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A LIFE OF ETHICS & PERFORMANCE



Edited by Dr. John Matthews & Dr. David Torevell

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A Life of Ethics and Performance
edited by John Matthews and David Torevell

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FOREWORD

Explicitly or implicitly, issues of ethics underpin every aspect of life, as public institutions and private individuals make decisions that will inform their own welfare and the lives of others. The ethical impulse and its determination has recently gained considerable intellectual attention, as many in the academy seek to understand the moral challenges and opportunities their own subject area presents. This series, which flows naturally from Liverpool Hope University's unique mission, is distinctive in its multi-disciplinary range and encompasses arts and humanities, social sciences, business and education. Each volume is informed by the latest research and poses important questions for academics, students and all those who wish to reflect more deeply on the values inherent within different disciplines. Bringing together international subject specialists, the series explores the complexities of ethics, its theoretical analysis and its practical applications and through the breadth of contributing subjects, demonstrates that understanding ethics is central to contemporary scholarship.

INTRODUCTION



John Matthews & David Torevell

In the narrative of one very famous ethical life, Christmas day is the *first day*. In the “ripping yarn” of another famed tale of life and ethics, it is almost the last: Christmas Day 1820, Henderson Island, South Pacific Ocean. A group of mariners who have hauled themselves and their battered boats over the rocky shores of this remote and uninhabited island fretfully hunt for food. Exhausted, dehydrated, starving and having found little to eat and no sustainable or reliable source of fresh water, the sailors reluctantly acknowledge that, having only recently found land they may have to take to their battered and barely navigable boats once more.

Five days earlier the malnourished crew of the whale ship *Essex* sailing out of Nantucket spied land at Henderson after drifting at sea for over a month. In under a week the exultation of the crew at spotting land had subsided to despondency as they realized that Henderson could not sustain human life. Stove by a whale on November 20th 1820 in the incident that would inspire Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, they had gathered what food and water they could from their broken and sinking vessel before setting off in three whaleboats in search of land and rescue. Having been rammed by the whale almost exactly at the equator and with the Galapagos Islands approximately 2000 miles to their east, the nearest inhabited islands where they might be saved were the Marquesas. With the strong west-flowing current and the mighty southeasterly trade winds their frail whaleboats could reach the Marquesas in a matter of days or perhaps weeks and thus long before their supplies ran out. However, Captain George Pollard, advised by his First Mate Owen Chase and Second Mate Matthew Joy took the fateful decision to sail a course for Chile and the East coast of South America, over 5000 miles away as the crow flies and almost double that distance along the course that the currents and winds would ensure they would take. The *Essex*’s Cabin Boy, Thomas Nickerson, who would, as one of the survivors of the ordeal, go on to write a memoir of the disastrous voyage, later described this decision as a “fatal error” and asked “how many warm hearts have ceased to beat in consequence of it?” (in Philbrick, 2007: 97). During the course of what would turn out to be an over-90-day voyage to South America nine men would die, all would suffer extreme dehydration and starvation, one would go insane and the surviving crew would be reduced to cannibalizing their shipmates. The reason Pollard, Chase and Joy elected to fatefully shun the nearby Marquesas? Their fear that cannibals inhabited the islands.

Without a satisfactory Christmas feast and having witnessed how the man-of-war hawks on Henderson island robbed the tropic birds of their food, and fearing that the same situation might play itself out aboard the

whaleboats as meagre resources dwindled further, three of the crew now on Henderson Island, Chappel, Wright and Weeks, decided to remain as their shipmates once again embarked for South America. Their judgement proved to be prophetic and, having consumed the emaciated remains of those who starved during the voyage, on February 6th 1821 the remaining crew of one of the whaleboats took the decision to draw lots. The proverbial short straw fell to a boy called Owen Coffin. After reassuring his shipmates that he “liked it [his lot] as well as any other” (in Philbrick, 2001: 176) and after he had imparted a message to Pollard (his cousin) to give to his mother should he survive to see Nantucket, Owen Coffin laid his head on the gunwale of the boat and was dispatched with a shot from the Captain’s pistol. Coffin was soon butchered and consumed and no doubt as his sparse remains failed to satiate his shipmates the remaining men in the boat must have eyed each other uneasily, wondering whose turn it might be next to lay their head on the gunwale.

