Why View All Time from the Perspective of Time's End?

A Bergsonian attack on Bataillean transience

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ABSTRACT. This work sets out to attack Bataille's assumption that life is essentially transient. Using Bergson's anti-teleological thought experiments, I hope to reveal the ludicrous paradoxes involved in seeing the essence of time in time's end. With Bergson, I demand that we consider time to be the whole of its flow. I insist that Bataille overestimates the importance that death has for living beings, and I affirm instead the intensity of lived time and ongoing experiences. KEY WORDS • duration • existentialism • postmodernism • transience

Introduction

In contemporary western culture, time is regarded as a transient phenomenon. Much of this sense of transience derives from western culture's past. The Christian view that worldly life is fallen and fleeting has been largely retained, as has the romantic fetish for this perspective. The ideological use of the concept of transience as a device to humble people through giving them a sense of worthlessness has never been discontinued. Transience is still used as a pacifying myth, with death reconciling all people by levelling all power relations. The cruder political use of a sense of transience (the threat of death) is perhaps always with us. This legacy has been built upon. Today there is the feeling that life is transient because lives seem to be programmed from birth to death, cutting out the unruly business of raw time. Ours is a performance-based culture with an accent on end results and therefore the ends of time, rather than on the

VOL. 12 No. 2/3 (2003), pp. 209–224 0961-463X[200309]12:2/3;209–224; 035491
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untamed drift of crude duration. And we have a certain pornography of transience, manifest in every violent Hollywood movie, and equally manifest in the visceral death-fixated work of contemporary conceptual artists.

The feeling that time is transient is physically debilitating and demoralizing. It is also illogical. Time may well be transient, but it is all there is. Time is the only stake. To damn time because it is finite is like damning a pleasurable scene because it is only what it is.

'Pro-transience', as I will term the philosophy which celebrates transience, sees all time from the end of time. This form of perspective ignores some truths in favour of other truths (for example, it ignores growth and concentrates on decay). The truth pro-transience thought favours above all others is the truth of death. At death, life no longer holds any stakes; nevertheless, pro-transience thinkers feel that the truth of death must inform the whole of life's conduct.

Death inevitably lies at the end of the life spans of living beings, but this does not mean that living beings are affected intimately by their future deaths *within their ongoing time*. In other words, death is real enough, and its effects final, but death affects life intimately only when life *reaches* death, when life spans *reach* termination. Since time, in my view, is experienced intimately by living beings as rich duration on a moment-to-moment basis, this duration cannot be intimately affected by the mere anticipation of the future event of death, an event which is in fact synonymous with the end of all experienced duration. Nor, in truth, does death intimately affect the way in which time is lived psychologically (even within a morbid consciousness) since lived experiences are irreducible *as lived*, and involve many psychological states other than a preoccupation with death.

The view that death dominates life is absurd as well as nihilistic given that duration must be lived through before death. This assumption that death dominates the movement of lived time can be shown to conceal a certain paradox, for in assuming that death dominates the flow of time one is trying to describe what time is from the point of view of what happens at the moment of time's annihilation. One is, in effect, surveying all time from time's end, and so analysing life's movement from the illusory vantage point of its cessation in death. I will concentrate upon this specific paradox.

Life proceeds at its own pace, and therefore does not slip towards death in a transient manner. Time's duration makes up the very substance of life, and duration's pains or pleasures cannot be avoided or speeded up towards their ends except artificially (in this sense pro-transience, which anticipates the end of all experience in death, is existentially an escapist view of time). People want to avoid spending long periods in slavery or in pain, and wish instead to enjoy extended periods of free time or pleasure. Pro-transience thought, however, evades this sense of time as a material stake. Pro-transience thought therefore maintains a politically impotent view of time.

I shall assume that time cannot be separated from space, and that time is essentially a view of what happens to space. If we see time as encompassing all of space, it is difficult to see time as rushing headlong towards an end, since we must imagine time as having to move through the tangled matter of space to get to any end: a tortuous procedure. Time does not cut through space instantly like a magic knife towards an end, so why should we view all time from its end?

