

Georges Bataille, a reader of Sade ***On enjoyment as an expression of force***

It is known that the medical (Krafft-Ebing) and psychological (Freud) thinking in 19th and 20th century was interested in the novels of Marquis de Sade. Or, at least, they used his name for the clinical concept that refers to the one who is sexually excited by seeing that the other is tortured or having pain. This concept is widely known as sadism. Between brackets, I said ‘at least’ because we all know that Freud didn’t really read Sade. But it is quite obvious that some fifty years later a lot of philosophers of the continental tradition also were interested in Sade, of course not from a psychological point of view but in a philosophical way. One of the first of those French philosophical readers of Sade was Georges Bataille. Although Bataille is also known as a poet and a writer of a lot of mystical and obscure texts, he wrote in the first place as a philosopher. And it was, by consequence, as a philosopher that he read Sade and wrote on him.

The main topic of our presentation will focus on Bataille’s reading of Sade. I think we have to ask ourselves two questions. These questions will divide our presentation into two parts. *First*. How did Bataille read Sade? *Second*. Why was Bataille interested in Sade? Why can Bataille’s reading of Sade still be meaningful and interesting today for contemporary philosophy?

Let’s begin with Bataille’s reading of Sade. Bataille wanted to deconstruct the implicit assumption we all often make if we talk about Sadean enjoyment, namely: enjoyment is the subversion of the power of reason, and reason is the repression of all ‘wild’ and romantic impulses that disturb the ‘peaceful’ work of reason. Bataille posed that Sadean enjoyment has nothing to do with a naturalistic liberation of basic instincts that were repressed by the cold pressure of reason. Or, at least, Sadean enjoyment has nothing to do with nature as far as it is the opposite of pure reason. Maybe there is some nature in the Sadean universe, but this nature is very closely linked to the power of reason. So, Bataille said that we cannot fully understand Sade if we don’t take for granted the power of reason in the Sadean universe and if we detach this reason from nature. So, the first question is: what is the link between reason and nature in Sade?

Bataille said that the characters in Sade's novels "*entendent une voix qui vient dehors*". They hear a voice that comes from outside. What is meant by this? Human reason has an insight in and theory of the principles of nature. There is, for Sade, a reasonable principle at work in the movement of nature and human reason has knowledge of it. So, we can say that human reason has knowledge of the reason of nature. But, this is not enough. It is like nature says: '*Well, Sade, you have knowledge of me, but that is not enough. You do not only have to know my principle, you also have to follow and realise my principle.*' The voice that comes from outside, heard by the sadist, is not his own natural voice, nor it is the voice of his own reason. It is nature's reason that is heard by Sade. It is nature that is speaking to the sadist.

But what is this voice saying? What is the principle of nature?

In fact, nature for Sade is what was proposed and developed by the metaphysics and philosophy of nature of the 17th and 18th centuries. We have to distinguish in this nature two notions. On the one hand we have 'matter', on the other hand we have 'energy'. We have to explain both notions.

First, matter. Nature is matter, and matter is perpetual movement. The death of one being and the resulting birth of another being is nothing other than a transmutation, a constant transformation of one substance into another. By consequence, the death of a being is not an endpoint, but just a moment of transition within the larger movement of matter and nature. Thus, we can say that death is necessary if nature wants to realise her own essence, namely constant movement.

Second, energy. If nature wants to be involved in a constant movement, then it depends on the power of energy. Why? Matter itself is formless. But if matter doesn't have any form, she cannot of course lose its form. This means that matter itself cannot keep alive the perpetual movement of nature. Therefore, matter has to be inspired and animated by an external force. This force is an impersonal energy that subtends the constant transformation of forms and life. We can therefore say that this energy does two things. First, the energy blows its force in the formless matter. In this way, the matter has a form, is animated and lives. Second, this energy is liberated in the formed matter through acts of violence. This liberation of the energy is the death of the formed

matter and thus the return of the matter to its formless state. So, we can say that in Sade the liberation of energy is the ultimate cause of the perpetual movement of nature.

