

BADIOU BEYOND FORMALIZATION? ON THE ETHICS OF THE SUBJECT

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The paper addresses the tension between Badiou's claim that his theory of the subject must be considered first of all as a 'formal' theory, and a certain genealogical history of his notion of the subject. In the latter case, it seems that a very specific political experience has played a crucial role (at least) for Badiou in his early conception of the subject. More particularly, the paper addresses this tension from an ethical perspective. As for the claim repeatedly made in his work (that the subject poses in the first place a formal problem), one can identify an implicitly ethical disposition in the formalization itself. At the same time, there are several formulations in his writings that seem to exceed the formal level. The paper examines four concepts or formulations appearing in his three main books (*Theory of the Subject*, *Being and Event*, *Logics of Worlds*) that seem to express a more or less explicit ethical dimension, namely his theory of affects, the principle 'to decide the undecidable', the contrast between 'fidelity' and 'confidence' and Badiou's answer to the question *What is it to live?* The paper's aim is to pinpoint the difference between the ethical stance implied in the formal description of Badiou's theory of the subject and an explicit 'ethics of the subject'. The author's hypothesis is that the latter embodies a dimension that remains tacit in the formal expression of the subject's 'household' alone: Badiou's subjectivity itself.

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Introduction. In his 2006 *Logics of Worlds* (LW), Alain Badiou writes that his theory of the subject has to be considered a *formal* theory. With this claim, Badiou opposes three conceptions of the subject that were omnipresent at the moment he was introduced to philosophy: a phenomenological one that designated the register of 'experience', a (neo-) Kantian one that designated the categorical imperative, and an certain structuralist, Althusserian one that was understood as ideological interpellation (Badiou 2009b, 47-48). In the light of the main claim of this book – "there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths" (Ibid., 4) – the figure of the subject designates the affirmation of this 'except that'. The characterization as an exception means that in his work the subject's "mark is certainly not to be found in pronouns – the 'I' or 'we' of first persons". (Ibid., 45) In the language of 1982 *Theory of the Subject* (TS), the subject's exceptional status designates in this regard an 'outplace'. In both TS and 1988 *Being and Event* (BE),

Badiou speaks in this way of “the *discovery* of the subject”¹ (Badiou 2009a, 284).

Badiou’s requirement that his theory of the subject has to be *formal* starts from a relatively simple premise he shares with Lacan: “a theory of the subject cannot be the theory of an object”. (Badiou 2009b, 49) He claims moreover, as he showed extensively in TS, that the basis of this formal theory of the subject must be *materialist*. In order to do so, Badiou has to provide a link between this formal theory of the subject and its materialist conditions. Although these conditions cannot be part of the formal theory itself, they appear in this way always linked up with a subject. According to LW, a first material condition of a subject is the occurrence of a body, a second that an event has taken place. Under these conditions (body and evental trace), Badiou defines the formal character of his theory of the subject as “a theory of operations (figures) and destinations (acts)” (Ibid., 50). It is exactly because of these structurally ‘separated’, material conditions that Badiou is able to concentrate on the question of formalization.

At the same time, Badiou’s theory of the subject has a certain genealogical story. Along his oeuvre, Badiou importantly mirrors his own subject notion to that of Lacan.² In psychoanalysis, however, the subject is in the first place a concept that was first derived from a clinical practice by Freud. The theoretical concept of the ‘subject of the unconscious’ Lacan articulates throughout all of his seminars and *Écrits* is therefore first ‘discovered’ in his analytical clinic. In the same way, Badiou’s formal theory of the subject in TS witnesses a certain political history: his subject notion is the result of a revolutionary practice. It is exactly in this way that the structural linking up of psychoanalysis and politics in TS makes sense for Badiou: both can be considered attempts to formalize a certain history of the subject. And more importantly, it makes clear to what extent Badiou endorses his philosophical project up to the point of his own subjectivity.

In this paper, I will problematize the tension between Badiou’s persistent desire to develop a formal theory of the subject and this genealogical footnote.³ I will imply that in particular in the field of ethics, this tension reappears. On the one hand, it can be claimed that a formalization of the subject unavoidably implies a certain ethical disposition: the

¹ See also: “A subject is nowhere given (to knowledge). It must be found” (Badiou 2009a, 278).

