

Critical Response

II

Neither Nor

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The thesis that I support does not in any way declare that being is mathematical, which is to say composed of mathematical objectivities. It is not a thesis about the world but about discourse. It affirms that mathematics, throughout the entirety of its historical becoming, pronounces what is expressible of being qua being.

— Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*¹

So spake the Fiend, and with necessitie,
The Tyrants plea, excus'd his devilish deeds.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.393–94

David Nirenberg, professor of medieval history and member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, and Ricardo Nirenberg, retired mathematician and editor of the literary journal *Offcourse.org*—son and father—have written a polemical critique of the contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou. This critique allegedly ‘approaches Badiou’s ontology through his mathematics.’² Long-time readers of Badiou will already be alert to the various problems this quaint formulation exhibits, but, in the first instance, we praise the stated ambition and willingly add: an excellent proposal! As Badiou himself says, a proper study of his great work *Being and Event* presupposes nothing but a ‘free attention disengaged *a priori*’ from the ‘horror’ that mathematics tends to inspire. Nothing else is required, Badiou continues, except ‘an elementary familiarity with formal language’ (*BE*, p. 19). As it transpires, the Nirenbergs

1. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London, 2005), p. 8; hereafter abbreviated *BE*.

2. Ricardo L. Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, ‘Badiou’s Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology’, *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Summer 2011): 365; hereafter abbreviated ‘BN’.

exhibit a happy familiarity with such language, and we will have little to say about their reproduction of it here. Their assertions regarding such language are another matter, as is the manifest political revulsion they evince in their approach to 'Badiou's ontology'. The latter concerns the question of 'free attention', and, as we will see, given the Messieurs Nirenbergs' elsewhere-avowed political commitments, their approach is not a priori uninterested.³ We wouldn't wish it so, but we would have hoped that such commitments be less obscurely avowed. We duly recognise, nonetheless, the ideological value of veiling one's disavowed avowals. For our part, in the spirit of recent French philosophical responses to American objections—we are thinking here of Jacques Derrida's renomination of John Searle as S.A.R.L. or Sarl, that is, a corporation with limited liability—we would like to renominate Nirenberg & Nirenberg, Nirenberg & Son, as Nini.⁴ The coinage will undoubtedly remind French logicians of neither/nor and Spanish speakers of an idiomatic phrase for shiftless youth. We deploy it here merely for its pragmatic compactness and alliterative beauty.

Let's begin by noting that Nini, seeking the necessity of necessity, desires to leave little to chance in this essay, going so far as to specify his audience. He claims not to be addressing working mathematicians, those Badiou apparently slanders as indolent and arrogant (Nini provides no references) because 'they are trained to recognize and reject Pythagoric

3. See, for example, Ricardo Nirenberg, 'The Twilight of the Humanities', *Offcourse*, no. 41 (Spring 2010): www.albany.edu/offcourse/issue41/nirenberg_twilight.html, and David Nirenberg, 'The Politics of Love and Its Enemies', *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 573–605.

4. See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston, Ill., 1988). Of course, the identifications at play here are preposterous; Nini is not a philosopher of the calibre of the hapless Sarl, although, as does Sarl, Nini does thank a host of professional friends in his footnotes. We ourselves are not Derrida, nor would we wish to be. We would, however, like to acknowledge the incomparable François Nicolas for his extraordinary notes on Nini's piece. Nicolas maintains a website where many of Badiou's year-long seminars and courses, going back more than twenty-five years, may be freely and openly accessed. See François Nicolas, 'Cours d'agrégation', www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/seminaire.htm

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snares' ('BN', p. 586). Nor will he address those dogmatists who are happily ignorant of set theory.⁵ He will address 'critical readers who feel the need to understand' ('BN', p. 586). The irony, if not the self-assurance, is palpable. There are three claims:

Badiou's set-theoretical models for ontology are at best a priori commitments rather than necessary truths of the set theory within which they are made. . . .

In deducing philosophical and political consequences from his set-theoretical arguments, Badiou confuses contingent attributes of informal models with necessary consequences of the axioms (we will call this type of confusion a Pythagoric snare). The politico-philosophical claims that result have no grounding in the set theory that is deployed to justify them. . . .

We will show that it could not be otherwise, for the axioms of set theory themselves dictate strict limitations on the kinds of objects they can and cannot be applied to. Any rigorous attempt to base an ontology upon them will entail such a drastic loss of life and experience that the result can never amount to an ontology in any humanly meaningful sense. ['BN', pp. 585–86]

We will not take these points one by one. Indeed, it is not possible to do so. Nini's log of claims contradicts everything Badiou has to say on these matters, and consequently what Nini draws from them is not coherent enough to afford us this luxury. To be both blunt and brief, then, Nini's failings include (although are not restricted to) the following:

1. a failure to contextualise Badiou's claims in acceptable detail or with respect to his clear references;
2. a concentration of attention on a too-short short list of Badiou's texts;
3. a lack of attention to existing secondary commentary;
4. a failure to read their own short list of Badiou's texts accurately;
5. a failure to argue, rather than merely assert, their (erring) claims;
6. a promulgation of an insinuating rhetoric, whose ideological affiliations are at once evident and obscured.

