

Alain Badiou

Plato's *Republic*



$\text{Id}(u, q) = \sum \{ \alpha(p) \leftrightarrow q / p \in T \}$
 $\alpha(p) \leftrightarrow p \leftrightarrow q \leq \alpha(q)$ par Ax. $\alpha.1$
 $\alpha(p) \leftrightarrow \alpha(q) \leq p \leftrightarrow q$ par Ax. $\alpha.2$
 $\alpha(p) \leftrightarrow \alpha(p) \leq p \leftrightarrow p$ Cas $q = p$
 $\alpha(p) \leq p \leftrightarrow p = p$
 $\alpha(p) \leftrightarrow p = \alpha(p)$ par Ex. A.2
 $\alpha(p) \leftrightarrow q \leq \alpha(q)$ par ci-dessus
 De $\text{Id}(u, q) = \sum \{ \alpha(p) \leftrightarrow q / p \in T \}$
 on tire alors $\text{Id}(u, q) \leq \alpha(q)$.



PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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*A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters, with a
Prologue and an Epilogue*

ALAIN BADIOU

Translated by Susan Spitzer

polity

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CONTENTS

The numbers and letters in parentheses after each chapter title (e.g. 327a) refer to a division of the text into sections, each usually about ten lines long. Although this division owes its existence solely to ancient methods of editing and paginating manuscripts, it has become the traditional one, enabling readers to find their place not only in the Greek text but also in the available translations, which include such indications in the text – something I have not done.

<i>Introduction by Kenneth Reinhard</i>	vii
<i>Translator's Preface</i>	xxiv
<i>Author's Preface to the English Edition</i>	xxix
<i>Preface</i>	xxxii
<i>Characters</i>	xxxvi

Prologue: The Conversation in the Villa on the Harbor (327a–336b)	1
1 Reducing the Sophist to Silence (336b–357a)	14
2 The Young People's Pressing Questions (357a–368d)	45
3 The Origins of Society and the State (368d–376c)	63
4 The Disciplines of the Mind: Literature and Music (376c–403c)	76
5 The Disciplines of the Body: Nutrition, Medicine, and Physical Education (403c–412c)	93
6 Objective Justice (412c–434d)	106
7 Subjective Justice (434d–449a)	131
8 Women and Families (449a–471c)	148
9 What Is a Philosopher? (471c–484b)	162
10 Philosophy and Politics (484b–502c)	183

CONTENTS

11	What Is an Idea? (502c–521c)	197
12	From Mathematics to the Dialectic (521c–541b)	224
13	Critique of the Four Pre-Communist Systems of Government. I: Timocracy and Oligarchy (541b–555b)	245
14	Critique of the Four Pre-Communist Systems of Government. II: Democracy and Tyranny (555b–573b)	263
15	Justice and Happiness (573b–592b)	291
16	Poetry and Thought (592b–608b)	316
	Epilogue: The Mobile Eternity of Subjects (608b–621d)	337
	<i>Notes</i>	355
	<i>Bibliography</i>	368
	<i>Index</i>	371

INTRODUCTION

Badiou's Sublime Translation of the *Republic*

Kenneth Reinhard

Alain Badiou stands, virtually alone among major philosophers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as a self-proclaimed Platonist, the champion of what he calls a “Platonism of the multiple.”¹ In an intellectual genealogy that few contemporary thinkers would share, there are, for Badiou, “only three crucial philosophers”: Descartes, Hegel, and above all, Plato.² In a 1994 interview, Badiou describes his privileging of Plato as a kind of “coquetry,” but he insists it is a *serious* coquetry.³ There is no doubt something contrarian in flirting with Platonism today, when modern philosophy and critical theory have generally agreed in denouncing it as idealism, essentialism, logocentrism, or even proto-fascism; but Badiou’s relationship with Plato is more love affair than idle dalliance – provocative, perhaps, but also a passionate attachment whose implications for his thinking continue to unfold. As in the legend of the gateway to Plato’s Academy, which was reputed to bear the warning “let no one ignorant of geometry enter,” the approach to Badiou’s thinking requires a rigorous and transformative engagement with Plato’s mathematical imperative, the only mast strong enough to resist the siren call of sophistry. Plato is, for Badiou, the first philosopher *tout court* precisely insofar as he is the first to establish philosophy’s ontological foundation in mathematics, on the one hand, and its necessarily antagonistic relationship with sophistry, on the other. Moreover, it is from Plato that Badiou derives his articulation of truth into four fields or sets of “procedures,” which are distinct from philosophy but are its conditions: science, politics, art, and love.⁴

For Badiou, Plato is the first warrior in the eternal battle of philosophy against sophistry, of truth against opinion, and the progenitor of the living idea of communism. If, as Badiou argues, sophistry is

“a system that creates a dissymmetry of power through the general equivalence of opinions,” we might say that philosophy uses the dissymmetry of opinions and truths to create a general equivalence or availability of power.⁵ There is no place for truth in sophistic debates, where it will inevitably be suspected of authoritarianism. Truth cannot be produced through the exchange of opinions, and in the *Republic* the arch-sophist Thrasymachus is not convinced by Socrates’ arguments but merely “reduced to silence.” Truth is already there, embodied in the subjective position represented by Socrates, and Plato’s dialogues, above all the *Republic*, will explore and articulate its consequences.