The fateful story of the crew of the whale ship *Essex* and the profound ethical dilemma they faced on February 6th 1821 inspires Andy Park’s illustration that adorns the covers of this book. The familiar peaks and troughs of the sea-waves appear to stretch out forever beyond the edges of the book, much as they must have stretched out interminably for the shipwrecked crew of the *Essex*. The great isolating power of the sea over human creatures of the land is emphasized in the monotonous and limitless rippled lines. The irony that, upon the limitless sea that divides and separates civilizations from one another, the crew of the *Essex* should become what they feared most is perhaps the most poignant detail of their story, especially given that the Captain and his mates were simply misinformed.

Captain David Porter of a US Frigate also called *Essex* had sent reports from his voyage via the Marquesas in 1812 to say that “in times of famine . . . the men [of the Marquesas] butcher their wives, and children, and aged parents” (in Philbrick, 2007: 95) and Captain Georg von Langsdorff who had alighted there eight years previously had observed that the natives found human flesh so delicious that “those who have once eaten it can with difficulty abstain from it” (in Philbrick, 2007: 96). No doubt it was these and similar reports that informed Pollard, Chase and Joy in their decision to avoid the Marquesas. The irony of placing themselves in such dangers to avoid cannibals and, in so doing, to become cannibals is compounded by the fact that modern day anthropologists have cast doubt on Porter and von Langsdorff’s accounts. Viewing Andy Park’s drawing with this in mind the mournfulness of the oceans comes to the fore; the oft-drawn parallels between seawater and salty tears, crying rivers and oceans. A special as-

sociation between the sea and mourning is a common theme in theatre: it gives a plot to Synge's *Riders to the Sea* and the poet and radio-dramatist Dylan Thomas utilized this association to great effect in *Under Milkwood* where a chorus of dead seamen return to visit their old captain from the orphan-making and all-widowing sea. In the example of the death of Ophelia, the inscrutable and implacable waters inspire a moral discourse on suicide between Hamlet's mother, Ophelia's brother, a priest and a church sexton (from the Latin *sacristanus* meaning "custodian of sacred objects").

A further irony of the *Essex* tale is that in that great isolating sea where the men of the *Essex* found themselves so terribly alone they were in fact *surrounded*. Their much-missed Nantucket loved ones were not physically present but, in a sense, omnipresent during their voyage and especially during their moments of fraught decision-making. Nathaniel Philbrick's historical account of the *Essex* disaster recalls Pollard's distress when Owen Coffin drew the short straw. Pollard offered to let his head take the place of Coffin's on the gunwale – an offer Coffin refused – and no doubt felt deep distress as a consequence of participating in the execution and consumption of his younger cousin. One dimension of Pollard's distress was no doubt the prospect of having to deliver Coffin's message to his mother, Pollard's aunt, and inform her that the son she had entrusted into her nephew's care was now inside his belly. Thoughts of their loved ones invaded the minds of the *Essex* crew constantly and at no times more so than when taking this decision: "what would they think of me if they could see me now?"

This aspect of the *Essex* story is in Andy Park's illustration too: turn the book in your hand to read the back cover and the image of the sea is inverted. The peaks and troughs of the sea-waves become the headrests of so many auditorium seats all facing at *you*. This image casts its viewer in a leading role and thrusts him or her on stage and disconcertingly though the seats are all empty – just as the Nantucketeers' loved ones were all absent – the presence of a critical audience is powerfully summoned. Like the *Essex* crew who feared the Marquesas and their "inversion of the natural order" (Philbrick, 2007: 96) the inversion in Andy Park's cover design reiterates the ethical question facing Pollard and his crew: "what would they think of me if they could see me now?"

This form of questioning and its summons to an absent, impartial and idealized "spectator" or "observer" has been part of ethical philosophy since at least as early as the eighteenth century and the work of Adam Smith and David Hume. Many of the essays in this work concern themselves with the ethical dimensions of spectating and theatre and performance offers an especially fertile territory in which to unravel these enquiries. Furthermore,

the auditorium uncovered in the inversion of the sea-image infers a stage and *actors* on it. This theme too – how one should *act* – is a central question proposed and addressed in the chapters that follow and in this collected exploration of performance and ethics. As I noted at the outset, Christmas day is, in the biblical narrative, the *first day*. The biblical narrative is a story of *Life* and also of *a life*: from creation in the Garden of Eden to destruction in the revelations of St John and from birth in a manger to death on a cross. The biblical narrative has given much impetus to ethical thought and the reference made to it in this work reminds us that ethics is not really about isolated choices – such as that taken by Pollard – but about the context and continuing consequences of each choice taken. Ethics is a question about how to act but it is also, as Adrian Heathfield has observed, concerned with the “timeless . . . question; ‘how to live?’” (2001).