Now it is clear what is meant by the principle of nature. We know what nature unceasingly demands from the sadist. What nature dictates and asks to human morality is constant murder and violence because these acts contribute to the natural process by freeing more energy. It is in the constant act of transmutation that nature becomes what it is, and by consequence, murder and violence speed up the process of nature and make nature more natural. The voice heard by the sadist is the voice of nature that dictates him to kill. The Sadean libertine thinks he's chosen by nature as an instrument for her cruel and destructive law. So the sadist, as a slave of the master-nature, thinks that he closes with his acts of destruction the cycle of birth and death of nature. Put in other words: the sadist is the cause of transmutation.

Let's give an example of this cycle in Sade.

It's known that Sade doesn't believe in God. But although he seems to be an atheist, he always evoked God in his books. Isn't that curious? Although he could not believe in God, Sade and his philosophy needed one. Sade always evoked a living God, not to praise and adore Him, but to destroy Him. So, Sade did two things. He created God, as the basis of identity of all formed matter, and then destroyed Him. And then, after his death, God just reappears at the scene but with no other means than his own death. By this, Sade could maximalize the rapidity of nature's process.

Bataille concluded that there is an identification between the Sadean libertine and the principle of nature. As the ultimate cause of the movement of nature, the sadist becomes one with nature's principle. The sadistic characters become one with the flow of energy. But there still remains something unclarified. It indeed is totally not clear why this principle of nature could have any effect on the sadistic subject. How could it be that following a principle means unifying with this principle? And what does this unifying mean? If we want to answer this question, I think we have to ask ourselves how Bataille understands destruction or torture.

When people are physically having pain, they cry but can't say anything. If they try to speak, they can only bring out some meaningless sentences and their talking sounds like stuttering. The speech of the one in pain is a stumbling over his own words. And

also the body becomes something very strange. This strangeness has to be taken literally. Their body doesn't express anything. It becomes just a mass of meaningless pieces of skin. The face of the tortured is like a stupid spasm. We can say that when in pain the body of the other loses his recognizability. The image of the other with his clear lines and separated parts, that normally make the other recognizable, becomes a diffuse non-image where all the lines and separated parts are overwhelmed by each other. The English language has a very accurate expression for the experience of having pain. They say: 'I am in pain'. This means that the tortured subject is disappearing in the overwhelming mass of pain. But what disappears is not the subject itself. Pain is not the death of the subject. What disappears is the identifiable structure and image of the subject. The fact that when in pain someone isn't identifiable anymore, means that I don't recognize humanity in the other, since it is the form of the other that makes him different from the animal and thus human.

But this is not the main point made by Bataille. This analysis overstressed the fact that in pain there is something disappearing. The disappearance of the form also means that there is something appearing, and for Bataille this was more important. The image of the other is broken and it is as if in this crack something lifts up that normally has to be hidden by the form. What appears in the image of the other is the meaningless flesh, or the stupid matter, that cannot be held and kept together by the form and breaks through the form of the subject. This 'more than the form', the matter, can be described as the impersonal and anonymous side of being. When in pain, the other becomes an obscene presence, an inert matter. In other words: what appears in and through the human face is the inhuman side of being.

Bataille said, and this is very important to notice, that this inhuman side '*ouvre une plaie*'. The inhuman side of the other opens in the sadist a wound. What is meant by this? For Bataille, our world can fully be described with two notions. *On the one hand* we have the world of discontinuity. This is the world of everyday life governed by instrumental reason and wherein everyone tries to survive. Although in this profane world people work and live together, they can be described as separate entities. Every human has one form with lines and marks that separate them from the others. His place in this space cannot be possessed by another being. *On the other hand* human being is always involved

in a larger movement of life, namely the movement of nature and impersonal energy. Bataille calls it the continuity of being. The continuity is similar to the world of animals because in this sphere the forms of the beings that separate them from other beings disappeared. This continuity can be described as an indifferent stream because it means the destruction of the difference that human being *is*.

