consider a few of the usual suspects, starting with Deleuze. Insofar as he orients his philosophy in line with the "imperceptible," with counter-actualization, with the dissipation of molar or recognizable forms of identity, Deleuze is in many ways no less subtractive a thinker than Badiou. It remains the case, however, that for Deleuze what survives this subtraction is a creativity or intensity that can not only be prescribed but also *lived*, sensed, or experienced, even if it is an experience that explodes the conventional subject of experience. Much of Deleuze's work is concerned with the composition and proliferation of intensive multiplicities, i.e., the dissolution of rigid forms of identity within a multiplicity that is itself directly available (as non-unified, as non-extensional) for intuition or experience. A large part of philosophy's task here is thus to assist in the navigation *through* multiplicity as such. The same applies, roughly speaking, to the work of Michel Serres. Lyotard is perhaps a little more complicated but belongs to the same general orientation of thought. For the early Lyotard, pure multiplicity, though it evades the conventional limits of discourse, can nevertheless be *figured*; the later Lyotard will insist that though a differend cannot be represented or resolved, we can nevertheless *bear witness* to this failure of resolution. As for Derrida, surely the most "implicative" of Badiou's philosophical contemporaries: despite his critique of presence and the phenomenology associated with it, he nevertheless dwells on the urgency of paradoxical or "impossible" forms of experience—the experience of a demand that can never be met, of a responsibility that can never be endured, a necessarily "secret" pathos that resists rational articulation. Ditto Levinas. And Žižek? He has always stressed that the Real is not some positive plenitude hidden behind the obstructive screen of the Symbolic but rather a sort of kink internal to the Symbolic itself. Nevertheless, much of Žižek's work orbits around the traumatic *experience* of precisely this kink, the experience of subjects confronted by the collapse of their Symbolic mandate, by the radical destitution of their authorized identity.

Though irreducible to an experience in any ordinary phenomenological sense of the word, the central categories deployed by all these thinkers are shot through with the vehemently experiential quality of *jouissance* or its equivalent. In each case, the approach is based on a sort of obscure experience, one that conveys some sort of demand at the same time that it renders this demand essentially problematic if not

“impossible.” The paradigmatic version of this scenario is what Derrida calls, after Levinas, our infinite responsibility to “every other as altogether Other.”⁸ The effort, in short, is still to orient (critical, ethical, political, creative, ...) behavior directly in line with some intense encounter with our most essential reality, regardless of how complex or inaccessible this reality might ordinarily seem.

For Badiou, by contrast, there can be no experience of inconsistent multiplicity, and thus no question of either pathos or jouissance. Inconsistency is not only subtracted from the categories of presence or identity, it is also withdrawn from the domain of an “absent” alterity. It is as indifferent to the domain marked by a transcendent “trace” of the Other as it is to the immanent intensity of a Life that lives beyond the limits of the organism. The “experience” of inconsistency is precisely *not* an experience, but merely an implication occasioned by a momentary suspension in the rules that usually make experience intelligible.

We are now in a position, finally, to **formulate** our question. We know that Badiou takes it for granted that all genuinely contemporary philosophers agree that pure being as being (as opposed to being-this or -that) must be thought as multiple rather than one. Readers already familiar with his work will also know that for Badiou (unlike Spinoza, Heidegger, Deleuze, ...), philosophy itself is not reducible to ontology: thought is capable of thinking more than what *is*, and a truth is a matter of what *happens* before it is a matter of what *is*.⁹ But now: if the thought of being affirms the primacy of the multiple over the one, might the effort to think what happens involve reintroduction of the one?

“The guiding question of all contemporary philosophy” is precisely this: how are we to “avoid reintroducing the power of the One at that point wherein the law of the multiple begins to falter,” i.e., at the point marked by the irruption of an *event* (TW 101)?

