

Levinas and Badiou on Ethics, Aesthetics and the Anticipation of the Unanticipatable

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Abstract

In this paper, I will present what I take to be a standard view of morality, and I argue that this view amounts to a paradox: the moral event or moral concern, the source of morality, ultimately leads, through moral theory, to a denial of itself. I will show how Badiou and Levinas take a way out of this and in doing so deny the possibility of anticipating the moral. Furthermore, I claim that this anticipatory moment can be introduced back by means of the concept of “practical wisdom” as used in analytical virtue ethics. Finally, I argue that the Kantian notion of the sublime is structurally the same as the moral event in Badiou and Levinas, and that our view of the sublime can benefit from both Levinas’ view and the concept of “practical wisdom” as well.

Keywords: Levinas, Badiou, Ethics, Aesthetics, Anticipation

Introduction

As so many endeavours, morality can be seen as an anticipatory activity. A moral theory, understood as a more or less systematized and more or less explicit set of rules of how we should act, what kind of persons we should be, which states of affairs in the world are desirable and which are not, is a conceptual tool built for a certain purpose, and that purpose seems to be an anticipatory one. Let me explain this further.

Moral theories do not come falling from the sky. As every theoretical constructions, they originate out of a specific kind of event within our daily life-world. In this case, the event is the morally sensitive situation, i.e. a situation in which we are, in some sense morally “perplexed”. Typical examples are moral dilemmas, cases where moral intuitions conflict and in which we are baffled by the fact that there seems no other possibility than violating a moral intuition. In situations such as these we do not know immediately what to do, in which, in other words, a stimulus is not self-evidently followed by the appropriate response. The decisive feature of this kind of situation is therefore the temporal gap between stimulus and response. As Henri Bergson has argued in *Matière et Mémoire*, this temporal gap between stimulus and response is constitutive of temporal consciousness in general, and through this, of subjectivity itself. (Bergson 1934, for a discussion of Bergson’s view with regard to anticipation, see Froeyman 2010) Therefore, if we grant that subjectivity can be seen as a practice or a property rather than a thing, it

can be defined as the ability of being “perplexed” i.e. as the ability of being struck by morally sensitive situations.

But of course, being perplexed by a moral dilemma is not a pleasant situation. As a consequence, man develops systematized valuations of these situations, which reduce the gap between stimulus and response and which can assure us that we will not be as perplexed as we could be by future moral dilemmas. By doing this, they prepare us for future perplexing situations. They allow us to take a justified decision and therefore get out of future morally problematic situations more rapidly and more easily. For example, if we doubt between going to war to protect our family and kill our enemies who are after all human beings of their own, moral theories allow us to make a confident choice. They can state that loyalty towards one’s own family is more important than kindness towards strangers, in which case one should fight. Or one could say that war is a bad thing in itself, and that all means should be taken to avoid it, in which case one should not. Or one could say there are just wars and unjust ones and offer criteria to distinguish one from the other, in which case it depends what kind of war one is in. Or one can be a utilitarian and try to base one’s decision on the possible outcome of the war on human welfare in general. And so on. All these theories reduce a practical and contingent situation to an arrangement of entities of a general kind (family, strangers, wars, a calculable notion of welfare). They reduce a contingent and perplexing situation, which cannot be anticipated, to a certain arrangement of general kinds, which can.

Of course, the picture of morality I have sketched is not generally accepted. As the attentive reader will have noticed, it depends on the assumption that a moral sensitivity which predates moral rules is a genuine possibility. If one adheres to the view that moral rules are the result of non-moral reasons or motivations, as do social contract theories of morality, this view is invalid. However, I will leave this point of view aside here, and start from the premise that moral rules are secondary to morally sensitive situations and emotions, such as concern and sympathy. What I will do in this paper, is argue that this picture of morality is essentially paradoxical, and that this paradox centers around the notion of the possibility or impossibility of the anticipation of the unanticipatable. I will show that Alain Badiou take a radical way out of this paradox, while Emmanuel Levinas opts for a more nuanced option. Nevertheless, both philosophers discard the anticipatory aspect of moral theory.