² “Whether it is a matter of the subject in the field of politics or of the subject of psychoanalysis, for these two orders – are there any others? – are those in which the question is most developed, and despite the fact that apparently they put at our disposal two specified terms for the subjective – class in one case, the unconscious in the other – we always proceed in a way that is askew, by a theory of the space (capital, the symbolic) in which we investigate, in a retroactive interference, the symptoms (revolt, neurosis) to which no justice can be done without situating the outplace” (Ibid., 285). Or in LW: “We must recognize that we are indebted to Lacan – in the wake of Freud, but also of Descartes – for having paved the way for a formal theory of the subject whose basis is materialist” (Badiou 2009b, 48).

³ This corresponds to a question Badiou poses himself in a 1999 interview with Bruno Bosteels. In this way, my argument addresses a question that Badiou asks himself: “At bottom, what is the internal link between the traversing of the Maoist experience in all its dimensions and the arrangement of thought (...)? And is this link of such a nature as to enable us truly and persuasively to isolate it, in the way I have attempted to do, starting in *Being and Event*, so as to reconstruct all the elements while separating them from their political genealogy?” (Bosteels 2011, 298).

specific way in which Badiou formalizes the subject gives an answer to the question what has to be done (by this subject). In a broader sense, this hypothesis thus witnesses a specific relation between experience and thought which is “a matter of transmitting the experimental adherences of the very concept itself and how the concept is a result, in the sense of being a result of experiences” (Bosteels 2011, 299). On the other hand, there are some ethical formulations along his work which seem to exceed this perspective of formal description. Since these seem to address something behind or beyond the merely formal level, they reveal a hint of Badiou’s desire to put the subject central stage in his philosophical investigation. I will claim that these formulations witness the (political) genealogy of this subject notion more insistently precisely because they seem to come back to the point of his own subjectivity. I will call the first – an implied ethical direction in the particular formalization of the subject – an ‘implicitly’ ethical disposition, while I will consider the concepts and formulations that seem to go beyond this merely formal level part of an ‘explicit’ ethics of the subject.

In this paper, three points along TS, BE and LW will be pinpointed where this difference can be identified. In (i)-(ii), I will contrast Badiou’s theory of the affect, which leaves its ethical weight implicit, with the decisive ethical formula ‘to decide the undecidable’. In (iii), I will claim that the difference between Badiou’s notion of ‘fidelity’ and ‘confidence’ marks the very same couple of an implicit/explicit ethics. Finally in (iv), I will consider LW’s conclusive chapter that explicitly answers the question ‘what it is to live’ as an attempt to provide an ethical appendix to the mostly formal work done in this book.

Some preliminary remarks. There are both structural differences and continuities along the conception of the subject in TS, BE and LW. On the basis of this, it is argued that there must be some kind of discontinuity along all of Badiou’s work (ao. Hallward 2012; Žižek 2004). At the same time, every subject conception must be related to the specific aims of each particular book. In this way, discontinuities to be identified can often be written back on the differences between these contexts and the place and function the subject has received accordingly.

The subject in TS differs in the first place from that in BE (and LW) because of its particular, political context. This book presupposed that ‘there was some’ subjectivization, philosophy was sutured only to a political condition and what concerns the question of organization, all hope was put in the figure of the (Leninist) party.⁴ Badiou’s concern for the subject in TS is therefore the outcome of a militant political stance: the question of the subject and that of political emancipation are one.⁵ In that sense, TS’s subject is in the first place a courageous identification with an ‘outplace’ that has to be ‘forced’ in a dialectical way. In this book, the dialectical tension is moreover played out at various levels:

⁴ I take this from Bruno Bosteels’ introduction to his English translation of *Theory of the Subject* (Badiou 2009a, xi).

⁵ As I argued in (Persijn 2017).

structure-history, splace-outplace,⁶ algebra-topology, subjectivization-subjective process, lack-excess, destruction-re-composition etc. As the subject is first and foremost considered as a figure of political emancipation, the (Maoist) language that describes its functioning is politically engaged, militant, violent even.⁷

