

Editorial Foreword

How “L'écart” Challenges and Reshapes “the Universal”

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The problem of the “the Universal” was addressed as early as the time of Socrates, with a relatively convincing argument: “we might be mistaken in supposing that we knew the standard of Beauty, but in speaking of objects as more or less beautiful we imply that there *is* a standard.... The perfect line and the perfect circle are not found among the objects of our experience: there are at best only approximations to the definitions of the line or the circle. There *is* a contrast, therefore, between the imperfect and changeable objects of our everyday experience on the one hand and the universal concept or definition on the other hand.” This confirmation of the “universal” was regarded by Aristotle as one of “the two improvements in science which we might justly ascribe to Socrates.”^①

In such an argument, the natural perception that something is “more beautiful” or “less beautiful,” “more round” or “less round,” precisely suggests that “there *is* a standard.” Thus, although we cannot assume that we know a given standard, the standard exists prior to our empirical experience. “The universal” or “universality” established on this basis manifests such a strong inertia in the Western metaphysical tradition that Immanuel Kant attributes “strict universality” to “pure a priori cognition” because “empirical knowledge” can only bring us “empirical universality,” namely an “assumed and comparative universality,” which is nothing but “an arbitrary increase in validity from that which holds in most cases to that which holds in all.”^②

^① Frederick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, Greece & Rome, vol. 1 (New York: Image Books, 1962), 126, 125.

^② Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 137.

Today, it seems that “universality” cannot avoid a harsher interrogation, which has led to French philosopher Alain Badiou’s “eight theses on the universal,” namely: “Thought is the proper medium of the universal;” “Every universal is singular, or is a singularity;” “Every universal originates in an event, and the event is intransitive to the particularity of the situation;” “A universal initially presents itself as a decision about an undecidable;” “The universal has an implicative structure;” “The universal is univocal;” “Every universal singularity remains incompletable or open;” and “Universality is nothing other than the faithful construction of an infinite generic multiple.” In Badiou’s view, “the philosopher commits himself with regard to a paradoxical situation in the name of universal principles.”^①

Badiou claims that if we combine these eight theses on the universal with the definition of a paradoxical situation, we can respond to the question what is “the commitment of philosophers in the present”? Yet, in reality, the issue is not so simple, which is why we hear Slavoj Žižek’s teasing response: “There will hardly be a dialogue between us because we are to a large extent in agreement. ... I have always considered Plato’s late dialogues to be his philosophical dialogues in the true sense of the word. In them, one person speaks almost without interruption; the objections of the others – in the *Sophist* – for example, would hardly fill half a page. They say, for example, ‘You are completely right,’ ‘Quite clearly,’ ‘It is so.’ And why not? Philosophy is not a dialogue. Name me a single example of a successful philosophical dialogue that wasn’t a dreadful misunderstanding. This is true also for the most prominent cases: Aristotle didn’t understand Plato correctly; Hegel – who might have been pleased by the fact – of course didn’t understand Kant. And Heidegger fundamentally didn’t understand anyone at all. So, no dialogue. But, let’s go on.”^②

Slavoj Žižek excels at banter, but he also recognizes, of course, that Badiou’s eight theses have replaced the issue related to “universality” with

^① Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, ed. Peter Engelmann, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 26, 29, 31, 35, 39, 46, 25. A brief discussion of this see YANG Huilin, *Yi yi* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013), 77-78.

^② Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 49-50.

“philosophical commitment ... of a theory of universality,”^① which in fact *is* a dialogue on another level. If we take some key points of Badiou’s theses, we can see that “the universals” he wants to express are very different from those of previous traditions. For Badiou, firstly, “the universal is in no way the result of a transcendental constitution, which would presuppose a constituting subject,”^② but, on the contrary, the subject is “always being constituted.”^③ Secondly, “the universal means that nothing exists as universal which takes the form of the object or of objective regularity. The universal is essentially ‘anobjective.’”^④ Thirdly, the “subject” and the “universal” constituted by the “undecidable” “decision” do not, in reality, need concrete support but rather logical: and so “the inauguration of its subject is tied to the consequences of the evental statement.” The assertion of the event declares that the “un-decidable has been decided.” Furthermore, “the constituted subject follows in the wake of this declaration, which opens up a possible space for the universal.”^⑤

In contrast to the “philosophical commitment ... of a theory of universality” (not “universal” per se), Badiou’s “event” can not only be proclaimed, but is also fundamentally “intransitive.”^⑥ In other words, the appearance of an “event” also “disappears in its appearance.”^⑦ The “reactive denial that the event took place”^⑧ means turning from any political or cultural “objective sphere” to a pure “event in thinking.”

