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Georges Bataille, Philosopher of Laughter

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Georges Bataille, Philosopher of Laughter

1. Introduction to Bataille

Georges Bataille was a philosopher, anthropologist, a kind of theologian, poet, an economist, a novelist, some sort of Marxist. He was influenced by the Marquis de Sade, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss. Writings are during the period of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Alexandre Kojève's Hegel lectures. Well-read, polemical, at times a libertine, any scholarly interest in Bataille has to first decide which avenue of his thought, and life, to pursue.

For my purposes here in developing a sketch of an ethical system based in Bataille's writing, rather than start with the most famous longer theoretical works, it would be better to start back in 1933 with the essay "The Notion of Expenditure". In this short text Bataille notices something amiss with both ontology, for instance, although not explicit in his essay the philosophy of Heidegger, but more importantly in current economic theory. To summarize quickly, the notion of expenditure is precisely this: material conditions and their lack have not given us a sufficient model for economic exchange. At its base it is not scarcity of goods that turns the economic wheels; instead, Bataille argues, the economy rotates by unproductive expenditures, i.e., via the sumptuous loss of material goods and energies excessive to a normal functioning system. In a humorous fashion he argues:

The two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement, whose combination is expressed by the locomotive's wheels and pistons.

These two motions are reciprocally transformed, the one into the other.

Thus one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and... that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus.¹

Sexual intercourse, an initially useless activity, makes the world turn by producing offspring (or so he wishes to say). Later, around 1949, Bataille would call this excess that each individual, society, state has, the accursed share, and develop this economics into a three volume work.

Acquisitive and conservative economics falls short in its explanation of the need to expend in a nonproductive manner. Granted, one form of consumption is "the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals' productive activity in a given society" (118) – such minimum requirements give us the bare necessity for existence generally. Expenditures of this sort, a utilitarian kind, have an end beyond themselves, i.e., a preservation of life. On the other hand, unproductive expenditures, in loss and destruction, are themselves end points. We discover the object, or person, in its present and full meaning by consumption. Bataille provides us with examples of unproductive expenditures such as jewels, where fortunes are sacrificed for small objects; cults, where animals and individuals are sacrificed; gaming and betting, in which we find large sums spent on the games and lost in bets (cf. what Freud calls a mania in "Mourning and Melancholia"); and arts, specifically poetry, where the practical use of words no longer reigns. The destruction of goods, as Bataille notes of

¹ Georges Bataille, "The Solar Anus", in *Visions of Excess*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1985, 6.

sacrifice in particular, is an intimacy among men and women, the formation of a community through great loss. The most famous of which is the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth:

If human beings had kept their own integrity and hadn't sinned, God on the one hand and human beings on the other would have persevered in their respective isolation. A night of death wherein Creator and creatures blend together and lacerated each other on all sides, were challenged at the extreme limits of shame: this is what was required for their communion.²

Expenditure is a loss of bodily energy, finding that expenditure pleasurable (if we are able) in excessive loss to the point of exhaustion. This exhaustion, of energy or one's wealth, the two are the same, brings us closer to the very core of existence, human or otherwise: death and the desire to return to the continuity or fluidity of the universe. The Bataillean subject expends recklessly for no other purpose than that expenditure. Whether we are climaxing in sexual activity or donating all of our wealth, this loss, and the anxiety that stems from not being able to preserve ourselves for tomorrow, is joyous in a Spinozist sense. We experience the universe in its indifferent response to life and death and remove ourselves from the all-important place atop a hierarchy of other forms of life. Once we meditate on such a brute fact, refuse to take ourselves so seriously in a constant pursuit of some higher end, we laugh.

