

Agency and Sovereignty: Georges Bataille's Anti-Humanist Conception of Child

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Georges Bataille (1887–1962) is one of the most significant thinkers of the 20th century, whose anti-humanist anthropology influenced subsequent existentialist and post-structuralist philosophy. His wide-ranging writings (across philosophy, archaeology, economics, sociology, poetry, erotica and history of art) frequently mention children, childhood and childishness, and yet there has hitherto been little to no attention paid to this aspect of his work. This article opens up a neglected theme in Bataille studies, and also explores the consequences of Bataille's presentation of the human condition for our understanding of the pedagogical relationship. Of particular interest is the idea of the agentic child, which occupies such an important place in childhood studies, educational theory and public policy. In the light of Bataille's anthropology, I shall explore the idea that the pursuit of children's agency is the victim of its vaunting ambition.

INTRODUCTION

There is dismay amongst many educators about the deadening effects of regimes of measurement and narrowing educational objectives in our school systems. It seems that whilst the academic community talks about children's agency, participation and 'voice', meanwhile contemporary education progressively diverges from these concerns with pedagogical approaches that are authoritarian, disciplinarian and transmissive. This divergence is likely to continue since policy is moved by many different social and political currents and eddies that have their origins in general, obdurate and often global trends. But rather than conceive of this divergence as a simple clash of educational values along the lines of a progressive/traditional binary, I want to consider the possibility that there is a fundamental misstep in the way we have come to think of children's agency, and that this mistake has contributed to the difficulties now being experienced. The second part of this paper will venture the introduction of Georges Bataille, an unfamiliar voice in childhood studies, to explore

alternative conceptions of agency, or something akin to it, through exploration of the concepts of taboo, transgression and sovereignty.

The Agentic Child

The agentic child is the pivot on which contemporary childhood studies turns: the importance afforded to voice and agency could hardly be overstated. Pedagogical theory, research methodologies and public policy take children's agency as precept, yet the idea of agency has only a jagged and constrained relation to the two dominant, incommensurate but interweaving paradigms. Firstly, the child as 'being', realising its potential and bearing inalienable rights; that is, the humanist child with the moral and legal claims of personhood premised upon their essential nature as anthropos. Secondly, the socially constructed, culturally constituted child: situated, plastic and acted upon. Both models, in different ways, are the vehicles for emancipatory thinking: the recognition of children as rights-bearing members of the human species is the legal basis for protection, provision and for their participation in 'all matters affecting the child'; while a social constructivist paradigm alerts us to the contingency of children's lives and, to an extent, provides a foundation for interventions seeking social change. Indeed, the original interest in children's agency was, as Oswell observes, 'less an exercise in theory than in politics' (Oswell, 2012, p. 38).

Neither paradigm – the humanist nor the constructivist – lends itself to anything more than a disappointing version of agency. In the humanist paradigm the child's agency is circumscribed by the parameters of her nature and potential where, in its biological form, the child develops psychologically and physically to a predetermined biological mandate. In the constructivist paradigm the child is formed by determinant structural features of their situation. None of the principal theories of the mutual constitution of agency and structure address the particular situation of being a child. When Margaret Archer, for example, speaks of 'our human ability to intervene in the world of nature and change it' (Archer, 1995, p. 1), the first person pronoun does not obviously include children, nor are they specifically mentioned in her writing. In fact, the *raison d'être* of a great deal of childhood studies scholarship is to make spaces and foster skills so that children might exert such influence, *precisely because* this does not happen as a matter of course in human society. Notwithstanding these conceptual difficulties, the agentic child reigns and sways research, policy and pedagogy.

This seminal lack of theoretical scrutiny leaves a legacy of contradictory postulates: the primacy of the individual or the social, the position on nature versus nurture and, most fundamentally, the essentialist/modernist or constructionist/postmodern versions of the world. In childhood studies these two distinct paradigms appear sometimes to merge as though one somehow leads to the other. This is quite puzzling. In what looks like a case of having your conceptual cake and eating it, we are told that there is no universal child and *also*, what that child *is*. The socially constructed child could equally be passive – what would prevent it? Only appeal to

a universal or transcendental vision, which cuts the feet from the original revelation of the child as socially constructed. Following the comments of Alanen (2017), the ontological grounding of childhood studies has not hitherto been a focus of attention. This situation is rapidly changing, however, as I will outline shortly.

