

# Book Reviews

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*Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion*. Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall (eds.). Perspectives in Continental Philosophy. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

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Georges Bataille (1897–1962) was a librarian at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris for most of his adult life. During this time he produced literary/artistic journals, novels, poetry, and a variety of philosophical books that draw on anthropological, sociological, economic, and political theory. He has been referred to as a “metaphysician of evil” as well as a “philosopher of excess and transgression” because his work explores violence, desire, the obscene, crime, sacrifice, the sacred, and (most importantly) the ways such phenomena enter life in the form of meaningful practices. Bataille insisted throughout his life that these phenomena involve transgressions which maintain the social order. His emphasis on excessive desire, ecstasy, and self-rupture, along with a transdisciplinary œuvre that remains on the fringes of traditional scholarship, has led to misunderstandings that have contributed to his marginalization in the realm of religious studies.

Jeremy Biles and Kent L. Brintnall’s *Negative Ecstasies: Georges Bataille and the Study of Religion* presents a collection of sixteen essays from a variety of disciplines that could help to improve the reception of Bataille’s work in the field of religious studies. The collection includes contributions from experts in the fields of philosophy, comparative literature, religious studies, as well as women’s studies and cultural studies, e.g., an essay by noted phenomenologist and translator Alphonso Lingis that explains Bataille’s “contestation” of the sociology and anthropology of religion.

The non-utilitarian emotions generated by sacrifice and religious experience are connected to what Bataille referred to as the “general economy.” This includes the heterogeneous realm of excess, waste, and other socially disruptive and disordering forces. The general economy is the opposite of the “restrictive” economy’s emphasis on scarcity and accumulation. Empirical observations, like those made by the social sciences, fail to recognize the “sovereign” state of existence that extreme experiences generate. These experiences always take place outside the realm of work and reason. Lingis points to Bataille’s commitment to such experiences and raises questions about the limits of empirical knowledge (152). Such ideas could be helpful tools for

anthropologists unfamiliar with Bataille who are seeking ways to relate excess and transgression to phenomena such as romantic love, charisma, as well as risk-taking behavior known as edgework.<sup>1</sup>

Allan Stoekl, the author of *Bataille's Peak* (2007), examines connections between Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the noosphere and Bataille's atheological pursuit of intimacy and communication through the breaking down of limits. Stoekl highlights Bataille's erotic fiction and his notion of the death of God in order to demonstrate how the "multiple user domain/dimension/dungeon" (MUD) is connected to notions of God as author, or author as God. As in Bataille's erotic fiction, the notion of a limitless (and limiting) author is disappearing today through pseudonyms and fictional personae in the realm of cybersex. "One communicates," he writes, "in and through the fictional, eroticized text, taking on and reshuffling personae." Stoekl views the eroticized and fictional world of cybersex as "the Omega Point." This refers to de Chardin's notion of noosphere, or the idea that the universe is "evolving" towards a higher state of consciousness. Stoekl argues that the possibilities for anonymity the internet provides "may be precisely the point of eroticism where the identity of the fictional 'author' . . . is the least knowable. In cybersex, Bataille's 'virtual' death of God has become planetary" (215).

The essays in *Negative Ecstasies* reveal the relevance and importance of Bataille's commitment to creating a myth of the sacred in a post-Nietzschean world while also addressing the difficulties his language and subject matter present. As Biles and Brintnall point out in the introduction, Bataille's ideas and subject matter have been marginalized because they present a challenge to the "aesthetico-moral sensibilities of many scholars of religion" (13). Despite this image, however, *Negative Ecstasies* undeniably presents the religious nature of Bataille's ideas and their ability to help address a variety of ethical and political problems today.

Bataille's challenge to "aesthetico-moral" sensibilities, and the misunderstandings his work has generated, is not limited to religious studies. Jean-Michel Heimonet refers to Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of Bataille's *Inner Experience* in "A New Mystic" (1947) as one of the "great literary misunderstandings," comparable to Gide as the reader of Proust.<sup>2</sup> Sartre's "A New Mystic," according to Heimonet, reveals a traditional and brilliant philosopher attempting to affirm his own system of

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<sup>1</sup> Edgework is a sociological model that seeks to understand the various reasons why groups and individuals in Western culture voluntarily risk their lives, their sanity and general well-being. Unlike psychological models of risk-taking that focus on personality disorders, or on addiction to adrenaline, the sociology of edgework emphasizes the intersection between intense bodily experience and the social conditions leading some toward high-risk activities.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Michel Heimonet, "Bataille and Sartre: The Modernity of Mysticism," trans. Emoretta Yang, *Diacritics* 26 (1996): 59.

values by accusing another of perverting them with religious mysticism. The irony, he argues, is that in the process, Sartre also reveals *his own* mysticism.<sup>3</sup>

A fundamental difference between Bataille's so-called "mysticism"—which Michael Richardson likens more to the terrifying journeys and ordeals of the shaman than to the transcendence or unity with God associated with Christian mysticism<sup>4</sup>—and Sartre's, is that the latter's aim is to "sanctify" the subject while the former's is to negate it.<sup>5</sup>

Bataille was committed to exploring the ways in which competing emotions and moral attitudes expose our deepest concerns, desires, and fears, as well as the ways these binaries are reflected in our notions of the sacred. The combination of death and desire, horror and *jouissance*, often taking place at the same time, in the same individual, for instance, is precisely what "gives the sacred world a paradoxical character," Bataille wrote.<sup>6</sup> In "Movements of Luxurious Exuberance: Georges Bataille and Fat Politics," Lynn Gerber begins with this observation as she explores the reasons for America's fascination with body size, fatness, and weight loss. Beyond this, Gerber's larger aim is to apply Bataille's thought to examine what she calls "the many contradictions, problems, and possibilities of fatness, fat subjectivity, and fat politics in an age of the loudly trumpeted obesity epidemic and its increasingly powerful prerogatives" (20).

