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Implications and Consequences of Post-Modern Philosophy for Contemporary Transpersonal Studies

II. Georges Bataille's Post-Nietzschean Secular Mysticism, Phenomenology of Ecstatic States, and Original Transpersonal Sociology

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The writings of the French philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) offer their own contribution to the descriptive phenomenology of mystical and numinous states, as well as a version of the modern secular or this-worldly mysticism variously anticipated by Jung and Nietzsche, and a highly original sociology and social psychology of transpersonal experience, influenced by Max Weber, that helps to open an area not widely developed in recent studies. At the same time, the trauma and personal difficulties in Bataille's life serve as a stark example of the often distortive effects of spiritual metapathologies on inner development. Bataille's views of ecstatic states as entirely an immanent human capacity, in which he was greatly influenced by Nietzsche, offer an opportunity to address larger issues of the "truth value" of mystical states in contemporary transpersonal studies.

Keywords: *numinous ecstasy, personal sovereignty, inner-worldly mysticism, Being experience, Heidegger, self-referential incompleteness, Lakoff and Johnson on metaphor, libidinal excess, projective identification, charisma, unus mundus*

The philosopher Georges Bataille (1897-1962) was a highly original, yet controversial precursor of contemporary transpersonal psychology, both in terms of his original phenomenology and comparative sociology of numinous experience, and in the persisting ambiguity over what larger "truth value" to find in his post-Nietzschean this-worldly mysticism as a naturalistic human capacity.

Bataille's understanding of the nature of ecstatic experience also duplicates, over a ten year span in his own development, a larger transition in 20th century "new age" spirituality. The latter began with earlier advocacies of the re-enchantment of an archaic mythic and ritual religiosity, of the kind so intriguing at least initially to figures such as the early Jung and Eliade (Hakl, 2013), and sometimes appealing to a more right wing conservatism overlapping with the Fascistic movements of the 1930s. Yet it ended with the more liberal and individualistic focus on psychedelic drug experience, visionary shamanism, and Eastern meditation

of the 1960s (Ellwood, 1999; Hakl, 2013). Bataille himself went from his own founding of a secret ritual society in the 1930s, based on his anthropological understanding of tribal festival practices of Dionysian group sexuality, animal sacrifice, and a fortunately unconsummated plan for an elective human sacrifice, to a dramatic shift in 1940s occupied France, where the collectivistic violence of Nazi mythology had become obvious, to his development in his major work *Inner Experience* (1954/1988) of an often surreal and highly dramatized version of an individual phenomenology of transformative ecstatic states. It was this more individualized approach that he developed further in *Erotism* (1957/1986) and the three volumes of *The Accursed Share* (1967/1991, 1976/1993) into a sociology and social psychology of what he saw as the creative secular "mystic" of the future, potentially re-enchanting a secularized and nihilistic modernity in a manner close to the earlier concerns of the sociologist Max Weber (1922/1963) and the later Jung (1959).

Certainly the earlier Bataille is a cautionary tale, and he lived his entire life in states of considerable inner anguish and torment. This will be considered below, both in terms of current transpersonal psychologies of the “metapathologies” that can both drive and distort spiritual experience, and in terms of the rather horrific childhood which he never overcame, despite the therapeutic help that allowed him to externalize some of his suffering in initially anonymous pornographic novels of considerable imagistic bizarreness. His childhood was spent in helping with the home care of his slowly dying father, who suffered the blindness, physical pain and growing dementia of tertiary syphilis. Bataille initially sought to overcome his deep guilt over he and his mother abandoning the invalid father during their evacuation from Rheims in World War I, through seminary training for the priesthood. However, he soon replaced any orthodox Catholicism with an orgiastic sado-masochistic sexuality that even his more “libertine” and surrealist circle regarded as “debauched,” and which he only partially “sublimated” into his initial attempt at a mythically elaborated cult (Suriya, 2002).

Despite a personal life of continuing instabilities, Bataille, in addition to his original phenomenology of mysticism, succeeded in formulating these more collective aspects of numinous states into an original sociology based on his own version of what W.R. Bion (1962) and other depth-psychoanalysts (Searles, 1979) would later term “projective identification.” This he understood not as a means of defending against psychotic-like anxieties, but as a natural way that the inner dimensions of an individual capacity for essential or numinous experience are exteriorized onto personally “inspiring” mythic, heroic, or spiritual figures in society at large. Such exteriorizations can then allow a partial and reflected re-incorporation of that capacity as one’s own sense of an ecstatic “sovereignty” or Being—a sociological version of Maslow (1962) and Almaas (1988) on experiencing one’s own identity as Being itself.

In developing these themes in what follows it will also appear that Bataille’s work touches on a continuing ambiguity in contemporary transpersonal studies over whether a “secular” mysticism can be fully developed without some more transcendent attribution, and whether a larger “truth value” of such experience can be articulated on broadly naturalistic grounds alone, without risking the incipient nihilism with which Bataille himself continued to struggle.

Bataille’s Secular Mysticism

In his major work, *Inner Experience*, Bataille (1954/1988) sought to evoke and dramatize immediate moment by moment consciousness, as understood by Husserl and the early Heidegger, as intrinsically open to the ecstatic experience of Being, which, with the early Heidegger, he sees as the core of the “numinous” sense of wonder, awe, and bliss that would be the experiential basis of all religion (as also for Otto, 1917/1958). Here something like classical “mystical experience” is understood as latent within ordinary consciousness, coming forward into full awareness to the extent that our specifically human capacity for self awareness can suspend all pragmatic “projects” and concentrate only on its moment by moment flow. In this regard, Bataille’s “inner experience” could be said to exemplify a secular or this-worldly understanding of “ecstasy” as a natural or inherent human capacity in the sense not only of Nietzsche, his major influence, but also of James, Jung, Maslow, and much of the later transpersonal psychology of “higher states of consciousness.”

Bataille’s definition of ecstasy is unusually broad. In addition to the great mystics, whom he insists organized religion has falsely tamed with its fixed concepts, ecstasy includes paroxysmal laughter, eroticism, most specifically in its “transgressive” aspects, all spontaneous intoxications of enthusiasm, festival celebrations, and revolutionary violence, and the aesthetics of dance, music, tragedy, and poetry. These are all “effusions” that express “a keen sensitivity to the present moment ... at the expense of every ... subsequent possibility” (Bataille, 1976/1993, pp. 229-230).

This very breadth of definition has for some commentators (Libertson, 1995) called into question Bataille’s own use of the term “mystical.” While Bataille seeks to separate that usage from all confessional associations, he also terms it “man’s only pure experience” (Bataille, 1957/1986, p. 238). Indeed, the broadly “this worldly” or “aesthetic” expressions he has in mind do fit with Max Weber’s (1922/1963) category of the “inner-worldly” mysticisms. These are best exemplified in Sufism and Taoism, as well as in the Romanticism of Blake, Emerson, and Nietzsche himself, and can be contrasted with the more “other worldly” mysticisms of the East, medieval Catholicism, and Plotinus, as well as with the this- and other- worldly propheticisms of Judaism, Islam, and the Protestant Reformation (see also Hunt, 2003). Very generally, the

this-worldly mysticisms are centered on a capacity for numinous experience understood as “immanent.” Its “transcendent” expression is not to be found only or even principally in a higher or supra-sensible realm but in the contradictory multiplicities of everyday “becoming”—the “thousand and one things” which form the outward emanations and fullest possible expression of a felt source or origin. If one then adds that this immanent sense of source can also be understood as a naturalistic human capacity or intuitive intelligence, and as such, “outside the pale of specific religions” (Bataille, 1957/1986, p. 34), then we arrive at a category of “secular mysticism,” as the “new age” variation of Weber’s original category within a secularized material society. It is this version of a this-worldly mysticism that Nietzsche, Bataille, and aspects of contemporary transpersonal psychology can be understood as articulating.