In BE, the approach is ontological: the aim is therefore in the first place a foundation for his theory of the subject (Badiou 2005, 239). In contrast to TS presupposing subjectivity as something already there, this presupposition is now questioned as such. In that light, the question becomes how exactly the concept of the subject is positioned in relation to BE's ontological design. Insofar as the aim of this book can be considered an outline of a 'system' founded on the decision that ontology equals mathematics, the subject receives a certain place and function in this 'system'. As a result, it is considered as a (crucial) link that fulfills a specific 'task' in the system's procedures of truth. In its most well-known definition of meditation 35, it is defined as a "local point of a truth procedure" (Ibid., 391). It is also in this book that Badiou introduced for the first time an extensively argued concept of 'fidelity', in a way reducing the question of the subject to its 'faithful' figure. Moreover, this ontological context extends the specific conditions in which a subject can appear: from only politics (in TS) to art, science, love and politics (in BE). This modification makes an important difference, both in style and content. Since it is not the political that insists anymore, BE's language is less militant. In contrast, because of its inaugural premise, its language is mathematical, more descriptive, and with a particular systematic aim.

As indicated in its introduction, LW rather emphasizes the *appearance* of the subject in a world: "the faithful subject is nothing but the activation of the present of the truth under consideration" (Badiou 2009b, 72). Important is that the subject here is stressed as an indirect and creative *relation* between an event and the world in which this event has left a trace (Ibid., 79). In this way, it does indeed play on the 'except that' of the inaugural claim of this book. Beside the faithful subject, this book considers as well reactive and obscure modalities of the subject that maintain a different relation with the eventual trace.

Along these books, the ethical dimension appears in various shapes and less or more implicit/explicit formulations. Therefore, it may be clear that I don't intend to be exhaustive on this matter at all. Of the three books mentioned, only TS has a chapter explicitly designated to 'Topics of ethics'. Insofar as BE and LW mostly describe how to be faithful, reactive or obscure as a subject, that is, its formal requirements, they remain mostly silent on what ethical 'attitude' exactly pushes this possibility. The absence of TS's militancy in these books thus seems to imply as well the absence of an explicit 'ethics of

⁶ Neologisms: splace as 'space of placement' (*espace de placement*), outplace (*hors-lieu*).

⁷ The emphasis Badiou lays on 'destruction' is part of this. He will modify this in BE: "I was, I must admit, a little misguided in *Théorie du sujet* concerning the theme of destruction. I still maintained, back then, the idea of an essential link between destruction and novelty. Empirically, novelty (for example, political novelty) is accompanied by destruction. But it must be clear that this accompaniment is not linked to intrinsic novelty (...); *Destruction is the ancient effect of the new supplementation amidst the ancient*" (Badiou 2005, 407).

the subject'. As is well-known, Badiou covered that part in another book – *Ethics. An understanding of Evil* – which certainly plays in the background of my thesis here. However, since the ethical dimension in this book is obviously out and all over the place, I won't focus on it in this paper.

(i) *A theory of affects*

In TS and LW, the occurrence of the subject brings along some effects that he calls 'affects': anxiety, courage, justice, superego (TS) / terror (LW). The specific status of these affects is very important to Badiou. In TS, he denies to consider them either 'virtues', 'abilities', 'experiences' or 'states of consciousness' as these characterizations would recall some kind of phenomenological interpretation of the subject. In that sense, they would tend to exceed the strictly formal aim of his theory of the subject. In contrast, he calls them "only names for certain processes" and "categories of the subject-effect" (Badiou 2009a, 291). Also in LW, Badiou preserves the same emphasis on the formal character of his theory of affects. In the latter, affects are considered subject effects that "signal the incorporation of a human animal into a subjective truth-process" (Badiou 2009b, 86). Since these affects are in the first place part of a formal theory of the subject, they are not qualified in any sense. Because all of them are moreover necessary effects of the occurrence of the subject, they stand in this sense beyond good or evil.

In TS, anxiety (in an immediate Lacanian sense) designates a paralyzing subject-effect: there where the too-much-of-the-real tends to "turn the disorder into the death of order, under the concept of this order itself" (Badiou 2009a, 291). Badiou's favorite example of this is the 'victory' of the Gaullist power that instigated anxiety in the hearts of many who claimed to be faithful to the events of '68. According to Badiou, the so-called failure⁸ of '68 is mostly due to the dissemination of the opinion that a 'real' core opened up by the uprisings cannot be covered by the subject that was born out of this structural 'crack'. Anxiety is therefore a loss of belief in the potential of the revolt due to, as Badiou indicates, "the production, by way of the excess, of a question without an answer (...): 'What does one want from me?'" (Ibid., 292). In its inability to provide an answer to this question, anxiety becomes eventually an affect of restoration of the splace.

