

**Georges Bataille's "Nonknowledge" as Epistemic Expenditure: An Open
Economy of Knowledge**

by

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ABSTRACT

GEORGES BATAILLE’S “NONKNOWLEDGE” AS EPISTEMIC EXPENDITURE: AN OPEN ECONOMY OF KNOWLEDGE

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This document is an argument that nonknowledge (*non-savoir*), understood as epistemic expenditure, is part of knowledge-creation. The first chapter examines a particular conversation in virtue epistemology, situating virtue epistemology within epistemology and philosophy in general. The second chapter is an explanation and a discussion of three of nonknowledge’s elements and their various features. The second chapter concludes with the original claim that nonknowledge exists in a “threshold” position in relation to knowledge and un- or a-knowledge. The third chapter examines the most significant element of nonknowledge—expenditure—and introduces a conceptual framework for nonknowledge as a “general” or “open” economy. Throughout the second and third chapters, we return periodically to the virtue epistemology conversation for points of contrast, clarification, and challenge. The fourth chapter is where we focus on the central argument that nonknowledge is a part of knowledge and its creation. In order to do this, the fourth chapter returns to the virtue epistemology conversation to examine why or how the conversation is incomplete as a “restricted” or “closed” economy, and how an “open” economy of knowledge recognizes and makes a particular kind of use of nonknowledge.

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List of Abbreviations

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AC – *The Accursed Share* (Volume I or Volumes II and III specified in text)

E – *Erotism*

IE – *Inner Experience*

ON – *On Nietzsche*

OC – *Oeuvres Complètes* (Volume V or Volume VI specified in text)

USN – *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*

VE – *Visions of Excess*

Chapter 1: A Closed Economy of Knowledge

Introduction

I began writing the thesis with a strong desire to spend my days figuring out what nonknowledge is. I wanted to dig into Bataille's body of work, and the work of those who have engaged him or who or are even tangentially connected to the clusters of thinkers and artists he engaged: Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Paul Sartre, Walter Benjamin, and Bréton, Baudelaire, and of course Nietzsche, Sade, Hegel. When I follow Bataille down the holes he writes, I am equally moved and made uncomfortable by his habit of turning received wisdom and scholarship and methodology on its ear. But more than this, and relating specifically to nonknowledge, when I first encountered Bataille's attempts at conceptual explanations and reconstructions of nonknowledge, I felt I was encountering an unusual honesty and vulnerability in his writing, and I couldn't turn away from it. Listen to this, for example:

To specify what I mean by nonknowledge: that which results from every proposition when we are looking to go to the fundamental depths of its content, and which makes us uneasy. [...] I have done everything to know what is knowable and I have looked for that which is unformulatable in my depths. I myself am in a world I recognize as profoundly inaccessible to me: in all the ties that I sought to bind it with, I still don't know what I can conquer, and I remain in a kind of despair. I recognize that this feeling is rarely tested adequately. I was surprised that someone like Sartre didn't feel this feeling in the least bit, much less the rest of the world. He said something like: if we don't know anything, we don't need to say it twice. [...] Faced with nonknowledge, I experienced the feeling of performing in a comedy, of having a kind of weakness in my position. At the same time, I am in front of you as a babbler, offering all the reasons I would have for keeping my mouth shut (USN 113-15).

It is maddening to be offered what seems like half-answers or non-answers, but Bataille cannot stop wondering—and I inherit this from him—why and how the so-called “full”

answers have the authority they do. Even Bataille knew this was maddening, and he suspected it was why philosophy was reluctant to claim his as one of its own. So the first goal of the thesis was to create a positive definition of something (i.e., nonknowledge) that has been defined negatively, and according to a logic of lack, a restricted economy. (By this I mean: challenging the assumption that something not clear or worthwhile according to existing standards is lacking or deficient.) Thus offering it new life. Insofar as Bataille's writing can be understood as a partial, though imperfect, precursor to deconstructionism, it jams conceptual machinery, requiring a project such as this one to tread carefully and to keep in mind Bataille's goal of using project to escape project (IE 59). I'll come back to the encounter with Sartre in a moment.

A Bataille scholar typically stays, though not always, in Bataille's compelling and difficult world, and in the so-called Continental tradition, without subjecting Bataille's line of thinking to questioning from the so-called "Analytic" tradition. (This is the case in the work of prominent Bataille scholars like Denis Hollier, Allan Stoekl, Amy Hollywood, Rodolphe Gasché, Shannon Winnubst, and even Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Baudrillard, and Lingis.) Typically, this work brings Bataille into conversation (as he did himself) with Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Sartre, Sade, Blanchot, and those listed above. Or into conversation with more contemporary thinkers and schools of thought: On the kinds of communication Bataille's thought endorses or provokes, for example. Or on the mystical and spiritual elements of Bataille's thought. I have done work in this realm, published in a volume on theorizing spirituality in the 21st century. ("Nonknowledge and the Sacred") And I have done other work here, also published in a volume on children's literature and

philosophy. (“Lovingly Impolite”) I could have happily stayed in this realm. I could have written an entirely Bataille-oriented thesis and the upshot would have been: I would not have to speak to, or answer questions from epistemologists.

But I found myself wondering if the two domains I was looking at—nonknowledge and Anglo-American epistemology—might have some common ground, as Bataille sometimes insisted and sometimes hinted. (Hint: “there is decidedly a progression wherein nonknowledge becomes a greater knowledge” (USN 247) Insistence: “Knowledge, in principal even, is nothing less than the questioning of knowledge itself” (USN 222).). Or more specifically, I found myself wondering if the two domains might be using some of the same terms, but differently, or using different terms that might share meaning. I found myself wanting to bring Bataille near—or provisionally into—epistemology in a philosophically interesting way, in a way that wouldn’t relegate my thesis to “comparative literature” or “critical theory.” I found that I could not answer the question “What is an open economy of knowledge?” without looking closely at at least one corner of Anglo-American analytic epistemology.

So I have a document that is a kind of hybrid. My specialty and my primary focus is nonknowledge and Bataille’s body of work, particularly because nonknowledge is sprinkled throughout and is a part of so many of Bataille’s texts. But I have taken what feels like a necessary risk and given attention *also* to virtue epistemology to ask, “What is the economy of knowledge here?” I saw an opportunity for philosophy to have a conversation with itself, so to speak.

When I looked closely at the virtue epistemology conversation, day after day, having put aside Bataille, I saw a sophisticated system that operates as though it were a restricted economy. But I wasn't at first set on virtue epistemology as a counterpoint and case study for nonknowledge. For months I read and wrote about feminist epistemology, thinking Linda Alcoff, Sandra Harding, Lorraine Code, and Elizabeth Potter might be a counterpoint. Then I spent time reading mainstream, dominant Anglo-American epistemology: like Timothy Williamson, who questions the project of analyzing knowledge¹, and Robert Audi, who aims to “develop and defend the core of a comprehensive, full-scale theory of rationality” (*The Architecture of Reason* vii). And of course I read virtue epistemology.

I saw a *general* treatment of knowledge as an acquirable good that requires a particular orientation toward utility. And this utility-orientation requires assessment of what is useful and what is not. I saw that which is regarded as not useful for acquiring knowledge treated as waste. I saw what Bataille struggled to call nonknowledge happening in that very waste—the moments of foolishly pushing too far, wandering way off course, asking what oughtn't to be asked, playing—and I realized I would have to accept Derrida's invitation to *slide* calculatedly from the security of established conceptuality in my construction of nonknowledge.

Thus I found myself and *still find myself* sharing Bataille's vulnerability, unwisely but necessarily putting myself in the position Bataille found himself in while standing in front

¹ *Knowledge and Its Limits*, 2000.

of Sartre. (And there are others who are so much more *sure* than Sartre: recall Quine and Ullian’s dismissal of anything that gets in the way of “acquiring and sustaining right beliefs”!) And I found out that nonknowledge is a specific claim—that is, one small sliver of a larger ontological claim—that others have already made and continue to make about the project or situation of humanity itself, a project that is “a teleology without a point, [...] a project that issues in nothing.” Those are the words of writer Maggie Nelson (*The Argonauts* 143). Uselessness is not only interesting in relation to evolution and humanity, of course. There are people thinking about uselessness in relation to art, economics, and even plant signaling (in the case of Karen Houle²).

One part of this document is a description and an explanation of the concept of “nonknowledge” (*non-savoir*), developed in fits and starts over roughly thirty years (1930-1960) by Georges Bataille. The other part is an examination of a constellation, or a cluster, of thought (mid-1980s-present) in the realm of virtue epistemology. It might seem that the work of Georges Bataille and the work of current prominent virtue epistemologists form an odd couple—or an impossible couple—but I aim to show that they can nonetheless be made to have an interesting conversation with each other.

We will focus on a conversation in virtue epistemology because virtue epistemology is not only concerned with the norms that govern truth- and knowledge-production; but it is *also*, and primarily, concerned with the *intellectual character* of knowers. Virtue epistemology is thus uniquely suited to highlight the demands epistemology places on producers of truth

² “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics as Extension or Becoming? The Case of Becoming-Plant”

and knowledge in two registers: the quality of belief and truth *and* the cognitive character of the believer or knower as well. Virtue epistemology's focus on intellectual character is an amplification of philosophy and epistemology's emphasis on *utility*. The focus on intellectual virtue is ultimately a focus on utility, but in virtue epistemology it is not enough that one's knowledge may be useful; the *way in which one's knowledge is sought, produced, communicated, and acquired* must also serve utility, and it must be done by making use of one's intellectual virtues. Virtue epistemology has thus strayed a bit from its Aristotelian roots, where knowledge was conceived of as valuable for its own sake, and virtue(s) associated with living a life that allowed one to acquire knowledge were conceived of as ends in themselves, insofar as they were constitutive of the good life. In this sense, this thesis offers a corrective. If virtue epistemology (Greco and Sosa in particular) employ an Aristotelian notion of virtue, they ought to acknowledge that their notions of intellectual virtue are in fact only *partially* Aristotelian, as they argue for the necessity of knowledge that is *not* merely valuable in and of itself. The acquisitive possibilities of knowledge have been overstressed by the virtue epistemology conversation, and the non-acquisitive possibilities have been ignored.

But virtue epistemology is a sub-disciplinary expression of the principles and presumptions of epistemology in general, and thus of philosophy in general. In order to highlight this, we will move back-and-forth between a wider focus on epistemology and philosophy in general, and our particular conversation in virtue epistemology.

I will begin by offering a sketch of the argument to be made in the document. The work of Linda Zagzebski, John Greco, and Ernest Sosa forms a cluster of ideas in virtue epistemology—the cluster on which we will focus³. I will claim that the conversation we see them having—about the value of knowledge (and consequently, the nature of knowledge)—exhibits and relies upon certain characteristic features of what I will call “classical epistemology” or “classical knowing.” It will come as no surprise that a particular conversation in mainstream virtue epistemology exhibits and relies on features of classical epistemology. I draw our attention to these features so that we remember them as we begin the discussion of nonknowledge.

The concept of nonknowledge contains elements and approaches to the acts of thinking and communicating that I will call an “alternate epistemology.” These elements are neither a-philosophical nor a- or anti-epistemological, but they do not fit easily into the virtue epistemology we will examine. And yet, if we find them philosophically compelling and sound, we are required to re-evaluate the virtue epistemology explanations for the value—and nature—of knowledge. Doing this re-evaluation will require, as I have suggested, looking at more than just the virtue epistemology conversation. And it will require looking at the virtue epistemology conversation as a sub-disciplinary expression of epistemology generally, and even more generally, of philosophy itself.

The argument will have four parts. In the first part (this chapter) I will introduce the virtue epistemology conversation and the features of classical epistemology we see at work in it.

³ I chose these three figures (Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa) *because* their conversation forms a kind of cluster, as they are having a conversation with each other about the role and value of knowledge.

In the second chapter I will introduce and explain two important elements of nonknowledge, returning to the virtue epistemology conversation from time to time. The third chapter has two goals: (1) to introduce and explain the most significant element of nonknowledge alongside (2) my claim that nonknowledge is “epistemic expenditure.” In the fourth chapter I will return to our virtue epistemology cluster in order to claim that if we think nonknowledge has got something right, we have committed ourselves to a position that is at odds with what some in virtue epistemology—under the umbrella of classical epistemology and classical knowing—have said about the nature of knowledge and its relationship to utility, acquisition, teleology, communicability, and productivity. The fourth chapter is where I hone in on the central positive argument that nonknowledge *can in fact be a feature of knowledge-creation*. This is in line with a pre-existing claim (from Bataille and Bataille scholars like Ladelle McWhorter⁴) that nonknowledge is already occurring within knowledge.

Part 1: Virtue Epistemology, Subset of Epistemology

In this introductory chapter, I identify eight presumptions in the sampling of one particular conversation in virtue epistemology. We will discuss these presumptions briefly but in some detail (before returning to the cluster after the explanation of nonknowledge), in order to do justice to the conversation taking place in our cluster. Rather than artificially separate the virtue epistemology conversation into eight sections that match the following eight points, we will follow the conversation as it unfolds, pausing at times to reflect on how we see the presumptions at work in the conversation. Because the presumptions are

⁴ In chapters 3 and 4 of this document.

persistent qualities, we cannot simply point to each moment they arise and leave it at that. We have to follow the conversation to see their persistence.

Here are the presumptions of classical epistemology we can see at work in the virtue epistemology cluster:

1. That knowledge is communicable, especially in the form of clear propositions.
2. That knowledge can be continuously acquired, as though it were a good.
3. That the acquisition of knowledge has an aim—that it is a teleological pursuit.
4. That knowledge is valuable.
5. That knowledge is useful.
6. That what counts as knowledge can be objectively determined (and relatedly, that it is *measurable* as a system of debit and credit.)
7. That virtue epistemology is a distinct community which forms the authority on matters of knowledge (why knowledge is valuable, who gets to be a knower, etc.)
8. That the intellectual character of the knower plays an important role in how and why knowledge is acquired⁵.

These presumptions demonstrate what I will identify as the “closed” or “restricted” nature of this particular economy of knowledge. What this means is that as an expression of philosophy (more generally), epistemology (more specifically), and the virtue epistemology conversation (even more specifically), that they are limiting. The presumptions patrol the borders of knowledge in a way that is detrimental to the discovery

⁵ This presumption is unique to virtue epistemology, but I include it because virtue epistemology is a subset of epistemology.

of new knowledge; namely, they cannot see the “waste” that ought to play an integral part in the creation of knowledge. In this particular virtue epistemology conversation, we see this limiting and patrolling happen via a focus on teleology, acquisition, and utility/production. In order to demonstrate that this focus on utility/production, acquisition, and teleology is not unique to our virtue epistemology conversation, we have to move outward, and backward. We can begin by looking to Aristotle, as Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa all happen to employ some version of an Aristotelian notion of virtue in their respective versions of a proper virtue epistemology.

In Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle determines that knowledge must be demonstrable, first and foremost: “Knowledge, then, is the state of capacity to demonstrate [...] for it is when a man believes in a certain way and the principles are known to him that he has knowledge, since if they are not better known to him than the conclusion, he will have his knowledge only incidentally” (1139b 31-5). Aristotelian knowledge (not to be confused with *phronesis*, or practical wisdom⁶) thus requires accountability and reliability of the knower, and communicability of the knowledge itself. In the Aristotelian tradition of defining, separating, and categorizing, we can see the history of knowledge in philosophy as a kind of entomology of thought and language (from the Greek *entomos*, “that which is

⁶ Knowledge, and not *phronesis* specifically, is the focus in the virtue epistemology conversation, but Zagzebski and DePaul suggest that virtue epistemology in particular ought to make use of *phronesis* to define intellectual virtue much the same way as Aristotle scholars have made use of *phronesis* to define moral virtue: “Aristotle linked the moral virtues with the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, and for that reason Aristotle scholars and ethicists influenced by Aristotle have attended to *phronesis* in their treatments of virtue, but their interest is generally limited by their concern with the connection of *phronesis* to the distinctively moral virtues. They typically give no attention to such intellectual virtues as intellectual carefulness, thoroughness, humility, courage, trust, autonomy, or fairness” (*Intellectual Virtue* 2-3).

cut in pieces or segmented⁷): a dissecting, labeling, storing, displaying, and careful considering of both the *workings* of the intellect and our ways of *communicating* the workings of the intellect⁸. And as the descendant of Aristotle, philosophy has held tight to the Aristotelian notion that knowledge *requires demonstrability*. Demonstrability includes communicability; we see this reflected, for example, in the large body of epistemological literature devoted to testimony⁹. Demonstrability includes utility, as it is through demonstrability that utility can be determined. We will see this reflected in the virtue epistemology conversation, but we see it reflected more generally in the history of philosophy. Shannon Winnubst expresses concern that in epistemology and philosophy we see knowledge being “ordered sequentially as the progressive development of clearer and more useful endpoints,” such that utility becomes the primary interest. Philosophy’s accounts of knowledge have thus required an increased focus on utility, such that utility may be “our highest value”:

This teleological order narrows in scope in later modern thought, exemplified perhaps in the texts of John Locke, where utility becomes the singular criterion to determine the satisfaction of desire’s demands: we know who/what we are through the usefulness that our lives/actions achieve. Across both of these schemas of broad teleology and more narrow utility, knowledge is ordered sequentially as the

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2005 edition. Also noteworthy is that the modern definition of entomology is related to Aristotle’s definition of insects as segmented (*History of Animals* Book IV and V).

⁸ Or as Thomas Kuhn describes it: “Aristotelian physics cuts up and describes the phenomenal world” (“What are Scientific Revolutions?” *The Probabilistic Revolution, volume 1*, eds. L Krüger, L J Daston and M Heidelberger, 1987, p. 22.)

⁹ At issue in the literature is not *whether* knowledge is communicable but *how* knowledge is communicable and why: methods of communication, sources and recipients of communication, perception of communication, how the quality of communication can be determined, whether rationalist or empiricist accounts of knowledge are more satisfying, etc. (For example: Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 88, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1902; Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, chapters 2 and 3, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966; C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.) Likewise, the body of literature devoted to *justification and evidence*. (Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), meditation 2, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992; Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*, 1764; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 89e, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953; Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Alvin Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?” In: *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George S. Pappas. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.)

progressive development of clearer and more useful endpoints. The demarcation of each segment of thinking—of each concept—thereby becomes critical to the forward march of knowledge’s ordering of experience and the world. [...] If this construction of meaning through the delimitation of concepts is the necessary structure of knowledge, then we find ourselves embedded not only in a limited economy of the psychosocial world through desire-prohibition-identity, but also in a limited economy of epistemology: our very impulses to find meaning (through teleology broadly, and utility specifically) and the way that we undertake this process (through the delimitation of concepts) may already enact a normative order of knowledge that sufficiently conditions the emergence of utility as our highest value (“Bataille’s Queer Pleasures,” RBN 85-6).

Winnubst’s concern is pertinent. In the introduction to *The Web of Belief*, for example, Quine and Ullian dismiss any line of thought that does not clearly contribute to “acquiring and sustaining right beliefs,” because acquiring right beliefs is useful:

A current Continuing Education catalogue offers a course description, under the heading “Philosophy”, that typifies the dark view at its darkest: “Children of science that we are, we have based our cultural patterns on logic, on the cognitive, on the verifiable. But more and more there has crept into current research and study the haunting suggestion that there are other kinds of knowledge unfathomable by our cognition, other ways of knowing beyond the limits of our logic, which are deserving of our serious attention.” Now “knowledge unfathomable by our cognition” is simply incoherent, as attention to the words makes clear. Moreover, all that creeps is not gold. One wonders how many students enrolled. Not that soberly seeking to learn is all there should be; let there be fun and games as well. But let it also be clear where the boundaries are. A person might have a moderately amusing time playing with a Ouija board, but if he drifts into the belief that it is a *bona fide* avenue to discovery then something has gone amiss. We will not pursue the possible socio-benefits of anti-rational doctrines; in our eyes, much better escapes from reality are available, if that’s what’s wanted. In the chapters ahead we will be interested in the ways of acquiring and sustaining right beliefs, be they pleasant or painful (*The Web of Belief* 5).

This example is a bit comical, but notice the dismissal of *anything* that might be conceived of as “anti-rational”—a dismissal so complete it reduces any “anti-rational” thought to playing with a Ouija board. Quine and Ullian imply that “anti-rationality” ought to be dismissed precisely because it cannot assist with acquisition—“acquiring and sustaining

right beliefs” (ibid). In more contemporary mainstream epistemology, Timothy Williamson expresses the same necessity for utility and teleology: “Desire aspires to action; belief aspires to knowledge. The point of desire is action; the point of belief is knowledge” (*Knowledge and its Limits* 1). Or within mainstream feminist epistemology, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter stress the importance of granting epistemic authority to women and other historically excluded groups in order to expand and increase the production of knowledge. This is ultimately a concern with utility: “For feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to an emancipatory goal: the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge” (*Feminist Epistemologies* 13).

More generally, Michel Foucault identifies this utility-orienting movement as an “epistemologization” of all branches of thought and knowledge, beginning with John Locke¹⁰ and (the economist) Richard Cantillon¹¹, and eventually becoming “the analysis of the *episteme*” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 187-191). Foucault’s immediate concern is not the ways in which episteme requires utility, but the ways in which it requires formalization and legislation (and then, secondarily or tertiarily, utility):

This episteme may be suspected of being something like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape—a great body of legislation written once and for all by some anonymous hand. By *episteme*, we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; [...] The episteme is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign

¹⁰ Dates of publication roughly 1680-1700; but especially with the publication of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1690.

¹¹ With the publication of *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* in 1755.

unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities (ibid 191).

Thus the examples of philosophy's utility-focus in this document cannot possibly be a comprehensive list of all the utility-focused moments in philosophy. But they can illustrate the discursive regularities of justifying the pursuit of knowledge via utility, and they can illustrate that this utility-orientation is not limited to the virtue epistemology conversation. We cannot present here "the total set of relations" that unite the discursive practice of epistemology, or virtue epistemology, but we can examine the discursive practices in one particular conversation, understanding that the smaller conversation is a representative of the dominant, formalized discourse. What we find is a distinct emphasis on utility and teleology. I will claim that this focus on utility and teleology is part of what makes for a "closed" economy of knowledge. And we will see, especially, that virtue epistemology's focus on intellectual character is a doubling-down on the importance of utility: the concern with intellectual virtue is ultimately a concern with utility, but it is not enough that one's knowledge may be useful; the *way in which one's knowledge is sought, produced, communicated, and acquired* must also serve utility, and it must be done by making use of one's suite of intellectual virtues.

We can move further outward in scope to see Bataille's ultimate example of the closed system of knowledge: the Hegelian dialectic. The Hegelian dialectic is "closed" because it offers the promise of completion, finality, "salvation"—that is, the objectivity of absolute knowledge:

A comic little summary. Hegel, I imagine, touched upon the extreme limit. He was still young and believed himself to be going mad. I even imagine that he worked

out the system in order to escape (each type of conquest is, no doubt, the deed of a man fleeing a threat). To conclude, Hegel attains *satisfaction*, turns his back on the extreme limit. *Supplication is dead within him*. Whether or not one seeks salvation, in any case, one continues to live, one can't be sure, one must continue to supplicate. While yet alive, Hegel won salvation, killed supplication, *mutilated himself*. Of him, only the handle of a shovel remained, a modern man. But before mutilating himself, no doubt he touched upon the extreme limit, knew supplication: his memory brought him back to the perceived abyss, *in order to annul it!* The system is the annulment (IE 43; emphases Bataille's).

For Bataille, the problem with Hegel's system is that it is "unable to sustain the unknowability of the unknown and the unknowable" (Boldt-Irons, *On Bataille* 5). When Hegel encountered the unknowable—the "extreme limit"—he receded and found the solid ground of a system, of the known and the knowable. Bataille accuses Hegel of using "system" to annul the "extreme limit" of unknowability. Hegel's system is thus "closed"; there is no opening into the unknowable. But Bataille believed and found multiple ways to claim that a "closed" system need not be closed: "I think of my life—or better yet, its abortive condition, the open wound that my life is—as itself constituting a refutation of Hegel's closed system" (*Guilty* 124¹²). In relation to knowledge and nonknowledge specifically, Bataille claims that outside the closed system of Hegelian knowledge is nonknowledge: "Beyond all knowledge there is non-knowledge and he who would become absorbed in the thought that beyond his knowledge he knows nothing—even were he to have within him Hegel's inexorable lucidity—would no longer be Hegel, but a painful tooth in Hegel's mouth" (IE 169).

Bataille seeks to find a way of knowing and a way of expressing such knowing that is free from "method," "discourse," "project," "system," or any other stricture philosophy has placed on thinking, reasoning, wondering, and all other mental activity, and the ways we

¹² Boone translation, 1988.

report on such mental activity. For Bataille the problem with “method” or “project” or whatever else we might call it, as we will see, is that it is yoked to utility, teleology, production, acquisition, and thus to a system of *limiting* what we think and what we imagine it is *possible* to think. Jacques Derrida writes, “philosophy is work *itself* according to Bataille” (*Writing and Difference* 252; emphasis Derrida’s). Jeffrey Kosky echoes this:

Project makes every moment of life servile by valuing it solely in relation to its usefulness in producing a desired end. It finds an ally or mirror, according to Bataille, in the forms of knowledge and rationality promoted by Hegelian systematic philosophy. For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, according to Bataille, reasonable thought is systematic thought that sees each individual and each moment in relation to the whole that transcends it. Bataille was sensitive to the fact that the Hegelian dialectic of consciousness is driven by unhappy consciousness and that it represents the historical progress of the slave who survives the struggle with the master. The Hegelian spirit, which for Bataille expressed the spirit of modernity, belongs therefore to a sad, servile, and serious culture, a culture that is always on the job, one that has no time for errant moments of laughter, tears, drunkenness, or ecstasy (“Georges Bataille’s Religion without Religion” 80).

According to Bataille, utility is the “spirit of modernity.” That is, the obsession with demonstrating one’s value in reference to one’s work (“always on the job”), in reference to one’s seriousness and work ethic (“no time for errant moments”), and in reference to one’s productivity (a representation of the “historical progress of the slave who survives the struggle with the master”—what we might call “upward mobility”). The question for this project—this document—then, is how to explain somewhat systematically a *way of knowing* that is free from “system” and the other requirements of philosophy-as-work.

1.1: The Question

The question of *why knowledge is distinctly valuable*—the 4th presumption—guides the conversation in our virtue epistemology cluster. Here we look closely at the recent works

of Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa, as they work out why knowledge is valuable, and why it is more valuable than true belief. But each of these interlocutors is drawing from and responding to their own and each others' seminal works in virtue epistemology. So we are seeing the more recent movements in the conversation—always with reference to earlier movements—and thus, we can see that the presumptions still made in the conversation have been made from the beginning.

Linda Zagzebski frames the question by asking whether reliabilism can satisfactorily explain the nature and value of knowledge. Reliabilism is the set of views defining knowledge in terms of true belief that arises out of *reliable belief-forming processes*, and it is “the earliest form of virtue epistemology¹³” (1996, 2000, 2003). Zagzebski’s claim is that reliabilism does not offer a satisfactory account of knowledge or its value¹⁴.

“According to standard reliabilist models, knowledge is true belief that is the output of reliable belief-forming processes or faculties. But the reliability of the source of a belief cannot explain the difference in value between knowledge and true belief” (“The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good” 13, 2003¹⁵). This is the focus of Zagzebski’s claims that reliabilism fails—that it cannot explain the difference in value between true belief and knowledge. “*Truth plus a reliable source of truth cannot explain the value of knowledge*”

¹³ Linda Zagzebski and Michael DePaul, Introduction to *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford 2003, p. 1.

¹⁴ In *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Cambridge 1996; “From Reliabilism to Virtue Epistemology” in *Knowledge, Belief, and Character*, ed. Guy Axtel, Rowman and Littlefield 2000; and “The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good,” *Metaphilosophy* vol. 34, pp. 12-28, 2003.

¹⁵ Zagzebski makes similar claims in earlier publications listed above (1996, 2000), and in a subsequent publication: *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford 2003. So Zagzebski is responding to her own, earlier work here, as well as the work of the others in this conversation (Sosa, Greco).

(ibid 14; emphasis Zagzebski's). Zagzebski and the others in our conversation call this the "value problem."

Reliabilist accounts of knowledge hang on the reliability of the source, requiring that the believer (the source of true belief) somehow will have demonstrated or communicated her reliability. This is problematic for Zagzebski: "The liquid in this cup is not improved by the fact that it comes from a reliable espresso maker. If the espresso tastes good, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable machine [...] If the belief is true, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable belief-producing source" (ibid 13). Zagzebski is not claiming that knowers-as-causes can *never* bestow the quality of value on their effects, but that reliabilism's general attribution of value to an effect if its valued cause(s) is a problem. "My point is just that the value of a cause does not transfer to its effect automatically" (ibid 14). A "machine-product model" of belief—in which the reliability of a process or a belief-producing source is all we need to produce knowledge—cannot explain what makes knowledge more valuable than true belief. This is Zagzebski's claim in 2003, and it is a partial response to Greco and Sosa on the question of reliabilism—both of whom altered and clarified their versions of reliabilism in response to Zagzebski's earlier (identical) claims (Zagzebski 1996 and 2000).

Having determined that reliabilism cannot offer a satisfactory account of knowledge, Zagzebski turns to the *value* of knowledge in order to find a suitable account of knowledge. According to Zagzebski, the standard approach to determining the value of knowledge (highlighted for her by reliabilism) asks the wrong questions. "The issue should

be not [sic] what is added to true belief to make it valuable enough to be knowledge but what is added to virtuous believing to make it knowledge¹⁶” (ibid 25). Thus, for Zagzebski, the value of knowledge can only be explained in terms of *the kind of believing* an agent does, in the context of the agent’s overall intellectual character and *life*. The kind of believing Zagzebski has in mind is “virtuous believing” (ibid 18). “Virtuous believing” is believing motivated by love of truth. “If believing is like acting, it can be virtuous or vicious” (ibid 17) and “a belief can acquire value from its motive” (ibid 18), so “virtuous believing,” *motivated by love of truth* is valuable believing, and gives rise to an account of the value of knowledge that must be connected to the value of living a good life. Ultimately, Zagzebski’s claim is that the value of knowledge ought not to be conceived of as something separate from moral values.