The further questions of whether such a “humanistic” spirituality is fully realizable, and in what sense it risks its own form, intended or not, of the “nihilism” with which Bataille himself wrestled, will be considered below.

Synonyms for Ecstasy and the Necessity of a New “Negative Theology”

Inner Experience as Being

Bataille offers multiple synonyms for “ecstasy,” in his own way extending a phenomenology of numinous experience also reflected in the multiple transpersonal dimensions of Otto (1917/1958), Laski (1961), and Almaas (1986). Most central for Bataille is the sense that these are experiences of Being, understood not as concept but as an immediate felt sense made possible by a specially intensified self awareness. Being for Bataille is the experience of the inner form of the dawning of each moment of consciousness, “continuously slipping away” into an unrepresentable “nothingness,” such that while its dawning is sensed as an inner feeling of creation, its slipping away foreshadows a kind of “death”—a “wave of life losing itself” (Bataille, 1954/1988, p. 118; 1976/1993, p. 203).

Here Bataille shows an astonishing similarity to the then unpublished early lectures of Heidegger, as well as to his later manuscripts of the late 1930s. Heidegger, influenced by Schleiermacher (see Hunt, 2012a), had initially understood mystical experience as the “intensifying concentration” or “reflectance” of our “self-aware existence” on the form of the “carry forward”

of the arising moment into “horizontal openness”—a self aware “effluence” of life itself (Heidegger, 1919/2008; 1919/2013). The later Heidegger (1938/1994; 1942/2013) spoke in a way reminiscent of Rudolf Otto of Being as the numinous sense of “wonder,” “awe,” and “astonishment” that arises through sensing the very form of the unfolding “event,” experienced as an emerging gift “flowing forth” out of an unrepresentable “inceptionality.” That this openness is also for Heidegger a “downgoing” and for Bataille a “slipping away” led both to their preoccupation with a felt affirmation of “nothingness” and “death” as always implicit in numinous ecstatic states.¹

Both Bataille and Heidegger independently echoed William James (1912/1971; 1911/1996) on this potential for “pure experience” as a background sense, beneath the multiple, more specific “whatnesses” of our experience, of an encompassing “thatness” of the unfolding moment which resists or negates any fixed formulation—and would be the core of mystical states. This author has previously suggested that such experience is based on the inner or abstract form of the organismic “orientation response” to the very sense of an unknown novelty ahead—here as the numinous sense of a “wholly other” (Hunt, 1995).

Inner Experience as Intimacy

Ecstatic states entail a “pure intimacy” (Bataille, 1967/1991), such that the “discontinuities” of personal identity are replaced by a unique “continuity” in which barriers between self and other are eliminated (Bataille, 1957/1986). Here alone is true “communication” possible. This can be most striking, of course, in shared laughter and intense eroticism. But it is Bataille’s insight that we are most connected to others in the most intense states of religious and mystical consciousness, which we have instead tended to understand as our most private and inward moments, and so missing their evocative or “charismatic” effects with and on others. In this regard he was most directly influenced by the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) on a “collective consciousness” best reflected in the shared “effervescence” of ritual and religious symbolization. Bataille (1967/1991) says that the sacred “things” of communal spiritual belief and celebration “make visible on the outside that which is really within” (p. 189), albeit with the continuous risk of a secularization that substitutes the merely “outward” for what was the intended “pure intimacy” of their earlier evocations. While the present author has attempted to expand elsewhere on this notion of human consciousness

as intrinsically shared and collective (Hunt, 1995, 2010, 2011, 2012b), it remains the case, as will be pursued below, that it was Bataille who developed the first fully original transpersonal sociology.

Inner Experience as Sovereignty

The ecstatic experience of Being is also what Bataille (1967/1991) terms a “sovereign moment.” This is the experience of an inherent or existential sovereignty allowed by the pure “self consciousness” of mystical ecstasy—“the return of Being to full and irreducible sovereignty” as a “freedom” within the timelessness of the unfolding moment (p. 189). Bataille’s “sovereignty” of the person is very close to what Almaas (1988) has termed “essential identity” or the “point”—in which there is both an expansion and focus of one’s sense of identity as Being itself. For Bataille this felt sense would have been most available in the vision quests of hunter-gatherer shamanism, but it would undergo a progressive displacement and projection caused by the endless tasks and “servilities” demanded by more complex economies. Projected forward and away from an immediate ecstatic experience, it becomes the future supra-sensible immortality or after-life that Nietzsche (1888/1954) so forcefully rejected in Pauline Christianity, and Bataille sees as a merely “pretended” deferment of the sovereignty experience.

Bataille’s “Atheology”

Meister Eckhart, often cited by Bataille in *Inner Experience* (1954/1988), says in one of his sermons:

The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye are one and the same...therefore whatever you get, you get from yourself...God and I: we are one. (Eckhart, fourteenth century/1941, pp. 82, 206, 244)

Taking this exclusively on the side of human experience, we could say that Bataille, with Nietzsche, is interested only in the epistemology of mystical experience as an inner intuitive capacity, rather than in any ontology of a God seeing us. Bataille goes much further than Otto, James, or Jung in seeking to separate a felt core of mystical experience from any traditional religious schematization. God as concept and belief falsifies the “inconceivable unknown” revealed in ecstasy. It “makes us feel there was a subjectivity that necessarily carried more weight than our own” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 417). Describing himself as “atheist” and “unbeliever,” he rejects all “positive theology” that ends by having

“inserted God into the chain of ends and means” that lead to some “after-life” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 316).

Only the “vehemence” of a “negative theology,” based on the intuition of a nondiscursive sense of Being, can overcome the “endless servility” of “all traditional dogma and belief.” Yet this will leave a very thin line between Bataille’s version of a naturalistic transpersonal spirituality and a kind of nihilism—and this he terms his “atheology.”

Being is “ungraspable.” It is only “grasped” in error; the error is not just easy ... it is the condition of thought. God is nothingness. Being is *nowhere*. (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 317)

The meditative or spontaneous experience of an open emptiness welling forth from “nothingness,” so basic to Eckhart, Ibn Arabi, and the later Heidegger, has traditionally appeared only at the most subtle and slowly developed stages of traditional spiritual practice, whereas, as will be outlined below, Bataille’s own experiences and predominant understanding of ecstasy remained with its more specifically intense and so more preliminary forms. Perhaps accordingly, in his radical heterodoxy Bataille often seems to pass over into a kind of Gnostic nihilism and/or existential despair that has traditionally been seen as the vulnerability or risk of a “negative theology” (Altizer, 2003; Hunt, 2003, 2007). Indeed, it can become difficult to separate a capacity to attune to the impalpable unfolding moment as a timeless ecstasy from a sort of self fulfilling cognitive illusion. Meanwhile, if Nietzsche’s “death of God” releases the life-affirming ecstasy of traditional spirituality as now entirely our own, it can be difficult to see how that will have any “truth value” beyond the merely pragmatic one Bataille scorned.

As will be addressed later, part of the importance of Bataille today may be in his extreme and pointed articulation of these genuine ambiguities that remain largely implicit within a “human sciences” transpersonalism or a contemporary “science of consciousness.”