In this way, it is the counterpart of another affect that is as well centered upon the lack rather than the excess: the superego. Their relation is therefore reciprocal: anxiety calls for the superego and the superego yields anxiety. It is the voice that impersonates the law in its essence of non-law, in a violent but empty call for structural restoration. Hence, the affect of the superego formulates the answer to the anxious question for a reaction to a situation of dis-order in the form of an empty law. Already in TS, but more explicitly in LW, Badiou speaks in this context of 'terror' (Badiou 2009a, 292; Badiou 2009b, 86). This emphasis on the figure of an empty lawfulness distributes the excess back to the available places. Structurally, this terror is therefore the attempt to algebraicize the topo-

⁸ Although Badiou strictly considers the concept of 'failure' to a political scene, not to the ethical realm.

logical, to reduce the excess to a logic of places.

On the other hand, the affects of courage and justice are centered upon the excess rather than the lack. Guided by the lack that is revealed in the structure, courage acts upon this lack by naming it (rather than being paralyzed by it). In doing so, courage is the attempt to displace the dis-order to install a new one. This new order, replacing the superego's non-law is what Badiou calls justice. In comparison to the superego, he says about justice that it designates "the consistency for the haste of the cause, [which] amounts to relativizing the law, whereas the superego makes it absolute" (Badiou 2009a, 296). It can therefore only be retroactive in its legitimization of courage.

Moreover, Badiou connects the elements of the affect matrix in various ways. The 'vertical' connections anxiety-superego and courage-justice will be important in (ii). For what concerns the aim of this paper, the horizontal relations, pairing up anxiety-courage and superego-justice, are significant since they seem to imply an ethical direction. The relation between anxiety and courage designates what Badiou in TS calls 'subjectivization', while the pair superego-justice is also known as the other subject half: the 'subjective process'. What concerns the (anticipatory) moment of subjectivization, Badiou says: "Ethical courage amounts to the force to traverse anxiety" (Ibid., 315) The other half of the subject's temporality is then retroactive: in the end the superego's empty law will be replaced by a new, just one. The 'horizontal' pairs thus imply an ethical directive in the dialectic between processes of destruction (subjectivization) and re-composition (subjective process).

And yet this horizontal connection is entirely played out at the descriptive level. Badiou emphasizes in this sense that his theory of the subject is centered neither on the lack nor on the excess. Hence, no affects are considered 'better' than others: the subject is only intelligible in regard to all affects. While this connection seems to imply an ethics of the subject where anxiety must become courage and the superego must be replaced by justice, this ethical charge always stays implicit. In the light of this, Badiou's affect matrix does not exceed the level of mere description: affects are only names for certain formal processes.

(ii) *'to decide the undecidable'*

In contrast with this, I will consider a formula that seems to exceed the level of pure description: Badiou's maxim 'to decide the undecidable'. This formula appears for the first time in the *Topics of Ethics* chapter of TS. Here, the undecidable is defined as "the immanent point of flight of any order whose necessity we determine at the crossover between two processes, ψ and α " (Ibid., 286). To understand what this means, we have to go back to the 'vertical' relations between the categories of the subject-effect: anxiety-superego (ψ) and courage-justice (α). The principal difference between these ψ/α relations is that ψ is centered upon the lack and α upon the excess. Insofar as anxiety and the superego both witness a profound lack – which paralyzes (anxiety) or obstinately asks for the law as non-law (superego) – they are two sides of the same coin. In both cases, there is a call for the restoration of the space: the excess is always returned to a logic of places.

On the other hand, the relation between courage and justice rather holds on to the excess. According to Badiou, it is on the crossing of both processes that the subject has to be put: “I posit that the subject-process is (...) the twisting of two processes of which one (ψ) subordinates the excess to the placement, and the other (α) inverts this order” (Ibid., 286). It is thus precisely at this crossing that the impossibility to decide is revealed. Since there can be no hierarchy between lack and excess, the subject process is not centered on one of them. And yet it is exactly this point of undecidability that calls for a decision. Badiou commands: “Decide consequently from the point of the undecidable” (Ibid., 287).