The larger claim Zagzebski is making, then, is that ethics and epistemology in general ought not to be separated. Reliabilism is particularly guilty of employing such a separation (according to Zagzebski). A reliabilist account of knowledge then is undesirable for two related reasons: (1) It cannot explain the value of knowledge with its “machine-product” model of belief, and (2) It employs a problematic separation between epistemic questions (i.e., the value of knowledge) and ethical questions (i.e., the “wider values of a good life”):

I also think we should conclude that if knowledge is a state worthy of the sustained attention it has received throughout the history of philosophy, it is because its value goes well beyond the epistemic value of truth and what conduces to true belief. Knowledge is important because it is intimately connected to moral value and the wider values of a good life (ibid 26).

¹⁶ Zagzebski makes this claim again in “Intellectual Motivation and the Good of Truth” (*Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Oxford 2003): “a belief that aims at the truth is better than one that merely leads to the truth, and one that is motivated by a valuing of truth is better still” (ibid 9).

Zagzebski's notions of virtue and "a good life" are influenced by Aristotle, and are what some call "neo-Aristotelian"¹⁷ on account of the move to unite ethics and epistemology (by uniting moral and intellectual virtues). Zagzebski herself writes, "Aristotle linked the moral virtues with the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom" (*Intellectual Virtue* 2, with DePaul). And: "Presumably, Aristotle thought that moral and intellectual virtues are constituents of eudaimonia" (ibid 141). Zagzebski is following Aristotle on this matter.

1.2: Agent Reliabilism

John Greco sought to defend reliabilism by way of clarification and refinement (1999, 2003, 2007). Greco's response to the value problem is to develop what he calls "agent reliabilism" ("Agent Reliabilism, *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), pp. 273-96). Greco claims that agent reliabilism solves an important problem for "simple" reliabilism (the *general* reliabilism to which Zagzebski objects): that it is not enough "that one's beliefs are in fact based on reliable grounds. Rather, one must be, in some relevant sense, aware that this is so" (ibid 273). Agent reliabilism has built into it the notion that a knower must have some kind of sensitivity to the reliability of her evidence. It is not enough that beliefs are (objectively) reliably formed; they must be formed in light of an agent's (subjective) sensitivity to the reliability of the evidence at hand (ibid 284-5). Greco clearly rejects the "machine-product" model with which Zagzebski took issue.

¹⁷ Greco, "Agent Reliabilism" 291.

A related point made by Greco is that reliabilism must restrict the kinds of reliable processes that are able to ground knowledge. This way, “strange or fleeting” processes (those in which reliable beliefs are formed accidentally, coincidentally, or strangely) won’t pose a threat to reliabilism. “The problem of strange and fleeting processes shows that simple reliabilism is too weak. Reliabilism must somehow restrict the kind of reliable process that is able to ground knowledge, so as to rule out processes that are strange and fleeting” (ibid 286). The way to do this—the way to restrict the processes that can ground knowledge—is to consider *only* “those processes that have their bases in the stable and successful dispositions of the believer¹⁸”; that is, the agent (ibid 287). Greco calls on Sosa to support this claim, making use of the conception of virtue epistemology offered by Sosa¹⁹: “the stable and successful dispositions of a person are appropriately understood as virtues” (ibid). Greco continues,

[T]he cognitive faculties and habits of a believer are neither strange nor fleeting. They are not strange because they make up a person’s intellectual character—they are part of what make her the person that she is. They are not fleeting because faculties and habits by definition are *stable dispositions*—they are not the kind of thing a person can adopt on a whim or engage in an irregular fashion (ibid; emphasis Greco’s).

On this view, justified belief and knowledge are grounded in “successful” stability and reliability, properly understood as (intellectual) virtues.

Sosa and Greco are working with a particular definition of virtue:

For example, it may be one’s faculty of sight operating in good light that generates one’s belief in the whiteness and roundness of a facing snowball. Is possession of such a faculty a ‘virtue’? Not in the narrow Aristotelian sense, of course, since it is

¹⁸ This move is also Greco’s response to Zagzebski’s accusations that reliabilism employs a separation between epistemology and ethics. Greco’s claim is that agent reliabilism in fact *adopts* a feature of virtue theory in ethics to solve the problems of “simple” reliabilism.

¹⁹ In *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology*, Cambridge 1991.

no disposition to make such deliberate choices. But there is a broader sense of ‘virtue,’ still Greek, in which anything with a function—natural or artificial—does have virtues. The eyes does, after all, have its virtues, and so does a knife. And if we include grasping the truth about one’s environment among the proper ends of a human being, then the faculty of sight would seem in a broad sense a virtue in human beings; and if grasping the truth is an intellectual matter than that virtue is also in a straightforward sense an intellectual virtue (Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective* 271; quoted by Greco in “Agent Reliabilism” 287).

Capacity for “grasping the truth” is understood as a virtue in the same sense that the faculty of sight is a virtue in human beings. Greco argues that applying such an understanding of virtue to reliabilism offers a compelling agent reliabilism, in which “knowledge and justified belief are grounded in stable and reliable cognitive character” (ibid 287). “Stable and reliable cognitive character” excludes as knowledge any true belief that arises by accident, by luck, or by a “strange and fleeting” process (ibid 286-9). An implied part of this “stable and reliable cognitive character” is the capacity to reliably *communicate* the beliefs acquired because of, or due to, one’s intellectual virtues. The capacity for reliable communication is an implied virtue.

Greco does not *directly* address the value of knowledge in “Agent Reliabilism,” nor does he take issue with Zagzebski’s claim that the value of knowledge can only be determined alongside the value of a good life. But we can hypothesize that an agent reliabilist account of the value of knowledge would be built on the value of the “stable and reliable cognitive character” of an agent (ibid). And we can see that it would fit Zagzebski’s description of an unsatisfying account of the value of knowledge (i.e., that it cannot respond to the value problem): it would likely be structured according to the “truth plus a reliable source of truth” formula.

Later, however, Greco addresses the issue of value directly, claiming that we *can* explain the value of knowledge by way of a “truth plus reliable (and thus virtuous!) source of truth” formula. This marks the first clear mention of virtue theory in our conversation other than Sosa’s brief definition of virtue on the previous page²⁰:

In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between a) morally virtuous action and b) action that is merely as if morally virtuous. One important difference, says Aristotle, is that morally virtuous actions ‘proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.’ (II.4) Moreover, it is morally virtuous action, as opposed to action that is as if virtuous, that is both intrinsically valuable and constitutive of the good life: ‘human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence.’ (I.7) The same point holds for intellectually virtuous action, where the distinction between ‘virtuous action’ and ‘action as if virtuous’ translates to a distinction between knowledge and mere true belief. Following Aristotle, therefore, we get an answer to the value problem: As is the case regarding moral goods, getting the truth as a result of one’s virtues is more valuable than getting it on the cheap (“Knowledge as Credit for True Belief” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology* ed. DePaul and Zagzebski (2007), p. 133).

The argument is roughly that knowledge is *more valuable* if acquired virtuously (or as a result of one’s virtues) than not. And if we agree with Aristotle, knowledge acquired through virtuous cognitive character traits (stability, reliability, firmness, etc.) is also *intrinsically valuable*. Such knowledge acquired through virtuous cognitive character traits is constitutive of the good life. For Greco, this argument satisfies the value problem with the claim that reliability or something like it *is* a virtue. It is an argument in favor of an

²⁰ Duncan Pritchard is critical of virtue epistemology for this lack of direct engagement with classical virtue theory. “When the discussion of epistemic value was in its infancy, it did not matter quite so much that epistemologists were not as *au fait* with the nuanced material in value theory as they could be, since the points being made were of their nature quite general. Now that the argument has moved on to a more sophisticated level, however, it is vital that epistemologists be able to draw on the expertise of those who are more familiar with value theory” (“Recent Work on Epistemic Value,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44.2, 2007, p. 103). Zagzebski (along with DePaul) admits this in the introduction to *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*: “Advanced discussions by ethicists on virtue ethics and its place in the pantheon of ethical theories (or anti-theories) is important for virtue epistemologists who generally have not gone very far in investigating the place of the different forms of virtue epistemology in the taxonomy of normative epistemological theories” (p. 4). For this document, this presents us with a challenge. Namely, this makes it difficult to be sharply, interestingly critical of the notions of intellectual virtue on offer.

agent reliabilist version of virtue epistemology, with the stipulation that the agent must acquire truth “as a result of [her] virtues” (ibid).

1.3: Elements of Classical Epistemology

For our purposes, what have we seen Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa do, or claim, that deserves more attention? We have seen a reliance on all six presumptions, but especially on the first presumption (that knowledge is communicable in the form of clear propositions); the second presumption (that knowledge can be acquired); the third presumption (that knowledge-acquisition is a teleological pursuit); the fourth presumption (that knowledge is valuable, despite asking why); and the fifth presumption (that what counts as knowledge can be objectively determined). Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa are not making the very same arguments, and are clearly at odds with each other at times, but all their argumentation is built upon a presumption that knowledge is communicable. Reliabilism in particular *requires* that knowledge be communicated clearly and reliably.

If Zagzebski, Greco, and Sosa were *not* working on the assumption that knowledge is communicable, it is difficult to imagine how their arguments or their larger projects would get off the ground. In other words, we can see the presumptions at work in the arguments if we ask what the arguments might look like were the presumptions *not* made. In the case of Zagzebski, we would have to ask how Zagzebski could *begin* to explain the value of knowledge in connection with the value of a good life (as she recommends) if she were

also claiming that knowledge is *not* fully or reliably communicable, or transferable via communication. In the case of Greco and Sosa, an argument that explains the value of knowledge in terms of reliable communication of knowledge leaves no room for an additional conception of knowledge as partially or arbitrarily (or even “strangely”) communicable. That knowledge is valuable, and can be objectively determined, is a deep precursor to the whole conversation. Zagzebski initiates this when she claims that virtue epistemology ought to be primarily concerned with carefully determining *why* knowledge is valuable, because it *is* valuable: “I say that knowledge has to be defined as something we value. We are not interested in a phenomenon with little or no value” (“The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good” 26). This is reinforced by others in virtue epistemology, by the claim that at the very least, knowledge is always “credit-worthy”:

[O]ne of the key parts of the virtue-theoretic story of why knowledge is valuable is that knowledge is of credit to the agent. The guiding thought here is that knowledge is an achievement that is creditable to the agent, in the sense that the agent, through her cognitive skills (i.e., her epistemic virtues, where these are construed broadly so that they could also include her cognitive faculties), gained a true belief *because* of her virtue. If knowledge is a distinctive achievement in this way—something that is worthy of credit—then this could, at least in part, account for the special value of knowledge” (Duncan Pritchard, “Recent Work on Epistemic Value,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2007, p. 98).

What is worth noting about the conversation’s reliance on this presumption is that such reliance excludes any alternative ways of knowing or *demonstrating* knowing. If we take Greco to be correct, there is no intrinsically valuable truth to be found as a result of any “strange and fleeting,” non-virtuous process. Additionally, any truth that cannot be *reliably* communicated, by an agent with “stable and reliable cognitive character,” aware of her reliability, cannot qualify as truth. If we take Zagzebski to be correct, we cannot find the

value of knowledge unless we find it *among* the values of “a good life,” and this requires our search for knowledge to have a simple, distinct (virtuous) motivation: the *love of truth*.

My own counter-claims, to be fleshed out in the coming chapters, are (1) that these presumptions are too strict, or too limiting, and that they thereby miss something important (viz., expenditure) about the value and nature of knowing that we can see with the help of nonknowledge; and (2) that the accuracy, and hence, the value of the presumptions—both taken for granted in the virtue epistemology conversation and in philosophy in general—are questionable when we consider a compelling account of a *different kind of knowing* exemplified by nonknowledge understood as a movement of expenditure. My *general* hypothesis is that an alternate way of knowing and communicating knowing—exemplified by nonknowledge—will require us to re-assess the completeness, accuracy, and value of the presumptions employed in the virtue epistemology conversation.

1.4: Performance Reliabilism

Ernest Sosa’s response to the value problem is a to develop a form of reliabilism that focuses on the faculties and the performance of an agent²¹ (1991, 2001, 2003). Reliabilism of this sort emphasizes the agent, but Sosa’s work stresses the *performance* of the agent in particular (“The Place of Truth in Epistemology, in *Intellectual Virtue* pp.155-80). “On this conception, knowledge is not just hitting the mark but hitting the mark somehow through means proper and skillful enough” (ibid 166).

²¹ Zagzebski calls Sosa’s early position “faculty reliabilism” (“early” meaning roughly 1991-2001) in footnote 3 of “The Search for the Source of the Epistemic Good,” p. 13.

Sosa's general claim is that virtue epistemology can only solve the value problem by appealing to the extrinsic, praxical value of "hitting the mark of truth through intellectual skill"—and this "hitting the mark" is to be understood as a performance of one's *intellectual skill and virtues*²² (ibid). The value problem cannot be explained with reference to the intrinsic (i.e., cognitive) performance alone; the extrinsic, praxical value of a "good performance" is necessary to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.

The 'chief' intellectual goods involve attributable truth-attainment, where one does hit the mark of truth through the quality of one's performance. Nevertheless, one cares about cognitive systems in good working order not for their own sake, but *for the truth-attaining performances that they enable* (ibid 181; emphasis mine).

Sosa's position works from at least two of our classical epistemology presumptions: 2 and 3—the presumptions that knowledge can be continuously acquired, and that there is a goal or end-point to the acquisition process, respectively. The acquisitive and teleological aspects of this portion of the conversation are clear. The quality or "good-ness" of a performance is determined by its practical value, which is in turn determined by its truth-attaining properties. And it is only *good* performances that can explain the value of knowledge. There is thus little or no value to be found in the performances that are poor; that is, the performances that are not productive of truth which can be attained, *regardless*

²² "Consider now a case where a true belief, a *true* believing is attributable to you as your doing. We may now say that, besides the epistemic good in that true belief, there is further the praxical good in your action of bringing it about. And this arguably involves your exercise of excellences constitutive of your cognitive character. That is, it seems to me, a way in which truth can have a distinctively important and fundamental place in explaining epistemic normativity, compatibly with knowledge having epistemic worth over and above the worth of mere true belief. We can see the good proper to an epistemic action creditable to the agent, who brings about that good for himself, and is more than just the recipient of blind epistemic luck" (ibid 21).

of whether they may be evidence of intellectual skill and virtue. This is because the intrinsic value of “hitting the mark” through intellectual skill and virtue is not enough.

The finer points of Sosa’s argument offer further explanation of how we ought to understand cognitive character as a virtue. Sosa is once again working with an Aristotelian understanding of virtue, taken from Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “[Human] good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (ibid Book I, Section 7); “[Of] the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual)” (ibid Book VI, Section 2); “With those who identify happiness [faring happily or well] with virtue or some one virtue our account is in harmony; for to virtue belongs virtuous activity. [...] And as in the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but those who compete” (ibid, Book I, Section 8; additions Sosa’s²³).

Sosa’s reading of these passages stresses the visible *activity* of intellectual performance. Good, truth-producing performances that can be credited to an agent are essential elements of “faring happily or well”; that is, human good which “turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue” (Aristotle ibid, Sosa ibid 177):

According to the Aristotelian view, then, passive reception of truth is not enough to count as human good, or at least not as the chief human good. Our preference is not just the presence of truth, then, however it may have arrived there. We prefer truth whose presence is the work of our intellect, truth that derives from our intellectual performance. We do not want just truth that is given to us by happenstance, or by some alien agency, where we are given a belief that hits the mark of truth *not*

²³ All passages taken from *Nicomachean Ethics* and cited by Sosa on the first page of “The Place of Truth in Epistemology.” Translation by Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985.

through our own performance, but in a way that represents no accomplishment creditable to us (ibid 177-8).

Like Zagzebski, Sosa offers us a neo-Aristotelian account of truth. Sosa's account is also a "closed" or "restricted" economy of knowledge. Luck, happenstance, and "some alien agency" are ruled out; they are not part of a (virtuous) intellectual performance, and "we prefer" "truth that derives from our intellectual performance" (ibid). A closed economy of knowledge sees waste (such as luck or an "alien agency") as nonessential and ignorable, because it does not contribute to the goal—the utility-oriented goal—of delivering performances that are creditable to intellectual agents. This is in line with the presumptions of classical epistemology, particularly that what counts as knowledge can be objectively determined, and that knowledge is useful (the fourth and fifth presumptions).

Bataille claims, on the other hand, that "no one can correctly answer the requirement given in the forms of objective knowledge except by positing a nonknowledge" (*Theory of Religion* 98). We turn to nonknowledge now.

Chapter 2: Nonknowledge

Introduction

Our explanation of nonknowledge takes place in four major sections, each of which is an “element” of nonknowledge. They are: unstable communicability (element 1), experientiality (element 2), threshold position (element 3), and expenditure (element 4). Each of these four elements (with the exception of element 3) contains a number of “features” that flesh out the element.

The features of element 1 (unstable communicability) collectively point to the larger claims that there is something in the experience of nonknowledge that does not comfortably or clearly reduce to language, that language can fail in significant ways, and that experiences of nonknowledge cannot be propositionalized. The features of element 2 (experientiality) highlight its subjectivity and affectivity, its transgressive nature, and its seemingly paradoxical property of leading both somewhere *and* nowhere. That nonknowledge has no authority other than itself is also emphasized in the features of element 2. The third element (the threshold position) differs from the others because it does not have a number of features, and it is not described in Bataille’s texts. The “element” is in fact my claim about the nature of nonknowledge and its position in relation to the kind of knowledge sought by the virtue epistemology conversation, made explicit through Bataille. Element 4 is expenditure. The features of element 4 stress the unmeasurability, partial uselessness, and destructive facets of nonknowledge. They also stress the non-acquisitive nature of nonknowledge—that as expenditure, it is not clearly

creditable, and thus cannot be acquired and stored up. Nonknowledge is thus a kind of thought-play.

Today, like other times, I am going to attempt to communicate my experience of nonknowledge to you. Of course, like the other times, I will fail. But first I would like to show you the extent of my failure. I can say precisely that if I had succeeded, the tangible contact between you and me would have the nature not of work but of play. I would have known how to make you perceive what is for me a decisive fact; the only object of my thought is play, and in play my thought, the work of my thought, is annihilated (USN 120).

Drawing this out will require explaining all four elements of nonknowledge.

We can already see that the features of the four elements of nonknowledge are significantly different from the presumptions made in the virtue epistemology conversation. Taking these differences seriously and making them explicit is the chief aim of this document. By the end of this document, however, I will argue that we can see these elements and features of nonknowledge at play *in the virtue epistemology conversation*, and that nonknowledge can in fact be seen as a feature of knowledge-creation of the kind we see in the virtue epistemology discussion, as an expression of classical epistemology, and of philosophy.

I will argue additionally (in chapter 3) that nonknowledge is best understood as “epistemic expenditure,” and as an open, or general, economy. Building on this, I will return to the virtue epistemology conversation in order to claim that what at first looks like a closed, or restricted economy (viz., the virtue epistemology conversation) is in fact an open, or general economy, with nonknowledge (understood as epistemic expenditure) already occurring within it. This claim requires some additional claims. I will identify them here before discussing them fully in the coming chapters. They are: (1) that the virtue epistemology presumptions are an adaptation to the excess, the waste, that is

nonknowledge; (2) that the elements of nonknowledge occur in virtue epistemology, *without being recognized* or identified; and thus (3) that what the classical presumptions suggest is the entire story—or a complete conversation—is in fact an incomplete story, or conversation.

This chapter tracks the instances of Bataille’s use of “nonknowledge” (*non-savoir*), both the *phenomenon* and the *concept*. I draw primarily from *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, a collection of Bataille’s nonknowledge-related writings compiled by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall. Much of the writing collected in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* is taken from Bataille’s notebooks over roughly twenty years, from 1942 to 1961. The majority of it remained unpublished until the (posthumous) publication of Bataille’s *Oeuvres Complètes*, twelve volumes made available by Les Éditions Gallimard (Paris) between 1970 and 1988. My work draws from the work of Kendall and Kendall, but it does not reproduce it. Kendall and Kendall have primarily done the scholarly work of collecting most of Bataille’s remarks on nonknowledge, but not the work of offering an explanation of nonknowledge to readers of Bataille. Offering such an explanation and description is my first task here.

The difficulty of placing Bataille in a theoretical framework cannot be ignored, in this work in particular. This difficulty—and the position of Bataille as a philosopher claiming to provide an “exit” from philosophy—mirrors the difficulty of positioning nonknowledge in relation to knowledge, and to the theoretical discourse of knowledge. Bataille uses theory to cast doubt on theory; even to destroy theory insofar as it is the “work” of

thought²⁴. In *Inner Experience*, Bataille claims that experience is not logically demonstrable. This claim offers a glimpse of the particular difficulty of placing Bataille's work into a theoretical framework, and, indeed, of trying to include Bataille in any larger theoretical framework of philosophy in the twentieth century: "These statements have an obscure theoretical appearance, and I see no remedy for this other than to say: 'One must grasp the meaning from the inside.' They are not logically demonstrable. One must *live* experience" (IE 8).

Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, editors of *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, write that Bataille's stance on experience—particularly his claim that it must be "lived" in order to be understood—is "philosophically untenable" (1). Yet, they write, "it is this aspect of Bataille's work that is most disturbing, exciting, paradoxical, and difficult, attracting and repelling readers in equal measure, often simultaneously" (2). Botting and Wilson identify Bataille as Foucault's exemplar *par excellence* of the philosopher who provides "an exit from philosophy" (ibid). Bataille's philosophical work, Botting and Wilson write, "burns and blisters discourse, consuming meaning," and yet, it still forms a particular discourse; it is not merely unintelligible jibberish or "strange and fleeting experience," it is not absent of meaning (ibid 2). This is crucial: it is not absent of meaning.

In terms of this project, Bataille's stance has significant repercussions. Firstly, what Bataille says of criticism—namely, that it can't get a foothold regarding his work and that

²⁴ Bataille sometimes suggests that this destruction of thought and theory is a necessary self-destruction on the part of the thought itself (again, insofar as "thought" is conceived of as a kind of work): "thought [...] has the power—one could also correctly say that it has the necessity—to self-destruct" ("Notebook for Pure Happiness," USN 242). Nevertheless, Bataille aims to actively destruct.

his work in some ways remains immune to criticism—applies also to commentary and analysis. Since analysis, commentary, and criticism always lead *somewhere*, or, more importantly, are teleological and utility-oriented pursuits, they will never be “caught in the movement” of inner experience (*On Nietzsche* 170-3). Thus, they will never be able to adequately explain, represent, or describe “inner experience”²⁵. Maybe knowing is affirmation—after the fact, after recovery from inner experience—of “inner experience.” Secondly, and strangely, if inner experience can only “be grasped by those experiencing it for themselves,” commentary, analysis, or criticism, which are from afar, cannot lead anywhere, *just as the experience cannot lead anywhere*. Analysis or criticism cannot take the place of experience, and as such, they serve as a kind of dead description. They describe something that must be *experienced* in order to be “grasped.” In this sense, criticism, analysis, and commentary are not unlike inner experience: they too “don’t lead anywhere” (*On Nietzsche* 173).

Thirdly, Bataille’s claim that experience can only be grasped “by those experiencing it for themselves” poses a challenge: if Bataille is right, my scholarly descriptions of inner experience will not help the reader understand inner experience. Nor, as such, will they help the reader understand nonknowledge. To meet this challenge, I will again call on Bataille’s work itself (see the footnote in the above paragraph). Kendall and Kendall write in the introduction to *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* that Bataille’s obsession with escaping project-oriented thinking and writing *through project* is a common theme.

²⁵ This problem, however, is not one from which Bataille’s work is immune. It is through theory that Bataille seeks to criticize and undermine theory. It is through analysis that Bataille hopes to escape analysis. The problem one faces when writing about Bataille’s work is the same problem Bataille faced when he sat down to write about the experience of nonknowledge.

“He returns to this same distinction again and again, always admitting the inevitability of project-oriented thought, of system building, yet always valorizing another necessity.

‘Project is the prison from which I wish to escape (project, discursive experience): I formed the project to escape from the project!’ ([IE] 59)” (xxiv-xxv). Kendall and Kendall describe *Inner Experience* as a “book written against itself”:

The book, written against itself, sets out to describe an experience, an experience that eludes all attempts at its designation. Like the tragic hero, the project is doomed from the beginning. This demonstration of the failure of all designation is the central movement and paradox of Bataille’s oeuvre (ibid xxv).

Anyone who writes about and with Bataille, then, is faced with the same problem of creating a project in order to escape “project.” The hope, though, is that we are nevertheless doing philosophy that is also a partial escape from philosophy. We are undertaking a project “in” philosophy and epistemology in particular—a project that is philosophical—while also escaping, partially, epistemology.

Two things to state clearly: Firstly, nonknowledge is both a *phenomenon* (i.e., a feature of experienced reality) and a *concept* (i.e., an idea). It is described by Bataille as a phenomenon, as something that must be *experienced*—that is necessarily experiential.

However, as Bataille describes the phenomenon he also conceptualizes it.

Conceptualization occurs during recovery or recuperation from nonknowledge; things can retrospectively be said about it—the experience, the phenomenon—and this recuperation begins to conceptualize the phenomenon. So it is both a phenomenon and a concept. It is a phenomenon as it is happening, but as soon as the move is made to describe it, to communicate it to others, it starts to stand as a concept. I make an effort throughout to

clearly state when I am working with nonknowledge the concept and when I am working with nonknowledge the phenomenon or experience. There are instances when such a distinction or separation is not possible, and this fact is acknowledged in such instances. Secondly, I do not address every feature of nonknowledge in this chapter. I address the features relevant to our examination of virtue epistemology as an expression of the presumptions at work in classical epistemology.

The primary goal of this chapter is to explain the elements and features of nonknowledge such that they are visible as philosophically compelling ideas, so that the reader may see that Bataille is onto something philosophically interesting. My position is that what we discover *is* interesting enough to question the accuracy of the premise that the virtue epistemology operates with about knowledge and its value.

A secondary goal is to introduce the reader to the terrain of Bataille's thought in a different context from the majority of Bataille scholarship, which has taken on epistemic concerns that conceive of knowledge and its value differently than mainstream Anglo-American epistemology²⁶. The exegetical nature of this chapter is then intended to serve the larger claim that nonknowledge is a feature of all knowledge-making. In order to make that argument, we have to get a handle on nonknowledge.

²⁶ In contemporary collections of Bataille scholarship, while much of the focus is often on eroticism and sexuality, communication, and expenditure, questions of knowledge, reasoning, and thought are addressed as well. They are addressed more broadly, however, than they are in our sampling of virtue epistemology. (E.g., *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson); *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* (eds. Andrew Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree); *On Bataille* (ed. Leslie Boldt-Irons); *Reading Bataille Now* (ed. Shannon Winnubst))

Element 1: Unstable Communicability

The topic of communication is one of Bataille's life-long concerns, present in all his written work. He devotes considerable attention to it in *Inner Experience* (originally published as *L'Expérience Intérieure* in 1954), *Erotism (L'Érotisme)*, 1957), *Theory of Religion (Théorie de la Religion)*, 1973) and in his notes collected in *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (taken from selections of Bataille's *Oeuvres Complètes*, published 1973-88).

Bataille's position on communication (especially in relation to nonknowledge) changes, but only cosmetically. Throughout his writing and thinking Bataille is sometimes precise, sometimes unclear, doubts himself, is sure of himself, moves back and forth, and back and forth. At the core of all Bataille says about communication and nonknowledge, four claims remains consistent: (1) Communication can never be "perfect"—it does not achieve perfect fidelity during transfer from speaker to listener—and, similarly, (2) Bataille claims that something is always *wasted* in communication—that human communication is rich with waste. (3) Communication is simultaneously possible and impossible²⁷. Although nonknowledge highlights this, Bataille means to claim that nonknowledge is not a special case when it comes to communication. The unique trouble with communication as it relates to nonknowledge throws light on what *all* communication involves. Lastly, (4), the larger claim is that there is something *beyond* language. This includes the notion that language is too limited to do justice to certain experiences, and the more specific claim that not all experiences can be communicated via propositions.

²⁷ Joseph Libertson puts it thusly: "How may communication's anti-communication communicate (itself)?" ("Bataille and Communication: Savoir, Non-Savoir, Glissement, Rire" in *On Bataille*, p. 213).

“Socratic College,” 1942

In the spring of 1942, in a lecture titled “Socratic College,” Bataille offers some early remarks on communication, highlighting two of the concepts just mentioned: *impossibility* and *waste*:

It is a banality to claim that there is a fundamental difficulty in human communication. And it is not hard to recognize in advance that this difficulty is partially irreducible. To communicate means to try to establish a unity, to make one of many; this is what the word *communion* means. In one way or another, something is always missing from the communion sought by humans (USN 5).

First and foremost, communication seeks an *impossible* union. There is “something missing” in all human communication because we are (at least partially) irreducible—singular. As two, we cannot be fully or perfectly unified. Each of us is a distinct, discrete being. This is why there is *always* “something adulterated and insufficient” (ibid) in contact between humans. Our attempts at communication are always insufficient. Our attempts and their insufficiency are evidence of our ontological irreducibility and involve our constant production of waste. Indeed, “something adulterated and insufficient” is evidence of waste, of something *lost* and *unused* in communication. This proves that waste and impossibility are inextricably linked: “All communication among men is rich with garbage. It is natural to want to avoid filth, garbage, ordinary trash. But a little simplicity reveals that a foul smell marks the presence of life” (USN 5). “Garbage” or “trash” here refers to *waste* in communication—the waste that, according to Bataille, necessarily occurs because we cannot be unified. If the foul smell of trash and filth reveals the “presence of life,” the failure or insufficiency—the “trash”—of communication reveals the presence of

some communication. “Garbage” is *necessary*. *Waste* is inevitable in human communication²⁸.

