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Alain Badiou, Kojève, and the Return of the Human Exception

1.

Alain Badiou's discussion of "what is living" or "what is it to live" in the section that closes *Logics of Worlds* is an investigation not into the nature of life itself but rather into the human, and what a human life is. So I suggest that the section, despite the generality of its title, is really about "what it is to live *as human*," though he does not add this qualifier. This same section also contains one of Badiou's critiques of humanism, in what he describes as its current "democratic materialist" incarnation. And so one finds in the same, short concluding section of a long and complex work both a promotion of a theory of the human and a critique of humanism. The significance of this should not be lost: it gives the impression that the elaborate and rather abstract philosophical mechanism of the entire book is trying to make this final "ethical" section possible (just as the first volume of *Being and Event* in a sense ended with the later publication of *Ethics*). And in this section, Badiou is trying to show that what goes for humanism now is predicated on an elimination of the key human traits he wishes to revive in his own theory of what life is.

The terminology Badiou uses in his re-framing of the human is rather off-putting. By framing his theory of life in terms of immortality, eternity, grace, and resurrection, this theory appears to be philosophically retrograde, not to mention blatantly religious, especially when compared to the view of the human that is found in democratic materialism. Democratic materialism (henceforth DM) levels down any kind of classical philosophical or religious human exceptionalism, and avoids positing any kind of abyssal species difference. As Badiou describes it, democratic materialism, as humanist as it may be, makes the human out to be one form of animal life among others. For Badiou, this in itself is enough to serve as a critique of DM. But it should be pointed out that it is certainly one of its desired goals and is what makes it so attractive to many. The flattening out of a human/animal difference is no doubt motivated by the many ill consequences of

the traditional understanding of the human exception – its hubris, its participation in justifications for racism, colonialism, and general intolerance and cruelty; and it is also driven by our increased attention to the lives and qualities of other species, and thus by the realization that the difference between humans and other animals cannot be framed in terms of simple qualitative differences involving language, reason, or what have you.

By thinking about a human exception again, and maybe even by thinking about “the human” at all, Badiou’s philosophy thus appears to be flirting with serious theoretical and ethical disasters. What makes Badiou’s return to the human better than the model of the human in democratic materialism is not necessarily the terms in which the revival occurs, which, I will explain, I think are ironic anyway. Rather, what makes his return to a human exception worth considering further is the way in which it introduces a transformation into the very grammar we have for thinking about the human, one that results from Badiou’s ontology of the multiple. The best presentation of this grammar or framework is found in Kojève’s reading of Hegel, which I will set up in the next few sections.

In Badiou’s theory, it will turn out that a (human) life itself becomes a strange a-human or inhuman thing, *for us*. Although this means that the human is an exception internal to individual members of the species *homo sapiens*, which is also one of the strongest points in the Kojevian framework, the human is in Badiou’s philosophy made out to be an exception that is external to us as well, external to our existence as individuals, and therefore not something we can safely claim to be “ours” as if it were some kind of essence with which we might identify. It is his way of accounting for the externality of the human that sets his theory off from the Kojevian framework, as well as from the assumptions about the human found in democratic materialism.

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2.

The focal point of Kojève’s treatment of the human is the notion of the “anthropogenic”. This refers to a trait or property the exercise of which is responsible for the appearance of the human at all. Thus, what is “anthropogenic” can exist without the human “properly so called” ever emerging. (Pre-history and possibly post-history would be the realms of these non-human members of the species *homo sapiens*.) Furthermore, for Kojève, once the human emerges its condition

is such that it is always, structurally, seeking its own overcoming in the satisfaction of its desire and the attainment of wisdom. The human is thus of a necessarily limited time span (and its members are keenly aware of such finitude) and on top of being a transitory thing it is also an aberration in the order of things. Giorgio Agamben has pointed this out as well in his discussion of Kojève in *The Open*:

in Kojève's reading of Hegel, man is not a biologically defined species, nor is he a substance given once and for all; he is, rather, a field of dialectical tensions always already cut by internal caesurae that every time separate – at least virtually – “anthropophorous” animality and the humanity which takes bodily form in it. Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropophorous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality (it is in this sense that Kojève can write that “man is a fatal disease of the animal”). (Agamben 12)