First, a remark on Nini's general conceptual failures. We remind Nini that, regarding Badiou, Nini is dealing with a *philosopher*. We emphasise

5. Despite Nini's self-representation, the working mathematician and the working philosopher might discern a certain ignorance of set theory in his presentation here: his definition of the singleton in terms that violate the axiom of foundation; the depiction of 'set-theoretical objects', which simply repeats Georg Cantor's flawed definition of set (which Badiou discusses in Meditation 3 of *BE*, pp. 38–48); the mistaken conception that the set-theoretic relations of belonging and inclusion are reciprocal; and the conflation of mathematics and logic.

philosopher, for although Badiou's work on mathematics goes back to his student days and has been a constant topic in his published work since the mid-1960s (from the essays published in *Cahiers pour l'analyse* to the present day), Nini shows no understanding of the fact that Badiou is a philosopher and that it is as a philosopher that he engages with mathematics. He is not a cultural theorist or any equivalent to such. Because of this failure, Nini also fails to understand, let alone acknowledge, that for Badiou—although this is the explicit basis of Badiou's entire philosophical project from 1985 on—mathematics, politics, and philosophy are distinct and irreducible discourses. One might argue that Badiou might fail to make this case, but not noting the effort Badiou puts into distinguishing them is tantamount to falsification. Normally, misunderstandings link to specific arguments made by those one has misunderstood. Normally, the arguments of the object of critique would be cited, rehearsed, and evaluated on their merits. Yet Nini indulges in flights of fancy—metaphysical and theological histories, dreamwork, Oedipal fancies, chemical and optical analogies, and postexistentialist *cris de coeur*⁶—that make no mention of Badiou and have no relation whatsoever to the latter's explicitly *metaontological* thesis that mathematics is ontology.⁷ This thesis, as Badiou often notes—and Nini never fails not to grasp—cannot itself therefore be either mathematical or ontological; it is, strictly speaking, a figure of philosophical *fiction*. No doubt, Nini senior is a fiction writer of great talent and Nini junior a hermeneut of wide range, but in this case Nini's hand is overplayed; the emperor is all cloak and no dagger.

That mathematics is ontology means precisely and decisively that philosophy does not do ontology and that mathematics does not determine philosophy. Nor does mathematics constitute truth. Nor does being subject on Badiou's terms mean, as Nini brazenly claims, that 'our only choice lies with the axioms of set theory'.⁸ The key to Badiou's efforts since *Manifesto for Philosophy* (another inexistent text here) is 'the return of philosophy itself' and thus to desuture philosophy from its subjection to poetry,

6. A passage from Nini senior's work cited above gives us the general frame of Nini's engagement and suggests to us the real interests at stake in this essay: 'The latest fashion among humanists, *le dernier cri de Paris*, is Alain Badiou's skeletal Platonism in motley garb with Stalinistic cap and bells: neither Menand nor Grafton gives us the means to attempt an explanation of such a frightening apparition' (Ricardo Nirenberg, 'The Twilight of the Humanities').

7. Indeed, his references attest to other interests entirely.

8. Still, this is perhaps better than Nini's Heideggerian pathos which, in his telling, amounts to an affective decision on the event, given that one can refuse its call. We will revisit this ontological choice below.

ontology, or politics.⁹ For Badiou, it is incumbent on philosophy to construct the discursive space whereby what is generic and subjectively produced by what Badiou denominates as philosophy's conditions (science, love, art, and politics) can be thought together, insofar as *each*, in its own way, exposes the threefold relation of being, truth, and subject. Philosophy examines the operations of these conditions, the ways in which their disparate subjective operations might nonetheless be articulated together, and the formal singularity of the truths they produce.¹⁰ Nevertheless, on this point, we agree entirely with Nini when he concludes that politics is neither mathematics nor philosophy. But, given that this is Badiou's position, it can hardly constitute an objection against it. So we wonder: what nonexistent works has Nini not been reading?

Second, to the restrictions. If Badiou's work spans more than five decades, then, as far as we can see, he, Nini, has (self-confessedly) restricted his attentions to several Meditations of *Being and Event* (certainly *not* the entire work),¹¹ two references to *Number and Numbers* (both quotations, of which next to nothing is made and does not engage evidence from that book which directly contradicts Nini's claims), and three references to one essay from the collection *Theoretical Writings* (again, one quotation and one citation, from an essay, moreover, whose arguments, precisely concerning the status of mathematics to philosophy, are not rehearsed once in Nini's piece). Alone, this strenuous effort not to engage with Badiou's philosophy smacks of bad faith, all the more so given Nini's own flabbergasting remark: 'Badiou's selective reading strategy is quite general' ('BN', p. 591 n. 12). *De te fabula narratur!*

Nini's short short list of Badiou's texts—a list on which he nonetheless bases a claim to critical authority—not only ignores what these texts have to say. It also ignores an entire context, including Badiou's first book, *The Concept of Model* (the title itself immediately falsifies Nini's claims about the problem of model in Badiou's work) and the 1982 'big book' *Theory of the Subject*, but also, and much more distressingly in this context, his more recent 'big book' *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event*, 2.¹² This is an especially

9. See Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy: Followed by Two Essays*, 'The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself' and 'Definition of Philosophy', trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, N.Y., 1999).

10. Despite his pretensions to the contrary, demonstrated in his claim that in using this term *situation* Badiou fomented obscurity, Nini shows no cognizance of the philosophical provenance in France of this term—let alone what it means for Badiou.