This book, *A Life of Ethics and Performance*, is not about how to live “the good life” but rather how standards of “goodness” are negotiated at different times of life and what any such negotiation entails. Its emphasis on the theatrical and performative reminds ethical philosophy that *being good* is in an important sense a matter of *acting good* and that acting good is a question of *performing* (or *not-performing*) certain roles and duties. The chapters of this book are loosely modelled on the “seven ages of man” motif and chart a selection of ethics from conception to birth, to childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, to old age and the experience of dying. The book also extends this motif and recalls the biblical narrative, which has been so central to ethical thinking, by beginning with a meditation on conception and concluding with some thoughts about afterlife.

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1

A PROLOGUE



Nicholas Ridout

The task: to write a prologue to a book comprising essays I have not read. The rule: to make no assumptions about what they contain. The response: to hazard a few guesses as to the circumstances under which such a book on ethics and performance might have been imagined. The hope: that I will neither coincide so absolutely with what is written in the pages that follow as to appear redundant by means of repetition, nor be so wide of the mark as to become redundant by means of irrelevance.

How to act? How to live? The distinction between these two questions might rest upon spectatorship. To act is to decide, to appear. It might be possible, though, to live without acting. To live, as it were, the unexamined life, not, apparently, worth living. The moment one imagines one's life to be examined, even if the examiner is none other than oneself, one's life becomes, in a manner of speaking, a kind of act. It offers itself up for the attention of others; it poses as exemplary. This quantum of self-regard turns over the living of the good life to the apparatus of the theatre, surrenders it to calculations of effect and affect. Thus it is that the life not worth living – the life that performance affirms against the pretensions of its double, the theatre – is the only life of which an ethical claim might be made. This seems to be true whether the ethical claim is articulated in either Kantian or Levinasian terms. For Kant, the surrender to calculation would be the disqualification, because for Kant, to act ethically is to act entirely disinterestedly, without any regard whatsoever for the attention of others and what they might think or judge. For Levinas, the very articulation of the claim might be unethical, in its non-recognition of the subject's infinite responsibility to the Other, as exemplified in the attention, in this account of the good life, that it pays to itself. One would be very tempted to abandon both Kant and Levinas, from the beginning, then, were it not for the greater temptation of considering the question of the life not worth living in relation to both ethics and performance. Before the beginning, then, it's back to Socrates.

Some one will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that to do as you say would be a disobedience to the God, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that daily to discourse about virtue, and of those other things about which you hear me examining myself and others, is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you are still less likely to believe me. Yet I say what is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. (Plato)

What might Plato intend by having Socrates speak of a life not worth living towards the end of a rhetorical performance which seems to be a matter of life and death? Only seems, though, as the trial is a foregone conclusion. A rhetorical performance, then, that seems, but is not, a matter of life and death. Socrates, we know from the beginning, will be condemned to death, since the only way for him to avoid this fate would entail his renouncing the philosophical (examined, theatrical) life. It would be, in other words, to accept a life not worth living. To return to the question of Plato's intention (as if that were a proper question), perhaps it is to help us understand that in this situation – a trial – a life is precisely what is under examination, and that the life in question and at stake – Socrates's – is a rhetorical performance, even if it begins, as is customary on such occasions (courtroom dramas, weddings, retirement parties), with a disavowal of performance capacity. The trial, then, the occasion for this performance, is also the condition under which life becomes worth living. And life itself takes the form of an *Apology* (for a life worth living). The life worth living is the life for which one can perform an *Apology* by means of living the life. Presumably this life is the exemplary life. Which suggests that it might not be entirely facetious to consider the heroic and exemplary figure of Socrates, embracing death in the name of the life worth living, as an early exponent of durational or endurance performance: a kind of Tehching Hsieh of the fifth century BC. This seems more interesting, at least, than to think of the performance artist as a latter-day tragic hero.