What this “anthropogenic” trait is for Kojève must indeed be thought of in terms of the negative: “Man is therefore *Nicht-sein*, Non-être, Néant” (Kojève 431). This entails not just a mental capacity for negation (which would be enough to distinguish the self-consciousness of human beings from the mere consciousness of other animals) but a practical capacity for negation as well. In other words, the human manifests itself in negative actions, such as the famous one in the pursuit of recognition during the master/slave dialectic – that gratuitous suicidal gesture, the demonstration of one's awareness of negativity, in the form of one's own non-being, by risking death. The anthropogenic trait is in Kojève a self-consciousness in action, become practice, and become self-negating.

That the human and the negative are identical is one reason why the human for Kojève constitutes a split (Agamben says, aptly, an internal caesura, a dialectical tension) that runs right down the middle, as it were, of the species *homo sapiens*. The problem this raises is, as Kojève claims in the course of his study of the master-slave dialectic, that “humanity must remain alive, but be or become human” (53). If the essence of the human amounts to self-negation and self-overcoming, remaining human for any amount of time seems impossible. The threat of the non-human, on both ends, is insurmountable: the negation of the human comes out either as a relapse into the merely animal, or death, or the post-human

(at the end of history). Thus, there is no human without what amounts to its rebuttal (which is also its very condition of possibility) constantly underlying it. From the moment of the emergence of the properly human on, the distinction between the animal life of a member of the species *homo sapiens* and that creature's life *as human* is its defining tension.

What Kojève's work brings out is the way in which the human tends to be thought of philosophically as an exception and a difference that is both internal to members of the species *homo sapiens* and external to them. It addresses very well the intuition we have that we are human, which is something strongly distinct in the animal kingdom, yet we must also struggle to remain so. The human is thought of then as an internal difference, in the sense that a human is always also not human – and an external difference, in the sense that the anthropogenic trait is a difference that sets the human off completely from other animals.

3.

Kojève's account assumes that self-consciousness as negativity or negating action is the human essence. This assumption has not fared well. It is even questioned by one of the "existential attitudes" Kojève himself discusses, one that rejects self-consciousness in a manner similar to what I think Badiou is trying to account for in his conception of democratic materialism. Kojève argued that there was only one way to go if one denied that self-consciousness was the essence of the human, which he describes as a mystical option, or, after Nietzsche, a kind of European Buddhism and Nihilism:

200 One can deny that self-consciousness reveals the "essence" of man. Or again, to put it in simpler terms, one can say that self-consciousness is a sort of malady that man must, and can, overcome; that there are, alongside conscious men, *unconscious* men, who are nevertheless just as much – although in another manner – *humans*. [...] It suffices to evoke Hindu thinkers who claim that man approaches satisfaction and perfection in a dreamless sleep, that satisfaction and perfection is *realized* in the absolute night of the "fourth state" (*turia*) of the Brahmins, or in the Nirvana, the extinction of all consciousness, of the Buddhists. (278)

Now, Kojève's reading of Hegel plainly suggests that self-consciousness is some kind of malady – he himself even refers to it as the disease of the animal. Yet it

is also clearly the (troubled, problematic) essence of the human for him; in this sense Kojève seems to share the dark view of self-consciousness contained in the “mystic” option, yet he refuses to place the essence of the human elsewhere – in a mystical communion with being, for example – and he also refuses to reject self-consciousness by pursuing its disappearance. For Kojève, self-consciousness is an aberration in the order of things, and the stuff of an abyssal difference between the animal and the human. Nevertheless it is the human essence, and he maintains that there is a satisfaction proper to it – in the attainment of wisdom, becoming a Sage at the end of history, attaining full self-knowledge and self-transparency, as problematic as all that is.

