Two Times: Being and Becoming in Jane Bennett and Matthew Scherer

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Abstract: In an era of exponentially increasing globalization, the experience of time has changed. Tasks that once took days or weeks, now take hours or seconds. This "shrinking" of time, or the "speeding up" of activities and processes that transpire within it, has also had profound effects on the experience of space, bringing personal and cultural identities into increasingly closer proximity. As a result, the public sphere has become a contested site in which a multiplicity of heterogenous identities vie for legitimacy and acknowledgment. In such an environment, the concept of identity has taken on a new and heightened significance. Citizens of the contemporary global village risk irreconcilable conflict by privileging rigid conceptions of identity based upon an understanding of time that privileges being over becoming; an understanding that excludes the reality of change, difference, and alterity. Although Jane Bennett's The Enchantment of Modern Life and Matthew Scherer's Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion are addressing fundamentally different problems, they nevertheless agree on the ethical and political significance of the plasticity of identity, as well as the possibility and nature of change. This convergence is not entirely surprising, given the web of influences in which Bennett and Scherer are implicated; a web wherein Gilles Deleuze is influenced by Henri Bergson and Bennett and Scherer by both Bergson and Deleuze. In this paper, I argue that both Bennett and Scherer, drawing upon the writings of Deleuze and Bergson respectively, acknowledge two kinds of time: a closed, circular time that solidifies habits—what I will call the time of being—and an open, spiral time which allows for the possibility of change and the production of new habits, the time of becoming. Not only do both Scherer and Bennett acknowledge these different understandings of time, but they also stress the necessity of cultivating an appreciation of the fundamental reality of becoming, and the role that such a cultivation can play in navigating an increasingly heterogeneous political landscape.

Keywords: Bennett; Bergson; Deleuze; Scherer; body without organs (BwO); time

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This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss habits and the time of being, a time that privileges being over becoming. Here, I offer an explanation about how the narratives of disenchantment and secularism not only inform but perpetuate the privileging of being. In the second section, I discuss the interval—a moment of indetermination where existing habits are suspended, and new ones become possible—and draw a correlation between Bennett's concept of enchantment and Scherer's notion of creative emotion, an idea borrowed from Bergson. Enchantment and creative emotions, I argue, act as catalysts for the creation of new habits and the cultivation of ethical generosity. In the third section, I explain the time of becoming, a conception of time in which change is understood to be the fundamental reality, and being, a useful but nevertheless illusory notion needed for the preservation of self-identity. Here, I argue that Scherer's idea of conversion, a theoretical concept borrowed from Bergson, and Bennett's use of spiral repetition, a concept borrowed from Deleuze, explain how the self can be transformed if one is open to the wave of becoming and the new.

The Time of Being

In *Beyond Church and State*, Scherer presents what he calls the "contentious" picture of the human. He states: "Following Bergson all the way down might lead one to say...that...human being[s] are nothing more than the solidification of habit, a temporary site of repetition and consistency within the larger flux and flow of impersonal life, of *life* itself." Elaborating on this picture, Scherer claims that "...the structure of human identity is crystalline," insofar as these layers of habit "...produce order and structure through the arrangement of planes and patterns within a homogenous physical substance." The unique arrangement of planes or habits within an individual are constitutive of self-identity. Not only do these habits "...regiment the smallest gesture," Scherer claims, but they also "...pattern the largest social institutions." In this crystalline conception of the human, it is habits all the way down.

Given the fundamental role that habits play in the creation and maintenance of self-identity, it is important to understand what they are and how they function. A habit, Scherer tells us, "...is the past's bearing on the present: it determines the self's consistency, contracting past and present." This relationship, wherein the past applies pressure on the present "...contribute[s] to the closure of personal being." This repetition of the same within a closed system forges the familiar notion of self-identity, where a person today is not only the same person they were yesterday but the

same person that they will be tomorrow. The repetitive pressure of habit relies upon a conception of time that privileges presence over absence and identity over difference, namely, the time of being. As Scherer notes, "The contraction of habit establishes a closed, circular mode of time" wherein "...individuals strive to persist as they are, aided in part by the repetition and circular force of habit." Self-preservation, wherein identity is preserved, presupposes a conception of time in which the present is the same as the past, where the self at T₁ and the self at T₂ are identical.