Titeltje

What is striking about the picture of morality presented above, is that it seems to suggest that morality is a self-destroying practice. Its source and essence is the morally relevant contingent situation. Nevertheless, the aim of moral theories, anticipatory systematizations of these situations, is exactly to reduce their importance. Moral theories help us to get over moral situations more quickly and more easily. By reducing them to arrangements of entities of a general kind, they lose their status as special and troubling events and become less and less important. So it seems that moral theories have a kind of Oedipus complex. The more they are developed and the better they are applied, the more

they actually reduce the importance of the moral event, and the less “moral” they themselves become. For example, one can say that utilitarian theories originate from a concern with the well-being of others and the desire to maximize it wherever this is possible. Nevertheless, if a sufficiently sophisticated and practically applicable utilitarian moral calculus could be developed, this would have a negative influence on people’s concerns of other people’s well-being. If a lack of well-being is spotted in a certain person or a certain part of society, this would not be reason for moral concern any more, since one can be assured that this limited quantity of well-being is still the highest possible, or that the lack of well-being at one place is more than compensated by a surplus at a different place. In short, an adequate, utilitarian or otherwise, moral calculus would severely limit moral concern and moral sensibility, and therefore the roots of morality itself.

Emmanuel Levinas and Alain Badiou have offered us ways out of this Oedipal conception of morality. Basically, they take the same essential move, namely denying that moral theories are essentially of a moral nature. However, they do this in slightly different ways. I will argue that Levinas’ view is, in the negative sense less radical, but in the positive sense much more subtle than Badiou’s.

Badiou’s view on ethics, most concisely expressed in *l’éthique*, is radical in many ways. Badiou attacks the traditional view on ethics in the Western world, especially the way it is used in international politics. Moral(istic) discourse as it is present in international politics, for example in justifying wars, humanitarian or political interventions, economic regulations and so on, is based on the (Kantian) idea of the universality of ethical theories. The main target here are human rights, the prototype of a moralistic theory which proclaims itself to be universal and independent of cultural differences and concrete moral situations and events. As we have seen, this universal theorizing can lead to a lessening of moral concern and moral sensitivity. But this is not Badiou’s point. His main problem with this kind of moralistic is that it is based on the ideas of evil and victimhood. The standard moral situation is a situation in which harm is done to a victim by evil, as a result of which the victim has to be saved by a good “prince on a white horse”, which is inevitably the West, NATO or the Americans. The whole idea of a universal moral system such as human rights is built on this idea of victimhood and evil in order to justify the “good” of Western interventionism. Of course, this means that the good is defined in terms of the evil, and the virtuous person in terms of the victim, which, according to Badiou, is anti-emancipating.

The solution Badiou proposes is as radical as his diagnosis. Badiou opts for a radically contingent view on ethics and morality, stating that morality and human subjectivity *only* have a place in real contingent situations, not in theoretical generalizations. (p 38-39 in *nederlands??*) Badiou connects this with a strongly Heideggerian notion of truth. According to Badiou, the subject can be overwhelmed by “truth-processes”, events which change our world view and which lead us to action. What is important about this events is that they are uncompromisingly singular; they are limited to a specific and contingent

subject, place and time. (Badiou names politics, love, art and science). Because these events cannot be denied or refused, there is no place for choice, and therefore no place for morality as well. Morality only comes in afterwards, when we have the choice of whether or not we will remain faithful to the event. According to Badiou, good people stay faithful, while bad people betray their events. This happens by means of *naming* the event. If the event has a name, it can still have an effect afterwards, after it has gone.

If we compare Badiou's view with the paradoxical idea of morality described above, we can see why this is a radical move. Badiou flatly denies the anticipatory aspect of morality. The role of ethical and moral theories, if they play a role at all, is not to anticipate future events, but do justice to past ones. Of course, one could say that it is possible to anticipate the way in which one can do justice to future events, but this actually seems rather futile, since the event is essentially singular and therefore breaks through existing conceptual schemes and categorizations. Because of this, any categorization made beforehand will always be inadequate after the event. This also means that Badiou cannot offer us any more practical guidelines than the general maxim: "Be faithful to your event!".