Focusing on waste, Bataille writes: “In communication, something fragile, I don’t know what, dies if one pushes it: communication demands that one slip” (USN 7). To “slip” in communication means to *allow or even cultivate* waste, in the form of confusion, inconsistency, or that which remains unsaid. “Slipping” is a kind of *not* requiring that definitions of each term be hammered out. Most importantly, “slipping” in communication means allowing the “something fragile” to live, wasteful though that may be. As I read it, the “something fragile” occurs in between two extremes (both undesirable for Bataille): insisting that everything be clearly laid out (*explained*), comporting oneself in communication like a dumptruck or an extractor, and on the other hand, allowing too much to remain unsaid, reveling too much in communicational mystery, never holding another or oneself acutely responsible for being responsive and attentive. Bataille’s “slippage” means protecting the in-between ground of the something—but not everything—necessarily remaining unsaid. This requires letting another “something” go to waste, or remain unused. Bataille is claiming that such waste is a necessary part of the communication he wishes to endorse and protect.

²⁸ This is part of a larger ontological claim about the role of waste in a general economy that we will return to throughout, but particularly in chapter 3, where I claim that nonknowledge ought to be understood as an instance of expenditure that operates as a general economy.

Feature 1.1 (of Unstable Communicability): Failure

“Socratic College” also contains multiple claims that some kind of failure is *necessarily part of communication*. In this sense, what is “fragile” is not just a potential connection because full or “perfect” connection is simply not possible: what is “fragile” in this sense is the *content of communication*. Without clearly marking the fact that he is doing so, Bataille is slipping from making claims about modes of communication into making claims about the content of communication. Bataille is claiming here that something will always go unsaid or be unclear in communication. Similarly, that *indeterminacy* is a permanent feature of attempts at conceptualization—that is, the move from our inner workings to our reports on those inner workings. This particular kind of failure is necessary and unavoidable, and Bataille advocates allowing and—stronger yet—*protecting* it²⁹: “[...] it is not too much to ask anyone who persists in wanting to live completely not to put on too many airs and, as there is always filth where there is life, to get used to filth” (USN 5).

²⁹ In this claim we can see the seeds of a conversation Derrida later had with Bataille’s work in *The Gift of Death*. Firstly, Derrida also claims that something is amiss or beyond the reach of communication. Secondly, Derrida also claims that we ought to protect the out-of-reach. In chapter 3 (“Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)”), Derrida is concerned with communication as it pertains to the realm of ethics. Despite this fact, his work recalls Bataillean notions of “flawed” or “failed” communication and Bataillean calls for silence. Derrida writes: “Once I speak, I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. This is such a strange contract—both paradoxical and terrifying—that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secret [...] but by not speaking to others, I don’t account for my actions, I answer for nothing, I make no response to others or before others. It is both a scandal and a paradox. According to Kierkegaard, *ethical* exigency is regulated by the generality; and it therefore defines a responsibility that consists of *speaking*, that is to say of involving oneself sufficiently in the generality to justify oneself, to give an account of one’s decision and to answer for one’s actions. On the other hand, what does Abraham teach us, in his approach to sacrifice? That far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept” (61). In the same chapter, Derrida describes a kind of communication appropriate to the impossibility of perfect communication. Using Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” as an example, Derrida claims that Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is communication that is not communication. That is, it is communication that hovers in the difficult in-between space of possibility and impossibility: “Bartleby’s ‘I would prefer not to’ takes responsibility for a response without a response. It evokes the future without either predicting or promising; it utters nothing fixed, determinable, positive or negative. The modality of this repeated utterance that says nothing, promises nothing, neither refuses nor accepts anything, the tense of this singularly insufficient statement, reminds one of a nonlanguage or a secret language [...] But for saying nothing general or determinable, Bartleby doesn’t say absolutely nothing. *I would prefer not to* looks like an incomplete sentence. Its indeterminacy creates a tension: it opens onto a sort of reserve of incompleteness; it announces a temporary or provisional reserve” (75).

This failure is part and parcel of the impossibility of Bataille's notion of communication.

Denis Hollier writes:

The matrix of communication is the *principle of inadequacy* that Bataille formulated in this terms: 'Man is what he lacks.' Consequently, it is the production of this lack (not its suppression) that is the issue. If a being exists only through communication, then communication itself is nothing if not the sacrifice of a being: 'I propose to acknowledge as law that human beings are never united with each other except through tears or wounds' ["The College of Sociology" *Oeuvres Complètes* 2:370].

In *Politics, Writing, Mutilation*, Allan Stoekl claims that Bataille advocates embracing "impossible difference" and "duplicity" in communication³⁰ (99). I intend to push this claim a bit, however, to say that what Bataille is encouraging us to embrace is the very incommensurability of the co-occurring, simultaneous *possibility and impossibility* of communication. Understanding the necessary failure of communication is essential to understanding what communication is. This must be done, according to Bataille, not to shirk the responsibilities communication saddles us with, but in order to get to the bottom of the difficulty—the tension—that is a necessary part of all communication. In "Socratic College" Bataille insists that he is not drawing attention to the insufficiency of human communication in order to sidestep the challenge of explaining communication altogether but in order to "get to the bottom of this difficulty" (USN 6) which is communicating and explaining communication.

³⁰ Stoekl calls this a "characteristic Bataillean move—the autodestructive and impossible embrace of what one has rejected or shunted beneath oneself in order to constitute oneself. [...] [R]ather than rejecting or doing away with the guilty conscience (or bad faith), Bataille advocates a Nietzschean embrace of its impossible difference" (ibid 98-9). "Duplicity" (*lâcheté*) is also translated as "dishonor," and strengthens Stoekl's reading of Bataillean communication as a joyful embrace of both the desirable and the undesirable ("dishonorable") elements of communication.

What is the “impossible difference” between the possibility and the impossibility of communication? What is the “difficulty” Bataille needs to “get to the bottom of”? It is a *failure* in communication that has to do with an inconsistency communication necessarily requires: “Only propositions reduced to a clear form—stripped of poetic artifice as much as possible—can truly engage consciousness and connect experiences” (USN 9). And yet (here is the trouble): “A portion of the expression of inner experience is necessarily poetic and *cannot* be translated into clear propositions, though I can clearly say that this is so” (ibid; emphasis mine). This particular failure of communication is an elaboration on the *impossibility* that also constitutes Bataille’s notion of communication. This failure—propositions must be clear in order that experience be communicable, yet some experiences (inner experience) cannot be clearly or fully communicated, especially in propositional form—is the “impossible difference” Stoekl identifies as that which Bataille recommends. It is what Bataille strives to “protect.”

And so, Bataille’s notion of communication is *tense*. It is always animated by a tension between two conflicting facts: communication fails; communication succeeds.

Communication is impossible, communication is possible. Stoekl interprets this tension thusly: “language is not unitary or simple,” but this is not the full story (*Politics, Writing, Mutilation* 92). To communicate adequately, attentively, is an impossible task, but nevertheless, we do it, Bataille does it, it *happens*. In “Socratic College,” this is an ontological claim. According to Bataille, it is a necessary fact of our existence as communicators.

What does it mean to say that communication can and does “fail”? For Bataille (in 1942), this means three things: 1) Something that is *meant to be* communicated is *not* communicated. When something meant to be communicated is not, Bataille says that this can be chalked up to (2) a failure of “authenticity” (USN 5). Bataille states that the “question of authenticity” (ibid.) is always present in communication. A failure of authenticity can be the result of many things: distraction during communication, embarrassment or shyness to say what is meant, lacking an ability to immediately arrive at the “right words,” having a weak or insufficient grasp on what a conversational partner means with her words, not taking the time to determine what the partner means to say. Bataille’s recommendation of not “putting on too many airs” in communication locates the hub of his notion of authenticity, and the site of another significant kind of failure in communication: paying greater attention to how one sounds, seems, or *comes across* than to the communication *with another being*: listening, hearing, responding. The remaining eleven pages of “Socratic College” suggest that Bataille wants to endorse a particular orientation toward communication that is focused on the ability to listen, hear, and then respond. This new orientation toward communication strives for not being too proud or embarrassed to say what one intends to say. It strives also to pay attention to the fragility of communication and the person with whom one communicates. Indeed, another “failure” of communication named in 1942 is (3) pushing that fragile *something* in communication too far, pushing it until it dies.

Inner Experience, 1954

In *Inner Experience*, we see a clearer connection made between nonknowledge and communication. Bataille engages in explicit discussion of how nonknowledge can or cannot be communicated (pp. 6-16). We see once again the difficulties that populated “Socratic College”: communication is both possible and impossible, a situation that is “analogous to a torment” (33). This difficulty is clear from the first pages of *Inner Experience*. On page 3, Bataille writes:

I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted nonknowledge to be its principle—for this reason I have followed with a keener discipline a method in which Christians excelled (they engaged themselves as far along this route as dogma would permit). But this experience born of nonknowledge remains there decidedly. *It is not beyond expression—one doesn’t betray it if one speaks of it* (3-4; emphasis mine).

Again:

Although words drain almost all life from within us—there is not a single sprig of this life which the bustling host of these ants (words) hasn’t seized, dragged, accumulated without respite—there subsists in us a silent, elusive, ungraspable part [...] But the difficulty is that one manages neither easily nor completely to silence oneself, that one must fight against oneself, with precisely a mother’s patience: *we seek to grasp within us what subsists safe from verbal servilities* (14-5; emphasis mine).

From the beginning of *Inner Experience*, then, Bataille cannot reconcile two things that appear true to him: communicating nonknowledge is possible, and does not cheapen the experience of nonknowledge, and communicating nonknowledge is *not* possible—nonknowledge is “safe from” “servile” communication. Here, my view is that Bataille is not *changing his mind* or having a difficult time deciding what to claim. He is claiming that the impossibility and the possibility of communication are *both true*, simultaneously. In the case of communicating nonknowledge, explaining in words an experience of

nonknowledge is not beyond us, is not impossible, and yet, explaining an experience of nonknowledge is impossible, and can only ever be little more than attempting to grasp what stubbornly remains *safe from words*. The main premise here is that there is something we might be tempted to call “beyond” language, but which can enter language *strangely*.

Despite this difficulty, Bataille is certain we must still communicate—that “it is necessary to persist”:

[...] what we grasp is ourselves fighting the battle, stringing sentences together—perhaps about our effort (then about its failure)—but sentences all the same, powerless to grasp anything else. It is necessary to persist—making ourselves familiar, cruelly so, with a helpless foolishness, usually concealed, but falling under full light [...] The moment comes when we can reflect, link words together, once again no longer silence ourselves (15).

Not only must we communicate (“It is necessary to persist”); we must also accept, as a fact, the “helpless foolishness” that communication entails. We saw a similar concern regarding helplessness, foolishness, and (*all attempts at*) communication in “Socratic College,” but here, in *Inner Experience*, Bataille’s focus is on communicating nonknowledge. Usually, our helpless foolishness and our failures in communication are hidden from us, or remain unproblematic. What happens in the attempt to communicate nonknowledge is the disconcealment of the always (already) present “helpless foolishness.” This disconcealment is something *felt* by those attempting to communicate nonknowledge. “Falling under full light,” our struggle with the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of communication is felt, and made visible or apparent to us. Our “helpless foolishness” is made apparent to us through the experience of not *finding the words to communicate*. We feel foolish. We find ourselves “fighting the battle” of

attempting to string sentences together, because it is “necessary” to do so, and we experience *powerlessness* in so doing (ibid).

Thus, in *Inner Experience* we find two important claims that can help us define Bataillean communication and determine communication’s relationship to nonknowledge: (1) We *cannot find the words* to describe experiences of nonknowledge, but we must attempt a description of nonknowledge anyhow. (The “we” here is those willing to join Bataille in “a voyage to the end of the possible” (IE 7). “Anyone may not embark on this voyage,” he says, “but if he does embark on it, this supposes the negation of the authorities, the existing values which limit the possible” (ibid).) We also find (2) that something about the experience of nonknowledge *does not allow us* to describe it. This “something” is present in all communication, but is emphasized or highlighted in nonknowledge.

Discourse

Bataille draws a helpful distinction between “discourse” and “communication” in *Inner Experience*. “Discourse” is the low-level, constant chatter and work we do to evade the helpless foolishness of communication³¹. “Discourse” is ideology, dogma; any system of utterances we rely on to give us ready-made answers. It is “intellectual operations” (IE 13). If we are operating in our communication efforts according to the rules or in the realm of

³¹ This is different from other definitions of discourse found in philosophy. Foucault offers an account of discourse that highlights the ways in which discourses form particular sanctioned ways of using language and knowledge to create and uphold power relations. But like Bataille, Foucault is critical of discourse: “We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset [...] [T]hese divisions—whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under examination—are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analyzed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics” (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 22).

discourse, we will lack an intimacy in our communication. This matters—and “discourse” matters—because Bataille says that “intellectual operations” *must stop* in order for communication to occur. *The experience of nonknowledge (also) occurs when “intellectual operations” are jammed* (IE 13-4).

Bataille uses the term “discourse” to name his (our) inability to completely silence himself and the workings of his own “intelligence” and “intellectual operation”: thoughts he thinks, ideas that nag him, narratives he constructs of his life and the lives of others, disappointments or titulations he will replay and replay, failures and dreams he revisits unceasingly, day and night. In short, it is the “workings of the mind” which do not stop, unless we force their temporary silence, with drugs or alcohol or meditation or sleep or sex or exercise or poetry³². Discourse, “if it wishes to, can blow like a gale wind—whatever effort I make, the wind cannot chill by the fireside” (IE 13). Discourse is “that sand into which we bury ourselves in order not to see” (ibid 14). If discourse is an embarrassed and frenzied hiding, communication is an exposing, perhaps also embarrassed, but an exposing nonetheless. Bataille is suggesting that despite the difficulty of quieting discourse, communication in the mode of intimacy *is* possible. “It is through an ‘intimate cessation of all intellectual operations’ that the possible intimacy in communication happens, and that the mind is laid bare. If not, *discourse* maintains in [sic] its little complacency” (ibid 13). Discourse is thus restrictive and limiting. Bataillean communication happens when discourse—when intellectual operation—*stops*.

³² Or whatever else we might have discovered capable of stopping intellectual operations. The method is not as important as the result: stopping intellectual operations.

According to Philippe Sollers (in “The Roof: Essay in Systematic Reading,”³³), operating solely in the mode of discourse has disastrous results: “[D]iscourse’ becomes the effect of a belief in a language that would be able to speak about language just as language speaks about ‘things,’ without asking itself whether anything can *really* speak *about* anything else. Actually, we never speak *about* anything” (ibid 80). This mirrors Bataille’s concern that communication is foolish and that that which is not discourse cannot reduce easily to language. Sollers claims that discourse prohibits intimate communication because it prohibits asking questions about the *reach of language* and requires a focus on achieving *truth*³⁴. Discourse in fact operates in the “mode” of *prohibition*, in which “truth” must be the only object of statements and language is unnecessarily beholden to meaning: “THE WORLD OF DISCOURSE IS PROHIBITION’S MODE OF BEING. This ‘world’ makes language the instrument of a meaning, co-ordinates statements which have ‘truth’ as their object, and for it prohibition is the signifier itself” (*Bataille: A Critical Reader* 79).

Bataille argues in *Theory of Religion* (1973) that discourse is the very *project of philosophy*. The language of discourse is caught up in problematic linguistic and epistemic distinctions between subject and object. This results in a separation of thinker and (the thinker’s) thought, a general dividing-up of the world, and an additionally problematic goal-oriented search for “truth” *via language* and thought (p. 30-3; 94-103). That all of this

³³ In *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson), reprinted from Sollers’s *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, pages 103-34.

³⁴ In *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, Alphonso Lingis makes similar claims. Lingis describes discourse as inseparable from “language” and as that which cannot capture the reality of the “force of things: “We are all aware of how language inhibits communication [...] Discourse retains not the force of things encountered but their meanings. In discourse the sense, force, and function of the opening word depends on the words to come” (127). Lingis focuses on discourse’s remove from the *experience* of communication: “In the movement of discourse the verb retains the noun already uttered, the sentence retains the prior sentence that it explains or justifies” (128).

is essential to discourse and its effects suggests that it is importantly—even radically—different from the phenomenon and the concept of nonknowledge.

Brief Return to Virtue Epistemology

How do we see the work of discourse in the virtue epistemology conversation? Can evidence of discourse in virtue epistemology confirm that discourse is the project of philosophy, as Bataille and Sollers (and Lingis) claim? Sosa in particular is focused on “truth-attainment” as a marker of one’s intellectual character; Greco is concerned with the reliability of thinkers and knowers insofar as the reliability can be a marker of good intellectual character; and Zagzebski is focused on the motivation of thinkers and knowers (again, as markers of intellectual character). It is clear that these are examples of a goal-oriented search for truth, via language and thought, but it is less clear that they are examples of the separation between thinker and thought. In fact, one of their primary goals is to understand thought as *a part of* the very character of a thinker. In this respect, the virtue epistemology conversation is an interesting case that challenges Bataille’s claims. In another respect, however, the virtue epistemology conversation seems representative of the “project of philosophy” as discourse, insofar as Sosa, Greco, and Zagzebski operate in the mode of prohibition. One of their most important goals (each of them, separately) is to determine what counts as knowledge, what can appropriately ground knowledge, what ought to motivate knowledge, and how to determine the utility of knowledge. They make these determinations, and they thereby prohibit what they have determined does *not* count as knowledge, *cannot* ground or motivate knowledge, and is *not* part of the utility of knowledge.

Returning to the concept of nonknowledge, I want to emphasize that discourse is also a particular *habit of thinking* that assumes the communicability of every experience. Bataille calls this habit the “law of language,” and he asks that his readers (readers of *Inner Experience*) contest the law, though he writes it out. To contest the “law of language” is to contest “discourse”: it means stopping oneself from making the assumption that language can communicate every possible experience (ibid 14-5). For Bataille, questioning the “law of language” is *not* akin to dismissing or abandoning language; communication—if it is communication and not discourse—does seem to allow for language being stretched or pulled into realms typically thought to be incommunicable, like “inner experience.” Nonknowledge is an example of one such realm. Communicating an experience of nonknowledge challenges language and *can* contest the “law of language,” even as it makes use of language to communicate an experience that challenges the assumption that all experience can be communicated. This fact is significant for Bataille’s construction of the concept of nonknowledge, as by 1943, in *Inner Experience*, Bataille claims that nonknowledge *cannot be communicated* and yet, he claims also that it *can be communicated*, that one does not betray or belittle an experience of nonknowledge in the attempt to communicate it. The fact that this appears as a paradox is important; *a vital tension between communicability and incommunicability sustains nonknowledge*. “Indeed, the specificity of Bataille’s dialectic is its sacrifice of a term of synthesis, in favor of a space of tense contamination in which two modes of being invade each other, compromise each other, while paradoxically retaining the integrity of their opposition” (*On Bataille* 212, “Bataille and Communication”).

As for the relationship nonknowledge has to discourse, it is clear that communicating nonknowledge through discourse is unlikely—perhaps impossible³⁵. If nonknowledge is an experience that challenges the “law of language,” nonknowledge cannot be communicable through what Bataille calls the unceasing “intellectual operation.” Nonknowledge is also not discourse because it is not a goal-oriented search for truth or any other distinct goal.

Feature 1.2 (of Unstable Communicability): Silence

If we quiet discourse, communication is possible. This communication is a communication which is *at peace* with the simultaneous impossibility and possibility of communication. It is a communication that *includes silence*:

[T]here subsists in us a silent, elusive, ungraspable part. In the region of words, of discourse, this part is neglected. Thus it usually escapes us. We can only attain it or have it at our disposal on certain terms. They are the vague inner movements, which depend on no object and have no intent—states which, similar to others linked to the purity of the sky, to the fragrance of a room, are not warranted by anything definable, so that language which, with respect to the others, has the sky, the room, to which it can refer—and which directs attention towards what it grasps—is dispossessed, can say nothing [...] If we live under the law of language without contesting it, these states are within us as if they didn't exist. But if we run up against this law, we can in passing fix our awareness upon one of them and, quieting discourse within us, linger over the surprise which it provides us. It is better then to shut oneself in, make as if it were night, remain in this suspended silence wherein we come unexpectedly upon the sleep of a child (ibid 14-5).

Silence has the power to contest the “law of language.” Silence can direct our attention to that which is elusive and ungraspable in our thoughts—our “vague inner movements” not

³⁵ This is one moment when Bataille suggests that nonknowledge and experience are achieved in particular ways that are similar to the intellectual virtues stressed by virtue epistemologists in our conversation. Bataille is claiming that particular habits and dispositions may lead to desirable results, and this is similar to what virtue epistemology also claims regarding intellectual dispositions and the acquisition of knowledge. We can read this as Bataille suggesting that a kind radical openness is a virtue.

tied to *intent* nor the division between subject and object. Silence quiets discourse and lets us linger with the inability to say something. Despite this, silence is still a part of communication—it is a precursor to Bataillean communication: “The moment comes when we can reflect, link words together, once again no longer silence ourselves [...] one must find *words* which serve as sustenance for practice” (ibid 15-16; emphasis Bataille’s)³⁶. Bataille’s treatment of “silence,” then, is somewhat counter-intuitive. Silence is a refuge from the “law of language,” from discourse. Silence confronts us with the fact that language cannot “grasp” every experience, every internal state, every “inner movement.” Yet, it is through the experience of silence that one form of intimate (Bataillean) communication becomes possible. After silence, “one must find *words*” (ibid). Communication (not discourse) can be at least partially composed of silence, and a communication inclusive of silence has a quality of intimacy. A communication inclusive of silence is an example *par excellence* of the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of communication.

Silence is a significant concept for the description of nonknowledge because nonknowledge is met at first with silence. It does not easily succumb to or fit with

³⁶ Bataille does not tell us what inspires silence. He does explain that the silence he is interested in remains *distinct* from the mystical and religious silences of ascetics, of Saint Ignacius, of tantric Buddhists, of Hindus, of Saint Theresa of Avila, of Saint John of the Cross, or of any individuals or movements who/which seek to use silence as the impetus for discovering something other than intimate communication (ibid 17-24). For Bataille, there cannot be knowledge gained from silence which serves a purpose other than increasing intimate communication. Indeed, a central project of *Inner Experience* (if it can be said to have a clear project) is to find and describe non-religious, non-mystical, apolitical (*non-teleological*) ways and methods of silencing discourse and achieving communicational intimacy. Being a non-religious, non-mystical, and apolitical project, the silence Bataille seeks and describes cannot be sought in order to find oneness with God, peace with the universe, or a solution to problems of modern politics. And there is perhaps no community for this communication: “it is not an extant community to which one belongs or from which one receives one’s meaning that is invoked by Bataille; he privileges no nation, religion, or ethnicity. Rather, what is exceptional in this thinking of community resists conceptualization as positive appropriation” (Mitchell and Kemp, *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* 1).

language. If silence is an important element of communication then silence is an important element of the communication of experiences of nonknowledge.

Erotism, 1957

Erotism is markedly different because it explicitly addresses communication as an element of nonknowledge. *Erotism* presents us with two such important moments, both at the conclusion of the book. The first is Bataille's use of what he calls "a language that equals zero":

I have cautioned you about language. I must therefore caution you at the same time against my own words. Not that I want to end upon a note of farce, but I have been trying to talk a language that equals zero, a language equivalent to nothing at all, a language that returns to silence. I am not talking about nothingness, which sometimes looks to me like a pretext for adding a specialized chapter onto speech; I am talking about the suppression of whatever language may add to the world (264).

The second moment is a refinement of Bataille's earlier claim that something "slips" in communication:

[L]anguage scatters the totality of all that touches us most closely even while it arranges it in order. Through language we can never grasp what matters to us, for it eludes us in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be referred ever appears. Our attention remains fixed on this whole but we can never see it in the full light of day. A succession of propositions flickering off and on merely hides it from our gaze, and we are powerless to alter this (274).

These two moments highlight a crucial aspect of the communication element of nonknowledge: language "that equals zero" is honest Bataillean communication, *but something* still eludes us—something escapes any and all language and thus escapes being *suppressed* (in the form of propositions aiming at totality).

Feature 1.3 (of Unstable Communicability): “A language that equals zero”

Our next concern is to understand this phrase: “a language that equals zero, a language equivalent to nothing at all, a language that returns to silence” (ibid 264). Understanding the concept of erotism will move us toward an explanation of this “language that equals zero.” According to Bataille, “erotism is silence” (ibid 274). And it is *secret*³⁷:

My starting point is that eroticism is a solitary activity. At the least it is a matter difficult to discuss. For not only conventional reasons, eroticism is defined by secrecy. It cannot be public. I might instant some exceptions but somehow eroticism is outside ordinary life. In our experience taken as a whole it is cut off from the normal communication of emotions. There is a taboo in force. Nothing is absolutely forbidden, for there are always transgressions. But the taboo is sufficiently active for me to be able to say by and large that eroticism, perhaps the most intense of emotions, *is as if it did not exist as far as our existence is present for us in the form of speech and language* [...] Erotic experience will commit us to silence (ibid 252; emphasis mine).

Bataille is claiming that erotic experience involves two kinds of silence. One is the kind of silence that taboo requires. This is a socially-required silence. Erotic experience cannot be part of “normal communication of emotions,” lest we risk the social exclusion resulting from taboo violation. (We are sometimes even prohibited from speaking of our erotic worlds, as in the case of codes of professional conduct in some workplaces.) The other kind of silence results from erotism being “the most intense of emotions”: erotic experience does not translate into language. *It is as if erotic experience does not exist*, “as far as our existence is present for us in the form of speech and language” (ibid). The erotic defies our attempts to communicate it, even if we wish to communicate it, even if we do not fear the repercussions of violating taboos. This suggests an additional, more challenging claim: there is a permanent part of our existence characterized by its inability

³⁷ See footnote 22 on page 37-8. “The ideas of secrecy and exclusivity (*non-partage*) are essential here, as is Abraham’s silence. He doesn’t speak, he doesn’t tell his secret to his loved ones. [...] Abraham can neither speak nor commiserate, neither weep nor wail. He is kept in absolute secrecy” (*Gift of Death* 73-4).

to be translated into and represented through language. This part of our existence, however, can be accessed in erotic experience.

Erotic language is partially characterized by silence. It is silence, as Bataille says, but it is more than one kind of silence. It is socially-sanctioned silence, and it is experientially-necessary silence. It is a silence required of us on two fronts: the outside world and the experience (of the erotic) itself. *If* we can say anything of erotic experience, Bataille claims, what we say will *amount to nothing*, as we are only describing a necessary silence. This is language which “amounts to zero”: speech and language used to describe silence, and to describe that which (for Bataille) resides in us but outside speech and language.

Feature 1.4 (of Unstable Communicability): Non-Propositionality and Elusion

However, a language that amounts to silence is *not* a perfect antidote to the fact that with language “we can never grasp what matters to us, for it eludes us in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be referred ever appears” (E 274). For Bataille this is true not only in cases of communicating erotic experience; this difficulty is true of all communication. We can speak a language which amounts to zero, but in the end, Bataille claims, we *still* cannot use language to grasp “what matters to us,” as “what matters” eludes language. In addition to this, language can find no “central whole” to which its acts refer. The first part of this claim (that there is something language cannot grasp) echoes Bataille’s claims (in 1942 and 1943) that

something is always amiss in communication and that communication necessarily involves the “helpless foolishness” we feel as a result of communication’s insufficiency.

Here, however, in 1957 (in *Erotism*), Bataille is more specific. His concern in *Erotism* is not just with (a slippage in) “language” and “communication” in general, but with “interdependent propositions and a central whole to which they might refer.” Bataille is leveling a criticism at the logic of the “law of language” and its assumption that language *does* communicate the “central whole”—the referent of language (i.e., experience)—via propositions.

Bataille is making an additional claim here regarding the *fundamental role* of language in the structuring and narrativizing of human experience. If language is to formulate anything, it can “take place only in successive phases worked out in the dimension of time. We can never hope to attain a global view in one single supreme instant; language chops it into its component parts and connects them up into a coherent explanation. The analytic presentation makes it impossible for the successive stages to coalesce” (E 274). So language forces our fundamental orientation to experience into a single successive, time-driven narrative. This is opposed to something like an *open* (“global”), un-narrativized, non-successive, unitary *experience*. Language poses a problem at the precise moment when it intrudes upon this experience and “chops it into component parts” *in order to be able to communicate it*. The “component parts” are interdependent propositions (language itself), always unable to communicate the “central whole” or the entirety of the experience, at least in part because they (viz., the propositions which make up language) arrive *after*

the experience. Bataille is claiming that at least one part of the “failure” of communication comes as a result of propositionalized language. My reading of this claim is that this particular “failure” consists in the habit of assuming that communicable experiences are propositionalizable by default, and, similarly, that propositional knowledge is either inherently or practically valuable, but *always* valuable³⁸.

“Notes for *Pure Happiness*,” 1958 (“What language refuses to communicate”)

In a project abandoned due to his failing health, Bataille offers some of his final thoughts on communication and nonknowledge in notes for *Pure Happiness*. Published originally as scraps in Bataille’s *Oeuvres Completes*, they continue themes from *Erotism* and offer a first definition of nonknowledge as a “perfect wealth of meaning” (USN 249). This hints at nonknowledge as somehow excessive.

“Eroticism communicates what language refuses to communicate. This is a question of two different kinds of communication. This is the foundation. This is also the profound meaning of nonknowledge. One must cease knowing (speaking) in order to experience” (USN 238-9).

³⁸ All these claims present us with a challenge to the presumptions at work in our virtue epistemology conversation, especially to the first presumption that knowledge is communicable via propositions. In the presumption that knowledge is communicable (in Greco in particular), we do not see a distinction between communication made possible by rational thought and communication made possible by erotic excitement. Erotic excitement, or something like it, is given no place in the virtue epistemology conversation, and we have good reason to believe it would be dismissed by Greco as “strange and fleeting”—at odds with stability and reliability—and thus not capable of producing true belief that might qualify as knowledge. Sosa’s focus on reliabilism makes the same restrictions on the states that can produce true belief, and “erotic excitement” would almost certainly be excluded.