In educational discourse we find the same ‘vexatious’ tension. Gert Biesta contrasts socialisation with individuation, and equates the latter with what he calls ‘subjectification’, which he describes as ‘the opposite of the socialization function [of education]’ (2010, p. 21). He refers to a long tradition of educational philosophy that held this process of subjectification to be the defining function of education: ‘to become more autonomous and independent in ... thinking and acting’ (ibid.). The notion of subjectivity at work here is so familiar that it is almost undetectable: to be a subject is to think and to act *on one’s own*. In reality people think and act in relationship or engagement with others, and the social and material continuity or contiguity of our agency belies any satisfying notion of the ‘independent mind’.

Ryan observed in 2011 that a ‘new wave’ of childhood studies had started to emerge, which draws on the work of post-war continental philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. What this emergent scholarship shares, according to Ryan, is a desire to bypass binaries, and instead employ notions of ‘hybridity’ and ‘multiplicity’ (Ryan, 2011). I think that the desire has a more radical orientation as new scholarship in childhood studies is starting to engage with contemporary challenges to the primacy of individual human subjectivity and agency. An attachment to the idea of human agency and dominion substantiates the agentic child; dominionist prejudice and the individualist ontology that it generates are the targets of ‘new wave’ endeavour. This is a direct challenge to Enlightenment humanism’s nationalism (Braidotti, 2013, p. 16), colonialism (Fanon, 1963) and its creation of the racialised, gendered and naturalised other as a ‘justification for pillage’ (Sartre, 1963, p. 21). The wider ethical import of our conception of the agentic child can no longer be ignored: it is offspring of the modern human, and so is implicated in the impending global ecological crisis, about which the field of childhood studies is remarkably silent. Recent work has started to recognise underlying political and epistemological ideologies: Cook (2018, p. 135) observes that the ‘darling’ of childhood studies ... bears marked similarity to the idealised subject of neoliberalism, whilst others have noted the cultural specificity of the dominant interpretations of children’s agency, calling for ‘greater dialogue across majority and minority worlds’ (Punch, 2016, p. 193) or for the acknowledgement of the normative assumptions that are applied to the attribution of children’s agency (Kayser, 2016).

As the substantivist ontologies of humanism and constructivism increasingly give way to more nuanced and complex understandings, there has been growing interest in relational approaches to understanding the nature of children’s agency. Alanen (2000, 2001) describes how recognition of childhood as an ‘essentially *generational* phenomenon’ can lead to an

understanding of the way in which relational social structures help us to develop a perspective on the agentic nature of childhood. This perspective focusses on the internal relationships of the social world and highlights the interdependency of both adulthood and childhood. Alanen's overarching concern is to develop an account that upholds the 'basic premiss (sic)' of new childhood studies, that is 'securing children's agency' (2001, pp. 17, 21). This leads to assertions of the reciprocal nature of the adult-child relationship in which both *relata* are 'constructed' in the situation, albeit asymmetrically (ibid., p. 19). What strikes me about this conceptualisation of childhood is the apparent absence of any awareness that adults in fact, in reality, *generate* children: the idea of begetting, or making, even, does not figure in the generational relationship – despite this sense being a conspicuous aspect of the word's meaning. The material genesis of the adult-child relationship (e.g. gestation, birth-giving, breast feeding) seems to be of no interest, and not substantive for its conceptualisation. In other words, matter does not matter, and motherhood is dissolved into the more generic state of adulthood. This elision facilitates an account of co-construction that supports the axiological assertion of children's agency.