Levinas

According to Levinas, on the other hand, the foundation and source of morality lies in the Other¹ (*L'Autre*), and the foundation ethics of lies in eschatology or, in other words, the study of transcendence, the movement towards the Other. (Introductive T&I) Therefore, the moral event per se is the appeal of the face² of the other (*autrui*) in which something of the order of the transcendent Other comes through. Levinas calls the ability to do so the *epiphany* of the face. (IT B5) The sphere of the Other is contrasted with the sphere of The Same, which consists of both our everyday life-world, which Levinas calls the "economy", and our theoretical activity, which he calls the "light". The essence of the Other is that it breaks through the sphere of The Same, through the comfortable, predictable and safe net of science and everyday life.

The image Levinas sketches of this event is similar to the one sketched above. The appeal of the face of the other is not a pleasant situation. (see IT, IB2, IIB1) It leads to worries en self-sacrifice, and it has a general discomfoting atmosphere (AE, II 4d) The realization that I am morally not in a position to demand the same things of the other which I demand of myself puts my world view into question (T&I, B1) This is a sharp contrast with non-moral daily life, which Levinas refers to as the "atheist I", and which is enough in itself, generally without a discomfoting element. It is, in other words, closed. The moral or

¹ Levinas makes a difference between the Other as a metaphysical principle (*l'autre*), exemplified in our relation to death, and the Other as a person (*autrui*). Since this distinction is hard to maintain in English, I will use the term "Other" with a capital "O" to refer to the first meaning, and "other" with a small "o" to the second.

² Again, there is a bit of a translation problem here. The French word Levinas uses, *visage*, expresses a kind of respectful and venerable attitude which the English word "face" does not. By lack of a proper alternative, however, I will stick to the word "face". The reader is therefore invited to interpret this term in the most venerable sense possible.

ethical relation on the other hand, is always an unfulfilled desire and never a closure. (B2). Furthermore, my relation with the other takes away my freedom (at least one kind of freedom), in the sense that it makes me dependent of the other. (IT C1, C3f)

However, Levinas' view on moral theories is somewhat different. Theorized and systematized are not a consequence of the other per se. The sphere of justice, in which moral and ethical theory have their use, only comes up in the sphere of the "Third". (see AE, I8) The third can be intuitively grasped as the "other other", the other which is not present, but which has a moral appeal nonetheless. Because the other other, and the other others, have a moral appeal as well, and because one cannot be susceptible to every single one of them, we have to formulate theories of justice. Now, as theories, they belong to the Same and do not have an ethical character. Nevertheless, they do originate from an ethical appeal, and therefore from a moral situation as well. So in Levinas' view, the moral character of the moral event changes somewhat. What is important in a moral event such as dilemma for example is not the fact that two moral intuitions are in conflict. In fact, since the Other is an unexpected guest who turns our comfy conceptual and intuitional household upside down, it is even essential to the moral experience as such. The development of ethical theories is not a consequence of the discomforting element of the moral situation is such, but of the conflict between the interests of the other and the other other. Of course, it is still perfectly possible for such theories to reduce our sensitivity to the moral event and to negate our moral concern. But through this point, the development of ethical theories is no longer a necessary consequence of the moral event itself, but one which originates from the problem of *comparing* moral events. In comparison to Badiou, Levinas' theory has the advantage that he can still see moral theories as moral phenomena, be it as consequences of moral events rather than as morally loaded entities in themselves. But this is still more than Badiou, who radically situates the moral at the contingent level.

Levinas is less radical than Badiou, in the sense that Levinas' theory is closer to common sense in the view that moral theories are still moral phenomena concerned with the well-being of others. Nevertheless, Levinas just as Badiou seems to do away with the anticipatory character of moral and ethical theorizing. Theories are a consequence of the appeal of the other and the other other, and not a preparation or an anticipation. One could say that theory is a way of preparing for the future appeals of other others, but this would be a misjudgment on behalf of the status of the other other. The other other is still the other, and as such still breaks through every kind of theory, and therefore every kind of anticipation, we have. So although Levinas' view makes it possible to understand how moral theories are moral without scrutinizing the moral event which leads to their development, it still does not clear the road for an anticipation of the moral. This seems to imply that it is impossible to anticipate the moral event, or in other words, to anticipate the unanticipatable. And this seems perfectly reasonable. Nevertheless, I argue that this is not the true, and that there is a way in which we can prepare ourselves for the unanticipatable moral event, by means of ethical theory.