Whatever their ontological achievements, Badiou suggest that most (if not all) contemporary philosophers have failed to meet this additional challenge. In Deleuze, for example, an account of innovation or invention, of what happens insofar as it *happens*, seems to require a distinction along Bergsonian lines between the “extensive and numerical multiplicities” of mere static being and the “intensive or qualitative multiplicities” of dynamic creation or life. As Deleuze conceives it, “an event is always the gap between two heterogeneous multiplicities,” a “fold between extensive segmentation and the intensive continuum” (TW 99). According to Badiou, it’s in this gap that Deleuze reintroduces the power of the one, i.e., of the event as the singular occasion of *an* individuation or differentiation: the “unity” of such an event is precisely not derivative but primary. Its oneness is not the result of an operation but an instance of a fully primary or constitutive force. And Badiou offers some other examples: our guiding question

is anticipated in Heidegger’s shift from *Sein* to *Ereignis*, or—switching registers—in Lacan, where it is entirely invested in the thinking of the analytical act as the eclipse of truth between a supposed and a transmissible knowledge, between interpretation and the matheme. Lacan will find himself obliged to say that though the One is not, the act nevertheless installs the One. But it is also a decisive problem for Nietzsche: if it is a question of

breaking the history of the world in two, what, in the affirmative absolute of life, is the thinkable principle that would command such a break? And it's also the central problem for Wittgenstein: how does the act open up our access to the "mystical element"—i.e., to the ethical and the aesthetic—if meaning is always captive to a proposition, or always the prisoner of grammar? (TW 101)

When they come to think the event, in other words, all of these philosophers fail to conceive of its unity as a result: banished from the domain of being, the one nevertheless returns here in the guise of an exceptional "act" or decisive "experience."

How does Badiou himself try to avoid this outcome? The problem, as he acknowledges, is very delicate. On the one hand, if we allow an *ontological* disjunction between being and event we appear condemned to follow Deleuze or Wittgenstein, and thus to reintroduce the one via the event, in its externality to mere being. On the other hand, if we absorb the event entirely within being then we seem to trap ourselves within a sort of "closed ontology" in which a break with the order of being is blocked in advance. Against Spinoza or Hegel, Badiou maintains that truth is a matter of what happens insofar as this breaks with what is. But against Deleuze, Badiou maintains that "multiplicity is axiomatically homogeneous," such that an event must figure "both as a rupture of the law of segmented multiplicities *and* as homogeneous to this law" (TW 99).

Badiou's **solution** to this double imperative is precisely to align the event with *inconsistent* multiplicity. The key to his notion of an event (and indeed to his project as a whole) is that when one occurs it is not presented as a consistent or discernible element of the situation but rather takes place as an exceptional indication of the inconsistency which, by this implication, figures as the very being of every such element. If an event occurs in a situation it occurs as something that the situation cannot count or discern. Rather than an imposing act or occurrence, an "event is always a perfect weakness because the being of an event is to disappear; the being of an event is disappearing."¹⁰ More, as far as we can know or observe any situation, including the abstract ontological situation, it is never possible to *know* anything of an event. *An event can never qualify as an experience of any sort.*¹¹

Badiou's careful reading of François Proust's partially comparable conception of the event makes this point especially clear. Since an event fails to conform to the logic that determines what can appear, what can be recognized in a situation, so then "the visibility of an event is indiscernible from an invisibility." The event appears only as "always-already-disappeared" and "precisely because its whole being is its disappearing, what is at stake in the event itself has nothing to do with an experience." But this disappearing—and this is where Badiou begins to distance himself from the pathos of Proust's own emphasis on the passive *reception* of an evental affect—is also the occasion of a "radical power of affirmation" insofar as it "bequeaths the imperative to weave a truth" from its trace.¹²