Both of these parallels might seem to participate in a kind of classicist exclusivism, in which ethics *tout court* is imagined as having been handed down from the antiquity of a single culture, as though the Greeks (whoever they were) had started everything. This tendency is perhaps especially acute in the field of theatre and performance studies, in which this kind of origin myth still holds surprising sway. The tendency tends to a lockdown once we start thinking about the relationship between theatre (or performance) and ethics, just as it does when we are trying to do the same thing with our politics. The myth of a simultaneous birth – of theatre, of politics as we understand it, and, pushing it, perhaps, but all the same, ethics too – not only radically limits our capacity to think the complexity of our cultural inheritance (as Settis (2006) argues so persuasively), it also invests too heavily in coincidence. An egregious example of this first error – the error of cultural limitation – is to be found in Ridout (2009), in which an exclusively Western or European conception of *both* theatre and ethics *and* the link between them seems to lie not too deep below the surface. Ridout would have done well to consider some of the postcolonial critiques of this tendency mobilized by Page duBois (2010).

DuBois (2010: 5) cites Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) coolly noting that “I am aware that an entity called ‘the European intellectual tradition’ stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history”. She goes on to identify the extent to which “even the most enlightened of classicists” – she refers here to Jean-Paul Vernant to whose work both duBois and Ridout clearly owe considerable debts – exhibits this tendency, albeit with some mitigation. DuBois writes of Vernant’s characterization of “Greek civilization”, that it demonstrates “the great virtue of dethroning the Greeks from their pedestal as the point of origin of human civilization *tout court*, but also the limitations of a Western perspective that sees the Greeks as autonomous and isolated from the Near East, Africa, and India, a perspective now eroded by our situation within globalization” (DuBois, 2010: 15). While duBois’ project is to open up the field of classical studies to an understanding of the historical reality of the ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual and cultural diversity of the “civilization” of which it speaks, Settis seeks to expand our sense of what “the classical” might mean, so that it encompasses both “classical” moments in cultural histories other than Europe’s and also the structures of return in which the idea of “the classical” is produced in the writing of history: “We have to look to the ‘classical’ not as our dead and unmerited inheritance, but as something profoundly remarkable and *alien* that needs to be recreated everyday and something that is a powerful incentive to understand ‘otherness’” (2010: 111)

My first guess, then (and about time, too), as to why we might be interested in exploring the relations between ethics and performance today, is this: Perhaps it is a way of simultaneously satisfying our desire for cultural continuity, while at the same time troubling that desire itself by naming it as exclusionary myth. The recognition of the myth as exclusionary is itself an ethical recognition, if ethics might be understood as bearing some substantive relation to the conceptions of “hybridity” (duBois) and “otherness” (Settis). That is to say, in a context where there is a pervasive understanding of ethics as grounded in one’s relations with others, it is our ethical reservations about our own cultural mythology that make the ethics-performance coincidence so appealing. The idea of undermining the association between ethics and performance appeals directly to our sense of what it might mean to act ethically.

To associate Socrates with Tehching Hsieh might then be a case of repetition with a difference. It might start out as the rhetorical subordination of a Taiwanese artist to the power of the exemplary “European” philosopher. It might reappear as a provocative anachronism in which the life of the Athenian is read as a kind of artistic practice, in which the Athenian’s

absent from writing and his appearance as merely a character in the writing of another makes him look like a rather surprising fountainhead for a culture which would like to imagine its world domination to have sprung from the nib of a pen rather than the point of a sword or the barrel of a gun (but not, perhaps, from one which might make performance its privileged mode of communication). It might also strike a third time, asking whether the association of the Taiwanese artist and the Athenian ascribes to the artist a genealogy which is not his own, and thus, in the process, reads his work under western eyes only, obscuring genealogies which might be more, well, Taiwanese. In this third strike a fourth already sounds: to insist upon not making this association is to promote the essentialist myth once again, this time in the form of the idea that one can only make sense of oneself in relation to a single cultural inheritance, defined in terms of nation or ethnicity. Why think of Tehching Hsieh as Taiwanese at all? Or Socrates as Greek, for that matter? Whatever happened to elective affinities?

