

COMMENTS ON SIMON CRITCHLEY'S *Infinitely Demanding*

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Prefatory Note
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The following text is the transcription of Badiou's remarks on my book, *Infinitely Demanding* (New York and London: Verso, 2007). The occasion was the invitation from the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia for a debate between Badiou and myself that took place on November 15, 2007. Badiou organized his remarks around six passages from my text and then raised a series of critical questions. The event began with my explanation of the ethical and political argument of *Infinitely Demanding*. A DVD version of the entire event was released as "Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance" (Slought Books, Philadelphia, 2008). This is the first publication of Badiou's remarks. Thanks are due to Jean-Michel Rabaté and especially Aaron Levy, Senior Curator at the Slought Foundation.

Some sentences of Simon Critchley in *Infinitely Demanding*:

1. "We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness, and this failure is a cause of much tragedy." (1)
2. "Without the experience of a demand to which I am prepared to bind myself, to commit myself, the whole business of morality would either not get started or would be a mere manipulation of empty formulae." (23)
3. "If what is meant by truth is the procedure by which norms are justified, as I think it has to be, then I think it would be better to speak of justification rather than truth, at least in the realm of ethics." (48)

4. "I would argue that humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation, but comic acknowledgement, not Promethean authenticity, but laughable inauthenticity." (82)
5. "This disappointment provokes an experience of injustice and the feeling of *anger*. I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action. Anger is the emotion that produces motion, the mood that moves the subject. But such anger at the multiple injustices and wrongs of the present provokes an ethical response." (130)
6. "At the core of such a neo-anarchism, there is not an ontology, not an economic theodicy, but an infinitely demanding ethics of commitment that challenges the vapid mantras of contemporary ideological moralism." (148)

It's difficult for me to speak after my friend Simon, with my English which is somewhere between French and German.

Simon's book has three characteristics. It's as clear as the pure water of the source. It's as affirmative or conclusive as a declaration of love. And it's as subtle and rigorous as a scientific work. It's this mixture of transparency, of conviction, and of rigour, which makes so profound and seductive the reading of *Infinitely Demanding*. If you also take into account his English humour, then you have the delicious and original theoretical style of Simon Critchley.

My own reading will be a sort of ramble in Simon's prose garden. I shall select one sentence in each chapter of the book. It will be as if we were to pick some roses in a marvellous park. Maybe sometimes I shall put into each rose a very small piece of poison.

First, at the very beginning of the introduction, we find an example, a clear example, of the descriptive dimension of the book, of the experi-

mental style of Simon, something like the very concrete approach to a problem, “We seem to have enormous difficulty in accepting our limitedness, our finiteness, and this failure is the cause of much tragedy.” In this sentence we find the first very important consequence of the fact that, for Simon, the beginning of philosophy, and the beginning of true thinking in general, is disappointment. A disappointment that leads to the appropriation, precisely, of our limitedness, our finiteness. We cannot accept, in fact, the world as it seems. And it is this refusal of the world as it is which is the beginning of ethics. I agree perfectly with this point, Simon. There is, in fact, something in disappointment which is essential. But the problem is the relationship between the negative dimension of disappointment and the affirmative dimension of something infinitely demanding.

Yes, we have the utmost difficulty in accepting our limitedness and so on. But if there exists something like the possibility of an infinite demand, there is something infinite in human nature. And maybe the problem sometimes is not at all to accept our finitude, but to accept our infinite dimension. So if I have to specify the discussion between Simon and me on this point, it is the question of the tension inside the subject, inside the individual, between the finite and the infinite, between disappointment and demand. I know that for Simon the subject is divided precisely by this situation, but the question of the becoming of this division is a very complex one. We can say this in another manner: Yes, we have much tragedy because of our non-recognition of our finitude but we also have another sort of tragedy, which is our inability to recognise our infinity. To recognise not only the infinite demand, but the possibility of something infinite in human creation. And so I only propose to say—it’s not really a piece of poison—or to complete the proposition, this first proposition, by saying there are two different sorts of tragedies: the refusal of finitude, but also the refusal of the infinite.

The second sentence is from Chapter 1. It is an example of the declarative, axiomatic style of Simon, the axiomatic dimension of the book, where it is not a question of a description, but a principle, and with a touch of abstract violence. You know Simon is against violence, but maybe there is something in him which is sometimes violent. Is this false Simon? And we can read something like this in the book. “Without

the experience of a demand to which I am prepared to bind myself, to commit myself, the whole business of morality would either not get started or would be a mere manipulation of empty formulae.”

I don't know who is a victim of your violence here; who it is that manipulates empty formulae. The question this time is the question of experience, which is really a very important word in Simon's book. Philosophy begins in an experience, the experience of disappointment, but it also begins with an experience, the experience of a demand, of an infinite demand. My problem is that in any case, we presuppose the existence of a subject of this experience "...without the experience of the demand to which *I* am prepared to bind *myself*, to commit *myself*." And the difficulty is with the word "prepared": I am prepared to bind myself, to commit myself. In the context of Simon's book, I think or I propose to say that there is finally a confusion—the confusion is deliberate, it's not an error—between individual and subject, and probably this is the most important discussion between us.