Admittedly, Badiou's frequent reference to an event as an "exposure" or "revelation" of inconsistency invites some confusion here, as does my use, in the preceding paragraph, of the word "indication." If you ask *what* is thereby exposed or revealed, however, the answer is just what you would expect: nothing at all. All that can ever

be shown of inconsistency is that which figures as empty or void in a situation, i.e., that which by the criteria of the situation counts as nothing rather than as one. The void presents nothing other than “inconsistency according to a situation” (EE 69), and an event is whatever manages to indicate or “reveal” this void.¹³ On at least one occasion Badiou says that an event “connotes” the void (EE 204), which is perhaps the least ambiguous way of putting it. In any case, if an event is to be defined as an experience, this “experience” will figure only, very literally, as the experience of nothing. Such is the difference between Badiou’s notion of an event and that of Deleuze (for whom it is a positive act of creation, or differentiation) or Lyotard (for whom an event, though it cannot be represented in the normal sense of the word, can nevertheless be experienced as a “sliding” or “fall,” as a moment of “vertigo”¹⁴).

However: though it is not an experience, an event is clearly not itself nothing. It can “reveal” only nothing, only the void of the situation, but this revealing as such is precisely not nothing but a *happening* (more precisely, an event both exposes the void of the situation and “interposes itself between the void and itself” [EE 203]). The event itself (the revealing, or exposing) occurs as an as-yet indiscernible or unidentifiable “addition” to the situation. Its indiscernible quality deprives this occurring of any phenomenological or experiential intensity, but its occurring can still be affirmed as real or *true*.

An event then is not mere non-being, it happens (and by happening, it “mobilizes the elements of its site”), but it cannot be described as an experience. So rather than describe it as an exposure or revelation it might be better, instead, to say that an event is the *occasion of an implication*. An event is simply an opportunity for some members of a situation, if they so decide, to affirm that which they can never experience or observe, namely the inconsistency that they and all other members of the situation indifferently and indiscernibly are. If these members take up this implication in a consequential way (and thus become “subjects” in its wake), it will entail fundamental transformation of the way a situation discerns its elements: such a transformation, of course, is what Badiou calls a truth.

This is why, initiated in the wake of such an event, “a truth does not draw its support from consistency, but from inconsistency. It is not a matter of formulating correct judgments, but of producing the murmur of the indiscernible” (PM 57). And this is why Badiou associates political justice, for example, with egalitarian *indiscernment*:

We have too often wished that justice would act as the foundation for the consistency of the social bond, when it can only name the most extreme moments of inconsistency; for the effect of the egalitarian axiom is to undo bonds, to dissocialize thought, and to affirm the rights of the infinite and the immortal against finitude, against being-for-death. Within the subjective dimension of the declaration of equality, nothing else is of interest save the universality of this declaration, and the active consequences to which it gives rise. Justice is the philosophical name of the inconsistency, for the State or society, of any egalitarian political orientation.¹⁵

Grounded only on an the implied status of that “unnamable being which is the very being of that-which-is . . . , art, science, and politics change the world, not by what they discern in it, but through what they indiscern [*par ce qu’ils y indiscernent*].”¹⁶

Any such indiscerning, however, always takes place within a precise situation of thought, i.e., in confrontation with particular mechanisms of discernment. To say that a truth is based on inconsistency always means, more precisely, that it is based on inconsistency *according to* a particular situation, or on the void of that situation. Badiou’s most fundamental ontological assumption, remember, is that everything *is* according to a situation, including the implication of that inconsistency which cannot itself ever be presented in any situation. Inconsistency is the implication that before the count the one is not, but the count itself clearly precedes this implication; there is nothing prior to the count. So the implication itself, we might say, will always be specific to a situation. (And this difference might be enough to “distinguish,” if we wanted to, the inconsistent being of human beings from say the inconsistent being of other kinds of being. There is nothing “in” inconsistency *per se*, on the other hand, that might serve as the positive basis for such distinction. The absolute indistinction that inconsistency *is* can itself only be evoked in the ontological situation, precisely, which is the situation purged of all reference to being-this or -that, i.e., of being-human, being-material, etc.).

