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# Unsayings Non-Knowledge: Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Writing

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## Abstract

Georges Bataille's writing seems to teethe with something utterly foreign to the discipline of philosophy. In this paper, I investigate what Jason Wirth calls 'Bataille's "mad game of writing"' in order to show that Bataille's bizarre writing style is actually an extension of his ethical and philosophical commitments. Bataille's writing attempts to produce a state within the reader rather than simply transmit information. I trace the justifications and roots for such a writing from his own system, as well as showing how such a style of writing has its roots in Kantian aesthetics and in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

I live by tangible experience and not by logical explanation. I have of the divine an experience so mad that one will laugh at me if I speak of it. I enter into a dead end. There all possibilities are exhausted; the "possible" slips away and the impossible prevails. To face the impossible — exorbitant, indubitable — when nothing possible any longer is in my eyes is to have an experience of the divine — *--Inner Experience*

How should, rather how *can*, one approach the work of Georges Bataille? Though exhilarating and refreshing, Bataille's writing seems to resist philosophizing in any rigorous way: he makes wildly contradictory claims throughout his texts, peppers bizarre aphorisms and graphic accounts of sexual escapades and alcohol abuse throughout otherwise carefully argued essays, and seems to delight in the abuse of language rather than the science of argumentation. Bataille's "mad game of writing" resists the very discipline within which it is situated ("The Dark Night" 129). This mad writing, however, is not an idiosyncratic form of expression of an otherwise unremarkable philosophical project. Rather, it serves a critical function and is a necessary consequence of Bataille's ethical commitment to the critique of a mode of subjectivity he terms "project."

Project, broadly speaking, is a mode of being-in-the-world in which we experience the world and the things that populate it as distinct from ourselves and as defined by their use. The division of the subject and the object introduced by project degrades the object by making it valuable only to some higher end, and degrades the subject. In entering the

world of project, the subject “puts off existence” indefinitely (*Inner Experience* 46). The present becomes valuable only insofar as it is relatable to a future to come. Thus, to live in project, for Bataille, is “not to die but to be dead.” (46). In response to this, Bataille attempts a performative writing capable of *enacting*, rather than describing, a unification of subject and object. He does this by bringing the reader to maddening experiences of aporia that call into question the apparatus of discursive reason and that provide an opening for the unification of subject and object. In this way, Bataille radically undermines the classic conception of what it means to do ethics or to act ethically and undertakes a writing that would not just describe, but would perform, enact, and breathe.

This analysis will require a close reading of Bataille’s thought, beginning with the intimacy of animality and the critique of project. Once the outline of Bataille’s thought and critiques have been traced, I will turn to Kant and Hegel to find the roots of Bataille’s commitment to the sovereignty of experience, and to track intimations of the possibility of a writing that would enact thought.

## **Animality**

Let us begin, then, with Bataille’s conception of animality:

animality is immediacy or immanence...the goshawk eating the hen does not distinguish it clearly from itself, in the same way that we distinguish an object from ourselves. The distinction requires a positing of the object as such. There does not exist any discernible difference if the object has not been posited...Between the animal that is eaten and the one that eats, there is no relation of subordination like that connecting an object, a thing, to man who refuses to be viewed as a thing (*Theory of Religion* 17-18).

Two remarkable themes emerge in this passage. The first is the claim that animality is “immanence.” This means the animal does not distinguish between itself as subject and its surroundings as objects or tools. Consequently, for Bataille, animals are conscious but not self-conscious. The animal does not plan to eat another animal with malice, calculation, guilt, hatred, or shame. It simply eats: “That one animal eats another scarcely alters a fundamental situation: every animal is *in the world like water in water*” (19). In the same way that one cannot distinguish in any rigorous way between different sections of a body of water, one cannot rigorously impose divisions of human reason and self-consciousness onto the animal world.

The passage also points to a consequence of the basic lack of determinacy: the absence of relations of reified power. The lion is not the king of the animals precisely because to be a king requires that one be acknowledged as such: “for a tiger to be a tiger, it does

not first need *tigertude*. It just pounces” (“Animal Desiring” 99). A tiger does not think it has a “right” to eat the animals it eats, nor does it think in its eating it has secured its place of power over those animals lower than itself. It simply eats. Jason Wirth points out that this distinction corresponds to the distinction in German between *essen* and *fressen*. *Essen* is to eat in the everyday (i.e. “human”) sense of the term, while *fressen* refers to devouring and is applied to animals (100).

