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The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

Contemporary Alternatives to "Ethics": the Contrasting Responses of Alain Badiou and Terry Eagleton to the Pervasiveness of Ethics-Based Political and Theoretical Discourse

Ethics has been in vogue for some years now in a number of theory-oriented fields in the humanities and social sciences but for radical thinkers, unlike for many of their liberal counterparts, it has been the object not just of fascination but also of scorn. Alain Badiou and Terry Eagleton exemplify this ambivalent attitude, their positions and claims being complicated by an apparently paradoxical gesture: each thinker expresses a profound scepticism with regard to ethics-based discourse whilst at the same time proposing an ethical theory of his own. More precisely, each on the one hand remains faithful to the traditional leftist hostility to any inflation of ethical discourse, wary that it might encroach on and divert attention from political questions, and yet reaffirms the vital importance of ethics, Badiou devoting a work to the topic, and Eagleton offering in-depth discussions of ethical questions in recent publications. This ambivalence, far from being

debilitatingly self-contradictory, proves highly productive, I shall argue, ultimately revitalising debates about the scope and parameters of ethics as a field which, though age-old, is undoubtedly as worthy of critical reexamination today as it ever was. In this article I shall take as my principal focus Badiou's *L'Ethique* and the reflections on ethics contained in Eagleton's *After Theory* as these works respectively contain each theorist's most sustained reflections on ethics specifically to date. After a critical appraisal of their principal criticisms of contemporary ethics-based discourse, I will discuss each thinker's proposed ethical theory, situating it in relation to contemporary intellectual and political tendencies as well as traditional left reflection on ethics and politics. This discussion will pave the way for a comparative analysis in which I will appraise the merits of Badiou's and Eagleton's theories highlighting key ways in which they both diverge from and complement each other. The fact that these works were published at ten years' distance from each other, Badiou's *L'Ethique* in 1993 and Eagleton's *After Theory* in 2003, cannot be simply passed over as insignificant especially in view of both writers' abiding concern with the relationship between politics and the cultural sphere. As I hope to show however, this chronological gap is in certain key respects illuminating in itself, throwing into relief as it does important lines of continuity between the political and intellectual contours of the one decade and the other. Indeed, Badiou's and Eagleton's views on the defining characteristics of the political and cultural conjuncture are in key respects substantially the same, in spite not only of the time gap but also of their own contrasting national and cultural contexts, a fact which is in itself not without significance.

Badiou and Eagleton: Critics of Ethics-Based Discourse

What, then, are the objections to ethics-based discourse advanced by Badiou and Eagleton? Roughly the first half of Badiou's *L'Ethique* is devoted to unmercilessly dissecting what he terms "l'idéologie 'éthique'"[1] or elsewhere "l'idéologie des droits de l'homme"[2].

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[1] A. Badiou, *L'Éthique*, 21, 31.

A critical discourse which is overladen with ethical claims is the dominant intellectual tendency of the moment, Badiou argues, and is founded on a reactionary desire to be done with the theoretical and political advances of the 1960s. In the aftermath of the cold war, an intellectual counter-revolution in the form of what Badiou describes as a "terrorisme moral"[3] has been taking place which is complicit with imposing western capitalism as a universally applicable political model throughout the world. It is complicit with this political project, either explicitly or implicitly, in its affirmation of a range of broadly coherent positions and theoretical strategies. In particular, there is now a pervasive insistence on human rights based on the idea of a universally recognisable individual subject which obfuscates underlying political questions. This brand of universalist thinking suffers from being excessively abstract: it abstracts from individuals' specific cultural and political contexts but, in so doing, actually does little more than project onto them a western view of how best they should lead their lives. In philosophical terms, the emphasis on human rights can be seen as a return to Kantianism, Badiou argues, in that it is based on the assumption that there are ethical imperatives which transcend empirical or situational considerations. There is much talk of 'difference' in contemporary theory, Badiou observes, but this is deceptive on two counts. First, it is based on the erroneous assumption that the ways in which people differ from each other have to be in some sense affirmed when in reality difference is simply a fact of human existence: "L'altérité infinie est tout simplement *ce qu'il y a*"[4]. The great difficulty we face, he counters, is not coming to see that we are different from each other but rather "*la reconnaissance du Même*"[5], that is, in practice, the common ground beyond our differences. Secondly, talk of difference acts as a smoke-screen concealing the west's projection of consensus liberal values onto the cultural other, whose difference is

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[2] *Ibid.,* 10.