2. Setting the Stage

To elaborate on what Bataille calls a philosophy of laughter, we can turn to his book *Inner Experience*. It takes the form of short and scattered essays written in the 30s up until its publication in 1943 (re-published and expanded in 1954).³ Its form is more like a diary than a philosophical text; but between the vague personal experiences Bataille relates are profound philosophical statements which give us much work to do. What I want to do then is leap into this text by way of laughter. It is perhaps the most significant of experiences Bataille writes on, I think mostly because it is an excellent blanket term and practice from which he discusses all the other themes and practices developed in the rest of his work. As well, I hope this account of laughter gives us a different perspective on the term, and furthermore, on ethics.

The Preface to *Inner Experience* does not hesitate. This "ontology" is to outline a mode of being removed from the intoxicating aroma of "the desire to be everything". Such a desire is defined by the construction of "narcotics" to avoid sufferings: we identify with the "entirety of the universe", believe ourselves to be immortal, put hope for salvation in gods. Heidegger's solipsistic *Dasein*, with its affirmation that everything is for the individual, or Immanuel Kant's universalized morality, are two such examples, the latter Bataille notes in passing while the former seemed to trouble Bataille for many years.

Herein one finds the key to man's integrity: "NO LONGER TO WANT TO BE EVERYTHING, [which] is the hatred of salvation" (IE, 174). When two certainties are embraced, namely that we are not everything and that we will eventually disappear, one touches upon an inner experience, a finding of your respective place in the universe. When separated from the intoxication of the desire to be everything, we find, in addition, a place filled with laughter. The subject of *Inner Experience* is, firstly, the self-acknowledged suffering of

² Bataille, On Nietzsche, trans. Bruce Boone, St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1992, 18.

³ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt, Albany, NY: SUNY, 1988. Hereafter cited as IE.

disintoxication, from those narcotics which sustain a coherent and illusory stable identity, and secondly, to scale the summit to the “*extreme limit of the possible*.”

3. A Philosophy of Laughter

In 1920, a then young Bataille was in London pursuing his studies at the British Museum. While there he was lucky enough to have dinner with Henri Bergson. Bataille knew he was a philosopher, but had not, up until this point, read him (and it seems by this year he had not read any philosophy). Prior to the meeting he picked up Bergson’s *Laughter* (1900). After reading and meeting the man, Bataille described feeling disappointed, by both the work and the author behind it. It was this year however that Bataille found the key to his thinking: laughter (IE, 66).⁴ 32 years following he restates this finding and sums his *oeuvre* in the lecture, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears”:

In fact, I can say that, insofar as I am doing philosophical work, my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and it does not even claim to go further. It is a philosophy that doesn’t concern itself with problems other than those that have been given to me in this precise experience.⁵

Bergson’s book, despite it being a disappointment, still “impassioned” Bataille because it was possible to reflect on such a topic. Laughter appears in Bataille’s work in the same way as sacrifice and poetry; it is another articulation of what he calls nonknowledge; that which escapes reason and understanding, those experiences (contra the transmission of logic and information) which are not within the realm of project, or as I began with, for the sake of simplicity, nonknowledge is the instant of unproductive expenditure. In other words, it is the unknown which causes us to laugh (NLT, 135). Indeed, it is the unexpected happenings which are the most unknown, and make us laugh most heavily (NLT, 136).

When we shed our stable identities which are comprised of seriousness, projects, immortality, and the like, Bataille describes this experience of nonknowledge as laughter. Laughter bursts forth as well, as I started with, in unproductive expenditure. It is also true that some of the most fear-inducing events are those that require us to expend recklessly. It would mean the world to our long-time friend if we could fly across the ocean to spend time with her; despite neuroses and taboos, your partner asks for a more transgressive sexual experience; 20 below zero and a person cracks the ice on a lake and is calling for help. In each of these instances we could easily stop ourselves: “I do not have the time, because of all the work I need to do, and I also don’t have the money”; “I would never do that sort of perverse thing”; “I too might drown”. We make such statements because we believe ourselves to be far more important than the other individual, all the while lacking the awareness that we make similar demands. This egoism, the refusal to shed even a part of it, is the unethical for Bataille. We step out of ourselves and encounter the other ethically in an intimate moment when lives are at stake. This moment comes when what we

⁴ Cf. Michel Surya’s chapter on this meeting, “The depth of worlds”, *Georges Bataille*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, London: Verso, 2002; Bataille, “Aphorisms for the System”, in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2001.153. Hereafter cited as AS.