Gerber stresses the need to focus on Bataille's embrace of the "left-hand sacred," i.e., "filth, brokenness and dissolution," as opposed to the right-hand sacred, which stands for "wholeness, cohesion, and order," when addressing new possibilities for a fat politics. She believes the "left-hand sacred" provides a starting point for changing views regarding the "monstrous" nature of fatness in American society because the fat individual—whose body, Gerber believes, has become a symbol of death in American society—challenges the belief that society is ordered and whole. Bataille's notion of heterogeneity and the monster's potential to invoke an inner experience of self-disruption, she contends, could provide a new way of seeing fatness: fatness as a bodily manifestation of the sacred that challenges narratives seeking to reconsolidate fat subjectivity and personhood. "A Bataille-informed fat generosity," she concludes, "might resist the lie that death can be overcome by projects like weight loss by using our proximity to death to insist that everyone face its possibilities with the kind of glorious expenditure that our bodies represent" (37).

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3. Ibid.

4. Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille* (London: Routledge, 1994), 114–16.

5. Heimonet, "Bataille and Satre," 59.

6. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volumes II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 95.

Stephen Bush's "Sovereignty and Cruelty: Self Affirmation, Self Dissolution and Bataillean Subject" explores the paradoxical nature of Bataille's thought, as well as his emphasis on cruelty. By first examining Bataille's emphasis on self-negation and laceration over goal-directed activities, Bush, like Gerber, sees the potential for a Bataillean ethics that can foster intimacy and generosity. Yet, while self-negation may appear to be a good strategy for compassion towards others generally, Bush points out that not everyone can afford to expend themselves this way. "We can agree with Bataille," he says, "that self-negation is ethically important," because it "mitigates our tendency to assert ourselves at the expense of others" (40). The problem with self-negation, he argues, comes when we attempt to apply it across social hierarchies. For those at the bottom of such hierarchies, i.e., the poor, women who may already be living self-sacrificially, and other marginalized or oppressed groups and individuals, the idea of self-negation could be harmful.

Another objection to appropriating Bataille's ideas has been the amount of violence and cruelty that pervades his work. Bush asks, "Why does Bataille emphasize violence so much?" and then answers his own question, "For one thing, Bataille thinks it takes a jolt to get us out of our normal experience of ourselves as discrete, individuated things." But the more pertinent question he asks relates directly to cruelty: "Why is Bataille relatively uninterested in forms of violence that do not involve cruelty?" (41). The key to understanding the ethical significance of cruelty in Bataille, Bush argues, is the centrality of *sovereignty*, a key concept in Bataille's work. Sovereignty, as Bataille conceives it, involves being in the present moment, in rejecting authority external to oneself and of assigning a supreme value to one's own desires and expectations. Bush argues that self-affirmation and self-negation, in a context of sovereignty, operate together. The "shock of cruelty" expresses both self-negation *and* what Bush calls "the shock of beholding individuals who are subject to no constraints, who obey no norms, no conventions, and no authorities other than themselves" (47).

Bataille's ecstatic experiences, predicated on a breakdown of the subject are ends in themselves that could raise an awareness of the need for self-denial (interdependence) and self-affirmation (autonomy). This awareness, Bush argues, is connected to political and democratic ideals and could help to challenge other potentially *dangerous* ideals such as notions of invulnerability. While sovereignty in its purest form takes place in ecstatic moments, Bataille also finds continuities between ecstatic sovereignty and political sovereignty. "The primary refusal," Bush writes, "is the refusal to not be subordinated to others. This is an important ideal, a democratic ideal, even" (48).

Biles and Brintnall's collection of essays includes some of the leading scholars in the world of philosophy, cultural and religious studies, and comparative literature. These writings, as the limited selections above demonstrate, bring together an array

of ideas that draw out and explore the religious elements in Bataille's work. They also provide practical and philosophical possibilities for the application of Bataille's ideas to a number of contemporary political and ethical issues. Most importantly, these essays help to make sense of a challenging and paradoxical thinker. By demonstrating a thorough knowledge of Bataille's key concepts, the essays here provide a concise clarification of Bataille's ideas without dismissing their problematic nature. Finally, through careful analysis and imagination, the authors in *Negative Ecstasies* have broadened Bataillean studies by bringing his ideas out of those unfamiliar and ethically challenging shadows that have often been cradles of misunderstanding. The cumulative effect is both thought-provoking and hopeful. In an era in which a new myth of the sacred seems needed more than ever, this collection offers an important contribution not only for religious studies but also for the humanities in general.