An unorthodox reading of Plato has been central to Badiou’s thinking, at least since his early book, *The Concept of Model*, which originated as a lecture in Althusser’s seminar, just days before the great events in Paris of May 1968. Badiou’s 1988 work, *Being and Event*, opens with a strongly unconventional reading of Plato’s *Parmenides* as a theory of “inconsistent multiplicity,” irreducible to the ontology of the One and the Many, an argument he expands in “The Question of Being Today,” published in the 1998 *Briefings on Existence*. Badiou’s 1989–90 seminar on Plato’s *Republic* examines the relationship between the philosophical concept of Truth and the four truth procedures; and Badiou comments extensively on Plato and mathematical “Platonism” in numerous essays throughout the ’90s.⁶ Plato is a recurrent touchstone in Badiou’s 2006 *Logics of Worlds*; and its 2009 companion, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, culminates with a chapter on the “Platonic Idea.” In recent years Badiou has devoted three major interconnected projects to Plato: the three years of seminars (2007–2010) entitled “For Today – Plato!”⁷; a forthcoming screenplay on *The Life of Plato*; and the translation – or, as he calls it at times, “hypertranslation” – into French of Plato’s *Republic* – translated here into living American English by Susan Spitzer.

If a certain critique of Plato begins already with Aristotle, the twentieth century was pervasively anti-Platonic. Many otherwise disparate schools of thought agree in their rejection of what they call “Platonism.” In the opening session of his 2007 seminar on Plato (as well as in numerous essays and talks), Badiou describes six major forms of modern anti-Platonism:

- 1 the vitalist anti-Platonism of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze, who see Plato as the theorist of an unchanging ideal realm of perfect being, hostile to the living reality of becoming. Plato,

- according to Nietzsche (perhaps the most pre-eminent among modern anti-Platonists), is the first “priest,” the first to turn life against itself, and thus one source of the metaphysical “disease” of which we must still be cured;
- 2 the analytic anti-Platonism of Russell, the later Wittgenstein, and Carnap, who associate Plato with the belief in supersensible mathematical objects;
 - 3 Marxist anti-Platonism, for which Plato is the origin of the notorious sensible/intelligible opposition, hence the source of idealism and the beginning of the history of ideology. Badiou frequently refers to this mode of anti-Platonism by citing the dictionary of philosophy commissioned by Stalin, where Plato is defined as “ideologue of the slave owners”;
 - 4 the existentialist anti-Platonism of Kierkegaard and Sartre, who see Plato as subordinating the singularity of existence and the creative negativity of non-being to eternal essences and to the stasis of being;
 - 5 Heideggerian anti-Platonism, according to which Plato obscures Being itself (and thus the ontological difference between Being and beings) by submitting it to the representational idea. For Heidegger, Plato flattens the originary Greek account of truth as *aletheia*, “unconcealing,” into one of knowledge as correspondence;
 - 6 the anti-Platonism of political philosophy, which regards Plato’s politics as “totalitarian,” as closing off the free circulation of opinions in order to assert a rigid politics, which tolerates no dissent. Exemplary here is Karl Popper’s attack on Plato in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, but Badiou also includes the more “noble” example of Hannah Arendt.

Badiou argues that each of these anti-Platonisms accuses Plato of ignoring a key element that they consider to be the very kernel of the real: for the vitalists, “becoming”; for analytic philosophy, “language”; for Marxists, “concrete social relations”; for the existentialists, “negativity”; for the Heideggerians, “thinking” as distinct from mere “knowledge”; and for political philosophy, “democracy” itself. But these objections to Plato are inconsistent with each other and do not add up to a coherent attack or to a counter-position beyond their shared anti-Platonism. The two notable exceptions to this general agreement that Plato fails to address the real, both emerging from the Maoism of the sixties, are what Badiou calls the “mystical Platonism” of Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet and Badiou’s own mathematical Platonism. Mathematical Platonism, according to Badiou,

is a subjective construction that begins with the thesis that there is something incommensurable about all existing measures, something similar to the irrational relation between a diagonal and the sides of a square. But, unlike the exponents of mystical Platonism, Badiou insists that it is incumbent on us to *determine* this non-relation, to construct a new measure for the immeasurable; and in the extended work along this process, Plato will be our guide.

The fact that two out of Badiou's three current projects on Plato are themselves works of art indicates the special position Plato has among Badiou's primary influences or "masters": for him, Plato is the great philosopher of the Idea, of course, but he is also a powerful literary artist in his dialogues – and, according to legend, the author of several tragedies in his youth.⁸ It has frequently been pointed out that, despite Plato's rather extreme criticisms of mimetic poetry and theater in the *Republic*, that work itself is clearly one of great poetic and dramatic art. Badiou's translation of the *Republic* emphasizes and enhances these literary qualities by refashioning Plato's sketchy interlocutors – for the most part bobble-headed yes-men who barely interrupt the relentless stream of Socratic discourse – into richly imagined characters, remarkably alive, complicated, and passionate.⁹ Badiou's theatricalization of the *Republic* also involves the redistribution of comments from Socrates to his interlocutors, so that what in Plato is a series of statements in Badiou becomes more dialogic, more representative of conflicting desires. And, while Socrates and his young disciples discuss the most serious questions of truth, justice, and communism, the mood of their discourse shifts rapidly from excitement to boredom, from melancholia to elation, from hilarity to frustration, and from petty rivalry to earnest collaboration. It is as if the austere situation of a play by Beckett were inhabited by characters by Brecht. At one point in Badiou's translation Socrates remarks: "I had a calling to become a comic actor [. . .] but I preferred the theater of philosophy." Something similar could be said about Badiou, who began his career as a novelist and later became a playwright. Moreover, Badiou's literary works are often based on a certain kind of "translation." His six plays (two tragedies, *The Red Scarf* and *Incident at Antioch*, and the four *Ahmed* comedies) imitate dramas by Aristophanes, Molière, and Claudel, transposing elements of character and plot into novel situations and liberally sampling fragments and at times entire passages of text. Although Badiou's translation of the *Republic* is the most sustained presentation to date of his philosophical relationship with Plato, it should also be considered a central part of his literary or dramatic *oeuvre* – a sort of "Platonic

Variations” or “Incident at Piraeus.” Some readers may be scandalized by the liberties Badiou takes in his translation: his systematic modifications of certain terms (e.g. “the gods” is translated as “the Other”), his occasional elimination of entire passages (e.g. Plato’s notorious argument for euthanasia, or much of the discussion of the family), his pervasive anachronistic references (e.g. to AIDS, iPods, or Euros), and his frequent expansion of brief comments into lengthy discourses. Badiou’s language (and Susan Spitzer’s translation) is colloquial, colorful, and at times rather gritty: Socrates and his interlocutors speak like Europeans or Americans of today or of the recent past, and their cultural references are both classical and contemporary; they move easily between Homer and Pessoa, Heraclitus and Deleuze, Aeschylus and Pirandello.