[3] *Ibid.,* 9.

[4] *Ibid.,* 43.

[5] *Ibid.*

accepted as long as it does not involve him or her questioning the parameters of our political and cultural world-view. Badiou also objects that in contemporary critical discourse there is an overweening tendency to conceive of the ethical good only in relation to evil. Taking an ethical stance today, he argues, consists first and foremost in being able to identify manifestations of evil, which is taken to be universally known. The function of the law is consequently understood as definable in opposition to evil, and human rights are conceived as rights to 'non-evil'. Such an uncritical conception of evil obstructs an awareness of the specificity of given situations. But above all, defining the good only in relation to evil is the ethical counterpart to a conservative politics which has given up on the idea of postulating a conception of the good and of striving to ensure its realisation. Badiou insists conversely that our first priority ethically is to define the good, and that it is only in the light of our positive capacity to do good that evil can be defined.

Badiou's most trenchant criticisms of the "ethical ideology", however, are reserved for what he sees as its tendency to induce people to see themselves as victims. Rather than according the needy their full dignity, advocates of human rights, he argues, reduce them to their basic animality, humanitarian aid projects in particular exemplifying this tendency in the patronising attitude towards the cultural other which Badiou believes they invariably encourage. They ultimately reinforce the west's sense of its own supremacy, Badiou argues, and shore up the pessimistic politics of our neoliberal age by inducing people to be merely glad that their situation is not even worse rather than urging them to fight for a positive political agenda.

Eagleton's objections to ethics-based discourse centre principally on the use of ethical language by the political class and are no less harsh. Eagleton points out that the tendency to demonise terrorists using ethical language has always been a means of denying the political content of their demands, and that this tendency has accelerated since the launch of the so-called war on terror. In particular, the reduction of all terrorist activity or sympathising to manifestations of "evil" is to deny the rationality behind terrorist action: "The word "evil" transfers the question ... to a sinisterly metaphysical [realm]", remarks Eagleton. "You cannot acknowledge that the terrible crimes which terrorists

commit have a purpose behind them, since to ascribe purposes to such people is to recognise them as rational creatures, however desperately wrong-headed. It is easier to caricature your enemy as a bunch of blood-crazed beasts – a deeply dangerous move, since to defeat an opponent you have first to understand him."[6]

When one takes account of their wider arguments, it is fairly clear that the ethics-based political discourse to which Eagleton objects is of a piece in general terms with "l'inflation socialisée de la référence à l'éthique"[7] which Badiou decries. They are symptoms of an overarching political and cultural climate in the west which both theorists consider reactionary, the social and intellectual gains of the 1960s and 1970s having been undermined by the success of the neoliberal right from the 1980s onwards. Eagleton's remarks on the ethical language used to characterise protestors and terrorists, whilst in no sense an apology for terrorism, is a comment on the ways in which western political elites alter the terms of debates thereby clouding the political issues which underlie them. For Badiou, the whole democratic parliamentary system in western nations is something of a sham, offering in reality, he argues, little more than re-confirmation at regular electoral intervals of a political structure which endorses the injustices of the capitalist system. The intellectual counterpart to this reigning political pessimism which he opposes so vigorously is postmodernism, a cultural phenomenon about which Eagleton has in numerous publications been just as scathing as Badiou is about human rights-based discourse. For both thinkers, the rise of postmodern cynicism in the cultural sphere stands in symmetrical relation to the decline of radical politics.