Bataille addresses this contrast between human and animal consumption, between *essen* and *fressen*, in *Theory of Religion*. For Bataille, the purpose of the preparation of meat, so unique to humanity, “is not primarily connected with a gastronomical pursuit” (*Theory of Religion* 39). Rather, it addresses the basic need of a discontinuous subject to “not eat anything before he has made an object of it” (39). If this seems like an abstract claim one need only consider the complete disconnect between the presentation of a foie gras desert in a \$100 prix-fixe restaurant versus the experiential reality of a factory foie gras farm where ducks are force-fed with tubes stuck down their throats. This making-object of *essen* stands in stark contrast to the simply-eating of *fressen*. Bataille’s animality, then, lacks the distinction between subject and object that defines the way we eat, and more broadly, the way we experience the world.

### **A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing**

Bataille is concerned with the possibility of living in the world “like water in water.” Is it possible for human beings to live in immanence, to live in “a world in which the beings are indiscriminately lost...[a world that] is superfluous, serves no purpose, has nothing to do, and means nothing: it only has a value in itself, not with a view to something else?” (*Theory of Religion* 13). In order to describe the difficulties of such a goal<sup>1</sup>, Bataille carries out several critiques of projective (transcendent) subjectivity.

Though the critiques of project and rationality follow similar structures and are equiprimordial, it is easiest to begin with the critique of utility. According to utility, an object must have reference to some external end in order to be considered meaningful. In this mode of being-in-the-world, the tool is the primary example of meaning. Importantly, the tool “has no value in itself” and is only meaningful “in relation to an anticipated result” (*Theory of Religion* 28). While the truth of the tool lies in its usefulness towards a given end, the end is itself also grounded in utility. The tools of agriculture, to use Bataille’s example from *Theory of Religion*, are defined in terms of their usefulness to the cultivation of crops: a plow is only a plow so long as it accomplishes the goal of preparing soil for planting. The resulting food is, in turn, only valuable to the end of being eaten<sup>2</sup>, which is only valuable in terms of its ability to sustain human life, which is only valuable in its ability to do work, etc.

The absurdity of this “endless deferral” is matched by the equal absurdity of “a true end, which would serve no purpose” (29). Either utility continues indefinitely such that no individual thing is valuable in itself, or the utility is grounded in something which is not itself useful. A “true end,” must be something with no use-value at all. This is true for two reasons. The first is clearly explicit in my preceding explanation: there must be something at the end of the line, so to speak, which grounds meaning. This is a purely logical objection. Meaning based in utility makes impossible the very thing it purports to offer: grounded meaning. The second necessity deals instead with Bataille’s ethical commitment to immanent subjectivity: “What a ‘true end’ reintroduces is the continuous being, lost in the world like water is lost in water” (29). The structure of the tool introduces a break into the continuity of animal experiencing. In order for me to use something as a tool, it must first be distinct from me. Once it is distinct from me, I am no longer in an immanent state of continuity with my world. The introduction of discontinuity into the indiscriminate immanence of existence is the condition of the possibility of a tool. To use a tool, therefore, is already to be in the realm of project.<sup>3</sup>

Bataille then introduces the dimension of temporality to the critique of utility in order to critique what he calls “project,” though it could easily be referred to as desire. Project denotes a mode of being-in-the-world in which time itself is experienced as an object to be enlisted in the favor of utility. The present becomes meaningful only insofar as its occurrences are useful in relation to the accomplishment of a (future) goal. The critique of this mode of being-in-the-world runs similarly to the critique of utility. First of all, I will never be fulfilled. This is the basic problem of desire or projection: desire is constituted on a lack. I can only desire something I do not have. More importantly, it will not actually fulfill my desire; my desire, instead, will simply reconstitute itself with a new object-cause, which will be equally unsatisfactory upon its acquisition. The infinite regress of utility-based meaning manifests itself here as the impossibility of satisfying desire.