This is the fundamental inspiration that the phrase “Nothing took place but the place” gives to Badiou. Given that the word “place” in this notion can refer either to a specific location or to something taking place, I once offered an analysis based on a close reading of Mallarmé’s original poem.^⑨ Badiou’s

① Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 24.

② Ibid., 27.

③ Alain Badiou, “The Event of Deleuze,” trans. John Roffe, *Parrhesia*, No. 2(2007):37.

④ Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 26.

⑤ Ibid., 36-38.

⑥ Ibid., 31.

⑦ Ibid., 36-37.

⑧ Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemen (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 181

⑨ YANG Huilin, “How Does The ‘World Literature’ ‘Take Place?’” *Journal of Peking University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, no.1(2017):111-115.

own understanding is more straightforward: “predicative descriptions are sufficient.”^① What does this “predicative description” mean? It is, of course, the “taking place”: that “taking place” of the “intransitive”, where “nothing took place”. Only in this way can thought be legitimately expressed through “the most naked form”^②.

Badiou once explained further: “This is what I call an event.....The event arises when the logic of appearance is no longer capable of localizing the multiple-being it harbours within itself.”^③ This expression is also leads to the relational structure he describes as “truth, subject and event”: “Truth, subject, and event are all aspects of a single process: a truth comes into being through the subjects who proclaim it and, in doing so, constitute themselves as subjects in their fidelity to the event.”^④ From this it follows that “Our path toward truth coincides with the truth itself.”^⑤

St. Paul provides a typical example of this the New Testament: Paul can only be established as “an apostolic subject” through “proclaiming the event of Jesus’ resurrection.” Conversely, “the event of Jesus’ resurrection” lies fundamentally in its being “proclaimed” or “committed.” Thus the “event is a vanishing mediator” instead of “an in-temporal instant.” “The event is neither past nor future. It makes us present to the present.”^⑥ This may be the reason why Badiou adds a subtitle “The Basis of Universalism” to his book *St. Paul*.^⑦

Exploring the origins of universality via Christian narratives is also, of course, a topic of theologians. In his article in this issue, “Christian

^① Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, 32.

^② Alain Badiou, *Manifeste Pour La Philosophie*, trans. LAN Jiang (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2014), 66.

^③ Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 175.

^④ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxvi.

^⑤ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 64. Quoted from Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, xxvi.

^⑥ Alain Badiou, “The Event in Deleuze,” translated by Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia*, No. 2, 2007, p. 39.

^⑦ Alain Badiou, *St Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, translated by Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

Universalism,” theologian and philosopher Kevin Hart traces the origin back to “the Great Commission”: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.” (Mat. 28:19)^① In a question of great insight, Hart asks: “Does he commission his followers to evangelize the entire world, beyond what could possibly be known at the time?” Does “all nations” really mean “the universal”? Hart evidently does not take recourse in the “almighty” nature of Jesus to discuss “all nations” but excavates the medieval theology and politics of Europe to find how the Great Commission has been “quietly transformed into a universalization of Christianity.” In his view, “the Western desire for a pure, universal faith” might produce a double-edged result. On the one hand, “the extension of religious practices by rejoicing in the good news becomes a dissemination of beliefs that are held to be true,” and on the other it inevitably disseminates “worldly corruption in seeking to establish it.” He asks a prepositional question: “Should the Christian faith truly be universalized?”^②

The key point in Hart’s thought lies not just in whether ecclesiology at the very beginning bore any universal features, but in the question of whether “ecumenism” or “universalism” is “universality” itself. If “a global perspective” means that all religions (or traditions or cultures) can only be regarded as “regional”, then where is the basis for the “ecumenical” or the “universal”? In other words, does the “universalization” of the “Great Commission” refer to a philosophical universality, or to an ecclesiological universalism, or even to the Catholic ecumenical council?