⁵ Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears”, in *Unfinished System*, 138. Hereafter cited as NLT.

believe to be our existence, as the only and most important one there is, is also the moment in which our destruction is no longer such a great loss.

...I consider my coming into the world – which depended on the birth and conjunction of a given man and woman, then on the moment of their conjunction. There exists, in fact, a unique moment in relation to the possibility of me – and thus the infinite improbability of this coming into the world appears. For if the tiniest difference had occurred in the course of the successive events of which I am the result, in place of this *me*, integrally avid to be *me*, there would have been “an *other*.”⁶

This meditation demarcates the end of solipsism because the I that I believed myself to be is contingent upon unproductive expenditures (sexual intercourse) and the recklessness that is demanded. The ego, which I carry proudly around, was brought into existence by a chance that two individuals collided in an infinitely large universe. Precisely this meditation, and others like it, is the sort that is akin to the mystics. When we embrace our existence as one no more grand than any other it is possible then to expend for another’s pleasure and well-being, which we hope, can never be sufficiently articulated due to the fits of laughter between or among the persons involved. Laughter is the forming of a community or communion.

How I arrived at this thesis will be the project of the next few pages. Let’s take a trivial example: one has a chance meeting on the street with a friend. This produces a brief chuckle (NLT, 135). Another: a fly on an orator nose’s (IE, 61).⁷ A third: a woman falls on the street or a serious man slips on a banana peel.⁸ We would not laugh if the woman who fell on the sidewalk had instead dropped from a window, and furthermore, if she had been one who mattered to us. The latter scenario fills us with immense anguish and horror, while the former is comic. But the two situations are in fact related for they both propel us out of the seriousness with which we live our lives: “When you laugh, you perceive yourself to be the accomplice of a destruction of what you are” (IE, 192). The burst of laughter touches on the limits of the possible; we perceive and understand ourselves as mortals when the person across from us appears comic or absurd.

This is no naïve childishness. Gilles de Rais never laughed. This Gilles de Rais was a 15th century child murderer, who also fought alongside Joan of Arc. He murdered anywhere between 40 and 250 children for the goal of immortality. Bataille wrote an essay on him in the 1950s, his interest being somewhat similar to the discussion here.⁹ A childish ignorance places all faith in the knowledge of grown-ups, or like Gilles de Rais, in alchemy and conjuring demons – and we must, according to Bataille, contest what we think we know, question authority – and such is not accomplished by feigning naivety or leaving projects solely in the hands of others, or in Gilles de Rais’ case salvation in the hands of the demons he conjured (IE, 42).

One must know anguish to be able to laugh, one must know that the grave seriousness we give to our projects should reduce us to laughter and tears:

⁶ Bataille, “Sacrifices”, in *Visions of Excess*, 130.

⁷ The fly first landed in one of Bataille’s earliest writings for the journal *Documents* (1929). Cf. “Human Face”, in *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. Alastair Brotchie, trans. Iain White, London: Atlas, 1995, 102.

⁸ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “The Laughter of Being”, in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 159.

⁹ Bataille, *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*, trans. Richard Robinson, Los Angeles: Amok, 1991.