The ethical problem of discontinuity, however, also reappears with the introduction of temporality. Right after the above-quoted passage about animality, Bataille also notes that the goshawk eating the hen exists in a way “in which nothing is given in time...in which nothing is given beyond the present” (18). For Bataille, the very division of time into past, present, and future introduces discontinuity and transcendence into the continuous oneness of immanence. This discontinuity is, for Bataille, the underlying problem of utility as well. The idea of discontinuity, either between subject and object or among past, present, and future, is the condition of the possibility of utility’s emergence. Nick Land explains, “Bataille’s thought of discontinuity is more intricate than his fluent deployment of the word might indicate. It is the condition for transcendent illusion” (Land 64). In this way the same critique of deferral applies to discontinuity: “Discontinuity is not ontologically grounded but positively fabricated”

(64). The groundlessness of discontinuity is not, then, accidental to the groundlessness of deferral, but rather constitutive of it.

Finally, Bataille applies the critiques of utility and project to the practice of discursive reason. Broadly speaking, discursive reason is the practice of philosophy understood as explanation. Insofar as discursive reasoning always occurs within the context of elucidating something for a higher end, usually “truth,” it is based in project and utility. In contradistinction to this approach to philosophy, Bataille poses “sovereign non-knowledge”—a way of philosophizing that does not attempt to elucidate transcendent truths, but rather forces the reader into an experience (“Nonknowledge” 196).

Discursive reason also rests on the distinction between subject and object. In order to define something for explication or exploration, one must first delimit it from the manifold. I cannot give an account of what a chair is without first designating that a chair is some object distinct from all other possible objects in the world. This ontological problem of discursive reason points to the role that language plays in Bataille’s thought. Language rests on this same dividing up of the world. It rests on the ability to define a subject as distinct from an object. Even if I proclaim that I am thinking about myself, syntax necessitates that there is an “I” who is thinking (subject) and an “I” which is being thought about (object). This structural necessity is, for Bataille, “one of the most fateful aberrations of language” (*Theory of Religion* 28). Bataille’s non-knowledge, then, cannot simply be expressed in discursive language. Instead Bataille engages what Michael Sells calls “unsaying,” perverting and twisting language against itself in order to “engage the ineffable” (Sells 3).

In these critiques Bataille attempts to elucidate and undermine the very basis of transcendent subjectivity—discontinuity. The calling into question of the structure of discontinuity, between subject and world, between I and thou, undergirds all of Bataille’s thought.

### **Inner Experience**

If the above critiques underlie and provide the basis for Bataille’s thought, then the possibility of overcoming these structures motivates it. In light of the critiques of the structures of transcendent subjectivity and in distinction to immanent animality, Bataille posits “inner experience” as the human possibility of being in the world “like water in water.” Inner experience, for Bataille, is a mode of being-in-the-world “in [which] transcendence is abolished” (*On Nietzsche* xxvi). This mode of being-in-the-world would be one in which the ego the subject-object distinction are dissolved.

Given his critiques of transcendent subjectivity, it seems Bataille is setting up an argument for a return to nature or a return to animality. Though at times Bataille’s

writing exhibits a profound nostalgia for the lost continuity of animality, inner experience is not a “return” to animality. Bataille’s writings clutch at the extreme limit of human experience, not an ascetic renouncement of experience’s possibilities. Though Bataille describes inner experience as immanence and intimacy, it is not—and cannot be—the intimacy of animality. In the discussion of animality in *Theory of Religion*, Bataille claims that “the animal cannot *realize*” moving through the world as water in water, implying that it is a distinctly human possibility to “realize” animality. Though this might initially sound like a value-claim about human truth over the mute existence of animality, it is in fact a logical necessity of Bataille’s commitment to immanence. Animality must always-already be part of humanity, or else it would succumb to the same fallacy as religion:

Religion in general answered the desire that man always had to find himself, to regain an intimacy that was always strangely lost. But the mistake of all religion is to always give man a contradictory answer: *an external form of intimacy* (*Accursed Share* 129).

For Bataille, religion addressed the very real yearning for intimacy and immanence, but did so by positing a transcendent and external god. Instead, inner experience must be a coming-forth of something latent in the subject. In this way, inner experience avoids the religious fallacy with which Bataille takes issue. Inner experience, then, is a state of immanence (intimacy) with the world reached not through external searching, but through a maieutic<sup>4</sup> bringing-to-knowledge of what was always-already latent within the subject.