Hart points out candidly that “In the Christian West, there has been little agreement as to what Christian belief is, ... Major doctrinal differences separate the Orthodox, Catholics, and the many Protestant churches, and there are conservative and liberal interpretations of doctrines. What should be universalized?” This is true within Christianity, without mentioning other traditions. Hart’s solution returns, it seems, to Karl Rahner’s “anonymous Christian,” where “If Christ and his Kingdom are one, the person of good faith, who is not a confessing Christian, is already one with Christ.” Hart even claims, “To identify this common commitment is not only to identify a moral

^① Kevin Hart, “Christian Universalism,” trans. Yen-yi LEE, in this current issue, 3-27.

^② Ibid., 10, 6, 11, 6, 11.

universalism but also to recognize that, from a Christian perspective, Christ is present in those religions because they are participating and affirming one or more profiles of the Kingdom by their own lights.”^①

In comparison with Badiou’s replacing the “universal” with “a philosophical commitment of a theory of universality,” what Hart offers is a “theological commitment.” This commitment also counters against the “universal imagination” of any singular subject, and so “commitment” and “the committed” have always been separate, but are at the same time both oppositional and complementary. It follows that the “path toward truth” is also where “truth” exists; an event only becomes an “event” when it is “proclaimed;” the notion that “Nothing took place” is a pure “taking place,” and the “most naked form” fulfills the meaning that is frequently to be questioned.

In various parallels to “the commitment” and “the committed,” the logic of “relation” emerges naturally and acts as an ideological tool running throughout. FANG Weigui attributes “relation” to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, and remarks wittily: “Buber firmly believes that ‘In the beginning was the relation,’... Buber’s philosophy is also a ‘relational philosophy’ or ‘relational ontology.’ He once clearly pointed out that ‘ontology is relation.’ What is ‘relation’ (Beziehung)? He answered, ‘In-between’ (Zwischen)... The ‘In-between’ helps Buber walk out of the subjectivity of a Western philosophical tradition.”^②

If one asks “what is relation?” and the answer is “in-between,” then what is “in-between”? FANG Weigui’s argument is similar to that of French scholar François Jullien in his article “L’écart et l’entre.” Jullien’s key insight is, while realizing the “issue of being... is the foundation of philosophy argumentation,”^③ to assert “from now on we do not think over ‘being’ (l’Être) but only ‘in-between’ (l’entre).”^④

^① Kevin Hart, “Christian Universalism,” in this current issue, 13, 4, 23

^② FANG Weigui, “Preface: I and Thou,” in *Si xiang yu fang fa: quan qiu hua shi dai zhong xi dui hua de ke neng* (Ideas and Methods), ed. FANG Weigui (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 2-3.

^③ Francois Jullien, “L’écart et l’entre,” in *Si xiang yu fang fa: quan qiu hua shi dai zhong xi dui hua de ke neng* (Ideas and Methods), ed. FANG Weigui (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 31.

^④ *Ibid.*, 36.

What does this make “in-between”? According to Badiou, “in-between” inspires a sense of “being constituted,” which relocates the “subject” and “opens up new possibilities for the universal.” Some scholars equate Jullien’s “in-between” to “embodying cultural diversities” or respecting the Other, etc. This is fine, but was certainly not Jullien’s original intention. For him, “in-between” as a “thinking tool”^① precisely targets “simple-minded universalism and lazy pluralism”. “Universalism” seems to be “simple” because it is too easily replaced by our own position, while “pluralism” turns out to be “lazy” because we settle too easily unresolved conflicts. Jullien’s “l’entre” finds no place here.

A closer reading of Jullien’s article suggests that when he describes how “l’écart” produces “l’entre”, he means that “l’écart” can “open, liberate and create” the perception of “l’entre” and make opposite polarities “active by facing each other,” from which “l’entre” becomes a place for all productive processes to “go through” and “take place”^②. The reason that Jullien insists on using the concept of “l’écart” to replace “différence” is because “l’écart” is productive, while “différence” is merely “descriptive,” and the descriptive concept “produces nothing but defines.”^③

Jullien further proposes that in Greek “dia” means “l’écart” so the true meaning of “dialogue” lies in “dia-logue”, and “dialectics” in fact stresses the “dia-lectic”. The stoics’ concept of “system” is “dia-stème,” which means the mutual support of different things.^④

If we were to say that Badiou’s “philosophical commitment” and Keven Hart’s “theological commitment” are illusionary efforts to resolve the “universal imagination” through the corresponding relationship between “commitment” and “the committed”, then Jullien’s “l’écart” and “l’entre” are in the same vein, but also represents a deeper effort to find a conceptual tool with more interpretive strength, drawing together ideas across the

^① Francois Jullien, “L’écart et l’entre,” in *Si xiang yu fang fa: quan qiu hua shi dai zhong xi dui hua de ke neng* (Ideas and Methods), ed. FANG Weigui (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 33, 36.