Perhaps another reason (and let this be the second guess) for the current interest in the intersection between ethics and performance might have something to do with the direction taken by ethical thought in the latter part of the twentieth century. Or, to be more precise: the theoretical humanities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have welcomed a new kind of ethical thought whose language, if nothing else, seems to offer terms in which performance and performance scholarship might speak of itself. This is attributable partly to the influence of Levinas, of course, whose language of responsibility towards the Other, conceptualized in the encounter with the “Face”, has been enthusiastically taken up in recent scholarship in performance studies (in most cases, somewhat after its appearance in literary criticism, for we students of performance are almost always after the event). But a more general sense of the possibilities of an ethics that attends to relations between subjects rather than the relations of subjects to norms also seems to appeal. Thus acts of spectatorship start to be fraught with new kinds of ethical considerations: in place of what might perhaps be described as a moralizing or ideological critique of spectatorship – a censorious blend of Debord and Prynne (of *Histrion-Mastix* not *Her Weasels Wild Returning* fame) – there has emerged a discourse of witnessing, responsibility, intimacy and care in which both makers and spectators (among them writers and scholars) have learned to speak of what they do. This is not just a matter of Levinas, as relayed by Derrida, nor even of the influence of Derrida’s own ethics, but rather a consequence of two far more pervasive assumptions which shape everyday thinking about ethics: the sanctity of human life and the freedom of the individual. And above

all, the routine assumption that these two principles amount to one and the same thing.

There is also some degree of complementarity to be found in the ways both this kind of ethical thought and performance might conceive of themselves as experimental practice: operating not in accordance with the law, but in the mode of hypothesis, in the experience of the event and in a spirit of openness to the future, to that which will come. This is ethics for the liquid subject, the subject in constant becoming. It is an ethics deeply invested in human potentiality. This means it is never far from struggle between the interests of the individual and those of whatever group (community, multitude, class) the individual might become in relation with. So this is not just a matter of language; it is also a question of politics. And the question of politics might be posed as follows: What has happened to politics in all this ethics? A third guess, then, as to what might be at stake here, could involve wondering to what extent the ethics adopted by performance studies might or might not be a form of politics, and suggesting that an interest in thinking things ethically responds to certain contemporary difficulties with the political.

This third guess, then, might be made as a speculation that follows directly from the historical proposition of the second: what I referred to earlier as “the direction taken by ethical thought in the latter part of the twentieth century”. In this respect it is hard not to make a fairly explicit connection between the specific contribution of Levinas’s philosophy and the general conditions of receptivity to this contribution, on the one hand, and the disaster of the Nazi genocide on the other. Levinas’s philosophical project might be understood as an attempt to begin the work of philosophy all over again. If the historical catastrophe of the Nazi genocide is understood as a consequence of the way in which modern Europeans had come to think about the world – as one in which human life could be disposed of altogether in the interests of a supervening but deranged “rationality” – then the undoing of such a way of thinking becomes an urgent ethical task, for philosophers and their publics alike. In starting all over again, Levinas places both the temptation to murder and its prohibition at the centre of the encounter with the Other, and makes the coming into being of the Subject, by way of the encounter with the Other, a matter of assuming full responsibility for the life of the Other. The injunction not to kill, when to kill might be possible, even desirable, is, in this sense, the foundation of subjectivity. The face of the Other is “exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time the face is what forbids us to kill . . . The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (Levinas, 1985: 86)

This constitutes a central element of what Howard Caygill (2002: 2) refers to as Levinas' "fragile response to political horror" – whose fragility is far from being a feebleness or inadequacy – which clearly has its origins in a specific political situation, and, as a response to that situation, may readily be understood as political. However, some adaptations and developments of this ethical relation, including several within the field of performance studies, either imply or openly press a critique of political action. In its more radical forms such adaptations of Levinas would argue for the value of certain modes of passivity in relation to political situations, or, if not passivity, an active abstention from action – usually on the part of privileged Western/Northern actors – on the basis that an active intervention would constitute an act of authoritarian violence. Given the longstanding investment in "efficacy" on the part of many scholars and practitioners within performance studies, this presents something of a dilemma. A powerful impulse to do something (and after all, performance is the field of action), to bring about change, to make things better, to transform, finds itself counterposed by a similarly powerful impulse to abstain from action. Does your responsibility to the Other make you an activist or a witness? In many situations this is by no means a simple choice, and the range of possible decisions and their ramifications is what constitutes the ethical and political landscape for numerous ethnographers, NGO workers, and, yes, government agencies too.

For this is not simply an issue for those of us interested in performance. Indeed, it may well be the case that articulations and experiences of this ethical situation arising from the practice and study of performance derive from our immersion in a more general contemporary political paradigm, which a commonsense view of ethics as concern for the rights and well-being of others predominates. This is perhaps best encapsulated in the problem of "humanitarian intervention", where the paradigmatic concept of "human rights" is deployed, both sincerely and cynically, to motivate or justify various forms of intervention in defiance of international conventions on sovereignty. The familiar leftist critique of this state of affairs is exemplified by Slavoj Žižek (2005: 128):

So, to put it in the Leninist way: what the "human rights of Third World suffering victims" effectively means today, in the predominant discourse, is the right of Western powers themselves to intervene politically, economically, culturally and militarily in the Third World countries of their choice, in the name of defending human rights.