I think that certainly the subject of the experience of disappointment is the individual; the subject of the negative experience. But is the subject of the infinite demand the individual? Is it the same subject? That is the real question. I propose to say that probably the subject of ethics is the result of the demand and not its support. And so we have to distinguish between the subject of the demand and the subject of, for example, the experience of disappointment. And maybe the most appropriate distinction is that between individual, empirical subjectivity if you want, and something else. But maybe ethics is not an experience in the same sense, because in the experience of ethics, the issue is that an individual must become a subject.

My third point is the question of truth. I have to speak about this because there is a discussion, an explicit discussion, with me, in Simon's book, a discussion of my vision in Chapter 2, pages 42–9. And it's certainly a very clear and very striking reading of my book on Saint Paul. And it's, I think, the most organised reading of my book on Saint Paul, very systematic and clear. But, I cannot agree, naturally, with the idea that we can suppress the word "truth" and choose instead the word "justification." You see the problem. Simon writes, "If what is meant by truth is

a procedure by which norms are justified, as I think it has to be, then I think it would be better to speak of justification rather than truth, at least in the realm of ethics.” (48) You have here the third style of Simon. I have spoken of the style of description, the phenomenological style, of the violent style of affirmation, the axiomatic style, and here you have the style when he acutely criticizes a notion, the style of critique in Simon.

What is the point at issue? And why is it that I cannot agree with the substitution of justification for truth? First, truth is not the procedure by which norms are justified. Ontologically—I shall return to the question of ontology at the end of my discussion—truth is the construction of something new. The truth is neither a judgement nor a justification. The truth is a construction of a new multiplicity in a concrete world. The truth is a creation, artistic creation, political creation, scientific creation, and so on. The truth is always the process of the construction of something new in the world. And, there is a formal and very precise concept of what a truth is: this new multiplicity, this novelty in the world is, technically speaking, the generic subset. There is a genericity of truth, it’s a multiplicity if you want, without qualitative determination, a truth which is not particular, but which is universal in some sense, and we can give to this concept of truth a completely precise definition. There is also a logical definition of what is a truth. A truth is the set of consequences of a perturbation, a disturbance, in the organisation of appearing, in the organisation of the world. In particular, a truth is a set of consequences of the fact that something that exists before the event in the world, understood in the minimal sense of existence, becomes existence in the strongest sense. A truth is always something in relationship to the modification of the intensity of existence of something in the world. If you will, it is the sublimation of something that holds like an “inexistent” of the world.

So I absolutely refuse Simon’s neo-scepticism, when he says with Wittgenstein that “truth is just a way of talking.” This is bad. That is the first point. You can say that there is no relationship between ethics and truth, but we cannot transform the definition of the truth, and after that, say that truth is nothing at all, and we will then only speak about justification. So, Simon, you have the duty to criticise my definition of truth and not merely to use Wittgensteinian means.

But as an effect of all that, when you write, “it would be better to speak of justification rather than truth, at least in the realm of ethics,” it’s clear that for me there is nothing like a realm of ethics. There are only singular situations where truth proceeds, or exists, and all commitment for me is strictly relative to this particular process. And so there is no sense for me to speak of a realm of ethics. We have only singular situations when perhaps we have something like the process of the truth and we have the question of ethics relative to this process. But in an abstract manner, we cannot define the question of ethics apart from the singularity of the situation.

In Chapter 3, the fourth quotation, we find a very original and subtle opposition between an heroic vision of ethics and a new way of sublimation through humour. It’s a very nice part of the book, and completely original: the idea that there is a comic sublimation of ethics that finally protects subjectivity much more than an heroic vision, which is the possibility of distinguishing between the ethical process and something finally like being for death. I completely agree with Simon, following in the line of Adorno or Günther Grass, concerning the critique of the Heideggerian pathos of authenticity. But my question is—this is really a question for you—is there, in fact, no close relationship between heroism and authenticity? Certainly, in the Heideggerian framework and some other frameworks we have this relationship, but it is not a necessity. We can perfectly define a heroism without any notion of authenticity, return to the true origin, and so on. We can have a heroism of the void—A heroism, precisely, of the becoming subject in a concrete situation. I define heroism as the possibility for an individual to become a subject. It’s my only safe definition of heroism. We exist as individuals, we exist finally as something like human animals. And in some circumstances we have the chance to become subjects. And there is some heroism, not at all because it’s much more authentic to be a subject than to be an individual or something like that, but simply because the becoming-subject goes beyond the popular limits of our existence as individuals.

