

## Bataille's Mystifying Communication

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I am speaking to my fellow beings: a malaise fills the room, and I know that they will never understand me.<sup>1</sup>

As I write these words, I experience a dreadful anticipation of this feeling. After all, as I write, I know that I am (and in a few days will be) addressing my fellow beings about something that I think cannot, strictly speaking, be understood. I want to speak of what Georges Bataille means by communication, and the first thing I want to say about it is that whatever Bataille means by communication is unintelligible. Since understanding requires intelligibility, and since (as I shall argue in the second section of this paper) Bataille's communication is *un*intelligible, Bataille's communication cannot be understood. I can put the point even more forcefully by saying that attempting to make sense of Bataille's communication is of no use and is in fact a waste of time.

Nevertheless, even if it rules out understanding, Bataille's communication is not for that reason meaningless. This is a risky proposition given how strange it must sound to philosophically trained ears; but I believe that one thing Bataille communicates is that intelligibility is not the sole criterion of meaningful language. So, although I will spend some time arguing that Bataille's communication is unintelligible, I will not stop with a simple refutation of his position. Instead, I will attempt to go beyond the issue of intelligibility and to explore the possibility of communication with Georges Bataille.

First, I shall offer an exposition of Bataille's notion of communication. Second, by subjecting this notion of communication to a philosophical treatment (Wittgenstein's 'private language' argument) that points to its unintelligibility, I shall offer a refutation of Bataille's notion of communication. Finally, I shall attempt to show that despite falling prey to the 'private language' argument, Bataille's communication is meaningful.

## I

**Exposition**

In his essay on Genet from *Literature and Evil* Georges Bataille opposes what he calls a strong, powerful sense of communication to a weak, feeble sense of communication; and it is precisely in opposition to weak communication that powerful communication most clearly manifests itself: "Communication, in my sense of the word, is never stronger than when communication, in the weak sense, the sense of profane language or, as Sartre says, of prose which makes us and the others appear penetrable, fails and becomes the equivalent of darkness."<sup>2</sup> Weak communication takes place through the profane use of language, a use that produces the appearance of clarity: ". . . the *profane* is the world of *reason*, of *identity*, of *things*, of duration and calculation. Each thing, in this world, receives a meaning in a durable relation with an other: such is the *intelligible* world, where *perceptible* elements are reduced to operating signs and have value only in view of ulterior possibilities" (EW, 40 -- Bataille's italics). As we operate in the profane world, always with a view to the future prospects things represent, we use weak communication ". . . in order to convince people to agree with us. We want to establish humble truths which coordinate our attitudes and activity with those of our fellow human beings" (LE, 199). Weak communication is thus used for the purposes of gaining a clear understanding of the things that constitute the objective world and of establishing a consensus as to how we ought to act in order to be productive members of society. It is precisely to the extent that we understand one another with a view to productive activity that we and others "appear penetrable" to each other.

Strong communication, on the other hand, manifests itself at moments when weak communication breaks down. As long as we remain active and productive, as long as we understand each other, we appear penetrable to one another. A failure of understanding, however, gives rise to a moment ". . . when subjectivity seems unintelligible in relation to

the intelligibility of customary objects and, more generally, of the objective world" (LE, 200). This abrupt interruption of our routine understanding of the world appears, Bataille claims, as a scandal:

The passage from intelligibility to unintelligibility, from that which, no longer being knowable, suddenly no longer seems tolerable to us, is certainly the origin of this feeling of scandal, but it is less a question of difference of level than of an experience 'given' in the major communication of beings. The scandal is the *instantaneous* fact that consciousness is consciousness of another consciousness, that is the look of another look. (LE, 200 -- Bataille's italics)

The experience that consciousness is the look of another look is scandalous in that what normally appears to us as completely clear -- the penetrability of others, our ability to understand one another -- is thrown into question. Whereas our normal interaction that is due to the intelligibility of weak communication is understandable and knowable -- and thus produces the appearance of the clearness of consciousness and the penetrability of others -- the failure of weak communication opens a passage from intelligibility to unintelligibility. Powerful communication, which opposes this normal understanding, ". . . abandons the consciousnesses that reflect each other, to that impenetrability which they 'ultimately' are" (LE, 200).