It would clearly be a mistake to read Badiou’s translation as if it were a scholarly edition, to be judged in terms established by the long history of translations of Plato. But it would be no less wrong to accuse Badiou of not having translated the *Republic* faithfully – or, at least, that would be to misunderstand Badiou’s intention here, which is indeed, above all, fidelity to Plato. For Badiou, however, fidelity is not a matter of custodial conservation; nor is it the unattainable ideal of an inevitably corrupting process (*traduttore, traditore*). For Badiou, fidelity is the subjective disposition that results from the decision in the wake of an event to participate in the construction of a truth. To be faithful is to follow the consequences of such an event – the sudden emergence of a void or excess in a world that previously seemed complete – wherever they may lead. In this sense, Badiou’s translation of the *Republic* is faithful to the event that “Plato” names – the origin of philosophy itself in its antagonism to sophistry and rivalry with poetry – more than it is to Plato’s text as a historical document. It so happens that Badiou’s translation is *also* largely faithful to the text of the *Republic*, with an ear closely attuned to Greek philology and form – but translational fidelity here is an act of *participation* rather than one of re-presentation or linguistic reinscription: Badiou’s *Republic* participates in the ideas of Plato’s *Republic* – above all, the idea of the “Idea” – and his fidelity to Plato’s text is conditioned by his fidelity to Plato’s ideas.

Etymologically, a “translation” is something that is carried or transposed from one language or locus to another; by calling this book, as he has done at times, a *hypertranslation*, Badiou suggests that it goes above and beyond the usual assumptions about the work of translation, taking its text to what we might call a sublime – *hypsēlos* (ὑψηλός) – place of new topological proximities,

unmappable according to the conventional metrics of history and geography. The hyper-space opened up by Badiou's translation is a realm of ideas, but it is no heavenly empyrean; Badiou's *Republic* is neither a philosophical purification nor a literary modernization of Plato in the sense of being an attempt to reduce historical distance for the sake of making an ancient text more familiar, a part of our world. On the contrary, Badiou's "hyper"translation *sublimates* Plato's text, in Lacan's sense of sublimation as "the elevation of an object to the status of a Thing," which is precisely to *de-familiarize* it, to bring out its strangeness – at least from the perspective of current opinion about Plato and Platonism.¹⁰ In his 2010 seminar on Plato Badiou describes sublimation as a mode of subjective estrangement: "If he [the subject] may occasionally be a creator, it's not because he is adapted to the world in which he lives, but on the contrary because he is *not*, and because he has had to follow the paths of *sublimation*." In Freudian terms, received opinion about Plato's *Republic* corresponds to the adaptive inertia of the dialectic of the pleasure and reality principles, which assures that our understanding follows paths we have previously traversed, and which yield moderate but reliable satisfactions – such as the clichés of "Platonism" that we take delight both in repeating and in denouncing. Many of our commonplaces about Plato and Platonism, according to Badiou, are confections propagated by Aristotle, by the so-called "Neoplatonic" philosophers, by Christianity, and by the various modes of modern "anti-Platonism" we have briefly discussed. Badiou's hypertranslation sublimates Plato out of that frequently gauzy history of ideas by dramatizing him as the philosopher who asks us to leave the cave of opinion, the comfort zone of "what most people think," and to participate in the collective construction of some truths from the new perspective that such an exit affords. In this sense, Badiou's hypertranslation lifts the *Republic* out of the cave of "Platonism" precisely through its fidelity to the Platonic idea, to that which, we might say, to continue our Lacanian terminology, is "in Plato more than Plato." At the very conclusion of his seminar of April 14, 2010, Badiou describes his translational fidelity to Plato in theatrical, indeed operatic terms: "at the end of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Brünnhilde, the disobedient daughter, defends herself by arguing that her goal was merely to realize Wotan's initial intentions, and it ends with her being pardoned by Wotan. And similarly, I hope to be pardoned by Plato."

In his seminar of March 10, 2010, Badiou describes the four key operations or transformations that he employs in his translation of the *Republic*: formal restructuration, universalization, conceptual

displacement, and contemporaneity. The conventional organization of the *Republic* into ten books is of course post-Platonic, and *formal restructuration* first of all involves a new division of Plato's text into sixteen chapters (plus Prologue and Epilogue) that reflect Badiou's account of their central concerns and distinctions. So, for example, his Chapters 6 and 7 on "Objective Justice" and "Subjective Justice" include what in conventional editions are the end of Book 3 and the whole of Book 4. This reorganization, however, is not merely for the sake of distinguishing the text's thematic elements, but it acts as a kind of *repunctuation* of the discourse, in the manner in which a Lacanian psychoanalyst might intervene in an analysand's discourse by adding or removing a comma or a period that transforms its meaning, or by unexpectedly cutting the session itself short, in order to draw attention to the sudden emergence of a new way of understanding its significance. Badiou's chapter break here, between chapters 6 and 7, asserts that subjective justice is not continuous with objective justice but distinct, an entirely different (and finally more pressing) matter. So, near the end of the anthropological discussion of objective justice in the state in Chapter 6, Socrates remarks that they "haven't made an iota of progress" toward the true meaning of justice; and the discussion of subjective justice (both individual and collective) in Chapter 7 opens with a suddenly urgent Socrates, "oddly on edge," pressing the interlocutors not to "waste any time" in their pursuit of the matter. If the discussion of subjective justice would seem to be the "theory" that should retroactively explain the earlier anthropological account, the chapter break before it resists such an implication, or at least it leaves it up to the reader to decide what kind of connection should be drawn between the two sections. And, as Badiou points out in his Plato seminar, this kind of restructuration emphasizes the *Republic's* theatricality as a series of scenes that demand our active participation in the process of its unfolding.