11. Indeed, it quickly becomes clear that the vast majority of quotes come either from the preface to the English edition or the introduction.

12. See Badiou, *The Concept of Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, trans. and ed. Zachary Luke Fraser and Tzuchien Tho (1966; Melbourne, 2007), *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London, 2009), and *Logics of Worlds: Being and*

deleterious omission given that Nini ('akin to Martin Heidegger') sees fit to accuse Badiou (alongside Descartes, killing two rationalist birds with a single humanist stone) of ignoring the "phenomenon of the world" ('BN', p. 609 n. 40).¹³ These works are evidence of Badiou's long, extensive, and constantly developing engagement with mathematics and, as such, should be of interest to anyone presuming to ensure 'our freedom' against the ravages of methodical and rationalised horror ('BN', p. 612).¹⁴ Nini, it almost goes without saying, ignores the numerous other essays, collections, and books in which Badiou directly discusses the mathematical orientations of his thought, for example, *Briefings on Existence*, which would, dare we say, have been very helpful indeed in setting Nini straight¹⁵—if, of course, Nini wants to be set straight about Badiou's philosophical engagement with mathematics, a desire that is hardly evident here. Nini seems quite content with assertion, misrepresentation, tendentious rhetoric, hermeneutical abandon, and historicist masquerades, in short, a garden-variety sophistry.¹⁶ As a result, it is sometimes actually impossible to know what it is that Nini misunderstands because, in Nini's essay, Alain Badiou, the Badiou philosophically presented since 1966 (let's say), does not exist. Fortunately, in-existence does not equate to nonbeing in Badiou's philosophy—another distinction unknown to Nini—and in fact, as Badiou puts it in his homage to Derrida, it's a condition of becoming everything!¹⁷

Even if we were happy to accept this short list, Nini still can't manage his minimal references. He erroneously refers to *Number and Numbers* as a collection of essays (see 'BN', p. 585 n. 4), which it is not; it is a detailed, coherent work that begins by confronting key modern figures in the thinking of number (for example, Gottlob Frege, Giuseppe Peano, Cantor,

Event, 2, trans. Alberto Toscano (London, 2009); hereafter abbreviated *LW*. That *Logics of Worlds* is explicitly the sequel to *Being and Event* would seem to make questionable Nini's claims regarding the extent of their critique. Whenever possible we will confine ourselves to citing the English translations of Badiou's texts.

13. The 'politics' of Heidegger oddly does not seem to pose a problem for Nini.

14. The use of such terminology always gives one pause: is it a universal syntax or an exclusive one? If the latter, who is in and who is out? By what criteria? By what logic? For whom? And so on.

15. See Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Madarasz (Buffalo, N.Y., 2006).

16. The stand-out example is the line of descent Nini draws from Plato to National Socialism to Badiou. This can only be described as fanciful.

17. See Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey (London, 2009), p. 144. Compare: 'The thinking of the inexistent formalizes what I believe to be at stake in Jacques Derrida's sinuous approach' (*LW*, p. 545). See below.

Richard Dedekind, John Von Neumann, and others) before proceeding to a detailed constructive exposition of certain recent mathematical developments, for instance regarding John Conway's 'surreal numbers'.¹⁸ As the title promises, Badiou sets out to develop a theory of number—precisely and declaratively an anti-Pythagorean project—arguing that thinking through the nonrelation of 'Number' and 'numbers' is key to the proper conception of the former. This conception, contra Nini's claim, 'does not in any way declare that being is mathematical' (*BE*, p. 8) but rather tries to think the being of Number such that Number itself marks only *and* only a part of that of which being is capable.¹⁹ In missing or in misrepresenting this project and this procedure, Nini also misrepresents Badiou as succumbing to what Nini rather ripely and in full mythological voice denominates 'the Pythagorean snare'. As we have already suggested, Nini simply could not have read all of *Being and Event* precisely because the claims repeatedly rehearsed by Nini do not correspond to the explicit, repeated statements of Badiou regarding the status of mathematical knowledge (see the epigraph above; see our further remarks below).

Among much, we will ignore Nini's effort to demonstrate a familiarity with French philosophy.²⁰ Badiou's engagement with the philosophical

18. Nini erroneously asserts that "surreal numbers" are additional numbers ascribed by Badiou to his 'realm of being' ('BN', p. 593). In fact, surreal numbers are not additional kinds of numbers for Badiou but provide for a thought of Number as such. Perhaps the French title of *Number and Numbers* would help Nini see the sense of the capital distinction: *Le Nombre et les nombres*. It's not a tautology but a philosophical distinction that the entire work is dedicated to elaborating and justifying. We should note also that Nini ascribes the discussion of Conway and surreal numbers to *Being and Event*. Again, Nini's scholarship lets him down; there is no mention of either in this text upon which Nini has 'concentrated [their] analysis' ('BN', p. 595 n. 4). For Badiou's comments on Conway and on his own conception of Number as 'substantially that of "surreal numbers"', see Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin McKay (Cambridge, 2008), p. 107. Note that Number and being, despite Nini's confusion, are not conceptually the same. Those truly interested might like to read Badiou's summary program for thinking Number in Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, pp. 111–12 and to judge for themselves the accuracy of Nini's claims.