^② Ibid., 31.

^③ Ibid., 27.

^④ Ibid., 36-38.

discussion. When “l’entre” is defined as the place for “going through” and “taking place”, then Badiou’s “took place” can also be perceived indistinctly. When “l’écart” inspires the two “polarities” of “face-to-face”, German theologian Gerhard Ebeling’s “polarity”^① once again brings together “philosophical commitment” and “theological commitment”.

That which “polarity” describes might be the “relation” formed between “l’écart” and “l’entre”. Ebeling even sees “polarity structures” everywhere in biblical texts, and believes one cannot understand Christian faith without grasping this structure. In his article on Jullien, FANG Weigui traces “polarity” back to Hermann Keyserling’s “polarization” and offers a detailed analysis of Buber’s impact among these thinkers.^② It is important to trace back from Keyserling to Buber in order to understand Ebeling’s theology, however, Jullien’s “polarity,” might also have a “Chinese origin.”

According to Jullien’s own recall, he came to China in 1975 to learn Mandarin,^③ and was “shocked” by the relational structure shaped by “the antithetical polarities.”^④ In his constant emphasis on concepts such as “l’écart” and “l’entre”, a Chinese way of thinking has evidently left some traces, and been operating “in-between” these ideas. Jullien pointed, for example, to the latent potential of “such a language-mind” in the article mentioned above, and specifically noted that the Chinese concept of “*you* 有” is radically different from the “is” of Western languages.^⑤

It seems particularly regrettable that Jullien did not fully realize where the “most naked form of ideas” exists. And so although he is exceptionally alert to “simple-minded universalism and lazy pluralism,” and although his “l’entre” targets the “productivity” of the concept instead of the “descriptiveness,” he unwittingly slips from “taking place” to “what has taken place.” This is most obvious in his comparison and analysis of Chinese

^① Gerhard Ebeling, *Studium Des Theologie*, trans. LI Qiulin (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 1999), 23-28.

^② FANG Weigui, “Preface: I and Thou,” 2.

^③ Francois Jullien, *Penser d’un dehors (La Chine). Entretiens d’Extrême-Occident*, trans. ZHANG Fang (Zhengzhou: Elephant Press, 2005).

^④ YANG Huilin, “The Potentiality of ‘Polarity’ and ‘Mutuality,’” *Social Sciences in Chinese Higher Education Institutions*, vol.5(2017), forthcoming.

^⑤ Francois Jullien, “L’écart et l’entre,” 31, 63.

ideas. In his own words, “Classical Chinese would not say ‘je suis.’ Nor would it say ‘Dieu est.’” As a result, similar questions of Christian faith “do not need to be asked in Chinese.”^① If we compare “être” to “taking place,” this should be the key point of narratives of meaning, but by taking “je” or “Dieu” as his base point, Jullien may have departed from the logic he originally sought to discover.

If we use Badiou’s “Universal Foundation,” to interpret Jullien, we might conclude that Jullien’s effort to introduce a “Chinese origin” for “polarities” ought to have been able to grasp the structural “l’écart” of ideas “in-between” languages, and it is a pity that he missed the “predicative description” of “taking place” - but no matter whether “I” or “Dieu,” both exactly deconstruct his expectations of “l’entre”.

Measuring one idea with another is, however, always too rigid a method. Between philosophy and theology, China and the West, “l’écart” is destined to adopt different approaches and generate different understandings. It is in this “polarity” of relations between “the commitment” and “the committed” that we may truly find meaning, and where we may discuss “universality.” Therefore, “l’écart” not only helps us evade the paradox and cycle of imaginary self-righteousness, but also allows us to add a jewel to the necklace of such “generative” concepts as “proclamation”, “commitment,” “taking place,” and “polarity.”

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^① Francois Jullien, “A Response to Chung-ying Cheng,” ed. FANG Weigui, 63.

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