This is an argument, we might note in passing, for the necessarily exceptional nature of consequential change. We know that a situation both presents a certain set of elements and then represents them in such a way that some privileged elements “count” more than others. Badiou’s point is that the only process that might allow all elements to count the same (i.e., that might allow equality to serve as the rule of representation) must be a process grounded not on the discernible qualities of any particular element in the situation, however worthy or admirable that element might be, but rather on affirmation of that indiscernible reality implied as the very being of *every* element of the situation. Since such a process cannot begin with an engagement with this or that element of the situation, it must begin instead with the mere occasion for such affirmation, i.e., with an event. Transformation of the prevailing order of the capitalist situation, for instance, will not proceed simply on the basis of a process that strengthens or empowers the discernible element known as the working class: it can only occur as the invention of new ways of indiscerning people in general, as the development of newly consequential ways of subtracting people from the various distinctions that serve to differentiate them in line with the interests of the status quo. (It remains the case, however, that in the capitalist situation such indiscernment will *begin* in the vicinity of the working class, insofar as that class gathers together the minimal or “fundamental” unit of what counts in that situation, namely property or capital: it’s for this reason that the working class is what Badiou calls the “evental site” of this situation, and thus concentrates its “historicity,” the location of its possible transformation [EE 199]).

A truth interrupts or dissolves the force of all established distinctions, so as to allow the elements of a situation to be represented simply as the indifferent, un-distinguishable members of a *generic* set.

But how then can an event “connote” inconsistency? Since a situation presents only inconsistent elements, since ontology only ever encounters or “experiences” consistent multiplicities (i.e., since mathematics only ever deals with discernible numbers), what does it mean to say that something could ever “indicate” inconsistency as such? Since a situation only presents whatever it can discern as an element, whatever it can count as one, what allows us to affirm, even by mere implication, the oneless multiplicity of that which is counted or discerned? There is just one possible answer: only **interruption** of the process that treats or counts as one the elements of a situation can offer an occasion to affirm that which is thereby counted or oneified. The basic, literally elementary operation that allows a unit to be distinguished as a unit, as *one* unit, must be thrown into momentary crisis.

Take the example of our propertied situation. The basic operation here is the conversion of any indifferent or inconsistent “stuff” (a piece of land, an object, a resource, a product, ...) into units of property. This operation is bound up, of course, with a whole series of complex historical processes (appropriation, commodification, development of the legal system, etc.), but as far as analysis of the resultant set is concerned it can be treated as a literally elementary procedure. The most basic unit of this situation will be the simplest or smallest instance of “property-ification”—in the case of landed property, we might say that a “plot of land” is what serves as this most basic unit, such that the rest of the situation is made up of any number of plots or combinations of plots. Each such combination will endure as a stable part of the situation as a whole insofar as the elementary integrity of what it includes (i.e., individual plots) remains undisputed. This situation might be thrown into crisis, then, not through the revalorization of this or that particular plot but if the very notion of “treating land as something divisible into commercial plots” is itself threatened—if the effort to divide up elements of land stumbles against a valorization of land that resists such discernment, for instance its valorization as sacred, or ancestral, or communal.

More precisely, what happens in such a moment involves a crisis in the *foundation* of a situation. In the terms Badiou borrows from set theory, this involves suspension of the “axiom of foundation.” This axiom simply stipulates that whatever belongs to a situation belongs as one unit or as a combination of such units (two units, three units, four ...), where the fundamental unit is precisely whatever qualifies as “one” rather than as none or as something mysteriously “less than one.” A situation made up words and combinations of words has, as its foundational unit or element, precisely the word—and not the letter, or phoneme, or gesture, ... The situation of landed property includes plots of land that are or can be incorporated into ever larger divisions of land; each combination, conversely, is “founded” on the unity of the smallest discernible plot. A plot thus figures as the “elementary particle” of this whole system, beneath which there are not still smaller units or sub-particles (portions of earth, patches of ground, ...) but rather, so far as *this* propertied situation is concerned, nothing at all. The orderly sequence of successive sequences is what guarantees the stability of a situation, founded on the integrity of its simplest unit. So long as the axiom of foundation holds good, in other words, it ensures that each discernible element of the situation is made up of other elements of the situ-

ation, and that this applies right down to the most basic such element. One consequence of this arrangement is that no element can then be made up simply of itself, i.e., that no element can belong to itself.¹⁷ The most basic element will just be the one to which *no* other discernible element belongs (the plot to which no smaller plot belongs).