Bennett discusses a similar conception of habit and time in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Drawing upon Deleuze's concept of "bare repetition," Bennett notes that the cyclical movement of such repetition is, "A to B, B to A...," *ad infinitum*. This closed circuit, in which the same actions are performed again and again, amounts to what Scherer calls the contentious picture of the human, the picture that posits a rigid self-identity. In his recent guide to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Eugene W. Holland says that, "Habits and neuroses...produce a kind of 'bare repetition." He characterizes this repetition absent of difference as, "...strict instinctual determination of behavior (as is the case with many insects, where a given stimulus inevitably triggers the same response)." ix

Scherer, also draws a connection between habitual behavior—behavior that Bergson calls "less-than-human" and the behavior of insects. Speaking of beehives and anthills, he states: "Each colony pictures a society... capable of assimilating all new experiences within the confines of instinctive repetition. Hive and hill perfect the tendencies of closed societies: they reproduce themselves by continuously enacting the demands of habitual action without deviation." Although Scherer and Bergson are speaking of collectives in this instance, the same process also affects the individual. Both "the closed society—and the closed individual—," Scherer explains, "are sustained through the pressure of habit to repeat the same." Less-than-human behavior can play out on scales both large and small.

There are, of course, various *kinds* of habits. On a spectrum, these may range from good to bad and beneficial to harmful. Bad or unhealthy habits are dangerous insofar as they close off the individual or society in a circuit where habitual behavior is sedimented and strengthened as a result of repetition. Furthermore, when bad habits become second nature, there is the possibility that they may be naturalized; the more a habit becomes instinctual, that is, the more it approximates "less-than-human" behavior, the more likely that naturalization follows. Quoting Bergson, Scherer states: "Although each single habit is contingent, 'everything conspires to make us believe that this regularity is comparable with that of nature." "xiii The difficulty in recognizing the contingency of habits is obscured not only by their constant repetition but also by their inclusion in an interconnected network of habits.

Given the many dangers associated with bad habits that trap the individual in a cycle, it is important to understand how habits are formed. Both Bennett and Scherer acknowledge that the predominant or authorized narratives within a culture are instrumental in the creation and perpetuation of habits. Bennett asserts that she, "...take[s] seriously...'the performativity of social representations,' that is the ways in which the cultural narratives that we use help to shape the world in which we live."xiv A narrative, Bennett continues, "...enters into moods,

temperaments, habits, perceptual comportments, and somatic predispositions that find expression or resistance in political choices, alliances, and policies. Some portions of those sensibilities and comportments are so sedimented that they are highly resistant to reform."xv Echoing this sentiment, Scherer suggests that, "One strong tendency, under such conditions [i.e., the processes of globalization] is to retrench identity—reasserting, for example, the essential place of a certain language, lineage, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, or tradition to national identity."xvi Cultural narratives have the power to solidify habits so thoroughly, effectively placing them beyond reform. In an age of globalization, when there is a premium on the plasticity of identity, such solidification can be extremely dangerous.

Bennett and Scherer are both in the business of telling tales, "alter-tales" more accurately, recognizing the formative influence that narratives exert on behavior. "Alter" indicates that their stories diverge from the dominant narratives; in Bennett's case, this is the familiar story of disenchantment, whereas, for Scherer, it is the story of secularism as primarily being the separation of religion and politics. Bennett tells her tale because it seems to her that, "Presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence, and that it is too hard to love a disenchanted world."xvii Not unlike Bennett, Scherer believes that his refiguring of secularism as a process of conversion "...may open new possibilities for democracy within the condition of deep pluralism that marks contemporary global politics."xviii It is clear that for both Bennett and Scherer, narratives play a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of habits; change the story, and new habits will follow.

