

ETHICS AFTER GOD'S DEATH AND THE TIME OF THE ANGELS

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ABSTRACT: The philosophical idea of the death of God (God understood in pre-modern terms as living presence) has had various semantic operations within dominant (post)modern positions on human empowerment. Beginning with the significance of this, the article aims to discuss the half-life of a God who has become a metaphor. In other words, it explores the reverberation of God and God's death in secularized philosophy as well as the consequences of this for ethics and the conception of the Good. Then, the article illustrates the complex connection of this aim with the Occidental delimitation of human potentialities through gleanings from Murdoch, Arendt and Badiou's ideas about the constellation 'worldlessness, rupture, human frailty and everydayness'. It shows that such delimitation, operative in theories that share most of the assumptions surrounding the above constellation, re-sacralizes the justification of ethics as (in)humanist programme. Finally, it indicates how this particular delimitation of human potentialities can be revisited through the revival of the dead metaphor of the angelic and the kind of ethics it can animate.

KEYWORDS: Badiou, Arendt, Murdoch, Eagleton, event, ethics, everydayness, angelology.

INTRODUCTION

What is it to be alive when a God is concerned? It is historically to be able to die, as Alain Badiou asserts,¹ like all living beings whose being alive is manifest so long as

¹ Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence*, trans. N. Madarasz, N. York, State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 24.

they are encountered by other living beings, so long as others have to live with them.² Especially when a God is concerned, being alive also means being inspiring and regulative of other beings' life. However, not only the living presence of God but also God's ideal animation of human action gives sense to life, and this is a feature Gods share with some metaphors. Beyond the question of living presence, ideal beings present metaphorically the other of human beings, the other that we are not, i.e. the other to be reached or the other as the outer limit of human aspiration. Some such idealities and metaphors enjoy a half-life, as they may no longer 'live' with living beings who used to believe in them as alive and present; but they are still creative of human meaning and vision at the deepest level of human motivation. Other metaphors, for instance that of angels, have already been dead in the sense that even this half-life has been denied to them, since they are no longer employed to inspire or guide human self-formation. Yet, they can still be revived, for the precondition for a revival is precisely death.

My aim here is to discuss the half-life of a God who has become a metaphor, or, in other words, the reverberation of God and God's death in secularized philosophy as well as the consequences of this for ethics and the conception of the Good. I explore the complex connection of this aim with the Occidental *delimitation* of human potentialities and illustrate it through gleanings from Murdoch, Arendt and Badiou. Finally, I indicate how such delimitation can be revisited through the revival of the (philosophically) dead metaphor of the angelic and the kind of ethics it can animate.

GOD, THE GOOD AND HUMAN ACTION

The passage from the theological to the secular worldview has been marked by complex philosophical responses and by efforts to making sense of it. From Hume down to Nietzsche, the issue is how to pass from a naturalistically debunked theology to a vitalistic ethics of aesthetic Dionysian creativity.³ For Nietzsche, the absencing of God initiates the decomposition of 'the figure of man';⁴ yet, only to open the possibility for the *Übermensch*. God's death is expected to create a new, empowered humanity. Nietzsche announced quasi-messianically the advent of the 'man of the future', exploring the potentialities of the *Übermensch*, of humanity's becoming God

² Ibid, p. 23.

³ N. Turnbull, 'Crossing Nietzsche', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 22, no 3, 2005, pp. 139-149, p. 148.

⁴ Alain Badiou, 'The Joint Disappearances of Man and God', in A. Badiou, *The Century*, trans. A. Toscano, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008, pp 165-178, p. 171.

after the death of God.⁵ In a similar shift, the sociological substitution of Humanity (Comte) or Society (Durkheim) for God illustrates also a way of ‘managing’ the secularization of meaning. For the positivist Comte, as Badiou remarks, God is humanity itself.⁶ A juxtaposition of the two tendencies, i.e., Comte’s humanist ‘immanentization of the True’⁷ and Nietzsche’s overcoming of humanism through the death of divinity clearly demarcates the productive effects of the transcendent void. ‘Comte’s positive faith in Humanity [...] is suspended over the abyss which Nietzsche inscribed with “the death of God”, to whose vertiginous and culturally dissolvent consequences it can be interpreted as both a panic reaction and an alternative response’.⁸ On balance, the adaptive response of theory to secularization has been to couch in a secular idiom what was once theologically thought as realization, fulfillment and plenitude.

Similar stances stem from another lineage of thought, the one initiated by Hegel. For Badiou,⁹ Hegel thought of God as ‘the process of a supposedly complete man’. As for Kojève, known for his important elaboration on Hegelian philosophy of intersubjectivity, God’s death opened a path for a re-formulated humanity. With the Enlightenment, Christianity ceased to be ‘a dogmatic theology but became a social and cultural possibility: a state of affairs where the Christian ideal of a masterless world of mutual respect became a founding idea and a real historical force’. From Kojève’s Hegelian perspective, the Enlightenment only negated Christian theology, not its *anthropological ideal*. Thus, in Kojève’s view, ‘Christian man can only become what he would like to be by becoming a man without God - or if you will a God-man. He must realize *in himself* what at first he thought was realized in his God’.¹⁰ Marx’s well-known view that religion is the opium of people and it will become expendable when humanity reaches emancipation¹¹ operates within the same framework of substitution. In Marx’s own words, as quoted by Kordela, ‘to call on people to give up their illusions about their condition is to *call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore in *embryo* the *criticism of that vale of tears* of

⁵ A. Wernick, ‘From Comte to Baudrillard: Socio-Theology After the End of the Social’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 17, no 6, 2000, pp. 55-75, p. 56.

⁶ Badiou, ‘The Joint Disappearances of Man and God’, p. 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Wernick, ‘From Comte to Baudrillard’, p. 56.

⁹ Badiou, ‘The Joint Disappearances of Man and God’, p. 167.

¹⁰ Cf Turnbull, ‘Crossing Nietzsche’, p. 146.

¹¹ A. K. Kordela, (1999). ‘Political Metaphysics: God in Global Capitalism (the Slave, the Masters, Lacan, and the Surplus)’ *Political Theory*, vol. 27, no 6, 1999, pp. 789-839, p. 818.

which religion is the halo'.¹² Through this prism, Slavoi Zizek's idea that 'Christianity both presupposes a materialist philosophy and is at the same time a phenomenological precondition for authentic Marxist consciousness'¹³ makes better sense.

Long before those developments, the Kantian praise¹⁴ of revolutionary *enthusiasm* and of the optimist philosophy of human history it could inspire had pointed to the self-reforming and world changing potentiality of *emancipated* rational human action. The connotations here cannot be missed; we need only to recall the Greek etymology of the noun 'enthusiasm'. It is derived from the verbs 'entheazo' and 'enthousiazō', both composed by the words 'en' and 'theos' (God) and combined in the root 'enthous', which means to 'be possessed by God', 'to have God in me', to 'be ecstatic', or, in a more transitive sense, to 'cause enthusiasm', to 'inspire', to 'inculcate, breathe, God in the other'. Such connotations give us an aesthetic or symbolic representation of the truth in Wernick's assertion that the highest aim of political conduct within the modern framework was theogenic, i.e. making God.¹⁵

The examples of Nietzsche's superhumanity of humanity, Comte's socio-theology, Kojève's anthropology as well as the example of revolutionary enthusiasm are emblematic of a tendency that was shaped in modernity and was meant to determine, almost unconsciously, as I shall show, the fate of philosophy in postmodernity too. What is at stake in the postmodern era is the position of radical redirection of human beings within a secular scheme that rules out the hope of divine assistance or providential planning. Now that no theodicy is allowed to harness the evil manifested in the smooth course of quotidian human life and place it at the service of a providential heterogeneity of ends (Ferguson), of a 'cunning of nature' (Kant) or of a 'cunning of reason' (Hegel),¹⁶ what makes an ethico-political radical redirection possible? What is presupposed is a certain reworking of humanity's relation to the Good. Following in the steps of some post-Enlightenment philosophy, contemporary thinking is still struggling to understand the death of God not as a symbol of meaninglessness and despair but as an 'evental' openness of a new human possibility. This struggle is marked by an encounter with a meaning-producing nothingness, one

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Turnbull, 'Crossing Nietzsche', p. 143.

¹⁴ For a discussion of it, see, J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: phrases in dispute*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 161ff. For a discussion of Lyotard's position, see, M. Papastephanou, 'Linguistic Archipelago and (its) History', *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 33, no 5, 2002, pp. 566-586.

¹⁵ Wernick, 'From Comte to Baudrillard', p. 63.

¹⁶ On these notions, see, for instance, M. Papastephanou, 'Kant's Cosmopolitanism and Human History', *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2002, pp. 17-38.

that is taken to generate perhaps the only human truth, the one of self-making and of truth's human-made nature.

For liberalism, secularization is the opening of new possibilities for an achievable modest betterment, for personal well-being *via* tolerance and respect of rights and for consensual deliberative handling of public issues. For much German contemporary philosophy along Habermasian lines, the issue of God (along with the question of why act morally) is bracketed and left to existential individual choice. In this vein, the emphasis is put on the possibility of a redemptive continuity, a reengagement with the counterfactual possibilities that remained unexploited by the Enlightenment. For much French philosophy, an ethic of break and disruption of everydayness is championed that, despite its secular gloss,¹⁷ it echoes all the resonance of religious parlance in the way the evental, the epiphany, the ineffable and unrepresentable are set against quotidian normalcy.

