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THINK PIECE

Pleasure and excess: Using Georges Bataille to locate an absent pleasure of consumption

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This article will engage with some recent changes in addiction discourses and research in order to introduce a new version of pleasure. Looking at how addiction research has reframed the 'addict' as a socially situated and contingent 'consumer', I will try to understand the role of excess in the distinction between 'normal' and 'problematic' consumption. This distinction remains prevalent, even in recent works on pleasure and drug-use. Pleasure is crucial here, because it is intimately related to consumption, yet has been previously ignored in research. Whereas the previous distinguishing feature of 'addict' and 'non-addict' can be argued to have been one of 'production' and 'consumption' (alongside a whole list of other attributes), the current debate seems to focus on various forms of consumption – the pursuit of pleasure through consumption being contentious. I argue that Bataille's formulation of overwhelming pleasure offers a way of combining excess and pleasure in a manner that is not problematic, further breaking down the distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' consumption. However, at the same time a new dichotomy is created between 'overwhelming' and 'purposive' pleasure, a distinction that might offer new ways of distinguishing 'problematic' and 'unproblematic' consumption in relation to drug-use. The version of pleasure formulated is argued to be absent in current work looking at pleasure in addiction, and a valuable addition to the growing repertoire of the types of pleasure available to addiction research.

Keywords: Addiction, Bataille, pleasure, consumption, excess, sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

Addiction research has begun to successfully reframe many concepts, including addiction itself, by exposing how they are socially constructed (often employing a genealogical method). This has increasingly led to associated concepts becoming complicated and muddled. There is no longer a clear dichotomy between the addict and the non-addict, but instead there are drug-users, problem drug-users, addicts and habitual users (Seddon, 2011) and arguably these are all variations of the 'consumer' effectively turning everyone into a 'user' of some description.

Pleasure is the latest concept to be problematised by new approaches to addiction research. The *absence of pleasure* in addiction research has received growing attention, especially in the last decade (see, e.g. Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Duff, 2008; Holt & Treloar, 2008; Keane, 2008; Moore, 2008; Moore & Measham, 2008; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). The absence has also been related to work that deconstructs or complicates ideas of addiction in order to show the relevance of pleasure, especially as a motive for action (Bergschmidt, 2004; Dwyer, 2008; Lindeman & Stark, 1999; Valentine & Fraser, 2008). Addiction research has thus opened up questions about the more conceptual understanding of pleasure, which has led to some typologies (Bunton & Coveney, 2011) and some genealogical work (this time on pleasure) (Duff, 2004; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004).

What is lacking, however, is an attempt to offer new formulations of pleasure. Either these might be more insightful than or a valuable addition to the current repertoire. To this end, this article tries to articulate a particular formulation of pleasure, 'overwhelming pleasure', grounded in a moderate reading of George Bataille. The hope is to contribute to an increasingly

established debate about the role of pleasure in addiction research. The absence of the proposed type of pleasure is, so I argue, due to a focus on motives and purposive action, neglecting pleasure that distinguishes itself through the absence of aims and intentions.

First, I will summarise the social-constructivist literature on addiction and the breaking down of the historical distinctions between addict and non-addict. The 'normal' neoliberal subject is increasingly contextualised socially, which complicated the clarity of the normal/abnormal distinction. Pleasure becomes relevant in light of this shift in the literature. Exploring this new importance of pleasure will rely on outlining two trends: (1) the 'rational individual' is increasingly replaced by a 'social consumer', (2) this consumers' relation to addiction is reconstructed by drawing various new distinctions. Moderate and excessive pleasure becomes a key distinction in the literature – if everyone is a consumer and no one is entirely autonomous, then, there are still either productive or destructive forms of consumption. After a short introduction to Bataille's work, this article will develop the proposed overwhelming pleasure. This pleasure and its relation to excess and rationality is missing conceptually and might aid a better understanding the role of pleasure in problematic drug use.

ADDICTION AND NON-ADDICTION

There are several recent accounts of the discourses of addiction, some of these are historical (Levine, 1978; Seddon, 2010), others look at the discursive structure in some depth (for a summary of several such analyses, see Bailey, 2005), and yet others try to understand normative aspects (Reith, 2004; Seddon, 2011; Vitellone, 2005). In other words, there is plenty of literature that not only tries to understand addiction, but also looks to understand how we have come to classify and construct addiction as a reality (at times aiming to alter how it is constructed). This relatively recent, mostly epistemological debate shows that the addict, in most cases, is constructed against a counterfactual, the non-addict.

We can find a long list of attributes that are associated with these dichotomous figures. Historically, especially in the nineteenth to early twentieth century, positive attributes were associated with the non-addict, whereas negative attributes were associated with the addict. A tentative list from various authors includes: positive *versus* negative, healthy *versus* ill, rational *versus* irrational, autonomous *versus* dependent, moderate *versus* excessive, disciplined *versus* rowdy, productive *versus* wasteful, empowered *versus* disempowered and also good *versus* evil (Levine, 1978; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004; Seddon, 2010).

The move towards harm-reduction in public health discourses more generally (Ritter & Cameron, 2006; Seddon, 2010) has started to blur this dichotomous view.