The Interval: Creative Emotion and Enchantment

The counter-narrative that Bennett puts forth, "...tells a story of contemporary life that accentuates its moments of enchantment and explores the possibility that the affective force of those moments might be deployed to propel ethical generosity."xix In this section, I draw a relation between these moments of enchantment and what Scherer and Bergson refer to as creative emotion. As Scherer puts it, creative emotions, "...issue from life itself and carry us back to our responsibility for life, precisely by tearing apart existing and partial regimes of habit."xx Moments of enchantment and creative emotion lie at the crossroads of the old and new, possessing the catalytic power to "propel" and "carry us" towards a future filled with richer ethical sensibilities.

Bennett's concept of enchantment and Bergson's concept of creative emotion share many characteristics. First, they take place in what Bergson describes as, "a brief interval of indetermination," or in a state that Bennett describes as a "temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement." To be enchanted," Bennett continues, "is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound." The experience of enchantment and creative emotion interrupts one's habitual activities, removing them from the cyclical time of being and the repetition of the same, leaving them indeterminate and immobile.

The second characteristic that they share is that they are both subjective and objective, this is, they do not name something that transpires either solely within a person or a world, but rather

stress the necessity of conjoining these two poles. "Enchantment," according to Bennett, "is *something that we encounter* [emphasis added], that hits us, but it is also a *comportment* [emphasis added] that can be fostered through deliberate strategies." Enchantment, as well as creative emotion, I argue, requires both that the world acts on one in a specific way, and that the one that is acted upon be receptive to this action.

Consider the objective side of the equation. *The Enchantment of Modern Life* contains a catalog of things-in-the-world that inspire enchantment, things that "hit us," ranging from minor characters in Kafka novels to talking parrots to Gap commercials. "My counterstory," Bennett explains, "seeks to induce an experience of the contemporary world...that calls attention to *magical sites already here* [emphasis added]."xxv Bennett's interest in the vitality of the objective world is even more center stage in her most recent book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Describing the shift in her work, Bennett states: "I want now to focus less on the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts and more on the catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies."xxvi The goal of such an undertaking, she maintains, is "to awaken what Henri Bergson described as 'a latent belief in the spontaneity of nature."xxvii It is not surprising that her shift to the nonhuman has aligned her more closely with Bergson, the philosopher of *élan vital* par excellence.

In their description of creative emotions, Bergson and Scherer do not shy away from emphasizing the importance of the objective side of the equation. Quoting Bergson, Scherer states:

The play of creative emotions...is like 'what occurs in musical emotion...We feel, while we listen, as though we could not desire anything else but what the music is suggesting to us'... 'Creative emotions are structures that exist *independent of the individuals who experience them* [emphasis added], so that 'in point of fact it does not introduce these feelings into us; it introduces us into them, as passers-by are forced into a street dance.xxviii

The musical analogy is important for the correlation I am attempting to make, for the "magical site" to which Bennett devotes an entire chapter, namely chant, is, like the combination of dance and music, also sonorous and somatic in nature. "The word *enchant*," on Bennett's authority, "is linked to the French verb *to sing: chanter*. To 'en-chant': to surround with song or incantation; hence to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream." At this point, it seems plausible to suggest that sound and music might be uniquely poised to induce the moods enchantment and creative emotion.