The 'ultimate' impenetrability of one consciousness to another seems to suggest that ultimately, we as human beings exist as isolated individuals. Yet Bataille in fact insists that this is not the case ". . . I am sure of one thing: humanity is not composed of isolated beings but of communication between them. Never are we revealed, even to ourselves, other than in a network of communication with others" (LE, 198-99). But, if humanity is composed of communication between individuals; if we are revealed only through this communication; and if communication reveals to us the impenetrable look of another look, then in what sense are we not isolated individuals? It seems that either we

are not ultimately impenetrable, or communication is impossible. In fact, Bataille recognizes this dilemma:

"Communication" cannot proceed from one full and intact individual to another. It requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is risked, placed at the limit of death and nothingness. . . .<sup>3</sup>

If communication is to take place, it requires that we as individuals risk our existence as individuals. To risk one's existence as an individual is to attempt to go beyond oneself as an individual. The risk involved is that beyond oneself is death or nothingness. So communication between individuals seems to require the risk of the death of the individuals involved. And, this is in fact what Bataille suggests:

The beyond of my being is first of all nothingness. This is the absence I discern in laceration and in painful feelings of lack: It reveals the presence of another person. Such a presence, however, is fully disclosed only when the *other* similarly leans over the edge of nothingness (dies). "Communication" only takes place *between two people who risk themselves*, each lacerated and suspended, perched atop a common nothingness. (ON, 20-21)

What happens to these individuals, lacerated and suspended over nothingness? The moment that communication takes place is " . . . the instant when their impenetrability reveals itself to the consciousnesses which unite and penetrate each other unlimitedly" (LE, 201). The individuals become, as it were, 'compenetrate impenetrabilities'.<sup>4</sup>

If you do not understand what this means, you are not alone.

Bataille himself struggles with the possibility of knowledge of communication.

He writes:

I could have told myself: value, authority -- this is ecstasy; inner experience is ecstasy; ecstasy is, it seems, communication. . . . I would have in this way *known* and *found* (there was a time when I thought myself to know, to have found). But we reach ecstasy by a contestation of knowledge. Were I to stop and grasp

it, in the end I would define it. But nothing resists the contestation of knowledge and I have seen at the end that the idea of communication leaves itself naked -- not knowing anything. Whatever it may be . . . I can provide it with neither a justification nor an end. I remain in intolerable non-knowledge, which has no other way out than ecstasy itself.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it would be better to say that Bataille struggled with the possibility of knowledge of communication, since even if there were a time when he thought himself to know it, it seems that in the end he denies the possibility of knowledge of communication. A further clarification:

**NON-KNOWLEDGE LAYS BARE.**

This proposition is the summit, but must be understood in this way: lays bare, therefore I *see* what knowledge was hiding up to that point, but if I see, *I know*. Indeed, I know, but non-knowledge again lays bare what I have known. If nonsense is sense, the sense which is nonsense is lost, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end).

If the proposition (non-knowledge lays bare) possesses a sense -- appearing, then disappearing immediately thereafter -- this is because it has the meaning: **NON-KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY**. (IE, 52 -- Bataille's emphasis)

It is only as an intact individual that I can possess knowledge. But if communication requires that I risk my existence as an intact individual (even my death as an individual), then communication rules out knowledge. The movement between existence as individual and death, between impenetrability and penetrability, between profane and sacred, between feeble communication and powerful communication, between knowledge and non-knowledge corresponds to the appearance (sense) and disappearance (nonsense) of the sense of the proposition: non-knowledge lays bare. Bataille writes:

As long as *ipse* perseveres in its will to know and to be *ipse*, anguish lasts, but if *ipse* abandons itself and knowledge with it, if it gives itself up to non-knowledge in this abandon, then rapture begins. In rapture, my existence finds a sense once again, but the sense is referred immediately to *ipse*; it becomes *my* rapture, a

rapture which I *ipse* possess. . . . As soon as I emerge from it, communication, the loss of myself cease; I have ceased to abandon myself -- I remain there, but with a new knowledge. (IE, 54)

Bataille continues: "The movement begins again, starting from there . . . "; and continues: ". . . without other end than exhaustion, without possibility of stopping other than collapse" (IE, 55). Can we understand Bataille's communication?