Although we are most of the time perceived as beings who exist as discontinuous entities, we *always* participate in this larger movement of nature. So, what Bataille means by the opening of a wound is the liberation of the indifferent stream that normally is stopped, canalised and condensed by reason, work and the form of the human being. We can say that by the destruction of the other and perceiving the inhumanity of the other, the sadist recognizes his 'own' between brackets impersonal inhumanity, the inhumanity he always was. By this recognition the indifferent stream lifts up and makes the sadist disappear as a discontinuous entity in this stream. By consequence, the sadist becomes one with what he always was.

Our answer to the question why the principle of nature could have any effect on the sadist is that for Bataille this subject was always involved in nature. Following nature's principle means a unifying with this nature because the subject always was unified with nature. The voice of nature appeals to this being unified with nature and this is why the voice of nature could be heard by the sadist. So, this voice can be described as the trigger of the actualisation of what the sadist always was potentially, one with the stream of energy.

Bataille posed that this is the moment of sadistic enjoyment. This enjoyment takes place when the sadist repeats endlessly his murders and tortures. At that moment he becomes one with nature's principle and he's disappears in the stream of energy. It is important to notice that these murders may not have any emotional effect on the sadist. He may not feel any anxiety or disgust, nor may he be excited by the death of the other. Nature itself creates and destroys beings, but is not interested in their wellbeing. In the same way the sadist feels nothing when he tortures the other. He's made insensible by the endless repetition. This is the moment he becomes one with the law of nature. At that time, and this is the moment of sadistic enjoyment, he feels overwhelmed by the force and stream of nature wherein he disappears.

We can now try to answer the second question we asked at the beginning of our presentation. This question was: why was Bataille interested in Sade and why can Sade still be interesting for contemporary philosophy?

Before he starts his analysis of Sade, Bataille poses that he wants to redefine and clarify the kernel point of not only sexual enjoyment but of enjoyment as such. After this statement he starts his reading of Sade. We can conclude that this means that Bataille was in the first place interested in Sade because of the enjoyment of the Sadean characters. With Sade, Bataille wanted to clarify some aspects of enjoyment. He argued that the vocabulary of force is also good to describe some experiences of enjoyment. He stated that enjoying sport, sexuality, religion, art and so on, can be better described with such notions as force and energy. This means that Bataille wanted to contest the common sense opinion that feelings and sensations are the most important notions for describing enjoyment. Maybe, something is felt in enjoyment, but following Bataille this feeling is only secondary. If we want to understand enjoyment, then we do not have to focus on feelings and sensations. So, following Bataille, Sade is used in a hermeneutical way.

The question is: which aspects of these experiences are important and can only be understood as an expression of force? Although there could be of course distinguished more than two things, I distinguish two aspects.

First. I think that the difference between the aesthetic experience of beauty and the sublime object is useful. Enjoying the beauty of an object still presupposes both the activity of the subject's imagination, and the distance between the subject and the object. But this is not the case with the aesthetic experience of the sublime, which can be called 'exaltation'. Here, the subject is passively overwhelmed by the artwork or the greatneses of nature. You cannot actively try to enjoy the greatneses of nature. You cannot say: *'Here, you have the artwork, enjoy the sublime beauty of it'*. In the experience of the sublime, the subject is not the agent. It is the other who starts the dynamics of the sublime experience. You *are* overwhelmed by the object. In addition, we can say that the subject is possessed by the sublime object. This means that the subject disappears and becomes one with the object. A work of art can be so sublime, for example the story of the

suffering of Jesus, that I want to become one with Jesus in his suffering. I want to suffer like Him.