Bataille’s Existential Philosophy of Human Nature

The key characteristic of human consciousness for Bataille in *Inner Experience* is its intrinsic “excess,” and a conjoined “anguish,” both as the result of an imaginative symbolic capacity simultaneously compelling us toward a “totality of the possible” which we must also sense as impossible to attain. This “wish

to be everything” can be temporarily fulfilled in ecstatic states, but is always opposed to the contending and contradictory multiplicities of all practical “projects”—that “impossible combination of movements that destroy one another” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 342). Human experience is an “infinite turbulence...a headlong rush forward...that loses any possibility of coming to a halt” (Bataille, 1945/1992, pp. 182-184). In this sense Bataille is advancing a theory of intrinsic human unbalance.

As a philosopher Bataille is best regarded as transitional, linking a traditional metaphysics, that would indeed posit such a single encompassing essence of human nature, and a post-modern relativism that would reject any single “totalizing account.” On the one hand, for Bataille, there is “excess” as the essence of human nature – explicitly patterned on the “will to power” of Nietzsche, who Heidegger regarded as the last great metaphysician of Western thought. While on the other hand, that very excess results from the intrinsic openness of our endlessly self referential consciousness which must remain incomplete and partial. On this post-modern side of Bataille, our continuous “falling short” is attested by the saving capacity for shared laughter.

The later Heidegger (1944/2011) suggested two levels of discourse in major philosophers. First, there is the philosopher’s “main thought,” which approaches a would-be metaphysics to the extent that it posits a “main trait” for all beings—a single all-encompassing “whatness” of things. Second, there is the philosopher’s “fundamental” or “ground” thought, most often implicit or even occluded, which for Heidegger is a “poetized,” necessarily metaphoric evocation of Being—which with its felt sense of awe, wonder, and mystery is the experiential origin of Otto’s sense of the numinous (Heidegger, 1938/1994).

For Heidegger, Nietzsche’s (1888/1967) “fundamental” thought is his “eternal recurrence of the same,” which he described as his own personally terrifying nihilistic challenge for yea-saying or ecstatic affirmation by his creative “overman” of the future. Bataille independently agreed with Heidegger here, understanding “eternal recurrence” not as a literally intended concept or theory, but as a spontaneous ecstatic evocation and original schematization of the felt eternity and timelessness of the numinous:

I imagine that Nietzsche had the experience of the eternal return in a form which is properly mystical,

confused with discursive representation....The object of his vision—what made him laugh and tremble—was not the return (and not even time), but what the return laid bare, the impossible depth of things. ... Perceiving it there is nothing left to do but ... lose oneself in ecstasy, weep (Bataille, 1954/1988, pp. 27, 154)

It is important to note that Bataille’s version of Nietzsche here is not that of the more analytic post-war attempts of Kaufmann (1956) or Foucault (1977) to redeem Nietzsche from unfair accusations of an influence on Fascism, but the more personal Nietzsche of the Dionysian yea-saying – which did lead to multiple mythically inspired “Nietzsche cults” earlier in the 20th century (Noll, 1994), including that of Bataille.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche’s “main thought” and what makes him the “last metaphysician” for Heidegger, and this despite his major influence on the relativism and perspectivalism of “post-modern” thought, is the “will to power”—as the essence of not only humanity and life, but, in the late notebooks of the physical universe itself (Nietzsche, 1988/1967). Bataille’s version, and the source of his own intellectual inspiration, is his doctrine of “excess.” For Bataille this “excess” is not only the essence of human consciousness but of all life. As with Nietzsche, his key metaphor for this intrinsic excess comes from the physical universe, in particular in the unstinting and unreturned energy pouring forth from the sun:

The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy—wealth—without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving. ... Living matter receives and accumulates it...then radiates and squanders it. ... Its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion. (Bataille, 1967/1991, pp. 28, 29, 30)

In human life this potential excess presents a fundamental problem. Where it cannot be used and fully absorbed within the systems of society, and so must exceed those limits, “it must be spent ... willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (Bataille, 1967/1991, p. 21).

In human economies there is always some portion of this excess energy to be released. This is his concept of the “accursed share.” The least destructive social patterning of this necessary “wastage” Bataille

locates in the Potlach tradition of hunter-gatherer peoples, with its continuous competition in reciprocal gift giving. Bataille's intuition of the importance of this gift-giving mandate as the fundamental means of forestalling the corrosive effects of envy and social hierarchy seems well attested by more recent work on the sheer extremity of class distinctions in later primitive kingships (Trigger, 2003; Bellah, 2011). For Bataille the earlier balancing of Potlach traditions was lost in more complex economies, with their "catastrophic" expenditures in the form of widespread warfare, the huge monuments of classical civilizations, and the "ritual wastage" of human sacrifice. The organized religions of primitive kingships became the ultimate justification that these more complex societies gave to this necessary "squandering," as also reflected in the suspensions of ordinary sexual and aggressive prohibitions in ritual festivals. While on the societal level the most complete balancing of this excess was already achieved in Potlach, on the individual level its most pure expression is to be found in mystical experience.

Bataille's "Excess"

and Related Theories of Human Unbalance

Certainly from the perspective of a post-modern relativism in which we are necessarily always within any human nature we might seek to comprehend objectively, there can be no proof of Bataille's view of a human essence of excess and unbalance. And this must follow despite the deep intuitive unease about the ultimate balance of the species shared by world religions and mythologies. Yet there can equally be no disproof either, and Bataille is in some very good company with his own version of some major theories of a human nature.

Freud and Jung on "Excessive Libido"

Both Freud (1917/1957) and Jung (1948/1960) posited an "excessive libido" or "instinctual drivenness" as following from our uniquely self-stimulating imaginative capacity. Freud's Id and Jung's shadow are not merely our inner "animalistic" selves, but a heightened, perversely driven sexuality and aggression, whose fantasy amalgams are unique to human beings. For Jung this makes any core of our instinctual drives unknowable, with their most direct experience as the energy or "mana" of the numinous. While for Freud too, the instincts are only knowable through their fantasy elaborations, whose repressive containment causes them to "ramify like a fungus" in an "uncanny" drivenness

(Freud, 1915/1959). In Bataille's terms this means that human sexuality and aggression have an inherent inner tendency that is automatically "transgressive," which is also his characterization of the full range of ecstatic states—as always displacing an everyday profane order. The social suppression of this imaginative drivenness has traditionally been compensated by the energized "sovereign transgressions" seen in mysticism, archaic festivals, and for Bataille himself in the elaborated sado-masochism of De Sade and his own anonymous novels.

The Incompleteness of Self Reference and Bataille's "Blindspot"

Another explanation of the human striving toward incompletable "totality" comes from the intrinsic openness of our cognitive-symbolic self reference, which we must attempt to fill with an endless, self transforming creativity. Modern formulations here range from Mead's (1934) sense of an unknowable "I" at the core of all experience, to Ricoeur (1984) on the unfillable blackhole-like aporias of self, other, consciousness, and time created by our open self reference, and Godel's theorem of the intrinsic inconsistency/incompleteness of any self referring formal system (Bronowski, 1971).

Bataille's version here is to posit the source of our endlessly partial "projects" of mind and society as necessarily incomplete attempts to fill an intrinsic cognitive "blindspot"—analogous to the blindspot of the eye except that it pushes forward into all attempts at self understanding:

The [blindspot] absorbs one's attention: it is no longer the spot which loses itself in knowledge, but knowledge which loses itself in it. ... Existence in the end discloses the blindspot of understanding and right away becomes completely absorbed in it ... What alone remains is circular agitation—which does not exhaust itself in ecstasy and begins again from it. (Bataille, 1954/1988, pp. 110-111)

The concept of God is the cognitive resultant of the automatic attempt to fill this sense of open incompleteness, while experientially only spontaneous ecstasy can approach the felt sense of a "nondiscursive" peace and temporary completeness that is not a "means" to anything other than itself. What temporary balance for us is possible comes from transpersonal experience.

