

Contestation and *Epektasis* in the “Discussion on Sin”

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Much French thought since the Second World War has been acutely attentive to limits and how they ought to be thought and lived. This is as true of French phenomenology as it is of the various examples of French avant-garde thinking and writing that, in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, in North America, came to define post-modernism.¹ Scholarly attention to the thought of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, as well as to subsequent generations of thinkers influenced by them, has made us familiar with a particularly tragic approach to the living of limits, defined by Bataille and Blanchot themselves as “contestation.” Contestation describes a highly mobile practice of living, thinking, and writing, wherein the limits erected by an authority are set up to be dramatized and then transgressed, and the transgressive

¹Jérôme de Gramont’s recent book *Blanchot et la phénoménologie: L’effacement, L’événement* (Paris: Editions de Corlevour, 2011) makes this point about the “passion for limits” that has been generative of so much creative thought in France since World War II. De Gramont, whose book joins those of Marlène Zarader (*L’être et le neutre. A partir de Maurice Blanchot*. Lagrasse: Verdier, 2001) and Jean-Luc Lannoy (*Langage, perception, mouvement. Blanchot et Merleau-Ponty*. Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2008) in providing precious illumination of the relationship between French phenomenology since World War II and the thought of Blanchot, writes that the destiny of phenomenology can be seen in its “histoire qui emporte l’Idée de phénoménologie vers ses propres limites et, sous la contrainte des phénomènes, l’amène à affronter sans cesse de nouvelles apories, l’entraîne vers l’impossibilité d’explicitier les choses mêmes” (Gramont, *Blanchot*, 23); he explains further: “Plutôt que le droit à un possible tournant théologique (Janicaud), la question à poser à la phénoménologie pourrait bien porter sur cette passion des limites, au moment où le passage à la limite se fait excès. . . . Tout au long de son histoire, la phénoménologie aura été hantée par les confins de la phénoménalité: ce qui déborde l’intentionnalité, ce qui échappe au travail de la réduction ou de la constitution, ce qui n’est susceptible d’aucun présent ou d’aucune donation originnaire, etc.—tout ce par quoi la phénoménologie semble répéter la lutte avec l’ange. (Il n’est pas tout à fait indifférent que Husserl ait accroché au mur de son bureau une reproduction de ‘La lutte de Jacob avec l’ange’ de Rembrandt.)” (Ibid., 29, note 33). What de Gramont writes here about the relationship between French phenomenology since World War II and the thought of Blanchot seems to me also useful when considering the larger relationship between what might be termed French phenomenology and French non-academic and/or ‘avant-garde’ writing since Surrealism, itself shot through with various degrees of phenomenological commitment—a category that would include Bataille, Blanchot, and Sartre, as well as the various thinkers who have more recently staged at least parts of their careers within an avant-garde framework: Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Sollers, Kristeva, and so on.

act is itself then dramatized and transgressed, and so on, in order that new instances of authority can never go uncontested. As Maurice Blanchot told Georges Bataille one day in 1941 or '42, in contestation “all authority expiates itself”: contestation must become self-contestation if it is to become the path to a life intensely and honestly lived.²

Attention to this tragic approach to limits has largely obscured the fact that, at the very moment in history during which Bataille and Blanchot were laying its ground rules, an alternative, Christian approach to living limitation was being rediscovered and presented in a striking way by French Catholic scholars of considerable eminence. Indeed, in some instances Bataille, Blanchot, and these Catholic thinkers even discussed their respective approaches. Further historical research is necessary, but in the meantime it is already apparent that the practice and doctrine of contestation took form not only through Bataille’s and Blanchot’s respective critical readings of certain primarily medieval Christian mystics, but also in and through conversation with some of their Christian contemporaries. When facts like this are taken into account, the noted “turn” to theology (by which I mean discourse about God that seeks, in whole or in part, to bring the faithful to a greater understanding of their religious experience) in recent French thought appears as not only unsurprising but perfectly fitting. After all, recent French thinkers passionate about limits are as much heirs to the contestatory thought of Bataille, Blanchot, Derrida, or Nancy as they are to the theological investigations of Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar (several of whose early works were written in French), Henri Bouillard, Yves Congar, or Marie-Dominique Chenu. Indeed, to read and be affected by both lines of thought would be to proceed in the intellectual style of these thinkers themselves.