### **The Hell of Desire**

So how might one emerge from the realm of project into a perfect intimacy of being-in-the-world like water in water? One should be able to expect an answer to such a question from Bataille. And yet, Bataille refuses. Or rather, he is unable to provide one. The problem is somewhat obvious: one cannot project oneself out of project.

What is at stake here is *not* inner experience itself—inner experience obviously cannot “abide” project, which would introduce discontinuity into the uninterrupted flow of immanence and continuity. Rather, insofar as Bataille wants to claim that we should live in inner experience, he should be able to tell us how to get there. Inner experience itself, however, precludes the possibility of such a road map. In situating himself within the tradition of mysticism and mystical experience, Bataille also inherits the greatest problem of mysticism: if inner experience, mystical experience, nirvana, etc is the abolition of desire, then one can’t *desire to reach it*. Meister Eckhart accurately and succinctly characterizes this problem in his sermon “Blessed are the Poor.” Eckhart acknowledges that while he has been telling his audience that they must rid themselves

of all desire, of all knowledge, of all their attachment to an illusory “self,” he has yet to tell them how they might accomplish such a goal. Eckhart examines asceticism, one of the most widespread practices of mystics:

It is those people who in penitential exercise and external practice, of which they make a great deal, hold fast to their selfish I. The Lord have pity on such people who know so little of divine truth. Such people are called holy on account of their external appearance; but internally, they are asses (“Blessed are the Poor” 211).

The project of asceticism is still one of ego satisfaction. It retains both the ego, and therefore the distinction between subject and object, and the structure of project, and therefore the distinction between future and present as well as a sense of meaning grounded in utility. The structures of ego satisfaction and project, however, can also manifest themselves in non-ascetic practices if such practices slip in hedonism. Ego-satisfaction is the driving force of hedonism and project is the means by which one attains satisfaction. Even though asceticism is particularly problematic for Bataille, any such “how-to” for inner experience defeats itself before it begins by reproducing the very structures it attempts to overcome.

### **...Not that I have any argument with hell**

Despite the insistence that inner experience cannot tolerate the structures of utility, project, or rationality, Bataille also insists that inner experience must emerge “from the realm of project through project” (*Inner Experience* 46). Literally just paragraphs after demonstrating the impossibility of the coexistence of discursive reason and inner experience, Bataille claims that, “inner experience is lead by discursive reason. Reason alone has the power to undo its work, to hurl down what it has built up....Natural exaltation or intoxication have a certain ‘flash in the pan’ quality. Without the support of reason, we don’t reach ‘dark incandescence’” (46).

The critique of asceticism is instructive here again. Bataille describes asceticism as “that...anemic, taciturn particle of life, showing reluctance before the excess of joy, lacking freedom.” Whereas in the context of the critique of project, asceticism retains the structures it tries to overcome, here it suffers from renouncing the very principle it should be lauding: life. While ascetics have their hearts in the right place—to be rid of desire—they misunderstand what it would mean to actually live without desire or ego. The destruction of desire is a Dionysian embracing of life, not a dry renouncing of its pleasures. The loss of the self and the destruction of desire are instead “possible from a movement of drunken revelry; in no way is it possible without emotion. Being without emotion on the contrary is necessary for ascesis. One must choose” (23). This is not



merely a critique of asceticism: the two-sided critique of ascetics demonstrates the impossibility of either renouncing or retaining the structures of project and everyday experience. One feels the openings for inner experience closing off.

Having shown that project is fundamentally incompatible with inner experience, Bataille now argues, “nevertheless inner experience is project, no matter what” (22). Insofar as inner experience is the complete continuity of subject and object such that both are abolished, such conclusions are only possible through language. Human subjectivity, which is the precondition of inner experience, is “entirely so through language, [and] in essence...is project” (22). Language is both the condition of the possibility of human subjectivity (and therefore of inner experience) and the condition of the impossibility of overcoming that subjectivity. The very thing that allows for inner experience to emerge, also blocks any full access to it.