We see Bataille making a few moves. Here he (again) asserts the claim that something unique or different is communicated in erotic experience. He opposes erotic experience to “language,³⁹” calling both (erotic experience and language) “kinds of communication.” This draws a more distinct separation between erotic experience and language than in *Erotism*. In fact, this distinction in “Notes for *Pure Happiness*” is predicated on the assertion that erotic experience communicates what language *cannot*. Whatever it is that language cannot communicate, erotic experience *can* (but not necessarily *should*) communicate. What are the conditions of the communication through erotic experience and not language? How does it happen? Bataille’s response is that it has something to do with shutting ourselves up and stopping ourselves from trying to know: “*One must cease knowing (speaking) in order to experience*” (ibid 239; emphasis mine).

Bataille here offers one sense of nonknowledge and links this meaning to the relationship between speech and experience. (In this case, erotic experience.) In a more challenging move, Bataille asserts the similarity of knowing and speaking: *both* knowing and speaking get in the way of experience. (Again, in this case, erotic experience.) Bataille equates knowing, speaking, and “language,” reducing them all to the same act of communication, opposing them to the communication found in erotic experience *and in nonknowledge*. Nonknowledge can only be experienced by ceasing to know and to speak⁴⁰. *The same thing that makes communication of erotic experience possible is what makes nonknowledge possible*.

³⁹ Bataille’s use of “language” in this instance recalls his designation of “discourse.”

⁴⁰ This is another moment when Bataille claims that only a particular orientation or disposition regarding nonknowledge can allow for nonknowledge to occur. The disposition or virtue here would be something like “challenging the law of language” via infinite interrogation. This is another moment when Bataille and the virtue epistemologists are not so far from each other.

Element 2: Experientiality

Bataille's use of the term "experience" does not match up with our common uses of the word⁴¹. As in, "As a teacher, I have experience working with children." Or, "I enjoy the experience of swimming in the ocean." More on the mark perhaps is something that begins with "I have had an experience." Bataille's use of "experience" suggests something *undergone*, something *gone through*, not a collection of facts describing our interactions with the world. Of course, even "I have experience with children" can be translated into experience in the Bataillean sense, if the work done with children *was* "experience." In his introduction to *Guilty (Le coupable)*, translator Stuart Kendall describes the concept of inner experience: "the field of inner experience can be staked out easily enough: religious experience without god, philosophy without knowledge, anthropology without society, psychology without the self, poetry beyond expression. It is a modern *via negativa*, a renunciation of everything modern life holds dear. It is life beyond utility" (xviii).

It is not so clear that "experience" can be actively sought despite the fact that Bataille offers suggestions for reaching or finding "experience." Even if we court it, following Bataille's suggestions, it is still something that *happens* to us and that often *overtakes* us, and in this respect, we are not in charge during "experience." This has repercussions,

⁴¹ N.B.: What Bataille calls "experience" in 1942 he sometimes calls "inner experience" following the publication of *Inner Experience* in 1943. This suggests a solidification of his description of experience (such that it becomes synonymous with inner experience), but this solidification is not permanent or unwavering. Even in *Inner Experience*, Bataille uses the two terms interchangeably. And as we will see, there are times when Bataille's use of "experience" is not synonymous with "inner experience" nor with his previous uses of "experience."

ontologically and epistemically. Bataille is making an ontological claim that “experience” (and nonknowledge) *may* be impossible for us to find when we are actively looking for it. Despite the fact that we can go courting “experience,” we cannot see it or know it in advance. So, epistemically, “experience” (and nonknowledge) make the claim that a certain blindness to ourselves, our experience, and our knowledge is permanent and unavoidable. This includes future-orientation. Bataillean “experience” challenges our ability to orient ourselves to the (or our) future because it is not knowable or foreseeable in advance. In “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille,” Denis Hollier explains this situation in the following way: “Bataille always longed for a ‘lived experience’ in the incandescence of which ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ would come to merge, from within which the future would rise as though the present, having opened up, would expand and flow into it, as though the future were this very drifting of the present and no longer an escape out of the present” (60).

This puts Bataille (and this work) in an awkward, difficult situation. We are tracking something that may be untrackable. And if it *is* trackable, we can’t be certain that we will be able to do it justice in description or definition after the fact⁴².

⁴² Karen Houle expresses similar concerns about trackability (in “(Making) Animal Tracks”), paying special attention to the epistemic “blindness” we may have to ourselves, and what kinds of experiences may allow us to disable the “blindness”: “An implication of my exercise and analysis is to call into question our adequacy, as epistemic agents, to the task of what feminist epistemologists call ‘critical self-reflection’; that is, knowing oneself more fully by perceiving what one is up to in one’s line of questioning, catching oneself unawares in particular. My experience of tracking the animal and then finding myself suddenly being tracked, casts what I hope is a useful doubt on the capacity of the isolated rational agent to accomplish a making-visible of what is invisible about her own perceptions; that is, reveals the very real limits of her evidence-gathering capacities. I want above all to argue that our own blind spots are disabled and critical self-reflexivity becomes possible, not by a willing and able isolated self but by a strange-making encounter with a non-self who stops us in our tracks” (*PhaenEx* 2, 2007, p. 244). Houle claims that only an unorchestrated encounter with a “non-self”—that is, an other—can help us see our epistemic blind spots. I claim, similarly (in the concluding chapter), that an encounter with nonknowledge is necessary to help us see the blind spots in the virtue epistemology conversation. Nonknowledge is a productive—or creative—other to knowledge.

Feature 2.1 (of Experientiality): Transgression and Interrogation of Limits (“Socratic College,” 1942)

Nonknowledge is an experience that occurs at the *limit of knowledge*. Reaching the limit of knowledge results in a dissolution of knowledge—a destruction (even if temporary) of knowledge—as the experience of nonknowledge occurs. What Bataille calls “experience” (and “inner experience”) is present in the moment of nonknowledge.

The first definition of “experience” offered by Bataille stresses the testing of limits:

The experience is itself exactly the act of a particular and limited being. What I question in myself is no doubt being itself, but I cannot call being itself into question before having thrown myself against the limits of the being that I am. Experience is therefore first of all the interrogation of the limits of being, essentially of the isolation in which the particular being finds itself. In this way, it is in search of an exterior object with which it will attempt to communicate (USN 15-6).

There are a number of things to note. Firstly, that “experience” can push everyday actions, thoughts, and interactions past a limit of normal or usual experience into this thing named “experience.” Secondly, that Bataille verges on making a normative claim that those who wish to understand what he means by “experience” must interrogate the limits of being. Thirdly, Bataille is offering an ontological claim—that “experience” begins with an interrogation of who and what we are, and the very limits of existence.

The sense of “limit” here is a psychological and intellectual limit, which cannot be easily separated from a physical limit. But this sense of “limit” is not a limit of the kind we will examine later in our virtue epistemology conversation. The virtue epistemology limits are ones constructed by the virtue epistemology community and pertain to what counts as evidence, what constitutes a virtuous motive, and what qualifies as knowledge. Bataille’s definition of experience as that which interrogates the “limits” of our being makes use of a *personal* and not a communal sense of limits; experience requires that I push *my* capacities as a thinking, communicating, feeling being to their limits⁴³. Foucault claims that interrogating limits in the tradition of Bataille requires the act of transgression, but it *also* requires a particular respect for limits: “The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusion and shadows” (*Bataille: A Critical Reader* 27). This relationship between limits and transgression is *Bataillean*, Foucault writes. The very “language of transgression” contains Bataille in “its calcinated roots, its promising ashes” (*ibid*).

Feature 2.2 (of Experientiality): Struggle Against “Useful Language”

“Experience” is also a “struggle against the spell” in which “useful language” holds us.

Bataille’s designation of “useful language” shares similarities with “discourse.” Like

⁴³ In “Method of Meditation,” Bataille describes encountering such a limit and experiencing the limit as a kind of twilight sleep before realizing that it is only in pushing past such a limit that he can make the impossible possible. This clarifies the relationship between possibility, impossibility, and limits. Impossibility lies past the (temporary) limit of possibility. Bataille describes recognizing that impossibility is *not* a final limit: “If I lead being to the extreme limit of reflection, to its misunderstanding of itself, like the infinite, starry expanse of the night, I FALL ASLEEP. And the IMPOSSIBLE is there. (I am IT.) How could I fail to recognize philosophers from all eras whose never-ending cries (powerlessness) say to me: YOU ARE THE IMPOSSIBLE?” (USN 84; emphases Bataille’s).

discourse, “useful language” is overly meaning-focused (teleological), it ignores what might be incommunicable (or useless to language), and it is a language that lets us order, categorize, and determine. It is not language that slides from meaning or that challenges the limits of what is communicable. “Useful language” is challenged by “experience”:
 “Experience is in the first place a struggle against the spell in which useful language holds us” (USN 16).

I take Bataille to mean a few things with his claim that experience is a struggle against useful language: 1) that “experience” defies language, or cannot be described adequately with the use of language; 2) that the concept of “experience” is part of Bataille’s attempt (in his writing) to find language which short-circuits itself by being somehow “useless”; 3) that “experience” can alert us to an overdependence we have on “useful language”; and 4) that we ought to use “experience” to move beyond or past “useful language.” Bataille continues:

This struggle [against useful language] can begin on the discursive level but it can not obtain great results. The opposition offered by a new kind of vulgar discourse is usually ineffectual. The mind can resort to more powerful spells, like modifications of the physiological state. It can resort to processes that rupture one’s intellectual equilibrium, to tragic thoughts. These solutions can even be presented as methods or techniques that it would be vain to underestimate. It seems to me, however, that these methods or these techniques can only call into question the limits of being, not being itself (USN 16).

The struggle against useful language may begin as discursivity (as free-flowing, unregulated thought play), but discursivity itself cannot bring down useful language.

Discursive thought and experience have powerful effects, as methods or techniques which modify “the physiological state” or “rupture one’s intellectual equilibrium” or lead one to “tragic thoughts,” but they will only call into question the limits of being, instead of calling

into question *being itself*. Now we can build a better definition of “experience”: it is not merely discursive experience or thought. Discursivity alone will not adequately challenge useful language, and as such, will not adequately induce or cause “experience.” *Something else* must also be present in order for “experience” to begin. This *something else* is a disruptive element that challenges—disrupts—our reliance on language as though it were a tool that could perfectly or seamlessly communicate what we experience. A disruptive element of this sort is not the same each time (i.e., it is not always one particular experience, like falling in love or getting drunk), and we may not know in advance what it will be, but it has the same effect of disrupting the utility of language, putting us in the realm of “experience.”

That a disruption in the utility of language signals “experience” does *not* mean that “experience” is incommunicable. It means, rather, that “experience” and language have an uneasy relationship and that language will not do perfect justice to attempts to communicate “experience,” just as in *all* communication something “slips.” When it comes to “experience,” Bataille is specific: “experience” challenges useful language (including discourse), but it does not necessarily challenge all communication. A larger claim about knowledge, language, and the role of philosophy is lurking in the background here: that we disrupt the utility of language and the role it plays in forming knowledge when we do what Bataille considers to be “real” philosophy—i.e., *infinite interrogation without concern for finding certain knowledge*⁴⁴. Also in the background is Bataille’s notion of utility as the

⁴⁴ Regarding the normative dimensions of Bataille’s (and Foucault’s) description of limits and transgression, Foucault claims that transgression and limits must be “detached” from ethics: “it [transgression] must be detached from its questionable association with ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or the subversive, that is, from

spirit of modernity. “Experience” doesn’t move us up any kind of ladder toward any kind of final goal, and it cannot be used to demonstrate our productivity or our value as (productive) thought-workers.

Nonknowledge “Rests On” Inner Experience

Bataille claims that nonknowledge “rests on” inner experience (USN 11). He allies both nonknowledge and inner experience with two (“famous”) maxims from Socrates⁴⁵. Inner experience is identified as the injunction to know thyself; nonknowledge as the admission that Socrates (and Bataille) know only one thing: that they know nothing⁴⁶.

My proposition rests on his [Socrates’] two famous maxims: ‘Know yourself’ and ‘I know but one thing, that I know nothing.’ For my part, only a kind of happy irony, I believe, follows from these two maxims; however, they seem no less fundamental to me than they were for Socrates. The first is the principle of inner experience and the second that of nonknowledge, on which this experience rests as soon as it abandons the mystical presupposition. And it would no doubt be difficult

anything aroused by negative associations. Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations [...] Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world)” (*Bataille: A Critical Reader* 28).

⁴⁵ Identified as “Socratic” by Bataille, but “Know thyself” is attributed to the Oracle of Delphi.

⁴⁶ The literature on Socrates’ seemingly paradoxical stance is expansive. Gregory Vlastos (in “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Jan. 1985, pp. 1-31) claims that Socrates is conflating—without marking the fact that he is doing so—two distinct kinds of knowledge or knowing. The first, knowledgeC, designates infallible certainty, while knowledgeE designates knowledge which is elenctically justifiable, knowledge known “through other things,” not knowledge which is “known through itself” (18). When Socrates claims that he knows only that he knows nothing, Vlastos believes Socrates is merely claiming to have knowledgeE that he has no knowledgeC (29), thus eliminating the possibility that Socrates’ stance on his knowledge is paradoxical. In *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou ties Bataille’s seemingly paradoxical stance to that of Socrates (“Elements of Experience: Bataille’s Drama”). Nikolopoulou writes, “Socrates’ ironic conclusion to his own quest [to understand the Delphic oracle’s pronouncement that he, Socrates, is the wisest man] barely hides the dark conundrum underlying his philosophical project: if he has proven the omen correct, that is, if he is indeed the wisest of men, it is only insofar as wisdom is not defined as positive knowledge, but as the limit of knowledge, the place where knowledge founders [...] He assigns to others unwisdom insofar as they pretend to know something that cannot be known” (102). With this, Nikolopoulou claims that the knowledge Socrates claims to have (namely, that he knows nothing), is *nonknowledge*. According to Nikolopoulou, it is nonknowledge because it is defined by its lack of positivity, by its absence of positive definition. “Wisdom for Socrates comes to signify nonknowledge” (ibid).

to define the object of the proposed research better than while talking about ‘the experience of nonknowledge’ or about ‘negative inner experience’ being contrary to what is generally regarded as knowledge [*connaissance*] (USN 11; editor’s parenthetical).

Notice that Bataille draws a distinction between the matched pair of nonknowledge and inner experience, on the one hand, and “what is generally regarded as knowledge” (ibid), on the other hand. In other words, Bataille positions *both* nonknowledge and inner experience as conceptually *contrary* to the concept of knowledge (*connaissance*).

Feature 2.3 (of Experientiality): Interrogation as Authority

“Experience” is inseparable from the “movement” of never-ending contestation and interrogation. In fact, according to Bataille, the *only authority* that exists is contestation and interrogation.

If inner experience affirms the existence of a beyond and establishes this existence as a principle, it cannot stop its contestation there: this principle itself must be contested in turn and experience appears in this movement as a contestation without limit. From this principle, the definition accusing inner experience of the *incessant interrogation of existence by itself*. It was natural that at the end of these interrogations we might attempt to locate an authority that escapes immediate contestation in the vaguest beyond and that we might personalize this authority as a God. Outside this hybrid historical affirmation, in part popular, in part scholarly, contestation again encounters the *poetic* and the *sacred*. But *poetic, sacred* cannot serve as preemptory affirmations that define God as would a petition of intoxicating principles. *Poetic, sacred* fall within the purview of discursive analysis: their reduction is inevitable. At the end of the reduction, experience alone subsists and, beyond pleasure, is only able to find value in itself. If experience appeared at this moment as the *poetic* itself or as the *sacred* itself or even, why not, as God, these values would remain connected to the contestation that the experience has made of itself. It would be a question of poetry contesting itself, of the sacred contesting itself, of God contesting himself. The pause that allows these possibilities to affirm their authority, to install themselves in existence, would disappear. Everything, authority itself, would be caught in a movement of interrogation without limit. There would be no other authority than in this movement, in this interrogation (USN 15).

In addition to this, if “experience” points to, or suggests, the existence of a “beyond,” such establishment would *not* be enough to qualify “experience” as such. I am claiming that this positions “experience,” and thus nonknowledge, as an *epistemic movement* that can never be completed⁴⁷. According to Bataille, to decide that “experience” had reached its conclusion or its final resting point would be to slip from “experience” into something else—into *project*. Suggesting that “experience” is a movement of contestation without limit leads Bataille to offer an additional definition (of “experience”), with this emphasis: “the *incessant interrogation of existence by itself*” (ibid).

It is “natural,” Bataille says above, to think we have reached the end of interrogation. Despite the fact that it is natural, however, the rest of the text quoted suggests clearly that we should not stop once we feel that we have reached the end—because we will *not* have reached the end. Interrogation must be incessant. It is also “natural” for an authority figure – something or someone to rely on – to be sought or identified with during interrogation. Any authority, however – whether God or the poetic or the epistemic – subverts interrogation. An authority *reduces*, offers “a petition of intoxicating principles,” making continued interrogation either impossible or unlikely. This suggests a response to the question of what “natural” means: although it may be inevitable to stop the incessant interrogation, this stoppage must be momentary. To rest too long in it, to succumb to “intoxicating principles” which block the desire to continue interrogation, is to leave the

⁴⁷ Bataille’s claims thus far indicate that nonknowledge is contrary to “what is generally regarded as knowledge.” In the initial look at our virtue epistemology cluster, we saw a reliance on the assumptions that knowledge is communicable, goal-oriented or teleological, and that the community of epistemic agents is the authority that can determine the *nature and value* of knowledge. If nonknowledge is communicated, it is *not* done so reliably or with a high degree of stability—it is “beyond” useful language. It lacks a clear goal of any sort; it is epistemic action without a purpose. And it is an act of never-ending interrogation (of thought, of *existence*) that serves as the only authority; i.e., the *only* authority nonknowledge will submit to is interrogation without limit. We’ll look at this claim now.

realm of “experience,” the realm where *there is no authority other than interrogation without limit*. Nonknowledge has only its own authority.

Not only is experience interrogation without limit; it is also refraining from turning to authority/ies which might stop interrogation or make us feel as though interrogation is no longer needed. Bataille offers three examples of such “authority”: God, the poetic, and the sacred. But *anything* can be an authority. A community’s decision about what qualifies as knowledge can be an authority. A reigning set of ideas about the value of knowledge—and how it is determined—is an authority. This is a clear point of contrast with the assumptions at work in our virtue epistemology conversation. There is no hint, no suggestion, that incessant interrogation is the *only* authority in the conversation. Rather, the conversation is built on the assumption that the virtue epistemology community forms the collective source of authority, comprised of rational individuals rigorously checking each other on their explanations for the nature and value of knowledge.

Inner Experience, 1954

Boldt’s translation and introduction frames *Inner Experience* (1988) in the context of Bataille’s oeuvre. Boldt’s introductory remarks offer her interpretation of “inner experience.” They illustrate the connection(s) between “experience” and communication (for Bataille). Her introduction also helps situate “inner experience” in relation to knowledge.

Boldt does not offer a direct definition of “inner experience” or “experience.” Instead, she continually re-situates the text of *Inner Experience* in relation to Bataille’s notions of communication, knowledge, religion, and identity. Boldt highlights an important feature of *Inner Experience*: over the course of its 209 pages, the text *performs* the experience of the concept it describes. *Inner Experience* is thus a performative document, meant to induce “inner experience” in its reader (IE xxiii). Boldt begins:

Given that the Judeo-Christian tradition situates the realization or the completion of Spirit in what is ‘beyond’—the infinite Being of God—the parameters of its experience are defined in relation to the Unlimited which transcends them. Bataille’s texts, however, operate within a space which is no longer complete vis-à-vis a transcendent unlimited ‘beyond,’ but within one which is ‘made and unmade’ by the transgression of its own limits—in particular as sexual experience reveals the absence of God. It is a space which is *interior* and *sovereign*, locked by the Unspeakable which exists at its margins, an impossible abyss glimpsed at the moment of transgression (ix).

Boldt’s first move is to separate a Bataillean notion of “experience” from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “experience” has clear parameters and only God/the Unlimited transcends them. Bataillean “experience,” however—and Bataille’s texts themselves—do not adhere to a model. Bataille’s notion of “experience” is one in which no body or organization may serve as the authority to limit or determine the appropriate meaning, as we have seen.

Boldt is claiming that Bataille’s entire oeuvre is marked by the movement of “making and unmaking” through continual transgression of limits. Bataille’s concept of inner experience (and the text of *Inner Experience*) identify a “space” which is interior and sovereign, locked in place by that which is unspeakable (or, as Boldt identifies it, “the Unspeakable”). This “space” is present in all of Bataille’s writing, certainly and especially in *Inner*

Experience, but not exclusively in *Inner Experience*. The unspeakable at the margins of this space is an abyss – an impossible abyss – glimpsed (and not grasped) only at the moment of transgression. According to Boldt, it is this necessity of continual transgression of limits which separates Bataille’s sovereign, interior, nearly-unspeakable space from a Judeo-Christian seeking of the beyond, of Spirit, of the infinite Being of God. This echoes Bataille’s claims in “Socratic College” of being separate from religious or mystical traditions because no final “beyond” in “experience” can be achieved without giving up the unlimited transgression, or “interrogation.” In fact, Boldt later writes, “A ‘voyage to the end of the possible of man,’ *Inner Experience* is a text which inscribes the notions of a ‘transcendent beyond’ and of the ‘totality of what is’ only in order to submit them to interrogation. Both are abandoned at the moment of sovereignty—impotent before the ‘impossible depth of things’” (x).

What is this sovereign and interior space? It is a space of infinite interrogation, akin to that of religion or mysticism, but, as we’ve seen, importantly different. It is a space where no “transcendent beyond” or “totality of what is” can be found, for to “find” such a defined beyond or a totality is to sacrifice interrogation. Whatever may be said of this space, according to Boldt, it is glimpsed in the moments of (unceasing) interrogation and transgression, but remains unspeakable. It is a space of or for nonknowledge.

Feature 2.4 (of Experientiality): Continuity (Communication in *Inner Experience*)

Boldt makes some challenging claims about communication as it relates to inner experience, or interior, sovereign experience: it is “locked by the Unspeakable which exists at its margins.” Boldt is not claiming that inner experience cannot be communicated. Nor is she claiming that *all* experience cannot be communicated. Instead, she is reiterating Bataille’s claim about the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of communication. Boldt’s claims are particularly close to those (regarding communication) we saw in “Socratic College” and *Erotism*.⁴⁸ communication is always insufficient because it cannot adequately describe our experience, and this insufficiency in communication reveals *our* insufficiency and discontinuity. Yet, we *must* try to communicate, we must push past discontinuity and (at the very least) see the possibility of—or (at the most) participate in—continuous communication. Boldt explains that according to Bataille, we cannot escape our desire for continuity, even the most “perfect” continuity in which we “identify with the entirety of the universe”: “Bataille opens the wound of insufficiency felt by each individual who wishes to surpass his limited existence. In *Inner Experience*, he states categorically: we cannot escape our desire to be everything, to identify with the entirety of the universe” (xi). Boldt interprets Bataille’s categorical declaration:

The isolated element seeks autonomy, yet wishes to embrace the entirety of the whole: on its own, in isolation, it cannot fulfill this second wish. To identify with the entirety of the whole, it must forego its desire for autonomy. It enters the transcendent whole, losing a good measure of its sense of discontinuity, only to find reawakened the frustrated desire for autonomy. The cycle is in this way renewed (xiv).

This cycle is at least a partial description of Bataille’s sense of communication. Boldt does not clearly distinguish between a “servile” communication and an “intimate,” continuous

⁴⁸ Boldt writes: “Whereas an isolated individual reinforces his removal from radical continuity, the communicant becomes lost in waves of eroticism, laughter, and intoxication” (xix).

communication (as Bataille himself does), but she does hint at a kind of communication which ignores or remains unaware of the possibility of continuous, intimate communication. This communication is limited to “utilitarian ends⁴⁹”: “We are babblers when we limit our use of language to utilitarian ends, when we make it serviceable to the projects through which we sidestep our anxiety” (xi).

Knowledge and Nonknowledge in *Inner Experience*

Boldt claims that inner experience is something from which we can “recover” (xxi-xxii). This sets it apart as a kind of experience unlike our everyday experience. Boldt describes this recovery by way of continuity and discontinuity, explaining the moment(s) of recovery as a move from radical continuity to “identifiable” continuity and then to discontinuity. Additionally, Boldt describes it as a move from nonknowledge to knowledge (IE xxii). In erotic experience, for example, continuity reigns, for a period of time. This can only happen for so long, and when continuity reaches its peak or naturally wanes, “recovery” begins. Continuous experience returns to discontinuous experience; radical continuity is replaced by the sense of discontinuity that makes up our everyday, common interactions. Boldt writes:

Radical continuity slips into a continuity which is identifiable at the horizon of discontinuous being. Individuals retreat from communication and the inevitable quest for the summit, for transcendence, for identification with the whole recommences. Knowledge becomes positive[...] Where there was fusion of non-

⁴⁹ We have another point of contrast with our virtue epistemology conversation. “Experience” and nonknowledge cannot be communicated reliably enough to “limit” the use of language to describe nonknowledge for “utilitarian ends.” If Boldt is right that restricting language to utilitarian ends (through “projects”) is a way to sidestep the anxiety we feel as discontinuous beings, we have to ask how this applies to our virtue epistemology conversation. I will not speak to the anxiety that may be felt in the virtue epistemology conversation as a result of discontinuity, but I *will* speak to virtue epistemology’s habit of limiting beliefs (and knowledge) to utilitarian ends as a result of the existence of nonknowledge. Whether or not anxiety is what motivates the restricting moves of virtue epistemology we cannot say.

knowledge and the unknown, the limit of knowledge descends, is discernible. Of the repeated slipping of non-knowledge into knowledge (and vice-versa), Bataille writes; '[it] 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 non-sense is sense, the sense which is nonsense is lost, becomes non-sense once again (without possible end)' (IE 52) (xxii).

If inner experience and radical continuity co-occur, so do inner experience and nonknowledge. Boldt states that radical continuity and nonknowledge are both *part of* inner experience, and that as radical continuity fades to identifiable continuity (and then to discontinuity), nonknowledge fades or dissolves into knowledge. Knowledge becomes “positive” and the revelation of nonknowledge (the laying bare of what “knowledge was hiding”) nearly disappears. This near-disappearance takes the form of nonknowledge turning positive, and as positive, *into positive knowledge*, about *what is known*. Thus Boldt suggests that nonknowledge is defined negatively. I disagree with Boldt on this matter.

Inner experience shares a special relationship with nonknowledge because, as we have seen in “Socratic College,” only an incessant interrogation can open the way for nonknowledge. In this way, both inner experience and nonknowledge require the same methodology; they require the same dedication to unending interrogation. Bataille claims (and Boldt re-states) that the incessant interrogation of inner experience leads to nonknowledge, and that nonknowledge reveals something knowledge had “kept hidden” or invisible. Seeing the once-invisible knowledge as nonknowledge does not mean that nonknowledge can be spoken in positive terms; Boldt suggests that nonknowledge actually *slides away* or *disappears* if it is translated into positive terms and thus forced to “fit” with knowledge.

Feature 2.5 (of Experientiality): Leading Somewhere and Nowhere

Bataille begins *Inner Experience* with a rough description of inner experience:

By *inner experience* I understand that which one usually calls *mystical experience*: the states of ecstasy, of rapture, at least of meditated emotion. But I am thinking less of *confessional* experience, to which one has had to adhere up to now, than of an experience laid bare, free of ties, even of an origin, of any confession whatever. This is why I don't like the word *mystical*. Nor do I like narrow definitions. Inner experience responds to the necessity in which I find myself—human existence with me—of challenging everything (of putting everything into question) without permissible rest. This necessity was at work despite religious beliefs, but it has even more far-reaching consequences if one does not have these beliefs. Dogmatic presuppositions have provided experience with undue limits: he who already knows cannot go beyond a known horizon (3).

Bataille is claiming (firstly) that despite its similarities to mystical, religious experience, inner experience *remains separate* from them. Secondly, Bataille is again claiming that inner experience is the process of “challenging everything” “without permissible rest.”

Bataille says he is not alone in his need to do such challenging; “human existence” along with him has the necessity to challenge everything. Thirdly, Bataille is claiming that inner experience shares a particular relationship to knowledge: “he who already knows” cannot (or perhaps simply will not) participate in inner experience, as inner experience is necessarily going beyond “known horizons.” Dogma and inner experience will not co-exist. Bataille does not directly address the fact that rational thought and the pursuit of knowledge aim to *overcome and eliminate* dogma. His focused concern is that once we think we “know,” we will not put “everything into question” (ibid).

Bataille claims that inner experience leads to nonknowledge. This has the effect of prescribing an end point or a goal of inner experience. But because nonknowledge is

described by Bataille (in *Inner Experience*) as part of the movement of unending interrogation, the end point of nonknowledge is not really an *end* point. Bewilderment, or nonsense, cannot be a prescribed, clear end point, as we have seen before: “I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted non-knowledge to be its principle” (IE 3).

This situation seems puzzling, but it is consistent with what we have already discovered about nonknowledge: Firstly, that whatever nonknowledge reveals cannot adequately be communicated with “useful” language, leaving one particular sense in which *nothing* is revealed by nonknowledge to anyone other than the non-knower. (Although this does not mean that nonknowledge *cannot ever* be communicated according to the Bataille of *Inner Experience*.) Secondly, we know that inner experience *cannot and must not* be thought of as capable of founding belief, knowledge, or anything else that might be a hindrance to unending interrogation, and if something or anything in particular were indubitably “revealed” by inner experience and nonknowledge, it would *establish* belief and knowledge. This cannot be the case. So nonknowledge and inner experience reveal *something*, lead us somewhere, and yet they reveal nothing, lead us *nowhere*.

