

# Education as Spectacular Sacrifice: A Response

to Steven Zhao

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William James wrote that he best understood Hegel when under the influence of laughing gas.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, I am amenable to James' position *vis-à-vis* Hegel. However, TSA restrictions precluded me from traveling to this conference with nitrous oxide. Nevertheless, James and drugs raise an important, and central, point in Zhao's paper. Namely, the virtual necessity of a companion when reading Hegel. While seemingly obvious, it is important to note that Zhao's paper is not an argument about Hegel as such. Rather "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance" is an argument developed from another's reading of Hegel. William James took drugs. Zhao read John Russon. I will use Georges Bataille.

Programmatically, my paper attempts two things. First, I recount three central ideas in Zhao's paper. Here, I highlight *hermeneutical pressure*, Zhao's operative definition of the "self," and lastly, how these two ideas tie back to what I see as the article's main task—developing a normative version of the teacher-student relationship. Secondly, I offer Bataille's reading of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" before cursorily sketching an alternative rendering of the teacher-student relationship.

## HERMENEUTICAL PRESSURE AND TEACHERS'

### PARTIAL AUTHORITY

Early in his paper, Zhao writes, "learning is an intrinsically existential enterprise."<sup>2</sup> As such, "the situation of the student [is]...significantly [also] existential."<sup>3</sup> It is here that the article turns to Russon's notion of *hermeneutical pressure* to highlight the "intrinsic existential situation of contradictions within the commitments of both teachers and students."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Zhao argues that "the hermeneutical pressure represents a pressure to reconcile the inherent contradiction that defines and facilitates [this] intersubjective situation."<sup>5</sup> More-

over, this hermeneutical pressure “compels an independent agency of the self that comes to know itself.”<sup>96</sup> Central here is Zhao’s claim that “intersubjective situation carries an intrinsic...pressure for the resolution of its contradiction.”<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, it is maintained that the “irresolvable contradiction of the student...*never ceases*.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, Zhao argues that the inherent compulsion for resolution of *hermeneutical pressure* is both necessary and irresolvable.

A second central facet of Zhao’s argument is his operative definition of the self. Namely, the self is the “space of the dialectic.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, the self is “the tension between the traditions that inform its specific portrayal... *and* the resistance against such portrayal towards a perpetual renewal of one’s portrait.”<sup>100</sup> This “dialectical demand for agency...necessitates” educational spaces of simultaneous agency and authority.<sup>11</sup> As such, education “compels the institution of the authority of the teacher as an imperative.”<sup>12</sup>

In this argument, the teacher —as authority — embodies “a fundamental source of the traditions that specify who [students] are and how they ought to act.”<sup>13</sup> For “without such existential specificity, [students] lack the scope of values that allow their hermeneutical power to meaningfully manifest as an interrogative agency.”<sup>14</sup>

However, for Zhao, the teacher as both possessor and exerciser of authority ought not be absolute. In other words, “the teacher must, in some artful way, *be* the target of resistance while covertly inviting such dispositions as educatively ideal.”<sup>15</sup> Under the guise of dominance, student resistance is to be partially and secretly allowed by teachers. As such, “the educative existential situation of the teacher-student relationship...is the space to which the dialectical dance between traditions and the resistance against them is sustained as the very movement, and therefore, the *reality for the meaningful self*.”<sup>16</sup>

## BATAILLE AND SACRIFICIAL DEATH

Georges Bataille in “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice” claims the “anthropological philosophy of Hegel is in the final analysis a *philosophy of death*.”<sup>17</sup> As such, “man is ‘death living a human life’...man’s negativity, given in death by virtue of the fact that man’s death is essentially voluntary (resulting from risks assumed without necessity, without biological reasons), is nevertheless the

principle of action.”<sup>18</sup> It follows in Bataille’s reading that “for Hegel action is negativity, and negativity action.”<sup>19</sup> The last sentence bears repeating—“action is negativity, and negativity action.”

The Hegelian association between death, negativity, and action is further inflected in Bataille’s appraisal of dialectics. Bataille writes that “death alone assures the existence of a . . . ‘dialectical’ being, in the Hegelian sense”<sup>20</sup> As such, it follows for Bataille’s Hegel that “if death did not dwell in [man] as the source of his anguish—and all the more so . . . freely choos[ing] it—there would be no man or liberty, no history or individual.”<sup>21</sup>

What differentiates man from beast is that humans, by virtue of death, “bear within [them] negativity.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, man’s negativity operates apropos nature.<sup>23</sup> In its initial facticity, the elements of nature are “inseparable from the whole.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, man segregates the elements of nature into presumably constitutive elements—“this tree, that bird, this stone.”<sup>25</sup> This separation, for Bataille, “implies human negativity toward nature.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Bataille writes that man “is first of all an animal . . . the very thing he negates: he cannot therefore negate nature without negating himself.”<sup>27</sup> As such, Bataille writes, “to negate nature is to negate the animal which props up man’s negativity”<sup>28</sup> wherein “the privileged manifestation of negativity is death.”<sup>29</sup>

Herein enters the centrality of sacrifice to Bataille’s reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. In sacrifice, Bataille writes, “death on the one hand . . . strikes the corporeal being; and on the other hand, it is precisely in sacrifice that ‘death lives a *human* life.’”<sup>30</sup> As such, sacrifice is both the philosophical and practical requirement of a Hegelian philosophy according to Bataille.

