



The True Life

ALAIN BADIOU

Translated by Susan Spitzer

"Alain Badiou's plea in this stimulating little book contains the 'serious coquetry' one expects from a philosopher committed to the corruption of youth: young people, whether young in body or mind, reorganize your youth, and in so doing reanimate thinking in radically new directions!"

Jason Barker, Kyung Hee University

"I'm 79 years old. So why on earth should I concern myself with speaking about youth?" This is the question with which renowned French philosopher Alain Badiou begins his passionate plea to the young.

Today, young people, at least in the West, are on the brink of a new world. With the decline of old traditions, they now face more choices than ever before. Yet powerful forces are pushing them in dangerous directions, into the vortex of consumerism or into reactive forms of traditionalism. This is a time when young people must be particularly attentive to the signs of the new and have the courage to venture forth and find out what they're capable of, without being constrained by the old prejudices and hierarchical ideas of the past. And if the aim of philosophy is to corrupt youth, as Socrates was accused of doing, this can mean only one thing: to help young people see that they don't have to go down the paths already mapped out for them, that they are not just condemned to obey social customs, that they can create something new and propose a different direction as regards the true life.

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The True Life

Note

This book is based on lectures, all of which were intended mainly for young people and were delivered in a variety of places, including high schools, but also other institutions, both in France and abroad (in Belgium and Greece in particular), as well as in my seminar. One of them (the second chapter of this book) has already been published as an Afterword to *Anthropologie de la guerre*, a collection of Freud's essays on war (Fayard, 2010). What I am offering here is the latest version of these lectures, with the idea of starting a discussion between contemporary youth and philosophy about what the true life is – in general, first of all, and then depending on whether one is a girl or a boy.

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To be young, today: sense and nonsense

Let's start with the realities: I'm 79 years old. So why on earth should I concern myself with speaking about youth? And why should I, in addition, care about speaking about it to young people themselves? Aren't they the ones who should speak about their own experience as young people? Am I here to give lessons of wisdom, like an old man who knows life's dangers and teaches the young to be careful, keep quiet, and just leave the world the way it is?

You'll perhaps see, or I hope you will, that it's quite the opposite, that I'm speaking to young people about what life has to offer, about why it is absolutely necessary to change the world, about why, precisely for that reason, risks must be taken.

I'm going to begin pretty far back, however, with a famous episode concerning philosophy. Socrates, the father of all philosophers, was condemned to death on charges of "corrupting youth." The very first reception of philosophy on record was in the form of a very serious accusation: the philosopher corrupts youth. So, if I were to adopt that view, I would simply say: my aim is to corrupt youth.

But what did "corrupt" mean, including in the minds of the judges who condemned Socrates to death on charges of corrupting youth? It couldn't be "corruption" in a sense related to money. It wasn't a "scandal" in the sense of the ones you read about in the press today, where people have gotten rich by exploiting their positions in one institution of the State or another. That was certainly not what Socrates' judges accused him of. On the contrary, let's not forget that one of the criticisms Socrates leveled against his rivals, the so-called sophists, was precisely that they got paid. He, on the other hand, corrupted youth for free, so to speak, with his revolutionary lessons, while the sophists were paid handsomely for the lessons they gave, which were lessons of opportunism. "Corrupting youth," as regards

Socrates, was therefore certainly not a matter of money.

Nor was it a matter of moral corruption, let alone one of those sorts of sexual scandals that you also read about in the press. On the contrary, Socrates, or Plato relating – or making up? – Socrates' point of view, had a particularly sublime conception of love, a conception that didn't separate love from sex but gradually detached it from it for the sake of a sort of subjective ascension. To be sure, this ascension could, and even should, begin through contact with beautiful bodies. But such contact couldn't be reduced to mere sexual excitation, because it was the material basis for accessing what Socrates called the idea of the Beautiful. And so love was ultimately the birth of a new thinking, which arose not from sex alone but from what could be called sexual love-subjected-to-thought. And this love-thought was a part of intellectual and spiritual self-construction.

Ultimately, the corruption of youth by a philosopher is a question neither of money nor of pleasure. Might it then be a question of corruption through power? Sex, money, and power are a triad of sorts, the triad of corruption. To say that Socrates corrupted youth would be to say

that he took advantage of his seductive speech to gain power. The philosopher supposedly used young people for the purpose of gaining power or authority. The young people existed to serve his ambition. So there was supposedly corruption of youth in the sense that their naïveté was integrated into what one could call, with Nietzsche, the will to power.