Rather than dependent addicts controlled by a substance, the new subject is a problem drug-user who is, to some degree, an independent decision maker. They are constructed to be more rational, health-conscious and able to minimise risks (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Dwyer, 2008). This also permits discourses of harm reduction to reframe risk-takers as irrational by choice. Unlike earlier discourses of dependence, the shift towards a neoliberal rational individual, whose rationality is measured by harm-reduction regarding health alone, has led to a normative shift from helplessness (lacking discipline) towards responsibility (not using discipline) (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). Harm reduction discourse still relies on the traditional Western definition of a 'subject' and leaves the distinction between the above positive and negative attributes intact; however, the line is blurred in so far as being irrational is no longer as clearly associated with having lost control – people choose to behave in an irrational manner. The concept of the 'controlled loss of control' is one outcome of this shift (e.g. Measham, 2004).

But, as I mentioned, there is an increasing literature that is critical of this prevailing, but hidden, dichotomy between the positive and negative attributes associated with the non-addict and addict. I say hidden because the addict and problem drug-user are both attributed the capacity of rational decision-making, but the decisions they make when contrary to health interests are continuously considered irrational (Dwyer, 2008; Moore, 2008; Moore & Fraser, 2006).

The concepts of control and dependence are a key aspect of this 'irrational' behaviour. They rely not only on a person controlling or being controlled by a substance/activity/object, since control also relies on dependence as a counterfactual (previously, this was exclusively the loss of control of the non-addict). In other words, control relies on a change in affairs compared to dependence. We can compare this to a hierarchical definition of power: A has power over B, if B manages to make A act in a way that would otherwise not have been the case and is counter to B's interests (Lukes, 2005). Depending on what we take A or B to be (either the actor or the drug), we can recognise either addiction or non-addiction: either the person has power over the substance, or vice versa. As Melley (in Bailey, 2005, p. 539) phrases it, 'Finally, one must view control as an indivisible property, something that is possessed either by the individual or by external influences'. The outcome of this counterfactual is the ascription of the positive attributes to one state and negative attributes to the other, focussed on a concept of the addicts 'real interests'. A person is not in control when dependent and their dependent state is 'irrational' compared to the 'rational' state of autonomy. This openly moral juxtaposition of 'control' as an empowering good and 'desire' as a disempowering evil is at the heart of the increasingly challenged (and outmoded) idea of addiction (Bailey, 2005, p. 540).

Some challenges are grounded in Foucault's concept of power and discourse (Bergschmidt, 2004; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). Framing drug-use and addiction as irrational is described as a discursive technology of power (Bailey, 2005; Valverde, 1998) that reinforces the normal, disciplined, rational non-addict as 'good' in a normative sense (Bailey, 2005, p. 539). A consequence of a less binary and hierarchical version of power is the empowerment of the drug-user. Several studies concerned with the reality of these discursively disempowered drug-users is sympathetic and begins to ascribe more of the positive attributes mentioned above to the actual decisions made (e.g. Bourgois, 2009; Dwyer, 2008). It is particularly with control and loss-of-control where the research outlines the degree of discipline required by drug users, esp. addicts. The shift towards control also aligns the addict more closely with a 'normal' or 'rational' actor, who is no longer entirely autonomous either.

By critically subverting the idea of power, there is an increasing recognition of the control and discipline required by addicts, especially in maintaining 'normality' (Bancroft, Wiltshire, Parry, & Amos, 2003; Bergschmidt, 2004; Bourgois, 2009; Dwyer, 2008; Reith, 2004; Taylor, 1993). The addict's dependency on a drug is more often depicted as a pursuit of 'functioning' reliant on some degree of self-control in order to be 'normal'. So, instead of a juxtaposition of a healthy, rational non-addict and an irrational, ill addict, the boundaries are blurred by an ever more sincerely 'rational' depiction of addicts. Even though not as discursively established as the control required in abstinence, addicts employ discipline to avoid an over- or underdose. Overdose here is not strictly used to mean a fatal dose, but also a dose that increases tolerance, requiring higher levels of consumption in order to maintain normality or functionality. Maintaining a steady supply is also a struggle. A striking example of this discipline is Taylor's (1993) ethnography of women drug users where the 'steady supply' becomes a major aspect of life. Dwyer makes similar use of the term 'normal' in relation to heroine usage, where a carefully measured amount is taken to 'stop them *feeling sick*', but not to produce a 'high' (Dwyer, 2008, p. 370). The aim of some instances of drug use is to 'get straight' or 'a relief from withdrawal symptoms and a feeling of normality' (Taylor, 1993, p. 71). Managing consumption becomes a process of routine, habit and discipline. Besides the control necessary to avoid withdrawal, research also shows discipline and expertise required in being part of a user community, where 'handling' one's addiction is important (Duff, 2004, p. 391). Even studies of 'drug-user communities' (Bourgois, 2009; Dwyer, 2008; Taylor, 1993) show how the independent, rational subject is not at the heart of research that tries to understand the realities of drug-users. Drug addicts become increasingly similar to a general 'consumer' where the rigorous distinctions between addict and non-addict

are less and less clear. This lack of clarity is not a result of 'elevating' the drug user to resemble the neoliberal subject, but by complicating the neoliberal 'non-addict' (Valentine & Fraser, 2008, p. 411).

No longer assuming addiction and non-addiction as distinct, research does not limit itself to finding out why users make irrational choices when they have the capacity to make rational ones, but it is trying to show how the decisions made are in fact 'rational' in a broader, socially sensitive understanding of that term (Bourgois, 1995). This broadening of the definition of 'rational' coincides with abandoning the idea of individual autonomy in the narrow sense. Many of these studies understand the drug-user to be a social actor and decision-making is contingent on the self-other relationships and the social realities of drug-users.