What happens with an event, then, involves the suspension of such well-founded inclusion. Something happens which cannot be discerned in terms of any combination of the distinguishable units of a situation. Lacking any foundation in the situation, an event appears as a pure supplement, a moment of pure chance that tears an aspect of the situation—say an exceptional “piece” of land that cannot be bounded or “plotted” in the usual sense—away from the prevailing order of inclusion. “What happens—and, inasmuch as it happens, goes beyond its multiple-being—is precisely this: a fragment of multiplicity is wrested from all inclusion. In a flash, this fragment ... affirms its unfoundedness, its pure advent, which is intransitive to the place in which ‘it’ comes.” And since it has come from no discernible place in the situation, since there is nothing in or about it that allows us to connect it to an identifiable cause or foundation, this “fragment thereby also affirms its belonging to itself, since this coming can originate from nowhere else.”¹⁸ To be sure, Badiou’s theory of the evental site ensures that this coming will itself have a location in the situation, it stipulates that a crisis of foundation is possible only with respect to the most elementary unit of the situation (that unit to which no other units belong), but the coming or happening *per se* is emphatically *not* a consequence or corollary of this site (EE 215). To finish with the example of a landed situation: in some versions of this situation we could say that the place (the evental site) where the normal division and commodification of land might be challenged will be marked by the inclusion of aboriginal “pieces” of land (pieces which are technically included in a situation without individually belonging to it). But in order for this challenge to become effective something else must happen—an appropriation must be blocked, a sale interrupted, a claim made or refused, a stand taken and upheld, etc.¹⁹

Take one last example, the one provided by the British situation. This situation presents or discerns individual Britons on the basis of elementary criteria of birth or citizenship (and so enumerates them all, indifferently, on the basis of identity cards or tax records, etc.), and it further represents or classifies them according to the criteria that order the situation in line with the interests of its ruling or dominant group (such that these individuals all count for more or less in terms of wealth, political influence, cultural impact, etc.). The basic operation here is the one that treats an inconsistent human “someone” as *a* Briton; the most “elementary” unit of the situation is not a person but a *British* person. An occurrence will only qualify as an event for this situation if it throws into question the discernible qualities of “British” as opposed to non-British, and thereby allows members of the British situation to consider, in a consequential way, what it means to be a person of *any* or *no* nationality. For instance: however unrealistic it might seem at present, it’s at least possible to imagine a process which might allow us to consider asylum seekers precisely not as “asylum seekers,” not as supplicants begging for inclusion within the well-founded

British situation, but simply as people *indistinguishable* in political terms from those already included in that situation.

To return now to the thread of our discussion: since it “surges up as such beyond every count,” since it is unfounded and thus indiscernible according to the elementary procedures whereby a situation identifies its elements, so then “it cannot be said that the event is One” (TW 101). An event as such *is*, like everything else in Badiou’s system, a multiplicity or set (more precisely, a set to which belong both the elements of its site, and itself). As with any set, the “one-ness” of an event considered in this sense is not primary but derivative, it is the result of a process that makes-one. However, in the exceptional case of an event, the process that makes-one is *also* this one itself. An event is precisely an element that belongs to itself, hence an element that founds itself. (This is precisely why “ontology rejects it” [EE 205]). We must say then that an event is both one *and* not-one. Badiou opts to call it an “ultra-One,” where “the essence of the ultra-one is the Two” (EE 228). An event is precisely *two* rather than one.

