



ALAIN BADIOU ON THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY TODAY

SANDEEP KUMAR SHARMA

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Punjabi University, Patiala. (Punjab) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Alain Badiou is one of the most renowned and distinguished philosophers of France and he occupies a commanding and distinctive place in French philosophy. He has written about a large number of disciplines and his philosophical ideas are deeply influenced by prominent philosophers like Plato, Heidegger and Althusser etc. He is a philosopher in the French tradition who survives with his own ideas and did not follow others and his entire philosophy is based on mathematics and more specifically on set theory. Philosophy does not have and has never had its own disposal the effective figures of emancipation. This is the main task of what is concentrated in political doing-thinking. Instead philosophy is like the attic where one accumulates resources, lines up tools and sharpens knives in difficult times. Philosophy is exactly that which proposes an ample stock of means to other forms of thought.

Key Words: *Radical Philosophy, Set Theory, Metapolitics, Philosophical Orientation.*

Alain Badiou is one of the most original and powerful voices in contemporary European thought. He is one of France's foremost and celebrated philosophers yet recognition of the force and originality of his work in the English speaking world has been slow to come, perhaps it is difficult to assimilate his work within the established categories of contemporary French philosophy. However, such recognition is now gathering momentum. He is a philosopher in the French tradition who survives with his own ideas and did not follow others. His work promises a radical renewal of philosophy. Influenced by Plato, Lucretius, Heidegger, Lacan and Deluze, Badiou is a critic of both the analytical and the postmodern school of thought. His work spans the range of philosophy, from ethics to mathematics, to science, psychoanalysis, politics and art. His writing is rigorous and startling and takes no prisoners. Most of Badiou's works are now available in English. His daring philosophical undertakings, underpinned by a long term political engagement with the question of revival of radical politics, have gathered sufficient critical appreciation across the wide philosophical spectrum. Numerous independent studies devoted to the explication of Badiou's edifice are already out. He has been described as an heir to Jean-Paul Sartre and Althusser and compared to figures such as Plato by the likes of Slavoj Zizek and others.



Philosophy, since Hegel has been declaring the end of philosophy and with post-structuralism it has taken a turn towards difference and otherness, as the contemporary concept of the subject does not longer have a substantial identity and the very thing put at stake is the representational process, as both the constituting and the de-constituting movement itself resulting from the being in language. However, Alain Badiou's philosophy seems to take a return towards philosophy of truth, maintaining all the time the modern doctrine that "the subject can no longer be theorized as the self-identical substance that underlies change, nor as the product of reflection, nor as the correlate of an object" (Feltham and Clemens 3). For Alain Badiou, philosophy is an identification of mathematics and ontology and in his view, mathematics is that which conditions or should condition philosophy and as such, "it is the infinite development of what can be said of being qua being" (Badiou, Theoretical Writings 38). Thus his entire philosophy is based on mathematics and more specifically on set theory. Considering the complex nature of the mathematical implications deriving from set-theory and its great relevance for Badiou's philosophy, a relatively extensive and detailed elaboration of this theory allows us to understand his main concern with mathematics and the manner in which he relates a modern doctrine of the subject with ontology. Badiou believes that philosophy begins with religion and for him, religion gives him the idea of the world. Philosophy begins where religion ends because philosophy is a radical activity. Since philosophy is out of the domain of religion then what is evil? Normally evil is considered opposite to good but Badiou says that evil is something different. For Badiou, the self of a person remains important and he says what is a bad faith? He elaborates that bad faith is that when a person is cheating with himself. Bad faith is that when a person believes that he is doing something great and he does not want to acknowledge that faith is a rotten faith. So making the choice is very important and the choice is between the good faith and the bad faith and Badiou says that bad faith is a temptation. Bad faith means to escape from the reality and responsibility and every human being is tempted by bad faith. Badiou says that transcendence must be accepted.

The task Badiou sets himself to accomplish is the reinvigoration of philosophy against the various twentieth century pronouncements of its ignominious demise, quite possibly, of its end altogether. In other words, it was proclaimed that the great history of modern philosophy with its rigorous efforts to construct grand metaphysical systems, or what Badiou calls "speculative systematicity has finally come to a historical consummation where it can scarcely have any meaningful role in the future other than as an academic discipline" (Badiou, In Praise of Love 27). Badiou reclaims philosophical thinking in order not to let it submit to the reign of information, data, facts, statistical analysis and crude obsession with anti-intellectualism during the late twentieth century. Although philosophy, as he says, never produces its own truths yet "the desire of philosophy includes a dimension of revolt through a rigorous application of logic, reason and argument so as to continuously raise the question of



universality" (Badiou, Infinite Thought 29). In other words one could say philosophy is never satisfied with the world as it is given in any historical juncture and thereby, it always earnestly takes thinking to its very constitutive limits and in the process unleashes a confrontation which is never without risk.