There is, by now, an established theoretical framework to account for and research the 'rational problematic drug-user' (Seddon, 2011). In our list of dichotomous attributes, we now attribute 'rational' to the addict by complicating the idea to 'autonomy' and 'normal' (insisting that all actors are discursively situated and that 'normal' is a discursive technology of power), drawing on the more complicated version of power. This blurring of the lines between the positive and negative attributes in addiction research by taking the addicts reality more seriously has arguably also lead to increased attention being paid to the absence of pleasure in addiction research.

PLEASURE: THE PRIVILEGE OF THE DRUG-USER

In the last 10 years, there has been an increasing number of publications noting the neglect of pleasure in addiction research. There is, by now, little new about noting this absence. Most authors, however, focus on explaining the neglect of pleasure, either by historicizing its absence or by relating addiction research to health research more generally (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Duff, 2008; Holt & Treloar, 2008; Keane, 2008; Moore, 2008; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). There are also even more empirical studies that try to remedy the absence of pleasure by framing their empirical research specifically in relation to the 'pleasure oversight', often claiming that pleasure is relevant and that it must be taken seriously as a motive (Bergschmidt, 2004; Dwyer, 2008; Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Jarvinen & Ostergaard, 2011; Keane, 2008). I want to take a look at these two ways of engaging with pleasure to show the ways in which the following development of Bataille's work can be useful.

We can broadly claim that the recent move to discuss pleasure relates to the above shift that reframes the drug user. If it has been argued that pleasure has been previously excluded because it was considered 'lower' than discipline and reason (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Dwyer, 2008; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004), then

the increasing recognition of disciplined, rationalised choices in cases of addiction has also reframed pleasure. The previous associating of pleasure with irrational and uncontrolled behaviour of a subject capable of a reason, results in pleasure as external (in a broader sense). The physical or carnal pleasure experienced is discursively related to excess and irrationality (Bunton & Coveney, 2011), and consequently it is associated with 'evil' or the 'problem' that causes dependence. We can see this in accounts of addicts as either 'helpless' or as lacking willpower and resolve (i.e. being 'weak' in some sense) (Davies, 1992).

As can be seen in looking at some examples of recent research on drug-users that focuses on pleasure (or do not deny/hide it), we can see how the new rational drug-user is still framed as problematic (Seddon, 2011), but the pleasure is now something more internal that is regulated, dosed and embodied (e.g. Bourgois, 2009; Dwyer, 2008; Taylor, 1993). The pleasure considered in these studies is still very much 'carnal pleasure' (with some attention given to 'ecstatic pleasure') in Bunton and Coveney's (2011) sense, but this type of pleasure is no longer in itself a problem or cause, but it is associated with the problem of drug-use merely as a motive for action that is rational. It is a pleasure open to all consumers and therefore it cannot be categorically 'problematic', but it can nonetheless be distinguished in some ways in order to maintain a distinction between the 'problem drug-user' and the 'normal consumer'.

The addict and non-addict distinction is no longer one of opposites with clear distinctions. The various conceptual challenges to the term 'addiction' from social-constructivists and the shift towards equally muddled terms like 'problem drug user' (Seddon, 2011) implies that we are moving along a spectrum of varieties of consumption, where 'problematic' implies a causal association between consumption and harm (Moore & Fraser, 2006). If this is the case, and pleasure is regarded no longer as a seductive cause, but as a motive to be taken seriously, then we can see how pleasure is not a problem in all consumption, but it is something that explains why people consume in a problematic manner. It is, in fact, this importance of pleasure in the explanation of harmful drug-use that is cited as justification for adding pleasure to the addiction research agenda (Bunton & Coveney, 2011; Dwyer, 2008).

Conceptually, then, the pleasure of drug-use is similar to the pleasure of any or most forms of consumption. This shows some resonance with the proliferation of types of addiction (Reith, 2004), including an addiction to the consumption per se (Clark & Calleja, 2008), and an addiction to recovery from addiction (Keane, 2002, p. 157). Addiction research has, however, focused on either explaining the absence of pleasure in addiction, or on trying to show that pleasure is important in accounting for addiction (or problematic use). The danger that I hope

to identify is that pleasure becomes closely associated with 'sensation-seeking' and is limited to being seen as purposive action: 'I do X to have fun!' Pleasure, in these accounts, is associated with problem drug-use through some idea of excess and it is not clearly articulated in relation to non-problematic drug-use. What is missed is pleasure that is not related to purposive action.

Not much work has been done trying to engage with how we might understand pleasure in a positive way. There are of course exceptions, most notably Duff's (2004) attempt to use Foucault's ideas about pleasure and ethics to show how we might understand a moderated consumption as pleasurable *and* desirable in an uncompromising way. We can notice a clear distinction between Duff, who tries to offer a constructive reformulation of pleasure, and authors like Bunton and Coveney (2011) or O'Malley and Valverde (2004), who take established formulations of pleasure to then explain their absence and illuminate some consequences of this absence to research. Most research that calls for pleasure to be more openly discussed seems oriented to understand pleasure as a motive or cause, rather than going beyond more established definitions. The inclusion of pleasure in discourse is said to be important because it might offer new ways of preventing addiction and substance abuse by better understanding all aspects of how drug-use choices are motivated (Duff, 2008, p. 390). There is little in the literature that tries to redefine pleasure away from gratification of desire in reference to substance abuse. Implicitly, the distinction between pleasures that are good or bad relies on some version of the distinction between moderation and excess. Even in Duff's use of Foucault, the proposed version of pleasure is a moderate pleasure. Moderate pleasure can, of course, concern itself with 'carnal pleasures', but it does so strictly through the exercise of discipline. 'Disciplined pleasure, then, is pleasure that has been rationalised' (Bunton & Coveney, 2011, p. 14). Excessive and moderate pleasure in drug use is a common theme, for example, differentiation of alcohol (read: spirits) from victuals (read: beer or wine). Looking at two engravings by Hogarth, O'Malley and Valverde (2004, p. 30) contrast the moderate enjoyment in the productive and bustling *Beer Street* with the complete lack of productivity and a great amount of suffering in the destructive *Gin Lane*.