Of course, we have another way to deny that self-consciousness is the essence of the human now, and it is the psychoanalytic way. What is referred to as the instance or insistence of the letter in the psyche by Lacan would be a compelling way of marking out the essence of the human after Freud, pointing out that which makes us into the fundamentally alienated “speaking beings” we are. Psychoanalysis does perhaps preserve a view of the essence of the human, and it also does so in terms of a split or difference, as Kojève’s model does – but here it is the unconscious that traces this split. From this point of view, identification with our essence becomes a more difficult matter, and if it were ever achieved it would have to involve some kind of embrace of alienation. The kind of satisfaction posited by Kojève (understood as a wisdom that is a full self-knowledge, a full transparency of oneself to oneself) is simply not possible from a psychoanalytic perspective, but psychoanalysis does not embrace the “mystical option” of a satisfaction in non-consciousness and a communion with pure being either. Thus, in psychoanalysis one is faced with the problem of “becoming”, of placing oneself and identifying oneself with an Other scene, there where one is not – where “it was” or “it speaks” (“ça parle”). See also Freud’s famous “*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*”.

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Badiou’s ethic clearly involves a command “to live” and an affirmation that “life”, in his sense, is possible. Yet it does not seem possible to identify oneself there where that life is, for reasons I will explain in what follows. This is why I wish to claim that Badiou makes the properly human out to be a kind of life that is more external or alien to the existence of the individual than even the unconscious is.

4.

The understanding of the human in democratic materialism, as I remarked earlier, attempts to reduce any abyssal human/animal difference. Whether it be language, thought, play, humor, emotions, or what have you, all of these are for democratic materialism just qualities that we have perhaps to a greater (or maybe it is better to say merely *different*) degree in comparison to other species. It is not clear what position self-consciousness would have for DM, and whether that would be the human essence or not. Probably not. According to Badiou the ethic of DM commands us to “live without ideas”, and one imagines this is meant as a guide to satisfaction: you will be happier if your life is not disrupted by “ideas” or by what Badiou calls truth procedures. Badiou, by contrast, will make “living”, and specifically living with an Idea (the only thing that counts as “living” for him), into an ethical command, something that he wishes to affirm can be and ought to be pursued. The task of *Logics of Worlds* is even to establish the possibility of life in this sense. “To begin, or begin again, to live for an Idea is, since it is possible, the only imperative,” he writes, in what is the concluding statement of the book (LM 602). So obviously a distinction between life and something else, which Badiou calls existence or mere being-there, needs to be made. Living is going to be something other than “persevering in the free virtualities of bodies” and something other than just “existing”, which is all it would be, and should be, for DM, which places DM close to the mystical option described in Kojève (LM 529).

Democratic materialism does not fail to recognize the stuff that Badiou associates with life and the human. In *Logics of Worlds* he has the following to say on this:

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Democratic materialism wishes itself to be humanist (rights of man, etc.) but it is impossible to make use of a concept of what is “human” without dealing with this (eternal, ideal) inhumanity that authorizes man to incorporate himself to the present under the sign of the trace of what changes. (LM 533)

This reference to “incorporation” into “the present” under the effects of an event is a significant part of his theory, and Badiou has been interested in something like it for a long time. What is different in the theory given in *Logics of Worlds* is that this is being put so explicitly in terms of living. Life is described elsewhere in the concluding section as “the creation of a present”, the production of a new situa-

tion in terms of the effects of an event (529). In other words, life is a life with a truth procedure. Badiou thinks DM is founded on a negation of life in this sense:

Because it does not recognize the effects of these traces, in which the inhuman commands humanity to be in excess over its being-there, it is necessary to annihilate these traces and their infinite consequences, and to maintain a purely pragmatic, animal notion of the human species. (LM 533)

So the “existence” or life-without-ideas DM recommends that we follow looks to Badiou like a recommendation to lead the existence of a contented animal. Whereas, for Badiou, it is something admittedly “inhuman” that “authorizes” us to live in another sense.

5.