The subject-form or event in Badiou emerges in four domains, namely art, science, politics and love and the emergence of the subject-form is to be elaborated via its implications. Situation means why a person sees everything but he sees in a different way. Can event be treated with theology and Badiou says the moment event happens, everything starts changing. The first definition of evil is when Badiou says that man betrays fidelity. The second is that when a person believes that something wonderful has happened but in reality nothing happens. when a person avoids truth, when he does not have the guts to face the truth. The third definition of evil is totalitarianism which means what I preserve the truth, everybody should also preserve the truth. Thus evil is a betrayal because man imposes truth on the world. He gives the concept of singularity which means the absolute uniqueness of a person or the thing. It is the pure uniqueness because event transforms man's singularity.

The philosophical investigation begins under the banner of poetry and Badiou says that philosophy is something like a 'logical revolt'. Philosophy pits thought against injustice and the desire of philosophy implies a dimension of revolt because there is no philosophy without the discontent of thinking with its confrontation with the world as it is. Yet the desire of philosophy also includes logic and moreover, the desire of philosophy involves universality. Philosophy addresses all human as thinking beings since it supposes that all humans think. Finally, philosophy takes risks as thinking is always a decision which supports independent point of view. So the desire of philosophy has four dimensions like revolt, logic, universality and risk and the world exerts an intense pressure upon these four dimensions.

As far as the dimension of revolt is concerned, this world does not engage in thought as revolt because this world is a free world and it guarantees us freedom and simultaneously it does not guarantees us the free use of this freedom. This world also exercises a strong pressure on the dimension of logic because the world is submitted to the profoundly illogical regimes of communication. As for the universal dimension of the desire of philosophy is concerned, this world is a specialized and fragmentary world and finally there is the dimension of risk because this world does not favour risky decisions because this is a world in which nobody has the means to submit to the risks of chance. Thus the desire for philosophy ultimately encounters four main hurdles in the world and it is a great challenge for philosophy to face it.

Then Badiou argues that it is essential to discuss the three principal orientations of philosophy today. These orientations correspond to three geographical locations and the first is called 'hermeneutic orientation' which historically goes back to German romanticism and



the key figures that are attached to this orientation are Heidegger and Gadamer. Then there is 'analytic orientation' and the major figures are connected to it are those of Wittgenstein and Carnap and finally we the postmodern orientation which borrows from the other two which is undoubtedly very active in France and prominent thinkers like Derrida and Lytoard are associated with it. It is equally very much active in Spain, Italy and Latin America. The hermeneutic orientation is an analytic orientation and according to this orientation philosophy has the aim of deciphering the meaning of Being. There are statements and writings whose meaning is obscure and the task of philosophy is to clarify this obscurity. The analytic orientation holds the aim of philosophy to be the strict demarcation of those utterances which have meaning and those which do not have the meaning. The essential instrument of analytic philosophy is the logical and grammatical analysis of those utterances and ultimately of the entire language. Badiou avers that the task of philosophy is to discover those rules which ensure the meaning. The fundamental opposition here is between what can be said and what cannot be said. And finally, the postmodern orientation holds the aim of philosophy to be the deconstruction of the accepted facts of our modernity. Its aim is to show that there is plurality of languages in thought as well as in action. According to Badiou:

The specific role of philosophy is to propose a unified conceptual space in which naming takes place of events that serve as the point of departure for truth procedures. Philosophy seeks to gather together all the additional names...Philosophy sets out to think its time by putting the state of procedures conditioning it into a common place... In this sense, philosophy's sole question is indeed that of the truth. Not that it produces any, but because it offers access to the unity of a moment of truths, a conceptual site in which the generic procedures are thought of as compassionate. (Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy 37)

Badiou's philosophy belongs to the great modern tradition of theorizing the constitution and the historical significance of the collective, a collective that takes shape in response to a radical break with the status quo. For Badiou this theorizing is a matter of making possible "the saying together of the truths seized from philosophy's conditions. Indeed philosophy is the locus of thinking within which there are truths is stated along with their compossibility"(Badiou, Metapolitics 141). So it is the supply of just this sort of welcoming space equally to all four conditions that distinguishes philosophical thought.

Yet, if we read Badiou's four conditions of philosophy - politics, love, art and science-as forms of the gathering, politics turns out to be primary for philosophy. Politics, according to Badiou does have a special distinction as evidenced by those rare political orientations in recent history that have had or will have a connection with truth, a truth of the collective as such. In his Metapolitics, Badiou notes that whereas science, love and art are aristocratic truth procedures in that they require only the two or one in the case of the artist. Politics is



impossible without the statement that people taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that constitutes the post-evental political subject. The political event is thus the event whose material is collective in an immediately universalizing sense. Only politics is intrinsically required to declare that the thought that is the thought of all. So we can say that even though love is no less a form of gathering, it is radical politics that introduces and practices the very idea of gathering 'we' as a universal collective.