Things-in-the-world, especially those sonorous in nature, have the capacity to envelop and carry us away, thereby engendering an atmosphere of enchantment or creative emotion. This power to enchant, however, does not mean that the subject can sit idly, awaiting the rapture. On the contrary, Bergson and Scherer, who both consistently equate the experience of creative emotion with mysticism, say that "true mystics simply open their souls to the oncoming wave' of becoming and the new."xxx The openness required by Bergson and Scherer is a kind of comportment that is described by Bennett in vivid detail. She states: "You notice new colors,

discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a collection of singularities...To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be caught up and carried away."xxxi The world, of course, hasn't changed—it is not suddenly replete with new sensory delights—we have, and it is this change, coupled with something that hits or envelops us at the opportune moment, that makes possible moments of enchantment and creative emotion.

The third point that Bennett and Scherer agree on is their belief that the comportment necessary to experience enchantment and creative emotion, namely openness and heightened perceptivity, can be cultivated. What's noteworthy here, is that in their attempt to explain the possibility of cultivation, both Bennett and Scherer appeal to different Deleuzean concepts, namely body without organs and stammering, respectively. Scherer claims that what is required of those most capable of experiencing creative emotions, —namely, philosophers, artists, and mystics—is stammering. "Stammering," Scherer explains, "is an event within language that disrupts, inflects, and reroutes its course, but it is not itself reducible to an ordinary use of language. A stammer opens an interval of indetermination within speech, irreducible to a pattern of speech, but nonetheless giving 'birth to a foreign language within a language." Although stammering is an event in language, it is important to note that it transcends its medium by "placing all linguistic, and even nonlinguistic [emphasis added], elements in variation, both variables of expression and variables of content. A new form of redundancy, AND...AND...and The conjunctive logic of stammering, which is rhizomatic in nature, cannot be contained within the cyclical time of being. Ultimately, stammering "...disrupts..." and "...reconfigures..." xxxiv the layers of sedimentation constitutive of self-identity.

Although Bennett claims that body without organs, or BwO for short, is something capable of inducing enchantment in others, I would argue that following the self-prescribed regime of BwO is the most surefire way to cultivate creative emotion and enchantment within one's self. This is because BwO is "...a making strange, or 'deterritorialization,' of bodily experience, a disruption of its usual habits of posture, movement, facial expression, voice, etc. These habits form the 'strata' that organize your body. And so, to play the game of becoming a body-without-organs is to twist and tweak those usual habits."xxxv BwO takes seriously the injunction of stammering to place *every* element in variation, extending the conjunctive logic of the rhizome from the merely human to the nonhuman. As Bennett puts it, BwO "is a multispecied and ongoing project of becoming in which new links are forged among 'things, plants, animals, tools, people, and fragments of all of these."xxxvi A more serious challenge to self-identity is difficult to conceive, given the human's anthropocentric desire to distance itself from animals and even more so from inanimate matter.

Despite its proclivity towards disruption and reorganization, "BwO is not thoughtless or undisciplined or the effect of unconscious drives." The human *qua* insect, trapped in the cyclical time of being might be characterized by terms suggesting a lack of self-governance, but not the BwO. For as Bennett explains, "[BwO] is a deliberate, carefully contrived self-experiment...[it] 'is not a phantasy, it is a program." The program, however, is not something that is ancillary to BwO. On the contrary, "To know BwO is to know its how: the techniques, exercises, postures, movements and rituals through which BwO might (the outcome

is surely not certain) come to pass."xxxix In this sense, BwO is synonymous with the processes involved in self-hybridization, that is, the processes involved in becoming new, becoming other.

One technique available to BwO in cultivating the experience of enchantment is mimicking the strata, that is, mimicking the sedimented habits constitutive of self-identity. Such a task presupposes not only an intimate acquaintance with one's organ-ization but also the world in which one is situated. To mimic the strata, Bennett advises, "place organism-strata alongside slightly altered copies of them; compose yourself in a way that's almost like your usual way, but with a twist; repeat yourself but with a difference."xl In an effort to remain identical from T1 to T2 to T3, etc., the organism preoccupied with self-preservation, repeats itself; BwO, in an effort to become other, repeats itself with a twist. The twist is any self-prescribed deviation from habitual behavior. For example, if you consume and use animal products, try being vegan for a week; or, if you only listen to country music, try incorporating a few hours of free jazz. These deviations are possible because, as Bergson argued, every habit —excluding, of course, the habit of having habits—is inherently contingent. Radical re-organ-ization, however, should proceed with caution as an abrupt and thorough liquidation of habits can result in the destruction of the organism. "The new," Bennett cautions, "must be administered in milligrams." xli