Ethics Nonetheless: Badiou's and Eagleton's Alternative Ethical Theories

In spite of all the aforementioned ills of ethics in its contemporary guises, both Badiou and Eagleton think it important to recuperate the term and embark on the project to formulate ethical

[6] T. Eagleton, *After Theory*, 141.
[7] A. Badiou, *op. cit.*, 17.

theories of their own. As Badiou puts it in the preface to the Greek edition of *L'Ethique* published in 1997, it seemed to him "périlleux d'abandonner aux chiens de garde du capitalo-parlementarisme le beau mot d'«éthique »."[8] He hence sets about forging an ethical theory from the fundamental principles of his philosophy. Eagleton argues that cultural theory is in need of a new orientation in our post-2001 era, seeing a reappraisal of our ethical outlook as a necessary and vital part of this. Badiou's and Eagleton's respective projects appear paradoxical not just because, as I have suggested, the two theorists run the risk of contributing indirectly to the overweening focus on ethical questions which they themselves decry but also, more fundamentally, because the Marxist political and intellectual tradition by which they have both been significantly influenced has long shown itself to be hostile to ethical reflection. Indeed, the charge that the inflation of ethics in contemporary critical discourse diverts attention from underlying political issues is nothing if not a reiteration of the disdainful attitude towards ethics to be found in Marxist writings and throughout much of the communist movement since the time of Marx himself.

The paradoxical character of Badiou's and Eagleton's gesture is in one important sense more apparent than real however, namely that it is not in fact the case that there is no precedent for ethical reflection in the Marxist tradition. Trotsky devoted a work of 1938 entitled *Their Morals and Ours* to the subject arguing that what he labelled "the morality of proletarian revolution" constituted an alternative conception to that which bourgeois society had inherited from religious doctrine. This conception of morality was intrinsically historicised and politicised, presenting ethical matters as inextricably linked to the class struggle. The right course of action, Trotsky argued, was that which harmonised with the advancement of the dialectic leading the working class to victory and to socialism. Also in the 1930s, growing interest in the early writings of Marx sparked the development of an ethical humanist Marxist current which was to constitute an important dissident strand of Marxist thinking until well into the 1960s. The early

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[8] *Ibid.*, 8.

Marx's preoccupation with alienation in particular increasingly found favour with Marxists dissatisfied with the scientistic world-view promulgated by Stalin and the PCF. It also found a sympathetic ear amongst the existentialists whose thought, which was very much in vogue from the Liberation onwards, placed considerable emphasis on questions of subjective responsibility. In more recent years, reappraisals of Marx's oeuvre have highlighted the suppressed ethical content of his thought. In *After Theory* Eagleton supports this reinterpretation. "Marx was a classical moralist who did not seem aware that he was"[9], he observes. The rejection of morality that pervades Marx's work is owing to his having confused morality with moralism thereby reducing it to a facet of bourgeois ideology. Morality, unlike moralism, involves "exploring the texture and quality of human behaviour as richly and sensitively as you can"[10], and the social and political dimensions of life cannot be ignored if you are to achieve this. In Eagleton's view, Marx's work demonstrates the breadth and richness of a truly ethical outlook, taking into account all these dimensions of human existence.

Eagleton's own ethical vision as set out in *After Theory* is resolutely Marxian but with the particularity of placing special emphasis on the line of filiation between Marx's world-view and Aristotelian ethics as well as unfashionably reaffirming the importance of believing in truths and principles. For Eagleton, one of the great strengths of Marxian thought, like that of Aristotle, lies precisely in the refusal to separate ethics from politics. Ethical presuppositions were inscribed by Marx in a political view of the human condition which they nevertheless vitally nourished. Eagleton is an unapologetically essentialist thinker, declaring his unwavering faithfulness to a materialist view of the world and dismissing theoretical anti-essentialism as an instance of philosophical amateurism. He also argues tentatively for a reinstatement of the idea of virtue. There is still much to be said, he asserts, for the idea of striving for ethical goodness in our actions, and this need not imply a puritanical acceptance of

[9] T. Eagleton, *op.cit.*, 143.
[10] *Ibid.*

suffering on our part. The pursuit of virtue and the good life can be a matter of joyful self-fulfilment when it harmonises with realising our own potential.