This aporia at the heart of inner experience illustrates precisely why it is not a return to animality. Animality, as described in *Theory of Religion*, exists prior to the discontinuity introduced by language—as far as Bataille is concerned, the goshawk does not think or communicate linguistically. Inner experience, however, arises along the edges of the discontinuity of project. Inner experience, though similar in description, must be a fundamentally different experience from animality.

## Experience of Aporia

The concurrent logical necessity and incompatibility of these arguments about the relation of project and inner experience is the determining factor in the movement of Bataille’s philosophical project: engagement with aporia. In forcing the reader to confront the ultimately aporetic nature of inner experience, Bataille asserts the sovereignty of experience and fundamentally rewrites what it means to do ethics.

An aporia, in contrast to a paradox, is an ontological blockage. The word comes from the Greek “poros,” meaning “passage.” An aporia, then, is “without passage.” A proper aporia has no solution, logical or otherwise.

The insistence on and revelation of aporetic experience asserts the sovereignty of experience itself. Most basically, this deployment of aporia refutes the possibility of replacing experience with argumentation or rational summary. Rather than summarizing arguments about inner experience, Bataille’s writings bring the reader through “L’tourment”—the torturous process of grasping at inner experience, finding the continuity of immanence in fits and spurts, all the while being pulled back into project and durational time. Bataille presents aporias not in order to prove or demonstrate, but rather to force the reader to undergo them.

## Bataille and Kant

Though Bataille certainly situated himself in the lineage of mysticism, he also situated himself in the more canonical lineage of Kant and Hegel. Indeed, this resistance of the singularity of experience to conceptual or rational explanation appears quite vividly in Kant's third *Critique*. For Kant, the beauty necessarily cannot be a concept. Judgments of beauty are not "logical but...aesthetic, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis *cannot be other than subjective*" (204). Specifically, this means that a judgment of taste has nothing to do with applying a pre-given concept of "beauty" to an object or measuring an object against a conceptual standard of "beauty." Furthermore, this judgment "does not contribute anything to cognition, but merely compares the given presentation in the subject with the entire presentational power, of which the mind becomes conscious when it feels its own state" (Kant 204). Kant unequivocally claims that beauty is not a concept in which an object participates or which it represents. Rather, beauty is the experience of the play of our cognitive faculties. The experience of the beauty is neither replaceable with nor reducible to rational description. Beauty cannot be described; it must be undergone. Consequently, the power of the beautiful must be in the subject rather than the object, since an object can be beautiful when from one angle, while wholly unremarkable when viewed from another.

Of course, Kant's other famous assertion of the singularity of experience in the *Critique of Judgment* is the Kantian sublime. For Kant, the experience of the sublime is experience of a "formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*" (Kant 245). The experience of the sublime, as opposed to the experience of beauty, consists in a mental state of "agitation" (247). Standing on a cliff before a "gloomy raging sea," for example, one feels overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite dynamism of nature (254). The key move for Kant, however, comes when the experiencing subject then realizes that she has a (bounded) concept for this very unboundedness: the idea of "totality" (113). Human reason saves the day and transforms awe of our own finitude into "respect for our own vocation...[that] makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility" (257).

Is Bataille's "inner experience" not, then, a surrender to the Kantian sublime? The difference that makes a difference between Kant and Bataille is that Kant's experience of the sublime is ultimately a victory of the human intellect through the application of the concept of infinity. For Bataille, the confrontation with the subliminality of inner experience is always a wholesale annihilation of concepts and the subject as such. Whereas Kant reasserts the power of human reason, Bataille leaps without abandon into this moment of the death of reason: "I am *open*, yawning gap, to the unintelligible sky and everything in me rushes forth, is reconciled in a final irreconciliation" (*Inner Experience* 59). With this important modification, Bataille carries Kant's legacy of

asserting the necessity of the particularity of experience. The Kantian sublime, despite the descriptions from Kant, the great systemizer, cannot be merely described—it must be experienced, and, for Bataille, *surrendered* to. Said otherwise, one must approach the sublime with the comportment of the beautiful. The Kantian experience of the beautiful must be “disinterested”—it is an experience of an object of “a liking...*devoid of all interest*” (Kant 211). We must approach the beautiful as something perfectly superfluous, something in which we find no nourishment or victory. In Oscar Wilde’s words, “beautiful things mean only beauty” (Wilde 3). In contrast, the sublime, for Kant, must always be experienced as that which reinforces the unbounded power of the human intellect; we are quite *interested* in the sublime. If we approach the sublime, however, without an eye towards the reassertion of human reason, if we approach the sublime as an experience to undergo for no reason other than itself, we find Bataille’s inner experience lurking already in the Kantian system.