19. See Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, p. 112.

20. There is much we must ignore: creative fantasies concerning dreams; the 'wow' factor of the Oedipus complex; the unfortunate yet revealing attempt to rally René Descartes to the side of nonthought via a misunderstanding of the syntax of the cogito; the tragicomedy of the high school chemistry experiment and the optical illusion; the invocation of 'father' Heidegger ('BN', p. 610); and the cleaving to the authenticity of anguish as the necessary condition for any possible mathematics. As Jacques Lacan so aptly put it, anxiety doesn't lie! Given Nini's commitment to the authenticity of anguish, we feel it imperative to alert him again to *Theory of the Subject*. There, anxiety is indeed a crucial part of subjectivity—along with superego, courage, and justice. When subjectivity is conceived within the logic of the first two alone and thereby foreclosed from dialectical articulation with the latter two, one remains within the subjective space of repetition and statist determination. Nini's attempt to compare Badiou and Derrida is instructive only insofar as it demonstrates how piecemeal our hero is prepared to be: 'Derrida deconstructed Plato, Badiou hyper-structures him. For Derrida all is deferment,

'tradition' is so extensive, fundamental, and so beyond anything cited here by Nini as to make the latter's contribution puzzling.²¹ Yet his references are nevertheless proposed by Nini as supporting argument to his polemic against the impending tyranny of Badiou: a tyranny supposedly affecting intellectuals everywhere (or at least coming to a campus near you!), whom Nini suspects of 'yearning for an ontology capable of generating a politics robust enough to motivate revolutionary engagement with the dominant statist and capitalist world order' ('BN', p. 612). If this is supposed to stand as an example of critical engagement, refutation, or indeed an argument in itself then one has to wonder about the state of humanities scholarship in the US academy. One can only suggest that the 'corruption' Badiou invokes as the true role of philosophy would have a positive effect, given that it would comprise a 'corruption of this corruption.'²²

Given, then, Nini's resistance to scholarship, it is hardly surprising when he asserts that 'we may doubt that much critical attention has been paid to the relationship between Badiou's "mathematical formalism" and the radical thesis—ontology is nothing more than mathematics itself—that he developed in order to "support" that formalism's "intervention" in the "science of being qua being"' ('BN', p. 584). Well, one may doubt a lot of things in the abstract, for sure—indeed, Sigmund Freud notes such

différance, and for Badiou all is immediate'. Or, 'in a sense, Badiou returns us to a prepoststructuralist stance: to a French structuralism (such as that of Lacan at certain stages of his thought) heavily influenced by French mathematics, especially Nicolas Bourbaki' ('BN', p. 611). Not only does this again ignore all salient work on the topic, for example, Antonio Calcagno, *Badiou and Derrida: Politics, Events, and Their Time* (London, 2007) and the scores of essays and book chapters which also deal with this nonrelationship, but everything Badiou himself has to say on the topic, including *Pocket Pantheon*. Or see *BE*, p. 482: 'Concerning the ontological prerequisite, J. Derrida must certainly be mentioned.' This is further evidence of a concerted lack of engagement with Badiou's oeuvre. For Badiou's place in French philosophy we recommend Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, 2003), and Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (New York, 2008). See also Badiou, 'The Adventure of French Philosophy', *New Left Review*, no. 35 (Sept.–Oct. 2005): 67–77, where one can enjoy some refreshing immodesty on Badiou's part.

21. Instead of bibliographical references, let us just list the critical engagements with the philosophical tradition one can find in Badiou's oeuvre. We will list only those of essay, chapter, or book length: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, G. W. F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Lacan, Jacques Rancière, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Cavaillès, Georges Canguilhem, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and *literally* and so on. We leave aside the artistic, mathematical, and political engagements, as we would not want to overburden anyone.

22. Badiou, 'Can Change Be Thought? A Dialogue with Alain Badiou', interview by Bosteels, in *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and Its Conditions*, ed. Gabriel Riera (Albany, N.Y., 2005), p. 245.

doubt as one of the familiar features of an obsessive character—but one could also go to the library or get on the internet and actually check for oneself. If one did so, one would immediately find, contra Nini's own insistent assertions, that there has by no means been any 'problematic' 'lack of attention' to this relationship ('BN', p. 584). On the contrary. Although Nini is a genuine polyglot—citing texts in Yiddish, French, German, and Latin—we would draw the reader's attention to six significant, easily available English language texts for which this relationship is centrally at stake: Hallward's *Badiou*; Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*; Z. L. Fraser's 'The Category of Formalization: From Epistemological Break to Truth Procedure'; B. Madison Mount's 'The Cantorian Revolution'; Sam Gillespie's *The Mathematics of Novelty*; and Feltham's *Alain Badiou*.²³ Notably, most of these accounts are—despite being by Badiou's own translators and adherents—strongly critical of Badiou's theses and arguments, but in every case they take Badiou's project more seriously and certainly aim to present it more accurately than Nini himself.