In light of this distinction between moderate and immoderate, we see that explorations of unproblematic pleasure (e.g. Duff, 2004) do not offer us any account of what an unproblematic, yet excessive pleasure might be. It is intuitively quite obvious why: it is difficult to advocate excessive pleasure when talking about problematic use. If disciplined pleasure is in fact rationalised pleasure, then any rational defence of excess is bound to produce disciplined (read moderated) pleasure. Excess remains problematic as antithesis to rational action. This excess, in the form of waste,

draws a connection between ‘productivity’ and ‘problematic use’ and we can see that pleasure is permissible only when it does not: (a) become the aim of all production or (b) prevents production. Reith (2004, p. 289) notes that erratic and excessive consumption is in conflict with production, something also clear in the engraving *Gin Lane* by Hogarth mentioned above (O’Malley & Valverde, 2004, p. 30) – the businesses depicted on the street relate to maintaining excess (a distillery and a pawnbroker) or to a complete failure of production (an undertaker). Production becomes dependant on consumption, rather than consumption enabling production. Pleasure is therefore still regarded as a problem when consumption prevents growth. Excessive consumption is equated with decay (either in terms of money, health or social relationships). In other words, when speaking of unproblematic consumption the literature only offers us moderated pleasure.

I want to, therefore, return to the list of positive and negative attributes mentioned at the beginning. There seem to be two currents in the literature that are not necessarily exclusive. The breakdown of the rational subject has led to a breakdown of much of the dichotomy between the ‘bad addict’ and the ‘good non-addict’. But at the same time, looking at the use of pleasure, new distinctions are drawn out to continue to differentiate problematic and unproblematic versions of consumption. One such distinction is between moderate and immoderate pleasure, which remains prevalent in research and policy. In line with these two directions, this article will now try to further break down the dichotomy by introducing a version of pleasure that is excessive, wasteful, but arguably positive. The version of pleasure introduced here is only available in its unproblematic form and is diminished or lost when ‘problematic’. Rather than ‘excess’ and ‘moderation’ being the distinguishing feature, a distinction between ‘purposive’ and ‘overwhelming’ will be developed from Bataille’s concepts of sovereignty and excess.

WHY BATAILLE?

Apart from Bunton and Coveney’s (2011, p. 11) almost dismissive mention, the literature appears to neglect Bataille entirely. This is in spite of him writing explicitly on pleasure. His work, much like Foucault, openly rejects the concept of the rational actor in line with much social constructivist work on addiction. Instead, Bataille grounds his understanding in a fusion of Nietzsche’s (1977, p. 218) self as conceptually trapped in a self-other relationship and Durkheim’s account of the self as actively negotiating this self-other relationship through communal membership and solidarity (Richardson, 1998, p. 39).

Maybe the neglect is not out of unawareness though, given that his arguments call for an excessive community of wasteful consumption. Bataille calls for mythical communal violence and romanticises various

forms of waste, excess and consumption (Bataille, 1985, 1988, 1991). His style is cryptic and inaccessible (e.g. Bataille, 1988) making for an, at first sight, unappealing mixture. Additionally there is the range and fragmentation of his works, which can, arguably, be related to one another to formulate some underlying coherence with regards to a political message, ethics and the constitution of the human subject, but this needs to be sought after by the reader. Bataille does little to assist any attempt to create order within his chaotic oeuvre. As a consequence, the reader can justifiably take liberties with his work, given that he or she is the person who undertakes the interpretive effort of making sense of it all – an appeal lost on many readers, but a key assumption for this article.

As far as addiction research is concerned, his detailed development of a social subject that requires both reason *and* passion, and his attempts to conceptually combine pleasure and excess, make him an interesting figure to add to the debate about pleasure. Much like Foucault, who is used more commonly in the drug-pleasure research literature, Bataille focuses on sexual pleasure. There are, however, numerous references to alcohol consumption and even addiction that make it easier to relate his more general argument to the topic of problem drug use. The approach to pleasure that Bataille recommends is, of course, not unequivocally recommendable, so this paper will have to pry out those aspects of his work that allow a positive reading to uncover an overlooked facet of pleasure.

AUTONOMY AND CONTROL OR SOVEREIGNTY AND EXCESS

I will argue that there is a positive version of pleasure that is irrational *and* excessive, but differentiated through a new distinction: purposive and overwhelming pleasure. This type of pleasure is conceptually and experientially elusive, but might offer new ways of conceptualising the ‘irrational excessive consumer’. Before making some tentative conceptual headway by developing Bataille’s pleasure and having already shown excess and moderation to be a maintained distinction, I will first show how ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ related to the debate so far.

The rational actor, even though challenged by some of the recent forays into social constructivist explanations, still survives in addiction research. As already indicated, the concept of ‘rational’ has been challenged and reformulated. We see a more rational addict that exercises some incredible control over consumption (e.g. Taylor, 1993) and we see problematic use that is not related to dependence (or addiction) but simply to excess (e.g. Griffin, et al., 2009; Moore & Measham, 2008). There remains, however, a hesitance to engage positively with ‘irrational excess’ – neither more generally in the challenge of the rational actor, nor more specifically in work that looks at pleasure.