Moreover, time is 'everything that happens', involving the irreducible durations of pleasure or pain, slavery or sovereignty. Again, with such a rich view of time, it is hard to see how time can be authentically described as slipping easily towards its extinction.

Since time is made up of everything that occurs, the philosophical act of analysing time from the point of view of the annihilation of all occurrence is narrow to the most extreme degree. How can this *backward* glance, this posthumous look at time from the illusory vantage point of nothingness, not be an emaciated view, a 'little' view? How can such a narrow, such a *restricted* view of time not be a *slave* perspective in the Nietzschean sense?

Pro-Transience, Accumulation and Projects

Transience is ironically the motor of accumulation. Projects can only take place through systems that defer time's lived spontaneity and flow. Grandiose projects can only take place on the ruins of time. Christian and romantic pessimism depresses and humbles the worker, leading him or her to become detached from the experience of rich duration and to invest the resulting alienated energies in any project of salvation whatsoever. An over-stimulated sense of individual temporal finitude induces the worker to invest his or her energies in absurd long-term projects, the completion of which may transcend his or her own lifetime. A pronounced emphasis on the consciousness that everyone's life is finite without exception, and in essentially the same way, fosters the belief that no one is especially favoured by that economy which is itself built out of a culture of transience, and so any social and political tensions generated by jealousy are neutralized. At the same time, everyone is assigned their proper place within any given hierarchy under the sign of universal transience. The workers' disinvestment of energies from rich duration and re-investment of these energies in industrial projects is furthered by the time-consuming rigours of the industrial work process itself. In a society increasingly dominated by advanced technology and science, time appears to fly because it seems to be programmed to the bitter end. The violent aesthetics of postmodern culture provide the final touch in bowing the head of the worker, making him or her derive solace from the vain promises of the future.

Although pro-transience is the motor of accumulation and project, contempo-

rary postmodernists and post-structuralists feel that it is a sense of transience which will happily free us from accumulation and project. They assume that a sense of our essential mortality will free us to withdraw our vital energies from systems that would invest these energies in projects that falsely claim to give us immortal life; we are then free to squander these energies in a sovereign manner.

For postmodernists and post-structuralists, the fleeting nature of time and the inevitability of death show linear time to be unreal. We would do well therefore to drop those unreal projects that are built on linear time. But captains of industry also affirm the fleeting nature of time and the inevitability of death. They encourage us to capitalize on the unreal nature of time in order to bring unreal projects into being. Postmodernists and post-structuralists simply offer the teleology of final death in place of the teleology of project. It is not possible to free that rich duration which is coercively funnelled into projects via a sense of transience that is just as violent towards rich duration.

My critique focuses on the contemporary philosophical affirmation of transience rather than on any wider cultural affirmation of transience. Continental philosophy has been dominated by pro-transience thinking throughout the 20th century and up to the present day, led by pro-transience thinkers such as Heidegger and Bataille, who have influenced the work of postmodernist/post-structuralist thinkers including Barthes, Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Baudrillard. I concentrate on the work of Bataille, since his work represents the most extreme example of pro-transience thought.

Bataille

For Bataille, living things have no reason to exist other than to expend their energies, just as the sun has no reason to exist other than to radiate its splendour (Bataille, 1967/1991: 28–9). Like the sun's unstoppable, explosive exuberance, beings are driven to expend their energies 'all at once', in an ecstatic, wayward manner that can only end in death (1976/1991: 241). Living things cannot indefinitely conserve themselves, any more than the sun can hold its rays in reserve. Therefore any attempt to preserve energy or life is an inglorious struggle that is bound to fail. By accepting the inevitability of one's future death, one can flow naturally with the spirit of expenditure that governs the universe.

Although life instinctively speeds itself towards death, there is another kind of instinct, the instinct that drives living beings to try to conserve themselves. Although the urge to conserve oneself is as natural as the urge to expend oneself, it is less intimate. With the onset of industrialization, the bourgeoisie created the ultimate conservative order. In order to ensure profit, social elevation and political stability, the bourgeoisie harness the spontaneous, exuberant

and destructive energies of the workers under their control, and re-direct these energies into productive works within industries owned by the bourgeoisie (Bataille, 1976/1991: 218). The instinctive desire to expend energies all at once, in the moment, is now repressed, with energies now placed at the disposal of the future and the completion of useful works.