Virtue ethics.

Besides the continental tradition to which Levinas and Badiou belong, there is a different tradition which also posits the irreducibility of the moral situation to theoretical schemes, namely virtue ethics. I will argue that some insights in virtue ethics allow us to re-introduce the anticipatory aspect of morality. Depending on one's point of view, one can see the result as a virtue ethical theory supplemented with the Levinasian notion of the appeal of the other, or a Levinasian ethics supplemented with the concept of "virtue".

In particular, there is one quite basic idea in virtue ethics which interests us in particular, and that concept is the so-called "uncodifiability thesis". This thesis states, more or less, that it is a priori impossible to formulate a general rule or a set of rules the application of which guarantees the morally right choice in every situation. Or, in other words, it is impossible to formulate a kind of decisive "manual" for good behaviour which everyone could follow and understand. The thesis is usually supposed to stem from Aristotle (Aristotle 2006, II9) and is, as already said, strongly associated with virtue ethics. Exactly how strong is a matter of debate, but I agree with John McDowell stronger statement that "*If the question "How should one live" could be given a direct answer in Universal terms, the concept of virtue would have only a secondary place in moral philosophy*" (McDowell 1979, 347).

It is only a small step from the uncodifiability thesis to the idea that moral events cannot be anticipated. And indeed, the idea that there is no general manual for moral behaviour fits remarkably with Levinas' and Badiou's view on the uniqueness and unprecedentness of the moral event. The first is implied by the second, although the second is not by the first. Nevertheless, it is clear that virtue ethics puts much more weight on the specific nature of the moral situation than mainstream analytical ethics. (see for example Nussbaum 1985) Because of this, and as a result of virtue ethics' general resistance against moral theorizing (verwijzingen???Pincoffs, McDowell, Anscombe, Hursthouse in Foot), it does indeed seem to be the case that in virtue ethics, generally speaking, the moral event is just as unanticipatable as it is in Levinas and Badiou. What is interesting for us now is that virtue ethics has a special term for the sensitivity to the uniqueness of the moral event – *phronesis* or *practical wisdom*, which Levinas and Badiou do not. This allows virtue ethics to make a difference between with more or less practical wisdom. And this allows anticipation to come back in through the back door. Although we can not anticipate moral events in the sense that we will know the answer to the question "what should I do?" in advance, we can anticipate moral events *as such*. This is to say, we can prepare ourselves for the possibility of a moral event, and we can try to be ready for the unexpected by cultivating and developing practical wisdom. Instead of eliminating the unexpectedness of the moral event by putting it into a general scheme of some sort, we can ready ourselves by cultivating properties which allow us to deal with the unexpected as such.

The key concept here is "practical wisdom". A general deontological moral rule or a moral calculus such a utilitarian specifies more or less exactly with to do, regardless of

details and specific circumstances. For example, if we state that the aim of moral action is to maximize well-being, it does not matter who's well-being we are talking about. If we state that there is a general moral law such as "do not lie", it doesn't matter who it is we are being honest to. Virtues, on the other hand, do the exact opposite. Because virtues by definition need practical wisdom in order to be applicable to a given moral situation, it is in the nature of virtuous people to be sensitive to contingent details. For example, according to virtue ethics, it is not enough to be honest in order to be a virtuous person. One should be honest in the right way, to the right person, at the right time. This requires practical wisdom, sensitivity to contingent detail. (ref Aristoteles??) This entails that virtue ethics leaves space for the contingency and the uniqueness of a moral event, and at the same time allows us a way in which to anticipate these moral events. This is because practical wisdom does not come falling from the sky, but can be developed, cultivated, learned and taught. Of course, this does not happen in an explicit way, by developing a sort of structured manual, but in an implicit way, by narratives and examples. (verwijzingen??) Because of this, we can prepare ourselves for the perplexity of moral situations without reducing these situations to their general characteristics and without therefore losing the moral concern and moral sensitiveness which lays at the base of the moral phenomenon as a whole. Contrary to traditional ethical theories, anticipation of a moral event does not entail a prefabricated solution of the event. On the contrary, the most virtuous persons are often those who can admit that they do not know what should be done. (see Hursthouse in Foot).