Yet, the loss of revolutionary enthusiasm, the kind of enthusiasm that used to be associated with political projects of radical change¹⁸ - the absence of which Habermas describes as typical of the postmodern era,¹⁹ is loss of divine inspiration. After Auschwitz, revolutionary self-confidence and enthusiasm turn into despair, while the inability to conjure up theodicy to mitigate the senselessness of recurrent evil and vindicate an optimistic account of the quotidian has led to a wholesale indictment of daily life. The space is opened for the liberal anti-utopianism of piecemeal engineering of societal change and for the modest goals that are appropriate to an essentially incriminated human being, which I see as some of the varying effects of developments which could be placed under Badiou's conception of 'animal humanism'.²⁰ Sure, this occurred through complex and often contradictory moves that cannot be chronicled here, but the upshot is that, ironically, a *contemptus mundi*, so reminiscent of some medieval philosophy, goes hand in hand with the secular loss of faith in any utopian qualities of the mundane – one that affects, as I argue later, even Badiou's own project. We could adapt here Wernick's aphorism (although it was

¹⁷ For Rudolf Bernet, 'a theological turn in the French phenomenology of the last fifty years' has been noted. R. Bernet, 'Christianity and Philosophy', *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 32, 1999, pp. 325-342, p. 325. His examples include the names of P. Ricoeur, E. Levinas, M. Henry and J. Derrida.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *The Differend: phrases in dispute*, pp. 151ff.

¹⁹ J. Habermas, 'A reply to my Critics' in J. Thompson and D. Held, (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1982, pp. 219-283.

²⁰ Badiou, 'The Joint Disappearances of Man and God', p. 175.

written for a different context) that ‘if the old god has culturally expired, the new one is not only mortal, and under threat. It is dead on arrival’.²¹

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF GOODNESS, ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TRUTH AND THE ACCOMMODATION OF INESCAPABLE HUMAN FAILURE

In her novel *The Time of the Angels*, Iris Murdoch describes the passage from the theological to the secular self-understanding of humanity, as well as the concomitant psychological and ethical trauma, as follows.

The concept [of Good] is empty. This has been said of the concept of God. It is even more true of the concept of Good. It would be a consolation, it would be a beatitude, to think that with the death of God the era of the true spirit begins, while all that went before was a fake. But this too would be a lie [...]. With or without the illusion of God, goodness is impossible to us. We have been made too low in the order of things. God made it impossible that there should be true saints.²²

It seems to me that this extract illustrates some of the most celebrated ideas of postmodern philosophy, of some of its precursors, of its contemporary advocates or even of some of its critics. For Kant, in Badiou’s parlance, ‘the Good, and not the True, opens man to God’;²³ we saw in the introduction that this link has been broken. Yet, the concept of God is reconnected, after the modernist interval, with the concept of the Good, but only in their common feature of emptiness, as we see in the above passage. The anthropological enthusiasm of the possibility for human perfectibility through emancipated action is now considered a delusion. Ironically, the era that dislikes the word ‘impossible’ about almost all issues of technological, biological and pragmatic change is at the same time the era that takes the impossibility of radical ethical redirection for granted.

The context of this surrender is marked, I claim, by both religious and Hobbesian residues. Goodness is understood in an absolute Christian sense of unworldliness and unconditionality. In Arendt’s words, chiming with those of Murdoch in implying the impossibility of ethical ideality, ‘goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or a dutiful member of a church’. Goodness as absolute inwardness is further presented as

²¹ Wernick, ‘From Comte to Baudrillard’, p. 66.

²² I. Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, introduction by R. Holloway, London, Vintage, 2002 [1966], pp. 171-2.

²³ Badiou, ‘The Joint Disappearances of Man and God’, p. 167.

unconditionally self-referential. 'For it is manifest that the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake'.²⁴ This dehumanized goodness of isolation meets, then, the additional insuperable barrier of a quotidian world of conflict, antagonism and egoism. In the *Human Condition*, Arendt adumbrates that any effort toward the good is doomed to fail, since 'no man can be good, save God';²⁵ interestingly, her textual support there comes from Luke and other religious sources. In like fashion, Murdoch's novel assures that 'one must be good for nothing, without sense or reward, in the world of Jehovah and Leviathan, and that is why goodness is impossible for us human beings. It is not only impossible, it is not even imaginable, we cannot really name it, in our realm it is non-existent'.²⁶

What is thus precluded is goodness becoming concretized through public good works, but this condemns the concept of goodness to remain disconnected from action. In fear of moralizing the public sphere, Arendt's approach ends up in the opposite direction, i.e., to construct a public in more proximity to a Machiavellian world²⁷ rather than to the ancient Greek world of public distinction and excellence that is her initial preference.²⁸ Goodness, 'as a consistent way of life, is not only impossible within the confines of the public realm, it is even destructive of it. Nobody perhaps has been more sharply aware of this ruinous quality of doing good than Machiavelli, who, in a famous passage, dared to teach men "how not to be good"'.²⁹ This is because 'goodness must go into absolute hiding and flee all appearance if it is not to be destroyed'.³⁰ For, to Arendt, a 'goodness that comes out of hiding and assumes a public role is no longer good, but corrupt in its own terms and will carry its own corruption wherever it goes'.³¹ Like Murdoch in *The Time of the Angels*, Arendt

²⁴ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 74. My attention was drawn to these passages by Vikki Bell's text, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics: an essay with Flannery O' Connor and Hannah Arendt' in *Theory, Culture and Society* vol. 22, no 2, 2005, pp. 1-27.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 75.

²⁶ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 172.

²⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 75-7. To avoid a misunderstanding of Arendt's theory, it has to be said that this world is Machiavellian only in the sense of grounding politics beyond good and evil.

²⁸ The story of Herostratus who notoriously burnt Efesus for posterity and was condemned rather than praised shows us precisely that distinction was not secured in antiquity just through unprecedented, innovative moves, but through moves that were considered great because of their goodness.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 77. This is no accidental approval: see the rest of her comments on Machiavelli in the same page.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 75.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 77.

reaches such conclusions because she draws her conception of goodness from religious absolutism and lacks any alternative to counterweight the latter's moralism.

Further proof of this is found in the following passage where the Christian undertone meets an unspoken Hobbesian treatment of humanity as inherently incapable of radical goodness. 'Good works, because they must be forgotten instantly, can never become part of this world; they come and go, leaving no trace. They truly are not of this world. It is this worldlessness inherent in good works that makes the lover of goodness an essentially religious figure and that makes goodness [...] an essentially non-human, superhuman quality'.³² The word 'essentially' is crucial in its semantic proximity to essentialism: the assertions that the lover of goodness is essentially a religious figure and that goodness has an essentially non-human quality mirror nothing other than the essentialist conjunction of religious and Hobbesian human understanding.³³ For, the Hobbesian thesis is 'that naked self-interest is the sole motivating force in human affairs, and that state authority is merely the outcome of a contract entered into for the sake of limiting its more destructive effects'.³⁴ In Murdoch's parlance, 'I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point'.³⁵ Significantly, when F. B. A. Asiedu comments on this passage from a religious point of view, the first statement, i.e. about natural selfishness, is endorsed ['the first of her premises might receive little objection'³⁶] and only the second is challenged on grounds of meaningfulness of human life. This shows once again the convergence of versions of Christian onto-anthropology with the Hobbesian liberal counterpart.

The inevitable theoretical implication of Arendt's view that 'no man can be good save God'³⁷ can be better unpacked through Murdoch's ideas. What is implied there is a radical questioning of the possibility of ethics – at least in its idealized sense that goes beyond social coordination of action: for 'God was at least the name of

³² Ibid, p. 76.

³³ For a humanity that is coming out of a world war and still engaged in the imperialist politics of colonialism or about to deploy cold war diplomacy and strategies, this essentialism is very comforting. It shifts the burden of political responsibility from the West and places it on humanity as a whole. Any human being would act in the way the Western subject does, since we are only human after all.

³⁴ C. Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 157. Norris makes this point with regard to Foucault's rhetoric of power/knowledge, but his discussion could very well apply to the whole philosophical trend that I examine here.

³⁵ I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 78.

³⁶ F. B. A. Asiedu, 'Intimations of the Good: Iris Murdoch, Richard Swinburne and the promise of Theism', *Heyf* XLII, 2001, pp. 26-49, p. 32.

³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 75.

something which we thought was good';³⁸ now that the old enabling fiction no longer holds, ethics is groundless, unrepresentable and ineffable. It has to be clarified here,³⁹ however, that Murdoch does not deny all moral theorizing; this would be a misrepresentation of her approach. While stating that the 'good' is empty and ethics is in need of transfiguration, Murdoch maintains both her interest and her faith in the practical weight of an ethics that operates with what she calls 'secondary moral words' rather than with primary and general ones such as 'the good'.⁴⁰ As she writes, 'modern ethics analyzes "good", the empty action word which is the correlate of the isolated will, and tends to ignore other value terms'.⁴¹ The latter ground thoughtful moral life and comprise courage, complacency, sincerity, helpfulness, presumptuousness⁴² and other such notions that we employ as social beings for assessing moral conduct.

Be that as it may, as we have already seen, for Arendt too, 'goodness in its purity does not belong - indeed, cannot exist - within the public realm'.⁴³ A dipole is being consolidated: an absolute ethics of transcendence, on the one hand, and an incriminated ontology of humanity that raises insurmountable obstacles to goodness, on the other. Even when ethics is not thereby dismissed but, on the contrary, prioritized precisely on such grounds,⁴⁴ ontology as the polar other of ethics becomes indicted in *essentialist* fashion.⁴⁵ Hence, for Levinas whose face-to-face ethics is the best example of such prioritization, 'the Good, and consequently ethics, situate themselves beyond essence'.⁴⁶

Yet, more often than not, the drastic choice between such ethics and such ontology does not operate in favor of a rejuvenation of ethical or moral discourse and its validity claims. To many contemporary thinkers and their commentators, the advent of a secular era demarcates, along with the death of dogmatic theology, a

³⁸ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 171.

³⁹ I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer of *Cosmos and History* for this valuable clarification and for drawing my attention to the necessity of avoiding a lopsided presentation of Murdoch.

⁴⁰ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² For these examples, thanks are due, again, to the anonymous reviewer of C & H.

⁴³ Bell, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics', p. 15.

⁴⁴ E. Levinas, 'To Think God on the Basis of Ethics', in Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. B. Bergo, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 136-139, p. 137.

⁴⁵ M. Papastephanou, 'Onto-theology and the Incrimination of Ontology in Levinas and Derrida', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 31, no 4, 2005, pp. 461-485.