In this essay, I wish to focus on the March 5, 1944 “Discussion sur le péché” (“Discussion on Sin”) that took place between Bataille and the Jesuit priest and patristics scholar Jean Daniélou, with the involvement of a number of other important Christian and non-Christian intellectuals, because it is, so far, the best-documented wartime intellectual encounter between the founding practitioners of “contestation” and serious practitioners of Christianity, and, just as significant, because it brings into focus what has proven to be, at least in French thought, the most influential Christian alternative to a life of contestation: a life defined by the phenomenon of *epektasis*, the dynamic of “straining forward” in response to the calling presence of the resurrected Christ that characterizes Christian experience.³

² See Bataille’s famous account of Maurice Blanchot’s posing of “the foundation of all ‘spiritual’ life,” his three guidelines for “contestation” or “experience,” in *L’expérience intérieure*, Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, tome V (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 120; *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Boldt-Irons (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 102. Subsequent citations of the *Œuvres complètes* will be signalled by the abbreviation OC, the volume number, and the page number. References to the English translation of *Inner Experience* will be indicated by the abbreviation IE. Any unattributed translations in this essay are my own.

³ *Epektasis* has been succinctly defined as the “infinite trans-ascendance of the soul toward God” [“transcendance infinie de l’âme vers Dieu”] (Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Note sur le temps: Essai sur les raisons de la mémoire et de l’espérance* [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1990], 62, note 33). See Jean Daniélou’s summary in his introduction to *Contemplation sur la Vie de Moïse*, Sources

Among scholars of Blanchot and Bataille, Kevin Hart is perhaps alone in recognizing the significant challenge that the figure of *epektasis* presents as a coherent alternative to a life of contestation: at the conclusion of a characteristically fascinating analysis of the role of Blanchot's encounter with the thought of Meister Eckhart in his development of the doctrine of contestation, Hart notes that, for Blanchot, contestation always implied a self-sacrificing "exposure to some other (or to the other) who. . . [can] bring me into play."⁴ But, writes Hart,

the question is why Blanchot restricts the 'other' to human beings and, like Levinas, runs the risk of turning ethics into ethicity. . . . It is the young Blanchot writing for *Journal des Débats* who, when pondering Eckhart, leaves open the possibility of an experience of the deity the meaning of which is not determined in advance by an onto-theological understanding of God. From Eckhart's perspective, God welcomes all contestations of 'God.' St. Paul's figure of *ἐπέκτασις* in Philippians 3:13 is not one that Eckhart explicitly puts to work in his homilies and tractates although its image of an endless stretching forth of the soul is one that the Dominican could use to his advantage in affirming the Godhead. In his turn, could not Blanchot maintain that infinite contestation coheres with the infinite God, a deity beyond all dialectic? And if he rejects that possibility, and maintains that infinite contestation meets its limits with ethics, could he reasonably deny the charge of dogmatism?⁵

Hart here delicately suggests two things: 1) that Blanchot seemingly turned away from or blotted out a discovery he had made at least as early as 1942-43 about

Chrétiennes I (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1941), 27-44. The word is used by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians 3: 12-14, to describe his experience of constantly straining forward toward God: "Not that I have already obtained this [i.e. the resurrection of the dead] or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward [*epekteinomenos, extendens meipsum*] to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ" (RSV translation). St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine each develop the description of the phenomenon in the Greek (*epektasis*) and Latin (*extensio*) Christian worlds, respectively, from whence it spreads through the experience and writings of myriad mystics (see Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La Joie spaciense. Essai sur la dilatation* [Paris: Minuit, 2007], 43, 44). The figure of *epektasis* has been enormously fruitful in various ways for both Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien. For just one example in Chrétien's thought, see *La Joie spaciense. Essai sur la dilatation*, especially 43-52. On the importance of the figure of *epektasis* for Marion, see Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 31-32 and following; see also Stephen E. Lewis, "The Lover's Capacity in Jean-Luc Marion's *The Erotic Phenomenon*." *Quaestiones Disputatae* 1:1 (Fall 2010), 239-241 on the role of the figure of *epektasis* in Marion's description of the advancing lover in *The Erotic Phenomenon*.

⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), 8; *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), 20. Quoted in Kevin Hart, "The Counter-spiritual Life," Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman, eds. *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 177.