Eagleton's reflections on ethics are more of a reaffirmation and reformulation of certain existing theories and perspectives than they are a genuinely original ethical theory. Their originality lies in the particular emphases he places on given themes and the audacity of his willingness confidently to reassert unfashionable positions when he considers it right to do so. Hence his defense of truth and principles in chapter five of *After Theory* which, like a number of his positions, is articulated in opposition to postmodernist scepticism, lacks Badiou's philosophical ambitiousness but links up with a valuable and, in view of international diplomatic disagreements of recent years, timely reminder of the necessity of upholding the rule of law. Absolute relativism, he argues, is as dogmatic and distorting as the absolute and immutable view of truth which many postmodernists thought they were berating. The rule of law has to be rigorously impersonal but this depends crucially on an acceptance of the need for intellectual principles.

For Eagleton, the soundest basis for an ethics is an acknowledgment of the universality of the material body, which he is keen to claw back from postmodernist discourses on the fetichised or sexualised body. The body in the sense meant by Eagleton is the physical body which all human beings have in common irrespective of their cultural moorings; the needy, and also labouring body which is capable of suffering, but which is also a precondition for happiness and self-fulfilment. By way of a counterpart to this materialist universalist view, Eagleton argues for an objective and impersonal understanding of love. Socialism requires compassion and solidarity for others who are not in our personal circle. Whilst it is easy to show love and fellow-feeling towards those we know, the real challenge, he asserts, lies in being able to extend this considerateness to the wider world.

Turning once again to Badiou, the ethical theory he proposes, as I indicated earlier, is best understood as emanating from and an extension of the fundamental principles of his philosophy which I have already mentioned briefly. Indeed, at the very least, Badiou's

philosophy offers the clear grounds for an ethical theory, for if one takes seriously his view that subjectivity and the condition of being 'immortal' follow the event, and that this condition, if accompanied by fidelity to truth, is preferable to that of our basic animalisitic state prior to the event, then one already has a blueprint for what Badiou considers to be the optimum type of ethical conduct. His work *L'Ethique* nevertheless contains distinctive accompanying positions some of which I will briefly assess before moving on to appraise the merits of his and Eagleton's respective theories. Central to Badiou's 'Ethics of Truths' is the idea that subsequent to the event, be it of a political, amorous, scientific or artistic nature, one should demonstrate what he terms "consistance", that is a certain strength or consistency. This quality is not simply a matter of being faithful to the event, which is to say leading one's life in a manner consistent with a recognition of the event having taken place, but involves the ability to persevere in fighting off whatever tries to disrupt that faithfulness. Badiou sums up "consistance" as "être fidèle à une fidélité"[11], but this is something that requires perseverance.

Badiou presents truths also as distinct from opinions. This claim, which would appear to be a descendent of Althusser's distinction between science and ideology, is based on a marked separation of truths from views which commonly circulate in everyday discourse. Where opinions are views which are the stuff of communication between people, a process of truth on the other hand cannot be communicated, Badiou argues. The immortal being which each individual has the capacity to become can only be summoned when it is directly brought into being by a "fidélité" in the aftermath of an event.

It would seem to follow on logically from these arguments that evil in Badiou's ethical thought would consist in departures from, or refusals of, fidelity to truths. This is indeed the case, Badiou arguing that two of the principle sources of evil are betrayals of fidelity to truths and simulacra of truths. In the former case, a "crise de fidélité"[12] can lead us to doubt the value of continuing to believe in the truth

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[11] A.Badiou, *op.cit.*, 69.

[12] *Ibid.*, 105.

produced by an event. Betrayal though is not simply a matter of giving up on a truth. Badiou argues, in what amounts to a reformulation of the Sartrean concept of *mauvaise foi*, that my rejection of the immortal in me must involve me convincing myself that the truth in question *never existed* in the first place. Simulacra of truths, for Badiou, contain all the formal qualities of truths and the injunction to be faithful to them whilst not in actual fact really being truths. The 'National Socialism' of the Nazis, for Badiou, is the most blatant example of such a simulacrum. This example in fact offers an illustration of the fact that Badiou has long identified truth-events exclusively with politically progressive tendencies. Indeed, it is only more recently that he has conceded that politically regressive happenings ought in some way to be classed as events. In the preface to the English edition of *L'Ethique* published in 2000, he acknowledges this shortcoming of his theory and argues that in the case of politically reactionary events what results is not the "figure subjective fidèle" but what he calls a "figure réactive" or "sujet obscur"[13].