Undoubtedly, we can see more diverse ‘selves’ appear in the literature. However, control and autonomy remain a key attribute of ‘normality’, especially in the guise of ‘choice’ and ‘power’. I have alluded to the use of Foucault in relation to power above. Here, challenging more conventional understandings of *control* and *rationality* is considered a form of empowerment or resistance by unmasking ‘addiction discourse’ as a technology of power (Bailey, 2005). Rather than abandoning control it is simply spreading further into a larger variety of selves, leaving everyone suspended in complex constellations of being ‘in control’ and ‘losing control’. There is now control over the loss of control, and losing control over control, including many nuances in between.

We can even draw a parallel between rationality and control: the controlled loss of control seems closely intertwined with the rationalised pursuit of the irrational. To relate this to moderation, there is a moderated (i.e. disciplined) pursuit of excessive pleasure. Much like the controlled loss of control, there remains some form of ‘limit’ or ‘boundary’ of consumption, the transgression of which is immoderate excess, uncontrolled loss of control, and unreasonable pursuit of the irrational. As a consequence, the solution to this problematic use remains an appeal to discipline, reason and. These three concepts relate to the idea of autonomy, and problematic use is overcome either through enabling autonomy (freeing the self, or reforming the self) or through appealing to already existing autonomy (Bergschmidt, 2004; Keane, 2008; Valverde, 1998; Valverde & White-Mair, 1999; Young, 2011). The autonomous self is, after all, in control, able to employ discipline to moderate consumption.

But what if autonomy is not the same as freedom? And at this point, we begin uncovering a route to the neglected form of pleasure that Bataille’s work implies. He abandons the ‘autonomous self’ by arguing that the entire distinction between ‘autonomy’ and ‘dependence’ is a false one – autonomy is merely a way of replacing external disciplining with a need for self-discipline and moderation (Richardson, 1998, p. 189). The claim that have a choice puts the autonomous self into a position where he or she both *must* choose and *must* work to maintain the ability to choose is similar to Foucaultian research – freedom is a form of disciplining and power. Remember how addiction or drug-use is increasingly recognised to require some control and discipline. Recent discourse spreads reason and control into more and more actions previously thought to be irrational and excessive, thus blurring this distinction. Bataille, however, tries to go beyond this by formulating a ‘way out’ or a different version of ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’. Put differently, Bataille tries to add a form of ‘sovereignty’, namely, the ability to transcend ‘choice’.

This discursive move is proto-postmodern: choice is framed within an essential dependence on articulated

consciousness, which relies on language (Bataille, 1988, pp. 13–16) and necessitates a relation to ‘others’. Choice or control is merely an illusion of autonomy since it relies on the communal law of language, similar to Derrida’s (1976) use of ‘language’ and Foucault’s (2002) use of ‘discourse’. The self, especially when it conceives of itself as ‘free’ by being able to pursue certain aims and projects, conceives of itself as outside this collective existence within language, all the while forgetting that the possibility of being ‘free’ occurs *within* the collective existence. Existence, for Bataille, is a struggle between radical difference and sameness, between inside and outside, and between ‘everything’ and ‘nothing’ (Bataille, 1988, p. xxxii). The problem itself should be familiar from Foucault and Derrida. What Bataille retains, writing earlier than these two thinkers, is some ability of transcending this ‘human condition’. Unwilling to concede to this ruptured self, Bataille is concerned with formulating a version of ‘autonomy’ (or ‘sovereignty’) that transcends discourse. His answer to this postmodern conundrum is quite simple: If the self is discourse, then transcending discourse and its control (for Foucault, read: power) requires us to abandon our self. But this claim needs developing.

Arguably, the enlightened self is free through an essential attachment to purpose (or project) and aim, which precludes overwhelming pleasure because it is concerned with production rather than consumption. To Bataille, the self is not complete when it is productive, disciplined and ‘autonomous’ – purposeful action, whether excessive or moderate, submits the self to the pursuit of something external. Bataille’s alternative, ‘sovereignty’, is therefore a form of refusal and resistance that does not simply resist the sway or influence of something external, but it resists externality more generally. However, as I just noted, the self is essentially related to something external, so sovereignty must, in some sense, achieve self-transcendence through self-consumption (or even self-destruction). In other words, Bataille attaches great meaning to the *absence* of the pursuit of something meaningful. The self has to, in order to experience freedom, let go of itself. Or as Habermas (1990, p. 224) puts quite plainly in his comment on Bataille: ‘The subject removed from labour and obsessed by the fulfilment of the present is wholly given up to the consumption of self’. It is this experience of being a self, unencumbered by its own existence, that is, to Bataille, the possibility of a desirable excessive pleasure.

It is also something that, to Bataille, is opposed to modernity and enlightenment. There is an absence of excess in modern society that diminishes existence by denying this particular sense of freedom. This restriction is so successful because it replaced ‘letting go of control’ with ‘being in control’ as the basis of autonomy. Sovereignty (in Bataille’s sense) is this capacity to loose oneself, to disconnect oneself from the constraints of choice. This, so far, is very abstract,

but even so, the possibility of letting go of oneself in this manner is already addressing an absence, even if it is not yet clear how this could relate to addiction research and how this could be desirable. Notably, this is also an absence in post-structuralist writing where purpose and project seem to be omni-present in the guise of discourse and grammar. Unable to escape it, the solution is irony.

The keen reader might have noticed a conceptual ‘trick’ in order to arrive at the ‘irrational’ aspect of the proposed pleasure. Even though Bataille formulates sovereignty as a resistance to rationality, if we take his key concern seriously, then sovereignty is not strictly irrational (i.e. opposed to rationality), but it is disinterested in rationality. In other words, it would be more accurate to describe Bataille’s sovereignty as arational, rather than irrational.