⁵ Hart, *Ibid.*

Christianity—namely, that in the account of Christian experience provided by Eckhart and others, “infinite contestation coheres with the infinite God, a deity beyond all dialectic”—and 2) that Blanchot’s (and, we could add, Bataille’s) subsequent characterizations of Christian faith as closed, static, and hypocritically afraid of putting itself at risk are intellectually untenable and even, it appears, dishonest in light of such a discovery—a conclusion that Hart entertains in raising “the charge of dogmatism” in his final sentence. Henri de Lubac, in a 1949 text devoted to the analysis of Nietzsche’s “mystical” experiences—a book in which Bataille’s *On Nietzsche* is quoted and discussed—puts the point more forcefully: “Ceux mêmes qui veulent s’en prendre directement à l’idéal chrétien ne l’osent pas pleinement; ils doivent commencer par le déformer et le réduire à autre chose” [Those who wish to attack the Christian ideal directly dare not do so fully; they must begin by deforming it and reducing it to something else].⁶ This observation unfortunately describes quite clearly Bataille’s tactics at certain moments in the “Discussion on Sin” which, interestingly, because it contains the transcript of a discussion, appears to be the only piece within Bataille’s entire corpus that can give us a sense of how he interacted with others in a live intellectual debate. However, indications about Bataille’s sociability and intellectual honesty are not the sole, or even the primary, interesting thing to be found in the transcript of the “Discussion on Sin.” These indications will enter into my analysis of the “Discussion” only to the extent that they relate to what I take to be the more fundamental issues raised by the debate, namely the way in which it makes clear the alternative between life lived as (self-)contestation, and life defined by the figure of *epektasis*. This alternative can be further broken down into an opposition, on the one hand, between personal communion and, on the other, impersonal “communication,” and between tragically closed being and dilatable created being. Running through all of these oppositions is a fundamental disagreement about what desire is, where it comes from, and how it works in a human life.

The “Discussion sur le péché”: Setting the Scene

On March 5, 1944, Georges Bataille directed his own fantastical session of the Inquisition. The 47-year old literary intellectual placed himself in the position of suspected heretic, while Pierre Klossowski (at that time a Dominican seminarian) served as ‘devil’s advocate’ and the Jesuit patristics scholar and future Cardinal Jean Daniélou was assigned the role of ‘inquisitor.’ The event, billed as a “Discussion sur le péché” [Discussion on Sin], took place in Nazi-occupied Paris, at the large and luxurious apartment (quai de la Mégisserie) of Marcel Moré, a foreign currencies banker and Catholic intellectual who during the war sponsored numerous discussions in his home and elsewhere on a variety of religious topics.⁷ The list of

⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Affrontements mystiques* (Paris: Editions du Témoignage Chrétien, 1949), 212, note 3; the reference to Bataille’s *Sur Nietzsche* can be found on 143, note 2.

⁷ Marcel Moré was a Catholic intellectual who, during a career spanning from the 1930s to the late 1950s, demonstrated a gift for bringing diverse figures from different intellectual spheres into contact with one another, often with very interesting results. Profoundly marked by his reading of the novelist

those in attendance is impressive, to say the least: among them were Arthur Adamov, Maurice Blanchot, Simone de Beauvoir, Pierre Burgelin, Albert Camus, Fr. André-Marie Dubarle, Maurice de Gandillac, Jean Hyppolite, Michel Leiris, Gabriel Marcel, Louis Massignon, Fr. Augustin Maydiou, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Paulhan, Pierre Prévost, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Klossowski began the gathering with a summary of Bataille's 14-point presentation arguing for an underground link between Christian mysticism and eroticism—the text of this presentation, which subsequently became the section entitled “Le sommet et le déclin” of Bataille's 1945 book *Sur Nietzsche*, had been distributed to “Discussion” participants beforehand. There then followed a detailed critical response to Bataille's thesis from the 39-year old Daniélou.⁸ The evening closed with a lively discussion involving many of the