The workers are not only economically and politically controlled by the bourgeoisie, they are also taken in intellectually by the bourgeoisie's ideological equation of hard work and survival. The workers are taken in by this equation, despite the fact that the workers' toil is unpleasant, time-consuming and may even be life-threatening, and despite the fact that the fruits of their labour which are not re-invested in industry are largely utilized simply to perpetuate the comfortable lifestyles of the bourgeoisie. With the gradual entrenchment of the bourgeoisie's conservative realm, the realm opposed to it, that of free expenditure, has become alien to people. But this conservative ideology can be periodically overturned. By accepting that death is inevitable one sees the bourgeoisie's promise of immortality to be a lie, and one therefore sees the conservative system of ceaseless investment, which is built upon this promise of perpetual life, to be an absurd fraud (Bataille, 1976/1991: 213–23). On realizing that one is mortal, one has no more desire to slavishly invest one's energies in projects that pretend to offer immortality; one is then free to expend these energies joyously and ruinously, in the moment.

Bataille's demand that we view time from the unproductive end of time, represented by death and ruin, is meant to undermine the bourgeoisie-promoted productive ends of time. But one form of teleology cannot cure another, if the desired result is to unleash a mode of time that is not end orientated.

Authentic and Inauthentic Temporality

The bourgeoisie secure for themselves a certain form of pleasurable and luxurious existence through their enslavement of the workers. Through a discrete and limited formal display of this luxurious lifestyle and wealth, the bourgeoisie wish to portray themselves as sovereign beings in order to maintain a symbolic advantage over the workers. For Bataille, however, this display is a false representation of an inauthentic form of sovereignty.

It is self-evident that long-shift workers can only enjoy brief 'momentary' pleasures compared to the bourgeoisie, who can enjoy long swathes of pleasure time. For Bataille, however, the powerless workers, who have nothing to lose, expend themselves as fully as possible within their brief pleasures, while the powerful bourgeoisie are careful not to expend themselves too much within their pleasures, since they would lose their economic and political standing if they ever weakened themselves. The workers' momentary pleasures are there-

fore more complete and *authentic* than the bourgeoisie's extended pleasures (Bataille, 1976/1991: 197–200). Bataille also believes that the powerless workers, who without power have no need to fastidiously maintain an elevated position within a social hierarchy or to segregate themselves, throw themselves through their momentary pleasures into general communion with their fellows, into an oceanic, promiscuous 'communication' which authentically fuses with the ecstatic universal meltdown that is death (Bataille, 1957a/1990a: 11–25). For Bataille, the workers' access to authentic ecstasy and authentic time via the ecstatic moment lends them a more general political authenticity; they both deserve to prevail over the bourgeoisie and perhaps, in the long run, cannot help but do so.

I see this political vision as ultimately hollow, since it evades any sense of real time as a real political stake. We are asked by Bataille to believe that a short burst of pleasure is preferable to a long burst of pleasure, and even that a long burst of pleasure is an impossibility. If this were the case, workers would have no need to change their condition of having limited access to pleasure time.

The Paradox of the Deferment of Gratification

For Bataille, accumulation is a process that can only come about through a deferment of the moment of expenditure, and it is the deferment of the moment of expenditure which in a sense gives birth to duration in the form of ordered linear time. He views the deferment of expenditure as illegitimate, since energy must eventually be spent in any case in a universe dominated by expenditure. Deferment is also inglorious, a costive holding back of the sun.

The investment of energies otherwise destined for spontaneous expenditure into the production of the means for future survival could theoretically ensure expenditure in the future, which would be a senseless exchange given that this future expenditure would be identical to that expenditure which could be simply enjoyed in the current moment. In fact the investment of energies in survival becomes even more senseless; investment becomes an empty chronic habit, tending to merely ensure the survival of investment itself as a system. However, through refusing to defer the urge to expend energies ecstatically and ruinously, this sterile circle of continuous investment can be broken, at least for a while (Bataille, 1973/1992: 101–2).