Incommensurabilities of Person and Thing

Bataille also presents his own version of a theory of human unbalance that the present author (Hunt, 2009)

has also sought to develop in terms of the human symbolic capacity as the creative driving together of two ultimately incommensurate domains of cognitive intelligence—“person knowing,” based on our capacity for empathy, and “thing knowing,” as the manipulative intelligence of tools and technology. It has been suggested that these were preliminary but largely separate in the higher apes and early hominids (Mithen, 1998), and that it is their intertwining that defines the human symbolic capacity (Mithen, 1998; Hunt, 2009). At their respective extremes, weighted first on the side of thing intelligence, there is our capacity to transform all things in nature, as well as people themselves, in terms of human purposes. Everything becomes tool or commodity. While this same creative fusion weighted on the side of person knowing is reflected in the necessity, developed independently by Jung (1944/1953), Asch (1961), and most recently Lakoff and Johnson (1999), of an anthropomorphically embodied physical metaphor for the representation and full embodiment of our more complex emotional experiences—including the loving light of classical mystical experience (Hunt, 2006, 2009).

Yet persons are not things and things not persons, so that their intertwining can never achieve any final balanced synthesis. Indeed, certain of these domain amalgams are especially unstable, and so become the chronic sources of human excess, as specifically reflected in slavery, torture, and warfare, where persons are treated as objects of extreme physical manipulation, or in the extremes of sorcery and magic where things are given personal agency. Bataille focuses especially on the tendency to treat the sovereign person as a commodity, which he considers as the “primary alienation” of humanity, prior even to the appearance of overt slavery or human sacrifice. It is the danger already implicit in tool use by a self-symbolizing creature. “Man, who makes use of the tool, becomes a tool himself, he becomes himself an object just as the tool is an object” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 213). Complex economic development further degrades our potential for a sovereignty of Being, in terms of our becoming more and more complex “things of servile use.” Indeed, if Bataille (1976/1993), foreshadowing Foucault (1983), is correct, this unbalance becomes both augmented and more subtly pervasive in the elaborate bureaucratization of institutional power and regulation in modern capitalist economies, where persons are valued only in terms of a quantitatively measureable utility.

Whereas the later Heidegger (1949/2012) saw this commodification as the unique dilemma of modern

technology, Bataille understood it as already present at our human beginnings, in the face of which archaic humanity sought:

to define alongside the world of practice, that is, the profane world, a sacred world; alongside the man more or less constrained to serve, a sovereign man; alongside *profane* time, a *sacred* time. (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 214)

Religion in general answered the desire to find himself, to regain an intimacy that was always strangely lost. (Bataille, 1967/1991, p. 129)

Yet the danger of religion was always of becoming its own commodity, itself sanctioning more and more elaborate forms of tool-like servility—which for Nietzsche became his major critique of later Christianity. For Bataille, the dilemma of Western modernity had become how to liberate our person capacity for the conjoined *qualities* of ecstasy as Being, sovereignty, and authentic intimacy, from the dehumanizing “utilities” of a social order *quantified* in terms of things.

Bataille on the History and Future of Religion

In his final work, the three-volume *The Accursed Share*, Bataille (1967/1991; 1976/1993) addresses this struggle between spirituality and the commodification of the person by a further development of Max Weber (1904/1958) on the Protestant ethic as the “inner spirit” supporting early capitalism. For Bataille Protestant Calvinism attempted for the middle classes what Marx would later envision for a broader proletariat: to re-confer an individual sovereignty of Being through newly sanctified motives for an increasing economic productivity—motives ultimately doomed to ever more secularization. In Calvinism the accumulation of personal wealth became the outer sign of God’s grace, but with the inevitable effect of “living less and less in the present” (Bataille, 1967/1991, p. 133), and more and more oriented toward a future sovereignty postponed into a heavenly after-life. Meanwhile, Marxist communism mandated an intensified economic productivity and rapid industrialization in order to *someday* allow a new utopian form of shared Being-ness. Marxism sought to finally attain, with Bataille here quoting the early Marx, the sense of “not being merely like a thing, but of being in a sovereign manner” (Bataille, 1967/1991, p. 135)—which had previously been conferred by an illusory God. In both Protestantism and Marxism an intrinsic individual autonomy of Being was inevitably lost to a permanently

projected and receding future—heavenly or earthly. Both traditions for Bataille reflected a maximum point of tension between a sacred presence and profane utility, destined by the ever more complex servilities of modern economic life to tilt permanently toward the latter.²

Bataille also developed his own version of Ernst Troeltsch's (1931/1992) prediction of a future this-worldly, secular mysticism, as the "secret religion" of the educated middle classes—a "new age" spirituality in the face of the radical secularization of a more traditionally ethical-prophetic Judeo-Christian orientation (see also Hunt, 2003). For Bataille such a potential shift toward Weber's inner-worldly mysticism would rest on a potential "widespread upward adjustment of living standards," in which the sheer excesses of modern capitalism would ultimately generate a version of the post-war Marshall Plan for all peoples. Such a prosperity and expanded conditions for leisure would create the outward conditions for a renewed individual sovereignty more typical of traditional shamanic peoples, and would encourage a widespread "interiority" and openness to ecstasy. For Weber (1922/1963) any widespread development of a pervasive this-worldly mysticism would indeed require the degree of individual freedom and material security that Bataille, writing in the late 1950s, was anticipating. Bataille hoped for an expanded equality of living standards, which was indeed the initial promise of a post-war capitalism and its potential globalization, such that a re-newed sense of sovereign Being would allow "an ahistorical mode of existence" or an "end of history" (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 190), and a post-Nietzschian "cultivation of individual excess." Interestingly, with both the later Heidegger and some contemporary transpersonalists, Bataille held that his re-newed sovereign humanity would be both a return to a shamanic "first beginning" before the "invention" of God, *and* a "second beginning" for a more originary ecstatic capacity understood as an essential part of new expanded humanism. Something like this was also envisioned by early psychedelic drug researchers such as Leary (1968) and Grof (1972).³

Some Further Insights, Limitations, and Selective Metapathologies of Bataille on Ecstasy

"Intensity," "Anguish," and the Rejection of Technique

Although Bataille clearly shows a conceptual interest in the more subtle formless states of the developed

Christian and Eastern mystics, his predominant language for the spontaneous ecstasies he advocates, and his own experiences in *Inner Experience*, center on words such as "intensity," "anguish," "agitation," "terror," and "nausea." In this way he keeps his focus on what Evelyn Underhill (1955) would regard as the preliminary or access levels of "purgation," well short of more unitive states. His emphasis on a dimension of increasing intensity is also reflected in his inclusion of paroxysmal laughter and erotic transgression in his phenomenology of ecstasy. Initially at least, he saw the formless states of Eastern meditation as a kind of "religious torpor" (Bataille, 1954/1988, p. 183).

With this concentration on "intensity" goes a related exclusive valuing of "spontaneity" and rejection of all "project," "ascesis" or technique. Thus for Bataille both traditional systems of spiritual understanding and their meditative techniques of sustained practice have the unintended consequence of making ecstatic states into a self-fulfilling project—an intended "thing." This also means that he rejects all drug use, without any apparent realization of the more open-ended, less pre-programmed properties of much psychedelic drug research (Grof, 1972). The key seems to be that deliberate induction would threaten spontaneity and freedom. Yet it is hard to see how Bataille could then approach the more subtle stages of unitive experience, with their admittedly paradoxical dedication to "project" in techniques of deep meditation. He also misses the varying degree of consensus among Otto (1917/1958), Max Scheler (1923/1960), and Martin Buber (1957) that the fuller forms of mystical experience are always an emergent dialectic between spontaneous numinous feeling and its schematization in terms of cultural understanding—each leading and further articulating the other (see also Hunt, 2012a).