Badiou describes the process of *universalization* by citing director Antoine Vitez's famous imperative "theater must be elitist for everyone." Whereas philosophy is apparently reserved for a select group of "guardians" of the state in the *Republic*, for Badiou this restriction is not essential to Plato's thinking, but merely a function of his historical situation and of his tendency to suture philosophical ideas to their political conditions. Indeed, the philosophical temperament is aristocratic, "exceptional," but Badiou insists that there is nothing to prevent it from being a *universal* exception, open in principle to all. The constant proponent of universalization in Badiou's translation, always pushing Socrates to extend his arguments to "all

people without exception,” is Amantha – Badiou’s feminization of the character Adeimantus of Collytus, Plato’s brother, and certainly his most conspicuous modification of Plato’s text. Badiou also uses this technique of recasting a key male character as a woman in his play *The Incident at Antioch*, where the heroine, Paula, is in part a feminized version of Saint Paul. Amantha is an exceptionally vivid creation, one of the true delights of Badiou’s text, and a character for whom Socrates (as well as Badiou) clearly has great love. To a certain extent, feminization is, for Badiou, a way of introducing what Hegel calls “the eternal irony of community” where it is missing; just as Paula questions the dialectics of state and revolution in *Incident*, so in Badiou’s *Republic* Amantha has a much more critical role than Adeimantus has in Plato’s. She frequently challenges Socrates, attacking any hint of sexism or other non-egalitarian views and questioning his reasoning when she thinks his arguments are unsound or inconsistent. She is a materialist, always quick to leap on Socrates when she suspects him of glossing over intellectual difficulties with evasive statements, or when her brother Glaucon has recourse to vague sociological, psychological, or anthropological categories. In Lacanian terms, we might say that Amantha is the hysteric to Socrates’ master – and, just as every hysteric needs a master to criticize, so every master needs a hysteric to support his authority. But, despite the brilliance of Amantha’s personality, the heat of her temper and the quickness of her thinking, Badiou does not use her merely to spice up the dialogue; nor does she represent just feminine “difference.” In fact we could say that Amantha represents not so much the particular qualities of her gender as the *universality* of the *generic*: above all, she insists that Socrates remain true to the radical universalism and egalitarianism without exception of the communist idea, and for this reason her femininity is the mark of a refusal to mark differences.¹¹

The translational process that Badiou calls *conceptual displacement* is meant to liberate Plato from the retroactive Aristotelian account of his so-called “dualisms.” Against the common assumption that Plato draws a hard line between a realm of the “sensible” and a realm of the “intelligible,” Badiou argued, already in his early book *The Concept of Model*, that Plato’s account of “participation” implies that intelligible ideas are located *in* sensible things.¹² And in his recent seminar on Plato Badiou will argue for a similar displacement of the opposition between essence and existence, which is implied by the common rendering of *ousia* as “being” in translations of Plato and as “essence” in translations of Aristotle. So what does Plato mean by the word *ousia*? Badiou argues that we should understand it as Plato’s

version of the Parmenidean account of the indiscernibility of being and thinking: “*Ousia* designates that aspect of being which is identical to thinking [. . .] this point of indiscernibility between the particularity of the object and the universality of the thought of the object is exactly what Plato names the Idea.” Hence Badiou will displace the concept of “essence” by translating *ousia* as “that which, of being, is exposed to thought.”¹³ Similarly, Badiou will displace the idea of “the Good” in Plato by translating the Greek τὸ ἀγαθόν (“the good”) as “the truth,” which would normally be the translation of the Greek τὸ ἀληθές. The displacement here is of the theological or moral sense that the modern concept of the Good brings with it: “Now the idea of the Good has no moral connotation. The idea of the Good involves thought’s possibility of having an orientation, of having a *principle*. [. . .] The idea of the Good designates the orientation of thinking towards *ousia*.” By shifting “the Good” to “the True,” Badiou no doubt violates the letter of Plato’s text, but he also thereby disengages the Good from the Neoplatonic and Christian opposition between good and evil in which it has long been mired, and thus he brings us closer to Plato’s Idea.

Badiou’s *contemporizations* of Plato in his translation are perhaps most conspicuous. But we should not understand the many references to elements of the contemporary world as an attempt to “modernize” Plato, to make him seem “relevant.” The historical situation of Badiou’s translation is intentionally vague: one moment Socrates might refer to Parmenides (whom he likes) or Aristotle (whom he dislikes) as contemporaries, and the next to Lacan or “old Hegel” as figures hovering in an indefinite past. Badiou’s stated intention in his translation of the *Republic* is to remove it from the “discourse of the university,” which has established Plato’s text in its philological–historical context, but at the cost of embalming it as a relic of the past, to be studied and appreciated without living value. Paradoxically, such historicization tends to freeze the *Republic* in a certain atemporal moment, and Badiou’s translation attempts, as he argues in his seminar of April 14, 2010, to *retemporalize* it, “to restore its true eternity, which is to be available for the present.” This process of dislodging Plato from the confines of academia through translation also involves a certain degree of what Badiou calls “rectifying” Plato; it is not only modern philology that is constrained by its historicizing imperative, but Plato himself, who cannot fully exit from the cave of his particular situation. Indeed, in Badiou’s translation, Socrates and his interlocutors criticize positions they regard as “vulgar Platonism,” and Socrates even declares at one point: “taking advantage of the

opportunity given me here by Badiou, I solemnly protest your brother Plato's interpretation of my thinking."