If Nini begins his essay with several citations of Badiou which are perfectly accurate, it turns out that literally *none* of these turn out to have any impact on what he thereafter says. If Nini makes a few grandiose assertions about the 'history of philosophy,' he shows no signs of having engaged in any 'humanly meaningful sense' (in Nini's own felicitous phrase) with Badiou's careful, clear, and thorough demonstrations of his own positions or with the similarly careful, clear, and thorough engagements with the work of major philosophers from Plato to Deleuze (p. 585). Nini prefers, when rhetorically fortuitous, to render quotes for which he gives either

23. See Hallward, *Badiou*; Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London, 2007); Fraser, 'The Category of Formalization: From Epistemological Break to Truth Procedure', introduction to Badiou, *The Concept of Model*, pp. xiii–lxv; B. Madison Mount, 'The Cantorian Revolution: Alain Badiou on the Philosophy of Set Theory', *Polygraph*, no. 17 (2005): 41–91; and Feltham, *Alain Badiou*. Badiou has given several comprehensive interviews rehearsing all the questions raised by Nini: Badiou, 'Beyond Formalisation: An Interview', interview by Bosteels and Hallward, trans. Bosteels and Toscano, *Angelaki* 8, no. 2 (2003): 111–36; 'Being by Numbers', interview by Lauren Sedofsky, *Artforum* (Oct. 1994): 84–87, 118, 123–24; 'Matters of Appearance: An Interview with Alain Badiou', interview by Sedofsky, *Artforum* 45, no. 3 (2006): 322; and 'The Concept of Model Forty Years Later: An Interview with Alain Badiou', interview by Tho, in Badiou, *The Concept of Model*, pp. 79–106. Examples could be multiplied, but we have provided a short list which anyone dealing with Badiou seriously should have read—and, given the dating of these works, Nini would clearly have had the chance to access and read. We have to note that Nini can't be unaware of the existence of at least one of these persons, Ray Brassier, because Brassier is one of the editors of *Theoretical Writings*, which Nini claims to use here. To use another of one of many of Nini's Pilate-like locutions, 'we can take a guess' as to why they have not attended to any secondary literature whatsoever ('BN', p. 601). Could Nini be the *only* 'critical reader'?

little or no context. It would be wrong to contend that Nini's introductory set-up is some sort of ruse. Rather, it's intrinsic, indeed imperative, to Nini's *appeal*. It's a nod to the initiated and a sign to those seeking initiation; under the sun, *there is* nothing new.²⁴ This is the general level of engagement judged acceptable by Nini for an academic paper in a major international journal, not to mention regarding the major international philosopher supposed to be its subject.

To some specifics. Nini erroneously insists, again without references, and under cover of the authenticity of personal experience (to which he has repeated recourse), that, 'unlike any mathematician we know (and herein lies the real radicalism) for Badiou those set-theoretical objects, those multiplicities, are not only real, they are the *only* real, the only objects that *are*, the only basis for ontology' ('BN', p. 584). Nini makes this claim in several guises, and each time it remains false, not least because Badiou does not 'base' an ontology 'on' mathematics (let alone something called 'set-theoretical objects').²⁵ This 'distinction', repeated throughout, is simply careless. For Badiou, if mathematics equals ontology, mathematics does not equal set theory. Mathematics is ontology because pure mathematics is the paradigm of consistent, rational knowledge—a knowledge, moreover, that rigorously formalizes its own limits in its constitutional drive for consistency.²⁶ Set theory is *one* modern, 'foundational' mathematical development; that is, all prior mathematical problems can be rewritten without loss in its terms, but not vice versa.²⁷ Its very success among mathemati-

24. The section of Nini's essay entitled 'The Pythagoreans' best demonstrates this appeal. Despite Nini's implicit appeal to what we can only assume must be an existing consensus concerning the authority inherent to 'authentic dialogue' and the received wisdom that 'Plato was perfectly willing to derive the world from mathematical principles', we simply remain unconvinced that taking a contemporary thesis and historicising it *necessarily* (to use the condition Nini invokes against Badiou) determines the failure of this thesis in the present or for all time — even if it is the same thesis, which of course it is not in the case of set- or category-theory ('BN', p. 603). To use a couple of Nini's own choice phrases, it strikes 'us as too silly' and 'remains to us . . . mysterious' ('BN', pp. 602, 601). For previous form in this regard, see as noted above, David Nirenberg, 'The Politics of Love and Its Enemies'. It is enough to note that while Agamben and Žižek are invoked in the opening pages of this essay as exemplary figures of this (re)turn to a politics of love contra *exchange* (note the conflation of these two discourses!), their work is never discussed, and they are not heard from again. This, despite all the 'proof' enacted by the scholarly paraphernalia.

25. Badiou repeatedly addresses the question of realism. We direct the reader's attention to the first four essays of *Theoretical Writings*, for example.

26. As Bertrand Russell notes, mathematics poses a 'perpetual reproof' to mere opinion and private judgements (Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic' and Other Essays* [London, 1918], p. 71).

27. Remarkably enough, despite his apparently bad-boy reputation, Badiou's general use of mathematics is by no means as idiosyncratic as his adherents and enemies often like to claim. As Rudy Rucker (incidentally, Hegel's great-great-great-grandson) puts it: 'Just as chemistry

cians is testament to these powers. Yet it is not the be-all and end-all; on the contrary, Badiou is fundamentally interested in the possibility of immanent mathematical transformations.