Proust as This-Worldly Mystic of Presence

Whatever the limitations of Bataille's concentration on the more preliminary or access levels of ecstasy, it seems also to have sensitized him to forms of an emerging this-worldly mysticism generally not recognized as such. In particular there is Bataille's (1954/1988) analysis of Proust's spontaneous experiences of re-lived remembrance as an ecstatic state. For Proust (1927) the seemingly necessary separation of the sense of semantic meaning conferred by imaginative memory from immediate here and now perception means that the latter lacks the sense of heightened significance that follows from its later assimilation in memory. In turn memory lacks the felt reality and impact of immediate

existence. Proust discovered a spontaneous experiential “doubling over” of the felt meaning of specific memory and the immediacy of perceived event as the basis for his *The Past Recaptured*. There he describes a sudden fullness of remembrances re-lived in the here and now as a “timeless joy,” and a “fragment of time in its pure state,” in which “immediately the permanent essence of things, usually concealed, is set free”—such that “liberated from the order of time...the word ‘death’ could have no meaning” (Proust, 1927, pp. 996, 1000).

Bataille identifies this as the same experience of presence or Being central to mystical/ecstatic experience. It would appear to be a version in states of remembrance of the same enhancement of timeless presence described in meditation. In more contemporary transpersonal terms, Proust is describing a version of Maslow on “peak experience” or Gurdjieff on the felt expansions of “self-remembering” in here and now situations, but for Proust located in the full reliving of a significant past situation, thus completing the experiential self awareness of its fully felt presence lacking on the original occasion.⁴

For purposes of more recent comparison, Proust was locating a potential transformation in lived remembrance very similar to the transformation of ordinary dream experience called lucid dreaming—the realization that one is actually dreaming while the dream continues. Just as it is easy to miss the fact that Proust is speaking of much more than vivid memory, lucid dreaming is often wrongly seen as simply a cognitive awakening within the dream. Whereas the actual experience of dream lucidity, and reason for its widespread interest, can often include a sense of felt presence and bliss that make its phenomenology akin to “peak experience” and spontaneous “self remembering” (Hunt, 1989). Indeed the capacity for lucid dreaming is explicitly cultivated as a form of meditative realization in Buddhist and Vedantist mysticism – a linkage also supported by the shared phenomenological, cognitive, and neurophysiological correlates of lucid dreaming and deep meditation (Hunt, 1989; Gackenbach & Bosveld, 1989; Gillespie, 1988). The commonalities between Proust’s felt states of presence in remembrance and the sense of Being in lucid dreams support both as spontaneous meditation-like states.

Spiritual Metapathologies in Bataille’s Life and Work

Bataille has both his own understanding and his own vulnerability in terms of what Almaas (1988) and Maslow (1971) have called the spiritual metapathologies

that can follow from disruptions of the ordinary sense of self in mystical states—including grandiosity, moral inversion, and/or emotional withdrawal. James (1902) called these “theopathies.” Much in the hyper-dramatization of Bataille’s writing and his personal life (see below) suggests such unbalancing effects, while he himself also warns against such risks. He points out that the very transgressive eroticism he advocates risks reducing the other to the status of a mere tool, deprived of the very sovereignty he values. He also suggests that Nietzsche’s “human sacrifice” of God risks the megalomania of oneself becoming God, and so an even greater solitude than that of more traditional mystics. Bataille’s earlier involvement in a sacrificial pagan cult certainly implies his own engulfment within what Grof (1972) saw as the blocked “peri-natal matrices” of violence, torture, and human sacrifice as preliminary to any fuller transpersonal realization. The group members were fortunate indeed that no one was willing to be the actual executioner for the supposed sacrificial volunteer (Suriya, 2002). By the time of the writing of *Inner Experience* in the middle 1940s Bataille was able to say that the importance of images of sacrificial death “should not be understood in the literal sense...of really renewing the savage practice” (Bataille, 1954/1986, p. 196).

He did not, however, distance himself from what can be seen as the metapathology of his own deliberate living out of the “moral evil” of a “transgressive eroticism,” based on the sado-masochism of De Sade reinterpreted as “mystical sovereignty.” In the same spirit that James (1902) saw alcoholism as a distortive “poor man’s mysticism,” the psycho-analyst Masud R. Khan in his *Alienation in Perversions* (1979), also citing De Sade as example, discussed a pattern in some schizoid clients who, complaining of an absence of “feeling real” and as its attempted cure, seek self-transforming “epiphanies” or experiences of Being through risky sado-masochistic sexual adventuring with strangers and in group orgies. For Khan, this is based on the simultaneous attraction to, and fear of, oblivion and “death” that also fascinated Bataille. Khan described a degree of planning and ritual pursuit in these clients that made their sexuality a kind of “private religion” centered on this quasi-mystical search for a way of fully feeling a sense of Being.

The distortive element in both Bataille’s eroticism and in his understanding of traditional mysticism may also be reflected in his suggestion that the “apathy” De Sade advocated, as the emotional detachment needed for

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the most extreme sado-masochistic practices, is the same as the “apathy” of the more subtle and formless mysticisms (Bataille, 1954/1988). At the same time, he warned that in any cultivating of the “ecstatic sovereignties” of transgressive eroticism it will be important to limit “possibly disastrous consequences” by an awareness of one’s own limitations and tolerance (Bataille, 1957/1986, p. 185). Bataille’s earlier life provides good reason for these cautions, as well as some understanding of the “irresistible excesses” with which he came to experiment.

The Personal Equation:

Bataille’s Childhood as Trauma and Source

Throughout Bataille’s childhood he, with his mother and sister, helped to care for his invalidated slowly dying syphilitic father. The father’s suffering was extreme. He was incontinent, staring in his blindness unblinkingly into the sun, often writhing and screaming in physical pain, and with hints of attempted sexual molestations prior to his increasing tertiary dementia (Suriya, 2002). Bataille seems to have felt a deep love for this horrifically suffering father, and so also an immense guilt after the family felt constrained to leave him behind in the forced evacuation from Rheims during World War I. This happened when Bataille was seventeen, only to learn of his final death a year later. It becomes understandable how the young orthodoxly religious Bataille would identify his father’s suffering and sacrificial abandonment with the crucifixion of Jesus, and he later described his initial year of seminary training, prior to its abrupt abandonment, as an “attempted evasion” of his extreme guilt. This more traditional attempt at religious sublimation was then followed by an equally understandable and longer lasting conversion to Nietzsche, who had also died in tertiary syphilitic insanity, and the latter’s “beyond good and evil” of the sovereign “overman.” During these initial years Bataille, in apparent deep identification with the father, pursued extremes of sado-masochistic sexuality in brothel orgies that even his “libertine” friends among French surrealist circles found “debauched.” He also experimented with Russian roulette (Suriya, 2002).

Some degree of stabilization, and a lifelong gratitude, came through his psychoanalytic therapy with Adrien Borel, who, similarly to Otto Rank in Paris of the 1920s (Lieberman, 1985), specialized in the relatively unorthodox treatment of the highly creative. Bataille later said “it changed me from being as absolutely obsessive as I was into someone relatively viable,” (Suriya, p. 99), and

it helped to replace his inhibited silence with others with a rather forceful extraversion. Borel encouraged him to partially exteriorize his sexual obsessions in a series of initially anonymous pornographic novels (he worked as a state librarian), beginning with *The Story of the Eye* and culminating in his best known *Blue of Noon*. Much of the imagery of these novels was apparently derived from his father’s suffering, including notions of a pineal eye in all persons capable of staring directly into the sun, and of the sun itself as cosmic anus excreting light. Borel also gave him a series of pictures of a Chinese torture victim, with hair literally standing on end, undergoing the “death of a hundred pieces,” one cut per day followed by the photograph. Bataille later described these photographs, with or without irony, as inspiring an ecstasy of love and compassion, rather than any of the sado-masochism with which we also know he continued to engage (Bataille, 1954/1968). So perhaps there is in all this a kind of sublimation, eventually as its own kind of spirituality, which in his own anguish and guilt, a seminary training could not address.