In *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou addresses this very difficulty, namely, that experience reveals or states nothing *and* that experience leads clearly to nonknowledge (“Elements of Experience: Bataille’s Drama,” pp. 99-118). According to Nikolopoulou, experience leads to nonknowledge precisely because it is

necessarily an encounter with finitude (105). Nikolopoulou responds to Bataille's statement that "nothing is stated in experience" thusly:

This is a difficult formulation, which exhausts the attempt at meaning. Bataille may mean that there is no other experience but the experience of nothing, of nonbeing, an experience that cannot be as such [...] Consequently, we might also say that the only thing experience can state and still be experience—not discourse—is nothing. But how can nothingness as the extreme limit be expressed? Bataille gives contradictory answers throughout *Inner Experience*, at times allowing and even demanding for its expressibility, but more often emphasizing its unattainability particularly within discourse, [...] experience ought to say nothing; but if it does say something, and because it is impossible to express nothingness, experience recognizes that this statement marks an obstacle to reaching the extreme limit. To a certain degree experience marks and mourns this diminution (the difference, the remainder) from affect to concept (106).

We can take from this the certainty that applying pre-existing guidelines for appropriately communicating experience (as we find in the virtue epistemology conversation) will result in nonknowledge *looking like nothing*—looking like babbling. Communicating nonknowledge may require challenging pre-existing guidelines, even if it seems that doing so is impossible. Impossibility is our next concern.

Feature 2.6 (of Experientiality): Possibility/ Impossibility (Methodology of Thinking, Questioning)

Bataille offers *impossibility* as an additional description of "experience" or inner experience. That is, nonknowledge may seem, at the outset, like it is impossible. "I call experience a voyage to the end of the possible of man. Anyone may not embark on this voyage, but if he does embark on it, this supposes the negation of the authorities, the

existing values which limit the possible” (IE 7)⁵⁰. Inner experience, and thus nonknowledge, is one way to overcome or transgress the limitations of the possible.

Bataille writes:

Traditional authorities and values have for a long time no longer had meaning for a good many. And those whose interest is the extreme limit of the possible cannot be indifferent to the criticism to which tradition has succumbed. It is tied to movements of intelligence wanting to extend its limits. But—it is undeniable—the advance of intelligence diminishes, as a secondary consequence, the ‘possible’ in a realm which appeared foreign to intelligence: *that of inner experience*. To say ‘diminished’ is even to say too little. The development of intelligence leads to a drying up of life which, in return, has narrowed intelligence. It is only if I state this principle: ‘inner experience itself is authority’, that I emerge from this impotence. Intelligence had destroyed the authority necessary for experience: by deciding the issue in this way, man has once again at his disposal his ‘possible’ and what is no longer the old, the limited, but the extreme limit of the possible.

These statements have an obscure theoretical appearance, and I see no remedy for this other than to say: ‘One must grasp the meaning from the inside.’ They are not logically demonstrable. One must *live* experience (IE 8).

In these two quotes Bataille uses “possible” in at least two senses. In the first quote, the sense of “possible” connotes negation of authority/ies and existing values. Existing values and authorities are described as the “possible.” Experience is the process of going to “the end” of the possible, along the way moving beyond whatever senses of “possible” have

⁵⁰ Bataille often associated possibility with a perceived “goodness” or “appropriateness,” and impossibility with (perceived) “evil”—the assumption being that it is unthinkable, inappropriate, *bad* to suggest that something impossible may in fact be possible. But the possible is right at the limit of the impossible. In “Nietzsche’s Laughter” (1942) Bataille writes: “The possible and the impossible are both in the world [...] The possible is organic life and its development in a favorable setting. The impossible is the final death, the necessity of destruction for existence [...] For man, the possible is good, the impossible is evil” (USN 18). One page later: “The possible, so it seems, exists at the limit of the impossible” (ibid 19). And the following: “An impossible exists in man that nothing will reduce [...], in the end we can only face the impossible. Putting life, that is to say the possible, in proportion to the impossible, is all that a man can do if he no longer wants to avoid it” (ibid 20). And in *On Nietzsche (Sur Nietzsche, 1945)*, Bataille mentions the possible and the impossible a total of three times: (1) “Never knew a happiness so pure, so wild and dark. Awareness of going quite far—and coming to impossibility. The fascinating impossible. As if in the night we’d gotten lost” (103); (2) “It’s said, ‘Instead of God there is the impossible—not God.’ It should be added, ‘The impossible, which depends on the whims of chance.’ [...] ‘Instead of God, chance’”; (3) “Being human/human being: to have impossibility opposite you like a wall...a wall that chance and only chance could...” (112). What we can take from this is a reminder that challenging the clear distinction between what is possible and impossible may lead to accusations of being “wild,” or “bad,” or “inappropriate.”

limited what *seems* possible. The voyage of inner experience requires placing *all value and authority* in the process of going to the end of the possible.

Bataille's emphasis on "going to the end of the possible" cannot be separated from his continual emphasis (in *Inner Experience* especially) of *unending interrogation*, refraining from resting comfortably in any moral or epistemic authority or certainty. Alison Leigh Brown explains it thusly: "There is an invitation here to expand reason beyond prohibitive limits [...] When Bataille asks us to consider creating our meanings without reserve, without tying ourselves into antecedent categories, he wants us to reconsider everything and to imagine beyond what is offered us" ("Malvolio's Revenge," RBN 134-5). We have already seen this claim that unending interrogation is the only authority on which nonknowledge can rely, but here we have the clarification that unending interrogation is a way to push *past* possibility into impossibility, going to the "extreme limit of the possible" (*ibid*), imagining beyond what is already on offer in categories of thought and *methods of thought*. Unending interrogation can take us to the end of the possible is an "invitation" to see what limits we have applied to our reasoning and thinking, and to see what resides outside the limits.

"Intelligence" and Knowing: Brief Return to Virtue Epistemology

Earlier we saw Bataille describe an "old" and "limited" kind of possible and "the extreme limit" of the possible. ("[M]an has once again at his disposal his 'possible' and what is no longer the old, the limited, but the extreme limit of the possible" (IE 8).) The "old" and "limited" sense is inseparable from "intelligence." And the state of "intelligence" and its

products are problematic for Bataille because they lead “to a drying up of life”:

“intelligence” has “destroyed the authority necessary for experience” (IE 8). Bataille’s concern is that a particular kind of intelligence ruins the possibility of inner experience as *the ultimate authority* for those embarking on the voyage of inner experience.

That it is only a *particular* kind of intelligence is important; Bataille does not claim that *all* intelligence leads to a reliance on authority. An old and limited “possible” is *limited*, according to Bataille, by the development of the kind of intelligence that must seek external authorities. The “extreme limit of the possible,” on the other hand, is tied to the voyage or process of inner experience without reliance on authority and intelligence (other than the authority that is the process of inner experience itself). In fact, it involves rejection of authorities and rejection of a form of intelligence.

Bataille recognizes that his claims regarding intelligence have “an obscure theoretical appearance,” and he sees no resolution for his obscurity other than to separate “intelligence” and “experience” by claiming that one must *live* experience, as it is not logically demonstrable, and consequently, incompatible with Bataille’s loose sense of “intelligence.”

Bataille begins to separate “intelligence” and “experience” using his notion of “intelligence” in part to further explain “experience.” The separating factor is that one concept is “*lived*” and another is *known or demonstrated logically*. According to Bataille, the fact that experience cannot be demonstrated logically is evidence that its meaning can

only be grasped from the inside, *if* it can be grasped (IE 8). Bataille suggests that “intelligence” and “experience” are opposites in this respect; one is grasped from the “inside,” one is grasped from the “outside.” Thus “intelligence” is the operation of *making sense of experience without having had* the experience. “Experience,” on the other hand, can only be made sense of *if it is experienced*. (Perhaps also *as* it is experienced.) Bataille’s claim is that “intelligence” cannot penetrate “experience” in order to describe it, understand it, make sense of it, or logically demonstrate it. This is a large, broad claim. Greco and Sosa might be able to serve as examples for us, of “intelligence” attempting to make sense of “experience” without experiencing “experience.”

Following Sosa, Greco comes to the conclusion that “strange and fleeting” processes cannot ground knowledge. *If* there is an example of “experience” in our virtue epistemology conversation, “strange and fleeting processes” must be close. “[N]ot all reliable processes give rise to knowledge. Namely, strange and fleeting ones do not. For this reason reliabilism must somehow restrict the kinds of process [sic] that are relevant for generating knowledge” (“Agent Reliabilism” 273). Greco’s examples of strange and fleeting processes are experiences that Greco has *not* himself had, as far as his audience knows, and his introduction of the examples with an invitation to “imagine” a scenario (ibid 285) supports the hunch that they are not Greco’s experiences and are instead imagined. One is “The Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion⁵¹,” another is “The

⁵¹ This first example is attributed to Alvin Plantinga, and it is a piece of Greco’s argument for refining generic reliabilism. “Imagine that there is a rare sort of brain lesion, one effect of which is to cause the victim to believe he has a brain lesion. ‘Suppose, then, that S suffers from this sort of disorder and accordingly believes that he suffers from a brain lesion. Add that he has no evidence at all for this belief: no symptoms of which he is aware, no testimony on the part of physicians or other expert witnesses, nothing. (Add, if you like, that he has much evidence *against* it; but then add also that the malfunction induced by the lesion makes it impossible for him to take appropriate account of this evidence.) Then the relevant [cognitive process] will

Case of the Absurd Reasoner⁵²”, and the last is “The Case of the Helpful Demon” (ibid 285-6). In “The Case of the Helpful Demon” we are to imagine a gambler, Rene, at the roulette tables, with a helpful demon on his shoulder “acting as a kind of epistemic guardian angel” (ibid 286). Every time Rene forms a belief that a particular number will come up next, the demon makes it so, making Rene correct (making his beliefs true).

Greco is building a case for agent reliabilism by drawing attention to the problems with general reliabilism through this scenario: Rene’s belief-forming process is reliable, but we aren’t comfortable saying that his belief-forming process can appropriately ground knowledge, so we need to restrict the kinds of processes that are “reliable.” If Bataille’s analysis of “intelligence” is right, Greco’s imagined examples are the work of “intelligence” and are thus limited because they must appeal to external authorities. We cannot possibly experience “The Case of the Helpful Demon” from the inside, nor can Greco. Bataille’s analysis requires that we ask how, if it’s *not even possible* to experience such a “strange and fleeting” process (or experience) from the inside, we can understand it. If Bataille is right, *and if* “The Case of the Helpful Demon” is “experience,” it is not logically demonstrable. Its proper place in a logical argument is unclear. Of course we cannot determine whether or not Greco’s examples are “experience,” but we ought to question the use of a technique that relies on an understanding of experiences that *cannot*

certainly be highly reliable; but the resulting belief—that he has a brain lesion—will have little by way of warrant for S’ [Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* p. 199]” (“Agent Reliabilism” 285).

⁵² “As a second example, consider ‘The Case of the Absurd Reasoner.’ Having little understanding of biology, but fascinated by deterministic explanations of human behavior, Charles reasons as follows. If he witnesses two people order the same fruit drink on the same day, he concludes on that basis that they are genetically related. As it turns out, his whimsical reasoning process is perfectly reliable, since everyone is genetically related” (ibid).

be experienced by the author or his readers. I take this to be part of Bataille's concern about "intelligence."

This methodological choice—to speak knowledgeably about what has not been (or cannot be) experienced—is not unique to virtue epistemology. Bataille associates all of philosophy with this tendency of "intelligence," and his initial separation of "experience" and "intelligence" solidifies as he compares "experience" to philosophy: "The difference between inner experience and philosophy resides principally in this: that in experience, what is stated is nothing, if not a means and even, as much as a means, an obstacle; what counts is no longer the statement of wind, but the wind" (13). If (inner) "experience" says nothing, offers nothing to be logically demonstrated – and if this is what principally separates it from philosophy – then philosophy, like intelligence, is the movement of *offering something* logically demonstrable or *capable* of saying something about something. This means that whatever "experience" may be capable of stating, it can only do so for the one *living* or experiencing "inner experience," and it cannot say anything to/for those not attempting to live "experience"⁵³.

Feature 2.7 (of Experientiality): Meaning in Affect

Bataille claims that the endlessness or goal-lessness of experience leads to nonmeaning, and to the anguish of nonmeaning remaining (at least partially) meaningless. (In a reply to

⁵³ It might seem that such a claim is a cop-out, but I claim that it is *not*, due to the fact that "inner experience" is not an object of comprehension but is a *state*. If Bataille were to claim that "inner experience" is an object of comprehension, available from the outside, and that it is *also* a state, this would be untenable. But as it stands, he only claims that "inner experience" is a state. Bataille is describing the state and its elements.

Sartre included in *On Nietzsche*⁵⁴). The only other sense Bataille is comfortable associating with nonmeaning is *intoxication*. The meaning that nonmeaning has, according to Bataille, is the meaning contained in the fact that it (nonmeaning) intoxicates him. This is an *affective* meaning. Bataille happily concedes to Sartre that (inner) experience is equivalent to “the pleasure of drinking a glass of spirits or feeling the sun’s warmth at the beach,” claiming that inner experience remaining/culminating in such frivolity only produces anguish (ON 173). From this it would seem that Sartre’s criticism of inner experience as mere “emptiness” is a claim that inner experience does not have adequate or satisfactory *ends*. “Emptiness” in this sense is an accusation of a lack of *telos*. Bataille is not bothered by this. Bataille *wanted* inner experience to be aimless but affectively productive. This is significant with regard to knowledge and nonknowledge:

Sartre is right in relation to me to recall the *myth of Sisyphus*, though ‘in relation to me’ here equates to ‘in relation to humanity,’ I suppose. What can be expected of us is to go as far as possible and not to stop. What by contrast, humanly speaking, can be *criticized* are endeavors whose only meaning is some relation to moments of completion. Is it possible for me to go further? I won’t wait to coordinate my efforts in that case—I’ll go further. I’ll take the risk. And readers, free not to venture after me, will often take advantage of that same freedom! The critics are right to scent danger here! But let me in turn point out a greater danger, one that comes from methods that, adequate only to an *outcome* of knowledge, confer on individuals whom they limit a sheerly *fragmentary existence*—an existence that is mutilated with respect to the *whole* that remains inaccessible (ON 174-5).

If inner experience were *not* aimless—if it had a simple, definitive outcome—the outcome would be knowledge. And experience is *necessarily different* from methods of contemplation and contestation which set out with knowledge as their outcome. Hence inner experience’s relation to nonknowledge: inner experience produces some absence of

⁵⁴ “Reply to Jean-Paul Sartre (Defense of *Inner Experience*),” 1945, Appendix IV of *On Nietzsche*, pages 169-76. Sartre’s critique appeared in *Cahiers du Sud* under the title “A New Mystic.”

knowledge, and it does not seek knowledge or *anything in particular* as a goal, paving the way for nonknowledge.

Inner experience is also different from “methods” which require an individual to live a “fragmentary existence,” separate and apart from some “whole” which remains inaccessible to them. This separation from some whole is a *greater danger* than the danger of a task as Sisyphean as endless contestation. Bataille’s claim that inner experience is *not* the kind of method which requires individuals to live fragmentedly, and separate, from some essential whole recalls his distinction between “continuity” and “discontinuity.” Bataille is suggesting that inner experience allows him to live *with* access to a whole—as *part* of the whole—that would otherwise (with other methods) remain inaccessible. The method which entails inaccessibility to the whole recalls discontinuity, and the method of being part of or caught up in the whole (inner experience) recalls continuity. It matters little what particular “method” or methods Bataille is using to describe inner experience. What matters in identifying such methods is that they are methods that expect knowledge as the outcome and that they achieve the outcome by limiting individuals to fragmentary existences without access to the whole of which they are seeking part (in the form of “knowledge”). We will not see this concern for continuity in our virtue epistemology conversation, nor will we see knowledge characterized as fragmenting, or splintering.

In *Sensible Ecstasy*, Amy Hollywood offers her analysis of Jean-Paul Sartre’s critique of Bataille in relation to Bataille’s desire for continuity over and above any desire for identifiable outcomes: “Sartre’s and Bataille’s opposing attitudes toward human projects

are crucial here. Sartre insists that to be human is to engage in projects; Bataille argues that inner experience is the opposite of project” (30). (And inner experience is especially *not* a project of self-improvement.) Thus Bataille “generates endlessly recursive negations of his own attempt to provide a method for attaining inner experience” (ibid). According to Hollywood, this is ultimately the problem Sartre has with all of *Inner Experience*; that is, it has no method, it offers no clear goal, it is useless, it is not a *project*. “For Sartre, if inner experience does not give rise to new enterprises it is worth nothing more than ‘the pleasure of drinking a glass of alcohol or of warming oneself in the sun at the beach’ [ON 173]. Such experiences are, for Sartre, ‘useless’” (SE 31). Excesses are permissible for Sartre, Hollywood writes, as long as they are channeled fully into project—whether the project is political or personal. “Only if these excesses are contained by project can they be meaningful and useful” (SE 33). However, the intoxication that inner experience and its nonmeaning produce are all we need to reply to Sartre: nonmeaning is not a total absence of meaning. Nonmeaning provides *some kind of meaning* in the form of intoxication, of *affect*. We will see that the same is true of nonknowledge: nonknowledge is not a total absence of knowledge, and its clearest meaning is an affective meaning. Nonknowledge does not have a particular kind of recuperable use.

Inner Experience, Inner Experience, and Nonknowledge

Bataille closes his reply to Sartre with a description of inner experience itself: it is the movement of “willing a knowledge beyond practical ends” (ON 176). Bataille acknowledges that this willing “can’t be indefinitely continued” (ibid).

Knowledge “beyond practical ends” is nonknowledge. Inner Experience (the text and the concept) is thus a method and a non-method for arriving at nonknowledge. *If reading Inner Experience* moves one to pursue experience, it opens up the possibility of arriving at nonknowledge. The “method” inspires anguish because it produces only knowledge beyond practical ends—useless pseudo-knowledge. The method looks, sounds, and seems like mystical ecstasy from the outside, but, according to Bataille, it can be and is understood differently from the “inside⁵⁵.” The method of inner experience is not just an avenue to nonknowledge; it is partially constitutive of nonknowledge. It is an element of nonknowledge.

Element 3: Threshold Position

“Bataille envisages the arrival of thought at the gates of nonknowledge only to the extent that thought would have exhausted its ‘resources’” (Robert Sasso, “Georges Bataille and the Challenge to Think,” *On Bataille* 47).

“One side of nonknowledge is chaos; the other, system. Knowledge forms a bridge between the two banks. Knowledge as such is a space of transformation” (Michel Serres, *The Parasite* 73)

⁵⁵ The issue of inner experience being intelligible from the “inside” is both a success and a failure of *Inner Experience*. Hollywood writes: “We can read Bataille, then, as demonstrating both what he *has* communicated to Sartre and where his efforts at communication fail; insofar as Sartre has glimpsed the excess, the fleshly promiscuity and unbounded emotion of Bataille’s inner experience, communication takes place. Sartre’s rejection of that experience in the name of philosophical coherence, universalizability, and project, however, marks the failure of Bataille’s text. He has not elicited inner experience in his reader and so, ultimately, his text (or his reader?) fails” (*Sensible Ecstasy* 35).

The position of nonknowledge in relation to knowledge is what I call a “threshold position.” Important to its threshold position is the “non” in “nonknowledge.” It is not a “non” in the sense of negation or opposition. Ray Brassier has described what he calls the “non-philosophy” of François Laruelle in just such a way, akin to the “non” in “non-Euclidean” geometry:

[...] not as a negation or denial of philosophy, but as suspending a specific structure (the philosophical equivalent of Euclid’s fifth axiom concerning parallels) which Laruelle sees as constitutive of the traditional practice of philosophy. New possibilities of thought become available once that structure has been suspended and non-philosophy is an index of those philosophically un-envisageable possibilities (“Axiomatic Heresy: The non-philosophy of François Laruelle,” *Radical Philosophy* 121, p. 25).

If nonknowledge were “a-knowledge” it would be the absence of knowledge. If it were “ir-knowledge” or “un-knowledge,” it would be the negation of knowledge. Sticking with the Latin roots, nonknowledge is closer to “not-knowledge.” But this cannot mean that nonknowledge is strictly *not-knowledge*. The relationship of nonknowledge to knowledge can be explained with Bataille’s description of what makes excess possible: “[O]nly the impossibility of continuing growth makes way for squander. Hence the real excess does not begin until the growth of the individual or group has reached its limits” (*Accursed Share* 29). At full epistemic capacity, what could have been useful intellectual activity becomes excessive, wasteful intellectual activity. Nonknowledge is thus not ignorance or total absence of knowledge, but a challenging not-knowing that occurs at a limit—at the continuous and permanent threshold of—knowing. Because in the next chapter we will see that I am calling nonknowledge *epistemic* expenditure, I maintain that its most easily identifiable incarnations occur when a limit in thought, in thinking, in problem-solving—in

“useful” mental activity—is crossed. When thought has “exhausted its resources,” (Sasso *ibid*) pushed past a limit of usefulness. Nonknowledge is thus an *alternate epistemology*. Following the “non” of Laruelle, nonknowledge makes “new possibilities of thought” available (Brassier *ibid*).

Bataille did not identify nonknowledge’s position as a threshold position, but he did lay the groundwork for my description. According to Bataille, nonknowledge occurs as a natural, necessary byproduct of the dissolution of knowledge (AC 74), which itself occurs at the height of knowledge, only when the “summit” of knowledge is reached (*ibid*).

[K]nowledge leads to the limit, because knowledge as a willful comportment is motivated by a relation to the limit. Just as the *interdit* called for transgression, through an intimate accord hidden within its illusory opposition, knowledge calls to *non-savoir* as its violent complement, its hidden condition, its silent end. ‘The non-essence of the will to know arises’: it is not reason that motivates the desire to know—no more than it was reason that instituted the *interdit*. The desire to know is violent—is *violence* [...] It is an exigency conditioned by survival and by death. It leads, through its privileged illusion of objectivity and the possession of truth, inexorably to its limit. The experience of this limit is *non-savoir*” (Joseph Liberton, “Bataille and Communication,” *On Bataille* 217).

Limits can be thresholds. Instead of being final, they are thresholds—a permanent zone of openness to transformation. What we are capable of doing is not once and for all determined. We can experience a limit as a final limit—a necessary stopping-point—or we can see if the limit is not perhaps as final or as *real* as it seems. Understanding that limits are thresholds is the key. This is a quasi-Deleuzian point. “Deleuze has an almost mathematical definition of the limit, as that which one never really reaches.⁵⁶” (Rosi

⁵⁶ This is opposed to a Lacanian understanding of limits: “Whereas for Lacan limits are wounds or scars, i.e., marks of internal lacerations and irreplaceable losses and for liberal thoughts limits are frontiers that cannot

Braidotti, “The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible,” *Deleuze and Philosophy* 10). Thus understanding the position of nonknowledge in relation to knowledge is not a matter of determining exactly *where* knowledge “ends” and nonknowledge “begins”; it is a moment when we are faced with something *unthinkable, unknowable, un-communicable, or even heretical*, and it is a matter of understanding that moment not as a final marker of a limit, but as a threshold. As *somewhere between* clear thought or discourse (that which can be clearly, reliably communicated, translated into knowledge, or seen as a contribution to the accepted scholarship) and something like a-knowledge or un-knowledge: a wild and entirely indescribable terrain. When we have utterly exhausted or clicked off our thinking and knowing resources, we begin to arrive in the region of nonknowledge. We’ve seen that this is perhaps uniquely possible in erotic experience, but it is not limited to thinking or knowing during, or about, erotic experience. Nonknowledge can occur when we are wondering about the structure of the universe. It can happen when a child asks us what time is. Certain events or experiences can occasion nonknowledge, but they are not *the form* of nonknowledge. In keeping with the threshold position of nonknowledge, we will see that it is a *part* of knowledge and knowledge-creation, despite the fact that virtue epistemology—and epistemology in general—seeks to strictly limit what kinds of processes or procedures can result in knowledge, and thereby excludes processes that might be nonknowledge. (And thus cannot ever really or *fully* be excluded.)

be trespassed without the required visas or permissions—for Deleuze limits are simultaneously points of passage or thresholds and markers of sustainability” (ibid 217-8).

Chapter 3: Nonknowledge is Epistemic Expenditure

“The sacred is *par excellence* the sphere of ‘*La Part maudite*’ [...], sphere of sacrificial expenditure, of wealth and of death; sphere of a ‘general’ economy which refutes all the axioms of economy as it is usually understood [...] It is also the sphere of non-knowledge” (Jean Baudrillard⁵⁷).

Introduction

This chapter is an argument and an explanation. Firstly, it is my argument that nonknowledge is an essentially *expenditure-related* concept, and that it is *because* nonknowledge is expenditure that nonknowledge can be a feature of knowledge-creation. That is, this chapter is an argument that nonknowledge should be understood primarily as an instance or example of expenditure, and thus, as a *positive* term with a positive definition. (As an “open” or “general” economy of knowledge.) Building on this, I will argue in the next chapter that an understanding of nonknowledge as (epistemic) expenditure makes possible an understanding of nonknowledge as productive of knowledge. In order to make these arguments, however (and secondly), we need to examine the most significant element of nonknowledge—expenditure—and we need to do so while continually returning to the virtue epistemology conversation for points of contrast and clarity.

Expenditure will turn out to be the most significant element of nonknowledge because nonknowledge itself is an act of expenditure. Nonknowledge is thought-waste or mental

⁵⁷ Jean Baudrillard, “When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy,” *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, 191-5.

energy-expenditure. It is thought-play rather than thought-work (USN 129).

Nonknowledge is pseudo-knowledge partially outside of—and with a complicated relationship to—utility. And expenditure is *waste*. It is not total or complete waste, but it is the act of wasting something and thereby removing or displacing it (at least partially) from economic utility. The claim that nonknowledge is an act or example of expenditure is a claim I make explicit through Bataille⁵⁸. Nonknowledge is thus best conceived of as an “economy.” That is, this *epistemic, general* economy is best made visible by seeing the conversation in our virtue epistemology cluster, by contrast, as a *restricted* economy driven by accumulation.

Element 4: Expenditure, “General Economy”

A note on the relationship between expenditure and “general economy,” a term I (and others) use in this chapter: General economy is a “principle.” The chief principle of general economy is that there is always excess (*The Accursed Share vol. 1* pp. 21-3). This excess is wasted through destruction (of itself). In fact, excess is *necessarily* a byproduct of growth, and excess *must* be destroyed and/or “not used.” When limits to growth have been reached, the excess must be destroyed. This is the basic ontological principle of general economy⁵⁹. “The general economy, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, which by definition cannot be utilized.” (“Méthode de Méditation, *Oeuvres Complètes* 5, 215). Bataille is not claiming that there is only excess with regard to the human population or a particular currency; his use of “economy” refers specifically to the

⁵⁸ Bataille comes close to making this same claim, but does not make it.

⁵⁹ When pressed on this (by Sartre), Bataille says, unequivocally: “There still exists a considerable overflow, an overflow that is necessary to expend as we wish” (USN 61, “Discussion on Sin”).

interaction of forces and energies within a particular realm, and that realm is *global*⁶⁰: “On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess” (AC 23; emphasis Bataille’s). The global nature of the principle of general economy—that there is always excess—does not allow for general economy to be pigeonholed as a principle applicable only to human reproduction and population-growth, for example. The ontological principle of general economy is that there is always excess, for *all* living matter⁶¹. Arkady Plotnitsky calls general economy a “theoretical framework” as well as a *science* (*Complementarity* 19). As a theoretical framework and a science, general economy is a way of understanding the world. It contains the notion of expenditure.

A restricted, or closed, economy, by contrast, is driven by a logic of scarcity, by the principle that the basic condition of life is not excess but scarcity. It is “predicated on the notion of a primal scarcity and the necessity to produce and accumulate in order to safeguard against this scarcity that perpetually threatens existence. It corresponds to economy viewed from the perspective of fear and anxiety” (RBN 64⁶²). So we find two sorts of economy in Bataille’s writing: restricted (or closed) and general (or open).

⁶⁰ Some claim that the realm of general economy is in fact *universal* and *cosmic*, and not just global (See Richard A. Lee Jr.’s “Politics and the Thing: Excess as a Matter of Politics” and Allan Stoekl’s “Excess and Depletion: Bataille’s Surprisingly Ethical Model of Expenditure,” chapters 11 and 12 of *Reading Bataille Now*, pages 240-81.) Stoekl’s reading of general economy and expenditure stresses the human capacity for awareness of expenditure, which allows us to strive to *be like the universe* and the cosmic tendency to expend.

⁶¹ “While biology continues to conceptualize a living organism as open to its environment and driven in its displacements and initiatives by lacks and need, Bataille found in his survey of organisms from the most simple to the most complex a production of energy in excess of what the organism needs, energy that has to be discharged. In his investigations of human economic systems from those of hunter-foragers, nomads, and sedentary agricultural societies to feudal, mercantile, and industrial societies, Bataille found that even societies with the most rudimentary equipment produce luxury products, that all economic systems tend to produce excess beyond what answers to needs or even wants” (Alphonso Lingis, foreword in *Reading Bataille Now* viii).

⁶² Pierre Lamarche, “The Use Value of G. A. M. V. Bataille,” pages 54-72.

Feature 4.1 (of Expenditure): Non-Productivity

General economy and expenditure are closely linked. Expenditure *operates in the mode of general economy*—or *according to* general economy. Unproductive expenditure – characterized by unrecoverable *loss*, as Bataille calls it – is similar enough to be sometimes inseparable from the notion of “sacrifice.”⁶³ Unproductive expenditure is non-teleological. Unproductive expenditure is not applicable “the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production” (ibid). With this, Bataille means to claim that unproductive expenditure is unproductive, and it is unproductive in *many senses*. “[L]uxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, [and] perverse sexual activity” are modes of activity that stand in contrast to productive modes in economy, politics, religion, and interpersonal relations. Bataille is claiming that unproductive expenditure happens. Bataille is not yet (in 1933) making claims with regard to the *value* of unproductive expenditure; he is claiming that unproductive expenditure *happens*. He calls it “pure loss.” Something escapes productivity and is a loss to the system—an “accursed” loss: “that *extra thing*—that *accursed share*—that never bows down to the yoke of utility” (Winnubst RBN 7-8).