I have a certain sympathy with Bataille's demand that we unleash our desires spontaneously, since life must be enjoyed and the moment has as much right to assert itself as the future (and more of a right in fact; the holding back of energies is literally repressive). But Bataille ties this spontaneity with a *ruinous* ecstatic moment, whereas there is no reason why a spontaneous burst of energies cannot have extended duration.

It might seem that Bataille is affirming a non-teleological form of time by demanding that we refuse to defer enjoyment of the moment in favour of any future goal. But Bataille's affirmation of the moment nevertheless represents a definite affirmation of a form of teleology (and a morbid form of teleology at that) in that for him the moment leads physically towards death or ruin rapidly and with teleological inevitability. And since, for Bataille, the moment symbolically draws its authenticity from its affirmation of death, it derives all its meaning from the future. The substance of time thereby slips quickly away, into its future fate, or is paralysed by its future-orientated obsession. By making pleasure feed on the death that is to come, Bataille has in effect deferred its spontaneous self-expression.

I suggest that the brief 'moment' of pleasure which Bataille celebrates has no objective reality, given that one can imagine a pleasurable moment to be 'dilated'. That is, one can imagine an entire wild weekend as representing a single 'moment' for the couple that enjoy it. Or one can alternatively imagine this same couple enjoying a succession of pleasures, therefore a succession of ecstatic moments, none of which turns out to be ruinously final.

Dualism and Transgression

For Bataille, the order of expenditure must antagonistically break with the equally natural (though less intimate) order of conservativism. The transgression of the conservative temporal order by the wild temporal order of expenditure is a kind of defilement, and so the pleasures of expenditure are tied up with the criminal defilement of taboos. The moment of expenditure is thus inherently criminal and therefore perversely destructive in a way that goes beyond the mere squandering of energies. Moreover, the urge to expend leads to destruction when given free reign because this urge has been previously stifled under the rule of the conservative order of time. A being's desire to expend becomes frustrated under the yoke of conservativism, and so when given the chance, this being's pent-up energies break loose violently. Expenditure therefore takes on an explosive, wilfully destructive, momentary form.

So, the moment of expenditure is violent and explosive, and therefore brief, because it must break through another order of time. But the transgressive moment of expenditure is also brief because the order of time that it has shattered comes eventually to re-assert itself. The moment of expenditure is mortal in that the wayward order that it represents can never permanently transcend the order of conservativism.

The dualist structure of Bataille's theory of time is one of his enabling devices, used to generate the friction necessary to create the explosive moment of ecstasy, which the bourgeoisie can never fully incorporate into their

pleasures without blowing their world apart. But no complex dualist vision of time can erase the simple fact that some moments are longer and more pleasurable than others, and that extended duration remains a stake for living beings.

The Nature of Pleasure

For Bataille, pleasures are not only ruinous because they represent wild, wayward expenditures of energy; they are also physically ruinous in a direct manner. One such hazardous pleasure is the orgasm. Bataille assumes that the orgasm is a kind of 'little death', a metaphor based on the drone bee that destroys itself through reproduction (Bataille, 1957a/1990a: 170, 239).

This assumption that ecstasy is inherently ruinous is, in my view, unsustainable. There are many intense pleasures that are not ruinous. Indeed, some of the very pleasures which Bataille stresses are ruinous can be seen to be actually health inducing. If we return to the example of the orgasm as 'little death', we can easily argue that the orgasm is a health-giving form of exercise, and that the drone which expires through reproduction is too isolated a case. Bataille may be right to affirm that the orgasm is not a direct investment of energy in production, but he is wrong to equate it with physical ruin.

Bataille is also wrong to equate all pleasure *symbolically* with death. He equates eroticism with a specifically violent transgression of utility and an annihilation of the will to survive. Importantly, he links eroticism with human sacrifice (Bataille, 1957a/1990a: 81–8). He also stresses that sex is a ruinous transgression of the self. Sexual intimacy generates a transcendence of the self through an interest in the bodies of others. The wildness of sex annihilates the self's desire to maintain its discrete survival. Sex can also produce a transcendence of the self by resulting in the birth of another self or other selves. Moreover, an individual's offspring may go on to outlive that individual, in which case we can see how the physical death of the individual is implied symbolically in the act of sex (Bataille, 1957a/1990a: 94–108).