Philosophically, “sacrifice is the precise response to Hegel’s requirement, the original formation of which : ‘Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment.’”<sup>31</sup> Practically, in “sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so . . . dies in seeing himself die . . . by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Bataille maintains, “at all costs, man must live at the moment he really dies, he must live with the impression of really dying.”<sup>33</sup>

Bataille’s Hegelian phenomenology of sacrifice differs from mere bestial death in primarily two respects: (1) spectacle and (2) utility. Bataille writes , in

addition to performing the bestial requirements of organic life, “man takes part in rites and performances.”<sup>34</sup> Gestures and enactments over and above maintenance of biological sustenance.

This Bataille-ian economy of spectacle involves a particular register of utility.<sup>35</sup> Whereas non-anthropological animals act only in the service of needs, sacrifice is a “rigorously autonomous gesture”<sup>36</sup> devoid of utility or negation outside of itself as itself.<sup>37</sup> By virtue of its rigorous autonomy sacrifice is sovereign.<sup>38</sup> And sovereignty is what Bataille’s Hegelian sacrificial man constantly pursues.<sup>39</sup>

### EDUCATION AS SPECTACULAR SACRIFICE

Zhao reads Russon’s Hegel in order to develop a dialectical teacher-student relationship of respective authority and contestation “such that the *process towards* reconciliation is the meaningful self.”<sup>40</sup> Bataille’s Hegel offers a fundamentally different rendering of the teacher-student relationship. Instead of normalizing an educational interchange characterized by hermeneutical pressure compelled towards existential resolution, Bataille’s Hegel gestures one toward spectacle, sacrifice, and sovereignty.

Whereas Zhao privileges authority, I turn in the complete opposite direction. A Bataillan rendering of the teacher-student relationship is one where the authority of the teacher ought to be sacrificed for none other than its own demise. The death of the teacher by the teacher for death’s sake. Anarchy for anarchy’s sake. Or, as Bataille might term it: *laughter*.<sup>41</sup> Giving audio-affirmation to the not only unknown, but the unknowable. For, as Bataille writes, “in every case of laughter we pass from the domain of the known from that of the foreseeable, to that of the unknown and unforeseeable.”<sup>42</sup> Now what that might look like in actual practice, I can’t say.

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<sup>1</sup>William James, “Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide,” *Mind* 7, no. 1 (1882): 186-208. Reprinted in *Altered States of Consciousness*, ed. C. Tart (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

2 Steven Zhao, "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

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14 Zhao, "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance."

15 Zhao, "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance."

16 Zhao, "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance."

17 Georges Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. F. Botting and S. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 280.

18 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 280.

19 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 280.

20 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 281.

21 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 281.

22 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 281.

23 Bataille writes, "for Hegel, it is both fundamental and altogether worthy of astonishment that human understanding (that is, language, discourse)

should have the force (an incomparable force) to separate its constitutive elements from the totality.” Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283.

24 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283

25 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283.

26 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283.

27 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283.

28 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 283.

29 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 286.

30 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 286.

31 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 286.

32 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 287.

33 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 287.

34 Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 287.

35 “So long as he needed to satisfy animal needs, he had to act with an end in view (he had to secure food, protect himself from the cold). This supposes a servitude, a series of acts subordinated to a final result: the natural, animal satisfaction without which man properly speaking, sovereign man, could not subsist. But man’s intelligence, his discursive thought, developed as functions of servile labour. Only sacred, poetic words, limited to the level of impotent beauty, have retained the power to manifest full sovereignty. Sacrifice, consequently, is a *sovereign, autonomous* manner of being only to the extent that it is uninformed by *meaningful* discourse. To the extent that discourse informs it, what is sovereign is given in terms of servitude. Indeed, by definition what is sovereign does not serve.” Bataille, “Hegel, Death and Sacrifice,” 291-292.

For Bataille’s systematic political economy, see George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vol 1., trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991); George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, Vols. 2 & 3, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993).

36 Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 291

37 "But simple discourse must respond to the question that discursive thought asks concerning the meaning that each thing must have on the level of utility. In principle, each thing is there to serve some purpose or other. Thus, the simple manifestation of man's link to annihilation, the pure revelation of man to himself (at the moment when death transfixes his attention) passes from sovereign to the primacy of servile ends...the sovereignty of sacrifice...is not absolute to the extent that the institution maintains within the world of activity a form whose meaning is, on the contrary, sovereign." Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 292.

38 As Bataille has it, "sacrifice, consequently, is a *sovereign, autonomous* manner of being only to the extent that it is uninformed by *meaningful* discourse... Indeed, by definition what is *sovereign* does not *serve*." Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 291-92.

39 "Indeed, man is always in pursuit of an authentic sovereignty. That sovereignty, apparently, was, in a certain sense, originally his, but doubtless that could not then have been in a *conscious* manner, and so in a sense it was not his, it escaped him. We shall see that in a number of ways he continued to pursue what forever eluded him. The essential thing is that one cannot attain it consciously and seek it, because seeking distances it. And yet I can believe that nothing is given us that is not given in that equivocal manner." Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," 293.

40 Steven Zhao, "Education as the Hidden and Incomplete Resistance."

41 "Communication, through death, with our beyond (essentially in sacrifice) – not with nothingness, still less with a supernatural being, but with an indefinite reality (which I sometimes call *the impossible*, that is: what can't be grasped [*begreift*] in any way, what we can't reach without dissolving ourselves, what's slavishly called God). If we need to we can define this reality (provisionally associating it with a finite element) at a higher (higher than the individual on the scale of composition of beings) social level as the sacred, God or created reality. Or else it can remain in an undefined state (in ordinary laughter,

infinite laughter, or ecstasy in which the divine form melts like sugar in water)." Georges Bataille, "Laughter," in *The Bataille Reader*, eds. F. Botting & S. Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 59.

42 Georges Bataille and Annete Michelson, "Unknowing: Laughter and Tears," *October*, 36 (Spring, 1986): 91.