The recent spate of translations of the work of Alain Badiou only serve to confirm his rising prominence in the English-speaking world. Against the background of an academic climate grounded in Heideggerian phenomenology and the “little style” of the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of mathematics, Badiou claims that mathematics is the domain of ontology. Originally appearing in French in 1998, *Briefings on Existence* follows the ontological thread of Badiou’s landmark *Being and Event* (also finally published in English in 2006): against the proponents of hermeneutics or the linguistic turn in philosophy, Badiou holds that mathematics—specifically the Zermelo-Frankael system of set theory with the axiom of choice— is the ‘royal road’ to ontology. In *Being and Event*, Badiou utilizes the axioms of set theory to demonstrate the ontology of pure multiples, subtracted from the dialectic of the One and the Many. The prohibition against ascribing any predicates to the pure multiple means that their representation (or in set theory terms, inclusion) in the state of any situation remains incomplete, and the gap between the presentation (or belonging) of multiples in a situation and their representation leaves open the possibility of novelty which breaks with the situation. This is what Badiou calls the event. The event is transitory, and cannot be decided within a situation. It can only be decided by a subject. After wagering that an event has taken place, the subject proceeds in fidelity to its truth, to ‘make sense’ of it. Thus Badiou’s position, which he calls the ‘Platonism of the multiple,’ thinks ontology under the categories of decision, truth and the subject, and the event under the category of fidelity (pp. 60-61).
In *Briefings on Existence*, Badiou sets out to defend this claim that set theory is equivalent to ontology. He sets out to defend this claim in a threefold manner: first, to critique the linguistic turn; second, to define his ‘Platonism of the multiple;’ and third, to respond to the criticisms of Jean-Toussaint Desanti, who called for Badiou to clarify his approach *vis-à-vis* category theory. Additionally, in responding to Desanti, Badiou introduces the concept of ‘appearing’ to supplement his previous work on ontology, a move which anticipates the work in the second volume of *Being and Event*, published this year as *Logiques des mondes*.

The first task for Badiou is to break with the linguistic turn in philosophy, be it Anglo-Saxon or Heideggerian. In the prologue, entitled “God is Dead” (which is, incidentally, the title of the entire book in its German translation: *Gott ist tot*), Badiou reiterates his differences with Heideggerian phenomenology. Against the poetic ontology of Heidegger, Badiou proposes the equation of ontology with set theory. To break with this poetic ontology,¹ Badiou dismisses the theme of awaiting the poetic gods by arguing for an engagement of thought with “contemporary atheism.” While it is often assumed that atheism lapses into the nihilism of finitude (like Nietzsche’s ‘last man’), Badiou attempts to break this link by noting that it is Heideggerian phenomenology, while relentlessly pursuing the theme of the being of finitude, which ends up awaiting the divine return of the poetic gods to escape the danger of nihilism.

For Badiou, and for us then, this should be an indication that atheism opens up a different possibility outside of the theme of finitude and the anticipation of the poetic gods, the possibility for an infinite fidelity to the event; that “contemporary atheism,” for us, is the clearest path to think the here and now, not ahistorically, but in the full gravity which comes with acting and thinking, with no guarantees other than the trace of truth. This atheism does not lapse into the

¹ It should be noted that Badiou’s critique of Heidegger is much more sustained elsewhere, especially *Being and Event*. 
order of quietism and consumerism, the ‘service of goods’ as Jacques Lacan used to say, but it
opens the possibility of “restrained” and militant action. For Badiou, the way to this atheism is
through the “mathematics of Being,” or, the thinking of every situation as pure multiple (p. 30).
The equation of set theory with ontology allows philosophy to avoid both the One-all of God and
Nietzschean vitalism of Deleuze, while providing the groundwork for a theory of a militant
subject.

Furthermore, to hold that mathematics is ontology, one must also break with the Anglo-
Saxon version of the linguistic turn. Badiou makes the innovative claim that the linguistic turn is
only possible through the equation of logic with mathematics, which makes it possible to reduce
the latter to a specialized field. The result is that mathematics is relegated to the “technical power
of the rule (p. 109).” Badiou cites the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*: “Mathematics is a logical
method (6.2),” and “The mathematical proposition expresses no thought (6.21).” Against this
disjunction of mathematics and thought, or the formalist interpretation of mathematics, which
carries and Aristotelian or Leibnizian provenance, Badiou holds to a ‘Platonism of the multiple,’
which both separates logic and mathematics and allows Badiou to respond to the criticisms of
Desanti.

To one trained in Anglo-Saxon philosophy, Platonism might be understood as the
following description, quoted by Badiou: “Platonists will be those who consider mathematics to
be the discovery of truths about structures that exist independently of the activity or thought of
mathematics (p. 89).” However, Badiou finds that the distinctions made in such a definition stick
to recent epistemological problems and thus external to a Platonic stance. Instead, Badiou
proposes that
Platonism is the recognition of mathematics as a thought that is intransitive to sensible and linguistic experience, and dependent on a decision that makes space for the undecidable, while assuming that everything consistent exists (p. 91).