Bataille's analysis of pleasure is extremely complex. It is useful, then, to consider the possibility that pleasure is simply pleasure. People are far more concerned with gaining access to pleasures that have an extended form than with gaining access to brief, rarefied or merely 'symbolic' pleasures.

There is another point worth making, which is that a feeling of security and strength, resonating within pleasure, might generate greater intensity of pleasure than any sense of ruination within pleasure. Even if we concede that *some* pleasures are *somewhat* 'ruinous', living beings nevertheless delight in the repetition of these 'ruinous' pleasures through time (given that they are not destroyed outright). Beings rarely wish to expend themselves 'all at once', since

by doing so they deny themselves the reproduction of pleasure, and pleasures themselves desire their own continuation.

'Bourgeois' Pleasures

The validity of Bataille's social/historical characterization of the bourgeoisie or the workers does not concern this present work. What concerns the present work is the way in which Bataille's attack on the bourgeoisie leads him to deny the possibility that one can enjoy extended pleasures, and the way in which his celebration of the workers leads him to celebrate ecstasy only as a brief moment.

Bataille believes that the bourgeoisie fear losing strength via pleasure. It should be noted that pleasure can lead to strength (just as the orgasm can lead to health), and that therefore pleasure may easily be able to maintain itself in an extended form. Any individuals in a position of power will presumably be fully acquainted with the reality of this economy. As for the bourgeoisie's supposed fear of contamination via 'ruinous' pleasures, it is clear that the bourgeoisie or any other dominant party in pursuit of pleasure have no real fear of getting into contact with the bodies of those under their command, since they know that they will not necessarily be ruined by such contact.

Pleasure is pleasure, and is therefore just the same for the bourgeoisie and other powerful groups as it is for working men and women (only the bourgeoisie and other powerful groups enjoy more of it!).

Pro-transience as a Form of Teleology

For Bataille, living things can be authentically seen as rushing at speed towards their demise right from the beginning of their lives, in a spirit of ecstatic expenditure. Any living thing, at any stage of its life, can therefore be legitimately viewed as being in essence already at the end of that life. This may seem to be an exaggeration of Bataille's philosophical position, but his logic forces him to this conclusion.

Bataille affirms the living moment, but as a moment that creates transience (the moment is ruinous) and which is itself transient (it cannot prevail in a dualist universe). The ecstatic moment, which should be a celebration of a kind of irrepressible flow of duration, is over in a flash, and either tends towards death or leads directly to death.

Often, Bataille states that the wild expenditure of life's forces can be described as life affirmed *up to* the point of death and not beyond, in order perhaps to avoid the accusation of morbidity. It is even possible that Bataille sensed

that his view of time was too teleological as it stood. He writes: 'I believe eroticism to be the approval of life, up until death' (Bataille, 1957b/1990b: 16). What Bataille is perhaps saying here is that beings caught up in the midst of the most extreme pleasure do not care whether they survive or not, thereby illustrating his equation of pleasure and ruin. However, the extreme indifference of beings in the midst of ecstasy to the whole question of survival suggests that death is of little importance to them compared to the experience of pleasurable duration enjoyed in the time up to death. On close inspection we can see that for Bataille 'the approval of life up until death' represents a very specific kind of behaviour that is almost totally death orientated, a foolhardy spirit of ruination that will end in death more or less directly. It can be seen that the exuberant devil-may-care spirit of affirming life up to the point of death can be accessed by individuals only if they open themselves up to death first. The vision of life affirmed up to the point of death is still a vision of life dominated by death.

Although Bataille's work shows him savouring, as it were, the taste of death in a sensual, poetic fashion, he concedes that an individual cannot physically experience the event of his or her own death in a concrete, knowing fashion, since in death the knower and known are wiped out at a single stroke. Only a living being can affirm death, through the ecstatic abandonment of toilsome life-conservation and care which a sense of mortality allows. Such a view could be seen to link up with Bataille's partial admission that life affirmed up to the point of death is more important than a mere leap from life *into* death.