## II

### Refutation

Before I proceed to the refutation of Bataille's position, a few remarks seem necessary. First, it may seem surprising to some that I am attempting to refute a position that seems to be so obviously (and one might add, though I have *not* emphasized this aspect of Bataille's thought<sup>6</sup>, self-consciously) self-refuting. But even if we were all to agree (and I suspect that we do not) that Bataille's position refutes itself, it is not enough to understand the mere fact *that* this is so. My refutation will attempt to establish not only *that* Bataille's position refutes itself, but also *why* this is so. Second, those of you who do *not* think Bataille's position refutes itself may think Wittgenstein's 'private language' argument an odd choice as a refutation of Bataille. After all, his entire emphasis is on communication and the necessity of shared experience.<sup>7</sup> But what is at stake here is whether we can understand what Bataille means by 'communication' in the first place. For if what he means by 'communication' is unintelligible, to say that Bataille is trying to 'communicate' with others is hardly an effective objection. Finally, I must admit that I am not by any measure a 'Wittgensteinian' or even a 'Wittgenstein Scholar'. I plan to offer neither a detailed explication of Wittgenstein's overall project and the place of the 'private language' argument within it nor a detailed account of the 'private language' argument itself.<sup>8</sup> Instead, I shall try to portray the argument with broad strokes and to show how it points to the unintelligibility of Bataille's communication.

Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language seems on the surface to be directed against such claims as 'Only I can know what I see when I see red' or 'You cannot have my toothache'. Such claims make sense to the private linguist who wants to claim that I could have my own language that no one else could understand to talk about those experiences that only I can have. On the other hand, the scope of Wittgenstein's argument extends far beyond our use of pain and color words. P. M. S. Hacker suggests that Wittgenstein's actual target is his own earlier commitment (e.g., in his *Tractatus*) to some form of solipsism (II, 185-86). I would like to suggest that we can get a good view of the kind of philosophical beliefs Wittgenstein is trying to refute if we take a look at his own *A Lecture on Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> Here Wittgenstein argues that whenever we attempt to say something ethical, it seems that we cannot find the words to express what we mean. A natural response to not being able to find the words is to recall to oneself and others an experience that one has felt to be ethical in the hopes that others will have had the same or a similar experience:

I will describe this experience to you in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist." (PO, 41 -- Wittgenstein's italics)

Wittgenstein's reaction to this expression is that it is nonsense; for if the expression 'I wonder at the existence of the world' is to make sense, it must also make sense to say 'I wonder at the nonexistence of the world'. But I cannot, in fact, even imagine that the world does not exist.

Our reaction is to insist that we still have not found the words to express the experience. Wittgenstein's reaction to this urging is that such expressions are not

nonsensical because we have yet to find the words, but rather that their nonsensicality is their very essence:

For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the whole tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. (PO, 44 -- Wittgenstein's italics)

To attempt to say what cannot be said is impossible.

The problem that remains is that we are still tempted to say that we have had the experience even though we cannot find the words to express it. Despite the fact that I cannot communicate it to others, I know that I had the experience because *I* had it. It is precisely here that privacy enters the picture. In his *Notes for Lectures on "Private Experience" and "Sense Data"* Wittgenstein writes:

"There is the experience and the description of the experience. -- So it cannot be a matter for indifference whether the other has the same experience as I or not; and therefore what matters when I talk to myself must be my experience. It must be a decisive factor that I know this experience (whereas I am not directly acquainted with the other's experience)." (PO, 209)

These are the utterances of the private linguist. But these are also the utterances of the individual who runs up against the limits of language.

Is it correct to describe Bataille as a private linguist in Wittgenstein's sense? As we have seen, the private linguist is one who attempts to invoke the same experience in others, but who seems not to be able to find the words to communicate the experience to others. In the preface to *On Nietzsche*, Bataille insists: "You have to experience a problem like this to understand how strange it really is" (xxiii). And again: "*I want to be very clear on this*: not a word of Nietzsche's work can be understood without *experiencing* that dazzling dissolution into totality, without living it out. Beyond that,

this philosophy is just a maze of contradictions" (xxxii-ii -- Bataille's italics). In order to understand Nietzsche (even a single word), one must have had the same experience. This is precisely what Bataille proposes to do:

*That in the path of inner experience, he only advanced inspired, undecided, does not stop me -- if it is true that as a philosopher he had as a goal not knowledge but, without separating its operations, life, its extreme limit, in a word experience itself. . . . It is from a feeling of community binding me to Nietzsche that the desire to communicate arises in me, not from an isolated individuality. (IE, 26-7 -- Bataille's italics)*

Here the uncertainty of the shared experience becomes obvious. Bataille feels himself bound to Nietzsche in a community, but only if Nietzsche, too, had the goal of reaching the extreme limit. But did he? How can Bataille know that communication has taken place between himself and Nietzsche?