Léon Bloy, Moré moved in Catholic intellectual circles beginning in the interwar period (it was through such circles that he came to know Colette Peignot, Bataille's “Laure”). He was also a friend of the poet and writer Michel Leiris, and through Leiris entered into relations with a number of Surrealists and Surrealist discontents, including Bataille, whom he met in 1935. Moré played an important role in the 1930s context of Christian personalism and the larger socio-political atmosphere of the Popular Front as the writer of a series of path-breaking articles, published in Emmanuel Mounier's journal *Esprit*, that attempted to reconcile Christianity and Marxism: “Notes sur le marxisme,” *Esprit*, no. 21 (juin 1934), 453-470; “Réflexions sur Karl Marx,” *Esprit* no. 31 (avril 1935); “L'humanisme communiste,” *Esprit* no. 37 (octobre 1935), 47-70; “Le réalisme économique et la morale,” *Esprit* no. 51 (décembre 1936), 402-412; “Un livre de Souvarine: *Staline*. Aperçu historique du bolchevisme,” *Esprit* no. 40 (jan. 1936). All of these articles, except “L'humanisme communiste,” are collected (with slight alterations in some cases) in Marcel Moré, *Accords et dissonances, 1932-1944* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967). For an account of Moré's role in the Catholic reception of Marx's thought, see David Curtis, “Marcel Moré et la découverte catholique de Marx dans les années 1934-1938,” *Digraphe* no. 86-87 (automne 1998), 79-89. For Moré's own account of the death of “Laure,” at which he was present, see Moré, “Georges Bataille en présence de la mort,” in Marcel Moré, *La Foudre de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 210-215.

⁸ Jean Daniélou was born in 1905 to Charles Daniélou, a prominent radical socialist politician (and staunch anticlerical) close to Aristide Briand, and Madeleine, first in the *agrégation* in literature in 1903 and director of the Catholic Collège de Sainte-Marie in Neuilly. From an early age Daniélou was positioned at the center of French Catholic intellectual life in Paris. See Paul Lebeau, *Jean Daniélou* (Paris: Editions Fleurus, 1967), 13-63; also John Hellman, *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 20. He passed the *agrégation* in grammar in 1927 (for which he wrote a study on the substitutes for the verb “to be” in Greek). In 1929 he entered the Jesuits, and was ordained a priest in 1938. He returned to Paris in the winter of 1941 to work on a doctorate in theology from the Institut Catholique (completed 1943) and a Doctorat ès lettres at the Sorbonne (completed 1944, primary thesis on the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa published as *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyssa* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), secondary thesis a translation of and commentary on Gregory of Nyssa's “The Life of Moses,” the first volume in the patristic and medieval texts series “Sources Chrétiennes”). While pursuing his two doctorates, Daniélou was active in Parisian student life, particularly as chaplain for the Catholic student group “le Cercle Saint Jean-Baptiste”; it was through his contacts with the larger intellectual community that Daniélou came to know Bataille. In addition to being an important patristics scholar, Daniélou was throughout his career deeply interested in dialogue between the Church and secular, agnostic, and atheist intellectuals. Daniélou was made Cardinal in April, 1969, after participation in the Second Vatican Council; he died in 1974. In addition to the “Discussion” with Bataille, Daniélou engaged in several exchanges with Merleau-Ponty up until the latter's untimely death. See, for instance, the essay on Merleau-Ponty in Jean Daniélou, *Dialogues* (Paris: Le Portulan, 1948), itself first published as a response to an intervention made by Merleau-Ponty in an exchange of letters between Daniélou and the writer Pierre Hervé: see Maurice Merleau-

attendees, with particularly intense exchanges taking place between Bataille, Sartre, and Hyppolite.⁹

The strange, almost comic mixture of guilt and complicity present in the way in which the event was organized, as well as the sincerity of Daniélou's critical response to Bataille and the philosophical and theological sophistication of the ensuing discussion, flowed not simply from the event's focus on the question of good and evil and how morality relates to the essential motives for human action. Ultimately of great importance was the angle through which this question about motives for human action was approached: agency in the life of Jesus Christ, particularly in his passion, death, and resurrection. The "Discussion" suggests that how one understands Jesus as the Christ can play a determinate role, even when only implicitly, in the elaboration of human subjectivity, particularly in attempts to conceptualize the 'why' of human action in terms of desire and the limits of human being.¹⁰ In the "Discussion," as I will show, questions about the limits of human

Ponty, "Foi et bonne foi," *Les Temps Modernes*, 1:5 (1 February 1946), 769-782. Daniélou also wrote numerous essays in this period, many published in *Dieu Vivant* and *Etudes*, on various aspects of the difference between Christian and Marxist approaches to the human person and history: some are collected in *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1982; originally published 1953). Daniélou and Bataille met for private discussions several times during the war: see Bataille's notes on a meeting with Daniélou that took place sometime between winter 1941 and October 1943, excised material from *Le coupable*, 1944 (OC V, 543), as well as Bataille's notes on a 28 January 1944 visit to Daniélou (OC VI, 397). Daniélou wrote a highly critical review of Bataille's *Sur Nietzsche* in *Etudes* no. 245 (June 1945), 397-398 (Daniélou was the journal's editor at the time), after which the two appear to have ceased contact. The text of the "Discussion sur le péché" is included in volume 6 of Bataille's *Œuvres complètes* and was first published in 1945 in the journal *Dieu Vivant* (no. 4, 81-133). Daniélou also published his response to Bataille as one of the essays in his 1948 book *Dialogues* (Paris: Le Portulan).