For all that Badiou identifies the ethical good with the 'ethics of truths' and evil with its refusal or hindrance, *L'Ethique* concludes with an important caveat. Our faithfulness to truth-events has a transformative impact on the views or opinions which circulate in society. Badiou calls this phenomenon "la *puissance* des vérités"[14]. What has to be guarded against, however, is this powerful influence of truths in discourse ever becoming a total, all-encompassing one. Should the terms in which opinions are expressed come to be completely moulded by truths, the latter would become dogmatic and rigid, and ultimately a source of evil themselves. Badiou hence places an important limit on the ethics of truths: they should never become absolute.

[13] *Ibid.*, 13.

[14] *Ibid.*, 108.

Comparative Analysis: Universalism, Materialism and the Question of Political Realism

Badiou and Eagleton, as I have already indicated, share many of the same basic antipathies, with truth-questioning relativism, and the active promotion of difference, coming high on the list, values which Eagleton in particular habitually groups together in the postmodernist category. These aversions clearly suggest a desire on the part of both thinkers to defend certain unfashionable theoretical positions but, given the areas of divergence between their own ethical theories, they clearly do so in contrasting ways.

One notable area of divergence concerns the matter of what kind of universalist thinking ought to be reinstated. The impetus for Eagleton's materialist universalism based on the body is his conviction that postmodern particularism is founded on a mistaken, because entirely abstract, view of universalism. Postmodernists, he argues, reject an idea of universality which very few people have ever actually defended rather, one might add, in the manner that the structuralists and poststructuralists attacked a conception of the subject which was a distortion of that advocated by many of their predecessors, the existentialists most notably. Postmodernists reject a universality which consists of positing that everything's the same, and it is on this basis that they assert difference and relativism in response to it. Eagleton's reassertion of a universalist position in materialist guise counters this mode of thought well but throws up other difficulties to which Badiou's position is not so easily susceptible. Like Badiou, he argues that it is imperative to defend principles and a neutral and "ruthlesslessly impersonal"[15] conception of the rule of law. Yet such thinking surely implies an abstract type of universalism, according to which laws are applicable to all. It is not clear how Eagleton thinks these two approaches, the materialist and the abstract, are best to be reconciled. He claims that the impartiality of the law should not be a matter of treating everyone the same but equally, which means "attending even-

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[15] T. Eagleton, *op. cit.*, 147.

handedly to each individual's unique situation"[16], but this seems an only partially convincing manner of explaining away the problem of laws being by their very nature abstract in their universal applicability. Part of the problem is that Eagleton's claim that the material body should be our point of departure for ethics does not ultimately provide much more than a limited basis for ethical reflection. The claim that we all share the same physical make-up, though a sound initial premise, leaves many of the concerns of ethics unanswered because, as Eagleton himself concedes, the kinds of issues which constitute bones of contention in the ethical sphere tend to be of a cultural nature. Hence if a court sets out to treat people equally rather than the same, as Eagleton urges, it is not clear on which criteria the judge and jury should circumvent the limitations implied by the universal applicability of laws. Claiming that the accused is just as much a physical being with basic needs as the defendant would probably not be enough to sway the jury. Only ethical principles based on cultural assumptions would bring the jury closer to a judgement. Similarly, it is unlikely that Eagleton's materialist universalism would provide an entirely satisfactory answer to the difficulties which Badiou identifies with respect to human rights-based discourse. Exchanging an idealist type of universalism for a materialist brand would appear to go only part of the way towards an adequate understanding of what is at stake in human rights debates. Rather than the vague assertion that all citizens in the world should enjoy 'freedom', for example, one might assert that all citizens require a square meal every day or should under no circumstances be subjected to torture. Whilst Eagleton is surely right to posit such corporeal rights as a basis for ethics, his materialist universalism does not bring us closer to understanding the reasons why demands for free speech, for instance, might perhaps require a different formulation in Zimbabwe from in China if they are to be most effective.