Bataille begins “The Notion of Expenditure”⁶⁴ (1933) with the following:

⁶³ This becomes especially clear by the time of the publication of *The Accursed Share* (1967). In *Reading Bataille Now*, Jesse Goldhammer writes: “Bataille’s political, economic, and philosophical targets are general, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing: concentrations of state power, capitalism, and utilitarianism. In order to liberate themselves, human beings must dare to sacrifice that which enslaves them. Paradoxically, it is the anguish of having nothing left to do that generates this will to sacrifice” (25).

⁶⁴ “The Notion of Expenditure” was published in *La Critique Sociale* 7 in January of 1933, then reprinted in Bataille’s (posthumous) *Oeuvres Complètes I* (1970); most recently, in 1985, it was translated by Allan Stoekl and published in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*.

Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinct parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals' productive activity in a given society; it is therefore a question simply of the fundamental condition of productive activity. The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves. Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word *expenditure* for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production (VE 118).

Loss that is unrecoverable is loss that cannot be reinvested in order to produce value or meaning. The peculiar loss involved with expenditure is loss that *cannot* “serve as a means to the end of production” (ibid). Loss that is temporary and recoverable is not unproductive expenditure; it is temporary loss that can be reinvested in production, value, or meaning. We see highly recoverable and re-investable loss in Las Vegas, for example, where the businessman goes for a wild weekend *in order to* return to work refreshed and productive. This is a temporary indulgence in expenditure for soon-to-be-recovered personal gain.

Bataille is making an ontological claim about human beings: *We just are* the sorts of creatures who squander; i.e., squandering is “necessary.” Yet squandering is unjustifiable or taken to be *bad* in the production-obsessed twentieth century, including the (production-obsessed) philosophical work of the twentieth century. Recall Sartre’s primary objection to *Inner Experience*: that it is useless, frivolous, and unproductive. “Waste,” “squandering,” and “loss” will always have negative connotations in a time (post industrial revolution) and place (the Western world) so defined by production and productivity: “on the whole, any general judgment of social activity implies the principle that all individual effort, in order

to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (ibid 117). And it is not simply the case that we are necessarily squandering creatures; *all our efforts at production and conservation are in fact secondary to expenditure*, whether we recognize this or not. Squandering is primary; production is secondary. “[I]f it is true that production and acquisition in their development and changes of form introduce a variable that must be understood in order to comprehend historical processes, they are, however, still only means subordinated to expenditure” (ibid 120).

When we labor under the assumption that we are producing and conserving, we are not *just* producing and conserving; we are also *primarily* expending. Production and conservation are secondary to expenditure. That is, production and conservation occur, but they are smaller movements within the larger movement of expenditure. “In the final analysis it is clear that a worker works in order to obtain the violent pleasures of coitus (in other words, he accumulates in order to spend)” (“The Use Value of D. A. F. De Sade” VE 99). Even in the realm of formal economics, for example, what is assumed to be the primary motivation for exchange (*acquisition*) is, according to Bataille, only a complicated covering-up of the general “need to destroy and lose” (ibid 121). In other words, while classical economics assumes that we are motivated by a primary need to acquire, we are in fact motivated by a deeper and more primary need to expend⁶⁵.

⁶⁵ On this, Bataille says: “Classical economics imagined that primitive exchange occurred in the form of barter; it had no reason to assume, in fact, that a means of acquisition such as exchange might have as its origin not the need to acquire that it satisfies today, but the contrary need, the need to destroy and lose” (VE 121). Among contemporary economists, similar claims are made. George Gilder—Ronald Reagan’s favorite economist—draws on Mauss and Lévi-Strauss (in 1981) to claim that all “capital investments are made without a predetermined return” (*Wealth and Poverty* 35). Gilder also writes: “The unending offering of entrepreneurs, investing jobs, accumulating inventories—all long before any return is received, all without any assurance that the enterprise will not fail—constitute a pattern of giving that dwarfs in extent and in essential generosity any primitive rite of exchange” (ibid). (Jean-Joseph Goux compares Gilder’s notion of

Brief Return to Virtue Epistemology

If expenditure is a squandering of excess that *must* occur, nonknowledge, as an act of expenditure, is a squandering of excess “mental energy” or “thought” that also *must occur* once a limit in thinking or knowing has been reached. The ontological claim contains the epistemological claim. In philosophy in general, a loss that is not recuperable is mental activity that solves no problems, contributes to no discussion, provides no temporary relief from fatigue so as to return to useful thought-work, or is otherwise not an *investment*. (Knowledge “beyond practical ends,” as Bataille says (ON 176).) Mental activity understood as investment—as it is in the tradition of philosophy—requires utility. Utility may take the form of acquisition, as it does, for example, for Zagzebski and Sosa: acquisition of concepts, of discrete or connected units of knowledge, of authorship and ownership, and of the time required to make such acquisitions. Such acquisition (utility) requires telos.

Let’s now pause and return with these insights to our virtue epistemology conversation, first about acquisition, and then about utility. On Zagzebski’s account of the value of knowledge, “virtuous believing” (i.e., believing motivated by “a love of truth”) is synonymous with *valuable believing*. We are to understand that virtuous believing is intrinsically valuable. It is only this believing—which is valuable on account of its (intrinsically valuable) virtuous motivation—that can explain the value of knowledge. This is because the value of knowledge cannot be explained separately from the value of living

expenditure to Bataille’s in “General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism” in *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (196-213).

a good life. The question for Zagzebski is what gets added to *virtuous believing* to make it knowledge, and *not* what is added to true belief to make it knowledge (“The Search for the Epistemic Good” 17-8). Virtue is dispositional here. What we have from Zagzebski, then, is a conception of knowledge that includes in the very definition of knowledge *the way in which the knowledge was acquired* and the acquisition of knowledge itself is so important that it must be appropriately motivated according to one’s dispositions. Again we see the influence of Aristotle. Zagzebski claims that actions must be analyzed in terms of virtuous character, and that intellectual virtues must be understood in terms of motivation for truth and knowledge. Zagzebski writes:

By a pure virtue theory I mean a theory that makes the concept of a right act derivative from the concept of a virtue or some inner state of a person that is a component of virtue. This is a point both about conceptual priority and about moral ontology. In a pure virtue theory the concept of a right act is defined in terms of the concept of a virtue or a component of virtue such as motivation. Furthermore, the property of rightness is something that emerges from the inner traits of persons (*Virtues of the Mind* 79).

This follows Aristotle’s structure of the moral virtues as character traits that are both appropriately motivated and can be reliably, successfully put to use (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I-IV). In Zagzebski’s account, appropriate motivation (disposition) leads to the reliable, successful utility of acquisition.

If Bataille is right that expenditure is the way we operate—that we do just *expend*—Zagzebski’s emphasis on not just acquisition but the *right mode of acquisition* makes the problematic assumption that knowledge can and must be acquired, after being produced the *right way*, and the equally problematic assumption that *correct* acquisition or appropriation is the primary goal. But if Bataille’s notion of expenditure compels us, we

ought instead to ask where expenditure—always non-appropriable but *available*—is also occurring. And we ought to ask what value it might have for an open economy of knowledge.

Ernest Sosa explained that virtuous character traits include cognitive faculties, and that such virtuous cognitive faculties are meant to have a special value. In the case of Sosa's notion of performance reliabilism, virtuous cognitive faculties produce *good performances*. ("The 'chief' intellectual goods involve attributable truth-attainment, where one does hit the mark of truth through the quality of one's performance" (*Intellectual Virtue* 181).) Thus the value of good performances produced by virtuous cognitive faculties is an instrumental value, or a "praxical" value.

[I]t is the goods to be delivered that we really care about [...] One cares about cognitive systems in good working order not for their own sake, but for the truth-attaining performances that they enable. Much less does one care about good performances by cognitive systems 'in display rooms' isolated from the environments within which they would enable one attributably to attain the truth (ibid 181).

The value of a good epistemic performance is also to be found in its utility—that is, in addition to character-development. And the value of virtuous cognitive faculties is to be found in *their* utility, as producers of "good performance." Notice, also, that utility is tied to acquisition on Sosa's account; the value of performance is determined by instrumental worth, which is highly dependent on "truth-attaining." Sosa provides us with a model of knowledge that requires truth-acquisition as a measure of utility.

Nonknowledge as an “Open” or “General” Economy

How is nonknowledge an “open” economy? Nonknowledge is an “open” economy because it is *epistemic expenditure*. Nonknowledge occurs at a limit of thought, *as* excess, and it is destructive of knowledge. In Bataille’s early writing about expenditure (roughly 1927-1939), nonknowledge is not mentioned, so the relation nonknowledge has to expenditure is not yet clear in Bataille’s texts. Denis Hollier, however, links expenditure and nonknowledge in the entirety of Bataille’s oeuvre. In “The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille,” (*Bataille: A Critical Reader*) Hollier writes that Bataille’s unification of “thought (*la pensée*) and its expenditure (*la dépense*)” is a fundamental part of Bataille’s desire to challenge the dualism of knowing and doing, a desire found throughout Bataille’s work (66). “It is a strange relation which ties together these two worlds [thought and expenditure] with no common ground, whose unthinkable and impossible coexistence cannot be described in terms of an addition or a totality, never amounting to a total” (ibid). Nonetheless, the “two worlds” united by a “strange relation” must be understood not as a duality but a *pseudo-unity* requiring tension and “an ever unresolved dissatisfaction” (ibid 61). The “unresolved dissatisfaction” must exist because thought and expenditure are “radically incompatible,” in the face of their pseudo-unity (ibid 67). Hollier’s position brings to mind the unresolved dissatisfaction which is a necessary part of communicating nonknowledge, and the failure that is part of communication. (“This is also the profound meaning of nonknowledge. One must cease knowing (speaking) in order to experience” (USN 239); “Through language we can never grasp what matters to us, for it eludes in the form of interdependent propositions, and no central whole to which each of these can be

referred ever appears” (E 274).) Regarding thought and expenditure, my claim is that nonknowledge *is* the pseudo-unity of thought and expenditure.

Comparing nonknowledge to Zagzebski and Sosa’s conceptions of knowledge, the expenditure aspect of nonknowledge—the wasteful, useless, work-annihilating aspect—is arresting:

Today, like the other times, I am going to attempt to communicate my experience of nonknowledge to you. Of course, like the other times, I will fail. But first I would like to show you the extent of my failure. I can say precisely that if I had succeeded, the tangible contact between you and me would have had the nature not of work but of play...in play, my thought, the work of my thought, is annihilated (USN 129).

This is how we can understand nonknowledge as epistemic expenditure, and thus as an “open” economy of knowledge and a kind of alternate epistemology. Nonknowledge is thought-play that is partially destructive of thought-work. Recently, I saw this in action. I was watching my two and half year old daughter Sabine play. She had skinned her knee the day before. She was fascinated with the scab on her knee, and the band-aid that covered it, and how my parental affection had been different or new to her as I helped her clean the wound the day before. And this day, she was caretaker to her stuffed animals, telling me they had all hurt their knees, and they were crying, and she was helping them. As she played, being every version of a doctor or caretaker she could be, I realized—suddenly, almost stupidly—this form of play is the only way she can *learn*, how she can figure out, after the fact, after recuperation from the experience, what an injury is, what care is, how injuries elicit certain kinds of care, and who knows what else. The childish play is *precisely* the thing that is making knowledge possible, in this case.

But the elements of nonknowledge are not a- or anti-epistemic. We see in the quote above that Bataille believed that nonknowledge as thought-play *has something to offer*, that it could show us how to think *outside* of the “work of thought”; that is, outside utility, production, and acquisition. Such play, however, “annihilates” work. Thus thinking, knowing, and communicating what is known in a threshold, “alternate,” “open” position is destructive of the work-like aspects (*production and acquisition*) of thinking, knowing, and communicating what is known.

Feature 4.2 (of Expenditure): “Dual” (Relative) Utility and Non-Acquisition

Utility and its relation to nonknowledge is our next concern.

What is clear with regard to unproductive expenditure is (firstly) Bataille’s complete separation of unproductive expenditure and utility. Bataille aligns unproductive expenditure with action(s) completed for ends *other* than what he calls “classical utility;” that is, the subordination of everything to eventual acquisition, production, and conservation—*telos* (*Visions of Excess* 116). Bataille claims that the principle of “classical utility” is “insufficient” (VE 116). This does not mean that Bataille’s notion of unproductive expenditure is wholly a- or anti-utilitarian. Unproductive expenditure is *not purely* or entirely unproductive, despite his claim that excesses “by definition cannot be utilized” (*Méthode de Méditation* 5, 215). Bataille is drawing from Marcel Mauss’s (and others’) notion of potlatch to locate an expenditure that does not align with “classical

utility” but that also does not abandon all senses of “utility.” What is given in potlatch is destroyed (expended), and utility can be achieved through greater and greater destruction that in turn confers prestige on the destroyer. Utility takes the form of accumulated social capital. Bataille calls this utility a “relative utility”:

Potlatch excludes all bargaining and, in general, it is constituted by a considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and *obligating* a rival. The exchange value of the gift results from the fact that the donee, in order to efface the humiliation and respond to the challenge, must satisfy the obligation (incurred by him at the time of acceptance) to respond later with a more valuable gift, in other words, to return with interest. But the gift is not the only form of *potlatch*; it is equally possible to defy rivals through the spectacular destruction of wealth. It is through the intermediary of this last form that *potlatch* is reunited with religious sacrifice, since what is destroyed is theoretically offered to the mythical ancestors of the donees [...] *potlatch* is the opposite of a principle of conservation (VE 121-2).

The example of potlatch demonstrates a potential backdoor use-value of squandering. In the form of potlatch, squandering has particular and clear aims, and serves multiple particular and clear uses. The central claim is that unproductive expenditure has a relationship with utility that is not “classical,” not that expenditure has *no* relationship to utility other than opposition (VE 116-8).

The example of potlatch shows us the way in which all production and acquisition are tied to squandering and expenditure. That is, production and acquisition can never be fully purged of squandering and expenditure. So Bataille’s claim is twofold: potlatch is an example of unproductive expenditure, which cannot be entirely unproductive; and potlatch is *productive enough* to demonstrate that all production and acquisition are caught up in (unproductive) expenditure and squandering. This is the “relative utility” of potlatch and

expenditure which Bataille means to distinguish from what he calls “classical utility” (VE 116).

According to Bataille, what we call purely “classical utility” does not actually exist. Or, it is a lacuna. Classical utility is a principle invoked *as though* utility could be wholly and finally measured when it cannot. In fact, “there is nothing that permits one to define what is useful to man” (VE 116). Nothing permits us to define, once and for all, what is useful.

Utility *cannot be measured* once and for all:

Every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word *useful*—in other words, every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised, no matter who intervenes and what opinions are expressed—it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily warped and that the fundamental question is eluded. In fact, given the more or less divergent collection of present ideas, there is nothing that permits one to define what is useful to man. This lacuna is made fairly prominent by the fact that it is constantly necessary to return, in the most unjustifiable way, to principles that one would like to situate beyond utility and pleasure: *honor* and *duty* are hypocritically employed in schemes of pecuniary interest (VE 116).

Bataille is not leveling criticism at J.S. Mill’s *utils* or any particular conception of utility.

He is leveling criticism at the suggestion that *what is useful* can be established and proven, indubitably. Bataille is critical of what he sees as a kind of smug certainty.

In addition to this, Bataille claims, a principle of utility often serves as a front for “schemes of pecuniary interest,” or, the acquisition of goods. In these cases, principles *beyond* utility are in fact called on. Thus, classical utility operates according to a bad-faith set of rules.

The question of *what* is useful and *how* it can be determined as useful is always partly eluded, and justification is provided (for continued acquisition) in the form of general non-economic concepts like “honor” and “duty”—concepts which are themselves *outside* the

realm of classical utility. For Bataille this is more evidence that the broadly conceived notion of “classical utility” is an attempt to cover up the fact that what really motivates our actions is expenditure—the need to destroy and lose. And expenditure will never be able to operate according to the rules of classical utility because expenditure is *unjustifiable* and *unmeasurable*. It cannot pretend, as classical utility does, to be justifiable or measurable.

At this point we have to return to the idea of general economy. We recall that general economy disrupts utility. That which is lost—expended—cannot be made fully useful or accounted for. “From the first, the excess energy, if it cannot be used for growth, is lost. Moreover, in no way can this inevitable loss be accounted useful. It is only a matter of an acceptable loss, preferable to another that is regarded as unacceptable: a question of *acceptability*, not utility” (AC 31; emphasis Bataille’s). Restricted economy, on the other hand, insists that loss is recoverable—that is, that loss can be reinvested and made useful. But it is not quite this simple.

Jean Baudrillard praises the concept of general economy for attacking utility “in its root,” but Baudrillard is also critical of Bataille’s efforts to wholly separate general economy from utility. “Utility is, of course, an apparently positive principle of capital: accumulation, investment, depreciation, etc. But in fact it is, on Bataille’s account, a principle of powerlessness, an utter inability to expend [...] All economics [other than general economy] are founded on that which no longer can, no longer knows how, to expend itself, on that which is incapable of becoming the stake of a sacrifice [...] it is against economy as a limited social fact that Bataille wants to raise expenditure, death and sacrifice as total

social facts – such is the principle of general economy” (*Bataille* 192). Baudrillard claims that Bataille’s concept of general economy runs counter to the idea of economy “which governs our societies.” (Economy is understood here as a system of exchange of energy. Neither Bataille nor Baudrillard is using the *strictly financial* definition of economy.) “The central idea [of general economy] is that the economy which governs our societies results from a misappropriation of the fundamental human principle, which is a solar principle of expenditure” (*Bataille* 192). General economy is an appropriation of “the fundamental human principle” of expenditure, which separates general economy from any economy governed by use and production. Baudrillard stresses general economy’s separation from utility: “Bataille’s thought goes, beyond proper *political* economy (which in essence is regulated through exchanged-value), straight to the *metaphysical* principle of economy. Bataille’s target is utility, in its root” (*ibid*; emphases Baudrillard’s). According to Baudrillard, general economy’s relation to utility is what distinguishes it from all other forms of economy, or *restricted* economy/ies.

But Baudrillard is critical of Bataille’s concept of general economy for its presumed opposition to utility. General economy is “too much the flip side of accumulation” for Baudrillard (*ibid* 192). General economy “is still too economic, too much the flip side of accumulation, as transgression is too close to the inverse figure of prohibition” (*ibid*). And general economy may no longer be sufficient, Baudrillard claims, for challenging restricted economies. General economy is no longer defiant: “In an order which is no longer that of utility, but an *aleatory* order of value, pure expenditure, while retaining the romantic charm

of turning the economic inside out, is no longer sufficient for radical defiance” (ibid; emphasis Baudrillard’s). Baudrillard’s concern is addressed by Lee.

Richard A. Lee claims that general economy is *not* divorced (or divorceable) from utility fully, and that general economy expresses a “dual utility” (*Reading Bataille Now* 245). A “dual utility” is not exactly the same as Bataille’s notion of “relative utility,” but it follows from Bataille’s claims. Lee writes that excess “poses the ‘economic’ problem in that it is what constitutes the more basic wealth that circulates in this most general economy. The excess has to be put to work in growth, or it has to be spent in exuberant squandering, or it threatens the very existence of all beings within the system” (245). In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille also says that our only choice or agency in this matter is limited to *how* the necessary squandering occurs. The real “problem,” then, consists in the fact that we must *see* or find the excess, and then we must use our agency to direct, or *use*, the squandering of the excess.

So the principle of general economy poses a new problem: We must *see* or *know* the excess in order to figure out how best to *use* it. What if we cannot see the excess? What if it is invisible? According to Lee’s reading of Bataille and general economy, if this is the case, we lose the opportunity to channel the squandering as it happens. The notion of “channeling” or “using” excess—if it can be seen or known—leads me to the next consideration: the challenge of finding the *dual sense* of utility in expenditure. Lee’s contribution to the notion of general economy consists in forcing us to consider carefully this dual sense of utility.

Different than the “relative utility” Bataille defines in “The Notion of Expenditure,” the utility expressed by, or present in, general economy (by the time of the publication of *The Accursed Share*) is *dual*. Expenditure without return is not *purely* without return. No expenditure is purely productive *or* non-productive; the excess that *is* there ought to be visible or knowable and then it ought to be *used*. This fact requires that some element of “classical” utility be present at a particular point in a complex process. However, to deny that expenditure can be partially useless or without return is to deny that excess exists (and escapes). The excess is what remains after “classical” utility has come near or arrived at some limit of use, at a *threshold*. The excess and the productive require each other. The second kind of utility, then, is the utility expressed in the necessity of expenditure: expenditure without return is useful insofar as it makes its partner (classical utility or production) then possible. Lee writes:

[...] utility now has a dual function. Its proper function is in the operation of growth and reproduction. However, there is a strange kind of utility present in the glorious exuberance, for it allows for life when the limits of growth have been reached. However, this inevitable loss cannot be accounted for as utility except that it is useful for the system as a whole. In other words, the sphere of utility itself presupposes an entire sphere of expenditure without return that makes possible the sphere of utility in which energy is used for productive purposes. Without the sphere of glorious exuberance, utility itself will come to be destructive—un-useful (RBN 245).

The dual utility of general economy is not the same utility of a restricted economy⁶⁶. A restricted economy is entirely utility-focused, such that excess, the useless, and waste are

⁶⁶ Allan Stoekl describes a related duality, but of expenditure, not utility: “Just as there are two sources of economic value—muscle power and inanimate fuel power—there are two kinds of expenditure. The energy derived from fossil or inanimate fuel expenditure, for production or destruction, is different in quality, not merely in quantity, from muscular energy. No intimacy (in the Bataillean sense) can be envisaged through the expenditure of fossil fuels. The very use of nonorganic fuels—coal, oil, nuclear—implies the effort to maximize production through quantification, the augmentation of sheer quantity of things. Raw material becomes, as Heidegger put it, a standing reserve, a measurable mass whose sole function is to be processed,

invisible or unreadable and *unhypothesizable*. All that could be characterized as waste—and allowed to exist as waste—is reinvested productively in utility. One of Bataille’s early examples of waste or expenditure without return—adornment with jewels—is understood in a restricted economy as purely useful. What could be understood as waste is reinvested as useful in a restricted economy: adornment is *merely* a means of accumulating social capital, through conspicuously displaying wealth. But a fuller analysis of general economy sees that the picture is more complicated than this. In the example of my daughter at play, this means that some of my daughter’s play can be understood as “classically” useful because it is the means by which she learns something and acquires knowledge. The play is first and foremost *pure* play, but some of the play lays the groundwork for knowledge *after the fact*. But not all of the play can be reinvested and made meaningful or readable as knowledge. Some of it is pure play—tinkering and experimenting and *trying*—without regard for the future, for learning, for sharpening any set of skills. It is just expenditure of energy, much of it intellectual or mental energy. It is a “loss” to the system.

The senses of utility applicable to general economy are not so marked, however, to justify claiming that general economy is really just utility-driven closed economy with a different name. Despite the utility involved in general economy, *loss occurs*. This is Bataille’s point,

and ultimately discarded. It is useful, nothing more (or less), at least for the moment before it is discarded; it is related to the self only as a way of aggrandizing the latter’s stability and position. There is no internal limit, no *angoisse* or pain before which we shudder; we deplete the earth’s energy reserves as blandly and indifferently as the French revolutionaries (according to Hegel) chopped off heads: as if one were cutting off a head of cabbage. ‘Good’ duality has completely given way to ‘bad.’ [...] Bataille, then, should have distinguished clearly between intimate [“good”] and impersonal [“bad”] varieties of wasteful expenditure. It is not merely a question of our attitude toward waste, our ‘self-consciousness’: also fundamental is *how* the wastage is carried out” (RBN 270-1; appears again, but re-worded, in *Bataille’s Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* p. 56-7).

and it is Lee's as well. If the possibility of at least partially unrecoverable loss is not recognized at the outset, we are in the realm of "closed" or "restricted" economy.

Brief Return to Virtue Epistemology

My claim in the next chapter will be that the virtue epistemology conversation operates as though it were a closed or restricted economy, when it is in fact an open or general economy. I will flag that larger future claim with some initial claims and questions here.

The virtue epistemology conversation consists of individuals working together to tighten definitions of acceptable belief, to draw the correct borders of processes by which the acceptable belief is produced, to reign in the communication of the belief, and to establish status as epistemologists from these efforts. This acts as a kind of border patrol of true belief and knowledge, and so a concern for all three interlocutors discussed must be ignoring, disqualifying, or eliminating unacceptable processes, methods of communication, etc. Looking at the conversation, establishing what *counts* and ought to be considered as evidence, justification, motivation (and adequate communicability of them) is a clear concern. For Zagzebski, the focus is having the appropriate motivation when looking for knowledge; for Greco it is using appropriate processes to discover knowledge; for Sosa it is "performing" the acquisition and the communication of beliefs appropriately. All else is waste—treated as waste—insofar as it is assumed to be ignorable or not worth considering. This treatment of waste implies a classical notion of utility. The question to ask in the next chapter, however, is what would happen if we applied a dual utility to the virtue

epistemology conversation. If the virtue epistemology conversation knowingly operated as an open, general economy, what could it do with the “channeled” excess? That is, if virtue epistemology could *see* the possibility of dual utility, what else could it do with the relevant or interesting excess?

Features 4.3 and 4.4 (of Expenditure): Destruction and Unmeasurability

Occurring at a limit of knowledge, nonknowledge is destructive of knowledge and some senses of *meaning*, particularly measurability: “The ultimate problem of knowledge is the same as that of consumption. No one can both know and not be destroyed; no one can both consume wealth and increase it” (*The Accursed Share vol. 1* 74). The destructive and unmeasurable aspects of nonknowledge become clear visible we consider nonknowledge in the context of general economy.

General economy “accounts for or relates to the operation [...] of loss and expenditure” (Plotnitsky, *Complementarity* 21). That is, loss and expenditure are internal to and part of general economy. Recall that general economy and expenditure are not the same (despite the former “containing” or “accounting for” the latter), but that they are also not easily separable. One constitutive feature of general economy, and thus of expenditure, is that it is *not* “predicated on the value of meaning” (C 21). A “restricted” economy, on the other hand, “be it Adam Smith’s, Hegel’s, or Marx’s, would still be predicated on the value of meaning, and particularly conscious meaning—meaningful investment, meaningful expenditure of labor and capital, meaningful production and conservation” (ibid 20-1).

Plotnitsky is here speaking specifically of political and fiscal economies, but he is clear that the designation “general economy” can apply to any economy, including epistemic ones. Similarly, Rodolphe Gasché claims that we can understand an “economy” as productive of meaning within a particular discourse: “We have to understand ‘economy’ here as an organization of the relation of forces that produce meaning within a discourse” (*Georges Bataille, Phenomenology and Phantasmology* 15). Our concern is the difference between two kinds of economy on offer: a restricted, closed economy and a general, open economy.

If a “restricted” economy is “predicated on the value of meaning,” and a general economy is *not*, expenditure becomes a particularly important element of general economy: it is the action (or “movement”) that embodies useless loss, *without regard for meaning* of the loss. Expenditure is the means by which “the value of meaning” is shown to have little or no bearing on the functioning of general economy. In this regard, expenditure is the key to general economy and its unique property of not being “predicated on the value of meaning.” Nonknowledge and expenditure share this feature. Like expenditure, nonknowledge is *a loss of value of meaning*. Like expenditure, nonknowledge is *not* “predicated on the value of meaning.” Nonknowledge does have affective meaning, as we saw in chapter two (Feature 2.7 of Experientiality: Meaning in Affect). The meaning found in nonknowledge is an “intoxicating” nonmeaning, understood in positive terms as an *affective meaning* with no clear goal (ON 173). Nonknowledge thus resists teleology.

Supporting this, Plotnitsky claims that “value” measured in terms of “meaning” *is* teleological analysis⁶⁷.

Recall Bataille’s assertions that nonknowledge doesn’t “lead anywhere” (ON 172-3), and that inner experience is a “struggle against the spell in which useful language holds us” (USN 16). These are two of the ways in which nonknowledge resists teleological analysis and measurement qua knowledge or truth-bearing. Nonknowledge cannot be measured, tracked, or accounted for—assigned a value based on its meaning—in ways we see, for example, our virtue epistemology conversation measure, track, and account for. Greco offers a clear example:

On the approach I prefer, knowledge is to be understood as true belief grounded in intellectual virtue, where an intellectual virtue is understood as a reliable cognitive ability or power. This approach is a version of reliabilism, since it understands knowledge as true belief produced by a reliable process. But the approach places a restriction on what sort of reliable process can give rise to knowledge. Namely, only those processes that are grounded in the abilities or powers of the believer do so (“Virtue, Luck, and the Pyrrhonian Problematic” 27).

The measurability and accountability of a belief *and* a believer’s cognitive makeup is key to Greco’s account of knowledge. Meaning must be clear. Beliefs and a believer’s cognitive makeup must submit to teleological analysis via clear meaning (in the form of measurability and accountability). Zagzebski presents us with a similarly measurable account of knowledge:

My proposal, then, is this. An epistemic agent gets credit for getting a true belief when she arrives at a true belief because of her virtuous intellectual acts motivated by a love of truth. She gets credit for getting a desirable true belief when she arrives at a desirable true belief because of acts motivated by love of true beliefs that are components of a good life (“The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good” 24).

⁶⁷ Plotnitsky does not provide a working definition of his sense of “meaning,” but given the emphasis on utility in the sections discussed here, I gather that his sense of “meaning” has something to do with that which is explicable (and understandable) in terms of utility.