⁹ According to Moré, Bataille approached him in late 1943 with the desire to lead a meeting at Moré's apartment on the topic of "sin." On the origins and form of the "Discussion sur le péché," see Marcel Moré, *La foudre de Dieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 8, 214; Jean Daniélou, S.J., "Et qui est mon prochain? (extraits)," *Digraphe* no. 86-87, 128; and François L'Yvonnet, "Entretien avec Maurice de Gandillac, autour de Marcel Moré et de *Dieu Vivant*," *Digraphe* no. 86-87, 93-96. These discussion meetings, like those Moré organized during the same period at a château called "La Fortelle" near Rosay-en-Brie (under the rubric "Vie spirituelle," these events served in part as a front to disguise the use of La Fortelle by a resistance group for the sheltering of young men likely to be sent to Germany for forced labor under the STO [Service de travail obligatoire], as well as the occasional allied airman or resister), gathered numerous intellectuals—Catholic, Protestant, Russian Orthodox, agnostic, and atheist—to hear presentations on topics such as "La mystique cistercienne au XIII^e siècle," "La stylisation de l'expression chez les mystiques musulmans," and "Le salut des infidèles" (for a summary of the content of a number of "Vie spirituelle" discussions, see "Dix séances de Vie Spirituelle," *Digraphe* no. 86-87, 35-50). One of the most remarkable aspects of these salon-like gatherings was the diversity of intellectuals they attracted, a diversity in part resulting from the stifling intellectual atmosphere of occupied Paris, where non-collaborating intellectuals were starved for opportunities to meet and discuss with one another. Bataille's session at Moré's apartment was no different in this respect—one reason for its renown is the fact that it assembled in the same room such a diversity of soon-to-be well-known intellectuals.

¹⁰ The important role of christology in the "Discussion" has been ignored or barely touched upon in critical engagement with Bataille's relationship to mysticism, probably because most writing on this aspect of Bataille's work has avoided investigating its theological and spiritual significance for orthodox Christian belief. Scholarly investigations of Bataille's relationship to mysticism have tended to use Bataille's "mystical" texts of the 1940's—*L'expérience intérieure*, *Le coupable*, and *Sur*