The most serious seem to me to be children, who don't know they are children: they separate me from true children who know it and laugh at being. But to be a child, one must know that the serious exists – elsewhere and mattering little – if not, the child could no longer laugh nor know anguish. (IE, 44)

Thus laughing is not as Thomas Hobbes theorized: one is not superior to another; one does not degrade another to heighten himself. Such a laugh is the exemplar behaviour of the naïve child, to know more than the one who laughed at. “[N]o one laughs at a scholar,” Bataille mentions, “for to see in him childishness would demand that one surpass him, as much as a grown-up surpasses the child” (IE, 42). Instead, laughter is pulling the rug out from under. It is seriousness taken aback, that orator determined to convince the audience of the gravity and weight of his position, the audience engrossed in this profound revelation about the nature of existence; and then in an instant the crowd is thrown into subdued giggles as this man who had solved the problems of the universe has a fly land on the tip of his nose, and at once are pulled back to reality (the dismissal of the will to know, to be everything).

Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's essay, “The Laughter of Being”, provides an account of Bataille's *practice* of laughter drawing the full connection between laughing and, as I said above, dying. The kind of reality Bataille suggests is one that is also replete with others: we cannot truly laugh unless it is with others. When two individuals burst, “we lose ourselves in another, and, with him, in this great panic laughter which gathers us together around our own loss, our own death.”¹⁰ Thus one cannot really theorize laughter as Bergson does; it must be experienced and practiced.

When we laugh we laugh at being. One cannot be everything and such a realization, manifests in the midst of seriousness gone awry. Individuals appear to be self-sufficient wholes, making their way about the world oblivious to their place in the universe. When a person crashes into a lamp-post however, as in Jacques Tati's film *Mon Oncle* (1958), there is a certain joy in seeing this as we witness the limitations of human existence.¹¹ The *sovereign* individual – a person who recognizes his or her independence from a reality of seriousness, naïve childishness, utilitarianism running amuck – witnesses the fall from the whole and Borch-Jacobsen asserts that one who mocks being possesses more being than the one who appears insufficient.¹²

But, like the woman or fellow-man crashing into a lamp-post, the sovereign person falls too: we come to identify with the person who crashes into the lamp-post because we too are the same, i.e., a limited and finite being.¹³ One who shares a laugh does so in the absence of anguish, and yet in the same movement, anguish is the cause of the burst (IE, 96). Sovereignty calls for the confrontation and then moving passed the moment of anguish – the anguish, a technical term for Bataille, felt in the face of unproductive expenditure or death, such as the fear-inducing events mentioned above. To articulate this in a less mortifying and more everyday-like occurrence: when two autonomous individuals see a serious man slip on a banana peel, they lock eyes at first, and then explode in laughter. Such behaviour for Bataille is true communication, two seemingly independent beings harkening back to what is means to be a human being – in touch with the animal side of our nature (the present moment).¹⁴ Alphonso Lingis makes a clever note of this in a very Bataillean manner:

¹⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹¹ Ibid., 156.

¹² Ibid., 154, 155.

¹³ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴ Ibid., 163.

Language is not the primary medium, then, for communication. It is not in speaking to another that we cease to deal with him or her as an instrument or obstacle, and recognize his or her subjectivity. It is in laughter and tears that we have the feeling of being there for others. We do not laugh alone and for ourselves alone.¹⁵

To laugh at being is to laugh at death. Think hard about your future: death is surely absent says Sigmund Freud in “Timely Reflections on War and Death”. To slip out of project and seriousness, for Bataille, is to tread alongside death. True, when one falls on the sidewalk it is she who dies, but we identify and slip with her into an experience of finitude. In laughter, and in laughing at a festival like the Day of the Dead, we are laughing because we too are the dead.¹⁶ “The strangest mystery to be found in laughter is attached to the fact that we rejoice in something that puts the equilibrium of life in danger” (NLT, 144). This remark gives us a rather precise definition of laughter: we laugh when a risk presents itself as a confrontation/identification with death.