Appropriately, an event is “two” in two senses. On the one hand, since it takes place as something that the situation cannot recognize or discern, the occurrence of an event is guaranteed only by the intervention of those who affirm this occurrence—an event is thus the occasion for the two of a radical decision, the separation of *for* from *against*, the opening of a gap with no middle ground (EE 229). And on the other hand, an event takes place within that element of the situation (its evental site) whose own elements remain indistinguishable for that situation: an event occurs within a space that appears undifferentiated or anonymous. But insofar as its occurrence is declared and maintained by the subjects who constitute themselves in its wake, it duly occurs as *an* event, as something identified by a proper name. An event thus figures as “an interval more than a term, it establishes itself, through the retroactive intervention [of its subjects], between the anonymous void that borders its site and the in-addition of a name [*l’en-plus d’un nom*]” (EE 228).

Neither reducible to mere being nor wholly other than being, an event thus appears as an instance of “trans-being.” Insofar as it happens, an event *happens* as one; insofar as it is, an event *is* not-one. Badiou’s entire project endures in the tension between this happening and this is, between this one and not-one. Between the two there is nothing but inconsistency, and inconsistency is the object of unverifiable implication alone. It’s on the sole basis of this most insubstantial of foundations that Badiou erects his whole conception of truth.

To put it in conventional Kantian terms: we *are* inconsistency (i.e., pure indetermination or unbounded freedom) but we can never experience what we are, we can never have some “supersensible” glimpse of our noumenal reality. We will never have some radical encounter, via our finitude or mortality, with our ownmost being. Instead, an event offers an opportunity for us to acknowledge an implication of what we are, and a truth is then the rational, inventive working out, step by step, of the consequences of this implication. A truth will allow for a new, as yet indiscernible representation of inconsistency with the terms available within the situation.

A truth is an infinite affirmation whose only ground is provided by the ephemeral occasion for a pure implication. A truth is a prescription occasioned by an implication.

This accounts for one of the most characteristic qualities of Badiou's work (and indeed of Badiou himself)—its combination of an almost imperturbable enthusiasm or serenity with an unapologetically militant conception of change. What is perhaps most distinctive about Badiou's philosophy is its effort to conceive of subjectivation in terms that are constitutively indifferent to the world as such: every subjectivation takes place in the world but proceeds independently of any mediation from the world. Subjectivation involves the evacuation of worldly distinctions. Though it invites pertinent comparisons with Saint Paul or Pascal, this indifference is obviously a consequence of Badiou's axiomatic or mathematical orientation. Mathematical thought, at least the classical version of it affirmed by Badiou, is from start to finish independent of both experience and world, and the paradigm of Badiou's notion of a subject has always been the subject not of religious fervor but of a mathematical proposition—a subject without identity or depth, a subject entirely absorbed in or carried by the articulation of a particular chain of reasoning, without any trace of existential "pathos" or "remainder."²⁰

It is this independence that allows Badiou to conceive of subject and truth in purely **consequential** terms. Since there can be no experience (and thus no remembrance or commemoration) of an event, a truth persists in the exclusive dimension of the present, the consequential present. Dependent on nothing other than an implied inconsistency, Badiou's notion of truth has always been carried by an elementary confidence in itself, rather than any sort of belief in something else.

Subtracted from the logic of foundation or cause, a truth is a sequence sustained entirely by its effects. ■

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- 1 Pending the translation of Badiou's *Being and Event*, I have instead based most of what follows on two decisive texts in the very useful new collection of Badiou's *Theoretical Writings*: "The Question of Being Today" (39–48) and "The Event as Trans-Being" (97–102). The epigraph is from Paul Celan, quoted in Badiou, "L'age des poètes," in *La politique des poètes: Pourquoi des poètes en temps de détresse*, ed. Jacques Rancière (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), 31; also quoted in MP 53; IT 78; PM 58; AM 118. [For a list of Badiou's principal texts and their corresponding abbreviations, see the introduction to this issue.—Ed.] I'm grateful to Alberto Toscano for his penetrating comments on a first version of this essay.
- 2 Plato, *Parmenides*, 144b, quoted in TW 42.
- 3 Lucretius, quoted in TW 41. Badiou quotes Lucretius again in his essay on "The Event as Trans-Being": "From all sides there opens up an infinite space / when the atoms, innumerable and limitless, / turn in every direction in an eternal movement" (TW 102).
- 4 Badiou, "Untitled Response," in *Témoigner du différend* by Francis Guibal and Jacob Rogozinski (Paris: Osiris, 1989), 109; cf. D 12. Badiou refers here to Lacan, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Derrida. This and all translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, "Sketches for a History of Being as Metaphysics," in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (NY: Harper & Row, 1973), 55, quoted in TW 39.