The generational conceptualisation precedes the 'ontological turn' in childhood studies. In particular, there is growing interest in 'relational ontology', a notion that has passed through an extraordinarily diverse array of academic disciplines, including theology, psychology and information science, before being left on the doorstep of childhood studies. This mischievous notion upturns the Aristotelian ontological priority of substance, the *relata*, over relation making, in this case, both children and adults conceptually subordinate to the relation between them. Neither human-centredness nor child-centredness is without significant dangers (Jessop, 2018), so this relational move opens up a space to consider alternative orientations in our thinking about ourselves and the world. It also reinstates matter (human and non-human bodies) as worthy of consideration for understanding agency. Although at the forefront of contemporary philosophy, the antecedents of this ontological turn lie in the philosophical anti-humanism of the last century.

Anti-humanism is a capacious concept originally associated with Marxism (Althusser, 2010) but also with Fascism and the evangelical extreme right in the United States (Elisha, 2008). It is used as a term of opprobrium in relation to post-structuralism (Hollis and Lukes, 1997) and approvingly in the context of philosophical animism (Plumwood, 1993), post-Newtonian cosmology and 'deep ecology' (Mathews, 1991), the repositioning of the human in post-humanism (Braidotti, 2013), radical critiques of colonialism (Fanon, 1963), as well as in the turn towards eastern philosophies and religions, nature-based spiritualities such as Wicca and aboriginal belief systems, all of which in some way de-centre human subjectivity. From the end of the First World War to the late 1950s anti-humanism came to be one of the dominant faces of philosophy, though in a strange inversion of this philosophical aspect, the end of the Second World War heralded the beginning of the human rights era.¹ At no time before has awareness of human hubris been more intense than in Europe

in the first half of the 20th century. The technologically enabled catastrophes of the first half of the 20th century left belief in progress tattered and shamed. It is this period that Geroulanos (2010, p. 1) describes as ‘a philosophical and intellectual revolution ... [that] created a new kind of atheism, demolished the value of humanism, and altered the meaning of “the human” virtually beyond recognition’. Thus, anti-humanism cleared the path for subsequent postmodern and post-humanist thought. Here I introduce a pre-eminent anti-humanist thinker closely associated with the Surrealist movement,² whose philosophical anthropology is original, provocative and enables a reassessment of the notion of agency, particularly in respect of children.

GEORGES BATAILLE AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTI-HUMANISM

George Bataille (1887–1962) mentions the child, childhood and childishness sporadically throughout his writings: she is pitied and admired, true and false, free and utterly constrained. Notions of ‘childishness’ and ‘child-like’ occupy a central place in his explorations of human experience. The Surrealist heirs to the Romantic critique were close intellectual and personal associates of Bataille, bringing him into the orbit of new conceptions of childhood, influenced by the Occult, by Freud and Jung and by philosophical anti-capitalism.³ Despite all this, to date, there have been no studies focussing on Bataille’s child, and only passing mention of the child in the context of other Bataille scholarship. The steady post-humous development of Bataille’s reputation has entered a new wave since the mid-1990s, with a number of new translations, collections and commentaries. The intention of this paper is to open up a neglected theme in Bataille’s work, and also to explore the consequences of Bataille’s presentation of the human condition for our understanding of the child both as icon and lived reality.

Bataille’s Child

The child in Bataille’s thought is not human: rather his anthropology situates the child as animal-becoming-human. He proposes the notion of childishness as an adult construct propaedeutic to the state of reason: it denotes a relational state of becoming. Grown-ups induct newcomers into the characteristically human system and over time children become human. It is axiomatic in several disciplines that make up childhood studies that children are persons. This is the foundation of the normative standard for the treatment of children: legal personhood is the determining condition for a standard of legal protection not granted to other beings. There is also the biological fact of human DNA indicating species membership. Neither of these conceptions either contradict or confirm the notion of child implicit in Bataille’s understanding of the human condition. What is at issue is the adult–child relationship and this is fundamentally *pedagogical*.

The calm ordering of life is brought to an end with the arrival of a baby: blood and shit and vomit and screaming are an unavoidable daily experience. (Reading about children in childhood literature, one sometimes cannot help wondering if the authors have ever met one.) When we are in a

parenting relationship with a child we first deal with aspects of their behaviour that must be curtailed in order to live a human life. The pedagogical relationship starts in this place. So I take nappies as my starting point:

Intestinal dejecta

Menstrual blood seems to have condensed the abhorrence and the fear. The behaviors relative to the other excretions are striking, but there are no prohibitions dealing with them like those aimed at preserving humanity from the least contamination by blood.