But Bataille admits that one cannot have a direct physical experience of death only to insist, almost in the same breath, that an indirect mystical and communal experience of death is as intimate as any direct physical experience (and is perhaps even more intimate). To this end, he speaks of us experiencing death through the medium of the death of another (Bataille, 1976/1991: 204–7), through ritual sacrifice, and through the symbolic destruction of useful goods (Bataille, 1967/1991: 63–77). He also claims that people can indirectly sense their mortality via the experience of exhaustion that inevitably results from any excessive physical expenditure of energy (Bataille, 1945/1992: 39).

In fact Bataille makes people's inability to physically experience their own death in a knowing fashion into simply another morbid proof of the power of death. Since death is unknowable and yet of profound importance, the category of death symbolizes the limitations of knowledge and therefore the vanity of the workman-like investment of otherwise free-flowing energy in systems of knowledge.

For Bataille, the eventual physical death of all life's lived thoughts ultimately makes non-sense of any lived form of meaning. This annihilation of meaning, which death generates, supposedly proves death's domination of the coherence of time. Bataille wishes us to deconstruct meaning through a sense of death's authenticity. However complex this move may appear to be, this semi-

meditative assault on meaning via a consciousness of death is as illegitimately teleological as any celebration of physical death.

Bataille does not always evaluate life from the vantage point of the *moment* of death in an overt manner. For example, in some parts of his work he describes life as being steeped in death long before the overt event of death takes place. In *The Accursed Share: Volume I*, death is described not so much as an ultimate end-state, but as a phenomenon which is integrated with the living activities of sexual reproduction and eating, in a kind of pact to ensure 'the intense consumption of energy' which existence represents (Bataille, 1967/1991: 35). But we need not complicate matters. For Bataille, death inevitably wins out over life, however intimately they may seem to be fused together. It should be noted that Bataille never describes death as lying subtly dormant within life, or as lying patiently in wait for life, but as being reached quickly as the inevitable result of an exuberant expenditure of energy.

Bataille often chooses to simply affirm death as a power over life and time in a direct and crude manner. In *Inner Experience*, he goes perhaps as far as it is possible to go in this particular form of death worship. Here he offers the paradoxical statement that one must actually die in order to 'live' in a sovereign manner:

> It is by dying, without possible evasion, that I perceive the rupture which constitutes my nature and in which I have transcended 'what exists'. As long as I live, I am content with a coming and going, with a compromise. (Bataille, 1954/1988: 71)

Bataille frequently drops all subtlety when affirming transience. The following matter-of-fact description of life's 'journey' reveals the extent to which Bataille's teleological system is banal and simplistic: 'Life will dissolve itself in death, rivers in the sea, and the known in the unknown' (Bataille, 1954/1988: 101).

It can be noted that by affirming the actual point of death Bataille ignores any kind of transience characterized by gradual decay. The more subtly morbid sense of life being a slow decline brings in duration, and the aches and pains and fears of those who are ageing are synonymous with the more joyous aches of duration in that they are unavoidable experiences (and yet they are also stakes, in that one tries to avoid some of their sting). The agonies of age and decay are irreducibly temporal. And ageing as a gradual process reflects growth as a gradual process, muddling the clarity of the pro-transience 'arrow of time'. So, ironically, Bataille's view of time is driven by an ideological need to install a teleological system, rather than by a desire to describe fully the rigours of transience.

Bergson

Bergson remains perhaps the only major western philosopher to have evaded the temptation to view time as a transient phenomenon. Bergson's thought experiments represent a devastating critique of the naïve pro-transience perspective which views all time from time's end, even though his aim in devising these experiments, and the anti-determinist, quasi-spiritualist conclusion which he reached via them, is different from ours.

In what I will call 'the omniscient scientist experiment', Bergson shows that determinist scientists have ignored the very substance of time through the vain assumption that they are all-seeing and all-knowing. The determinist scientist 'knows' that any cause leads to an effect in an inevitable manner, and so feels no need to consider time as an essential element in this process; the development from cause to effect may as well happen instantaneously. The determinist scientist has forgotten that causes *take time* to reveal themselves in their effects. At his or her most extreme, the determinist scientist arrogantly feels that he or she only needs to be sufficiently armed with knowledge of the material processes involved at the universe's beginning to predict the exact composition of its end. The determinist scientist believes that the end of time (and the universe) can be simply 'read off' from the 'evidence' of the beginning of time. Bergson illustrates the excessive nature of the determinist's claims, quoting Huxley's assertion that if the properties of the pre-universe 'cosmic vapour' could be fully known, the state of the Fauna of Great Britain in 1869 could be accurately predicted (Bergson, 1907/1911: 40–1).