My point is that we cannot fully understand both the passivity and the unifying aspect, without using such notions as the force or power of the sublime. The passivity of the subject presupposes the force of the object that overwhelms the subject. Here, it is the force of the object that takes the initiative. This means that we have to describe the exaltation as being overwhelmed by the great force of the object. The subject is possessed by a force that is greater than him. Then, it is like this force pushes the subject to the object. This pushing force makes the subject becomes one with the object. In exaltation the subject is passively ‘transported’ by the force of the sublime. We are attracted by the force of an object that pushes us to the object. Between brackets, this description can explain why sexual enjoyment can cause anxiety.

Second. The central place of the impersonal force implies that the subject hasn’t a central position any more. This makes clear the disappearance or death of the subject in some experiences of enjoyment. So, we have to posit this force if we want to clarify this disappearance. I think we can distinguish three sorts of disappearances of the subject. *First*, we have the death of mental activity. This is of course most recognizable in sexual enjoyment. In the French language they call the orgasm ‘la petite mort’. I understand this as the death or closure just for one moment of consciousness. More generally we all know that enjoyment excludes mental activity. If you think about the thing you are enjoying while you are enjoying it, you don’t really enjoy any more. Thinking about sex while you have sex disturbs your sexual enjoyment. Thus, we can say: ‘I enjoy when I do not think and I think when I do not enjoy’. *Second.* In some experiences of enjoyment we lose the preoccupations for the self and its preservation. It is known that the one who really enjoys studying or working, forgets to eat, to sleep and so on. He loses his care for his own biological body. *Third.* In enjoyment care for the image of the self also disappears. The one who enjoys isn’t interested any more in the impression and the image that others have. The one who enjoys working, studying or collecting some strange objects just wants to work, study or collect. If enjoying these things isn’t well appreciated by others, than he or she doesn’t care about it. In enjoyment there’s a sort of insensibility with regard to the other.

I think that Batailles reading of Sade is not merely hermeneutical. It can not only contribute positively to a description of enjoyment, it also implies a philosophical critique of for example a psychoanalytical tradition. I briefly give here the most important critiques by Bataille.

First. It is known that in the psychoanalytical tradition the actual experience of lust always is the repetition and reproduction of a previous and primordial lust. Batailles reading of Sade however shows us that actual enjoyment is not a repetition. On the contrary, it is the constant and endless repetition of always the same behaviours and murders that produces enjoyment.

Second. The idea of a reproduction implies that enjoyment has a melancholic structure. Enjoyment is the consequence of a desire that returns to a previous lust. This often means two things. *On the one hand* it means that the return is the fulfilment of an actual deficit (Plato, Lacan). *On the other hand* it often means that in the fulfilment a law is transgressed, the law that first interdicted the previous lust. So the subject consciously searched for transgression.

I think that Batailles analysis can counter these two statements. Enjoyment is not the fulfilment of a deficit. While I enjoy listening to music, I maybe have something I didn't have before, but this doesn't mean that this enjoyment is caused by or is experienced as a desire to fulfil a deficit. This also means that enjoyment can be described as a transgression but this transgression is not (un)consciously desired. Driven by an impersonal force I can't stop working, and so I damage for example my marriage. But this damage is not consciously desired, it is just a consequence of my behaviour. Transgression is not a condition of enjoyment, but a non-intentional effect of it.

Third. A lot of Anglo-American philosophers claim that 'to enjoy' always is a transitive verb. If we enjoy, then we always enjoy something else, for example a glass of water, a conversation and so on. But maybe Batailles reading of Sade showed us that it is possible to define a intransitive form of enjoyment. We have indeed seen that in Sades enjoyment there appears an impersonal force. So maybe we can say that it is not me who is enjoying, but an indifferent nature or stance. This stance not enjoys me, but just enjoys. So my question would be: is it possible to say 'it enjoys (in me)'?

As our conclusion we can say that Batailles reading of Sade in terms of force and energy can function as an original attempt to rethink enjoyment or to focus upon some hidden and forgotten aspects of enjoyment. And of course, another question is: can Sade help us to clarify religious enjoyment?

Thank you for listening.