Less familiar than this kind of denunciation, however, is the way Žižek develops this, dialectically, to suggest that the commonsense ethics of concern for the other which underpins and legitimates such political intervention thus performs precisely the kind of violence against the subjectivity of the other that the foundation of such an ethics sought to make its central prohibition:

The moment human rights are thus depoliticized, the discourse dealing with them has to change: the pre-political opposition of Good and Evil must be mobilized anew. Today's "new reign of ethics" . . . thus relies on a violent gesture of depoliticization, depriving the victimized other of any political subjectivization. (Žižek, 2005: 128)

Or, to put it bluntly: an ethics whose origins lie in the command "Thou shalt not kill" has found a way of justifying murder. Which is an old story.

It is tempting to consider the "depoliticization" that appears to constitute this "new reign of ethics" in relation to the crisis of the communist project. Whether "communism" in its twentieth-century form came to an end with the fall of the pro-Soviet regimes in Europe in 1989, as is generally assumed, or in 1968, when the legitimacy of the communist parties and orthodox Marxism in Europe was challenged by radical alternative forces on the left, the absence of a single ideological project with universal ambitions (with the exception, it should be noted, of feminism) clearly made space for the emergence of a differentiated range of political movements, nearly all of which actively sought to distance themselves from the supposed 'violence' of a single transformative ideological project. In doing so many such movements adopted and developed ways of thinking and speaking about politics in which questions of difference emerged as central, alongside very careful calibration of subject positions and a renewed emphasis on personal authenticity. While Žižek may view, and rightly so, the mainstream appropriation of an ethics of alterity in the service of the economic interests of 'Western powers' as an attempt to do away with politics altogether in the name of ethics, it would be unfair to extend this critique to the continuum of post-1968 radical movements, for whom the emphasis on difference and plurality rather than universalism contributed to new ways of thinking and doing politics, rather than a retreat.

What is lost, and often deliberately repudiated, in this way of doing politics, is the idea that collective action can best be undertaken by means of a community that defines itself in terms of its self-identity. What is to be gained, then? The question of how one might think and proceed on this

basis lies at the heart of Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, in which he affirms that

there is . . . no form of communist opposition – or let us say rather “communitarian” opposition, in order to emphasise that the word should not be restricted in this context to strictly *political* references – that has not been or is not still profoundly subjugated to the goal of a *human* community, that is, to the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence *as community*. An absolute immanence of man to man – a humanism – and of community to community – a communism – obstinately subtends, whatever be their merits or strengths, all forms of oppositional communism, all leftist and ultraleftist models, and all models based on the workers' council. (Nancy, 1991)

For Nancy, then, political action both grounded in this kind of community – in the form, say, of the political party – and seeking the realization of a society modelled on such an idea of community, might be understood as deficient in terms of both efficacy and ethics. Efficacy, because such an idea of community is inadequate to the reality of human relationality and thus provides a faulty vehicle for action. Ethics, because the coercion involved in the formation of such a community, as either strategy or *telos*, constrains the potentiality of relations between and among us (and not, it has to be said, between “individuals”, because, for Nancy, the individual is itself a product of the very “community” he wishes to avoid). So, crucially, this is not simply the familiar argument that “community” is coercive and homogenizing, and that it restricts the “freedom of the individual” or some such ideological construction. It is, rather, an opening out, beyond both “individual” and “community”, towards a mode of relationality in which, somewhat ecstatically at times,

The presence of the other does not constitute a boundary that would limit the unleashing of “my” passions: on the contrary, only exposition to the other unleashes my passions. (Nancy, 1991: 32–3)

This, it seems to me, does not place the same limits upon action as have recently been developed within performance studies from a reading of Levinas. Instead it seeks to find affirmative value in the passionate exploration of relationality, where others appear as invitations rather than prohibitions. The practice of performance, then, might understand itself and its ethics in terms of its passionate movements, movements that might make you beside yourself, with something or someone.