Bataille placed himself within the history of philosophical thought, this much he makes clear in the post-script to *Inner Experience*. Where he differs from traditional philosophy – if inner experience is taken as fundamental to his thinking – is an assertion of *praxis* over theory: “what counts in no longer the statement of wind,” Bataille poetically illustrates, “but the wind” (IE, 13). It took him many years before he read his first book of philosophy, and whether we can even say Bergson’s *Laughter* is within the canon of the history of philosophy, it would be longer still before he tackled a work of any significance. When he finally did get around to reading philosophy (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Plato, through Lev Shestov around 1923 [AS, 154]), he studied in a way altogether different from philosophy students, and further, wanted to study subjects outside the discipline (NLT, 139). But he describes in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* that his work, despite its interdisciplinary leanings and at least in that text, is an ethical project.

Laughter then is the moment we no longer maintain the individualism inherent in other modes of ethical thinking. We throw ourselves into a lake to save the drowning person and if we are successful, through laughter and tears, in exhaustion huddled together on the shore, experience a kind of ecstasy or joy. This is not the categorical imperative at work; I did not jump into the lake because I secretly hope the drowning person would do the same for me. Neither is it reciprocity, in which individuals come to mutually agree that we are both equal and we can compromise on various endeavours, etc. When a friend asks another to appear at her birthday party and the other fails to show citing important work as the reason for her absence, reciprocity commands understanding from each other which results in a vicious cycle of varying acceptances and rejections such that no one is happy. In this form of ethical seriousness the ego remains – the individuals involved demand recognition that their project is the more pressing. With Bataille however, seriousness founders and laughter explodes when without hesitation we give ourselves to others, not for reciprocity, improving our own happiness, or because Kant tells

¹⁵ Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1998, 127.

¹⁶ Borch-Jacobsen, op. cit., 164. Cf. Bataille’s short story *The Dead Man* (1943-44? Turns up in 1964, published in 1967), in *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man.*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, London & New York: Marion Boyars. 1989. In this tale a drunken woman seduces a hideous count. She brings him home and tiptoes to the bedroom. The woman undresses and the Count enters only to find a “ghastly grin” on her face and the corpse of her husband still warm on the bed.

us to; no, we do so because of the energy that is excessive to our normal everyday, and in that expenditure of it directed in such a way toward the well-being and pleasure of the other, we connect and communicate with them in the most ethical way we can. And in so doing, laugh ecstatically.

To think philosophically for Bataille is to break into laughs and sobs. In these sovereign moments, apart from them having any use, we find a kind of thinking: “to *laugh* is to think,” he casually notes. What makes us laugh is the moment the object, person or autonomous self has been taken out of useful activity, its utilitarian purpose, and is destroyed in frenzy, in excess.¹⁷ Such laughter is truth: the falling away of an object or other person as the sign of finitude. In such a moment I see my own falling into the void as well. To take each moment as serious, as something which is for the future – most explicitly for my work on Bataille and laughter, the serious quality of sustaining bodily integrity and a safe amount of wealth to preserve ourselves for tomorrow (“Always keep at least two months extra pay in your bank account in case you lose your job”, we so often hear) – is to miss the sovereign operations Bataille writes of, including the one that I have explicitly discussed: giving yourself away to save others. If a person negates the present, does not throw himself into the lake, he becomes the object of the sovereign individual’s laughter or on a larger scale, is publicly ridiculed. In seriousness there is a lack of meaning Bataille argues; when a concentrated person slips on a banana peel or a fly lands on the orator’s nose, it is these instants given to us by chance that we laugh and “open the depths of worlds” with “gratuitous affirmation” (MM, 90). Laughter is life and likewise philosophy.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bataille, “Method of Meditation”, in *Unfinished System*, 90-91. Hereafter cited as MM.

¹⁸ Much of this paper was presented at a York University conference, hosted by their Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program, entitled “Snickering Scholars”, in March 2012, and again “Good Laugh, Bad Laugh, Ugly Laugh, My Laugh,” hosted by the Comparative Literature and Hispanic Studies departments, in March 2013. The comments following my presentations were quite helpful in clarifying certain ideas.