The position set out in *After Theory*, though an effective response to the postmodernist tendencies Eagleton deplores, is hence not detailed enough to offer any sort of genuine blueprint for ethical

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[16] *Ibid.*

conduct. What Eagleton offers are the founding principles of an ethical theory which are integrated into a broader critique of contemporary intellectual and political tendencies. He rightly reasserts the need to acknowledge humankind's basis in nature but more explanation is needed if we are to negotiate the tension between the natural and the cultural in a way that is meaningful for ethical theory, and if the gap in Marx's thought where ethical reflection proper might have been is to be filled convincingly. Were Eagleton's position as it stands to be taken for a guide to ethical conduct, there is a danger that its materialist anti-culturalism might cancel all the way through. By accounting so little for the cultural dimension of the ethical it could allow the kind of unruly inflation of the cultural sphere for which Eagleton chastises postmodernism in again through the back door, in a manner reminiscent of classic Marxism's abandonment of ethics to politically reactionary forces. If the cultural sphere in general, and ethics specifically, are not to be left in the hands of such forces, they need to be theorised just as rigorously by radical theorists as by their liberal and conservative counterparts.

Badiou also argues in favour of universalist thinking in opposition to cultural relativism, and to what he sees as the phoney universalism of monetarist abstraction[17]. He ultimately presents a more nuanced view of the relationship between the universal and the particular than the position advanced by Eagleton in *After Theory*, perhaps, in the final analysis, because he is not so keen to found universalist thinking specifically on materialism. For Badiou, difference is everywhere: it is an ontological fact but should not, in either the socio-cultural or intellectual spheres, be promoted as a model. The good, which Badiou identifies with the true, should rather be defined in terms of a universality which requires that we separate "chaque processus de vérité de l'historicité «culturelle» où l'opinion prétend le dissoudre"[18]. "Ce qui est vrai (ou juste, c'est en l'occurence la même chose) ne se laisse renvoyer à aucun ensemble objectif"[19], by which

[17] A. Badiou, *op.cit.*, 7.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.* 6.

Badiou means any particular cultural group. The sphere of truths is for Badiou an "universel concret" but the emphasis here is on truths being situated rather than on materialism *per se.* Truths, Badiou believes, are dependent on the active work of acknowledgement and promotion on the part of the subject in order to come into existence. A given truth cannot simply transcend real circumstances as it is dependent on the participation of individuals who are necessarily situated. Reading between the lines of Badiou's argument, it would seem to follow that a recognition of cultural specificity is implicit here as individuals' situations are of course culturally diverse, and this diversity must manifest itself at the level of cultural *values.* Badiou thus manages to reconcile the universal and the particular in a way which is not excessively reductive of the latter. However there is a certain ambiguity in his position because he often presents truths as transcendent in their universality. A process of truth of say a political or artistic nature is not in Badiou's view true just for me in my given context but must be capable of being acknowledged as such also by others. But in this case it cannot simply be derivative of my own situation, with all that this implies in terms of cultural particularities.

Ultimately, whereas Eagleton's theory verges on dissolving cultural specificity in the idea of universal corporeal materiality, that of Badiou appears at times to effect its assimilation to the sphere of truths. Like Eagleton, Badiou vigorously defends what he terms "la neutralité transcendante de la loi"[20] against identity-based politics. In his case, although this commitment does not conflict with any fundamental questioning of cultural abstractions specifically as with Eagleton's argument, it does stand in a somewhat tense relation to his castigation of human rights-based discourse. For even if we assume that his criticisms in the latter regard are to some extent overstated for polemical effect, they do nevertheless convey a genuine antipathy on Badiou's part for the defense of human rights. But such rights, founded as they are on the premise that there are human needs which should be universally respected, are surely of a piece with the objective and neutral conception of the law which Badiou defends.

[20] *Ibid.* 9.