There is an ironic family resemblance between the sober determinist scientist (albeit of Bergson's imagination) and the anarchic ex-surrealist Bataille in their attitude to time. For both, the belief that one can 'sum up' existence conspires with the belief that one may as well 'fast forward' existence to its end. Both ignore the richness of time in order to impose a certain 'ultimate' meaning in its place. Both the determinist scientist and Bataille believe that things may as well already be at their end. For the determinist scientist that end is scientific truth revealed. For Bataille that end is ruin.

The second Bergsonian example, which I will call the 'sugar and water experiment' (Bergson, 1907/1911: 10), likewise reveals the ludicrous nature of both the determinist temporal view and the pro-transience view. For Bergson, the classic determinist 'demonstration' of the mechanical nature of cause and effect, and of the deterministic nature of chemical processes, involves the dissolving of a solid in liquid. Bergson wishes to subvert the objective and detached way in which this demonstration is routinely observed, and so he personalizes it. He describes a person dissolving sugar in water for personal use. Bergson states that for the determinist scientist it is a forgone conclusion that the sugar will disappear and that one may as well not even bring in the notion

of time; the sugar is doomed to dissolve, what will be will be, and in a sense already 'is'. But Bergson reminds us to consider a person's impatience as he or she anxiously waits for the sugar to dissolve. The determinist scientist may not have to wait in an anxious frame of mind for a solid to dissolve in liquid, or even have to 'wait' at all (this would be, after all, an experiment only), but the person who is dissolving sugar in water to fulfil a pressing personal need does not have any option. True, the determinist scientist may be 'impatient' for results, but this is not a visceral impatience experienced through time but rather a philosophical attitude of mind, and in any case an analysis of already received results may make up the bulk of this scientist's duties. In Bergson's most extreme example, the determinist scientist is not actually impatient to *see* the end of the universe; he or she simply wants to *predict* its final make up from a knowledge of original causes.

The experience of impatience reveals the irreducible nature of rich duration that cannot be instantly transcended towards some predicted end. Any intense experience can be considered as likewise proving this irreducible nature of rich duration. The compelling experiences of lingering bliss and lingering pain, long periods of drudgery and long periods of freedom, reveal this irreducible nature of rich duration as strongly as the experience of impatience. Within an average lifetime, the average individual enjoys or suffers countless experiences of lingering pleasure time and lingering pain time, lingering free time and lingering slave time. Therefore time is a *stake* (one wants to grasp pleasure time and avoid pain time, to secure free time and escape slave time). Death, which is time's end, is simply an existential full stop or even an *escape* from the stake that is time. Death, then, is not itself the most important stake in the affairs of living beings but, rather, the annihilation or evasion of all stakes. Death, of course, is a stake in that it represents the wiping out of stakes; death represents the end of the great game of time, and this annulment of the game can be intensely dreaded or desired. But a clear analysis of the relationship between death and time shows death to be relative in its importance; it is nothing without its relation to real temporal stakes, to real duration.

Bergson's thought experiments show that the determinist scientist fastidiously refuses to engage with the raw stuff of duration, preferring to fast-forward time to its 'end' in order to reveal its 'truth'. In a similar way, Bataille fastidiously refuses to engage with the earthly stuff of pleasure duration and pain duration, free duration and slave duration, by constantly affirming the future annihilation of all duration. Just like the cold determinist scientist, Bataille wants to evade the temporal ache of experience. He wants to jump past the *excess* that is duration. Bataille is therefore the very opposite of a philosopher of excess, despite his standing among postmodernist and post-structuralist philosophers as something of a wild man.