⁴⁶ Bernet, 'Christianity and Philosophy', p. 326.

demolition of moral autonomy, justice and truth. Murdoch describes this tendency as follows: ‘We cannot know the truth because [...] it is something that cannot be endured. People will endlessly conceal from themselves that good is only good if one is good for nothing. The whole history of philosophy, the whole of theology, is this act of concealment’.⁴⁷ Even the only truth that this *Zeitgeist* considers unshakable, the one of human inescapable guilt is, according to Murdoch, concealed. As to other truths, relativism becomes the only paradigmatic certainty, since ‘there is nothing any more to prevent the magnetism of many spirits’.⁴⁸ Once the Shibboleths of modernity are deconstructed, unmasked as residues of an onto-theology that arrests time, there is no point or no room left for reconstructive approximations of truth. Approximations of that sort are not only doomed from the start as they, supposedly, pursue a chimera, but they are also presented as dangerous in perpetuating the illusion that such effort is the *raison d’être* of philosophy. Anticipating Foucault,⁴⁹ the above extracts claim that the abolition of power systems could leave nothing at all, nothing visibly human. Or new codes and disciplines will be produced but we shall have no reason to expect ‘that these will be any better than the ones we now live with’, or we may not even *know* what ‘better’ might mean.⁵⁰

Truth is unknown and therefore relative. However, this uncoupling of philosophy as truth-seeking and thought as the space opened by the end of the author does not always entail the abandonment of the kind of humanity-as-programme that had inspired radical humanism. Despite the gap separating, say, Sartre from Foucault, ‘radical humanism and radical anti-humanism agree on the theme of Godless man as opening, possibility, programme of thought’.⁵¹ In an interesting sequence, and from another perspective, for many who share a large part of the ontological assumptions about humanity’s predatory employment or treatment of ‘knowledge’ but wish to avoid the relativist conclusion at all costs and to maintain the post-God programme, ‘truth is unknown’ does not merely describe a disjunction of two terms, i.e. truth and knowledge. It describes rather a contradiction in terms. There is ‘no knowledge of

⁴⁷ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, pp. 171-2

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁴⁹ Just as above, my reference to Foucault here is not accidental, for he also belongs in this lineage and his ideas could be paralleled to those of Arendt and Murdoch that have attracted my attention here.

⁵⁰ C. Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993, p. 51. Norris’s discussion of Foucault on this point draws from Walzer’s critique of determinism and nihilism.

⁵¹ Badiou, ‘The Joint Disappearances of Man and God’, p. 171.

truth', for 'truth makes a hole in knowledge'.⁵² Truth is unknown not because it escapes the order of knowledge but because it shatters it: for Lacan, and Badiou who follows him on this, truth is a hole on the body of knowledge because knowledge connotes automation, transmission and repetition, whereas truth is interruption, break and risky decision.

I turn to Badiou at this juncture because his thought is emblematic of the possibility to share some of the above assumptions of Arendt and Murdoch – despite the very many differences on surrounding philosophical issues – but to be unwilling to subscribe to some of their conclusions and thereby to produce an interesting, innovative and valuable (yet, in my view, not always felicitous) account of ethics and truth. Badiou shares with Arendt and Murdoch the conviction about a predatory, aggressive and egoistic side of humanity⁵³ in a Hobbesian sense. As we shall see below, Terry Eagleton's criticism that Badiou's 'philosophy reads rather like a bizarre conjuncture of Hobbes and St Paul'⁵⁴ can better be justified through placing the relevant points of his works alongside those of Murdoch and Arendt.

More specifically, knowledge is to Badiou,⁵⁵ just as to Arendt,⁵⁶ a manifestation of human automation and statistical repetition that solidifies hierarchies and perpetuates the *status quo*. He wishes to rescue truth from all this habitualization by grounding truth in the eruptive and subversive event, just as Arendt grounds it in natality and Murdoch in the 'unselfing' force of beauty. Apparently unlike them, Badiou dissociates ethics from the unworldly and the ineffable and aspires to elaborate an ethic of political intervention and change. Still, as I shall show, his theoretical universe is parallel in its shortcomings to those of Arendt and Murdoch. It will become apparent if we follow the thread from the assumption of the impossibility of goodness down to the assumption of human failure and selfishness and view how the latter completes the picture of an onto-anthropology affected by the Christian and Hobbesian essentialist residue.

In the *Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch writes that 'good is mysterious because of human frailty, because of the immense distance which is involved. *If there were angels*

⁵² A. Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, New York, State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 80.

⁵³ See, A. Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, trans. P. Hallward, London, Verso, 2001 and A. Badiou, *Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Brassier, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.

⁵⁴ T. Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths' *New Left Review* vol. 9, 2001, pp. 155-160, p. 159.

⁵⁵ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 37 and Badiou, *Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, p. 45.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

they might be able to define good but we would not understand the definition'.⁵⁷ This negative side of the self that creates an unfathomable gap between goodness and frailty needs to be monitored and contained, and so political rule becomes the bridle of a rampant human nature. Regarding a similar assumption, Arendt quotes in a footnote the following idea of Madison: 'but what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If *men were angels*, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls would be necessary'.⁵⁸

Just as in the cited extract from Murdoch and in Arendt's reference to Madison, in much postmodernist discursive hegemony too, and in the thought of many of its critics, the only paradigmatic certainty, the most unshakable truth, appears to be that of inescapable human failure, of human essential incompatibility with unconditional goodness. Human nature precludes the prospects for radical moral and social change beyond mere adjustment to, and refinement of, the state and the law. The model is an absolute saintliness beyond ontology and its economies, which, in its unattainable height, it effects a despondency that blocks the possibility for a radical and redemptive politics. This model is further supported by the only signs of vitality that the metaphor of the angel enjoys in much philosophizing. As we saw in the above quotations from Murdoch and Arendt, the angelic is recruited to illustrate absolute impossibility, radical difference and ineluctable absence.

Summing up Arendt's disconnection of ethics and politics around the axis of unconditionality, aneconomy and worldlessness, we may establish the affinity with the postmodern celebration of the human desire to escape all order of knowledge and the failure to do so - what I would call the 'impossibility yet necessity' thesis (a phrase drawn from the deconstructive context). In Bell's succinct way, to Arendt, 'institutions cannot be founded on goodness; they cannot respond to things outside the world, "whether angels or devils"'.⁵⁹ For "good works" have a "worldlessness" that differentiates them from action; goodness lacks the capacity to *appear* in the world'.⁶⁰ Goodness belongs to the other of humanity and its worldliness: it is the divine other of institutions and human historical learning process. Likewise, for the later Derrida, ethics 'is a matter of absolute decisions, which must be made outside all given norms and forms of knowledge; decisions which are utterly vital, yet which completely evade

⁵⁷ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 40, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ In Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 110, fn. 54, emph added.

⁵⁹ Bell, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics', p. 16. Also, H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Bell, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics', p. 15.

conceptualization'.⁶¹ Yearning and failure demarcate the inexorable circle of repetition into which humanity is trapped, equally determined by it and responsible for it. 'Such ethical choices are at once necessary and "impossible", wholly mine yet "the decision of the other in me", a kind of implacable destiny for which, like Oedipus, we are nevertheless entirely to blame'.⁶² The 'impossibility yet necessity' thesis is accomplished through a spectral presence of God. For Arendt, 'God [is] the only imaginable witness of good works'.⁶³ For Derrida, 'confronted in our solitude with such asocial, incommunicable crises of judgement, "we fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible"'.⁶⁴

At first sight, Badiou seems to oppose this 'impossibility yet necessity' thesis as he is at odds with Derrida's position and its Levinassian undertones (as well as the postmodern utilization of them). Peter Hallward makes this point most eloquently in his introduction to Badiou's *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*.⁶⁵ Thus, in Badiou's philosophy gone is the Derridean 'theoretical association of ethics with a "goodness too good for this world", along with its practical (legal) justification of this same world'.⁶⁶ Yet, the possible implications of such a distance are almost annihilated (regarding the point of concern here) when we consider that for Badiou just as for Derrida⁶⁷ the realm of decision is distinguished from that of knowledge. Badiou shares with his opponents the view of the good being excessive and beyond the supposed automatism of everydayness.⁶⁸ Astonishingly reminiscent of Arendt's legality, the law

⁶¹ Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 156. I follow Eagleton's parlance solely for reasons of space, succinctness and relevance, in no way aiming to replace a direct discussion of the original Derridean sources with secondary bibliography. For my own direct engagement with Derridean texts on these issues, see, Papastephanou, 'Onto-theology and the Incrimination of Ontology'.

⁶² Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 156.

⁶³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 76.

⁶⁴ Cf. Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 156.

⁶⁵ In Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, pp. xxii-xxvii.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

⁶⁸ By everydayness, the everyday, the quotidian etc, I do not refer strictly to how daily life is in our contemporary world. I refer, rather, to the everyday as the complex, invaluable rich modes of actual existence, irrespective of time and space. This sense of everydayness encompassing liberating forces and suppressed potentialities that contradict habituating tendencies characterizes even the worst accomplished dystopia. Thus the way I employ the term is close to Agnes Heller's use. To her, as Gardiner explains, 'daily life cannot be understood as a "thing" or "system", or even an "attitude"'. Instead, she conceptualizes the everyday as an ensemble of historically constituted practices and forms of subjectivity that are complexly related to and mediated by other structures, institutions and practices'.

in Badiou ‘governs a predicative, worldly multiplicity, granting to its part of the whole its due’. In contrast to law, ‘evental grace governs a multiplicity in excess of itself, one that is indescribable, superabundant relative to itself as well as with respect to the fixed distribution of the law’.⁶⁹ Where he differs from the ‘impossibility yet necessity’ thesis is in his consideration of redemptive politics as possible, in breaking with the conclusion of its impossibility yet without jettisoning its theoretical underpinnings. He wishes to see ‘the way towards the positive prescription of possibilities, the way towards the Good as the *superhumanity of humanity*, towards the Immortal as the master of time’ unblocked.⁷⁰ The good is excessive and beyond the order of knowledge; it is beyond everydayness. A quotidian realm saturated with the predatory, egoistic automatism of a mortal biological being can be transcended by a good without God,⁷¹ an ethical decision that restitutes ‘the infinite to the banality of manifold-being’⁷² and redeems the Immortality of the human self, rendering it a subject. Yet, the impossibility, the revenge of quotidian automation, lurks ontologically and not merely socially, as it would do in other variations of post-Marxism.⁷³ Hence, for Badiou, just as for most strands of contemporary thought since Kant’s idea⁷⁴ of the ‘unsocial sociability of men’, the subject is split.