His secret society, Acéphale, had, apart from their initial ambitions for an actual human sacrifice, some similarity to other “Nietzsche cults” of the era (Noll, 1994). These, sometimes also inspired by the anarchism of Sorel (1919/1961), sought a re-enchantment of secularized society by means of the often violent imageries of pagan myth. The actual membership and specific ritual and orgiastic activities of Bataille’s group have remained secret, but surprisingly enough at least its outer fringes included a young Jacques Lacan, later one of the major innovators of modern psychoanalysis. Some critics later saw a link with the similar use of myth and ritual in early German Fascism, and Bataille, like Jung at the same time (Ellwood, 1999), was certainly fascinated by the propaganda methods and ritual rallies of the National Socialists. However, Bataille soon came to see Nazism, with its emphasis on the servitude and subordination of the individual, as a deep falsification of the personal freedom and ecstatic sovereignty sought by his own group. By the mid 1940s his own “mystical” path had become entirely individual.

That said, the personal impression he continued to make on others was complex and sometimes disconcerting. He is said to have had an especially portentous, somewhat unctuous manner of speech, described as having the “solemnity” of a prelate. Some saw this, given his advocacy of sado-masochistic group

sex, as “diabolical,” as if he were an “evil priest,” while most who came to know him best saw this seriousness as covering an exalted, often childlike, spontaneity, and a tendency to be carried away by the emotions of the moment (Suriya, 2002). Certainly, however, his understanding of an ecstatic sexuality had less to do with any would-be Dionysian yea-saying, but rather reflected a more purgative inversion of values. He described his sexuality, which he associates with a deliberate immersion in “animal muck,” “putrification,” and “anticipation of death” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 119), as “this disgust that has become my delight” (p. 118). He terms this his “hypermorality,” based on a “sanctity of evil” that “reaches toward a pure sovereign intensity” (Suriya, 2002, pp. 431-432). Again there is this form of spirituality that insists on purgation and anguish, and approaches a kind of Gnostic antinomian inversion of values (see Hunt, 2003).

Whatever his original insights into a contemporary this-worldly mysticism, Bataille’s version of a Nietzschean yea-saying remained caught within his own characterological issues, be they meta-pathological or more overtly clinical. In a late interview Bataille spoke of God’s “despair”: “a despair no human being could have the power to imagine,” such that “to be God is equivalent to torture” (Suriya, 2002, p. 483). The necessity of God’s continuous assent to the very worst of all that exists creates a despair that would justify God in committing suicide. In this it is hard not to see the suffering of both himself and his father, and a life spent in its attempted spiritual redemption – some of that genuine, some severely distortive.

It seems likely that without Borel there would have been instead only an early death.

An Original Sociology of Ecstatic Sovereignty

The most original element of Bataille on ecstasy, only fully developed in his final writings *The Accursed Share* and *Erotism*, comes with what he saw as the intrinsically social aspect of ecstatic states—their opening into the only genuine intimacy possible for human beings. With Durkheim (1912/1961), states of ecstatic Being are intrinsically a “collective consciousness” (see also Hunt, 2010, 2011). They are “a contagious subjectivity like an intimate tidal wave” communicated by “sensible emotional contact” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 243). With Weber on charisma, as the social face of Otto’s numinous, ecstatic states are for Bataille an intrinsic, if

often nascent, human capacity most readily projected onto others—in religion onto God, later in more secular contexts onto the “sovereign” leaders of different forms of social order, and most recently onto the “stars” of mass media. In Bataille’s secular spirituality of the future all these projections must be taken back and re-owned as the intrinsic existential right of each sovereign individual. Here Bataille quotes Nietzsche from his late notebooks:

“All the beauty and sublimely we have bestowed upon real and imaginary things, I will reclaim as the property and product of men.” To which Bataille adds: “We see our own deep subjectivity into these imaginary others ... for which we have renounced the possibility of seeing the magnificence in ourselves. ... There was nothing in God or in the kings, that was not first in man.” (Bataille, 1976/1993, pp. 375-376, 321)

With regard to acute psychotic states, considered here as the inversion of mystical experience (Hunt, 1995, 2003, 2007), there is some evidence, supportive of Bataille on the social projection of the numinous, of how intense subjective states are not only readily projected onto others, but actually induced in them—a phenomenon in later object-relations psychoanalysis termed “projective identification” (Bion, 1962). Harold F. Searles (1979), in his long-term psychotherapy with both hospitalized schizophrenic and borderline patients, described the spontaneous appearance in his own awareness of what he calls a “psychotic counter-transference,” in which he comes to understand that his own bizarre involuntary imagery and even delusional content normally alien to himself, is actually indicative of inner states in his patients which are unbearable to them, and so induced instead in the empathic therapist. This would be a version of Bataille’s “intimacy” of deep subjectivity, appearing even within the ostensible emotional isolation of schizophrenia. To the extent Searles could recognize the ostensible source of these states and inwardly accept them, the patients could gradually begin to report these same experiences in themselves, now felt to be more tolerable. W. R. Bion (1962) suggested that such acceptance by the therapist allows these projected toxic states to be inwardly “de-toxified” and so “returned” to a self-aware ownership in the patient.

Searles (1979) concluded that often as children such patients had unconsciously taken on the intolerable anxieties of their near-psychotic parents, in part as an automatically empathic attempt to make bearable or

“cure” the suffering of their loved parents—but doomed to fail owing to the depth of the anxieties involved and their own immaturity. One can generalize Searles’ model to suggest that children high in creativity and imaginative sensitivity are fated to take on the valuative crises of their surroundings, initially of their parents and then potentially as adults of the valuative dilemmas of society at large (Hunt, 2000). In tribal times these would have been the children, often following the early death of a parent, whose visions and dreams marked them as future shamans (Eliade, 1964). Certainly in Bataille’s case we see his massively overwhelming identification with the slowly dying father and its later attempted alignment with a redemptive post-Nietzschean spirituality.

The later Bataille intuited his own similar model for the societal projection and reciprocal induction of mystical-ecstatic experience. He suggests that after the greater individual sovereignty of access to ecstatic states in shamanic societies was gradually lost, more complex social orders “worked” in part through the projection of this capacity, still nascent within each individual, onto powerful others defined as “sovereign.” Meanwhile the latter’s often involuntary enactment of this “excess” helped to compensate the average person for the inevitable servilities of daily life. Indeed subsequent anthropological research has shown a steady decline in socially sanctioned individual access to trance experience as social-economic complexity increases (Bourguignon, 1973). Bataille goes further to suggest that a projected existential sovereignty and nascent ecstasy is then sensed indirectly and by proxy through its mirrored reflections, back from respected rulers and priests to its actual source in the individual. “The possibility that any man has of perceiving his own inner truth in others, and the difficulty he has in perceiving it in himself, accounts for [this] disarming aspect of sovereignty” (Bataille, 1976/1993, p. 247). Namely, that we unconsciously give it away, and gain its pale reflection back from religious leaders, kings, and now movie stars.