[He then goes on to suggest that the reason there are less elaborate purity rules about 'intestinal evacuation' is mainly because men do it too.]

[C]hildren, with whom our contracts are unavoidable, would destroy a priori the hope of eliminating the contamination entirely. Nothing can be demanded of a young child, whereas a pubescent girl regularly observes the prescriptions. It was necessary to get used to bearing with this infantile waste, which explains the mildness of the disgust it provokes: nothing more extreme than the reaction to animal waste. Besides, what are children if not animals becoming human – but this is not on their own initiative ... (Bataille, 1991, p. 65)

What pedagogical initiative do adults take?

[W]e teach our children to be ashamed of filth ... the mother simply says to the child: 'It's dirty,' and she often even uses the childish word denoting both excrement and the forbidding of contact. (Bataille, 1991, p. 72)

In a later work he returns to this idea:

We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to to pass on to our children the aversions that make us what we are, which make us human beings to begin with. Our children do not spontaneously have our reactions We have to teach them by pantomime or failing that, by violence, that curious aberration called disgust ... passed onto us from the earliest men through countless generations of scolded children. (Bataille, 2012a, p. 58)

This first initiative of adults in relation to the child is one of bifurcation: what can be admitted into human life and what must be excluded. To make sense of this we need first to pay attention to Bataille's understanding of the human.

Being Human

In contrast to social and cultural anthropology, the sense in which I use the word here is philosophical rather than comparative. There is no necessary assumption that there is a plurality of ways of being human. Rather, the presumption is that it is possible to make meaningful statements about the human condition *per se*. The question is, what is it to be human? In a nutshell, for Bataille, to be human is to enter into the human economy of

production. Human existence happens in the space formed by two modes of action: taboo and transgression.

The advent of taboo is what marks the genesis of human society. It is the stretching out and separation of what is human and what is not. What makes the formation of the human collective possible is the exclusion of ‘violence’, and this is achieved by the institution of taboos. Sigmund Freud’s writings on taboo were well known and highly influential at the beginning of the last century. Like Bataille, Freud associated taboos with desire. He also saw them as ancient, describing them in racialised language as ‘the dark origin of our own categorical imperative’ (Freud, 2001a).⁴ But as that last quotation indicates, he distances modern European humans from the idea of taboo, seeing it as vestigial with no continuing function and appearing only in the form of compulsive disorders and neuroses. For proponents of *homo rationalis* that which is non-rational is less than human.

This is reversed by Bataille. Taboo is itself non-rational, but it makes reason possible. Reason needs a certain kind of space, free from violent desire and its expression. The means by which it does this is not through reason but emotional states such as fear, terror, disgust and shame, the prospect of anguish: ‘basically a shudder appealing not to reason but to feeling, just as violence is’ (Bataille, 2012a, p. 6). Though we only become conscious of this relationship and feel this way when violation of taboo is a possibility before us. This ‘calm ordering’ (ibid., p. 38) makes possible human society: the human collective. Thus violence, which is defined by its opposition to reason (ibid., p. 55) because it is the result of emotional states (ibid., p. 64), is in a sense both the beginning and the substance of human society. Contrary to the belief that ‘taboo prohibitions lack all justification and are of unknown origin’ (Freud, 2001a, p. 18), taboo for Bataille is the living foundation of all human societies.⁵

The mode of the human collective is ‘work’ and it is work that results in production, which enables us to meet our physical needs and, crucially, to meet the needs of our dependent children: ‘Taboos are there to make work possible; work is productive’ (Bataille, 2012a, p. 68). Work entails deferred or functional expenditure and allows us to plan and think beyond the present. At the centre of Bataille’s thought is the idea of the social: living together in a complex future-orientated social nexus and communicating with one another are core distinguishing features of the human animal. Communication means ‘all forms by which the individual moves out of a state of enclosure in its own isolated existence and opens on to others’ (Hewson and Coelen, 2016, p. 13). The idea of ‘project’ is closely connected to that of work: this is the term Bataille prefers to progress. Work literally *projects* into the future creating what he calls a ‘paradoxical way of being in time: it is putting existence off until later’ (Bataille, 2014, p. 51). He declares his ‘opposition to the idea of project’ and, more playfully, his ‘project of escaping from project’, for emersion in project is slavish and degrading (ibid., pp. 64, 49).