The value assigned to both beliefs and believers is dependent on the discernable—trackable, measurable—motivations of the believer(s). The unit of measure in virtue epistemology is thus utility, which can only be determined via the particular accountability required of intellectual virtue.

In relation, then, to Plotnitsky's assertion that general economy—and with it expenditure—is not “predicated on the value of meaning,” nonknowledge is an *essential* example of expenditure. As expenditure, nonknowledge too has a relationship to the value of meaning that challenges the assumption that *all* is “predicated on the value of meaning.” Not only is nonknowledge not “predicated on the value of meaning”; as a kind of expenditure, nonknowledge is *not predicated on measurability*. I am extending Plotnitsky's designations of “value” and “meaning” in the case of nonknowledge to include all metrics other than the utility discussed directly above. That is, the dual utility that (in part) makes knowledge possible. But because nonknowledge is expenditure, it is not predicated on measurability.

I have to stress once again that nonknowledge is not a total absence of knowledge, or, in experiential terms, it is not an experience which makes knowledge-gathering and -measuring forever impossible. An important part of nonknowledge's threshold position is its relation to meaning: meaning is not nonknowledge's primary orientation or goal.

Nonknowledge is not wholly goal-less, but *as expenditure*, its only observable outcome is expending, wasting, or sacrificing, not for the purpose of establishing or discovering meaning, but for the purpose of expending. *This is why nonknowledge cannot be*

continuously accumulated or stored up. Nonknowledge is an expenditure of individual and collective mental (intellectual) energy—undirected mental activity. I take “intellectual” here to mean the complex suite of *general* activities of the intellect, including thinking, pondering, wondering, remembering, problem-solving, connecting, orienting, understanding, etc. I do not use “intellectual” activity as it is scientifically defined or demonstrated: synapses firing and connecting, areas of the brain lighting up on fMRI scans, etc. Undirected mental activity could be wondering, or day-dreaming, or absentmindedly remembering, but it matters *less* what form it takes and *more* that it is a state, and an experience, not bound to and by utility.

Nonknowledge is (at least in part) the experience of expending intellectual energy without return. Expenditure without return is by definition *separate* from meaning-driven experience. Lee writes: “from the point of view of general economy, it becomes clear that some entities *must be placed outside the sphere of utility*, that is, there has to be exuberant spending” (RBN 246). Nonknowledge is just such an exuberant spending that cannot be measured according to a metric such as “value” or “utility” or “meaning.” Nonknowledge is outside the “sphere of utility”—not entirely *outside*—but at least partially outside. This does not make nonknowledge or anything else outside the “sphere of utility” *special*; in fact, it is far from “being a special mode of being that belongs to entities when they are no longer useful”; exuberant spending is rather “the necessary condition of life, and, consequently, of utility” (ibid). And nonknowledge occurs *at a limit of knowing*—as the exuberance of knowing—not before knowledge in some perfect ignorant state.

Nonknowledge thus opens onto an *alternate epistemology* as an open, general economy of knowledge.

Limits and Destruction

“[G]eneral economy must always take into account “the loss in representation and knowledge” (C 30). However: nonknowledge is not merely a “loss in representation and knowledge” such that the possibility of knowledge or some amount of knowledge is suddenly popped out of existence in an experience of nonknowledge; nonknowledge is the *dissolution* or *destruction* of actual knowledge (in the moment of nonknowledge), and the interruption or dissolution of the dream of un-ending knowledge in the face of knowledge’s *limit* (AC 73-4). “Un-ending knowledge,” in this instance, is knowledge predicated on the value of meaning; utilizable and capable of being accumulated because of the meaning it offers. Nonknowledge makes visible the impossibility of perfect utility and expenditure—the loss that cannot be explained in terms of meaning.

But recall that some excess can and *ought to be* “channeled”—in a particular way, a particular way that we may not have seen yet. Allan Stoekl writes,

‘Bad duality,’ as I crudely put it, is the indulgence in expenditure out of personal motives: to gain something for oneself (glory, social status) or for one’s social group or nation (booty, territory, security). From the chief who engages in potlatch, all the way to the modern military planners of nuclear war—all conceive of a brilliant, radical destruction of things as a *useful* contribution: to one’s own standing, to the position or long-term survival of one’s own society (RBN 268).

The proper goal, then, is to channel or *use* some expenditure, and to allow the rest of the expenditure to be destructive. And of course some “channeling” might also be destructive. Nonknowledge as expenditure means nonknowledge as destructive but potentially useful in particular ways: the creation of knowledge.

Exuberant spending being “the necessary condition of life” (Lee, RBN 246) means that nonknowledge is the primary “necessary” intellectual squandering of intellectual energy without return. Just as exuberant spending is the necessary condition of utility, intellectual squandering or exuberance (nonknowledge) is the necessary condition of utility in the sphere of knowledge. According to this formulation, *nonknowledge is a necessary condition of knowledge*. We turn to this final claim—that nonknowledge is already internal to and primary for knowledge—now in the fourth chapter.

Chapter 4: Nonknowledge in Knowledge-Creation: An Open Economy (of Knowledge)

Introduction

This chapter is an argument that nonknowledge is a central aspect of knowledge-creation; that is, that nonknowledge is *a part of* knowledge, and that knowledge-creation is always in fact an act of expenditure. I argue this, in part, by returning to the virtue epistemology conversation that begins in chapter one. If we have found nonknowledge and its elements (and the features of those elements) philosophically compelling, we have to ask how, then, these are missing from the virtue epistemology conversation—how the conversation might be incomplete—and how nonknowledge might extend or enrich that conversation⁶⁸.

I argue that nonknowledge can help us see the blind spots in the virtue epistemology conversation, and that those blind spots are its moments of waste and expenditure, invisible or covered up. An “alternate,” general, or open epistemology can make visible some things taken for granted and thus made invisible in “standard” epistemology. The thing that is “alternate” and partially outside informs and contributes—is already partially internal—to what is more obviously “standard” and “inside.” This allows to us assign positive value to that which has been negatively defined (the “waste” of nonknowledge), or defined in terms of what it lacks. Bataille writes, “The interest of philosophy resides in the fact that, in

⁶⁸ Further notes on the decision to look to virtue epistemology as a counterpoint: It was after the completion of this document that I noticed shared characteristics of the virtue epistemology approach to intellectual virtues and Bataille’s suggestions (see footnotes 35 and 40) that particular dispositions “lead” more naturally to nonknowledge. This is fleshed out in this last chapter.

opposition to science or common sense, it must positively envisage the waste products of intellectual appropriation. Nevertheless, it most often envisages these waste products only in abstract forms of totality [...] to which it itself cannot give a positive content” (*Visions of Excess* 96). Following Bataille, I aim to assign the waste products of virtue epistemology (and thus epistemology and philosophy in general) positive content. According to this structure, I will claim that nonknowledge is a part of knowledge-creation. Using this claim, the goal is to make the blind spots of nonknowledge visible, in order to enrich philosophy’s general picture of knowledge and the norms that govern its motivation and production. A claim from Ladelle McWhorter is our starting point: “In its truest operations, knowledge is not in the service of utility and conservation at all but an event of pure expenditure” (*Reading Bataille Now* 162). This is only our starting point, however, and we have to identify the moments in our virtue epistemology conversation when expenditure is occurring but is invisible to those in the conversation.

This chapter has three sections, in which I:

(1) Explain how the virtue epistemology conversation operates as though it were a closed or restricted economy, particularly because of its focus on intellectual virtue. I do this by returning to three key moments in the virtue epistemology conversation. The key moments are representative—illustrative—of the features of the entire virtue epistemology conversation, as a subset and example of both epistemology and philosophy in general. That is, the moments draw attention to *persistent qualities* we see in the arc of the virtue epistemology conversation and in epistemology and philosophy more generally.

(2) Re-establish that nonknowledge is an open, general economy of knowledge, *as* epistemic expenditure, and examine one noteworthy example of creation within the conceptual framework of general economy.

(3) Argue that the open economy (nonknowledge) is in fact the way in which the closed economy of virtue epistemology, epistemology, and philosophy in general *already* functions. That is, that the closed economy incorrectly takes itself to be closed when it is, in fact, always already open. Nonknowledge is the heart of knowledge. I close with ideas and questions about how to begin creating within an open economy of knowledge.

Part 1: The “Closed” Economy of Virtue Epistemology, and of Knowledge

The virtue epistemology conversation operates as though it were a closed economy. As a representative of mainstream epistemology—and philosophy more generally—virtue epistemology works at defining and continually shoring up the boundaries of belief, knowledge, and the processes by which they are “appropriately” produced and communicated. This defining-and-shoring-up movement removes the excess, the wasteful, and the useless—nonknowledge—from thought and knowledge. But nonknowledge—epistemic expenditure—is occurring nonetheless. Our task in this section is to identify distinct moments when epistemic expenditure is visible *but ignored or covered up*—to prove that the virtue epistemology conversation endeavors to be (and to remain) a closed economy. We are widening the scope, however, to include more than just virtue epistemology, as virtue epistemology cannot be fully or neatly separated from the rest of epistemology, and philosophy in general.

The emphasis epistemology has placed on utility, teleology, and acquisition has been a source of concern for other Bataille scholars as well. Recall that Shannon Winnubst writes that the “teleological ordering of knowledge and experience” in the pursuit of epistemology’s accounts of knowledge has required an increased focus on utility, such that utility may be “our highest value”:

This teleological order narrows in scope in later modern thought, exemplified perhaps in the texts of John Locke, where utility becomes the singular criterion to determine the satisfaction of desire’s demands: we know who/what we are through the usefulness that our lives/actions achieve. Across both of these schemas of broad teleology and more narrow utility, knowledge is ordered sequentially as the progressive development of clearer and more useful endpoints. The demarcation of each segment of thinking—of each concept—thereby becomes critical to the forward march of knowledge’s ordering of experience and the world. [...] If this construction of meaning through the delimitation of concepts is the necessary structure of knowledge, then we find ourselves embedded not only in a limited economy of the psychosocial world through desire-prohibition-identity, but also in a limited economy of epistemology: our very impulses to find meaning (through teleology broadly, and utility specifically) and the way that we undertake this process (through the delimitation of concepts) may already enact a normative order of knowledge that sufficiently conditions the emergence of utility as our highest value (“Bataille’s Queer Pleasures,” RBN 85-6).

Winnubst’s concern is not our virtue epistemology conversation in particular, but the *general* way in which a limited economy of knowledge requires a strict utility-orientation, whether the focus is the relationship of desire to identity or the criteria by which beliefs might qualify as knowledge. We saw this utility-orientation in Aristotle⁶⁹ and the Aristotelian tradition from which virtue epistemology emerges. We saw it in the Hegelian dialectic (and we will return to Hegel shortly). We saw it in Foucault’s notion of the “epistemologization” of thought and knowledge, and we have seen Bataille’s concerns

⁶⁹ In Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is first and foremost demonstrable (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI), and in Greco and Sosa’s claims that virtuously acquired knowledge (following Aristotle) is either more reliable (in the case of Greco) or is a better performance (in the case of Sosa).

(and Bataille scholars' concerns) with utility throughout. The utility-orientation is especially significant in the virtue epistemology conversation, however, because one's *very intellectual character, one's intellectual dispositions* must be utility-oriented, in addition to the knowledge and truth of which one is productive.

In all of the virtue epistemology conversation we see a tripartite emphasis on utility/productivity, teleology, and acquisition. This tripartite emphasis stands in stark contrast to the elements of nonknowledge we have discussed: unstable communicability, experientiality, its "threshold position," and expenditure. There are moments in the virtue epistemology conversation when we see *additional* emphases on communicability, propositionality, objectivity, and measurability. These moments of additional emphasis are subordinate, however, to the larger, overarching emphasis on utility, teleology, and acquisition. The moments taken together demonstrate the sweep, or the reach, of the presumptions made in the conversation, and thus in epistemology and philosophy. Showing this sweep is our next concern.

1.1: Zagzebski and Acquisition

The first moment to focus on is Zagzebski's emphasis on the virtuous acquisition of knowledge, motivated by love of knowledge and truth: "The issue should not be what is added to true belief to make it valuable enough to be knowledge but what is added to virtuous believing to make it knowledge" ("Search" 25); "I suggest that knowledge, in at

least one of its senses, is the conscientious satisfaction of the desire for truth” (“Knowledge and the Motive for Truth” 9); and

But love of truth is plausibly the primary motive underlying a wide range of intellectual virtues. If love of truth is a good motive, it would add value to the intellectual acts it motivates [...] I suggest that the agent’s motives must be such that they include a valuing of truth or, at a minimum, that they do not involve a devaluing or neglect of truth (“Search” 18-9).

I have already claimed that in this emphasis on the virtuous acquisition of knowledge Zagzebski makes (at least) three problematic assumptions: assumption 2 (that knowledge can be continuously acquired, and that the acquisition of knowledge is the primary goal of the virtue epistemology conversation), assumption 3 (that the acquisition of knowledge *has a goal* and serves a particular purpose), and assumption 4 (that knowledge is valuable, despite asking why knowledge is valuable). In making such assumptions Zagzebski has described a restricted economy. Belief that can qualify as knowledge must have a particular *quality*; it must be “virtuous believing” as a component of *eudaimonia*, “a life of flourishing” (“The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good” 25). Belief that is *not* motivated by love of truth or any other virtue would be *wasted belief* on Zagzebski’s account. The wasted belief is epistemic expenditure. Which is to say, it is excessive.

Nobody disputes the conception of *eudaimonia* as a desirable life; in fact, *eudaimonia* is generally defined as a desirable life. It then has to be argued that virtuous—that is, admirable—activity is a component of the desirable life. And that, of course, is hotly disputed. The same problem arises over the value of knowing. Nobody is likely to dispute the claim that some true beliefs are desirable. What can be disputed is whether beliefs that are intellectually virtuous, either in the way I have described or in some other, are also components of a desirable life. The question Why should we want to have admirable beliefs? is really no different from the question Why should we want to do admirable acts? If virtuous acts are desirable, it is because it is more desirable to act in an admirable way (*ibid*).

The wasted belief here is the belief that is not “intellectually virtuous” and is thus not an “admirable” “component of a desirable life.” If we ought to strive for admirable, desirable beliefs, we have to discredit or ignore the undesirable beliefs, and not just in order to avoid harboring false beliefs, but in order to *live a desirable life*. The excess, in this case, is the belief that occurs outside of Zagzebski’s strictures that belief must be motivated by the appropriate virtue. This excess cannot help Zagzebski accomplish the goal of determining what is “added to virtuous believing to make it knowledge” (ibid), and how we can understand (virtuous) belief in the context of one’s entire life—that is, how we can assess intellectual character.

Zagzebski’s chief concern is meaning that contributes to the goal of determining why knowledge is more valuable than true belief, and this meaning can only be provided—or added to the conversation—by those with the appropriate motivation, which is reflective of a person’s overall intellectual character. Meaning in this case is not affective as it is in the case of nonknowledge. Affective meaning may only be equivalent to something as lacking in *telos* as “the pleasure of drinking a glass of spirits or feeling the sun’s warmth at the beach” (ON 173). Affective meaning, or meaning that leads to no goal in particular, is again excessive waste. In *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge*, Zagzebski defines justified belief in terms of motivation (i.e., motivation by intellectual virtue), and she defines knowledge as an intellectually virtuous act: “A justified belief is what a person who is motivated by intellectual virtue, and who has the understanding of his cognitive situation a virtuous person would have, might believe in like circumstances” (241). We can see how there is no

room here for a kind of meaning—like affective meaning—that might move one away from virtuous motivation (love of truth) or that might get in the way of one having an “understanding of his cognitive situation a virtuous person would have” (ibid). Put differently, if the meaning of nonknowledge has no particular goal but is an affectively productive meaning, it must be shut out of a utility- and teleology-oriented definition of knowledge.

Also key to Zagzebski’s account of the value of knowledge is uniting—at the least not artificially separating—ethical and epistemic concerns. It could be said that Zagzebski is thus searching for a kind of continuity, albeit a continuity different from the kind Bataille seeks in nonknowledge. Recall Boldt’s claim that we cannot escape our desire for continuity, even the most “perfect” or complete continuity in which we “identify with the entirety of the universe”: “Bataille opens the wound of insufficiency felt by each individual who wishes to surpass his limited existence. In *Inner Experience*, he states categorically: we cannot escape our desire to be everything, to identify with the entirety of the universe” (IE xi). The experiential features of nonknowledge make it a *possibility* to surpass our “limited existence” through continuity—including (especially) continuous communication. Boldt claims that limiting language to “utilitarian ends” is the primary way in which we limit our existence—that we limit our existence *by* limiting our use of language to utilitarian ends. So Bataille is in fact endorsing a particular intellectual virtue: a radical open-mindedness and an orientation to language that does *not* limit it to utilitarian ends. (As if Bataille is saying: Loosen your grip on language as a tool to express thought and

knowledge, and *see what happens*.) This kind of intellectual virtue is not what Zagzebski has in mind, though.

Zagzebski's goal to unite epistemology and ethics is done for "utilitarian ends"—to determine why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, with the understanding that being in possession of knowledge is a reflection of one's virtuous intellectual character. So we have to ask: Do we limit our existence by limiting our use of language to utilitarian ends? What could be possible if epistemology and ethics were united a little bit uselessly (according to a dual utility), and not for strictly utilitarian ends? And without the concern for virtuous intellectual character? That is to say, what would an "open economy of knowledge" approach to this problem say? It would say: loosen the ties that bring together (a) virtuous intellectual character and knowledge, (b) the "wider values of a good life" and virtuous intellectual character, and (c) meaning and knowledge, as these ties require *and constitute* a restricted, closed economy of knowledge. In part two of this chapter we will more fully explore what becomes possible if these ties are loosened.

1.2: Greco and Reliable Processes

In Greco's emphasis on reliable processes we see a focus on communicability, propositionality, objectivity, and teleology. The excess—the expenditure—here is true belief that is *not* the product of an agent with stable and reliable cognitive character, and thus cannot be reliably communicated. Strange and fleeting true belief (or true belief that is the outcome of strange and fleeting processes) is also excess, waste.

“Reliabilism must somehow restrict the kind of reliable process that is able to ground knowledge, so as to rule out processes that are strange or fleeting” (“Agent Reliabilism” 286). Greco works toward just such a restriction later, drawing from Aristotle and Sosa’s reading of Aristotle: “When we attribute knowledge to someone we imply that it is to his credit that he got things right. It is not because the person is lucky that he believes the truth—it is because of his own cognitive abilities” (“Knowledge as Credit for True Belief,” *Intellectual Virtue* 123). “Cognitive abilities” as Greco defines them must be understood as virtues. Greco makes use of the first presumption (that knowledge is communicable, often in the form of clear propositions), the third presumption (that acquiring knowledge is a *goal*, an endpoint), the sixth presumption (that what counts as knowledge can be objectively determined), and the seventh presumption (that the virtue epistemology community is the authority on matters of knowledge).

Employing what Bataille has called the “law of language” (IE 14-5), Greco has made the assumption that if an experience is not clearly communicable, it cannot be more than “strange and fleeting” true belief—and it will only be *coincidentally* true. But questioning the “law of language” does not mean abandoning language or attempts at precision, clarity, and whatever might be the opposite of “strange and fleeting.” Alphonso Lingis claims (following Bataille) that erotic experience occupies a separate sphere of communication than the sphere of communication dedicated to rational thought, and that the sphere of communication occupied by erotic experience is a sphere that *precedes* communication in what Lingis calls “rational thought”: “This sphere of communication in laughter—and in

tears—and in erotic excitement precedes and makes possible, and is not superseded by, communication in rational thought and in practical projects conceived and regulated by rational language” (*The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* 120). Lingis draws a distinction between communication in “rational thought” and communication in “erotic excitement.” These two spheres of communication are distinct but related. Lingis claims that one sphere (“erotic excitement”) in fact *precedes and makes possible, without superseding* the other sphere (“rational language”). That which cannot be propositionalized precedes and makes possible the propositionalizable.

Greco, however, claims that “some reliable processes (strange and fleeting ones) do not give rise to knowledge and justified belief” (and this is precisely why *agent reliabilism* is preferable to generic or “simple” reliabilism) (“Agent Reliabilism” 285). Greco thus seeks to remove the “waste” of unreliable processes (and communication of them) by those with unreliable cognitive character: (once again) “Reliabilism must somehow restrict the kind of reliable process that is able to ground knowledge, so as to rule out processes that are strange and fleeting” (ibid 286). Contra Greco, Bataille and Lingis claim that clearly and reliably communicated true belief is *made possible* by processes like Greco’s strange and fleeting ones. If Bataille and Lingis are right that the strange and fleeting makes the reliable possible, we ought to take a closer look at what Greco calls “strange and fleeting” to determine the possibility for the communication of strange and fleeting (yet true) belief in ways that are philosophically compelling and sound, despite their unreliability. Because, again, if Bataille is right, *all* communication is at least partially unreliable, and to think otherwise is to unquestioningly employ the “law of language.” Is there something worth

philosophical reflection in the strange and fleeting processes, and in unreliable cognitive character? This is our next concern.

Cognitive character is key to Greco's restriction of processes that can ground knowledge. Greco again draws on Sosa to claim the following: "Just as the moral rightness of an action can be understood in terms of the stable dispositions or *character* of the moral agent, the epistemic rightness of a belief can be understood in terms of the intellectual character of the cognizer" ("Agent Reliabilism" 287; emphasis Greco's). This is due to the fact that

[T]he cognitive faculties and habits of a believer are neither strange nor fleeting. They are not strange because they make up the person's intellectual character—they are part of what make her the person that she is. They are not fleeting because faculties and habits by definition are *stable dispositions*—they are not the kind of thing a person can adopt on a whim or engage in an irregular fashion (ibid; emphasis Greco's).

But Greco's examples of strange and fleeting processes leave something to be desired. (They also make it clear that some experiential knowledge would qualify as waste to Greco, and we will attend to this shortly.) "The Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion"⁷⁰, "The Case of the Absurd Reasoner," and "The Case of the Helpful Demon" are the examples of strange and fleeting processes. In each case, we are to imagine someone who has "strangely"—that is, coincidentally, absurdly, or supernaturally—stumbled upon a true belief. In "The Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion," we imagine "that there is a rare sort of brain lesion, one effect of which is to cause the victim to believe he has a brain lesion" (ibid 285). The victim possesses correct information but it has little or no warrant, as it is possessed merely coincidentally. In "The Case of the Absurd

⁷⁰ Greco is borrowing this case from Alvin Plantinga, in *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 199.

Reasoner,” Charles “witnesses two people order the same fruit drink on the same day [and] concludes on that basis that they are genetically related. As it turns out, his whimsical reasoning process is perfectly reliable, since everyone is genetically related” (ibid). And in the third example, “The Case of the Helpful Demon,” Rene has a “demon helper,” “a kind of epistemic guardian angel” who arranges it so that Rene’s guesses at the roulette table become true (ibid 286). For Greco, the question to ask in light of these examples is a question about exclusion: “How can simple reliabilism be revised so as to exclude these strange cases as counting for knowledge and justified belief?” (ibid). Insofar as this is Greco’s question, Greco’s (agent) reliabilism functions as a restricted economy, focused primarily on utility via production and meaning via communicability and intellectual character. The waste of strange and fleeting processes is to be excluded. Again, if nonknowledge can be understood as endorsing particular intellectual virtues or dispositions, they are not dispositions that are tied strictly to production of knowledge and clear, “wasteless” communication.

The coincidental, absurd, and supernatural nature of the strange and fleeting processes suggests that they, the processes, are also subjective and *experiential*. Experiential knowledge—like nonknowledge—is thus also waste on Greco’s account⁷¹. This would be knowledge that can only be “grasped from the inside” of experience (IE 8) and is hence subjective. It may not be produced under strange and fleeting circumstances, but it is

⁷¹ Nonknowledge is experiential in one particular sense, i.e., that it can only be “grasped” during and from “inside” the experience. I recognize that the field of experientialist theory—different from the experientialism of nonknowledge—in epistemology is wide. Robert Audi, for example, calls experientialism a subset of empiricism while claiming that reason and experience are inseparable: “My overall position, however, has at least one major affinity to empiricism: the position is experientialist in the sense that it attributes an indispensable and indeed enormous role to experience in grounding rationality. The role I ascribe to reason in our lives is inseparable from the part played by experience, and on my view their normative authority is both shared and mutually integrated” (*The Architecture of Reason* ix).

certainly produced *and* communicated unreliably, and it is not replicable. The imagined examples of strange and fleeting experiences of knowledge-production are significantly different from nonknowledge, but they are Greco's examples of strange and fleeting, unreliable, subjective, experiential processes⁷². But the question to ask is: How does the experiential quality of nonknowledge challenge Greco's exclusion of a kind of experientiality from processes that can ground knowledge? In the introduction to *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* Kendall writes: "Bataille proposed a notion of experience founded on the search for values beyond the limited means of the servile domain" (USN xxix). This means that nonknowledge and its experiential quality place it outside the realm of the "servility" of utility. Utility is not incompatible with experientiality, but a concept which is experiential in the sense of "searching beyond limited means" of a "servile domain" will fail to operate reliably and objectively, or with a focus on utility. Nonknowledge is essentially experiential and it is expenditure, placing it outside (though never completely outside) of servility and utility, like unreliable, strange, and strangely communicable processes by those with unreliable cognitive character.

If this is the waste—that which ought to be excluded—what happens if it is not discarded but is instead channeled? Is it possible that something "unreliable and strange" can or *does* ground knowledge in ways Greco doesn't see? Again, a provisional response until this is more fully addressed in sections two and three: Strange and fleeting, unreliable, useless

⁷² It seems as though Greco stacks the deck in his favor here. It is unlikely that his readers will ever experience "The Case of the Helpful Demon," "The Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion," or "The Case of the Absurd Reasoner" "from the inside." Sosa mentions this objection in "Dreams and Philosophy": "According to one popular view, a possibility is relevant only if it is not *too remote*, only if it might really happen. Possibilities like that of the evil demon or the brain in a vat are said to pose no real threat, being so remote" (7). It seems less important that such remote examples might "pose a threat," and more important that they can strike a reader as hollow, i.e., incapable of doing justice to experience.

pseudo-knowledge (that we might not be comfortable calling knowledge), is already part of knowledge anyhow, and knowledge can be produced by those with unreliable or disharmonious intellectual character. Determining and assessing intellectual character while simultaneously ruling out unreliable processes is but one part of a larger categorizing move so crucial to philosophy that makes philosophy a labor—makes it *work*—when knowledge-creation is in fact a kind of aimless and even irresponsible play⁷³. The notion that the earth might not be the center of the universe was heretical—something like “unreliable and strange”—and certainly unacceptable. If it has already been determined *what* will be accepted as knowledge or true belief and *what will not*—if the terms have already been set—how will we be able to see the thing that might challenge the standing limitations and thereby eventually change them? This question is sincere: *how* will we be able to see *the new*? The new, the aleatory, the strange, the tensely-communicable, the thing we cannot recognize *in advance* as knowledge, is in the threshold position and *may become* knowledge. If we are not open to the useless or the wasteful as capable of producing knowledge, we accept only refinements of what we already know. We leave no room for creation, for *the new*. To borrow the words of another Bataille scholar: There is an invitation here “to expand reason beyond prohibitive limitations [...] When Bataille asks us to consider creating our meanings without reserve, without tying ourselves into antecedent categories, he wants us to reconsider everything and to imagine beyond what is offered us” (Alison Leigh Brown, RBN 134-5).

⁷³ I will repeat this: “Today, like the other times, I am going to attempt to communicate my experience of nonknowledge to you. Of course, like the other times, I will fail. But first I would like to show you the extent of my failure. I can say precisely that if I had succeeded, the tangible contact between you and me would have had the nature not of work but of play...in play, my thought, the work of my thought, is annihilated” (USN 129).

1.3: Sosa and Performance

In Sosa's focus on good performance—"hitting the mark"—there is an implied requirement to discard or ignore failed performances. Failed performances are the excess, the waste. On Sosa's terms, a failed performance is one that cannot be explained in terms of utility. The value of a *good* performance is found in its utility as "truth-attaining." Likewise, the value of virtuous cognitive faculties is to be found in *their* utility, as that which produces a good performance by "hitting the mark." The overall measure of utility for Sosa is truth-acquisition, or truth-attainment:

[I]t is the goods to be delivered that we really care about [...] One cares about cognitive systems in good working order not for their own sake, but for the truth-attaining performances that they enable. Much less does one care about good performances by cognitive systems 'in display rooms' isolated from the environments within which they would enable one attributably to attain the truth ("The Place of Truth in Epistemology" 181).

Sosa thus provides us with straightforward use of the presumptions (numbers 2, 4 and 5) that knowledge is useful, valuable, and acquirable, as though it were a good. And it is important to note that this provides us with clear evidence that part of the virtue epistemology tradition has strayed from its (acknowledged) Aristotelian roots wherein knowledge is valuable for its own sake.

This is where cognitive character becomes important. It is only on account of one's intellectual virtue and overall cognitive character that a good performance occurs, and truth is attained. Intellectual virtue is thus the precursor to utility and acquisition or attainment.

Like Greco, Sosa's conception of intellectual virtue is rooted in

a broader sense of 'virtue,' still Greek [only partially Aristotelian], in which anything with a function—natural or artificial—does have virtues. The eye does, after all, have its virtues, and so does a knife. And if we include grasping the truth

about one's environment among the proper ends of a human being, then the faculty of sight would seem in a broad sense a virtue in human beings; and if grasping the truth is an intellectual matter then that virtue is also in a straightforward sense an intellectual virtue (*Knowledge in Perspective* 271).

It is this notion of intellectual virtue that makes the good performance possible, and Sosa's notion of the *credibility* of good performances hangs on precisely this conception of intellectual virtue: "According to the Aristotelian view, then, passive reception of truth is not enough to count as human good, or at least not as the chief human good. Our preference is not just the presence of truth, then, however it may have arrived there. We prefer truth whose presence is the work of our intellect, truth that derives from our intellectual performance" ("The Place of Truth in Epistemology" 177).