For Bion (1965) we cannot *know* our own Being but only *be* it. Bataille is adding that we can both know it and be it indirectly and partially, as reflected back to us by certain significant others. It is here that Bataille also anticipates the understanding of self awareness developed by the psychoanalyst Winnicott (1971), Lacan, and recent cognitive approaches to mirroring (Meltzoff, 2002), in which what the developing infant sees in the responsive faces of its caretakers is its own

emotive reflection, which it then comes to own as its personal sense of “self” through its identification with them. Human self consciousness is thus based on the partial re-owning of one’s own expressive states, as to varying degrees they are reflected back to us by others.

For Bataille, quite apart from the political and physical oppression involved, Feudal societies could become more “livable” for the average person through this embodied reflection of individual sovereignty back from God and King, and from the magnificence of medieval cathedrals—a sovereignty necessarily sacrificed in the daily labor of the peasants. The latter could come to an indirect sense of ecstatic presence by virtue of imagining what it might be “like” to be a king, lord, or priest, while this would in turn place unconscious pressures on those with such “sovereign” status that they may or may not have been able to embody without some risk of paranoid grandiosity—a phenomenology well documented by Canetti in his *Crowds and Power* (1966).

By extension, one could add that a corresponding danger in “new age” spiritual movements can appear when leaders lack the humility to recognize their “holding” of their followers own incipient ecstatic capacities, and also fail to accept the guidance they gain by means of that very projection. Also, a spiritual teacher may not be able to “hold” the more negative inflations, despair, and deficiencies that they are also asked to contain and de-toxify. A further consequence of the social phenomenology Bataille lays bare occurs where more overtly “pathological” gurus (Storr, 1996) may not themselves be able to embody and feel what their followers actually feel in their presence, as a sort of “inversion” of the forms of group “empowerments” based on genuine realizations in the teacher. Given the subtlety of such relationships, perhaps we should take figures such as Socrates or Jesus more at their word, and without either our own or any attributed irony, when they appear not to know, must ask others, or for a time cannot fully accept, who they are actually becoming. The gradual ownership, containment, and constructive direction of such “excess” must have been all but overpowering.⁵

Bataille’s understanding of the social externalization and reflective identification with one’s own capacity for multiple levels of numinous experience may be open to further research in the context of contemporary transpersonal studies. Although

meditation in Buddhist, Sufi, Yogic, and related “new age” practices is often solitary, there is also what Bataille might understand as the “reciprocal echoing” of the widely attested enhancement of meditative experience in group settings and retreats. Similarly, there can be the subtle guidance that comes from exposure to the outward embodiment of realized states in advanced meditators and teachers, where what is perceived in these others is both the actual outer expression of the realization sought and the reflected projection back of its nascent potential and beginning within oneself. All human consciousness, at its highest and most debased, and its ostensibly most interior forms, is intrinsically social in its form, genesis, and potential collectivity (see also Hunt, 2010).

Conclusions

By the end of the posthumously published third volume of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille seems to have had a “project” after all, one that he attributes also to Nietzsche, as the development of a naturalistically understood form of individual mysticism, and one that has at least some resonance to later developments in transpersonal psychology. From Nietzsche he derives the view that God is a projection of an intrinsically human capacity for ecstasy and the sense of sovereign Being, and that the task of our radically secularized era is to take this actually redeeming and healing capacity back as our own. Again, he quotes Nietzsche from his late Notebooks:

“One must shatter the all; and [our] baptizing it [as] God; take back what we have given to the unknown... and give it back to what is nearest, what is ours.” [Then Bataille:] This sums up the whole movement of my thought....I would rediscover in [us] what was enchanting in God. (Bataille, 1976/1993, pp. 321, 459).

It is this tendency for our thoroughly human capacity for ecstatic experience to be carried and maintained as if from outside that would be called into question in a secular mysticism of the future.

The problem is that this projection of our Being that Bataille traces historically may not be accidental or somehow optional, but rather intrinsic. This may follow from the permanent incompleteness of the self-referential awareness underlying all symbolic intelligence, such that it cannot encompass itself from within. This also fits with the corresponding ubiquity of a “reflective” physical metaphor that runs all through language, as necessary

for the self depiction of states of consciousness and all complex feeling—following here the demonstrations of Lakoff and Johnson (1999), Asch (1961), and the later Jung (1944/1953). We need these outward mirrors for the sustaining and representing of even everyday emotionality. As social dialogical beings, our fullest development of an immanent spiritual capacity may correspondingly *require* its projection and outward location, as *beyond* our phenomenal sense of “ourselves,” to be reflected back in the maximally pervasive metaphors from nature based on light, open space, and energy. This would be the cognitive medium for ecstatic experience (see also Hunt 1984, 1995, 2006).

A defining phenomenological characteristic of the numinous is the sense that “it has you” not “you having it.” Such experience in its fullest development is *felt* as coming from something *beyond*. These experiences are dialogically patterned and metaphorically structured. *Scientifically* we may say they are “within,” but *phenomenologically* they come from a larger Beingness sensed as beyond/outside the ordinary sense of self, and “reflected” back to us via metaphors of encompassing light and spaciousness.

A related issue that Bataille’s naturalistic “immanence” may not be able to resolve is the question of what he calls his “atheology.” To what extent, if Heidegger and Bataille are correct that the phenomenology of human consciousness requires its own reflective amplification that will be indistinguishable from the general categories of religion and mysticism, must a modern naturalism conclude that these forms are drawn forward as a kind of cognitive trick or illusion in order to fill temporarily the “blindspot” of our intrinsically open and uncompletable self awareness? Spirituality, as understood from Freud (1930/1961) to Persinger (1987) then becomes a sort of “anxiety buffer” for the trap set by our uncompletable self aware symbolic capacity. At times something like this does seem to be Bataille’s own, ultimately nihilistic, conclusion.

Against that may be two considerations – the first immanent, the second perhaps something more. With respect to the former, and as developed in more detail elsewhere (Hunt, 2000, 2003; Wilber, 2000), there is the view of mystical-ecstatic experiences as potential markers of an abstract version of “formal operations” within emotional/interpersonal intelligence. These states do seem to support a genuine decentering from an ego-centrism of self image and a radical equilibration

of compassionate empathy toward others. Along these lines of the functionality of spirituality as a fully mature emotional intelligence, one could also call attention to the small but convincing literature showing that classical forms of mystical experience can be directly curative and spontaneously remittive of acute psychotic states (Boisen 1936/1952; Bowers, 1974), and experimental studies showing mystical states to be an accompanant/mediator of individual creativity in the arts (Ayers, Beaton, & Hunt, 1999; Michalica & Hunt, 2013).

On the side of “otherness” as necessary mirror for transpersonal experience, as the author has developed at greater length elsewhere (Hunt, 1995, 2006), the metaphors of light, shining darkness, and energy embodied in more developed mystical states are drawn from the same perceptual matrix that is the source of metaphors intrinsic to all forms of human thought – humanistic, scientific, and even mathematical (Lakoff & Nunez, 2000). Traditionally, in both classical civilizations and in the elaborately metaphoric mythologies of tribal peoples, this metaphoricity has allowed the coordination of human microcosm and physical macrocosm, creating the sense of “unus mundus” that enabled traditional peoples to feel “at home” in the universe of their understanding.

The fascination in both contemporary consciousness studies (Atmanspacher & Primas, 2006) and transpersonal psychology (Wilber, 1995) with the seeming correspondences of the phenomenology of consciousness and/or mystical states with aspects of the spontaneity and indeterminism of quantum physics, and the space/time relativities of physical cosmology, may have less to do with mystics somehow directly intuiting modern physics (Goswami, 1993), or with attempts to use quantum mechanics to explain neuronal activity (Hameroff, 2014)—whether the latter be seen as promising or itself unintentionally projective (Hunt, 2001). Rather these parallels would follow from the phenomenologies of consciousness and modern physics both drawing common metaphors from the same background matrix of ambient perception. The complex patterning of perception in motile organisms will itself mirror or resonate with the deeper dimensions of physical reality by necessity of survival, and especially when understood by Gibson (1979) as based on the intricate flow gradients that generate the cross species space-times of relativistic organismic movement (see Hunt, 1995, 2006).