The force of Badiou's attack on the defense of human rights lends it a certain idiosyncrasy in relation to traditional left thinking about the law. The classic Marxist critique of civil liberties had not been based on the idea that the defense of rights to such as freedom of speech and freedom from arbitrary imprisonment was questionable because it induced those who did not enjoy these rights to see themselves as victims. It tended rather to acknowledge that they were in some sense victims and, on the basis of that acknowledgement, advocate revolutionary struggle to overthrow those forces which were responsible for this state of affairs. Moreover, the problem with the right to freedom bestowed by political liberalism was not that it was not worth fighting for but rather that it was debilitatingly abstract: to be meaningful, it needed to take greater account of people's material conditions of possibility. In a review which Eagleton devoted to *L'Ethique*, appearing in the May/June 2001 edition of *New Left Review*, Badiou's attack on human-rights discourse is not singled out for criticism. Eagleton's own ethical theory is divergent from Badiou's precisely in its greater alignment to that of classic Marxism, however, not only acknowledging humanity's basis in nature, as Badiou similarly does, but also the intrinsic value to cultural theory of stressing this material foundation. In a work published in 2000, *The Idea of Culture*, this naturalist tendency in Eagleton's thought had already been articulated very clearly.

It is perhaps here in this area of divergence with respect to the importance accorded to the natural that the basis of the disagreement between Badiou and Eagleton with respect to ethics is located. Bearing the traces of the existentialist notion of authenticity, Badiou's theory postulates a qualitative leap between our ordinary biological state prior to the event and the post-eventmental immortal state. We are best placed to circumvent evil, Badiou believes, when we demonstrate perseverance in our faithfulness to the truth-event which has arrested us from our animality. Although not a denial of our material constitution, this view does imply a certain disdain for the everyday human needs which, for Eagleton, should also be considered the stuff of ethics. What gets overlooked is, as Eagleton puts it, "the sheer

banality of the ethical"[21]. Indeed, ethics for Badiou is by its very nature an altogether more momentous affair than for Eagleton. Accordingly, Badiou employs religious terminology such as his concept of "l'Immortel", believing as he does that the project to formulate or enact an ethics is fundamentally religious in nature. More precisely, ethics is, he claims, a "religion décomposée"[22]: "toute tentative de faire de l'éthique ce qui est au principe du pensable et de l'agir est d'essence religieuse"[23] (Badiou 2003, 40), he claims. This contributes to Badiou's theory taking on a pronounced metaphysical dimension. As Peter Dews observes, "Badiou's ethical thought can be placed squarely within the tradition that understands the ethical demand as exceeding, almost by definition, our finite human capacities to satisfy it"[24].

Badiou's desire to conceive of ethics as concerned with the big questions of human existence means that his theory is a step further removed from political realism than is that of Eagleton. I noted earlier that Eagleton, for instance, insists on the possibility of intellectual principles and truths just as much because he believes them necessary for a just legal system founded on the rule of law as because of his opposition to postmodernist relativism in academic theoretical discourse. In Badiou's case, the insistence on perseverance in our faithfulness to truths, these latter being identified very largely with progressive politics, and his relative disregard for whatever does not fit in with this paradigm, means that the ethical implications of many of the more everyday aspects of the contemporary political and social

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[21] T. Eagleton, *op. cit.*, 154.

[22] A. Badiou, *op. cit.*, 41.

[23] *Ibid.*, 40.

[24] Peter Dews "States of Grace: the Excess of the Demand in Badiou's Ethics of Truths", in Peter Hallward (ed.) *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. London: Continuum, 2004, p.114 Eagleton closes *After Theory* with the following remarks: "If [cultural theory] is to engage with an ambitious global history, it must have answerable resources of its own, equal in depth and scope to the situation it confronts. It cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race and gender, indispensable as these topics are. It needs to chance its arm, break out of a rather stifling orthodoxy and explore new topics, not least those of which it has so far been unreasonably shy." (222)