Consider first how this subjective split is manifest in Murdoch's text.

We are largely mechanical creatures, the slaves of relentless strong selfish forces the nature of which we scarcely comprehend. At best, as decent persons, we are usually very specialized. We behave well in areas where this can be done fairly easily and let other areas of possible virtue remain undeveloped. There are perhaps in the case of every human being insuperable psychological barriers to goodness. The self is a *divided thing* and the whole of it cannot be *redeemed* any more than it can be *known*.⁷⁵

Thus, the everyday is ‘a universal human experience’ and as such it exists ‘in all societies, although of course the actual content of the mundane life-world and its relationship to wider sociohistorical forces is historically variable. [...] Heller asserts that in pursuing the goal of “humanizing” and democratizing everyday life we must strive to nurture utopian hopes within a largely (but not inevitably) dystopian society that exists in the present day’. M. E. Gardiner, ‘Marxism and the Convergence of Utopia and the Everyday’ *History of the Human Sciences* vol. 19, no 3, 2006, pp. 1-32, pp. 24-5.

⁶⁹ Badiou, Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, p. 78.

⁷⁰ Badiou, Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil, pp. 31-2, emphasis added.

⁷¹ Badiou, Briefings on Existence.

⁷² Ibid, p. 30.

⁷³ For such variations, see, Gardiner, ‘Marxism and the Convergence of Utopia and the Everyday’.

⁷⁴ I. Kant, in H. Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 44.

⁷⁵ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 40, emphasis added.

The self is similarly divided in Badiou. ‘In reality, one subject is the weaving together of two subjective paths, which Paul names the flesh (*sarx*) and the spirit (*pneuma*).’⁷⁶ Even if one grants the empirical validity and currency of this split, which is a debatable theoretical move in itself, one should question the onto-anthropological status it gains through philosophical hegemonic concordance from modernity onwards. That this split acquires an onto-anthropological relevance that works ultimately as an ethical alibi and domesticates, ontologically, human failures that could be otherwise interpreted as merely ideological is shown by Badiou's own employment of the subjective division in the case of Saint Paul. Note the essentialist tone and its indirectly exculpating function in the following description of Saint Paul. ‘Because he is a violent, grudge-bearing man (for how could the *path of death not persist in dividing the subject?*), there are occasions in which he lets it be understood that evildoers [...] will not be particularly well treated’.⁷⁷

I have argued that a variety of positions on ethics (from redemptive politics and its hostility to relativism down to the ‘impossibility yet necessity’ thesis and further on to the view that a morality for nothing, a non-contractual relation, is impossible and that moral relativism is the logical conclusion of the end of philosophy) could be due to an implicit endorsement of a Hobbesian anthropology. Before I clarify how the connection between ethics and humanity (as the other of the divine) is complemented with a wholesale incrimination of everydayness, I shall tackle a possible objection to the Hobbesian affinity I detected in the texts above. The objection is that some of these thinkers, e.g. Arendt, or their followers, would explicitly reject Hobbes or protest at the assumption of direct influence. To show how it is possible on these issues to reject Hobbes but reintroduce him by the back door, I make a detour here to discuss the example of Spinoza.

The reason why I employ this example is that Spinoza placed his ideas squarely against Hobbes (on the points that concern us here) but unwittingly reintroduced his ideological commitment to an incriminated anthropology in a manner that is reminiscent of many contemporary theorists. For, even when there is no issue of direct influence, or even contemporary accounts that are at first sight dismissive of it, the Hobbesian thesis ‘that naked self-interest is the sole motivating force in human affairs’ seems to have somehow imbued much of current thought. To produce a similar effect, even a more mitigated form of this thesis would suffice, one that reformulates it as follows: ‘even if naked self-interest is not *the sole* force in human affairs, it is nevertheless an important and inescapable parameter of human affairs’.

⁷⁶ Badiou, Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, p. 55.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.94, emphasis added.

The unqualified welcome of this thesis, owed to the exaggeration of empiricist conclusions about history, leads, by implication, to the impossibility of true goodness. Like most contemporary theorists, Spinoza also accepts some of Hobbes's empirical pragmatics for the sake of a realist account of politics. However, at first sight, he seems to break with the Hobbesian account of human nature and the natural condition. For the Hobbesian state of nature 'is a chaos of conflicting wills, interests and desires, a perpetual warfare of all against all which can only be restrained by the sovereign imposition of state authority and power'. By contrast, Spinoza's "natural condition" is a life conducted in free-willed accordance with the dictates of reason, or in pursuit of common goods - like justice, liberty and truth'.⁷⁸ Yet, as I show below there is only a difference in degree. Neither Spinoza nor Arendt and Badiou would accept that naked self-interest is the *sole* motivation of humanity. But they would still grant self-interest a large motivational role; thereby, they would not avoid a static conception of what counts (and how it comes to count) as self-interest.

Consider Spinoza's words. 'If human nature were such that men desired nothing but what true reason prescribes, a society would need no laws whatsoever':⁷⁹ yet, we should wonder here whether there is such a thing as a fixed human nature that delimits what people desire prior to their acculturation. What kind of philosophical research is most appropriate to the question of human nature? In my opinion, before any attempt to reconstruct this notion, we need first to deconstruct the received view down to its ultimate conclusions. Going only halfway leads to uneasy concessions to the kind of postmodern political pessimism that sees the passage from ethics to politics as always forced and inexorably externally imposed and that imposes a drastic choice between ethics and politics. This can be immediately extrapolated even from Spinoza's theory. Because human nature does not allow people to wish only what true reason prescribes, 'no society can exist without government and force, and hence without laws to control and restrain the *unruly appetites of men*'.⁸⁰ In some proximity to the (post)modern failure to radically question Hobbesian essentialism, Spinoza seems also to arrest time by unwittingly elevating history- and context-dependent ideas (*sub specie durationis* contents of thought), e.g. the unruly appetites of men, to the status of unshakable truths (*sub specie aeternitatis* tenets). He views some contents of thought (which, due to their intuitive self-evidence, they enjoyed, then as now, hegemonic concordance) from a quasi-divine perspective of pure, disinterested knowledge and

⁷⁸ Norris, Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory, p. 158.

⁷⁹ Cf Norris, Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory, p. 157.

⁸⁰ Spinoza quoted in Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*, p. 157, emphasis mine.

not as revisable conjectures under dominant interpretations of socio-political conditions.

What is thus effected, both in Spinoza and in more recent cases, is an immurement in ideological onto-anthropological thought. The notion of ideology can be understood here as equivalent to Spinoza's 'knowledge of imagination', i.e. 'the kind of "natural" or pre-reflective attitude that accepts what is given in a commonsense way, and finds no reason to question or to criticize the grounds of naïve sense-certainty'.⁸¹ Following the path of this conception of ideology, we may reach an immanent critique of the Spinozist talk about the 'unruly appetites of men' (that are ostensibly endemic to human nature) and we may identify it as ideological, since it is unquestioned and taken for granted once and for all on grounds of the naïve sense-certainty that the empirical encounter of unruly appetites produces. The ontologization of the kind of anthropology⁸² that derives from the intuitive, an intuitive that is constructed point by point through the hitherto inauspicious record of humanity, is sheer ideology. For, instead of questioning the time-honored reliance on how human affairs have so far been and instead of exploring the counter-intuitive, political thought consolidates the amassed empirical evidence as an ahistorical anthropological constant that determines futurity (e.g. if there have always been wars, then wars will be breaking out forever). The need to avoid utopian reverie and to acknowledge realistically the barriers that the translation of ethics into politics confronts led Spinoza to an unconscious slippage from a diagnosis of undesirable empirical realities to their onto-anthropological elevation to a human constant. In this way, what should fall into the category of *sub specie durationis* philosophical research becomes *sub specie aeternitatis* content and the break with Hobbesian ontology is not radical enough. The human as (even partially) given (to a degree, a product of animalistic, unruly appetites) comes to block from the (onto-anthropological) start the human as programme. An animal humanism, reminiscent of contemporary liberalism, is unwittingly re-inserted by the back door, re-sacralized (recall here the Christian undertones of the impossibility-of-goodness thesis) and elevated to an ontological obstacle to radical human re-invention.

⁸¹ Norris, Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory, p. 35.

⁸² Postmodernism, despite its questioning of essentialism still allocates ontological space to unsocial human forces thus placing them *sub specie aeternitatis*. See further, Papastephanou, 'Onto-theology and the Incrimination of Ontology'.

GOODNESS AND EVERYDAYNESS

Let us return now to the connection of worldlessness, ethics and divinity and examine how it charges everydayness with constitutive egology. We have already seen how this is stated in Murdoch's theory. She considers human beings as 'largely mechanical creatures, the slaves of relentless strong selfish forces the nature of which we scarcely comprehend'. From there she concludes that 'there are perhaps in the case of every human being insuperable psychological barriers to goodness'. She by no means sets for a cynicism of moral relativism or the impossibility of transcending 'our ordinary dulled consciousness'.⁸³ But her presupposing the latter is a fact that almost cancels out, in an ironic fashion, indeed, her own escape route either to an everyday, moral evaluation on grounds of values that resist the unification of God/Good or to an aesthetization and concomitant ethicization of the attentiveness to worldly, natural beauty (as we shall see in the next section). What is important here is that a selfishness that insuperably blocks goodness saturates the ordinary. The very same idea of the inability of goodness to appear in the worldly is encountered in Arendt, and that not only in her *Human Condition* but also in her *On Revolution*.⁸⁴ To her, action is the faculty that 'interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life'; 'seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world', action 'looks like a miracle'.⁸⁵

This incrimination of a worldliness whose supposed automatism can be interrupted only via forces that are external to it enjoys a wider hegemony. Eagleton describes how French thought (from Sorrel and the Surrealists to Sartre, from Levinas to Lyotard, Derrida and Badiou) 'returns incessantly to the break, crisis, disruption or epiphany of otherness that will tear you free of *everyday inauthenticity*'.⁸⁶ Here we could add Heidegger, whose influence on French thought is unquestionable. For Heidegger, the everyday world is fallen, as it is not attuned to the truth of Being, and authenticity is located in elements that contradict the 'mundanity and habitualized repetitiveness of the everyday'.⁸⁷

In any event, contemporary French theorists diverge on the mode of transcendence they favour. For instance, Badiou treats the ineffable as different from

⁸³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 90.

⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp. 82-5.

⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 246.

⁸⁶ Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 155, emphasis added.

⁸⁷ Gardiner, 'Marxism and the Convergence of Utopia and the Everyday', p. 27, fn 5.

the order of the evental⁸⁸ and criticizes vehemently Derrida and Levinas.⁸⁹ However, what they all share and render, literally, of pivotal importance is the condemnation of the quotidian. R. Bernet's assertion that 'Levinas does not cease repeating that the "Face" of the other is not a worldly phenomenon'⁹⁰ could also be said of the other thinkers discussed here, on the condition that the 'Face' is replaced with the transcendent notion that is appropriate in each case.

Deriving from, or at least, presupposing, religious and Hobbesian undertones, such indictment of the everyday (and counterposition of it to the evental) is, arguably, uncommon to most Greek philosophy. I refer to some such examples only to show that, along with Marxism, there has historically been a theoretical trust in some redemptive qualities of the quotidian, without this trust entailing affirmation of the existent or blindness to the need for transcendence. The evental was *within* everydayness, an everydayness suffused with divinity, impregnated with dynamic unexpectedness and radically different from the modern conception of a calculable and controllable ordinary reality. Interestingly, the Greek world, and pre-Socratic philosophy in particular, seem to share this with Hinduism and Vedic philosophy.⁹¹ The evental, be it the lightning and thunder by which Zeus' presence was announced⁹² or the intervention in human affairs of divine messengers (*angeloï* such as Hermes or Iris) or the fly that set Socrates' reflective subjectivity on course, saturated everydayness. Hesiod [c. 8th century B.C.] turns to the rulers in his *Works and Days* and warns them of the existence of divine guardians of justice among human beings, thus connecting politics and ethics for the first time in Occidental thought:

as for you kings, too, ponder this justice yourselves. For among human beings there are immortals nearby, who take notice of all those who grind one another down with crooked judgments and have no care for the gods' retribution. Thrice ten thousand are Zeus' immortal guardians of mortal human beings upon the bounteous earth, and they watch over judgments and cruel deeds, clad in invisibility, walking everywhere upon the earth.⁹³

⁸⁸ Badiou, Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, p. 52ff.

⁸⁹ Badiou, Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil, pp. 18ff.

⁹⁰ Bernet, 'Christianity and Philosophy', p. 326.

⁹¹ B. Sriraman, B. and W. Benesch, 'Consciousness and Science: an Advaita-vedantic perspective on the Theology – Science Dialogue' *Theology and Science* vol. 3, no 1, 2005, pp. 39-54, p. 40.

⁹² F. Kittler, 'Lightning and Series – Event and Thunder' *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 23, nos 7/8, 2006, pp. 63-74, p. 64.

⁹³ Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans Glenn W. Most, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006, WD, verses 248-255.

Within the actual dystopian world, among human beings, there is a utopian world, a set the size of a city, a city of gods or ‘angels’ as a positively meant hetero-topia, clad in invisibility. This *epichthonian* (earthly), divine justice within human everydayness is ‘evental’, not in the sense of a transcendent disruption that is not of this world, as we know it today e.g. through the French line of continental thought, but in a sense that gives unity to action and its consequences in a more mundane manner than the modern religious counterpart or the philosophies of transcendence can do. And there was divinity and evental quality even in the repetitive and automatic character of daily and ordinary activities too. ‘There are gods here too’ (*einai kai entaytha theous*) was precisely the answer Heraclitus gave to his visitors,⁹⁴ who expected to see signs of the supposed extraordinariness of a famous philosopher instead of the familiar and unassuming figure of an old man sitting by the fire. Now, whereas ancient everydayness itself, suffused with the divine, was constantly breaking any brittle automation and standardization, the modern conception of the quotidian and the evental irruptiveness of divinity are set in tension and mutual exclusion. This modern incrimination of the quotidian and the conjunction of unworldliness with the idea of God can be inferred, for instance, if we think through to its implications the following axiom of Michel Henry, the religious French thinker, as put by Bernet. ‘Nothing that is divine, that is, that participates in the divine Life, can appear and be recognized in the world’.⁹⁵ Bernet draws a conclusion that is particularly helpful here: ‘egoism would therefore be a necessary consequence of atheism’;⁹⁶ in religious thought, egoism is connected with worldliness as denial of the divine.

Even when the paradigm is not religious-philosophical, much (post)modern philosophy - with the exception of some Marxist lines of thought - incriminates the everyday as irreparably egological and automatic. We have seen in the beginning of this section how this operates regarding Murdoch's and Arendt's thought. Having established the connection with the general tendency in most contemporary French thought, let us now turn to Badiou who has taken distances from that thought on other crucial points.⁹⁷ When it comes to the incrimination of the everyday we detect the same elitist transcendence. For Badiou ‘characterizes everyday life in quasi-

⁹⁴ For a fuller account of the story, see, M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, Frankfurt A.M., Vittorio Klostermann, 2000. Obviously my use of this story is different from the Heideggerian.

⁹⁵ Bernet, ‘Christianity and Philosophy’, p. 327.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 330.

⁹⁷ Some of this difference is captured by Eagleton's following remark. ‘For Badiou, to be sure, ethics is not identical with the revelation of truth; it is rather the business of striving to remain loyal to it, and thus a practical form of life rather than a lonely epiphany’. In Eagleton, ‘Subjects and Truths’, p. 158.

biological terms as a realm of appetite, self-interest and dull compulsion'.⁹⁸ What transcends it and renders a redemptive politics possible, in Badiou's view, is grace, a notion that rehabilitates revolutionary enthusiasm, animates thought by turning it active and tries, in other words, to breathe 'God' in human life. "Grace" means that thought cannot *wholly* account for the brutal starting over on the path of life in the subject, which is to say, for the rediscovered conjunction between thinking and doing. Thought can be *raised up* from its powerlessness only through something that *exceeds the order of thought*. "Grace" names the event as condition for an active thought'.⁹⁹ Thus, in Eagleton's words now, Badiou wishes 'to insert the eternal into time', to 'negotiate the passage between truth event and everyday life, which is what we know as politics'. However, this passage 'is blocked by the fact that Badiou, for all his undoubted political zeal, is as much caught in an elitist sort of antithesis between the ordinary and the epiphanic as Derrida'.¹⁰⁰ For, Badiou does not share the Hegelian and Marxian view that 'there are forces which are part of the situation but which also have the power to transform it. He does not trust the quotidian world sufficiently to believe that'.¹⁰¹

Against such mistrust we may argue that human beings are not just captive of the strict order of everydayness, the incriminated, nuance-lacking everydayness of Badiou and others that is disrupted by the monumental evental truth. The apparent recklessness of everyday dealings may hide a substratum of various ethical instances. But these remain hidden and bypassed when theory misses the translucence of such recklessness. When that happens, the gap between the incriminated quotidian and its transcendence appears unbridgeable. From Walter Benjamin down to Agnes Heller, there have been efforts to avoid precisely this gap.¹⁰² Eagleton argues to a similar effect, I believe, when remarking that, if everydayness is as Badiou characterizes it, 'then indeed, little short of a quantum leap out of it into a higher dimension of truth is to suffice'.¹⁰³ Let us explore this 'quantum leap' (or perhaps leap of faith?)¹⁰⁴ in each of the cases that we have presented.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 159.

⁹⁹ Badiou, Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism, pp. 84-5, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 158.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Gardiner, 'Marxism and the Convergence of Utopia and the Everyday'.

¹⁰³ Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 159.

¹⁰⁴ Consider, for instance, Wernick's question regarding Baudrillard's notion of the symbolic that resists thematization: 'what would be a community that obviates communion, or that is a sharing of the finitude, sovereignty and ecstasy of those who comprise it, or that welcomes, without reducing, the

LEAPS OF FAITH

Murdoch argues for a transcendent good that can orient moral life. ‘In place of God as single, perfect, transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention, [Murdoch] proposes the Good, which she has already pointed out is difficult to define and mysterious’.¹⁰⁵ It is crucial here to explain that, for Murdoch, transcendence signifies ‘unselfing’ (as ‘the ability to overcome the primal fault of humanity, selfishness’) and ‘absolute goodness’ (as that which lies ‘outside phenomenal experience’).¹⁰⁶ In search for such transcendence away from traditional metaphysics Murdoch resorts either to a rich code of moral conduct or to aesthetics. As some indication of the first strand has been given in a previous section, let us here turn to the second strand of Murdoch’s moral theorizing. Objects of beauty elicit a gaze, an attentiveness that undoes the self: ‘beauty, Murdoch claims, demands an “unselfing”’.¹⁰⁷ But, as Asiedu’s apposite counter-arguments prove,¹⁰⁸ this kind of aesthetization of the secularized Good moves too quickly from the aesthetic to the moral. It is significant that Badiou’s criticisms of Heidegger’s ‘poetization’ of the prospects of secularization could very well apply to Murdoch’s transcendence too.¹⁰⁹

But, thought more deeply, the divergence of Badiou’s and Murdoch’s solutions to the problem of Good without God appears more radical than a mere disagreement on aestheticization. For, whilst Murdoch finds in the acceptance of human mortality the key to transcendence, Badiou assigns to philosophy the task of finishing up ‘with the motif of finitude’¹¹⁰ and of embracing the image of the human as ‘something other than a mortal being’.¹¹¹ To Murdoch, ‘Good is non-representable and indefinable. We are all mortal and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance. These are the true aspects in which all men are brothers’.¹¹² Therefore,

Other? Along this path - shadowed by the *deus communis*, its horrors and its exorcism - lies the enquiry into the impossible, unworking or unavowable community conducted by Bataille, and more recently by Nancy and Blanchot’. In Wernick, ‘From Comte to Baudrillard’, p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ Asiedu, ‘Intimations of the Good’, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

¹⁰⁹ Badiou, Briefings on Existence, pp. 27-9.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

¹¹¹ Badiou, Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil, p. 12.