- 6 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 38, quoted in TW 40.
- 7 Though it cannot be presented or perceived as such, pure or inconsistent “multiplicity is the inevitable predicate of what is structured, since structuration, i.e., the counting-for-one, is an effect. . . . Inconsistency, as pure multiplicity, is simply the presumption that, prior to or above the count, the one is not” (EE 32, 65).
- 8 Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 78; Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 68. Françoise Proust’s call to “resist the irresistible” is another variant on this schema.
- 9 See in particular EE 391.
- 10 “The event is nothing—just a sort of illumination—but the consequences in the situation of the event” are entirely variable (“Ontology and Politics,” IT 187).
- 11 “If the word ‘experience’ means anything,” in Badiou’s system, “it designates presentation as such” (EE 429). And an event indicates only “the inadmissible empty point in which nothing is presented” (PP 115; cf. EE 227).
- 12 Badiou, “Sur le livre de Françoise Proust, *Le Ton de l’histoire*,” *Les temps modernes* 565/566 (1993): 240–42. It’s essential to maintain, Badiou continues, that while an event involves “*déliasion*, the undoing of every related or bound figure of objectivity,” it does not thereby confront us with the “raw,” unbound stuff or essence of being, the “other side of being, as if the unappearing was the ‘heart’ of the appearing.” No, an event is a supplemental implication, nothing more (or less) than an “incalculable excess,” and it says nothing about any allegedly sublime “depth” in being (240). Andrew Gibson demonstrated the pertinence of a comparison between Badiou and Proust in a talk given at London Metropolitan University, 15 December 2003.
- 13 See EE 204; PM 88; AM 134.
- 14 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), 135.
- 15 And he continues, quoting Celan again: “in matters of justice, where it is upon inconsistency that we must lean or rest, it is true, as true as a truth can be, that it all depends on you” (IT 77–78).
- 16 EE 377. “Since the truth of the situation is its inconsistency, a truth of this being will present itself as indifferent [*quelconque*] multiplicity, as an anonymous part [or subset] of the situation, consistency reduced to presentation as such, without predicate A truth is this minimal consistency (a part, an immanence without concept) which indicates in the situation the inconsistency that makes its being” (MP 90). Or again: “Since the groundless ground of what is presented is inconsistency, a truth will be that which, from within the presented and as a *part* of the presented, brings forth [*fait advenir au jour*] the inconsistency upon which, ultimately, the consistency of presentation depends” (MP 88).
- 17 Sticking with our example, we might say that the real estate market depends precisely on the impossibility of any one owner buying *all* land, every piece of land, as a single plot: the set made up of all plots of land cannot be itself a plot in the commercial sense of the term.
- 18 Badiou gives as his examples, here: “a certain modulation in a symphony by Haydn, a particular command in the Paris Commune, a specific anxiety preceding a declaration of love, a unique intuition by Gauss or Galois” (TW 101).

- 19 For a useful analysis of an example along these lines, see Oliver Feltham's analysis of the landmark claim initiated by Eddie Mabo in Australia. Feltham, *As Fire Burns: Of Ontology, Praxis and Functional Work* (PhD thesis: Deakin University, 2000), 132ff.
- 20 There is perhaps no contemporary thinker more opposed to Badiou's orientation, on this precise point, than Giorgio Agamben, who seeks to articulate or bear witness to "that which remains" after the cancellation of all presentable distinctions.