The self-prescribed cultivation of difference within repetition—the variation of the twist, the stammering that conjoins—opens one's self to the wave of becoming and the new. This distinct variety of comportment is advantageous in courting enchantment and creative emotion. The language of love is appropriate here insofar as moments of enchantment and creative emotion, that interval in which the self opens to the world and the world envelops the self, are, like love, "never fully under one's control." For Bennett, Scherer, and Bergson, the cultivation of these moments is essential insofar as these moods form the basis of ethical behavior. Bennett cautions that, "Ethics requires both a moral code (which condenses moral ideals and metaphysical assumptions into principles and rules) and an embodied sensibility (which organizes affects into a style and generates the impetus to enact the code)."xliii In other words, ethics requires a moral code and enchantment. Scherer, quoting Bergson, reiterates this conviction: "Even if it enjoins on us...certain rules of conduct, there will be a wide gap between this assent of the intellect and a conversion of the will... Antecedent to the new morality and also the new metaphysics, there is emotion [emphasis added], which develops as an impetus in the realm of the will.""xliv On its own, the intellect is unable to inspire ethical behavior. Creative emotion and enchantment, those moments of joyful attachment to life itself, are essential for the mobilization of the will to ethical action.

The Time of Becoming

Thus far, I have shown that Bennett and Scherer acknowledge how both the repetitive force of habit and the cyclical, albeit illusory, time of being are instrumental in the formation of self-identity. Additionally, I have argued that both authors believe in the catalytic power of enchantment or creative emotion, those moments of joyful attachment to the world that allow for the possibility of new habits. Finally, I suggest that both authors advocate for a more nuanced understanding of time that resists "...the subordination...of becoming to being."xlv

In the first section of this paper, I began with Scherer's "contentious" picture in which the human is conceptualized in terms of a crystalline structure. Scherer and Bergson are reluctant to abandon this crystalline conception, but rather situate it within an alternative conception of time, the time of becoming. Scherer states, "If the contraction of habit established a closed, circular mode of time, the more profound truth of time is that of becoming, figured as the eternal return of difference within repetition." It is within the time of becoming that the sedimented layers and planes of habitual behavior—the crystalline structure of the human—are susceptible to reconfiguration.

To say that the crystalline structure is susceptible to reconfiguration, however, is not to suggest that such a reorganization is easy or inevitable. For as Scherer notes: "Individuals...strive to persist as they are,"xlvii and this will to self-preservation can be a serious impediment to change. Here, it is important to note that there are varying degrees of reconfiguration, or what Scherer calls, conversion, ranging from minor to significant. Minor conversions, such as, "discovery, insight, failure, mood, thought, loss, decision, [and] avoidance,"xlviii happen on a daily basis. Significant conversions, the kinds that result in the cultivation of an enriched ethical sensibility, register "the disruption of an individual life as the disruption of less-than-human habits through the intervention of more-than-human creative emotions."xlix Unlike minor conversions, which seem to happen just regularly of their own accord, significant conversions are rare, requiring the catalyst of a creative emotion, as explained previously in section two.

Regardless of the kind, whether it be minor or significant, it is clear that conversion is a process, not an event; it is, as Scherer notes, "...a depersonalizing *transformation* [emphasis added] allow[ing] passage to a better form of life." Conversion is a protracted phenomenon that subsumes old habitual behavior, the brief interval in which creative emotions transpire, and the formation of new habits. It is a "...continuously renew[ed] process that jostles and effectively adjust[s] the crystalline structure of identity." Both types of conversion, however, underscore the fluidity of identity and the fundamental truth of becoming.