If set theory is indeed of the first importance in Badiou's own philosophy, this is not because it deals with real objects. On the contrary, one of the extraordinary consequences that Badiou draws from set theory is not that it works with objects but that it functions precisely *without any objects at all*. As he explicitly announces: 'If the argument I present here holds up, the truth is that *there are no mathematical objects*. Strictly speaking, mathematics *presents nothing*' (BE, p. 7).²⁸ Is it possible to be any clearer about the lack of objects in set theory? We find it hard to imagine. How, by the way, can Badiou sustain such a thesis? Precisely because the infinite sets of set theory can be configured as resting not upon a foundational element, but upon the paradoxical nonelement that is the empty set: 'There exists a set which has no elements.' To put this another way, the empty set is clearly not an object but—to advert to Badiou's terms, that can only be invoked here, although they are embedded in an extraordinarily careful demonstrative apparatus to which any reader can refer—'a multiple of nothing' (BE, p. 58) and 'the proper name of being' (BE, p. 59).²⁹

When Nini comes to deal with Badiou's careful transliteration of such mathematical statements into metaontological, that is, philosophical terms, he again misunderstands what is at stake. Nini writes: 'Out of *nothing* (which Badiou interprets the set $\emptyset$ to be) the whole cosmos, he will show us, will be created or rather deduced. But if we are logical readers rather than dogmatic ones, we will pause to note that there is nothing necessary about such an origin *ex nihilo*' ('BN', p. 590).³⁰ This is quite

was unified and simplified when it was realized that every chemical compound is made of atoms, mathematics was dramatically unified when it was realized that every object of mathematics can be taken to be the same *kind* of thing. There are now other ways than set theory to unify mathematics, but before set theory there was no such unifying concept' (Rudy Rucker, *Infinity and the Mind: The Science and Philosophy of the Infinite* [Boston, 1994], p. 64). What makes Badiou special is the intensity of his attention to details.

28. In the context of what he calls a 'greater logic', that is, one underpinned by category theory, and from the perspective of 'thinking appearing' Badiou 'proposes an entirely new concept of what an object is'. An object 'counts as one *within appearing*' (LW, p. 193; our emphasis) toward being. It still is not real in the sense Nini presumes.

29. If, as Nini suggests, there are indeed other possible versions of set theory, some of which do not have the empty set as an axiom, this is also one of Badiou's points; there is no necessity that rules, except perhaps the necessity that a *decision* be made. Once again, Badiou's own decision to use the standard version of set theory (ZFC) is in accord with general mathematical practices and can therefore hardly be considered idiosyncratic—on the contrary, and this is, with the requisite nuances he provides, part of the point.

30. As we will see, this claim is meaningless, and, in the context, it seems to be invoked

stupefying. First, in rendering mathematics ontology, Badiou not only carefully discriminates (as we have noted) philosophy from mathematics but also ontology from the natural sciences. As the epigraph states, this thesis is 'not a thesis about the world but about discourse.' In other words, 'the whole cosmos' is clearly *not* what Badiou is talking about. We also direct the reader to Badiou's demonstrations that the idea of a whole is rationally incoherent. In his interpretations of Russell's paradox, Badiou shows how, first, this paradox requires the conclusion one does 'not have the power to count as one, . . . everything which is subsumable by a property' (BE, p. 40), thereby separating formal language and that of which it speaks and, second, how this paradox also thereby means that 'a set of all sets cannot exist' (LW, p. 153). If Badiou is therefore speaking neither of a 'whole cosmos' nor of 'creation,' he is also not speaking about the empty set as 'an origin'. The motivated obscurantism of Nini's work could hardly be more evident in his failure to acknowledge the clearest demarcations. It's not really for us to speculate, but one cannot help but wonder if the paterfamilias, certainly not against his will, has been invited onto the field to provide some sort of mathematical cover to the wayward hermeneut son. But apart from a strange and, obviously for Nini, unsatisfying encounter with Grothendieck (another form of cover?), it's difficult not to suggest that Laius has exposed himself.

Secondly, Nini's claim that there is 'nothing necessary about such an origin ex nihilo', despite the mistaken ascription to the world noted already, busts down an open door. We will leave a fuller examination of this claim concerning the ex nihilo. It's been asked and answered many times in the secondary literature, not to mention by Badiou himself. In any case, the following elaboration of decision and its vicissitudes should suffice. For Badiou, necessity is precisely that to which the axiomatic form denies provenance. An axiom itself *decides*; it is a decision and declaration at once. Moreover, it itself decides necessity or what *will have been* necessary to render the decision true, a 'forcing' into the future perfect. The set-theoretical universe, as Cantor discovered (and was bound to accept) and which Paul Cohen affirmed, is simply irreducible to either a transcendently or metaphysically ordered continuum, which is to say a point of necessity. One must *decide* on one's orientation to this universe; thus, the three great orientations Badiou identifies are constructivist, transcendent,

merely to provide him with the opportunity to add a note on Badiou's own dogmatics. We cannot let it pass that someone else—someone who had perhaps *read* the 'offending' text—noted this for Nini.

and generic. Badiou discusses each at length and together in *Being and Event* (and elsewhere) and affirms and justifies his own choice in the context of these discussions. To put it plainly and with regard to 'our freedom', *that there is no necessity* is the very condition for Badiou on which there may be some subjects, and thus some truths, and thus something other than the free reign of opinion without thought.³¹ Mathematics teaches precisely this.