Transgression is the crossing of a line drawn by taboo. ‘Organised transgression’ complements taboo. In earlier human societies there were designated times for transgressive behaviour: rituals, festivals, the death of kings.

These were occasions of non-productive consumption, of expenditure and excess. This weft in the fabric of society changed as ‘the great free forms of unproductive social expenditure’ fell out of use as capitalism replaced feudalism (Bataille, 1985, p. 124). Transgression took the individual form of the erotic, until even this was subdued by project. In its place is the hypocritical ‘hatred of expenditure’ of the bourgeoisie (ibid., pp. 124–125). The venal behaviour and insatiable appetite of this class makes it the target of Bataille’s most vehement criticism – he does not miss and hits the wall when he spits:

It is right to recognise that the people are incapable of hating them as much as their former masters, to the extent that they are capable of loving them, for the bourgeois are incapable of concealing a sordid face, a face so rapacious and lacking in nobility, so frighteningly small, that all human life, upon seeing it, seems degraded. (ibid., p. 125)

In a reversal of the common order, it is not prohibition that Bataille identifies with the sacred, but transgression. The sacred is present in what is *expelled* from homogenous society: from the body (blood, sweat, tears, shit), in extreme emotions (anger, laughter, drunkenness) and in non-utilitarian social activity (games, poetry, eroticism) (Richardson, 1994, p. 36). It is in this ‘dejecta’ that humans are sovereign – free from the instrumental and utilitarian thinking that is required of project.

In this way Bataille entirely subverts the familiar notion of sovereignty. Whereas for Kant it refers to the primacy of individual reason, and for Nietzsche it means the free spirits, the ‘commanders and law givers’ (Nietzsche and Del Caro, 2014, ch. 6, para 211), Bataille opposes it to the domain of work and project – means-end orientated discursive thinking. Instead it is ‘pure expenditure’ – ‘generous, orgiastic and excessive’ (Bataille, 1985, p. 124). The kind of autonomy we ordinarily mean is a kind of *algorhythmic* freedom – liberty to determine and pursue ends without constraint or duress. Sovereignty is liberty from ends and from the heteronomy *or* autonomy that determine means.

A slack reading of Bataille could miss the radical reversals in his account of being human. The role of taboo is not that of conquest over emotion; reason does not have dominion over violence. Rather reason is dependent on strong emotion for its very existence. The images that Bataille uses to describe this relationship are not oppositional, as one has come to expect in the more familiar Christian binary of good and evil, light and darkness. Nor is it a question of challenge to taboo, the notion of subversion, since the transgression reinforces and confirms taboo: transgression ‘does not deny the taboo, but transcends it and completes it’ (Bataille, 2012a, p. 63). Rather Bataille employs symbiotic metaphors such as dance: ‘The dance of human life would now come closer to violence, now distance itself from it in terror, as if its attitudes were composed in view of a compromise with violence itself’ (ibid., p. 3). Elsewhere he describes the movement between the taboo and the desire to transgress it as a heartbeat: ‘just as the diastolic movement

completes the systolic one ... The compression is not subservient to the explosion, far from it; it gives it increased force' (ibid., p. 65). This symbiotic relationship gives us the first layer of understanding heterology. This is the profound and dynamic duality of human existence:

There are therefore, broadly speaking, two opposed regions in human affairs, one homogeneous, profane and commonly practiced, the other heterogeneous, completely other, deeply separated from the first and, additionally, itself deeply divided by the violent opposition between pure and impure, angelic and obscene, noble and common ... (Bataille, 2018b, p. 36)

At the beginning of *The Accursed Share* Bataille describes a man who bounces his child on his knee at home but in war burns, kills and tortures. (Written in the immediate aftermath of WW2, one thinks about the death camp commanders who enjoyed domestic normalcy with their families just outside the camps where they committed their atrocities.) Through such apparently exceptional examples of belonging to two worlds, Bataille proposes this as the essential human condition, a universal anti-syzygy: 'Man belongs in any case to both of these worlds [taboo and transgression] and between them willy-nilly his life is torn' (Bataille, 2012a, p. 40). Taboo mediates this self-estrangement that defines the human: taboo *is* the relational term that constitutes the human self.