What for Plato was the struggle of philosophy and truth against sophistry and opinion is for Badiou the opposition of what he calls the "materialist dialectic" and "democratic materialism." What most people think today, as they more or less did in Plato's time, according to Badiou, is one version or another of democratic materialist ideology. In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou describes democratic materialism as the belief that the world consists exclusively of "bodies," material entities, both animate and inanimate, and of "languages," the symbolic systems and cultural practices that structure bodies and organize their relationships in various contingent ways. If sophistry represents the cynical mode of democratic materialism, its more earnest (hence more ideologically dangerous) spokesman is Aristotle. Democratic materialism regards a human being as what we might call a *zoon doxastikon*, an "animal with opinions," essentially located in a body that is conditioned and inscribed by its exposure to various (inessential) linguistic systems and cultural practices. The coexistence of multiple symbolic systems is promoted by democratic materialism as an expression of its belief in their relative value and general equivalence; the only cultures that are not tolerated are those that are themselves deemed intolerant, because they regard their beliefs and practices as absolutely true or good. Democratic materialism rejects all transcendentalism and relegates spiritual and religious beliefs to the realm of local customs and practices, where they are honored – as long as they don't challenge the principle of universal equivalence or interfere with the free circulation of material goods and symbolic capital. Democratic materialism is deeply suspicious of uses of the word "truth" where it means anything other than logical consistency, representational correspondence, or scientific exactitude; any other sense of truth is dismissed as an attempt to dominate and hierarchize the fundamental equality of opinions. The implicit motto of democratic materialism is "live without any ideas; don't interrupt the circulation of opinions."

Kant famously combated dogmatic rationalism and its empiricist inversion by developing the "critical philosophy," in which knowledge of the world is always relative to a subject. The Kantian co-dependence of subject and object, however, itself became the new dogmatism that Quentin Meillassoux has called "correlationism" and that underlies the democratic materialism of today. The relativism that characterizes modern sophistry is based on the assumption that subject and object are contingently correlative, hence the most that

any subject can claim is that something is true “in my experience” or “in my opinion.”

It is Plato, according to Badiou, who first wages war against the democracy of opinions in classical Athens and insists that the only life worth living is one oriented by an idea and by our participation in a truth procedure. Hence Plato will be our guide for the critique of democratic materialism today and our inspiration for the “materialist dialectic” that Badiou will oppose to it. As a variety of materialism, the materialist dialectic agrees that there is nothing more than bodies and languages. Nevertheless, there are sometimes exceptions, bubbles of the earth, if you will, which fall out of the material relationships of bodies and languages and fundamentally transform them, allowing for the possibility of *truths*. Truths do not constitute some third type of thing, a spiritual or metaphysical entity, but are fully immanent to the world and composed of nothing more than bodies and languages. This does not mean, however, that truths are merely local, contingent, or transient. Truths are not part of the democracy of opinion concerning the essential animality of human life and the relativity of languages, and they cannot be adjudicated by the standards of representational correspondence, statistical probability, or majority rule. Truths, according to Badiou, are procedures that establish and expand new “generic sets” – groupings of elements not organized according to any shared objective predicates but merely by their subjective orientation around a common void. Human beings may collaborate in such “truth procedures,” local experimental instantiations of universal, infinite, and eternal truths, and in so doing they participate in a subjectivity in excess of their corporeal and linguistic individuality.

Badiou describes three aspects of democratic materialist epistemology in his 2007–8 seminar on Plato: “analysis” (what are the structural conditions of the current situation?), “prediction” (in what direction will the current situation likely develop?), and “critique” (what are the contradictions underlying the current situation?). In contrast, the materialist dialectic argues that thought cannot be “analysis” of reality precisely because thinking, as participation in a truth procedure, is an *exception* to what is, an *interruption* of the laws and structures governing the possibilities of appearing in a particular world; ideas are neither descriptions of the world nor entities describable according to pre-existing conceptual categories. Moreover, thinking cannot be understood as “prediction” or as the calculation of probabilities, insofar as it is itself improbable and unpredictable, contingent on an “event” that cannot be foreseen

and whose consequences cannot be merely extrapolated. Thinking involves chance, even luck, and demands risks that cannot be fully managed. Finally, thinking cannot be understood as “critique” insofar as it is not essentially negative (even if it involves negation) or dialectical (even if it makes use of dialectics), but positive, as the *affirmation* of a new possibility, previously unthought and for the most part still unthinkable according to the governing logic of the world. Critique may clear the ground for thinking, but it is only propaedeutic to thinking proper. According to Badiou, Plato’s *Republic* is such an act of *thinking*: not simply analysis or critique of the existing Athenian democracy (although it implicitly includes both) or the utopian program for improving it, but thinking as the construction of an idea that, according to opinion, is inconceivable, or can only appear as “idealism.” Thus, for Badiou, the *Republic* is an account of the production of a new *subjective disposition* that is based on the possibility of eternal and universal truths evidenced by mathematics and on the elaboration of the consequences of the decision to take up one or more of those truths.

But what does Badiou mean by truth? He clarifies this notion in his 2010 seminar on Plato, in terms of the Lacanian concepts of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. A truth is an infinite multiple (like all beings, according to Badiou); what distinguishes a truth from other infinite multiples, however, is its *genericity*, which means first of all that it is nearly indiscernible under the phenomenological structures of the particular world in which it occurs. According to the possibilities of description or predication available in that world, a truth does not exist. In this sense, a truth makes a “hole” in knowledge, since it is unrecognizable according to current categories of understanding. The *real* of a truth, Badiou argues, is the conjunction of its multiple generic being and its appearing in a world for a subject for whom that truth does indeed exist; hence we might say that the real of a truth is “anamorphic” in relation to what Heidegger calls the dominant “world picture,” being only apparent through the radical reorientation provided by the subject’s decision to be faithful to (that is, to pursue the possible consequences of) the trace left by an event. Moreover, the real of a truth is always “to come,” insofar as that truth’s generic being expands in unpredictable ways and its appearance in a world is only fragmentary, part of a subjective procedure that is always in process, as the “infinite promise” of truth. If the real of a truth is the sum of its being and appearing, the *symbolic* aspect of a truth is their *difference*: a truth is an exception to the rules of appearing, and as such “proves” those rules – that is, it