We must admit here, however, that Kant fell short. Insofar as Kant details the necessity and conditions for the particularity of experience, he does not enact it in his writing. Though the third *Critique* points to some of the blind spots of Kant’s own system, Kant remains in the position of describing the beautiful and the sublime from outside; he demonstrates the logical necessity of the particularity of experience, but he does not enact it with the reader. In other words, Kant admirably attempts to systematize the unsystemizable. To revise Kant’s own infamous phrase, experience without description is blind; description without experience is empty. Kant falls into the trap of the latter. For Bataille, the external explanation of the torturous aporia of inner experience is necessary but insufficient; Bataille’s texts aim to bring the reader into direct confrontation with this experience: “What counts is no longer the statement of the wind, but the wind” (*Inner Experience* 13).

## **Bataille and Hegel**

The radicality of this assertion irrupts most forcefully in relation to its ethical consequences for Bataille. Given that Bataille’s project is ultimately an ethical one, the insistence on experience necessitates a revolution in our understanding of ethics. Ethics, so understood, must not be a prescriptive discipline. Rather, ethics is the process of engaging with and confronting aporia. This insistence on engagement shows the main point of engagement with one of Bataille’s other major predecessors in the history of philosophy—Hegel. The Hegelian dialectic owes its power, in part, to its experiential aspect. The force of the *Phenomenology* lies in its insistence on the *movement* of thought. Hegel’s dialectic relies on an insistence on the power of the dialectic to embody the movement of thought and the thorough rejection of lifeless maxims and prescriptive judgments.

The authority of experience in the dialectic grounds the possibility of what Slavoj Žižek calls the “parallax view” aspect of Hegel’s philosophy. A parallax is an apparent shift in an object that is caused by a shift in the subject. In the move from consciousness to self-consciousness, then, the world around the subject has not changed, and yet is completely transformed. The literal materiality of the manifold remains the same, but a shift in the subject (or subject-position) alters it radically. The difference between animality and inner experience gains its significance from precisely this parallax shift. Insofar as both are an abolishment of discontinuity and an immanence of being in the world “like water in water,” inner experience is fundamentally different from animality at the level of phenomenal experience because of the context of its emergence. Inner experience emerges from within a discursive and linguistic subjectivity, while animality exists prior to any such structures. The “objective” description of the two states is the same, but the subjective conditions under which they are experienced render them radically distinct. A shift in the subject begets a shift in the object.

It is in this precise sense that Bataille “recommences and undoes Hegel’s *Phenomenology*” (80). *Inner Experience*’s wild vacillations—both at the level of style and argumentation—reflect and radicalize Hegel’s dialectically experiential philosophy. In “The Torment” section of *Inner Experience*, Bataille progresses through a series of seemingly contradictory claims about inner experience. He first claims that “inner experience is the opposite of action [project]. Nothing more” (*Inner Experience* 47). Within the page, however, he asserts a “principle of inner experience: to emerge through project from the realm of project,” before reasserting “progress [project] negates ecstasy [inner experience]” (48). If one were to tear these claims out of their context, it would stand as a series of stark contradictions with no real conclusion. In the context of the books, however, these statements are not meant to be summations of logical arguments, but rather openings of engagement with aporia. As we move through these vacillations *with* Bataille, we come to see that they are all necessary and yet all impossible.

Furthermore, in the context of the movement of Bataille’s writing, each of these assertions shifts and displaces its previous iteration. Throughout the text, Bataille repeatedly makes the claim that inner experience is the sovereignty of experience. This very sovereignty, however, changes in its varied contexts and iterations: sovereignty can mean the authority of experience, the destruction of the limits of human possibility, or the complete supplication of oneself to “ecstasy in the void” (122). The parallax movement of Bataille’s writing creates an “image of the subject” (117), not through mere logical argumentation or poetic description, but employs both in order to do so at the level of the text itself. Bataille does not care to address a reader who expects to be told what to do, but rather writes “for one, who, entering into [his] book, would fall into it as into a hole, who would never again get out” (116). Understood in this way,

Bataille's ethical project recasts ethics not as a calculus of moral action, but rather as a lived process of engaging with the inherent contradictions of human subjectivity. The power of ethics becomes the authority of experience and not the prescription of moral action.