What is portioned off as *inhuman* is what Bataille calls 'the accursed share'. We deny our own heterogeneity, our forked nature (I am this; I am also this) in order to 'keep [our] place in the mechanical order' (Bataille, 1991, p. 24). But humanity is not homogeneous: 'We often speak of the world, of humanity, as if it had some unity. In reality, humanity forms worlds, seemingly related but actually alien to one another ... [T]his incompatibility also concentrates in a single individual' (ibid., p. 21). '*Conceivable* humanity' is that thinking, planning, rational way of being. We achieve this delusion of unity by refusing the integration or assimilation of what Bataille calls the 'erotic'.

Adult–Child Pedagogical Relationship

In Bataille's thought there is nothing inevitable about the eventual humanity of the child. They do not become human of their own volition, or due to any biological process of maturation. Bataille's understanding of the child as 'animal-becoming-human' involves the intentional activity of adults upon the child in order to take them to the state of being we call human. This is how the adult–child relationship is described in *Inner Experience*:

The miniscule 'absents' are not in contact with the world, *if not through the channel of grown-ups*: the result of the intervention of grown-ups is *childishness*, a fabrication. Grown-ups *obviously* reduce the being that comes into the world, which we are at first, to trinkets. This seems important to me: that the passage from the state of nature

(of birth) to our state of reason necessarily takes place along the path of *childishness*.

Childishness is the state wherein we put the naïve being, from the fact that we must lead it there, even without precisely willing it, we lead it to the point where we are. When we laugh at childish absurdity, the laugh disguises the shame that we feel, seeing to what we reduce life emerging from nothingness. (Bataille, 2014a, p. 47)

The intention to change someone's relation to the world is fundamentally pedagogical. The child is not 'in contact with the world', that is, with the world as object of its attention. The adult 'fabricates' the artificial construct of childishness, in which state the child is first reduced and uprooted from now, and then brought to the place where we are, the world of existence deferred, of utility and of continence. The end of the pedagogical relationship is the recapitulation of the primeval heterogeneity of the human condition.

What this means is that a child *cannot transgress*. If the child is on the pathway of childishness then by definition they are not yet properly subject to taboo. There are things that they are not permitted to do, but they do not yet experience anguish at the thought of transgression. The child is not yet fully 'uprooted from nature' so their impulses do not yet have meaning in the human world and childhood is not 'an active expression of human being' (Jenks, 1996, p. 150). Nonetheless, they are never members of any other animal species. Conversely an animal is never childish: their existence is *chrysalid*, liminal between animal and human.

The implications of Bataille's notion of childishness should be a barrier to the instrumentalisation of children's behaviour, that is, as a challenge or critique of the current order. And this is important: transgression can never be part of a *project*. The appropriation of transgression to an end is a recurring misstep in Bataille scholarship. The origins of this may be traced in part to the interpretation of Bataille presented by Foucault in his essay 'Preface to Transgression'[4]. Here he acknowledges the co-dependence of taboo and transgression:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. (Foucault, 1977, p. 34)

And yet his account does just this: the 'limits' – he does not use the term 'taboo' except once, preferring 'la limite' – are pale and insubstantial, without purpose or definition. A limit is always genitive, always a limit *of* something else. Foucault's overriding interest is in the nature of transgression rather than in taboo, that human-defining digression from the animal. Regardless of his acknowledgement of the reciprocity and co-dependency of the two concepts he manages to succeed in separating transgression from the whole. This permits precisely the oppositional positioning of transgression that appears in many contemporary Bataille studies.⁵ Given the

definitional centrality of taboo to the human and to the human collective, and the central importance of the child in relation to taboo in Bataille's anthropology, this Foucauldian reconfiguration changes substantially what can be said about the pedagogical relationship.