The distinction bears also on the distinction Badiou maintains between mathematics and logic and even between inscription and classification or description. In *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire*, he makes a clear distinction which Nini, confusing necessity with the real (and thus acceding to an ever-present Aristotelianism), continues to ignore. He writes: '[the real] is only encountered under the axiomatic rule' (the real being simply what an axiom schema decides as such concerning being qua being), while it is 'merely possibility that can be described under the regime of definitions and classifications'.³² We will expand on this in a moment, as it crosses several of Nini's reductions and misunderstandings. Here, we note that Badiou does not oppose mathematics to logic, or inscription (being qua presentation and not qua object) to description. What he does do, however, is insist that thought, mathematical inscription, the thinking of being as such (presented, let's say it again, not as a cosmos but as discourse), is prior to logic.

As Badiou argues in *Theoretical Writings*, the question of the logicisation of mathematics is a fraught one, but mathematics itself, precisely through its axiomatisation, authorises decisions. It thereby also engages—in Badiou's philosophical terms (but again taking his cue from 'working mathematicians')—a subjective fidelity as consequence (and this of course within the mathematical 'situation itself'). And such fidelity shows, from within the discursive procedure of mathematics, that *decision* is not subject to predicate, rule, or judgement. The full complement of this argument against logical necessity (as against the transcendent and intuitionism)—a notion Nini never himself questions—is carried out in the several Meditations

31. Under the no-doubt ironic gaze of Nietzsche, Nini senior professes the despair of every democratic *bonhomme*: 'The Platonist, furthermore, is allergic to opinion, with its abundance of stupidity and logical inconsistency. Now, opinion is largely decisive in modern democracies, but all Leninist Parties take themselves to be masters of a general method for arriving at truth. Stalin, typically, declared himself a philosopher, the perfection and culmination of all philosophy; insofar as academic humanists are Platonists, it is frightening indeed, but not very surprising, that they feel nostalgic for a philosopher-king' (Nirenberg, 'The Twilight of the Humanities'). Lenin, Stalin, Plato . . . nothing compares to flogging a dead horse. 'Stupidity and logical inconsistency'? Mais, bien sûr!

32. Badiou, *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire* (Paris, 1998), p. 135; our trans.

addressing Leibniz in *Being and Event*. The mathematician subject, as with any other, is in the first instance subject to that which logic cannot prescribe or know. Logic exists and prescribes only post facto. In short, an axiom is a pure decision, a decision on existence—that there is something (that is, $\emptyset$) rather than nothing—and not a *knowledge* of the former nor of its inherent *potential*. Given an event, that which unaccountably takes place, and the decision on and for its taking place—the first formalised retroactively (and not, as Nini assumes, by mathematics a priori) and the second in anticipation—‘Necessity is always a result’.³³ This decision, declared as such on the basis of *the* nothing, has the subject as its effect and not as its substance. This is not the end of the mathematics/logic story and, fortuitously, this discussion of the order relation between mathematics and logic crosses neatly with another of Nini’s wild claims: Badiou effectively deprives “‘mathematicians” of any special authority they might have in judging the quality of his work’ (‘BN’, p. 585). Not only does Nini entirely misrepresent a section of Badiou’s introduction to *Being and Event* to elicit this claim,³⁴ he yet again shows his indifference to scholarship.³⁵

In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou remains convinced of the priority of mathematical thought, that thought is not circumscribed by logic. However, as he says elsewhere, ‘it is no less true that there is always a logic of thought. To think mathematics as thought means, from within this thought, to forget the logic, to the advantage of a fidelity to the decisions’.³⁶ Thus, in Hallward’s words—words that resonate with category theoretic terms—Badiou acknowledges what fidelity forgets, and so, in this later work, work begun at the behest of mathematical critique, Badiou proposes a new theory of appearance, one whose formal demonstration is categorical and not set-theoretical, but which at the same time in no way breaks with the unconditional commitment to axiomatic ontology and to the primacy of

33. Ibid., p. 138.

34. See *BE*, p. 11, but also, given that Nini plays fast and loose with Badiou’s discussion of the relationship between philosopher mathematicians and mathematician philosophers, all of section 5 of the introduction.

35. On the question of Badiou’s engagement with mathematics, mathematicians, and philosopher-mathematicians, see for example Badiou’s notes at the end of *BE*, pp. 481–97 and his *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London, 2005), for the importance of Canguilhem, Cavaillès, and Albert Lautman to Badiou’s ‘mathematical’ conditioning. For the texts which conditioned the turn to category theory as the ‘logics of appearing’, see Jean-Toussaint Desanti, ‘A propos de l’ontologie intrinsèque d’Alain Badiou’, *Les Temps Modernes* 526 (May 1990): 617–71 (Badiou repeatedly notes Desanti’s importance); and for developments immanent to *Logics of Worlds*, see Badiou’s comments on the importance of Guillaume Destivère in *LW*, pp. 534–35.