Now to the private language argument itself. Hacker divides the argument into two main parts: (1) the private linguist can neither form nor possess a concept, and (2) the private linguist cannot form sentences (II, 233 - 34). If the private linguist cannot form a concept of the experience, then not only will the experience be incommunicable to others, but also the private linguist will be unable to understand the experience. This is so because unless the private linguist can correctly use words to describe the experience, he will never know what the words mean. But the private linguist can never use the words correctly, since a correct use of words requires an independent standard according to which a correct use can be distinguished from an incorrect use. This is precisely the situation of the individual who wishes to go beyond the limits of language to express the essence of Ethics.

Moreover, this is precisely the situation in which Bataille finds himself with regard to communication. He cannot know whether communication with Nietzsche has taken place. In fact, he cannot even know what communication means. Instead, communication, inner experience, is, Bataille insists, the site of non-knowledge. If I

attempt to know whether communication has happened, I come back to myself and communication comes to an end. Bataille's communication is, thus, impossible.

### III

#### Communication

Is Bataille's communication intelligible? No. But he never claims it to be so -- quite the opposite, in fact. Is Bataille's communication understandable? Obviously not. He writes: "My method has confusion as a consequence -- and in the long run this confusion is unbearable (particularly for me!). This is something to be corrected if possible. . . ." (ON, 188). There are two possibilities as to how a correction of this confusion might be effected. One may, following Wittgenstein, seek to eliminate philosophical confusion and concentrate instead on what is intelligible. Wittgenstein's pride was to have developed a method that allowed him to stop doing philosophy when he wanted. Understanding, in that case, is eventually ensured. Or, one may, following Bataille (following Nietzsche), seek not to understand, but to communicate what is and must remain unintelligible. This communication is never and can never be an understanding. Should one choose Bataille over Wittgenstein, one's prospects for success are limited: "Considered from the standpoint of action, Nietzsche's work amounts to a failure (one of the most indefensible!) and his life amounts to nothing -- like the life of anyone who tries to put these writings into practice" (ON, xxxi). Can we find meaning in a failure to understand? It happens all the time.

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<sup>1</sup>Georges Bataille, *Georges Bataille -- Essential Writings*, ed. by Michael Richardson (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 44. Further references will be made parenthetically (EW).

<sup>2</sup>Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (New York: Marion Boyers, 1993), 199. Further references will be made parenthetically (LE).

<sup>3</sup>Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 19. Further references will be made parenthetically (ON).

<sup>4</sup>Jean-François Lyotard suggested this term to me in his questions for the defense of my dissertation prospectus in July, 1997.

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<sup>5</sup>Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY P, 1988), 12. Bataille's italics. Further references will be made parenthetically (IE).

<sup>6</sup>This, too, may seem surprising to some. But, really, Bataille never stops contesting the knowledge of communication: "If I ever have occasion to write out my last words in blood, I'll write this: 'Everything I *lived*, said, or wrote -- everything I loved -- I considered *communication*. . . . My accomplishment, its sum total, is to have taken risks and to have my sentences fall like the victims of war now lying in the fields" (ON, 7 -- Bataille's italics). The entirety of his entire work consists in unworking.

<sup>7</sup>One instance among many: ". . . if I wish my life to have meaning for me, it is necessary that it have meaning for *others*" (IE, 42 -- Bataille's italics).

<sup>8</sup>For anyone interested in such a detailed account of Wittgenstein's argument, see P. M. S. Hacker's *Insight and Illusion: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and the Metaphysics of Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1972), especially chapters VII and VIII. Hereafter, this text will be referred to parenthetically (II).

<sup>9</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*. ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 36-44. Hereafter this text will be referred to parenthetically (PO).