demonstrates the normative operation of the existing symbolic order precisely by falling out of it, and at the same time it tests its limits by nevertheless appearing for the subject of that truth, who discerns the difference between its being and its appearing. Finally, there is an *imaginary* aspect of a truth – which is not to say “illusory” or unreal. The subject of a truth must evaluate the real of a truth in terms of its future perfect completion: how will the world appear once a truth procedure will have been followed to its end? The subject for whom a truth is both real and symbolic must *represent* (or imagine) the relationship between its fragmentary reality in the present and the symbolic system in which that truth will fully appear in the future. This “imaginary” function of a truth is its communicability, its possibility of being shared through something like a Kantian *sensus communis*: a truth is universal insofar as it excludes nobody on principle and potentially includes everybody, without exception.

Badiou demonstrates this tripartite structure of truth in the *Republic* in the relationship of myth, education, and collective life: the truth of Πολιτεία involves both symbolic *Bildung* and the “true lies” or imaginary constructions of utopian myth, so that the critique of the current situation can open the possibility of another world; but this education into the communist Idea depends on a transformation of the real – which, in the case of Plato just as today, involves the abolition of private property.

Yet, as Badiou points out in his seminar on Plato, “something is missing from Plato, and that’s a doctrine of the event [. . .] what Plato lacks is a theory of opportunity, the favorable moment, a theory of chance” (January 23, 2008). But, although Plato does not have a fully developed theory of the event, Badiou finds suggestions of such a “chance” encounter at various points, and develops them. In a metaphor on education in Badiou’s Chapter 10, Plato presents a sort of “parable of the sower,” in which the fate of the seed depends upon the ground in which it is sown: with proper education, the universal philosophical temperament will thrive and grow; but, when this temperament is corrupted by the sophistry of politicians or by the media under the protection of the so-called “freedom of opinion,” the good become not merely less good, but fully bad, active supporters of the general confusion. In Allan Bloom’s translation of Plato, Socrates suggests that avoiding such an outcome is difficult, rare, and depends on something like divine intervention:

if the nature we set down for the philosopher chances on a suitable course of learning, it will necessarily grow and come to every kind of

virtue; but if it isn't sown, planted, and nourished in what's suitable, it will come to all the opposite, unless one of the gods chances to assist it.¹⁴

If Plato might seem to be saying something along the lines of Heidegger's famous remark that "[p]hilosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world [. . .] Only a god can still save us,"¹⁵ Badiou understands the intervention of Plato's "gods" here quite differently.¹⁶

In Badiou's version, Amantha, in a flattering mood, replies to Socrates, "unless [. . .] it happens to encounter a teacher like you." But, for Badiou's Socrates, something more is required:

No, that won't suffice! It still has to be seized by some event – a passionate love, a political uprising, an artistic upheaval, or what have you [. . .] No one has ever changed or will ever change, merely through moral lessons, a character that's been set in stone by prevailing opinion. Philosophy can only be effective if the political divine has intervened first, if some event interrupts the consensual routine [. . .] The unpredictable event, the emergence of a rallying cry and of a collective organization that couldn't have been foreseen in the ordinary confused babble of opinions and their so-called freedom. (Ch. 10, pp. 188–90)

For Badiou, education is not merely an activity of proper cultivation, to continue the horticultural metaphor; indeed it requires the *interruption* of "the consensual routine" of culture through the experience of an "event" and the subjective reorientation that it involves. If Badiou's translation cannot be taken to render Plato's literal meaning, it is nevertheless the result of considering Plato *as* an event, one that requires a kind of conversion, the break with received opinion, as much as the patient work of induction.

The use of an imaginary representation (or Midrash-like supplementation) to activate the relationship between the currently fragmentary real of a truth and its future complete symbolization evokes the mathematical procedure developed by Paul Cohen and known as "forcing," which has been a central idea in Badiou's work since the 1970s. In set theory, forcing is a means of generating new knowledge from within a current situation by, in a sense, wagering on the future perfect completion of a currently fragmentary truth. This knowledge depends on the addition of what the mathematician Thomas Jech calls "a sort of imaginary set" to a set-theoretical world or ground model, a *generic* set that, as of yet, we know only in part, and then on exploring the implications of its superaddition to the original world, which expands in unexpected new ways, depending on the promise

that the partial knowledge (or “forcing conditions”) that we now have will some day have been completed.

A truth procedure always takes place according to the protocols of one of philosophy’s four “generic conditions” or modes of producing and expanding sets of indeterminately linked elements pertaining to an event.¹⁷ Each of these procedures is taken up in the *Republic* in terms of its relation to philosophy: mathematics (as a science) is the preamble to philosophy, love is its mode of transmission, poetry is its seductive rival; but, above all, the central problem of the *Republic* will be the relationship – and distinction – between philosophy and politics. In Chapter 9 of Badiou’s *Republic* there arises the question of the possibility of a practical implementation, in “empirical reality,” of the “ideal model of the true political community” under discussion. Socrates resists the demand that he demonstrate how such an ideal could be fully realized, but he suggests two steps toward approaching such a demonstration. There is still the necessity for critique, first, to “show what’s dysfunctional in countries that aren’t run according to our [communist] principles”; second, to “uncover, case by case, a change that’s trivial in itself but that would have the effect of reconfiguring the whole political community”:

Ideally, this change would concern only one point or two, at a pinch [. . .] above all, from the standpoint of the established order in which we’ll isolate them, they should have no apparent importance. I’d even go so far as to say that, in the eyes of the state that we want to radically transform, the point to which the change would apply doesn’t exist, as it were [. . .] What we need is a single, inexistent – albeit real – point, which, once it’s been identified and spotlighted, will change everything and bring about the truth of the body politic. Yes! Let’s change this one point bordering on nothingness and we’ll be able to show that the whole of the state concerned will then completely change. (Ch. 9, p. 165)