Another aspect of Sosa's account (as a restricted economy) is the credibility of good performances—that is, that the agent deserves *credit* for the successful performances which make use of her intellectual virtues. This focus on credibility is of a piece with the focus on acquisition. Knowledge can be acquired if it can be assigned an author. Namely, the successful performer is successful *because of* her "truth-attaining" performance, *for which she deserves credit*. She can take credit for the true belief made possible by her performance, and she can thus acquire the true belief. What would Sosa make of the difficult—or unreliable—credibility, and thus acquirability, of an experience like nonknowledge that slips away as we try to grasp it in order to claim it for credit, or in order to propositionalize it? ("On entering into nonknowledge, I know I erase the figures from the blackboard" ("Nonknowledge," USN 204).) As *not useful* in terms of credit and acquisition, it is not part of Sosa's account of the value of knowledge. For Bataille, however, acquisition or appropriation (via credit) is the opposite of expenditure. The

appropriative habits of philosophy *in general* are problematic: “This last appropriation—the work of philosophy as well as of science or common sense—has included phases of revolt and scandal, but it has always had as its goal the establishment of the homogeneity of the world” (“The Use Value of D.A.F. De Sade,” *Visions of Excess* 96). Thus the work of philosophy as appropriation of knowledge or thought entails determining how the knowledge or thought fits a pre-existing category, representation, or system of thought or knowledge, which in turn precludes it from having a character all its own.

Both Bataille and Sosa are concerned with failure. Sosa’s implied concern is failed performances that don’t make use of cognitive virtues, and are thus not useful for acquiring knowledge. Bataille sees the way in which communication always fails, despite our best efforts, to get at the “central whole” of any experience it describes. To Bataille this is true not only in cases of communicating nonknowledge; this difficulty is true of all communication. As we saw in chapter two, we can speak a language “which amounts to zero,” we can speak a language inclusive of silence, we can do our best to offer our whole interiority in communication, but in the end, we *still* cannot use language to grasp “what matters to us,” as the totality of “what matters” eludes language. That Bataille can successfully communicate this set of claims means that Bataille’s notion of communication is tense. The tension is unresolvable. Bataille’s concern, then, is a notion of communication that would be useless to Sosa. And again, Bataille is advancing a notion of intellectual virtue that is importantly different from Sosa’s claims, as Bataille understands *failure* as a kind of virtue.

The virtue epistemology conversation consists of individuals working in concert to create definitions of beliefs able to ground knowledge, the processes by which the acceptable beliefs are produced, and the communication of the beliefs. I have claimed already that this acts as a kind of border patrol of true belief and knowledge, and that an attendant concern in the conversation is removing or avoiding of unacceptable processes, methods of communication, etc. The concern for removal or avoidance creates a restricted economy. In Zagzebski's work, the focus is having the appropriate, virtuous motivation when looking for knowledge; for Greco it is using appropriate processes in accordance with one's intellectual virtue to discover knowledge; for Sosa it is "performing" the acquisition and the communication of beliefs appropriately, again according to one's intellectual virtue. The collective work of creating the restricted economy has repercussions for authority. In the virtue epistemology conversation, the conversation and its members serve as the authority. The source of authority is thus an internal one, but it is significantly different than Bataille's notion of authority as internal to the process of unending interrogation. This means that even the sense of "authority" in nonknowledge has to be viewed as waste in the closed economy of virtue epistemology.

The waste that the virtue epistemology conversation hopes to eliminate (perhaps without recognizing it as such) is the waste of nonknowledge: partially useless pseudo-knowledge that is experiential, meaningful only in terms of its affect, unreliably produced and communicated, un-acquirable, unmeasurable, and not the product of one's intellectual virtue. This is proof that what looks to be a closed, restricted economy is *not* simply that. That is, that the virtue epistemology conversation continually works at eliminating such

waste is proof that it is already occurring and must be removed, or prohibited in the first place, for the conversation to function as it hopes to. The virtue epistemology conversation is thus incomplete.

Now we have to return to the question posed throughout this chapter: What do we find if we can channel the waste? What becomes newly visible? The answer is something like “philosophy without knowledge,” as Kendall writes of Bataille’s oeuvre⁷⁴, and “thinking not centered on conceptuality,” as Nikolopoulou writes of Bataille’s oeuvre⁷⁵.

Part 2: The “Open” Economy of Nonknowledge as Epistemic Expenditure

“Knowledge destroys fixed notions and this continuing destruction is its greatness, or more precisely, its truth” (*Guilty* 25⁷⁶).

Knowledge “destroys fixed notions” each time we find a new set of answers to our most troubling questions. (What is an atom? What is the center of the universe? What is a species? What is the gene?) We find the new answers when we reach limits that seem final (The earth is the center of the universe), but when we waste intellectual energy *anyway* and

⁷⁴ Introduction to *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, Stuart Kendall, p. xviii.

⁷⁵ In “Elements of Experience: Bataille’s Drama,” *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, eds. Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree, p. 107.

⁷⁶ This is the translation offered by Bruce Boone (1988). A more recent translation by Stuart Kendall changes the emphasis from “knowledge” to “science”: “The destruction of fixed notions that science has effected and continues to effect, constitutes its greatness and more precisely its truth” (*Guilty* 20). In the original text (in *Oeuvres Complètes V*), Bataille writes “la science,” but the difference between science and knowledge (*savoir*), taken in context, is not so significant as to detract from Bataille’s point—a point about *systems of knowing* and how their truth may be measured by their ability to destroy: “La ruine que la science a faite, continue de faire, des conceptions arrêtées, constitue sa grandeur et plus précisément que sa grandeur sa vérité” (*Oeuvres Complètes V*, “L’Ange,” p. 260).

continue to wonder about the questions (What if we haven't understood the universe correctly?). We do a kind of "thinking not centered on conceptuality" (*Obsessions of Georges Bataille* 107). We spend excess energy on wondering, we do intellectual tinkering, we find ourselves *past* the limit, and this is how we create the new answers. Creating knowledge is spending or "channeling" the excess. This is how *nonknowledge* is at the heart of—already internal to—knowledge and its creation.

Nonknowledge is an experience that occurs at the *limit of knowledge*—at the threshold—as an act of expenditure. Reaching the threshold position results in a dissolution of knowledge—a destruction (even if temporary) of knowledge—as the experience of nonknowledge occurs⁷⁷. What comes after and as a result of such destruction cannot be known in advance. This is another sense in which nonknowledge is an *open* economy; we don't have directions or a roadmap to guide us. It is an unguided—unguideable—experience. It is thus destructive of "teleologically ordered" knowledge. But this does not mean that nonknowledge cannot create knowledge. On the contrary, it is at the heart of knowledge, and as such, it is productive in the sense that it is *creation*—it is *creative*.

⁷⁷ There are two senses of "limit" in use here. One is the limit(s) presented by the assumptions of a discourse (a discourse like the virtue epistemology conversation) that determine acceptable methods, outcomes, and modes of communicating. Another sense is the limit in relation to energy and resources. (Related to the determination, discussed in chapter 2, that nonknowledge occurs when thought has "exhausted its resources" (Sasso, *On Bataille* 47).) This second sense of "limit" is a natural limit according to Bataille, like the limit of carrying capacity, and it is the result of saturation of a given economy or environment.

2.1: Sovereign Writing: “Open” Creation

There is a “recipe,” offered by Jacques Derrida, for the kind of squandering creation of knowledge-as-play I have in mind. Understanding it requires returning to Bataille’s relationship to Hegel.

Derrida begins Chapter 9 of *Writing and Difference* (“From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve”) with a description of the difficulty Bataille faces as he struggles to see beyond the Hegelian dialectic: “Misconstrued, treated lightly, Hegelianism only extends its historical domination, finally unfolding its immense enveloping resources without obstacle” (W&D 251). It is not the case, however, that Derrida is accusing Bataille of treating Hegel “lightly”; Bataille himself was critical of Nietzsche for knowing of Hegel “barely more [...] than a standard popularization” (IE 109; note 2). According to Derrida, Bataille did not make the mistake of taking Hegel too lightly, as Nietzsche did: “Bataille, thus, took Hegel seriously, and took absolutely knowledge seriously. And to take such a system seriously, Bataille knew, was to prohibit oneself from extracting concepts from it, or from manipulating isolated propositions” (W&D 253). It is because Bataille took Hegel seriously and prohibited himself from isolating or manipulating Hegelian propositions that Bataille was able to “put into question the idea or meaning of the chain in Hegelian reason, but [he] did so by thinking the chain as such, in its totality, without ignoring its internal rigor” (ibid).

But the concept of sovereignty is *not* Hegelian lordship (*Herrschaft*). Derrida describes lordship (via the “well known” (ibid) master-slave dialectic):

The servant is the man who does not put his life at stake, the man who wants to conserve his life, wants to be conserved (*servus*). By raising oneself above life, by looking at death directly, one accedes to lordship: to the for-itself (*pour soi, für sich*), to freedom, to recognition. Freedom must go through the putting at stake of life (*Daransetzen des Lebens*). The lord is the man who has had the strength to endure the anguish of death and to maintain the work of death [...] Lordship has a meaning. The putting at stake of life is a moment in the constitution of meaning, in the presentation of essence and truth (W&D 254).

Lordship, thus, *has clear meaning*, is achieved at the moment of putting (one's own) life at stake, and is itself a "presentation of essence and truth." Lordship's moment of putting life at stake is done for a reason and as an investment: freedom and lordship itself are gained. Lordship is closed. Sovereignty is open. The difference between lordship and sovereignty hinges on these facts and is a *difference of sense*, according to Derrida. "It cannot even be said that this difference has a sense: it is the *difference of sense*⁷⁸" (ibid). Sovereignty, unlike lordship, exceeds dialectics.

Simultaneously more and less a lordship than lordship, sovereignty is totally other. Bataille pulls it out of dialectics. He withdraws it from the horizon of meaning and knowledge. And does so to such a degree that, despite the characteristics that make it resemble lordship, sovereignty is no longer a figure in the continuous chain of phenomenology (W&D 256).

Sovereignty is "totally other" and exceeds dialectics because it does *not* have meaning, is not a "presentation of essence and truth," and is a putting of life at stake *not as an investment*. According to Derrida, what ties the putting at stake of lordship to the closed circle of the dialectic is the fact that the putting at stake is *made meaningful* by being made an investment: death as investment requires "that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of 'abstract negativity,' that a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment,

⁷⁸ This "difference of sense" is key. The difference between lordship and sovereignty does not make sense or have a sense; it is a difference *of* sense. This means that the sense a) conveyed by both terms, and b) needed to understand both terms, is different.

confers meaning, serious, and truth upon the ‘putting at stake’” (W&D 256-7).

Sovereignty, on the other hand, is destruction of meaning *without reserve*. It is putting life at stake without investment, and without the expectation of a return on investment. Thus, sovereignty is expenditure⁷⁹.

The “operation” of sovereignty (W&D 254) is one of expenditure, but Derrida claims that “sovereignty has no identity” (ibid 265). The fact that sovereignty has no identity (and the same might be said of expenditure) is further evidence for Derrida that the “operation” of sovereignty is an operation of expenditure. Sovereignty “*must subordinate nothing [...], be subordinated to nothing or no one [...], it must expend itself without reserve, lose itself, lose consciousness, lose all memory of itself and all the interiority of itself [...], and, as the ultimate subversion of lordship, it must no longer seek to be recognized*” (ibid 265). Just as nonknowledge destroys knowledge.

Central to Derrida’s description of sovereignty (and its distinguishability from lordship) is the fact that it destroys meaning *without reserve*. In doing so, it *expends* without reserve.

⁷⁹ Contemporary scholars interpret Bataille’s notion of sovereignty similarly. Mahmut Mutman writes: “Bataille subjected Hegel’s notion of the master to a fascinating *displacement* by taking the fight for recognition to an extreme. In Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave, the master *retains* the life that he exposes to risk. Bataille thought of a strange, excessive moment of mastery which he named ‘sovereignty’—an impossible ‘mastery’ which destroys mastery. Unlike Hegel’s dialectic, in which meaning and truth is always preserved, this excessive sovereignty has to do with an absolute expenditure or loss, a negativity without reserve, without measure, and without discourse (and therefore a negativity that can no longer be called negative). Sovereign operation (laughter, drunkenness, eroticism, sacrifice, poetry) is outside dialectic, without *Aufhebung*. As an affirmation of loss, sovereignty neither maintains nor governs itself. It is already displaced, on the move, without gathering itself in concepts such as displacement or sovereignty. This implies that sovereign operation is impossible. It is nevertheless experienced as paradox, as an experience that cannot be experienced” (“Difference, Event, Subject: Antonio Negri’s Political Theory as Postmodern Metaphysics,” from *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Revolution in Theory*, Eds. Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha (London, Ann Arbor, Michigan: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 141-166).

Establishing the nature of sovereignty, however, is difficult in the same way establishing the nature of nonknowledge is difficult. Both defy systematicity, both defy totalizing language, and *as expenditure*, both defy maintenance and investment—utility and teleology. Derrida writes:

[S]overeignty, since it is not lordship, cannot govern this scientific discourse in the manner of a founding basis or a principle of responsibility. Like lordship, sovereignty certainly makes itself independent through the putting at stake of life; it is attached to nothing and conserves nothing. But, differing from Hegelian lordship, it does not even want to maintain itself, collect itself, or collect the profits from itself or from its own risk; it ‘cannot even be defined as a possession’ (W&D 264).

Derrida describes “sovereign thought” as a process by which sovereignty operates in order to destroy meaning. *What Derrida calls “sovereign thought” I am calling nonknowledge*⁸⁰.

Drawing from Bataille’s description of sovereign thought, Derrida builds his own description of Bataillean “sovereign thought” informed by Bataille’s and his own relationship to Hegelian dialectics. This moment is significant:

At stake in the [sovereign] operation, therefore, is not a self-consciousness, an ability to be near oneself, to maintain and to watch oneself. We are not in the element of phenomenology. And this can be recognized in the primary characteristic—illegible within philosophical logic—that sovereignty *does not govern itself*. And does not govern in general: it governs neither others, nor things, nor discourses in order to produce meaning. This is the first obstacle in the way of this science which, according to Bataille, must relate its objects to sovereign moments and which, like every science, requires order, relatedness and the difference between the original and the derivative. The *Méthode de méditation* does not hide the ‘obstacle’ (the expression is Bataille’s): ‘Not only is the sovereign operation not subordinate to anything, but it makes nothing subordinate to itself, is indifferent to any possible results; if afterward I wish to pursue the reduction of subordinate thought to sovereign thought, I may do so, but whatever is authentically sovereign is not concerned with this, and at every moment disposes of me otherwise’ (p. 283) (W&D 264).

⁸⁰ Derrida does identify “unknowledge,” and makes claims about its incommunicability (specifically that it cannot be spoken of, at all), but there is a small blind spot in Derrida’s work. The blind spot, I believe, is his implicit separation of nonknowledge (or “unknowledge” as it is translated by Alan Bass for *Writing and Difference*; the French *non-savoir*, however, is used by both Bataille and Derrida) and “sovereign thought.” My claim in regard to this is that Derrida is *already* doing some of the work of describing (indescribable) nonknowledge with his description of “sovereign thought.”

This contribution is particularly significant because it identifies “sovereign thought” as *procedural*, process-focused, and experiential. Understanding nonknowledge as an ongoing *activity* is preferable to understanding nonknowledge as a noun, as a *thing*, and as something more fixed and goal-oriented than an experience or a process.

Like nonknowledge, sovereign thought “slips” from our grasp. Sovereign thought destroys the meaning it might offer in the form of propositions and in the form of knowledge as classical epistemology understands it: “Sovereignty dissolves the values of meaning, truth, and a *grasp-of-the-thing-itself* [...] Sovereignty is impossible, therefore it *is not*, it *is*—Bataille writes this word in italics—‘this loss’” (W&D 270). As a destructive force, sovereignty as such does not exist as a quantifiable entity or unit. It *is not*, or if it *is*, it is loss. And it necessarily “dissolves the values of meaning.” Not only does sovereignty “dissolve meaning”; sovereignty is also *loss*, or, to use Bataille’s language, it is *expenditure*. Recall that Bataille claims there is a necessary limit to the consumption of knowledge, and that once this limit (or “final object of knowledge”) is reached, knowledge itself *dissolves*, and this “destroys” the knower:

We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce its object to the condition of subordinated and managed things. The ultimate problem of knowledge is the same as that of consumption. No one can both know and not be destroyed; no one can both consume wealth and increase it (AC 73-4).

But we must not stop at that. Bataille does not stop at that; he keeps writing, he keeps thinking. Nor does Derrida stop at that; he lays out what he calls “sovereign writing.”

Sovereignty “simultaneously prescribes and prohibits writing” (ibid 265). Or rather, Derrida writes, sovereignty “discerns *two* forms of *writing*” (ibid). In the first form of writing, “the sovereign renunciation of recognition enjoins the erasure of the written text” (ibid). Or, as Bataille says, “The survival of that which is written is the survival of the mummy” (*Le coupable* 146).⁸¹ But there are two forms of writing in relation to sovereignty, according to Derrida. One is more “fully” sovereign than the other. The first form of writing in relation to sovereignty is a kind of walking-dead writing, a writing which has built into it the impossibility of communicating sovereignty and the erasure of the sovereign experience itself. The second form of writing, according to Derrida, “is a sovereign form of writing which, on the contrary, must interrupt the servile complicity of speech and meaning [...] The putting at stake, the one which exceeds lordship is therefore *the space of writing*” (W&D 266). This second form of writing—the more fully sovereign form—is a writing that has the capacity to “interrupt the servile complicity of speech and meaning.” This sovereign writing is not complicit in meaning-making for the sake of solving some problem, setting some goal, especially meaning-making via language. This sovereign writing is *alive* in a way that the first form of writing is not. Integral to its aliveness is its construction *in* or *from* sovereignty itself. Writing from within sovereignty, may also be possible *after* sovereignty, but once meaning and utility emerges we have to recognize that we are in the realm of the first, “less” sovereign kind of (sovereign) writing. This structure mirrors nonknowledge’s relationship to recuperation, reflection, and communication. After the experience, reflection and recuperation allows for meaning to be assigned. During the experience, meaning is either lacking or destroyed.

⁸¹ This is Bass’s translation of the text included by Derrida. Stuart Kendall’s 2011 translation reads: “Writing survives like a mummy” (*Guilty* 94).

Sovereign writing is not incoherent (as Bataille's texts written from sovereignty, like *Inner Experience* and *Guilty*, demonstrate), but its meaning—particularly the meaning of the second, more “fully” sovereign writing—is a kind of *nonmeaning*. I take this to mean that the meaning of sovereign writing is not to be located in its utility or purpose, like the affective meaning of nonknowledge. This is a “slide” from meaning—a “calculated” slide—into the realm of “non”: “Carried away in this calculated sliding, concepts become nonconcepts, they are unthinkable, they become *untenable*” (ibid 268). Again, this does not result in incoherence, because the “sliding” from meaning does not happen wholly, completely, and with total abandon: it is *calculated*. Through it, concepts are constructed, and then they are sacrificed in moments of expenditure:

Within this writing—the one sought by Bataille—the *same* concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning, or rather will be struck by (even though they are apparently indifferent), the loss of sense toward which they slide, thereby ruining themselves immeasurably [...] This writing (and without concern for instruction, this is the example it provides for us, what we are interested in here, today) folds itself up in order to link up with classical concepts—insofar as they are inevitable (“I could not avoid expressing my thought in a philosophical mode. But I do not address myself to philosophers” *Méthode*)—in such a way that these concepts, through a certain twist, apparently obey their habitual laws; but they do so while relating themselves, at a certain point, to the moment of sovereignty, to the absolute loss of their meaning, to expenditure without reserve (W&D 267-8).

And most importantly, Derrida claims, the sovereign writer is able to *let go* of “the security of the concept as security against this sliding” and to simply *slide* (ibid). The sovereign operation, then, is not entirely “indifferent” to its outcomes. It is indifferent insofar as it knows its outcomes must be sacrificed through becoming nonconcepts or nonmeaning (but keeps “operating” anyhow), but the sovereign operation is far from indifferent when it comes to the necessity of this process, leading (necessarily) to the sacrifice of “the security

of the concept.” So, we have to write philosophy sovereignly. But contra Derrida, or in addition to what Derrida says, we have to also pursue knowledge sovereignly (this is not just about *writing*⁸²), looking at waste to see what it offers and being willing to waste—to expend. In the next section we will apply this to the virtue epistemology conversation, and to philosophy itself.

Part 3: The “Closed” is Already the “Open”

Following Bataille, we now have to use project to escape from project (IE 59) in order to find something like philosophy without knowledge (USN xviii):

The order of knowledge at stake in Bataille’s turn toward general economies is thereby more far-reaching than any simple notion of utility or instrumental reason. Broader, more expansive contours of rationality may be at stake in his challenges to go “in the wrong direction on the paths of knowledge—to get them off” and find that “only unknowing is *sovereign*” [AC II and III 208]. To go in the wrong direction on the paths of knowledge may be to challenge our very demarcation of concepts, our very act of categorization. While the attempts to find routes into general economies are appropriately numberless (and also unpredictable, shifting with historical conditions), those experiences which resist a reduction to a clear and distinct concept need not be read as defective or *lacking* in some fundamental way. Such experiences may challenge the very epistemologies that subtend such judgments, opening onto kinds of living that resist both these epistemologies of mastery and the politics of domination that they spawn (Winnubst, RBN 88).

The “wrong direction” for philosophy, and for our virtue epistemology conversation specifically, is the direction of waste, of nonmeaning or nonconceptuality, and of non-virtuous intellectual character. It is creating knowledge sovereignly, through a “calculated sliding” (W&D 268), keeping in mind (as I write at the conclusion of chapter two) that

⁸² Indeed nonknowledge is not solely (or even primarily) about the act of writing. Nonknowledge requires us to look first and foremost at how and why we *pursue and accumulate* knowledge. In this way I extend Derrida’s claim while offering a small corrective of it.

limits ought to be understood as thresholds, and not as final limits, and that nonknowledge itself is located in a “threshold position.”

Recall the ontological claim Bataille makes about expenditure (*Visions of Excess, The Accursed Share*): that squandering is primary, and production is secondary. It is of a piece with the claim from Lingis that the incommunicable is prior to and makes possible the communicable. It looks, on the surface, like the virtue epistemology conversation is concerned primarily with production and accumulation, but my claim is that there are “second-order” epistemological operations trying to *adapt* to the operant fact of the excess of knowledge—the primary squandering—that is nonknowledge. The “second-order” operations are the (eight) presumptions I have identified—integral to the process of producing knowledge, but not acknowledged as such by the interlocutors, the producers of knowledge in this particular conversation. The argument here is not that the virtue epistemology conversation is incorrect; it’s that it’s incomplete, that it can’t see something that, with the help of general economy, expenditure, nonknowledge, *is* visible. It’s not that virtue epistemology is *wrong* to have made the presumptions it has made; it’s that the presumptions are an adaptation to the occurrence of expenditure, excess, nonknowledge.

The applicable lesson of general economy and expenditure is this: Waste will occur regardless of the sophistication of the shoring-up techniques or methods. There is no perfectly closed or limited economy. That is, all production and acquisition of thought, and true belief or knowledge, is already part of—already caught up in—the movement of expenditure. Nonknowledge is a part of knowledge-creation, is a part of knowledge. So

then, why not look at what we might be tempted to call waste, or strange and unreliable, or not in accordance with virtue, and see what we find? The four elements of nonknowledge seem wasteful, useless, frivolous, but they are not quite that. They function according to a “dual” utility. What can the dual utility show us that we might apply to the virtue epistemology conversation? Firstly, dual utility can show us that despite the existence of excess/epistemic expenditure/nonknowledge, the excess can and must be *channeled*. Secondly, dual utility can show us that recognizing and channeling excess or expenditure makes a robust “classical” utility possible. Whereas an attempt at “classical” utility, without the channeling of excess, will fall flat or be incomplete. This is because if Bataille is right, “classical” utility is an inaccurate description of the way an economy functions. Classical utility is a closed economy that does not recognize the waste that necessarily exists; an account of an economy driven by classical utility cannot see that it is in fact an open economy. We can see, then, how the dual utility of nonknowledge *can be* productive of knowledge in the context of our virtue epistemology conversation: An open economy of knowledge first sees the waste, and determines how some of it might be channeled, and this in turn serves the original, “classical” utility—all in the mode of dual utility. The key, however, is to see and use whatever can be used of the excess in a way that is not a refusal, and then a reluctant use, of waste. And it cannot just be an insistence that all waste be reinvested productively in utility.

Returning to limits and thresholds: Nonknowledge is by definition a movement of unending interrogation, so an end point of nonknowledge is *not* an end point but a temporary pause—a *threshold*: “I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it

to some end point given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted non-knowledge to be its principle” (IE 3). A pause—what looks like certain knowledge—is an opportunity to continue interrogation. “The final development of knowledge is that of interrogation. We cannot endlessly defer our response...to knowledge...Knowledge in the final degree lets go before the void. At the summit of knowledge, I no longer know anything, I succumb and I have vertigo” (*Guilty* 79; Kendall translation). The question, then, is: What do we see, in knowledge and in the virtue epistemology conversation in particular, when we “succumb and have vertigo”? What limits do we hit, and can we dissolve them? And then, after the fact, what can be said about what we’ve seen? We have to attempt an unsettling of philosophy in its roots, at its origin, and at its core:

Bataille asks Hegel (and we can presumably think he would have asked the same to Socrates): ‘why must there be *what I know?*’ (OC 5: 128/IE 109). This question also asks, why must there be *that I know* at all, including the fact that I may not know. Why am I even capable of thinking this thought and yet have no way out through thought to answer it? The ‘why’ begs an aetiology that exceeds the limits of epistemological inquiry. To put it bluntly, it asks, like a child does, for the reason things exist and for the necessity of one’s knowledge of them; understandingly, it partakes in the childish dissatisfaction of the ‘so what?’ So what if I know all this, when I do not know what I know it *for*, when I do not know why I know, and when I cannot think the wherefrom of my thought? Academic philosophy, having privileged questions concerning the ‘what’ as it now privileges the ‘how,’ grows often weary of this ‘why.’ The why ends up abandoned with childhood, or handed over to theology for better or for worse, dismissed as being naïve and irrelevant because it challenges the discursive *modus operandi*. Bataille’s insistence on ‘why’ brings about the *désœuvrement* of the question itself as a mark of skepticism, a means toward a proof, or a rhetorical figure of philosophical authority. The question is no more the foundation behind a project of research; it is always posed in the beginning but from the end of research and the exhaustion of what cannot be answered. Hence, as if speaking for the first time, as if not returning to the scene of the Socratic trial, Bataille, using unattributed quotations, constantly responds to this question of knowledge, with the ‘I know nothing’ with which philosophy began (OC 5: 49, 62, 67, 73, 125/IE 37, 48, 53, 58, 106). However, all this would still be the mere comparison of a figure, if it did not reveal something

about the movement of thought itself, namely, that the question for both Socrates and Bataille, being fundamentally the question of death, takes its authority not from philosophy, even if for Socrates philosophy forms its outer limit. The question takes its urgency from the unknown, and if the Socratic project conceals this impetus in the process, it also reveals it as the inception and the end (that is, also, the limit, the horizon) of philosophical practice, lest we forget that the question of mortality prompted Socrates to doubt the oracle and become a philosopher in the first place (Nikolopoulou *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* 103-4).

This means we have to do what Socrates did: Begin thinking about knowledge from the position of nonknowledge—from the position of waste and excess—understood as encounter with our finitude. “Socrates began philosophizing from the excess of finitude he felt” at the “limit, the horizon of philosophical practice” (ibid 104). That is, we should back up or dig in, or whatever the metaphorical movement may be, and look closely at what we consider excessive or wasteful in the process of knowledge-creation. We see “strange and fleeting.” We see dreamlike states. We see ungrounded wonder. We see stupidity. We see uncertainty and unreliability. We see thought that is not motivated by love of truth. We see thoughts that we struggle to communicate, and that defy “the law of language.” We see irresponsible cognitive behavior—cognitive wandering without aim. We exceed epistemological inquiry and ask the childish, experimental questions. We *play*. Looking more specifically at the virtue epistemology conversation, we may look at the waste of non-virtuous beliefs (not motivated by love of truth), performances that fail to make use of cognitive character virtues to arrive at true belief, and strange and fleeting (or similarly non-virtuous) belief-production processes and see *insight* instead of waste. In this state, in these moments, we find something radical or heretical. (What if there *is* something to a hunch? What if a temporary impairment in cognition *does* allow us to think in novel and philosophically meaningful ways? What if placing restrictions on the creative

conditions of knowledge *prevents* but does not improve or refine the creation of knowledge?) We cannot expect to be rewarded or credited for what we find. *However*, recall that while some experiences may occasion nonknowledge, they are not the *form* of nonknowledge. We cannot say exactly which experiences will be nonknowledge—and thus part of knowledge—and which will be entirely wild and incapable of grounding anything.

This ending is thus an opening onto another beginning, an opportunity to pose a “childish” “Why?” (the most vertiginous moment, of which one will later be embarrassed): Why is any of us certain about what we know? If Bataille is right, maybe thinking well *is* best understood in relation to one’s entire life. Nonknowledge and philosophy (even and especially virtue epistemology) *are* compatible, then. Is laughter the proper response to the fact that this revelation has the character of truth?:

Laughter, love, even tears of rage and my inability to understand are means of an understanding that should not be placed on the level of intelligence, that strictly speaking compromise with intelligence to the point that intelligence assimilates laughter, love, and tears to other modes of action and reaction of the objects amongst themselves [...] To laugh at the universe would liberate my life. I escape its weight by laughing. I refuse the intellectual translation of this laughter: slavery would recommence from there on (*Guilty* 13; Kendall translation).

Is posing a childish question the first moment of sovereign creation?

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