What concerns the question of temporality, this maxim has to be importantly considered in a retroactive direction. At the same time pushed forward and pulled back in a dialectical relation between subjectivization and subjective process, the subject eventually *will have decided* the undecidable. Significant for this is Badiou’s interpretation of the figure of Antigone in TS. At a given moment in the *Topics on Ethics* chapter Badiou asks (with Hölderlin) the question: “How can she [Antigone] bear the assumption of justice at the precise point where, in the guise of Creon [...] the violence of the superego demands repetition?” (Ibid., 288). After elaborating a bit on this, Badiou concludes that this problem is undecidable: a logic of places only attains half-way. The subject, in contrast, designates the torsion at the intersection of two half-ways: a logic of lack and an excessive one.

But also in BE, the same formulation returns: “that which decides an undecidable from the standpoint of the indiscernible” (Badiou 2005, 407). Insofar as the aim of BE differs from that of TS, it uses a different vocabulary. In BE, Badiou equals this formula therefore with yet another one: “that which forces a veracity, according to the suspense of a truth” (Ibid., 407). Playing on the relation between knowledge and truth, Badiou makes the same point in a language that is once again inspired by Lacan: taking part in a truth procedure, the subject ‘interrupts’ a certain knowledge.⁹ At the same time, he adds: “truth is subtracted from knowledge, but it does not contradict it” (Ibid., 406). That is what ‘undecidable’ means in the context of BE: it is impossible to decide if a statement that appears in a certain situation is veridical or erroneous given the knowledge of a given situation.

Therefore, Badiou assigns to the subject the directive to investigate if this statement can be linked within the situation with the (already circulating) name of an event (Badiou calls this ‘enquiries’). As a result, in the situation to-come the statement will be either veridical or erroneous (corresponding to: linked with the event, or not). In the former case, the subject will have “forced” the statement “in the truth” in the situation to-come (Ibid., 407). As a (local) part of an indiscernible truth, the subject will then have decided (in the situation to-come) an (in the situation) undecidable statement. What ‘happens’ is that the situation is supplemented with a truth that reorganizes this situation at the level of multiples. The veracity of terms in the situation (judged by the finite instance that is the subject) corresponds to the truth of these terms in the situation to-come.

Despite the complication of a particular temporality at this point, a maxim that calls

⁹ See Lacan’s *Science and Truth* (Lacan 2007, 726-745).

for a decision seems to make explicit the sort of implicit and descriptive ethical charge of Badiou's theory of affects. In this way, the Beckettian formulation Badiou uses in LW fully covers this: "I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (Badiou 2009b, 89).

(iii) Fidelity and confidence

Both in TS and BE, the formal procedure of the subject knows two different temporal aspects: a 'time' of intervention (in TS: subjectivization) and a 'time' of fidelity (in TS: subjective process). In this consideration, the subject is characterized as both a figure of interruption and an 'operator of fidelity'. In BE, the former aspect is strongly linked to a process of giving names and putting them into circulation. Therefore, these names can offer a new 'count' of the situation, different from that of the situation ('count-of-one'). The other aspect, the subject as the operator of fidelity, consists in consequently linking up terms of the situation with the name of the event (a process which eventually surpasses the counting of this situation). Being thus defined as the conjunction of both dimensions, the subject stands for the singular possibility of taking part in a truth procedure and act likewise. In doing so, it 'forces' the event by organizing its consequences. The concept of 'fidelity', therefore, seems to be situated entirely on the formal plan of BE.¹⁰ It can best be understood as a description of the 'second' dimension of the subject procedure that implies a certain ethical directive.

As for the concept of 'confidence', the ethical weight seems more explicit. In TS's last chapter *Topics of Ethics*, Badiou first explains more profoundly what he understands when speaking of 'ethics'. Mainly, he declares to agree with Lacan's reduction of ethics to the question 'has the subject given in?' (Badiou 2009a, 311). In what follows, Badiou makes clear that the exact opposite of ethics is therefore, in a firm communist tradition, 'betrayal'. Accordingly, what is at stake is the subject's 'being': the moment it gives in, the subject irrevocably disappears. Therefore, TS's section on ethics conforms in the first place the book's political line. Moreover, it is a place where the relation between theory and practice, so important to Marxism, reappears: "Ethics falls on the side of that which, in the primacy of practice, functions as a remainder for the impossible exhaustion of theory" (Ibid., 309). Therefore, the difference between ethics and betrayal can be judged only retroactively: it is only then that the question 'has the subject given in?' can be answered.