We now see how this sovereignty is other than reason, but it remains to see how this relates to control and moderation. For Bataille (1991, p. 30) ‘life . . . releases a steady flow of excess energy’. It is this slow draining excess that allows moments of waste and squandering, or in other words, consumption (Bataille, 1991, p. 38). And, being different from *intentionality* and *project*, this squandering has to be pointless. This, again, does not mean the opposite of efficiency, utility or productivity, but it declares the absence of these as a concern. Excess or transgression ‘demands freedom of temperament – that of a horse which has never been mounted’ (Bataille, 1988, p. 23), *but this freedom is not the same as being in control*. ‘Under the mask of justice, it is true that *freedom* takes on the lackluster and neutral appearance of existence subjected to the necessities’ (Bataille, 1991, p. 38). Even purposeful waste is not the same as ‘sovereignty’ because it is concerned with something external.

The desire to avoid suffering by ‘imaging oneself to be everything’ (i.e. imagining being in control) is described as ‘hazy illusions like a narcotic necessary to bear life. But what happens to us when, disintoxicated, we learn what we are?’ (Bataille in Richardson, 1998, p. 189). Sovereignty could then be described not as the loss of control, but maybe as losing the *will* to live. This must not be misunderstood as the being equal to a will to die. The loss of the will to live denotes being overwhelmed or caught up in living.

I can now laugh, drink, abandon myself to the pleasures of the senses, give myself over to the delirium of words . . . if I had not entirely dissolved the world within me, I would remain submitted to necessity . . . I am playing if sexual pleasure or sorrow project me *beyond* a sphere in which I have only one meaning: the sum of responses I give to the demands of utility . . . *But the smallest activity or the slightest project puts an end to play – and I am, lacking play, led into the prison of objects that are useful and full of meaning.* (Bataille in Richardson, 1998, p. 194; emphasis added)

This formulation already shows that sovereignty in this sense relates quite directly to excess – both ideas very

much focussing on losing constraint or ‘freeing the temperament’. The idea of losing constraint and being overwhelmed by a compulsion to act is also different from the advocated moderation and control in addiction research. We have a form of action that is not captured in the various formulations of ‘rational/irrational’, ‘discipline/dependence’ and ‘moderation/excess’ in the literature.

Furthermore, I will now argue that this sovereignty is also different from formulations of problem drug-use, but this will require further explanation. Picking up the argument with the claim that Bataille’s sovereignty can lead to excessive pleasure, there is a need to differentiate pleasure through excessive consumption in the literature, from the more specific version introduced here, which I will refer to as ‘overwhelming pleasure’. A short version of this distinction is that the accounts of drug-use are not ‘free’ of purpose: the *aim* is to consume and pursue pleasure, the aim is to lose control. We only need to reconsider *Gin Lane* to realise that excess was a project. Of course, losing control can result in something akin to ‘self-transcendence’, but it is nonetheless depicted as purposive action, such as Alison’s (a research respondent) account:

Just completely free expression, not worrying about what anyone thinks, not worrying about probably perceived limitations I feel I have with my body . . . it’s about kind of feeling totally in my body . . . (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009, p. 158)

The ways in which binge drinking is recounted by the young people in Griffin et al’s (2009) study, and the heroin addicts’ use temazepan to pursue a high in Dwyer’s (2008) ethnography all fit this idea of excess driven to and past a limit.

So far, we have critically employed Bataille to throw light onto a form of action that is neither rational nor moderate, that is neither disciplined nor purposive. This final aspect, purpose and its absence, is arguably the new distinction that permits an immoderate, undisciplined, and arational pleasure to be positive. This pleasure is absent in the research literature, both in relation to unproblematic use (or normality) and problematic use. The next section will explore this distinction further by suggesting that accounts of pleasure relating to addiction and drug-use mention the intention and pursuit of a ‘high’, but the consumer is rarely overwhelmed by pleasure. Additionally, the next section will slowly start to show examples of overwhelming to illustrate it in relation to the much more abstract concept of sovereignty.

OVERWHELMING PLEASURE

We return to pleasure and its noted absence in addiction. Maybe, we can now relate the absence of excess in Bataille’s sense to the focus on control, the loss of control, escape, dependence and the absence of a positive account of excessive pleasure in the addiction literature. This will require me to successfully

relate Bataille's excess and pleasure to general accounts of pleasure in addiction research in such a way that the two versions of pleasure are distinct and exclusive. This is ambitious for two reasons: firstly, most writing on excess by Bataille focuses on anguish, experiencing death and suffering (in short, nothing pleasurable); secondly, as we have seen, there are similarities in narrating excess of self-transcendence and the controlled loss of control.

Let us start by differentiating Bataille's sovereignty from the idea of an escape from choice, because several accounts of drug use frame the motivation to seek pleasure as an escape from having to make choices. This is often an escape from unbearable (or boring) everyday reality (Reith, 2004; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009; South, 2004). If excess is a form of escape from choice and overwhelming pleasure is a release or reprieve from choice, we can begin to highlight the former as actively pursued and the latter as experienced.

In Bataille, the excessive and overwhelming experience projects us and delivers a fleeting moment of sovereignty: it is a surprising moment that suddenly releases us from our constraints, but the moment we realise this freedom, it returns us to being bound by necessity. Realising self-transcendence, we become concerned with that very self and return to it. So, for Bataille, what 'moves us is a desire that rends our being, ruptures us momentarily, fleetingly and teasingly, to reveal the sacred and then is gone, leaving us incomplete but needing to communicate this rapturous experience' (O'Shea, 2002, p. 934). These overwhelming actions are an aspect of our existence and they occur in everyday life, even if quite elusively and rarely.