Nietzsche—to focus more or less exclusively on how they demonstrate that Jean-Paul Sartre was mistaken about Bataille’s “mysticism” and that Bataillean mysticism subjects the metaphysical grounds of Sartre’s philosophy of political engagement to a thorough-going deconstruction. Narrow focus on the Bataille-Sartre “pas de deux,” even when the text of the “Discussion” comes under analysis, has precluded consideration of Bataille’s interactions with any other interlocutors. Thus Peter Connor, to take a prominent example, devotes the central pages of his book on Bataille and mysticism to the “Discussion sur le péché”—indeed, the second half of the title of his book, “The Mysticism of Sin,” is lifted directly from the text of the “Discussion”—yet does so almost entirely in order to elaborate upon Sartre’s misreading of Bataille. There is no mention whatsoever of Daniélou’s intervention; indeed, a reader unfamiliar with the text of the “Discussion” would, after reading Connor’s book, conclude that it is composed almost uniquely of dialogue between Sartre and Bataille. An unfortunate result of this omission is that Connor’s discussion of Bataille’s position on Christianity, though useful, is thoroughly uncritical: the full significance of Bataille’s bending of Christian terms and rewriting of the central event of Christianity and, thus, of Christian experience thus goes unexamined. See Peter Tracey Connor, *George Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 119-127. Similar distortions with regard to Bataille and Christianity are the norm in other scholarly accounts, as well. For instance, in her “Introduction” to the volume *On Bataille: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons simply dismisses Gabriel Marcel’s Christian criticisms of Bataille’s *L’expérience intérieure* (see Marcel’s “The Refusal of Salvation and the Exaltation of the Man of Absurdity”/“Le refus du salut et l’exaltation de l’homme absurde,” in his book *Homo viator: prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l’espérance*, nouvelle édition [Paris: Aubier/Éditions Mouton, 1944], 260-293; English trans. Emma Craufurd, “The Refusal of Salvation and the Exaltation of the Man of Absurdity,” *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope* [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 185-212) as merely derivative of Sartre’s (unpersuasive) objections, thus failing to grasp the original significance of Marcel’s criticism, which is that the three ‘rules’ of contestation Bataille picks up from Blanchot are adopted dogmatically. Stuart Kendall, in his “Editor’s Introduction” to *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge* (op. cit.), is more patient with Marcel’s argument, but similarly avoids the real heart of it, which is that Bataille’s entire approach to reality is “dogmatic,” “deliberately chosen,” what we might call “ideological,” rather than truly open (see Kendall, xxvi). Bernard Sichère’s chapter on Bataille in his *Le Dieu des écrivains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999) mentions Daniélou and gives one or two insights into the import of what he says about Bataille; but again, the focus is on differences between Sartre and Bataille, which read as a rehearsal of a familiar French post-structuralist dismissal of Sartre as, essentially, a Cartesian who failed to understand Heidegger. Amy Hollywood’s significant study, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), is better, but still disappoints me. She demonstrates an obvious grasp of the centrality of a specifically Christian experience of reality, a life lived in Christ, to the mystical experiences of the Franciscan mystic Angela of Foligno, whose writings figure so prominently in Bataille’s *Inner Experience* and *Guilty*; indeed, Hollywood acknowledges that medieval mystics like Angela were able in their mystical experience to witness to both “the ethical call of the other, whose suffering demands attention” and “the desire for self-shattering anguish and ecstasy” precisely because their experience was Christian experience: “the soul shattered in contemplation of Christ’s suffering body attends, in and as Christ, to the suffering of others” (Hollywood, 87). Bataille, Hollywood rightly points out, rejects out of hand such a “pure” witnessing as not possible, because he refuses out of hand the possibility of salvation in Christ—that is, the possibility that a human being can live in this life “in and as Christ”—on the grounds that salvation is always a conceptual “project.” But is Bataille right about salvation? Hollywood ultimately seems caught between a sympathy for the medieval Christian women she knows and understands so well, and Bataille: she seems to agree at times with Bataille’s assessment of salvation as project, but at other moments she is quite critical of the sado-masochistic attachment to violence toward women implicit in Bataille’s “appropriat[ion]” of Angela of Foligno’s “mystical position” (114, 118). Hollywood’s conflicted attitude toward Bataille’s treatment of Christianity, and above all her avoidance of the issue of the truth and accuracy of that treatment, ultimately weakens her concluding gesture in the book toward a practice of unspecified “forms of ritual” that would offer “new ways to negotiate the often fraught relationship between the political, the religious, and the mystical” (278). As a religious

being, the dynamism and origin of human desire, and the consequences for human action of the apparent mismatch between mortal human being and infinite human desire crystallize within a debate about whether the fullness of human being is essentially personal or impersonal.

In what follows I intend to proceed in a manner that takes into account the properly religious intention, in the sense of an approach to life that presupposes a totalizing account, of both Bataille's atheological mysticism and Daniélou's Christian anthropology. In analyzing the debate between Bataille and Daniélou, I want to suggest that the notion of human personhood, when unfolded according to the christological dimensions in which it appeared in the "Discussion," has more to it than much post-structuralist thought (often explicitly following Bataille) seems to realize.¹¹ Jean Daniélou, because of his thorough knowledge of Cappadocian Christian thought (where the Christian understanding of personhood was first elaborated) and his ability to bring that thought to bear on the issues of being, limits, desire, and action raised by Bataille, proves to be an excellent guide to a deeper, third understanding of human being, different from both the impersonal fusion sought by Bataille and the individualistic, self-sufficient ego conceived by Sartre.

Limited Being and the Desire to Open it as Presuppositions for Bataillean Contestation

Let's begin by sketching Bataille's presentation at the "Discussion," post-poning a critical reading of it until we come to Daniélou's response. Bataille's set of propositions begins with a "fundamental thesis" about the true meaning of the common tendency to oppose good to evil: "*In common judgment,*" states Bataille, "*the essence of a moral act is being rendered servile to some utility, returning to the good of some being a movement in which the being aspires to surpass being.*"¹² In fact, however, this submission to utility and the accumulation of good is best seen (as the word "servile" already indicates) as a betrayal, resulting from weakness, of a fundamental human desire to expend energy and break out of individualized, limited being. The morality Bataille wants to propose opposes the "moral summit"—approached by the dominant human urge to take "tragic intensity to its maximum" by expending energy without reserve and "violat[ing] the integrity of beings"—to the "decline"—the greedy urge, resulting from exhaustion or fatigue, to "preserve"

proposal, this comes across as not terribly attractive, because the book has made unclear the criteria one would use for making such negotiations.