¹¹² Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 74. Being equally at the mercy of necessity and chance due to all being mortal is not quite true. One would object to Murdoch here that her approach is oblivious to social and global inequality that determines the risks one faces, but that is beside the point here.

goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves.¹¹³

This position can be thought as both parallel to and different from Badiou's idea of immortality, from which he urges us to begin in order to 'think any aspect of Man'.¹¹⁴ Murdoch's view, as cited above, could very well be criticized in Badiouian terms, as one more case of the 'renunciation of philosophical eternity, the cult of time, of Being-for-death and of finitude', which are 'obvious effects of historicism'.¹¹⁵ Thus, for Badiou, if 'rights of man' exist,

they are surely not rights of life against death, or rights of survival against misery. They are the rights of the Immortal, affirmed in their own right, or the rights of the Infinite, exercised over the contingency of suffering and death. The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man's identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him.¹¹⁶

For both thinkers, mortality understood in secular terms (note Murdoch's 'our own nothingness' and Badiou's 'only dust remains') is not a source of destructive meaninglessness. But, whereas for Murdoch mortality plays a more active role as an ethically enabling point of departure, Badiou's starting point is the metaphor of the Immortal. 'An immortal: this is what the worst situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life'.¹¹⁷ Outside grace, 'humanity is an animal species. It is mortal and predatory'.¹¹⁸ What is significant is that both thinkers search for an ethically creative nihilism in a *self*-referential binarism of human life versus death, where selfishness is associated with the former and selflessness with the latter. Whether mortality or immortality, in both cases the reference point is the *self* in its relation to death. Bernet's question, which originated in a different context, is pertinent here then. 'Are there only two forms of sensing: that which closes me off in an egoist

¹¹³ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 103.

¹¹⁴ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, p. 12.

¹¹⁵ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 123.

¹¹⁶ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

enjoyment and that which relates itself to an other who empties me of my blood and my life?"¹¹⁹ Equally pertinent is a question posed by P. Dews. 'If the Good, as Badiou asserts (reminding us that Nietzsche, too, belongs in this lineage), is the "superhumanity of humanity", then how on earth are we to get beyond ourselves, solely by our own effort, in order to attain it?'¹²⁰ To answer them, Badiou has to resort to what Eagleton describes as 'the *numinous* sphere of our fidelity to non-normative, *exceptionalist* truth events'.¹²¹

Such exceptionalism pervades also Arendt's solution to the problem of goodness. In place of and in contrast to goodness, Arendt offers her conception of action.¹²² She then grants it a miraculous quality,¹²³ whose 'potential to appear is rooted in the appearance of human beings in the world, in natality, which one can only witness and at which one can only marvel'.¹²⁴ This is how Arendt herself puts it. 'The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, *though they must die*, are not born in order to die but in order to begin'.¹²⁵ Here the emphasis is on life rather than on mortality but in such a way that birth becomes a secular substitute for bygone religious immortality, supposedly radically other to worldly, everyday normalcy. 'The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born'.¹²⁶ Regarding the miraculous character of unexpected action that is supposed to break the chain of worldly 'causality', it can be shown to suffer from the same exceptionalist elitism of Badiou. Here is Gardiner on the parallel claims of Surrealism: 'the Surrealists evoked the "marvellous" as an escape from or transcendence of everyday life. This prompted Lefebvre to argue that while the Surrealists understood that daily

¹¹⁹ Bernet, 'Christianity and Philosophy', p. 332.

¹²⁰ P. Dews, 'States of Grace: The Excess of the Demand in Badiou's Ethics of Truths', in P. Hallward, (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London and N. York, Continuum, 2006, pp. 106-119, p. 115.

¹²¹ Eagleton, 'Subjects and Truths', p. 159, emphasis added.

¹²² Bell, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics', p. 16.

¹²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 246.

¹²⁴ Bell, 'On the Critique of Secular Ethics', p. 16.

¹²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 246, emphasis added.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 247.

life was routinized and degraded, they failed to realize that this was for distinct sociohistorical reasons. For Lefebvre, the notion of the “marvellous” therefore expressed a “transcendental contempt for the real”.¹²⁷ Again in Eagleton's parlance, ‘whether all significant truths are of such a sublime, world-shaking kind is a point worth considering’.¹²⁸

One may object to Arendt that that natality engulfs utopian energies (implicit in beginning again) in no way entails the radical difference of the new from the old that was outlived. The Arendtian conviction that action redeems the world¹²⁹ by interrupting the automatic quality of life is one more philosophical effort, like Murdoch and Badiou's, to escape the chains of an incriminated everydayness. The objection that any interruption of automation does not necessarily signify a true break but perhaps only a new automation, lest it is a divine interruption, holds for all three theories. The cluster of concepts such as ‘rupture, automation, intervention’ presupposes the metaphor of the divine in the following sense. According to Badiou, as Antonio Calcagno explains, the subject ruptures ‘the pre-political in order to give it a political sense through a decisive political intervention’.¹³⁰ Thus, subjects ‘can investigate the pre-political in order to find out when the optimum time occurs so as to make an intervention’.¹³¹ Apart from having a reactive character¹³² and apart from reminding us the ‘waiting for God-ot’, this solution makes intervention appear not only timely but also divine. For, if everydayness is incriminated onto-anthropologically, the forces that can disrupt it cannot but belong to the ‘other’ of everydayness. True, as we saw above, Badiou accommodates this ‘other’ post-metaphysically in the division of the subjective path. However, we must recall here that Badiou¹³³ explains how all eventual revolutionary enthusiasms were betrayed by their subjects through the fact that the latter did not display an ethical, ‘keep going’,

¹²⁷ Gardiner, ‘Marxism and the Convergence of Utopia and the Everyday’, p.27, fn 5.

¹²⁸ Eagleton, ‘Subjects and Truths’, p. 158.

¹²⁹ Bell, ‘On the Critique of Secular Ethics’, p. 17.

¹³⁰ A. Calcagno, ‘Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou: is there a relation between politics and time?’ *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 30, no 7, 2004, pp. 799-815, p. 811.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, p. 813.

¹³² N. Hewlett, ‘Engagement and Transcendence: the militant philosophy of Alain Badiou’, *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 12, no 3, 2004, pp. 335-352. Hewlett explains that ‘Badiou insists that we should not wait for the event and that there are plenty of events in the past we can remain faithful to’. Apart from being itself a problematic assertion as to which past occurrence would qualify as an event, this does not undo, as Hewlett rightly notices (p. 347), the logic of Badiou's philosophy which ‘does indeed seem to be that we are playing a waiting, reactive game’.

¹³³ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, pp. 120-135.

fidelity and they fell pray to the disastrous amalgam of ecstasy, the sacred and terror. They succumbed to the 'dark desire of finishing off'¹³⁴ what, on their view, should 'not have the right to be',¹³⁵ the opponent. This proves indirectly that the tension within the subject is between forces of equal measure (consider again Badiou's question: 'for how could the *path of death not persist in dividing the subject?*'). The symmetry of the alternative subjective paths that Badiou establishes speaks, in the end, for an 'impossibility yet necessity' thesis. Even when the event irrupts and subjects are ready for a timely intervention, the ethic of fidelity to it is doomed from the start, because the subjects are called to overcome ontological (located within them) rather than merely ideological-contingent (sociohistorical) barriers. It seems that the strength of the quotidian is such that this ethic is just impossible for human beings. Badiou connects eventual truth with an ethic lagging behind it and trying to keep pace with it - a futile task when the connected terms are of a different order; for a divine interruption requires a divine intervention and a divine perseverance unavailable to, or constantly annulled in, split human subjects.

Thereby it is no wonder that all three thinkers we have discussed here move agonizingly toward death and life as the limits of selfishness. In Murdoch's case this is ultimately effected as enrichment of moral conceptualization against the unity of primary concepts, as reconciliation with mortality and as aesthetic unselfing. In Badiou's case this is effected precisely the moment this mortality becomes connected with biologism and transcended by the immortality of the (wo)man as a 'tissue of truths'.¹³⁶ In Arendt's case, this is effected through the recurrent reemergence of hope manifested in new life.

To sum up, in (post)modernity, searching for the Good without God entails a break with the old dogmatism of a single dominant conception of the good and paves the way for the dominance of various and competing conceptions of the good, comprehensive theories of the good life, a sacralized 'marketplace' of ideas about ethics. This cherished liberal development which is at first sight at odds with theism can be very well accommodated in northwestern contemporary thought in all its dominant varieties: thus, we may have Good(s) without God but also God without Good.¹³⁷ There is ethic(s) for all tastes: e.g. a liberalism of human rights, appreciative

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 133.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 132.

¹³⁶ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, p. 12.

¹³⁷ See, for instance, Richard Swinburne's theory as discussed by Asiedu, 'Intimations of the Good'.

or at least tolerant of a corresponding world power structure that prays to God¹³⁸ before unleashing a war. Also there is an ethics of radical otherness, reverent to a metaphor of God and relatively blind, patient or at least inoperative regarding concrete manifestations of global injustice. Or, there is an ethic of consistency and duration that operates within the death of God paradigm but is fraught with religious metaphors deriving either directly from the Bible¹³⁹ or from Lacan (e.g. most of Badiou's ethical concepts). In the case of various ethical theories of a Lacanian origin, the imperative is: be truthful to desire and to an originary revelation; down with human rights and other theoretical bulwarks of the weak that actual political practice has usurped and constantly betrayed and anti-humanist psychologism has branded irreparably moralist. The impression that is given is of drastic choices everywhere and of a selection of one ethic(s) on offer, the most suitable to one's preference. In all those attempts at providing us with a version of goodness without God, God is neither alive nor dead: probably going along with Lacan on this, but meaning it somewhat differently from him, we may set for the view that 'God is unconscious'.