In all this, Badiou designates the concept of 'confidence' as fundamental for an ethics of Marxism. Although this concept will return in an ontological context in BE, the highly political context of TS in which it first arose is significant. 'Confidence' is the name Badiou chooses to claim the ethical maxim 'not to give in': "there is only one way of giving in, which is by losing confidence" (Ibid., 322). Again, the recurrent, most significant example is the so-called failure of '68 by a massive loss of confidence in its potential. As said, according to Badiou, a collective anxiety won over the possibility to stay courageously confident in what the crack of '68 had revealed. Hence Badiou blames

¹⁰ In the same way as the 'subjective process' is a part of the formal outline of TS.

many intellectuals for giving up, and for permitting themselves to be delivered to the Gaullist powers of the superego which proposed a restoration of the dis-order.

In a first attempt Badiou defines confidence as “a belief in the outplace” (Ibid., 322). At the same time, he emphasizes that a mere belief does not suffice at all. In a passage later on he says that belief actually denies the obstacle it is trying to overcome.¹¹ In merely believing, no ‘real’ is attacked but, on the contrary, the obstacle is believed to be there for a reason. In this way Badiou speaks of an “ornamental belief”. (Ibid., 326) As a mere belief therefore leads to no destruction at all, it is therefore linked to the possibility of betrayal. According to Badiou, that is exactly what happened with those who gave in on ’68. Believing the masses to be a master-signifier, they only saw the fullness of revolts and riots in the streets. After believing in their potential for a couple of years, they concluded that nothing had structurally changed and a return of order was therefore necessary.

Against their passive, believing attitude, Badiou places an ideal of confidence. In contrast with the fullness of those who gave in, Badiou claims to have rather focused on a lack: “the political and subjective precariousness, the absence of a party” (Ibid., 327). In doing so, it became possible to act upon this lack, upon the small openings the revolts had already made in the structure. According to Badiou, the role of confidence is therefore twofold: a confidence in the masses as the anticipation of justice and a confidence in the party as delimitation of the superego. This goes fundamentally further than a mere belief in the potential of the revolts: in order for the space to become subverted entirely, one must act as if the outplace had structurally taken over. That is what confidence means for Badiou. Essential for this process of confident acting upon the lack is the emphasis on the local level as necessary condition of possibility for the unfolding of the subject: “the conviction that having confidence in oneself, in the mode of the destructive scission of local constraints, generalizes the process of the subject” (Ibid., 326). It is there that the figure of Prometheus comes in as a paradigm of confidence: every particular destruction will have destroyed the belief in the obstacle, will have displaced the place of the impossible (Ibid., 326).

Also in BE, Badiou resumes the notion of confidence, this time defined as the subject’s “knowing belief” (Badiou 2005, 399). Again, confidence is defined stronger than mere belief: it always comes in the form of a knowledge. Since the subject shows itself able to generate names that cannot be traced back in the situation (because they have no referent there), it shows itself confident. In this way, the subject in BE is defined as necessarily self-confident (Ibid., 397) Because these names undermine the language of the situation, self-confidence is an essential ‘feature’ of the subject to stick consequently to the truth it participates in: “the subject believes that there is a truth, and this belief occurs in the form of a knowledge” (Ibid., 399) In connecting certain terms of a situation with the name of the event, the subject judges these terms to be veridical or erroneous in the situation to-come. Only by holding on to this ‘knowing belief’, the subject can hope for

¹¹ See the fable of Mao ‘How Yukong Moved the Mountains’ (Badiou 2009a, 326-7).

the names it has put in circulation to become ‘true’, that is, to receive a referent in the situation to-come. Since the subject structurally remains a *local* point of a truth procedure, it is the notion of confidence that takes the subject’s local gains all the way up to the eventual forcing of a truth.

Whereas TS devotes a whole chapter to the question of ethics, an explicitly ethical stance in BE is way harder to find. Since the construction of BE extensively develops the theme of fidelity (in the light of his freshly articulated event), this absence of an explicit ethics is not entirely unexpected. It is my conviction that the notion of confidence is the closest Badiou comes to this matter in BE. Whereas I identified the concept of fidelity as part of the formal design of a theory of the subject, the notion of confidence (as self-confidence) thus explicitly seems to appeal to an ‘ethics of the subject’. I can here recall an important difference mentioned: fidelity concerns only one aspect of the subject (TS: the subjective process). In contrast, to be (self-)confident as a subject means to put itself under the condition of a truth, both in its intervening and faithful dimension.