This transformation of a single “inexistent” point and the exploration of a new generic set around this point, invisible from the outside but fully real and urgent from within, is a “translation” of the mathematical notion of *forcing* into political terms. Can we not also see Badiou’s hypertranslation of Plato’s *Republic* as itself such an act of forcing, meant to expand what is generic in Plato through the clarifying processes of subtraction and supplementation? Badiou’s “generic translation” in this sense rectifies Plato, by insisting that truth is not just for the few, but for everyone. Badiou’s “sublime” translation of Plato’s *Republic* forces the set of guardian-philosophers to expand, this being the condition of participation in the eternal idea of

communism. As Amantha never lets Socrates forget, the generic set of philosophers must come to include everyone in a universal exception without exception: “They must all be philosophers? [. . .] All without exception, said Socrates softly. Yes, without a single exception.”

Notes

- 1 On Badiou’s Platonism, see A. J. Bartlett’s “Plato” (Bartlett, 2010) and *Badiou and Plato* (Bartlett, 2011); Justin Clemens’ “Platonic Meditations” (Clemens, 2001); and Peter Hallward’s comments on Badiou and Plato in his *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Hallward, 2003).
- 2 “In effect, I think there are only three crucial philosophers: Plato, Descartes and Hegel” (Badiou, 2009c, p. 529).
- 3 This remark is from an interview with Lauren Sedofsky, which was published in Alain Badiou’s *Entretiens 1* (Badiou, 2011a, p. 177).
- 4 In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou writes: “The fact is that today – and on this point things haven’t budged since Plato – we only know four types of truths: science (mathematics and physics), love, politics and the arts” (Badiou, 2009c, p. 71).
- 5 See Badiou’s seminar on Plato of February 17, 2010 (which is available at <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/09-10.htm>).
- 6 See for example “Platonic Gesture,” in Badiou’s *Manifesto for Philosophy* (Badiou, 1999b); “Anti-Philosophy: Plato and Lacan,” in his *Conditions* (Badiou, 2008a); Badiou’s “Platon et/ou Aristote-Leibniz,” in Panza and Salanskis (Badiou, 1995); and “The Question of Being Today” and “Platonism and Mathematical Ontology,” in *Briefings on Existence* (Badiou, 2006a), the translation of his *Court traité d’ontologie transitoire* from 1998.
- 7 These seminars have not been published, but are available in redacted versions online (at <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/seminaire.htm>).
- 8 The other philosopher–dramatist whom Badiou especially admires is of course Sartre.
- 9 At one point in Badiou’s translation, Glaucon becomes frustrated with Socrates’ apparently tautological reasoning and refuses to follow him without question, as he does in Plato’s text: “Am I supposed to say ‘Yes, sure!’ or ‘Certainly!’ [. . .] Have you read my brother Plato’s write-ups of the dialogues? All the young people in them speak like that; they’re all a bunch of yes-men.”
- 10 Lacan, Seminar 7: “Thus, the most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises an object – and I don’t mind the suggestion of a play on words in the term I use – to the dignity of the Thing” (Lacan, 1992, p. 112).
- 11 Let us recall that Badiou’s symbol for the generic in *Being and Event* is ♀ (Badiou, 2005a, p. 356).
- 12 As Badiou indicates in a 2007 interview included in the English translation of *The Concept of Model*, “Platonism, in the end, is the knowledge of ideality. But this is also the knowledge that we have access to ideality only through that which participates in ideality. The great problem of Platonism is not really the distinction between the intelligible and the sensible, but the

INTRODUCTION BY KENNETH REINHARD

understanding that sensible things participate in the intelligible” (Badiou, 2007b, p. 92).

13 See e.g. pp. 170, 208, 228, 230, 350, etc.

14 Plato, 1968, p. 171.

15 *Der Spiegel* interview with Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1976).

16 Badiou comments on Heidegger’s remark in his essay “The Question of Being Today” (above, n. 6): “Can the One be unsealed from Being? [. . .] Can thought be saved without having to appeal to the prophecy of a return of the gods?” (p. 34). The response to this is of course, yes, and Plato will certainly be of more help in this project than Heidegger.

17 In Plato’s case, that event was the living presence of Socrates – an inversion of Paul’s relation to the living absence of Jesus. Hegel has noted the parallel between Socrates and Jesus, which, for him, is, however, based on death.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

“Hypertranslation” is the word Alain Badiou has used, in *The Communist Hypothesis* and elsewhere, to describe his treatment of Plato’s *Republic*. Not a “simple” translation into French of the Greek original, then, and still less a scholarly critique of it, Badiou’s text transforms the *Republic* into something startlingly new by expanding, reducing, updating and dramatizing it, leavening it with humor and revitalizing its language with his own philosophical lexicon. Yet, for all the plasticity of the hypertranslation, its freewheeling appropriation of the sourcetext, it still remains an adaptation based firmly on his painstaking translation of Plato’s language into modern French – as he reminds us in the Preface to this edition.

Such a hypertranslation inevitably problematizes the task of the translator, who must not lose sight of Plato’s *Republic* even as it undergoes myriad transformations in its new French incarnation. Badiou may well have had something like this in mind when he remarked: “Imagine what a strange thing it must be to translate into English this sort of translation into French of a Greek text!” (Badiou, 2009b, p. 55). Working on the translation, I was reminded of a palimpsest, with one text, more ancient, underlying the other. In this case, however, the *scriptio inferior* – the inner text – far from being an entirely different text, was the very original, the sourcetext of my sourcetext, and perhaps the greatest work of philosophy ever written, at that. While my task was certainly facilitated by consulting other translations of the *Republic*, both in French and in English, the exercise often proved futile precisely to the extent that Badiou’s work, albeit consistently faithful to the spirit of the *Republic*, nevertheless departs from it freely at every turn. The resulting English text might,

then, be considered a sort of hyper-hypertranslation, at two degrees of separation from Plato – although not, it is hoped, from the truth, in the way in which the poets whom Socrates condemns are said to be at three degrees of separation from it.