Esthetics & Kant

The way in which I have characterized morality has a remarkable counterpart in aesthetics, more specifically in the Kantian notion of the "sublime". Kant describes the feeling of the sublime as a feeling of abundance, something which is in a sense "too much" for our cognitive categories (paragraaf 25-29), combined with a feeling of harmony at the level of reason. The feeling of the sublime arises because of the interplay between the disharmony in the faculty of the understanding and the harmony at the level of reason. This bears a remarkable structural resemblance to Levinas' en Badiou's conceptions of the "moral event". Just as in Badiou's truth-processes and Levinas's appeal of the other, the essence of the sublime event is that it surpasses our cognitive concepts. This clears the road for an appeal to a faculty other than cognition or understanding. In the case of Levinas, this is an appeal to our ethical sensitivity, while in the case of Kant and Kantian aesthetics in general, there is an appeal to reason, which results in an aesthetic benevolent feeling.

Because there is a structural similarity between Kant's view of the sublime and Levinas' and Badiou's view on the moral, there is also a structural similarity of the issues involved in this view. Just as in Levinas and Badiou, the Kantian event of the sublime cannot be anticipated, since its essence is that it goes beyond the categories we have at our disposition. Nevertheless, it would be a good thing if we could do so. If we hold rigorously to the view that the sublime event cannot be anticipated, this leads to two

negative consequences. The first is that we cannot be made less or more sensitive with respect to the sublime, which entails that aesthetic education is completely useless with respect to the sublime. The second is that sublime events, or works of art which aim at the feeling of the sublime, cannot be compared with each other. We cannot possibly say that work A is better or worse than work B. So the Kantian view of the sublime seems to lead to the promotion of an uneducated and unsophisticated outlook and to a radical relativism of criteria. What I will argue now, is that we can use some of the insights developed above to solve these two problems.

With regard to the problem of criteria, we find ourselves an ally in Levinas' concept of the "third", or the other other, as I have called. In a moral event which takes place between two persons, there is always the implicit appeal of the others not present at the moment itself. Likewise, we can only engage with one work of art at a time, but we always carry a background of experiences with other works of art with us. And because of this, we have to develop schemes in which these artistic experiences can be compared and weighed, just as we need systems of justice in the context of morality. What Levinas offers us now, is the view that, although such schemes originate from a direct moral and non-cognitive experience, they are not moral themselves, which means that they will always be necessarily inadequate with respect to a next moral event. Likewise, aesthetic criteria used for critical comparison are not the essence of what aesthetics or artistic experience is, but merely a necessary consequence. As we have seen with Levinas, this kind of theory-building cannot be used for anticipatory purposes.

With regard to the first problem (that of education), we can turn to the concept of "virtue", as described above. As we have seen, this concept allows us to preserve the uniqueness of the moral event, through the introduction of practical wisdom. Analogously, one could introduce the concept of "aesthetic wisdom", a sensitivity to the uniqueness and the details of a single piece of art. Just as moral wisdom, a person with a lot of aesthetic wisdom would know when which trait of a work of art is important, for example when one can transcend the formal boundaries of a work and when one cannot. Just as moral wisdom, aesthetic wisdom can be developed and cultivated, of course more by examples, narratives and concrete experience than by the explicit teaching of rules and criteria.

Summary

In this paper, I have presented what I take to be a standard view of morality, and I have argued that this view amounts to a paradox: the moral event or moral concern, the source of morality, ultimately leads, through moral theory, to a denial of itself. I have shown that Badiou and Levinas take a way out of this, at the cost of the possibility of anticipating the moral. Furthermore, I have claimed that this anticipatory moment can be introduced back by means of the concept of "practical wisdom" as used in analytical virtue ethics. Finally, I have argued that the Kantian notion of the sublime is structurally the same as the moral event in Badiou and Levinas, and that our view of the sublime can benefit from both Levinas' view and the concept of "practical wisdom" as well.

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