THE TIME OF THE ANGELS

The metaphor of the angel has mostly been abandoned, unless a philosopher wishes to illustrate what human beings are not capable of and should concede all effort to it.¹⁴⁰ We have seen above instances where Arendt and Murdoch employ the angelic as the totally other of humanity that sets the latter's outer limit. However, in her *Time of the Angels*, Murdoch makes a different use of angelism so as to illustrate the centripetal psychological forces (or, in Spinoza's words, the 'unruly appetites of men') that block, in her view, the path to goodness. Referring to God's death, she writes that 'the old delusion ends, but there will be others of a different kind, *angelic delusions* which we cannot now imagine'.¹⁴¹ Carel, the main character of the novel, declares that there is no God and human life is senseless. He further states that 'the precarious reign of morality, itself of course an illusion, is now at an end and that henceforth human kind is to be the victim of irresponsible psychological forces'. He visualizes them as angels¹⁴² of whom 'we are the prey'.¹⁴³ When uttering this, Carel¹⁴⁴ is confronted by his

¹³⁸ This point suffices to problematize Murdoch's position on prayer as a practice of unconditional merit. For more on this, see Asiedu, 'Intimations of the Good', p. 33.

¹³⁹ E.g., Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 247.

¹⁴⁰ See, for instance, I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, p. 250.

¹⁴¹ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 172, emphasis added.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 172 and 192-3.

carefully listening brother, Marcus, who felt ‘as if some ghastly threatening structure had been materializing in front of him’ and that he had to answer back. He does so by invoking and ethically rehabilitating everydayness. ‘But you are wrong, there are facts, real things, people love each other’, Marcus says.¹⁴⁵ Consider, here, for a moment, Eagleton's reaction to Badiou's incrimination of the everyday: ‘are there really no contradictions in this quotidian realm? Is there no selflessness, compassion, extraordinary endurance?’¹⁴⁶ And back to the novel now, where the primacy or, perhaps, exclusiveness, of selfishness is reasserted. Marcus receives the following response from Carel: ‘one can only love an angel. And that dreadful thing is not love. Those with whom the angels communicate are lost’.¹⁴⁷ It should be mentioned that Murdoch does not share Carel's view about ethics after God's death¹⁴⁸ and the absolute suffusion of humanity with cruelty. But because she does not share his brother's view either, she cannot but resort either to a socialized moral evaluation on grounds of a rich set of socially current values or to the lonely introspective unselfing of the aesthetic experience. Something equivalent can be said about the other thinkers we have discussed here, given their approach to the quotidian. Eagleton's remark, in his reading of Badiou, that, if one ‘had a less jaunticed view of the everyday, one might need a less exalted alternative’¹⁴⁹ holds for Arendt and Murdoch too. Such a possible alternative I shall only indicate here by using the metaphor and image of the angel differently. A closer consideration of it and the required disentangling of the important theoretical issues demarcating it go beyond the scope of this article.

Angelology, which flourished in medieval times,¹⁵⁰ has increasingly been philosophy's embarrassment¹⁵¹ and it has been confined to the history of ideas and scholasticism. That hindered a possibility for the angelic to become a productive metaphor for secularized philosophy, with the exception of its describing what is

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 172.

¹⁴⁴ The character of Carel that Murdoch constructs in her novel personalizes, in a way, a figure that we encounter in Baudrillard's thinking as the ‘evil genie’ thereby registering another affinity of diverse contemporary theories. On Baudrillard's account of a diabolism, see Wernick, ‘From Comte to Baudrillard’, p. 69-70.

¹⁴⁵ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 172.

¹⁴⁶ Eagleton, ‘Subjects and Truths’, p. 159.

¹⁴⁷ Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 172.

¹⁴⁸ On this point see Richard Holloway's afterword in Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels*, p. 241.

¹⁴⁹ Eagleton, ‘Subjects and Truths’, p. 159.

¹⁵⁰ M. L. Colish, ‘Early Scholastic Angelology’, *Recherches de Théologie Ancienne et Médiévale* vol. 62, 1995, pp. 80-109.

¹⁵¹ D. White OP, ‘Are Angels Just a Matter of Faith?’ *New Blackfriars* vol. 86, 2005, pp. 568-583.

impossible for humans, as I have already said, as well as rare cases of employment for more interesting and innovative purposes. The latter comprise uses as diverse as those by George Santayana's humanist discussion of Hermes as messenger,¹⁵² various analyses of the angelic in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, Walter Benjamin's angel of progress inspired by Klee's *Angelus Novus*¹⁵³ and Michel Serres' angels of decentred circulation.¹⁵⁴ These uses, which cannot be discussed here for reasons of space, are exceptions to the rule of the philosophical neglect of angelism.

In sharp contrast to the philosophical embarrassment for the word 'angel', there is the everyday use of it, in contexts varying from soap and mushy culture down to the genuine tenderness of the vocative, the way to address a loved one: 'my angel!'. Outside philosophy, the picture regarding the metaphoricity of the angelic becomes even more complex if we consider the fact that many tens of millions (perhaps even hundreds of millions) of people today believe literally in the existence of angels, with many even believing in the (invisible) presence of angels in our midst.¹⁵⁵ We even come across the highjack of the angelic by New Age books, magazines and shows,¹⁵⁶ by anti-terrorist action aiming to establish volunteer networks of spies and connoting the associations of the surveillance and disciplining power of the term 'Archangel',¹⁵⁷ and by the unfounded and politically dangerous New Age talk about Indigo and Crystal children sent to save the world. The latter cases justify Murdoch's remark about forthcoming 'angelic delusions' and the view that 'we are the prey of the angels' in a more literal sense than the one Murdoch bestowed on these phrases. It also provides a very apposite example of the pertinence of Badiou's critique of the position in which the Western subject has been put by 'human rights and politics of difference' discourse.

¹⁵² G. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*, Introduction by R. Ross, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1967.

¹⁵³ Y. de Maeseneer, 'Horror Angelorum: Terroristic Structures in the Eyes of Walter Benjamin, Hans Urs von Balthasar's Rilke and Slavoj Žižek', *Modern Theology* 19, 4, 2003, pp. 511-527.

¹⁵⁴ S. D. Brown, 'The Angelology of Knowledge: Michel Serres', *The Sociological Review*, 2000, pp. 147-153.

¹⁵⁵ I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer of C & H for pointing out the need for this interpolation.

¹⁵⁶ The angelic material of them includes stories of quasi-miraculous angelic interventions, 'angel friends' and rituals for summoning angelic assistance. In a curious way, this points to another sense of the times of the angels after God's death. For angels seem to be the handy compromise for many in need of replacing God with more popular and less-judgmental 'solutions' to metaphysical problems. See, White OP, 'Are Angels Just a Matter of Faith?', p. 572.

¹⁵⁷ As de Maeseneer explains, the slogan of that particular, New York based private security agency is: 'become a Crusader for the preservation of Western Culture and Values. Become an Arch Angel and Fight Terrorism', de Maeseneer, 'Horror Angelorum', p. 511.

This discourse, which Badiou astutely criticizes, places the Western self in the position of the distant voyeur, a position that can be better illustrated, I believe, by the metaphor of the angelic in yet another version, although Badiou himself refrains from drawing any such analogy. 'Politics is subordinated to ethics, to the single perspective that really matters in this conception of things: the sympathetic and indignant judgement of the spectator of the circumstances'.¹⁵⁸ Failing in its theogenic aspirations, the Western self goes for the second best, the angelic power of a detached viewer. This self is the voyeur who has not, supposedly, created the circumstances of the watched drama but is found in the morally privileged position of the intervening rescuer or the independent judge and referee. In front of 'the good-Man, the white-Man', lies the 'victim-Man': 'on the side of the victims, the *haggard animal exposed on television screens*'; this 'ethics which rests on the misery of the world' always 'assigns the same roles to the same sides'.¹⁵⁹ The spying apparatus that employs the *archangelic* metaphor we saw above is only an extreme instantiation of this world division into the looking down 'angels' and the observed 'recipients' of their possible benevolence or 'just' retribution.

Thus, we may depict the view of the pseudo-active, well-fed and well-protected of the world as an angelic view from above. But, from another perspective, beyond the scope of Badiou's philosophy, the angelic spectatorial passivity belongs to those chained in place, to those unable to reach that height, to fly upwards and have an overview. In Samuel Beckett's play,¹⁶⁰ while waiting for Godot, the tramps fail to theorize the master-slave narrative enacted in front of them. They only receive it voyeuristically as something that adds variety to their lives, makes their lives look less deprived and miserable (compared to the worst, as experienced by even more unfortunate others) and renders awaiting less tedious. They lack the theoretical distance, the transcendence that is implicit in radically questioning ideological hegemony; but they have the angelic detachment of the inactive, the non-intervening but mellow charitable reaction of the sympathetic viewer. During the prolonged waiting for the divine timely interruption, the tramps themselves try out this master-slave game. It helps them pass their time while waiting, but it also precludes the exploration of other possibilities of shaping their lives, irrespective of the promise of *Godot*. The social construction of the master-slave relation and its historically contingent grounding in antagonism and selfishness remain unnoticed, as the relation

¹⁵⁸ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, p. 13, emphasis added.

¹⁶⁰ S. Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, London, Faber and Faber, 1988.

is projected to the ahistorical sphere of the ontological split of subjectivity. Thus, they are left to alternate in the position of the prey and the angels.