But once again I would say: “*Au contraire!*” Socrates, as seen by Plato, explicitly denounces the corrupting nature of power. It is power that corrupts, not the philosopher. In Plato’s work there is a scathing critique of tyranny, of the desire for power, that cannot be improved upon and is in a way the last word on the subject. There is even the opposite conviction: what the philosopher can contribute to politics is not at all the will to power, but disinterestedness.

So you see that we end up with a conception of philosophy completely foreign to ambition and competition for power.

In this connection, I’d like to read you a passage from Plato’s *Republic* in the rather unusual translation I did of it. You can find it, if you so desire, in paperback. On the cover there’s the following information: “Alain Badiou” (the author’s

name) and, below it, “*Plato’s Republic*” (the title of the book). So it’s not clear who wrote the book: Plato? Badiou? Or perhaps Socrates, who is said never to have written anything? It’s an arrogant title, I admit. But the result is perhaps a livelier book, one that’s more accessible for a young person today than a strict translation of Plato’s text might be.

What I’m going to read you takes place when Plato asks himself the following question: What exactly is the relationship between power and philosophy, between political power and philosophy? We can thus appreciate the importance he attaches to disinterestedness in politics.

Socrates is speaking to two interlocutors, two young people, in fact, and that’s why we’re not getting off topic here. In Plato’s original version, they are two boys, Glaucon and Adeimantus. In my obviously more modern version, there’s a boy, Glaucon, and a girl, Amantha. Including girls on the same basis as boys is the least you can do today if you’re speaking about young people, or to them. Here is the dialogue:

Socrates: If we can come up with a much better life for those whose turn has come to be responsible for

a certain share of power than the one offered them by that power, then we'll have the potential for a true political community, because then the only people who will come to power are the ones for whom wealth isn't measured in money but rather in what's required for happiness: the true life, full of sublime thoughts. If, however, people hungry for personal advantage, people who are sure that power always favors the existence and expansion of private property, rush into public affairs, then no true political community will be possible. People like that always fight ferociously with one another for power, and a war of that sort, combining private passions and public power, destroys not only the rivals for the top positions but the country as a whole.

Glaucón: What a hideous spectacle!

Socrates: But tell me, do you know of any life that can inspire contempt for power and the State?

Amantha: Of course! The life of the true philosopher, the life of Socrates!

Socrates [*delighted*]: Let's not get carried away. Let's assume that people who are in love with power should never be in power, because if they were, we'd have nothing but war between the rivals for power. That's why it's necessary for that enormous

mass of people whom I unhesitatingly call philosophers to devote themselves, each in turn, to guarding the political community: selfless people, who are instinctively aware of what public service can be but who know that there are many other rewards besides the ones you can get from frequenting government offices, and that there's a life that's a lot better than the life of political leaders.

Amantha [*in a murmur*]: The true life.

Socrates: The true life. Which is never absent. Or never entirely.¹

So there you have it. Philosophy's subject matter is the true life. What is a true life? That is the philosopher's sole question. And so, if there is corruption of youth, it's not for the sake of money, pleasure, or power but to show the young that there is something better than all those things: the true life. Something worthwhile, something worth living for, that far outstrips money, pleasure, and power.

The "true life," let's not forget, is a phrase of Rimbaud's. Now *there* was a true poet of youth: Rimbaud. Someone who made poetry out of his

1 Alain Badiou, *Plato's Republic*, tr. Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 321.

whole experience of life as it was beginning. It was he who, in a moment of despair, wrote heart-breakingly: "The true life is absent."

What philosophy teaches us, or at any rate tries to teach us, is that, although the true life isn't always present, it is never completely absent either. That the true life is present to some extent is what the philosopher tries to show. And he corrupts the young in that he attempts to show them that there is a false life, a devastated life, which is a life conceived of and lived as a fierce struggle for power and money. A life reduced in every possible way to the pure and simple gratification of immediate impulses.

Basically, says Socrates – and I'm just following him for now – to attain the true life we have to struggle against prejudices, preconceived ideas, blind obedience, arbitrary customs, and unrestricted competition. Essentially, to corrupt youth means only one thing: to try to ensure that young people don't go down the paths already mapped out, that they are not just condemned to obey social customs, that they can create something new, propose a different direction as regards the true life.

When all is said and done, I think the starting