There are a variety of examples in Bataille's work that might help us develop the idea of overwhelming pleasure around a range of excessive experiences, which include laughter, joy, tears, disbelief, fear, to name a few. Bataille's extensive interest in eroticism of course makes sensual carnal pleasure a key experience. He describes it as an experience *beyond* meaning in a rational sense. Erotic is one of the main arenas for the sovereign experience, partly because it is an activity that risks the self by exposing it to the *other* completely. 'The Janus-faced character of physical eroticism is also manifest through the paradox lying at the heart of this experience: while it involves a fusion which travels beyond the limits of a person, its immediate focus is an object, a body' (Shilling & Mellor, 2010, p. 442). This embodied self is the beauty and pleasure of eroticism, but simultaneously it is risked for that pleasure. It is "'an embodied creative power" that facilitates a sensual experience of "unique meaning" through a "boundless giving of self" radically opposed¹ to functionality and rationality' (Shilling & Mellor, 2010, p. 338).

We also find this absence of function in Bataille's (1982) fictional novel *The Story of the Eye*. Here the two main characters, the narrator and Simone,

experience a series of sexual excesses, but the book never really mentions an intention: the characters seem constantly overwhelmed by desire (in a very destructive manner). Maybe the most illustrative instance, which clearly distinguishes Bataille's form of excess from the accounts of excessive drinking elsewhere (Griffin, et al., 2009; Measham, 2004; Reith, 2004), is a party attended by several 'boastful youngsters' (Bataille, 1982, p. 16). Simone, sober, dances frenzied by herself, and then, *pretending* to be drunk, challenges one of the young men to an outrageous dare. In comparison to the narrative of Alison quoted above from Shinebourne and Smith (2009), Simone is compelled to behave drunkenly, rather than pursuing intoxication. Unlike Alison she lacks any sign of a project to pursue 'totally free expression'. Through the entire scene, Simone fails to articulate a desire for anything (even a desire to 'have fun' or a desire to 'radically oppose function'), but she is explicitly driven by *desire*. The narrator comments that they 'did not lack modesty – on the contrary – but something drove us to defy modesty together as immodestly as possible'. (1982, p. 11)

Concerning pleasure, we now have one dividing line between excess in Bataille and excess in addiction research: the couple never lost sight of modesty, always being returned to it after something had driven them to defy it; the couple was never motivated by excess and pleasure but lacked motivation. This is unlike accounts of intoxication as a project or aim in its own right (Measham, 2004; Moore & Measham, 2008; Pennay & Moore, 2010; South, 2004) – in other words, it is something that is a destination rather than a fleeting encounter.

The opening scene of Bataille's (1986) *Blue of Noon* offers further glimpse at this immodesty. Dirty, an aptly named female character, who is drunk, is described as not being able to stand: 'Dirty had given up trying to stand on her feet unless she had a wall to lean on'. (p. 7) and 'She got up and several times nearly fell' (p. 8). The entire scene describes the loss of control, quite literally, as she barely stands and both urinates and defecates sitting in an armchair, but without any purpose or aim – it is 'emptiness.' (p. 12) There is no 'controlled loss of control' here. However, these accounts, that display a peculiar mixture of the comical, the laughable, and the outrageous, show us excess as ecstasy², permitting a distinction to excess as project. It is not the degree of excess (there are accounts of inebriation of this degree that are intended and sought after (Griffin, et al., 2009)), but it is how one comes to be excessive.

I want to finish with an example that will lead us into the concluding section. The example shows us how the excess of Bataille must not always be immodest and can be strikingly pleasurable. Bataille writes:

I found myself alone, seated on a narrow white veranda, not seeing anything of where I was... Before getting up in order

to go to bed, I felt the extent to which the sweetness had penetrated me. I had just had the desire for a violent alteration of spirit and, in this sense, I saw that the felicitous state into which I had fallen did not differ entirely from 'mystical' states. At the very least I had passed from a state of inattention to surprise, I felt this state with more intensity than one normally does... (1988, p. 112)

This scene describes an odd unintended and 'surprising' bliss that *overcame* someone. Bataille, almost surprised at the serenity of this odd version of a transgression, claims that 'this banal felicity was an authentic inner experience, obviously *distinct from project*, from discourse [...] the "sweetness of the sky" communicated itself to me... making me take *pleasure* in it' (1988, p. 112, emphasis added). He describes this pleasurable calm without of project as a release. It is the moment of letting go of oneself and losing control. The image of an escape returns in the experience of escaping in spite of oneself, and it is again only temporary and elusive.

Having differentiated Bataille's excess from the excessive consumption encountered in addiction research literature, especially in relation to pleasure, I will now outline the value of making this form of pleasure visible in relation to said literature.

CONCLUSION: THE INCOMMUNICABLE PLEASURE

Overwhelming pleasure offers the possibility of transcending the self, but at the same time, it destroys itself through being realised. There is, however, an epistemological consequence. Pleasure that is without *need*, without *motive* and without clear *function* is hard to articulate and, therefore, barely accessible to discourses dealing with addiction or problematic use. Pleasure, when researched, is often discussed as if it is something that is *pursued* and somehow *functional*. A desire for pleasure (including a sacred experience) results in a pursuit of pleasure: the outcome is always *expected* and serves the *function* of creating pleasure in some form. The very particular pleasure introduced here offers an alternative experience that overwhelms us with pleasure. I argue that this form of pleasure, which is articulated using Bataille, remains absent in addiction research, even though there is a drive towards formulating pleasure more clearly; as Bunton and Convey (2011, p. 20) note 'observing the absence of serious study of pleasure is an easier task than building a more adequate treatment of the topic'. It is in this vein that this article tried to contribute to the treatment of the topic by elucidating and developing a pleasure whose absence has not even been noted, and through this, add to the process of 'building an adequate treatment of the topic'.