world are passed over. Such a sidelining of the comparatively mundane is of a piece with Badiou's disdain for the capitalo-parliamentarist system as a whole. How though is one to conduct oneself in an ethically laudable way, according to Badiou's theory, in a politically reactionary era? Many types of everyday conduct are not progressive and militant enough to be classed as truly ethically desirable but it would seem somewhat reductive to conclude that they were all therefore in some sense intrinsically reactionary. In the closing chapters of his recent *De Quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom ?* Badiou perhaps offers an indirect answer to this question. In the present era of the "figure réactive" or "sujet obscur" of Sarkozism, Badiou argues, the communist hypothesis must be kept alive. That is to say, the idea of a society not based on economic competition and inequalities of wealth, and in which democratic politics is not limited to that allowed by the parliamentary system. Perhaps then, by sustaining the communist hypothesis, our everyday ethical conduct will naturally tend to demonstrate greater faithfulness to politically progressive truth-events. This reaffirmation of the communist ideal notwithstanding, there is undeniably an elitist dimension to Badiou's ethical theory, however. Everydayness is equated more often than not with an ethical turpitude from which the momentousness of truth-events arrests us.

Conclusion: Towards a Coherent Left Ethical Stance

Neither Badiou nor Eagleton claim to have advanced comprehensive ethical theories in the works I have discussed. What we are offered in both cases are essentially the founding principles for ethical theories. Where Badiou's reflections are part of a broader and distinctive philosophical system, Eagleton's reformulate a range of existing positions moulding them into a new synthesis. I have concentrated on highlighting areas of divergence between Badiou's and Eagleton's responses to the ethical turn in contemporary theoretical and political discourse, and indeed the disagreements are real. In certain respects there is potential for reconciliation though, given positions overlapping with each other more than they at first appear to.

For instance, Eagleton's rehabilitation of the ethical ideal of virtue is surely not so distant a philosophical gesture from Badiou's idea of perseverance in our fidelity to truth-events. Striving for ethical goodness, after all, surely involves in part being courageous through the passage of time, which Badiou argues is essential to a condoneable ethical outlook today[25]. Or if one considers the contrasting positions which Badiou and Eagleton advance on the subject of love, closer examination reveals that they are essentially approaching the matter from different angles and that their conclusions are by no means mutually exclusive. In his review of *L'Ethique*, Eagleton complains that Badiou presents love "as though it is a self-evident experience"[26], a criticism which certainly is no longer an altogether fair one in view of the remarks on the difficulties facing amorous relationships today in *De Quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*[27] But more evident still is the fact that the two theorists are essentially talking about different things on the subject of love: Eagleton's advocacy of an impersonal, more objective conception of love is in fact not a theory of romantic love at all, unlike that of Badiou. Their contrasting positions are hence at one level simply incommensurable, although Eagleton's conception would appear to be more easily reconcilable with a manner of thinking which attaches importance to solidarity with strangers and indeed friendship than is that of Badiou, for whom these laudable ethical values are not a central focus as they don't make it into the event category. But then, the fact is that Eagleton simply does not advance a theory of amorous love at all and this is surely a serious lacuna given its vital importance to the ethical problematic. Ultimately, though, the one position is by no means exclusive of the other and there is ample room for cross-fertilisation which would be mutually beneficial to both theories.

It will be apparent from what has preceded that Badiou and Eagleton diverge in quite significant ways philosophically and yet are in many respects close politically. But if, as Eagleton rightly argues in the closing pages of *After Theory*, cultural theory is in need of a new

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[25] A. Badiou, *op.cit.*, 97

[26] T. Eagleton, *op.cit.*, 252.

[27] A. Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom ?*, 64-6.

direction in our post-2001 era, it being necessary that the political left advance more resolute claims of a specifically ethical nature than it was traditionally prepared to, then it will be vital in the years ahead that philosophical differences do not obstruct the development of clear, unified positions enabling the left to face up to the urgent political challenges ahead. This is not to say that the subtleties and idiosyncrasies of contrasting theoretical claims should be glossed over or that positions which appear to be the most politically expedient should automatically be allowed to take precedence over debates or disagreements about philosophical questions. But that a coherent left political agenda is needed as much as ever, and moreover one which can rise to the challenge posed by the globalised capitalist economy on the one hand and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism on the other. In short, a new brand of left internationalism, hard to conceive of though such a project in many ways seems at present. A crucial dimension of this undertaking will be the formulation of ethical as well as political claims which are convincing and attractive as well as socially just.

Sam COOMBES
University of Edinburgh

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