CONSEQUENCES⁶

I began with a complaint around the state of children's agency, and how, despite the centrality of these ideas in education, public policy and academic research, progress towards realising them in practice is somewhat disappointing, particularly in the context of vaunting ambitions for children to be empowered, included, liberated: for them to reach their 'full potential'. Children's agency is often tokenistic, sometimes disingenuous and, more than occasionally, *uninteresting* to adults or to the children themselves. The spaces for children's agency are strictly circumscribed by practical considerations concerning their levels of understanding, need for protection and adults' desire (however it is motivated) to direct and control. In thinking about the ontologies of the child employed in childhood studies I observed that not only are the two principal ontologies – the humanist and the constructivist – incompatible, but also that neither actually allows for anything other than a thin conception of agency.

Reading Bataille leads me to think that rather than focusing on 'fixing' children's agency, we probably need to manage our expectations by founding them on a clearer understanding of what we are about, what can and what cannot be achieved in the pedagogical relationship. It may be that our treatment of children, whether we are paid or unpaid educators, is misdirected if we pay too little attention to the task of introducing children to the system of taboo that defines the human collective, in that we reduce the chances of the children participating in discursive reasoning at some point along the path. On first impression, this seems to be an inherently conservative educational position: education as the creation of 'docile bodies'. But docility is not a requirement for taboo – quite the opposite. Docility is about the eradication of desire, strong emotion, violence. This kind of education is narcotic. The pedagogical relation that is implicit in Bataille's 'path of childishness' is, in contrast, highly emotionally charged. Induction relies on shame, violence, mockery and, in time, the experience of anguish when the transgression of taboo is contemplated.

If we were previously imagining that pedagogy is an intention in relation to reason, then Bataille pushes our attention back to a primary intention to 'make space' for reason through the harnessing of un-reason (shame, fear) in order to control and hold back what is not admissible in the space of reason (extreme emotion, desire, bodily excreta, useless activity). The space created by taboo is not *sovereign* space. Rather it is a space of *solidity*: of work directed to goals, with utility as the only measure of value, of traditional disciplinary scholarship, of quantifiable inert existence. Though work is not servility, nonetheless it is an a priori impossibility to foster sovereignty as the outcome of end-orientated pedagogical activity. The autonomy we seek to foster is an algorithmic freedom – liberty to define

problems, determine ends and pursue means. This understanding is more modest, but it might save progressive educators from turning the Crank – a machine of pointless labour pursued to the point of exhaustion – in an endeavour to achieve something apparently greater.

But this does not mean that change – transformation if you prefer – is impossible. Docility favours the status quo, but not so taboo. Because taboo is constituted by the very things it seeks to limit, it means that there is an explosive tension in being human. Belief in growth and evolution is part of project as it describes linear progress; it is not a complete description of human life. Change, for Bataille, is more like a chemical explosion, a build-up of internal tension, the continuity of the erotic around the world of work and project.

Why do we even need to think about this? Bataille struggles to speak about the state we are in. To do so is to be entangled in a contradiction: discursive reason is the mode of project not of sovereignty. The task of talking about sovereignty is heavy and resistant, and takes on the shape of project as soon as discursive reason is applied. Bataille playfully describes this impossibility as the ‘project of escaping from project’, and the repeated acknowledgement of this contradiction in his writings somewhat lessens my own hesitancy about instrumentalising his thought (Bataille, 2014a, p. 64). The need to pursue this comes out of a sense of crisis or endgame in the human collective. In the 1930s and 1940s the reason for this is obvious. In our own time, the sense is more acute as the very real prospect of ecological collapse and species extinction desiccates human project.

Bataille’s diagnosis is unexpected. Under conditions of late modernity we are experiencing the fruition of denial of eroticism – ‘an attempt to deny and close out death and our connection with nature’ (Richardson, 1994). The absence of transgression in modernity results in homogeneity, in direct denial of the bivalency of human nature. This is an absolute and irrevocable loss of sovereignty:

The mind of man has become its own slave and, through the labor of autodigestion that the operation assumes, has consumed, subjugated, destroyed itself. Cog within the available cogs, the mind of man makes of itself abuse whose effects escape him – to the extent that this effect is only the end, nothing subsists in the mind of man that is not a useful thing. (Bataille, 2014a, p. 134)

What we are experiencing is not the result of the Enlightenment, though this is an important acceleration of a trend in human history. The current state we are in had its genesis in the notion that the relation between taboo and transgression was adversarial. This is the Christian belief in good and evil and, ultimately, of salvation: ‘salvation is the summit of every possible project and peak in matters of project’ (Bataille, 2014a, p. 52). There can only be one victor in the battle between sin and salvation and this understanding constitutes the germ of homogeneity.