### Groundless Authority

The entirety of Bataille's rewriting of ethics stands on the sovereignty of experience, on his claim that "experience itself is authority" (7). Who is to say that experience is sovereign after all? In order to provide such a justification, Bataille would need to reintroduce a subjugation of experience to some higher power—the Good, productivity, ethics, etc. To do so, however, would be to reintroduce the infinite deferral of meaning. Instead, Bataille posits the sovereignty of experience, which is, in a strict sense, ungrounded. Eckhart's "dialogue of the righteous man" seems fitting: "'Why are you living?' 'My word! I do not know, but I am happy to be alive'" ("Woman, the Hour is Coming" 54).

In the same way that any chain of utility must ultimately rest upon a useless ground, Bataille's argument rests upon the positing of the sovereignty of experience, for which he "can provide neither a justification nor an end" (*Inner Experience* 12). Instead, the engagement with aporia and the sovereignty of experience are "not logically demonstrable. One must *live* experience" (8).

### The Sleep of Reason

Bataille's *Theory of Religion* ends with a strange and strikingly appropriate final word, so to speak:

TO WHOM LIFE IS AN EXPERIENCE TO BE CARRIED AS FAR AS POSSIBLE...

I have not meant to express my thought but to help you clarify what you yourself think...

You are not any more different from me than your right leg is from your left, but what joins us is THE SLEEP OF REASON—WHICH PRODUCES MONSTERS (113).

This odd passage succinctly expresses the spirit of Bataille's writing. He asserts the sovereignty of experience, the practice of maieutic and experiential writing, and the ethical necessity of a continuous being-in-the-world with other beings, all while indicting reason in undermining these claims. The reference to Goya's "El Sueño de la Razón Produce Monstruos" (fig. 1) in this context is also significant. Often read as one of the first instances of romanticism and the combination of imagination and reason,

Bataille reappropriates Goya's "monstruos" to represent those who would engage his ethical revolution against the discontinuity of reason and utility. This reappropriation points to the radicality of Bataille's rewriting of ethics: "monster" denotes one who breaks so radically with the rational foundations of conventional ethics that she no longer appears human. To return to the opening question of this paper, then, we should approach Bataille's work with faith in the sovereignty of experience. We should allow ourselves to enact the sublimity of his mad writing. We should approach Bataille not with the attitude of a pupil awaiting passive instruction, but rather that of a comrade ready to join him in the sleep of reason, ready to become monsters.



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (Spanish, 1746-1828). *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (El sueño de la razón produce monstruos)*, 1797-1798. Etching and aquatint on laid paper, Sheet: 11 7/8 x 8 in. (30.2 x 20.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, A. Augustus Healy Fund, Frank L. Babbott Fund, and the Carl H. de Silver Fund, 37.33.43. Used under terms provided by the Brooklyn Museum (<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org>).

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<sup>1</sup> Even the use of the word “goal” here will soon prove to be problematic, and yet necessary to Bataille’s critical structure.

<sup>2</sup> One might argue that food is also eaten for pleasure. Food eaten for pleasure, however, is still being valued to some end external to itself. Even if pleasure can be considered a true end, this would still be a structure of ego satisfaction, which will be shown to be problematic.

<sup>3</sup> This is almost directly contrary to Heidegger analysis of tools as ready-to-hand in *Being and Time*. Though an extended discussion of this difference is outside the scope of this essay, it should be noted that Bataille actively wrote about his disagreements with Heidegger and was aware of the break he was making with phenomenology.

<sup>4</sup> The term “maieutic” comes from Socrates’ claim in the *Theatetus* to practice a pedagogical “midwifery” through the Socratic method (Plato 149A). In the case of Bataille, the bringing-out of knowledge is not accomplished through dialectical questioning, but performative writing. The term, however, is strikingly appropriate to describe the role of immanence in Bataille’s writing.