Now if we focus on philosophy in so far as it is thinking in relation to political thought and if thought is understood as a capacity which is specifically human and defined and defined as nothing other than that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal. What is the precise relation between politics and philosophy? For Badiou, philosophy depends upon the unfolding of radical politics in order for it to think. However, radical political orientations can perform the role of a condition for philosophy's thinking, not because they 'trace a destiny' or because 'they construct a monumental history' but because they have a connection with truth, a truth of the collective as such. If it is indeed correct that the political understood in terms of the procedure that generates a truth of the collective as such is a paradigmatic expression of thought then there must be something more primordial in philosophy's association with politics as compared with its other three conditions. Philosophy's thinking can be practiced unconditionally only if it is directed to thought as such just as it is politics' association with philosophy that can affirm politics' thought as being universal or the thought of the collective as such. Badiou articulates the relation between politics and philosophy via a general axiom that bears some resemblance with the command 'be as the world'. He insists for a political orientation to be worthy of submission to philosophy under the idea 'justice', its unique general axiom must be: people think, people are capable of truth. So the specific political orientation is suitable to be elevated to a condition of philosophy in that it bears the general axiom. Through this association political thought can be affirmed in philosophy's thinking and presumably the criterion for submitting one political orientation to philosophy rather than some other must be a matter for philosophy rather than politics since the actual practice of radical politics does not depend upon philosophy. Indeed according to Badiou philosophy's evaluative role is its distinctive service to thought.

There is no doubt to say Badiou that philosophy activates its thinking when its conditions are available. It must equally be correct to say that philosophy's thinking must nevertheless affirm the authenticity of its conditions as a precondition for its activation. So philosophy must already include within itself, quite apart from its conditions, criteria of adequacy for what is to be thought in order to prepare the space of the thinking together of its conditions. Consequently just as philosophy depends upon the readiness of it conditions in order to think them, so these conditions also presuppose philosophy's prior readiness. If this is correct, then philosophy must have access to its adequacy criteria prior to engaging in the act of seizing its



truths. This is also possible when philosophy has direct access to the political event unmediated by its four conditions. The political event has primacy here in so far as philosophy's thinking is primarily the thinking of the collective as such in which case access to the command or the general axiom becomes crucial for the constitution of such thinking. In other words, philosophy must have a more primordial relation to the political event, the event that harbours the great mystery as pre-requisite for its activation.

Accordingly, if philosophy is the general theory of the event, as Badiou insists, it must also be of the event in the sense that it belongs to the event. We also observe that any articulation of what happens in the practice of philosophical thinking presupposes some account of how this thinking is activated and where it takes place i.e. the question of philosophy's own site and the process of its own generation becomes a pressing issue. Here the attention of philosophy is directed away from the conditions of philosophy whose compossibility philosophy must think to the condition of philosophy understood as that in which philosophy happens. So in the first instance, the primary challenge is to determine not what philosophy thinks or how it welcomes

its multiple conditions but where one encounters philosophy or in Badiou's terms, how the subject of philosophy is constituted.

Like Badiou we believe that radical philosophy, or a proper philosophical project, relates somehow to the radicality of the event. From our perspective the activation of a philosophical orientation is a matter of appreciating the command 'be as the word' and the indeterminate gathering 'we' that is constituted as a response to this command. This means that the collective as such - the collective that the political event manifests - must be available to philosophy as its place of activation. So the philosopher is somehow related to the real process of fidelity to a singular political event. This is important because it is only through such relating that one is exposed to the experience of the collective as such. One can participate in poetry by appreciating a poem someone else has written but one cannot have the fundamental sense of the collective without being engaged, at some level, with the being of the collective in its different manifestations.

Conclusively, the task of philosophy today is to welcome everything into thought which maintains itself outside that synthesis. Everything which affirmatively seizes a point of the real and raises it to the symbol will be taken by philosophy as a condition of its own becoming. But to do that philosophy must break with whatever leads it into the circuits of nihilism, with everything that restrains and obliterates the power of the affirmative. It must go beyond the nihilistic motif of the end of western metaphysics. More generally, it must detach itself from the Kantian heritage from the perpetual examination of limits, the critical obsession and the narrow form of judgement. For one single thought has an immensity far beyond any judgement. Moreover, it is essential to break with the omnipresent motif of



finitude. Its origins both critical and hermeneutical as well regarded by the phenomenologists as by positivists. The motif of finitude is the discrete form through which thought yields in advance, accepting the modest role it is enjoined to play, in all circumstances, by contemporary nihilism in all its ferocity. So the duty of philosophy is very clear as to rationally reconstitute the reserve of the affirmative infinity that every liberating project requires. Philosophy does not have and has never had its own disposal the effective figures of emancipation. This is the main task of what is concentrated in political doing-thinking. Instead philosophy is like the attic where one accumulates resources, lines up tools and sharpens knives in difficult times. Philosophy is exactly that which proposes an ample stock of means to other forms of thought. This time it is on the side of affirmation and infinity that philosophy must select and accumulate its resources. It also appears that for Badiou the future of philosophy depends entirely upon the destiny of truth as the outcome of this hermeneutic battle i.e. between philosophy and sophistry-dogmatism, between philosophy and anti-philosophy.

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