It is through our involvement with truth procedures that we have access to the concepts, the stuff of life, that Badiou revives from the religious tradition: grace, immortality, eternity, and even resurrection. Badiou refers to Spinoza in his discussion of these matters, who wrote that “we feel and know by experience that we are immortal” (in the *Scolia* to Proposition XXIII of Book V of the *Ethics*). For Badiou, this is certainly nothing but a feeling, nothing but something we experience now and then. Through a life with ideas, in a truth procedure, an individual experiences the eternal, or participates in it. But it is the truths produced by such a process that are eternal, not their makers. This is why I want to call the revival of religious terms in Badiou’s philosophy ironic. His return to the human exception seems to be giving life, the true life and not merely existing, all that the religious (especially Christian) theory of the human promised, yet none of it is ours really, in the sense that no existing individual can be said to enjoy such things. Truths are eternal. It is “here and now” that we resurrect ourselves “as” Immortals insofar as we live (LM 536). But we are still not immortal. What Badiou adopts is something like a Platonism without the soul: eternity is for truths and ideas, but not for us; and we live “as” immortals only insofar as we live with ideas. And “resurrection” happens because what Badiou calls a “life” is something that occurs sometimes, that may die out but flare up again in the course of one and the same individual’s long or short existence (like a love, or an enthusiasm for a new formula). But what Badiou calls “life” is not, it seems, ever able to be the defining essence of the individual who bears it.

Just as Badiou talks about his theory of the infinite as a banalization and secularization of what had always had religious connotations, he could say he is doing the same for the religious terms that evoke what was formerly sacred about human life. He renders immortality and eternity banal, in a sense. He makes resurrection trivial and ordinary. I don't think the sense of this can be fully appreciated unless one tries to account for the status of the individual, of a human "existence" (not "life") in Badiou's philosophy in some more detail. Addressing this will also allow us to see better how Badiou is bringing about a significant transformation in the philosophical grammar for thinking about the human.

The banalization of infinity in Badiou's ontology has important repercussions on the status of the individual in Badiou's philosophy. Mladen Dolar recently wrote the following about what the philosophical status of the individual should be in the wake of psychoanalytic theory:

One may say that for psychoanalysis there is no such thing as an individual, the individual only makes sense as a knot of social ties, a network of relations to others, to the always already social Other – the Other being ultimately but a shorthand for the social instance as such. Subjectivity cannot make sense without this inherent relation to the Other, so that sociality has been there from the outset – say in the form of that minimal script presented by Oedipus – a social structure in a nutshell. (Dolar 17)

This is a lesson from psychoanalysis that really should have sunk in by now but for some reason hasn't. Given Badiou's perspective on the ontological status of the multiple ("the one is not"), and given what we know about "life" now for Badiou, what can be said about the relation of a human life to an individual member of the species *homo sapiens*? I would assert (though I do not think Badiou does this explicitly) that there is no *human* or *living* individual in Badiou's philosophy, in the sense that there is no individual identical with someone who lives a human life (or, who can be said to be *exclusively* living such a life). To live "as human" is simply one (or several) traits or tracks followed in the multiplicity that is the existence of any member of the species *homo sapiens*. And this is yet again why eternity and immortality may be the stuff of "life" but not the stuff of our existence.

Badiou therefore continues to make the human into an exception internal to us, albeit one no longer having to do with self-consciousness. A human life, for Ba-

diou, is an interruption of another type of life (or more strictly, existence) that goes on in the many different “worlds” inhabited by one and the same creature:

Humanity is this animal whose property it is to participate in a great number of worlds, to appear in innumerable sites. This sort of objectal ubiquity, which makes it pass almost constantly from one world to another, on the basis of the infinity of these worlds and their transcendental organization, is by itself, without any need for any miracle, a grace: the purely logical grace of innumerable appearing. [...] To every human animal is accorded, several times in its brief existence, the chance to incorporate itself into the subjective present of a truth. To all, and for several types of procedures, is distributed the grace of living for an Idea, thus the grace of living *tout court*. The infinity of worlds is what saves from any finite dis-grace. (LM 536)

And so, as it was for Kojève, such a life is parasitic on something else, labeled by Badiou “existence”. Yet, since no individual is “there” where this human life is, in the sense that no individual can identify with it, this life is as external to us as it is internal to us. Thus, unlike the Kojevian framework, life here does not exempt or mark us off from other species (comparative discussions of animals and humans seem to be absent from Badiou’s work); life as human is as much an exception to us as it is to other species. Thus, the human is a strangely “inhuman” thing from the perspective of our existence as individuals. This is not the case for democratic materialism: DM may not adhere to self-consciousness as the essence of being human, but our individual existence is what we are for it, and is what we are commanded to cultivate in the pursuit of our satisfaction.

Works Cited

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