36. Quoted in Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 313.

decision.³⁷ The point is that Badiou addresses the question of necessity via mathematics, and it is mathematics itself—and not as Nini contends *his* mathematics³⁸—which determines the lack of necessity as constitutive of an *axiomatic* ontology. Moreover, Badiou has sought to demonstrate that logic, the very tool Nini seeks to invoke against Badiou when he repeatedly declares that ‘there is nothing necessary’ in all this, is not at all incompatible with the chance of the event, the impasse of ontology (Kurt Gödel/Cohen), or the axiomatic form. Yes, there is no necessity because there is the entirely formal presentation of choice. As such, consequences follow—necessary consequences, if you like, of a contingency whose very taking place can nevertheless be formalized as that which is not (being qua being). In other words, what choice authorizes in a formal sense is existence without properties and thus, for a philosophy *properly* oriented to an ontology and not reducible to it, also the possibility of an undecidable event, a substance-less or indiscernible subject and a truth devoid of knowledge. In other words, it authorizes the generic or the new, the truly new, which Badiou says, is the central effort of his entire philosophical project.³⁹ Now, it is this, precisely, that disturbs Nini—not the plea of necessity, but the argument against it.

So it is not a critical engagement with the work of Badiou that is at stake here but—as Nini’s allusion to ‘our freedom’ paradoxically makes evident—a refusal of a thought that refuses necessity. Badiou has demonstrated that what is logically or necessarily *impossible* can nevertheless *be* thought; this surely triggers horror, consciously or not.⁴⁰ Consider why Nini invokes ‘our freedom’, if indeed it’s simply a critique of the misuse of

37. Amazingly, Nini has the audacity to note, and in a pedagogical tone, that ‘category theory is another basis for mathematics, competitive with set theory’ (‘BN’, p. 585 n. 5).

38. In *Number and Numbers* and the English edition of *Being and Event* (to confine references to the texts Nini claims to have consulted) Badiou states clearly and unambiguously that he makes no claims to have advanced anything in the field of mathematics; see Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, p. 107 and *BE*, p. xiv. Nini must know this, having partially cited the paragraphs above and below that cited in *BE*.

39. See Badiou, ‘Can Change Be Thought?’ p. 245.

40. See part 6 of *BE* for a full discussion of constructivism: ‘an orientation’, as Hallward says, ‘broad enough to include nominalism, Leibniz, Wittgenstein, the linguistic turn [and] Anglo-American analytic philosophy’, each of which, unsurprisingly, is represented in Nini’s essay (Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 159). With perspicacity Badiou notes that constructivism is ‘the ordinary regime of the relation to being under circumstances in which it is not time for a new temporal foundation’, thus constituting the default position of established states (*BE*, p. 294). On Badiou’s engagement with Wittgenstein (of which Nini makes no mention), who serves Nini as some sort of Berlin Wall-type figure, keeping out the generic riff-raff, see Badiou, course listing for year-long seminar devoted to Wittgenstein, 1993–94, www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/seminaire.htm and ‘Silence, solipsism, sainteté: L’Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein’, *Barca! Poésie, Politique, Psychoanalyse* 3 (1994): 13–53. This version has been kicking around the net for some time. Otherwise, see Badiou, *L’Antiphilosophie de Wittgenstein* (Paris, 2004); trans.

mathematics by yet-another-French-philosopher who is ultimately, on Nini's own admission, doing nothing new and is indeed 'conventional'.⁴¹ Consider why so many pages of *Critical Inquiry* have been given over to this act. Consider how Nini senior, in his own previous work, names Badiou to the index on terror. Consider how Nini junior directs a similar 'critique' at Badiou's fellow travelers. What is fascinating is not Nini's response but rather the uncanny familiarity of the operation itself.⁴²

What, then, is at stake in such a 'critique'? It is difficult for people not to represent their own self-harming self-interests in the name of 'our freedom', and one cannot displace the ruses of such an operation by means of argument or demonstration. Freudian psychoanalysis began with this insight, and some philosophers have attempted to take up its consequences without giving way on rationality. One consequence, at least, is that there can no longer be any rational philosophy either of will or, for that matter, a consciousness that can function as ground. Hence the *event* of Badiou's *Being and Event*, the chance of an encounter that comes to supplement the world that we all already know to be all that is the case. Attempting to think the event or encounter—refractory to all ontology—leads us back to the not-knowing proper to the philosophical procedure. Perhaps, in accordance with our own rediscovered unknowing, other readers of Badiou, new and old, will also be able to come to know that they do not know what Nini knows. For any reader who knows what Nini knows about the work of Badiou will not know the work of Badiou. All allusions and abstractions aside, let us conclude by saying that Nini's critique of Badiou's 'ontology through his mathematics' never stops not being written.⁴³

into German by Heinz Jatho under the title *Wittgensteins antiphilosophie* (Berlin, 2008). An English translation by Bosteels is forthcoming.

41. As we have shown, Nini manages to contend this *and* its opposite in his essay.

42. In the terms of Bourdieu, Nini seems to be representative of a panic, current to some sections of the academy, over a perceived redistribution of symbolic capital—as if what is at stake in philosophy or in intellectual life as a whole is merely the bureaucratic and factional distribution of status or goods. Plato notes this same distribution and bequeaths it as a problem for every philosophy and philosopher to come when he reminds us of the representative function of each of Socrates's accusers: Meletus, aggrieved on behalf of the poets; Anytus, the professional men and politicians; and Lycon, the orators (Ap. 23e).

43. We are conflating Lacan's two senses found in the phrases 'stops not being written' and 'never stops being written' (Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, vol. 20 of *The Seminars of Jacques Lacan* [New York, 1999], p. 145).