These correspondences, based on the drawing out of shared metaphors for both consciousness and physical science, will generate their own reciprocal mirrors of human microcosm and physical macrocosm. These will vary by culture and era, and Miller (2000) and Arnheim (1969) have already demonstrated the emergent parallels by the 1920s between modern abstract art and contemporary physics. To return to Bataille on his “excess” as the fundamental form of both human and physical realities, if this is not deeply resonant with recent formulations of an expansive dark energy, universe creating quantum fluctuations in nothingness generating the “big bang,” cosmic inflation, multi-verses, and infinitely proliferating parallel universes, it is not clear what would be. To dismiss such correspondences as a sort of abstract anthropomorphism assumes that a) we can ultimately avoid this, if even mathematics itself is our own metaphor-based interior language, b) that this correspondence was not already part of these formulations in physics itself, and c) with Heidegger (1942/2013), that *we* could ultimately know what is or is not anthropomorphic anyway, in a universe that somehow generated us who also reflect/represent it. How with any certainty would we pull out of that circle and finally distinguish between ourselves and cosmos if our knowledge of both must be ultimately based on the same root perceptual metaphors?

That said, is it somehow “wrong” to respond with a sacred sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude, while using their respective self-representing physical metaphors, to the very existence of that universe? Are we required to stay with Bataille on spirituality as entirely immanent, and purely subjective? In his book *A Universe from Nothing* (2012) the physicist Lawrence Krauss claims to have demonstrated the final irrelevance of all religious and spiritual response to this question of Being itself, since the physics of quantum fluctuations within “what is essentially nothing” would, on the grounds of physics alone, have generated the “big bang.” He then states that physics thereby renders all anthropomorphic spiritual categories superceded, making the universe itself the “ultimate free lunch” (Krauss, 2012, p. 150). What seems utterly strange in this conclusion, especially given the “negative theologies” also of such interest to Bataille, is how or why the avowedly mundane metaphor of “free lunch” for the creative emergence from “nothing,” is somehow superior to Eckhart, Ibn Arabi, or the later Heidegger on the emergence of Being as a “gift”

and “grace”—felt as transcending and encompassing humanity, and as occasion for an objective gratitude, humility, and wonder.

If to a surprising degree the great mystics and modern physics could be said to “see the same” in these ways, it becomes a potentially rather significant matter of existential and cultural choice whether we choose “free lunch” or “grace”—or even, as Bataille himself occasionally verged upon, and perhaps understandably given his personal suffering, the sort of “Gnostic curse” reflected in his suggestion that the effluence of time and creation out of Eckhart’s Godhead could be taken as a manifestation of God’s “self-hatred” (Bataille, 1954/1988, pp. 102-103). Yet it does seem that some form of “anthropomorphic” felt response to our creation becomes inevitable—whether explicit in mysticism or mostly tacit in physics. We find ourselves intrinsically linked to some sense of what is “beyond” and “encompassing,” and how we understand that, and the extent we can allow our openness to it, becomes crucial for how we live. “Grace” inspires a gratitude, while “free lunch” implies a triviality.

Accordingly, Bataille’s own envisioning of a fully developed understanding of ecstasy as an entirely interior human capacity may have to fall short of the potential he foresaw for a secular spirituality of the future, at least to the extent it would also be *felt* only in terms of our own subjectivity and inwardness. The phenomenology of mystical-ecstatic experience seems intrinsically pulled beyond that. However humanly sovereign and even noble Bataille’s core understanding of the numinous as human capacity aspired to be, the experiences in question seem to have a broader “truth value” than he was able to envision. Perhaps very much with Nietzsche as his major influence, Bataille’s own search for a unitive spiritual affirmation had to remain more asserted than fully embodied. Given the burdens he carried, what he did manage to achieve and foreshadow remains deserving of both respect and empathy, and of some further development of what remains novel and unassimilated in his later work.

Notes

1. It was the situation of this ecstatic moment as exteriorized and dramatized in both the experience of the sacrificial victim and of the tribal observers identifying with the victim about to be ritually

slaughtered that led Bataille to his fascination with such practices.

2. Bataille also had his own way of extending Weber’s (1922/1963) hints of a unique predisposition towards a later secularization even in early Christianity, and more than in any other world religion. For Weber it would seem to be an ethical “on earth as it is in heaven” and incarnation of a “son of man” that would both blur and endanger the division between sacred and profane that Eliade (1959) and Jung (1938/1958) saw as central to a directly experiential spirituality. Bataille (1957/1986), in turn, expresses his own puzzlement over a Christian immortality based on the preservation of a “discontinuous” personhood, rather than as an amplification of the “continuity” and unitive “intimacy” of mystical-ecstatic experience. For Bataille the essence of a fully felt spirituality would be some final release from the endless “project” and demands of a mundane, separate individuality.
3. Correspondingly, after the initial flowering of a “new age” spirituality through the 1980s, reflecting the anticipations of Troeltsch and Bataille, a Weberian analysis of more recent economic pressures on the once expanded middle classes would predict the more reactive, prophetic fundamentalisms of recent years, as more communal and with less of the individuality central to mysticism. Meanwhile on the side of a more populist this-worldly mysticism, we find, in addition to continuing “new age” tendencies, the more anarchic underground use of opiates, barbituates, and methamphetamines as ways of catching brief and ultimately self-destructive flashes of specific qualities of numinous-uncanny states, whose socio-cultural “set and setting” unfortunately entail both a context and aftermath of anomie and often despair (Hunt, 2003, 2013).
4. Bataille’s discovery of Proust as this-worldly mystic is analogous to the realizations of Rank (1936/1978), Balint (1932/1965), and Reich (1949) that the psychoanalytic experience of “catharsis” was not merely a repetition of the past, but in itself a potential felt “rebirth,” “new beginning,” or “ecstatic release” not part of the original memory, and with features of “peak experience” that foreshadowed the beginning of a more transpersonal phase of “self-realization” often unrecognized by more traditional psychotherapists.

5. An irony of the present highly secularized era in which children are often not exposed to any formal spiritual traditions, and so are lacking any systematic exteriorizations of ecstatic capacity into the supra-sensible, is that they are thereby constrained into their own more local “religion of the family.” This very modern phenomenon is already embedded in Freud’s theory of the “primal horde,” as what is widely seen as his own projection of the middle class nuclear family, with its oedipal patterning of the punishing father, onto his fanciful account of early hominid evolution—then to be used in turn as his “explanation” of the Judeo-Christian God as divine father (Freud, 1939/1961). In what I am referring to as the quasi-religion of the secular family, and using Bataille’s model of the external attribution of one’s own spiritual potential, in the absence of any formal, socially endorsed transcendent God, the young child will project the entirety of its own nascent childlike but numinous power, will, and compassion onto the now god-like parents, and “worship” in them those same qualities. Meanwhile the parents themselves will see their own once potential numinous capacity into the actual innocence and spontaneity of the child. The seeds of nascent religious experience are thus communally held within the family, making the mutual disillusionments of adolescence all the worse, and without any more overtly mythic externalized mirror and container for what are very real energies of the human being. In the case of Bataille, by contrast, more traditional religious categories would at least have partly contained the suffering of his father as its own crucifixion, while still making the extremity of his larger than life status a kind of God-man within the family.

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