The implications of this shift are not immediately obvious. Therefore, how can we summarize this ‘Platonism of the multiple?’ First, mathematics is a thinking of ontology. The orientation is not epistemological, nor does it concern a knowing subject. Instead, mathematics proceeds axiomatically; thus thought must choose. A Platonist decides in favor of the axiom of choice. Finally, thought is bound to truth, yet this truth is bound to the axiomatic decisions set forth. Truth breaks with all opinion and experience, and is not questioned regarding its existence independent of thought. Instead of the opposition of subject/object and interiority/exteriority, virtual/actual, a Platonism of the multiple is concerned with the activation of being embodied in thought, an activation of a subject in fidelity to an event.

While this looks foreign to Anglo-Saxon ‘analytic’ philosophy, in French philosophy, authors such as Jean-Toussaint Desanti have attempted to engage Badiou on his own terms. In “Quelques Remarques à propos de l’ontologie intrinsèque d’Alain Badiou,” first published in Les Temps modernes in 1990, Desanti challenged Badiou to clarify both internal questions regarding his ontology and the relation of the latter to the advances of category (or topos) theory. To answer Desanti’s criticisms, Badiou is required to delimit the gap between logic and mathematics. In this preliminary reworking of the co-ordinates of Being and Event, set theory retains its ontological priority: it is still the domain of being qua being, inasmuch as it “decides axiomatically on the existence of an empty set and at least on one infinite set (p. 112).” Category theory is the domain of logic; it explains the relations between terms in possible universes,

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2 For an English translation, see Jean-Toussaint Desanti, “Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou,” in Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy, ed. Peter Hallward, New York, Continuum, 2004, pp. 59-66. Here I would also like to thank Tzuchien Tho for his commentary on an earlier draft of this review.
inasmuch as it analyses the emergence of objects according to their relations (point-objects and arrows; on these points the introduction by Norman Madarasz was helpful to this non-expert in mathematics). While the possible is not the domain of ontology, categorical presentation is the intrinsic description of a possible universe (p. 113). Only the axiomatic decision of the Platonism of the multiple can decide on being: thus set theory remains the domain of ontology while category theory becomes the domain of logical description (p. 119).

Yet this division does not ‘denigrate’ category theory. Instead, Badiou quietly concedes to Desanti’s critique: the ontology of Being and Event remains incomplete, insofar as it lacks a robust account of how beings can be localized within a situation. Badiou adapts category theory to give such an account; he now calls this localization of beings within a situation “appearing” (and even “being-there” no less! See pp. 162ff). Category theory is the domain of the logic of appearing on two conditions: first, that logic emerges within mathematics itself and is not linguistic, and second, that logic is not “bolted to grammatical and linguistic analyses,” but deals with relations within possible situations (p. 165). Thus there is not a logic of worlds, but logics of worlds. The latter formulation, in fact, is the title of the second volume of Being and Event: Logiques des mondes. Yet the limit of Briefings on Existence is that it is only a transitional ontology between these two volumes.

As it stands in Briefings on Existence, I am not entirely convinced that category theory is the domain of the logic of appearing. It should be noted that Badiou’s anti-linguistic stipulations extend beyond Anglo-Saxon philosophy to his Lacanian interlocutors. Badiou’s work often offers the temptation (to which, admittedly, I sometimes succumb) to translate his terms into Lacanese, such as rendering what the former calls the ‘state of the situation’ into what Lacan calls the Symbolic. Here, Badiou reverses this process: after outlining the tenets of the logics of
possible situations, he shows how the psychoanalytic subject can be explained in his system (pp. 150-152). Yet Badiou does not explain how the relations constituting the subject can find themselves articulated—there are hints but the exposition is brief. While it is true that Lacan was standoffish regarding ontological commitments, he elaborated many complex topologies of the symbolic order. There, it is not enough to speak just of a subject, but also the relations between the subject and desire, language, et cetera. Most crucially, for Lacan, the psychoanalytic subject is constituted by its capacity for language, an ability to speak not just a language, but the fact that he/she expresses desire by the very fact of speaking (or writing). How then can we understand this nexus of language and logic according to Badiou? Despite the appearance of solidarity, the tenets of this link between logic and ontology—which subvert Lacan’s approach—remain underdeveloped. Badiou admits as much: Briefings on Existence “is really but the introduction to the real difficulty…in which the logical match up between the Subject and truths ends up finding its logic, as well as its ethics (p. 152).” Thus there remains much to be thought between these preliminary sketches and Logiques des mondes.