Bergson relates tortured psychological impatience to the tortured primordial

struggle which living things endure in their continuous endeavour to use dead (and deterministic) matter as a vehicle for the expression of their *élan vital* (their creativity and spontaneity). The long ache of impatience reflects life's drawn out, open-ended and unpredictable struggle with matter. Bergson wishes to prove that the determinist scientist is wrong to evade the unforeseeable creative work done by organisms on the vast temporal journey between the artificially isolated 'cause' or beginning of the universe and the equally artificially isolated 'effect' or end of the universe. Drawing on Bergson's model, I show that Bataille is wrong to evade the existential richness that lies within the temporal journey between the beginning and end of life.

Existential Aspects

Life is a serious business of highly charged temporal stakes, involving a being's struggle to secure for itself the experience of pleasure time/free time rather than pain time/slave time. Since lived time is a living stake, death is not the profound phenomenon that Bataille thinks it is. For one who is racked by drawn-out pain, the pain of death situated at the end of time is an irrelevance. And for one who is caught up in the throes of extended pleasure, the dubious pleasure of death is likewise irrelevant. Death, far from being profound, may simply provide a pragmatic escape from a life of pain and toil, or a simple halt to a life of pleasure and freedom. We *can* see death as important to time in that it is the end of the great game of time, the great flow. But death is relative in importance to time for the same reason; it is simply the end of the great game of time, a game without which it would be pure abstraction.

However, we are not suggesting that death has absolutely no importance for living beings. On the contrary. By countering Bataille's view of death, which tries to domesticate death through attempting to engage it in 'intimate' dialogue, and which tries to make political gain out of death, we can see death as a real, non-negotiable phenomenon. Death can no longer be thought of as an ambiguous but essentially accessible deity, but must instead be seen as that which wipes out real substantial time with no hope of appeal. Death can now be viewed as a certain element in the game of time, as something to be dreaded or desired as the end of time, but which has no fixed moral or political meaning in itself. By affirming the reality of time we are in fact affirming the reality of death, and so we are proposing a more tragic philosophy than the one Bataille proposes – which is ironic, given that Bataille is considered by most post-modernist/post-structuralist philosophers to be perhaps the cruellest thinker.

Political Aspects

Bataille believes that an affirmation of transience is politically liberating, that transience is a vital force that renders absurd the coercive, long-term projects of the bourgeoisie. Yet pro-transience takes away any real consciousness of political stakes when it annihilates a sense of life's rich duration. Indeed, a sense of transience cannot authentically liberate people from coercive projects, since such projects are themselves generated by a sense of transience.

People want to gain lingering pleasure and freedom, and to avoid long periods of pain and slavery. Bataille's pro-transience view, on the other hand, evades any sense of these irreducible durations; it therefore evades a sense of the world of time as a world of stakes, as involving elements to be either avoided at all costs or *seized!* Through this evasion of real time, Bataille's thought is politically neutered. Against Bataille, I insist that only an affirmation of real time can be politically progressive.

For Bataille, the full engagement with the truth of transience generates a form of wild abandon (which unfetters forces that would otherwise be invested in conservative projects), but if we see pro-transience as an end game, as a pointless act of looking through the wrong end of a telescope, this view of time is shown to be about as exuberant as nostalgia TV. Pro-transience is in fact less audacious than a priest's remorse, a slave's regret.

Conclusion

Time must no longer be treated merely as a form of fiction, to be used in a fast and loose manner by storytellers in order to mould moral and political beliefs. Instead, time must be treated as a raw phenomenon, being itself the stake over which moral and political forces fight. Time must no longer be seen as a pristine phenomenon that could receive its essence from a single instance (in Bataille's view, this instance is death). Rather, time must be seen as a vulgar plenitude that encompasses everything that happens. Time must no longer be seen as an existential option that can be authentically transcended in an instant to its end, but rather as something that is experienced by living beings as unavoidable and irreducible in its flow.

To see all life from life's end is to see all life with the eyes of the dead. To think all time from time's end is to think with the mind of the dead. It is time to quietly drop this pro-transience philosophy of time, which is hardly a philosophy at all. Instead we must begin to observe what time looks like from the only real vantage point that there is: the vantage point of the living.

There is no way to experience the world except through time. Time may be transient, but it is all there is. By dropping the perspective that sees all time from

time's end, one *has* time. And the pleasures and pains of time are revealed to be excessive stakes.

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