This pleasure can be experienced as something violent or as a calm pleasure that nonetheless overwhelms. In between the experience of the sudden painful outburst on the one hand and losing track of

time having one's spirit lifted on a veranda on the other, lie all manner of losses of control: laughter, the impulsive sexual act (even between long-term committed partners), the joy of a surprise, the loss of something deeply important, the urge to dance to music and an endless list of instants where all *project* ceases and *utility* fails. It is, by its very nature, fragile and elusive because it is experienced only for as long as it overwhelms the personal need for control.

Hopefully, the above portrayal of Bataille's formulation of excess also shows how this sensation of being *overwhelmed* is nothing 'outside of this world', or something that requires discipline, practice or control to reach – to Bataille this is something that we all do, something that makes us human; 'we do not transgress because we are human but are human because of transgression' (O'Shea, 2002, p. 936). Consequently, the idea of an overwhelming pleasure that is 'normal' complicates the counter-factual of the addict, i.e. the non-addict. Given this measure of what is desirable, a concept of recovery focussed on 'control' and 'rational action' is equally incomplete. And we have already encountered the absence of this pleasure as incompleteness: this overwhelming pleasure is momentary, 'leaving us incomplete but needing to communicate this rapturous experience' (O'Shea, 2002, p. 934).

The proposed pleasure is not unambiguously desirable of course, and we can see how this overwhelming pleasure can be intoxicating: it is problematic when *combined* with project. Limitless excess can turn excess into a *project*, into something that eradicates the boundary between 'excess' and 'use', thus destroying the idea of transgression. It robs the unrestrained of the pleasure of losing control. To Bataille,

The life of the underworld is not to be envied. ... All it does is exploit a complete loss of control, unimaginatively and in a way that minimises apprehension for the future. Having submitted unrestrainedly to the pleasure of losing self-control it has made lack of control into a constant state with neither savour nor interest. (2006, p. 244)

This grim depiction resembles Hogarth's *Gin Street* mentioned above and permits a new way of critically engaging with why it is problematic without focussing on ill health or lost economic production. The moment overwhelming pleasure is thought of as attainable through a purposeful pursuit, it becomes concerned with consequences and to 'worry about consequences is the beginning of greed and anguish' (Bataille in Richardson, 1998, p. 190). It is here where we can locate a possible importance of making overwhelming pleasure visible in research: if it is risked and destroyed by other forms of excessive consumption, then its invisibility precludes any concern for it in recovery processes. Overwhelming pleasure is not aided by discipline, but by a realisation that it is diminished, even destroyed, by its purposeful pursuit.

To return to the rather dichotomous view of 'normal' and 'abnormal' mapped onto the positive

and negative attributes at the very beginning, there is now a distinction that transcends this opposition. The addict and non-addict are framed as concerned with either a productive project or a destructive project. Recent studies manage to blur the boundaries between the two types of project (e.g. Bergschmidt, 2004) but nonetheless maintain a discourse of 'purpose'. The current literature still overlooks this admittedly narrow type of pleasure. This limitation might not have been as relevant prior to the increased attention paid to pleasure in addiction research, however, since the inclusion of pleasure as motive renders pleasure into something problematic for only some consumers, the concept of an overwhelming pleasure might permit a clearer articulation of 'problematic consumption'.

Bataille's pleasure as excess, rather than endorsing addiction and problematic drug-use, offers something overwhelmingly enjoyable (or painful) that undercuts the current distinction between 'problematic' and 'normal'. Bataille shows the conceptual limitation of consumption as always useful or purposive. His work does not help with clarifying which purposes and motives for drug-use are problematic and which ones are not, but he does offer a different version of pleasure that has no 'motive' in the prevailing sense.

This leaves me to propose two contributions. (A) The type of pleasure that has been developed here through a moderate reading of Bataille can be added to the analytic repertoire. Given its elusive nature, this overwhelming pleasure is possibly hard to identify in accounts of drug-use and the analytic focus on pleasure as 'purposeful' is symptomatic of its absence in literature. There is a potentially new way of accounting for pleasure that is not explicitly framed as pursued, and that is shown to be overwhelming and impulsive. (B) Following from the above, there is also a tentatively formulated concern for what a 'normal' actor is in relation to pleasure. This reflects on the assumption of recovery, especially if we can now claim that a 'normal' actor is not only a rational, moderate consumer, but also capable of overwhelming moments of excessive pleasure. Recognising the experiential reality of this might open up new way of theoretically approaching the idea of 'normal' in relation to addiction and pleasure.

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NOTES

1. The more moderate reading of Bataille pursued here would insist that, rather than 'radically opposed' to functionality and rationality

we are simply formulating its absence. A radical opposition reverts 'sovereignty' into an action with a clear function and purpose, which is the very thing that it hopes to transcend.

2. The words project (to throw something forward) and ecstasy (to be displaced or placed-out) might clarify the distinction, especially with the regards to the status of the ontological *I*. Excess as project does not 'move' the self. Ecstasy is not just throwing something forward, but it is the *self projecting itself*.

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