The path of childishness enrols the child in the human project and entails ‘putting existence off until later’. Under conditions of homogeneity,

we require that the child, like ourselves, put existence off forever. Modernity's futurism is utterly self-defeating: instead of ensuring future survival, it makes it an impossibility. The total suppression of heterology is dangerous:

Bataille's whole thinking assumes that the enormity of what happened in the concentration camps was not an aberration of mankind, rather it showed the danger we run if we engage in a collective repression of our fundamental internal violence. (Richardson, 1994, p. 131)

Rescuing the pedagogical project needs to start with self-examination about where we are leading children if we are taking them to where we are, and where we are heading as a species. The adult shame is not to do with our fundamental relation as adults to the animal-becoming-human: it is a response to a refusal to allow children to come into their heterologous inheritance by denying the fundamental dualism of the human species.

Being drawn into Bataille's world and becoming complicitous with his thought involves adopting his 'opposition to the idea of project'. Such a position results in a profound ambivalence about the education of children under conditions of late, homogenous modernity. A partial immersion in this world might lead one to ask: What spaces are there for transgression, for the *dejecta*, the 'waste products of intellectual appropriation'? (Bataille, 1985, p. 96). What is the place of non-discursive modes of thought: the mythical, analogical, affective? How can we 'recognise the profound value of these lost modes of thought' (Bataille, 2006, p. 64)? And finally, is there a way of regaining what he calls 'the domain of the moment (the kingdom of childhood)' (Bataille, 2012b, p. 10) in opposition to modernity's futurism?

However, it may be, as Bataille occasionally argues, that:

It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to want to be reasonable and learned, which has led to a life without attractions. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become other, or else cease to be. (Bataille, 2018, p. 124)

There is a sense in which the iconic child who is found in Bataille's work can be seen in the Romantic tradition of nostalgia for what is lost to the human condition under late modernity. But there is an important difference: as non-productive expenditure (sovereignty) is diminished, so also is taboo, which is the defining character of the species. The pedagogical relationship becomes shameful if we lose our sense of the fundamental bivalency of being human and that there are absolute dangers to both work and sovereignty in our denial of what is useless, excessive and transgressive.

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NOTES

1. The strategic use of humanism in the political context of post-war Europe and its relation to the emergent French existentialism is explored by Baring (2010).
2. Surrealists viewed humanism as a totalitarian ideological platform which takes its place beside both Stalinist communism and Fascism, anticipating a number of themes of anti-humanist thought (Eburne, 2006).
3. I explore Surrealist thought in relation to understandings of childhood elsewhere (Jessop, 2018).
4. 'dunkeln' is rendered as 'obscure' in the Standard Edition I am using here but would normally be translated as 'dark'.
5. Freud continues: 'Though they are unintelligible to us, to those who are dominated by them they are taken as a matter of course'. In later writings, Freud speaks about the inherent reasonableness of the prohibitions of 'civilisation' which are there to serve human interests, and which are 'intended to make our communal life possible' (albeit not recognised as such by those who see them as arbitrary restrictions (Freud, 2001b, pp. 15, 41). In this discussion Freud no longer employs the term 'taboo' which continues to be associated with man's infancy which is still visible in 'primitive' societies. It is originary rather than a living part of contemporary European society (Freud, 2001c, p. 101).
6. Richardson warns that 'it is no use approaching [Bataille's] work with the aim of 'understanding' him in any conventional sense' (1994, p. viii) and I follow his advice that Bataille is not 'for those who are merely interested in a vague way in this work, but for those who would seek out its consequences' (Richardson, 1998, p. ix).

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