God animates ancient, modern and postmodern thought, either as image of the Other of existing 'standardized' humanity in more 'evental-structured' pagan human pasts or as the image of perfect goodness or omnipotence in monotheism or as a figurative speech for immortality in forms of atheism. Both, when present as well as when absent in a theory, God has so far been thought's breath and shadow. For even God's death leaves a specter behind, haunting philosophy.¹⁶¹ Either as an image of power and autonomy to be imitated or as a simulacrum of human inability of true goodness, the metaphor of God still demarcates human potentialities. The (post)modernist megalomania (even in its despondent moments) of the man(sic)-becoming-God metaphor can be countered with the audacity of the metaphor of the angel as much in its parodic, uninhibited, even acrimonious, quality as in its enabling and thought-enlarging ethical significance. *Contra* becoming God, people should try to become angels. In throwing such dice,¹⁶² philosophy can bring into play an 'additional signifier'.¹⁶³ Perhaps that is the challenge confronting a world-wide philosophy that, in its post-metaphysical pretensions, it employs and recruits prophets, apostles, martyrs, saints, but never angels - as it treats them as humanity's only radical others.

Philosophy has, nevertheless, purported to have, since many decades now, overcome the dogmatic model of the thinking subject as a self-appointed prophet. Now, what is of greater importance for philosophy of subjectivity is also to escape the absolutism of the figure of the true saint. For it rejected the idea of the philosopher as self-appointed prophet only to replace it with the idea of the disappointed saint. The latter is saintly enough in order to perceive the absolute nature of ethics *contra* facile rationalist notions of it but also adequately disillusioned and reconciled with his/her own and humanity's constant failure to realize it. Thus, s/he confines his/her role to communicating (or, rather, failing to communicate) impossibilities and deplors or celebrates in an oracular way the unrepresentability and unattainability of true ethics. Perhaps it is time for philosophy to focus on the enabling and reconstructive side of order and articulation beyond the postmodernist gestural emphasis on the ineffable, the wholesale incrimination of representation and the unattainable height of

¹⁶¹ Here we may usurp and adapt Derrida's notion of hauntology. For a brief account of this Derridean term, see Calcagno, 'Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou', p. 808.

¹⁶² Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 138.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 36.

saintliness. Divine speech may be unavailable to humanity,¹⁶⁴ but there is always the Pauline option of the ‘tongue of the angels’ accompanied with love.¹⁶⁵ Far from being self-appointed prophets and at variance with the model of postmodern absolutist saintliness burdened with an undecipherable and superhuman message, critically thinking subjects could be described as angels. Outside metaphysics, the metaphor of the angel that I am employing here must be understood chiefly in the Greek sense of the word, denoting the messenger.¹⁶⁶ Critical subjects as messengers do not impart a divine will,¹⁶⁷ perhaps not even a will that is entirely their own: they harken to the coarse truth of things and try to shape it into an early warning or an ethically permissible intervention. Whether issuing a warning against an unjust war, an illiberal new order, environmental damage and perhaps less tangible pathologies or voicing the agony of an examined life, the messengers' means should be the seduction of the persuasion by proof rather than the persuasion by seduction. They should bring to the fore an unnoticed segment of quotidian reality, breaking the news to unsuspecting hearers.

For the terrain of human drama is the quotidian. ‘The content that is tested by a moral principle is generated not by the philosopher but by real life. The conflicts of action that come to be morally judged and consensually resolved grow out of everyday life. Reason as a tester of maxims (Kant) *finds* these conflicts. It does not create them.’¹⁶⁸ Instead of waiting for the event to break out, we must learn to notice it and receive it, to prepare it and be it. In Italo Calvino’s view, the stake we face is to ‘seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space’.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ D. H. Fernald, ‘A Good Man Speaking Wisely: morality, rhetoric, and universalism’, *Dialogue and Universalism*, vol. 3, no 4, 2004, pp. 209-215, p. 209.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Badiou, *Saint-Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, p. 91.

¹⁶⁶ This sense is the common denominator of both pagan and monotheist notions of the angelic as it is present in various cultures and religions e.g. Hinduism, Islam etc. See, White OP, ‘Are Angels Just a Matter of Faith?’, pp. 568, 574 and 578). It is of particular interest, but surely beyond the scope of this essay, to examine the angelic message in Greek tragedy from the philosophical point of view of the enabling metaphor.

¹⁶⁷ Even in traditional religious angelology, angels were often granted an existence and will that was independent from God. See, Colish, ‘Early Scholastic Angelology’.

¹⁶⁸ Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism*, p. 77. Norris takes this passage from Habermas but uses it for a purpose that is different from mine here.

¹⁶⁹ I. Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, London, Vintage, 1997, p. 165.

That humanity can search its best in a non-metaphysical ethical exploration of the metaphor of the angelic is justified by the fact that the metaphor of the angel is ethically multi-faceted. It has even a Manichean division of angels of darkness (the indifferent or self-congratulating voyeurs we saw above with their own hierarchy up to the archangelic punishing, or protective of Western interests, hand) and angels of light. Would theirs be a struggle, however, regarding whether the light could defeat darkness? This would fall into the paradox that Arendt describes,¹⁷⁰ of the good becoming bad in the effort to spread goodness. The answer is the other way round. The indifferent, voyeurist ‘tourists’ of the world that we tend to be, facing no haunto-anthropological paltry excuse for our condition, should seek and learn to discern and decode the message of quotidian complexity. For there is nothing inherently compelling about the lack of light: only too much viewing from afar, too unreflective tele-vision viewing. But, then, what would a world of true angels be? Many philosophers would have a ready answer: a world of utter boredom, for it would lack drama! Drama lived or drama watched, and from the protected seat of the academic for that matter? But in answering as above, philosophy would be trapped once again into the voyeurist-angelic, detached ‘enjoyment’ of the world. That would be precisely an ‘angelic’ answer: one fascinated by, and praising, eternal tele-vision. For, after all, drama comes from the Greek word ‘dran’ which means to act. Boredom (*otium*) is an element of eternal passivity not of eternal activity, if eternity is understood as ‘an attribute of the category of Truth’ as operation.¹⁷¹ To act like an angel is an eternal task, the task of an (im)mortal with ethics.

The standard delimitation of human potentialities that is fraught with religious and Hobbesian undertones can be revisited through the angelic because the latter in its ancient or non-Western as well as in its religious and modern sense of the messenger illustrates the reconciliation of transcendence and immanence, a hovering between heaven and earth. Neither human nor divine,¹⁷² the angel's interstitial existence moves between a God's eye view and looking at human eye level. In polytheist contexts, as a messenger, the ancient *angelos* (divine or human) is a vector of a break with reality that is born by reality itself,¹⁷³ by its inexorable course which

¹⁷⁰ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 83.

¹⁷¹ Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 130.

¹⁷² For some thinkers of early scholasticism, unlike the deity, ‘angels live in time and are mutable, capable of learning what they did not know already and of experiencing joy and sorrow’. See, Colish, ‘Early Scholastic Angelology’, p. 84 and p. 92.

¹⁷³ We must not forget that the transcendence of deity in antiquity is neither one of being outside earth-bound existence nor one of being emotively and ethically wholly other to humanity.

comprises not just automation but constant reshuffling. After the delivered message, the self is called to live with the new knowledge and act upon it as a critical, reflective subject. Even if a critical redirection does not occur, e.g. when the message falls on deaf ears, still, little remains the same for its recipient, who starts facing the consequences, as the example of environmental damage of today may glaringly prove.

Beyond the trauma of a reconciliation with mortality and the renewed promise inherent in recurrent life, as well as beyond the heroic immortality of uncompromising commitment, there lies the perfectibility that is enabled by undoing the metaphysical insuperable barriers to goodness that are raised by the incrimination of self-love and everydayness. According to some medieval angelologists, angels share with human beings a kind of 'self-love that is not sinful'. They describe it as a natural moral aptitude and inclination that 'includes the desire to live, the desire to know oneself, and the desire for self-preservation'.¹⁷⁴ Between selfishness and self-denial there is ample space for conceiving an ethically authorized love of the self and the other. Likewise, a view from above need not be a God's eye view, as one of unfathomable distance from everydayness, as a pure outside: the only permissible position for looking down is the position of imagination. Above the everyday you hear its noise, all the languages, all the tragic dilemmas, losses and mourning of humanity. And you hear the heroic and saintly *within* the quotidian, the joy of the memorable moment, the hope and effort despite failures. You hear more clearly what others expect from you, you have a clearer view of your involvement in their lives. Like Walter Benjamin's angel, but not as desperately and hopelessly, this angelic figure tries to 'interrupt the (dis)course of history by bearing witness to its victims'. Instead of intervening 'in order to deliver a discontinuous moment, to introduce a shock'¹⁷⁵ or to assert one's power and enhance one's moral self-image, it opens one's eyes to the ruined of history by making their voice heard. Instead of being too immaterial to make a difference and instead of being destructive enough to produce a disruption which borders with terror, the angelic imaginative overview articulates a message in a self-critical tongue of love for the other as much as for the self.

But the position of imagination, to be ethically truly enabling, should be held momentarily. The perspective of the observer must be followed by the one of the participant. In Wim Wender's film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (the title literally translated as 'the sky over Berlin' but the film was released in English as *The Wings of Desire*) what is common to humans and angels is desire, not the desire of a Nietzschean will to power but a desire to live among others, like others, and timely intervene in human affairs.

¹⁷⁴ Colish, 'Early Scholastic Angelology', p. 101.

¹⁷⁵ de Maeseneer, 'Horror Angelorum', p. 513.

In the sequel of *Der Himmel über Berlin*, in *Faraway, so Close* (original title *In Weiter Ferne, so Nah*), the angel intervenes to save a person and becomes human. Such an intervention makes humanity - unlike the intervention that interrupts the voyeurist angelic overview of a self-righteous western moralism and that it curiously happens to be always profitable and self-congratulatory. Against the timeless downward gaze, the challenge is, ultimately, to look at eye level¹⁷⁶ rather than down from above. Away from the megalomaniac association of perfection with divine omnipotence, this metaphor of the angelic bestows upon the human being its lost transcendence. Away from a haunto-anthropological indiscriminating incrimination of self-love and the quotidian, it restores the human subject in the realm of perfectibility, breathing power and possibility in humanity. Perhaps wandering at sea level, plunging into the depths of everydayness is the only vindication of the mistaken Platonic etymology of the human being, *anthropos*, as *ano throsko*, to look up.

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¹⁷⁶ The correct etymology of the Greek word for human, *anthropos* is *anti + opos* i.e. 'in front of the other's 'eyes', facing the other at eye level.

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