Like Scherer, Bennett also has a conception of time that privileges becoming over being. Adopting the conceptual vocabulary of Deleuze, Bennett makes a distinction between "bare repetition," and "spiral repetition." Unlike bare repetition, which moves in a closed, cyclical circuit from A to B, B to A, *ad infinitum*, spiral repetition moves from "A to B, B¹ to A¹, A² to B^2 ... (where $B^1 = B + a$ nano-alteration produced by B's encounter with A.)." If we think of these variables in the most abstract terms—where A corresponds to object, and B corresponds to subject—then it is clear that both A and B are involved in a continuously renewing process of conversion. "In this spiral repetition," Bennett explains, "things repeat but with a twist. And this twist…makes possible new formations…new identities, and new social movements." Like Scherer's concept of conversion, the transformative process of spiral repetition privileges becoming over being.

Conclusion

Although Bennett and Scherer are engaged in the transformation of different narratives, they nevertheless agree on the nature of transformation itself. Both acknowledge the role that habits and a cyclical conception of time play in the formation and preservation of self-identity.

Furthermore, they are both aware of the influence that dominant cultural narratives have on reinforcing and entrenching habitual behavior. Second, they agree that these habits can be disrupted in moments of enchantment and creative emotion and that these disruptions are the wellspring for ethical behavior. Finally, they admit that both the cyclical conception of time and the self are illusory, arguing instead for a conception of time that privileges becoming and the fluidity of self.

Ultimately, both Bennett and Scherer are exploring ways in which new ethical sensibilities can be fostered. As our global village continues to shrink, putting diverse and disparate cultures in closer proximity, the danger that lurks in the closed individual and the closed society continues to grow. Perhaps more than ever, there is now a need "...to be open to the wave of becoming and the new;" a need to cling loosely to our cherished identities, whether they be racial, national, or religious in nature. In other words, as Foucault warns in his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, we must fight "...the fascism in all of us." This is arguably an objective for both Bennett and Scherer as well. To do otherwise is to court fascism.

Notes

ⁱ Scherer, Matthew. *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion.* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 105

viii Holland, Eugene W. *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus: A Reader's Guide*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 8.

ii Ibid.

iii Ibid., 114.

iv Ibid., 122.

^v Ibid., 110.

vi Ibid., 125.

vii Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 38.

ix Ibid.

^x Scherer, *Beyond Church and State*, 112.

xi Ibid., 124.

xii Ibid., 117.

xiii Ibid., 116.

xiv Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 9.

xv Ibid., 16.

xvi Ibid., 128.

xvii Ibid., 12.

xviii Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 1.

xix Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001.), 3.

xx Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 123.

xxi Ibid., 106.

xxii Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 5.

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xxiii Ibid.
xxiv Ibid., 4.
xxv Ibid., 8.
xxvi Bennett, Jane, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. (Durham: Duke UP, 2010.), xii.
xxvii Ibid., viii.
xxviii Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 120-121.
xxix Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 6.
xxx Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 104.
xxxi Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 5.
xxxii Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 105-106.
xxxiii Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Translated by Brian
Massumi. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987), 98.
xxxiv Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 105.
xxxv Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 25.
xxxvi Ibid., 24.
xxxvii Ibid.
xxxviii Ibid., 24-25.
xxxix Ibid., 25.
<sup>xl</sup> Ibid., 26.
xli Ibid.
xlii Ibid., 169.
xliii Ibid., 131.
xliv Scherer, Beyond Church and State, 97.
xlv Ibid., 101.
xlvi Ibid., 126.
xlvii Ibid.
xlviii Ibid.
xlix Ibid., 112.
<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 123.
li Ibid., 99.
lii Bennett, Enchantment of Modern Life, 38.
liv Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Translated by Robert
Hurley. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1983), xiii.
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