¹¹ As an example: Connor claims that the need to go "beyond the philosophy of personalism" (*Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin*, 61) in search of a greater ethical rigor justifies the efforts of Bataille, and after him those of Jacques Derrida and Pierre-Jean Labarrière, to conceive of a non-human "sliver of a subject" that remains as witness to the other in communication (102-103). The shortcomings of this sort of celebration of impersonality will be analyzed later in this essay.

¹² Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973, 316, 319); Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 28, 30, modified. Subsequent citations to these books will be given parenthetically, with the abbreviations OC VI for the French text, and US for the English translation.

and “enrich” our being by establishing rules of morality that encourage individual accumulation of energy and protect the individual being from the risk of violation or wounding (US 28/OC VI 316). From the state of decline, the morality of the summit appears to be “evil”; but, says Bataille, it is evident that the glory of human being flashes forth only when the summit is being pursued: this is clearest, says Bataille, in the crucifixion of Christ, which is “the most equivocal expression of evil at the summit”:

Man attains the summit of evil in the crucifixion. But it is precisely in having attained this summit that humanity ceased being separate from God. From here we understand that ‘communication’ cannot take place from one full and intact being to another: communication wants beings with their being *at stake*, placed at the limit of death, of nothingness; the moral summit is a moment of risk taking, of the suspension of being beyond itself, at the limit of nothingness. (US 28, modified/OC VI 317)

From here, Bataille, pursuing further the description of the consequences of this human desire for “communication,” draws an analogy between a sacrificial act—the sacrifice of an animal, or even of God himself in Jesus Christ—and the violation of the flesh that Bataille sees taking place between lovers engaged in love (understood here as something sinful, OC VI 50-51): “what attracts desire in the being of flesh is not immediately the being, it is its wound: it is a point of rupture in the integrity of the body, . . . a wound that puts its integrity at stake, its rupture, which does not kill but desecrates. What the desecration reveals, is also what death reveals: nothingness” (US 29/OC VI 317-18). Attainment to the moral summit comes from the full pursuit of the desire for “communion,” which occurs only, says Bataille, through “ruining the integrity of being in myself and in the other”; thus, “*all ‘communication’ partakes of suicide and crime. . . . In this light, evil appears as a life source!*” (US 30/OC VI 318; see OC VI 48-49 for the full account). However, the drive to conserve being warps this desire for the summit, and (here Bataille seems to be making an historical claim) has led human beings to compromise the desire for “communication.” Human beings have the tendency to reject the drive toward real crimes and (self-)annihilation by channeling their desire into the attainment of “spiritual summits”: the bloodless sacrifice of the Mass instead of the “real” desire to put oneself at risk in “orgies” and bloody sacrifice; “spiritual effusions” in place of “sensuality”; or, in short, “the project of salvation” as means to “escape the vertigo of sensuality” by “representing some good for ourselves, situated in a future time” (US 31, 32/OC VI 319, 320), which is “substituted for the real things” (OC VI 53). Ultimately, Bataille holds forth as the only modern means to stay true to the fundamental human desire for “communication” and the “beyond of being” that is “nothingness” the practice of “contestation,” carried out while awaiting the impossible occurrence of a “chance” that would give “possible [real] access to the summit” (US 34/ OC VI 322). In order to understand why Bataille thinks what he thinks about moral categories, it will be useful to fill out what in this presentation can appear to be rather schematic by looking more closely at Bataille’s

account of the way in which modern life in a liberal democratic society mutilates human being by rendering the “sovereign” or “free” exercise of the desire for a communication with the beyond of being virtually impossible.