Some brief comments, now, on a few features of the translation:

- *Colloquial speech* As is apparent from the first page of the Prologue, and perhaps especially there, the characters – and I stress the theatrical dimension of Badiou's text advisedly – speak much the way twenty-first century Americans do. The unquestionable youthfulness at the heart of Badiou's enterprise, owing to the vastly expanded roles of Socrates' young interlocutors Amantha and Glaucon, makes modern American speech an ideal vehicle for translation here. However much Socrates may play the starring role in the dialogue, it is clear that he is speaking not only *to* but *for* these young people, in whom he has the utmost confidence. By putting into their mouths – and, to a great extent, into Socrates' mouth as well – speech that sounds perfectly familiar to our ears, jaunty yet free of current slang for the most part, I hoped to convey the youthful quality that inheres in the work as a whole. Yet colloquial speech is balanced in the dialogue by highly sophisticated speech; it is their constant juxtaposition that is perhaps the most striking feature of the text.

- *"Dated" speech* There is a certain "dated" flavor that is more pronounced in the English translation than in the French original, owing to the use of one word in particular: "dear" (*cher*). The text is laden with phrases such as *mon cher maître*, *cher Socrate*, *ma chère fille*, and so forth. Such locutions, which are common in French even today, are as a rule omitted in English translations of modern texts, since they lend them an air of stuffiness. No great translation loss is incurred by eliminating them; and yet I decided to preserve them, because they seemed too integral to this particular text to be excised. *Cher*, in its various permutations in the dialogue, often conveys relationships between the characters in a way in which the neutral English "you" simply cannot, varying as it does from being deferential at times (Amantha and Glaucon vis-à-vis Socrates) to being affectionate (Socrates vis-à-vis his young interlocutors) to being ironic (Thrasymachus and Socrates mutually), with a few other subjective states in between. The inclusion of all these *dears* risked making the dialogue sound a bit fusty; but – as Badiou's frequent evocations of the nearby Piraeus, of the patio of the harborside villa, of its columns, and so on remind us – this is, after all, supposed to be taking place

in ancient Greece. In this way, too, retaining a certain old-fashioned formality in the otherwise contemporary American English of the conversation seemed to me justified.

- *Philosophical speech* As Badiou notes in his Preface, he renamed key concepts. Chief among these is the Idea of the Good, which has become the Idea of the True (*l'Idée du Vrai*). This might plausibly have been rendered as "The Idea of Truth," had Badiou not instructed me to maintain a clear distinction between *le vrai* and *la vérité*, a distinction he himself calls attention to in the dialogue. Glaucon's suggestion that it would greatly simplify matters just to call the Idea of the True "Truth" is followed by the line: "And yet, *said Socrates pensively*. . ." The teacher cannot quite relinquish his own terminology, however much it may strike Glaucon, and even perhaps the reader, as odd. (Incidentally, the word "teacher" is, itself, not quite a satisfactory rendering of the French word *maître*, which has connotations of "mentor" and "master" as well. "And yet" . . . we are forced to choose among them.) Overall, the philosophical terminology deployed in the text, its Lacanian resonances – "the Other" or the "big Other," the three "agencies" of the Subject, the "split Subject" – as well as the extensive vocabulary of being and appearing – "in its being," "being-in-truth," "that which of being is exposed to thought," and so on – are so many notes in a familiar Badiouian symphony. Finally, the long rhetorical periods in which Socrates and even Amantha and her brother occasionally indulge, with their intricate concatenation of clauses, showcase Badiou's verbal exuberance and his enduring love of classical language and literature. The description of the interrelationship between the three agencies of the Subject in Chapter 7 is a typical example of this.

- *Poetic speech* Where Plato cites a line or two from an ancient Greek author, Badiou might cite three, four, or more. And these extracts invariably appear in classical French alexandrine verse expressly composed for the purposes of his text. I quickly abandoned my initial efforts to reproduce these verses with existing rhymed English translations – the heroic couplets of Pope's *Iliad*, for example – when I realized how little these ultimately resembled the French. The constraints of rhyming, in both languages, certainly accounted for some of the lack of symmetry between them; but it was mainly the freedom of Badiou's adaptations, which veered wildly at times from the original, that precluded any use of existing translations. Reluctantly, then, I took it upon myself to match the French rhymes with English

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

ones of my own, at the risk of “doing a number on old Badiou,” as Socrates at one point claims Amantha has done on “old Homer.” The text is, moreover, studded with farcical ditties, witty parodies, clever imitative odes of Badiou’s own invention, again always rhymed, challenging me to come up with suitable approximations. The reader’s indulgence is begged for these efforts, which I nevertheless hope will impart a little of the flavor of the ingenious originals.

- *Politically incorrect speech* There is a humorous moment in the dialogue when Socrates gets in a dig, as a linguistically conservative Frenchman might, at political correctness in speech. After mentioning, in a discussion on love of wisdom, a young person unable as yet to distinguish between what’s important and what’s not, he remarks: “Let’s assume that ‘*he or she*,’ as the Anglophones say, has no liking for theoretical knowledge” (my italics). In fact, Socrates in French virtually always uses *il* alone, which it would have been a serious error, in my opinion, to update as “he or she.” I did occasionally use “they” or “them,” as is standard now in English, when the reference clearly applied to both genders. For the most part, though, Socrates is politically incorrect in French and he remains so in English, as even the young people do. Amantha may take Socrates to task for his failure to include women in his examples, but her own speech, like his, is indifferent to political correctness of the Anglophone variety. However much a radical feminist project Socrates’ “fifth system of government” may be, his speech in general often betrays a certain sexism, playful, no doubt, but pervasive in the text.

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

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