(iv) What is it to live?

In the concluding chapter of LW, Badiou eventually comes to a question that philosophy ultimately must answer: ‘what is it to live?’. As indicated in the introduction, a formal theory of the subject for Badiou stands under two material conditions: a body and an evental trace. In BE, he had importantly dealt with the event and its disappearing appearance. In LW’s chapter just before the final one (book VII: what is a body?) he had elaborated on the condition of the body.¹² Therefore, he is able to concentrate in this dissertation on what he calls “the true life”, which designates at the same time the possibility, in an Aristotelian formula, “to live ‘as an Immortal’” (Badiou 2009b, 507). It is significant that Badiou’s understanding of this ‘true life’ eventually bears witness to the whole of his philosophical investigation, its particular aims, its conceptual apparatus. It is precisely in that sense that this answer, and everything in his system that resonates with it, designates an ethical maxim: “to (re)commence to live is the only thing that matters” (Ibid., 514).

In this exposition of what it is to live, Badiou once again takes as his enemy what he has called since the very beginning of his writings ‘democratic materialism’. With this term he designates every procedure, every (im)possibility, every operation or term that (eventually) belongs to the structure. It is therefore every theory, concept or idea that (not necessarily intended to) ends up serving a logic of restoration. In this way, it denies the second part of the main claim of LW: although affirming that there are bodies and languages, ‘democratic materialism’ refuses to accept the exception that ‘there are truths’. Since Badiou had spent his entire philosophical journey in fulminating against this sort of ‘conservative’ thought (there is literally not one book that does not touch upon this problem), it may not surprise us that ‘life’ according to Badiou still persistently speaks against

¹² Unfortunately, it would lead us too far to go profoundly into these issues within the aim of this paper.

all this.

In contrast, equally according to his philosophy, he proposes life to be “a subjective category (Ibid., 508), implying in this every past effort to clarify the ‘eternal’ possibilities of the subject. Against any form of ‘democratic materialism’, he proposes a ‘materialist dialectic’ that involves (in short) mostly his formal theory of the subject and its material conditions: “[t]o live is thus an incorporation into the present under the faithful form of a subject” (Ibid., 508) In order to think this, Badiou even recalls Plato’s ‘Idea’. It is in ‘experiencing’ this ‘Idea’ that the subject is able to incorporate itself in its eternal truth and create a new present both within and against the mere ‘existence’ of bodies and languages. It is difficult not to be charmed by this particular ethical formulation: “We must therefore accept that for the materialist dialectic, ‘to live’ and ‘to live for an Idea’ are one and the same thing” (Ibid., 510).

While most of LW conceptually describes the procedures concerning the appearance of truth (and thus the subject) in a world, this concluding chapter opens up to explicitly ethical matters. In this way, it seems as if Badiou puts the entire formal effort of LW in function of an ethical directive. The question ‘what it is to live’, which Badiou answers in reference to the articulation of his system, stands in for the very first ethical question ‘what has to be done’.

Conclusion. This paper investigated the tension between Badiou’s formal aim of a theory of the subject and this concept’s genealogical, political history. It does so by assessing an ‘ethics of the subject’ as declared or implied in three books (TS, BE, LW). First, describing the effects of a subject occurrence as ‘affects’, Badiou implies an ethical direction considering their horizontal relations: anxiety-courage and superego-justice (i). Secondly, it was argued that his directive to ‘decide the undecidable’ can in contrast be understood as an ‘explicitation’ of an ethics of the subject (ii). Thirdly, defined as an answer to Lacan’s ethical formula ‘has the subject given in?’, Badiou’s notion of (self-) confidence can be considered the ethical core of his subject. In (iii), this explicitly ethical concept was contrasted with the more ‘implicitly’ ethical stance of the concept of fidelity. Finally, in LW’s final dissertation ‘What is it to live?’, Badiou seems to put the formal explicitly in function of an ethics of the subject: the ‘true life’ equals the subjective incorporation in a truth procedure (iv). In all this, it was this paper’s attempt to map out the difference between an ethical dimension implied by the formal description of Badiou’s theory of the subject and an explicit ‘ethics of the subject’. It was argued that the latter insistently bears witness to a certain dimension that remains unsaid in a merely formal expression of the subject’s ‘household’ alone: Badiou’s subjectivity itself.

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