And this point is linked to another one. You sometimes say, and it’s the case in this sentence, “I would argue that humour recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not

for tragic-heroic affirmation, but comic acknowledgement, not Promethean authenticity, but laughable inauthenticity.”

But, I do not really like the word “modesty,” because it can absolutely be the word of the State: “Be modest my friends,” “Stay in your place,” “Don’t harbour illusions,” “Don’t do something great.” So modesty is also the possibility of something very oppressive. And generally the point of view of the State is to desire modesty. So there is a real problem concerning the word modesty. I think it is necessary to divide this word and to say that there are two different modesties: there is a modesty of knowledge, of an appreciation of the real situation, the modesty of what is possible in some situations, and so on. But there is also a negative modesty, which is finally only the imperative, “Be Quiet, Be Quiet,” “Be in your place,” “Do not move.” And I think this has a very precise relation to the distinction between the individual and the subject, because modesty can signify the desire to stay in condition of the individual, to not become a subject. So maybe concerning modesty, you pay the price of the lack of distinction between individual and subject, because if, in fact, you cannot decide between individual and subject, then modesty becomes a very difficult word in the realm of ethics, which doesn’t exist.

Chapter 4 is a magnificent chapter concerning anarchic metapolitics, a complex and precise discussion with the Marxist legacy and with the modern theories of emancipatory politics, including Negri, Laclau and others. I do not know of another text that is so clear and complete concerning the situation today of metapolitics in fact, of general metapolitics. Really, I have great admiration for the whole beginning of the chapter. And, the central concept is true democracy. Why not? Why not true democracy? If democracy can be true...

My question would be the question of the means, of the real, of the body of true democracy, or something like that. How can true democracy be something more than an idea? I read the fifth sentence, “[Political disappointment] provokes an experience of injustice and the feeling of *anger*. I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action. Anger is the emotion that produces motion,

the mood that moves the subject. But such anger at the multiple injustices and wrongs of the present provokes an ethical response.”

My problem is that this sort of beginning is a negative one: the sense of injustice, the revolt against the wrongs of the world, the feeling of anger. But, I think that this cannot create a new political subject. This is my difficulty. I think that we can have, naturally, negative feelings, negative experience concerning injustice, concerning the horrors of the world, terrible wars, and so on. But I don't think that all that is the creative part of a new political subject. All great movements in the political and historical field have been created, have been provoked not by that sort of a negative feeling, but always by a local victory. And this is true from the very beginning. If we appreciate, for example, why we have during two years the great revolt of the slaves in the Roman Empire, under the leadership of Spartacus, it is not because slaves have the feeling of injustice and so on. Because they always have that, it's their experience day after day. It is rather because in one small place a small group of slaves finds new means finally to create a victory—a small victory, a local victory. And after that, as the effect of enthusiasm, of affirmation, of the possibility of something new, we have the possibility of the creation of a new subjectivity at the general level. And it's the same thing, to take a completely different example, for May '68 in France. May '68 was not provoked by a feeling of injustice concerning universities, etc. It is a small victory at a precise moment, namely, the decision of the French government to withdraw the police from the Sorbonne. And it was an extraordinary feeling of victory. For the first time, at a precise point, Power was on the defensive. And so, I say all that because I think that we cannot keep the political process within the limits of negative affects. And it's a logical problem too: the great problem of the relationship between negativity and affirmation in political creation. But I think that the creation of a new subject, more precisely, of something which goes beyond the existing individual, is always something of a victorious nature and not of negative pathos. And this is what I name the power of affirmation, the positivity of ethics.

I think that what I have just said may be the final consequence for you, Simon, of the influence of Levinas. I quote and this is the last quotation,

“At the core of such a neo-anarchism, there is not an ontology nor an economic theodicy, but an infinitely demanding ethics of commitment that challenges the vapid mantras of contemporary moralism.” Yes. But, you stay within the opposition of ontology and ethics. And that is the great idea of Levinas. But after all it’s not certain that there is an opposition between ontology and ethics. There is a clear opposition between ethics and ontology if ethics begins with an individual experience. If ethics is really an individual experience, then we can say that this individual experience is not reducible to ontological considerations. I agree with you. But if the beginning of ethics is in a concrete situation under the condition of the construction of truth, the becoming-subject of an individual, then this is not the same framework. This is the case because the becoming-subject of an individual under the condition of the process of the truth, and finally under the commitment to an event, is of an ontological nature in one sense: it’s something, an event, which is a rupture in the order of being as such. And so the ethics of the situation, the ethics of truth, depends on something that is not reducible to the experience of the individual; rather, it is precisely beyond all possible experience of the individual because it is rupture in the becoming of being as such in the situation. And so, probably, our final, but very significant comment would end on two points: first, the distinction or indistinction between individual and subject, and, second, the general context, which is the general opposition between ethics as fundamental experience, for example, the experience of the other, and ontology, including an ontology of the event.