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2

PERFORMING LIFE, LIVING PERFORMANCE



David Torevell

This chapter demonstrates how the meaning and significance of the paschal mystery in Christianity, and its relatedness, according to St John (10.10), to living life “abundantly”, is best understood within a *performative* rather than propositional framework. It will also outline how offering the salvific mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection to the world is experienced most poignantly within the Church’s liturgy, for it is in this arena that participants are invited into a dramatic ritual of *anamnesis*, at which they learn to inhabit in their own lives (and bodies) the life and death of the One to whom they pay homage. Above all else, then, Christian worship is concerned with participants’ absorption into an event, a happening which is repeated and made present again and again for all time; the consequence is that the ontological changes involved enable worshippers, through their involvement in liturgical performance, to experience a ‘fuller’ life not possible by their own efforts alone. As Eagleton comments, “religious faith is not in the first place a matter of subscribing to the proposition that a Supreme Being exists, which is where almost all atheism and agnosticism goes awry . . . it is for the most part performative rather than propositional” (2009: 111; Loughlin, 1996; Davies, 2002). This is not to say that any act of faith is independent of the propositional, but it is to suggest, along with Badiou, that genuine ontology only becomes possible by response to an *act*, and that faith is substantially loyalty to an event, an original happening, which disrupts the grain of the world, even if that occurrence is never easily defined or named. Liturgies remind and implicate participants in an event, therefore, and are acted out for all time until the *eschaton*, so that their eventfulness might be internalized and become the bedrock of a different form of life by those committed and obedient to its claims.¹

Encountering the Event

Let us stay with the French atheist contemporary philosopher Alain Badiou a little longer. He maintains that an authentic life is one lived in loyalty to an event which becomes a revelation to be esteemed and followed, since it turns the tide of history by its originality and counter-cultural insistence. A passionate allegiance to any such event is necessary for a new type of living and being to emerge, since ethical living is determined and maintained by such loyal commitment. Badiou is concerned, therefore, to outline an ontology which stems from a notion of an “event” which calls for a strong response of commitment which has the aura of a “fidelity”, rather than a passing or casual following. Events which generate such allegiance are “truth

events” and are most likely to emerge from the sites of love, art, science and politics. The kind of fidelity such truth events invite and demand is not tame, but disruptive and startling; it “is not a matter of knowledge. It is not the work of an expert: it is the work of a militant” (2007: 329). By this he means ethical living entails the radical following and exploration of the effects of a significant happening, involving the performance of a “militant” life in connection to such an event. “Militant”, he avows, “designates equally the feverish exploration of the effects of a new theorem . . . the activity of St. Paul, and that of the militants of an *Organisation Politique*” (2007: 329). St Paul’s activity comes about because he is part of the “militant” response to the event of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, the paschal mystery. This brings about a new way of seeing and acting in the world, or what Badiou sees as another mode of discernment. Consequently, the constitution of the subject is connected to an individual’s intense loyalty to a world-changing event, who perpetuates it through her witness of staggering allegiance. It is described thus: “The operator of the faithful connection designates *another mode of discernment* : one which, outside knowledge but within the effect of an interventional nomination, explore connections to the supernumerary of the event” (2007: 329). Such loyalty demands a distinct type of activity and beckons one to “perform the minimal gesture of fidelity . . . The actual meaning of this gesture – naturally depends on the name of the event . . . on the operator of faithful connection” (2007: 329–330).

Although Badiou’s theory situates itself within mathematical discourse, a strong performative element can be discerned in his writings. His work on ethics, for example, borrows from Lacan’s idea that “all access to the real is in the order of an encounter” (quoted in Burns, 2009: 29) and in *Being and Event* he writes that any minimal gesture of fidelity as referred to above, “is tied to the *encounter* between a multiple of the situation and a vector of the operator of fidelity” (Badiou, 2007: 330). Badiou’s atheistic position becomes evident in his belief about the relationship of the event to its source; there is no “One” from which matter emerges, only the void. What there is instead, is an endless series of multiples, which all emerge from nothingness. The only foundation that exists is void or absolute nothingness. Nevertheless, his view of fidelity signals a notion of “infinity” when the effect of and loyalty to, an event is generated over time and when eventually culture assimilates it into its folds and it becomes normalized. He writes “the generic procedure of fidelity progresses to infinity” and “entails a reworking of the situation; one that, while conserving all of the old situation’s multiples, presents other multiples” (2007: 342). This in turn “*forces the situation to accommodate it* : to extend itself to the point