Bataille approaches the issue of the limits on free human communication with the beyond of being by asking the question, What essentially motivates human being? His answer, articulated in a variety of rhetorical styles (literary, sociological or ethnographic, Marxist, “mystical” and philosophical) throughout his career is that human action is governed by a dual regulatory structure that controls human desire. On the one hand humans have an overriding desire to expend energy uselessly so as to break out of the stifling limits of individual being and thereby fuse with others in a risk-charged movement toward the horizon of death (or what Bataille in *Sur Nietzsche* calls “le néant”). Bataille says of lovers, for instance, that they are necessarily condemned to fight with one another: “c’est au prix d’un combat, par les plaies qu’ils se font qu’ils s’unissent” [it is at the price of combat, through the wounds they make in one another, that they are united].¹³ Of even greater exemplary significance for Bataille is the desire for inner combat, a willed self-destructive emotional state described in a particularly evocative manner as follows in *Le coupable*:

J’ai voulu m’en prendre à moi-même. Assis au bord d’un lit, en face de la fenêtre et de la nuit, je me suis exercé, acharné à devenir moi-même *un combat*. La fureur de sacrifier, la fureur du sacrifice s’opposaient en moi comme les dents de deux rouages, si elles s’agrippent au moment où l’arbre de force entre en mouvement. (OC V 250)

I wanted to take it out on myself. Seated on the edge of a bed, facing the window and the night, I practiced, determined to become, myself, *a combat*. The fury to sacrifice and the fury of the sacrifice opposed themselves in me, like the teeth of two gears gripping one another at the moment when the drive shaft is engaged.¹⁴

In the “Discussion” this violent desire to tear open oneself and others in order to move with them toward fusional “communication” is described as a need to be “le tout de l’univers” [the whole/the all of the universe] (OC VI 202/ON 187 modified).

At the same time, however, Bataille notes that this desire to break out of one’s individual being and fuse with the other is matched by a less imperious, guilt-filled desire for rest and restoration of energy, which involves a retreat into the limits of individual being through the erection of moral barriers that will block any assault on one’s bodily and/or subjective integrity. In the “Discussion,” as we saw above, Bataille’s initial concern is to explain that moral categories of good and evil thus do

¹³ OC VI 74; English translation from Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1992), 58, trans. modified. Subsequent references to this translation will be signaled parenthetically in the text by the abbreviation ON.

¹⁴ English translation, modified, from *Guilty*, trans. Stuart Kendall (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 13.

not determine or motivate human action in any fundamental way, but, instead, are by-products of the alternation between the exuberant sado-masochistic desire for communication and the guilt-ridden desire for rest that marks the flow of human desire.

Thus the terms “evil” and “good” are to be understood as markers established by the ego in decline from the summit of exuberant self-expenditure. They are tools that the declining ego, well aware of its unwillingness to risk everything, uses to re-establish the limits protective of its individual integrity, not unlike the Hegelian bondsman who, afraid of death, shamefully pulls back from the fight to the death, knowing he cannot live up to his destiny. Human desire is thus always violent: in fusion-seeking exuberance the ego tries to tear apart the limits of beings, while in the mode of decline it forcefully imposes closure, upon its own being and that of others.

The above schematic account of desire could give the impression that Bataille’s concern with moral categories and their relation to the motives for human action is dispassionate or scholarly. But this is only partially accurate. The text presented at the “Discussion” forms part of a book written in what Bataille terms “communication” with Friedrich Nietzsche, much of which consists of excerpts from diaries Bataille kept during 1944, while leading a rather miserable and anxious existence in Vézelay, in the unoccupied zone. Bataille’s argument about morality and human agency thus arises explosively from amidst the tension he was living between his desire for total liberation from all moral limits—a desire for the “summit”—and the historical situation of penury, fear, and constant threat of unforeseeable violent death in which he was situated. What Bataille calls the “question déchirante de ce livre” [the rending question of this book] expresses this tension well:

S’il n’est plus de grande machine au nom de laquelle parler, comment tendre l’action, comment demander d’agir et que faire? Toute action jusqu’à nous reposa sur la transcendance: où l’on parla d’agir, on entendit toujours un bruit de chaînes, que des fantômes du néant traînaient à la cantonade. (OC VI, 161)

If there is no general interrelation of things in the name of which speaking is possible, how can action be addressed, how can people be made to act, do anything?’ Until our time action depended on transcendence. When the talk turned to action, offstage there would always be clunky chains, rattled by ghosts of nothingness. (ON 143)

Self-contesting contestation as the sole form of honest, non-alienating action available to the human being becomes more and more apparent as Bataille describes what he sees: he is convinced that the modern utility-maximizing society in which he lives systematically “humiliates our human nature”; utilitarian society—society organized for the purposes of maximized production—subordinates everyone and virtually every thing to objecthood within the dictates of a project:

It seems to me that no matter what the difficulties, the movement of minds converges: there is on all sides . . . a ferment which promises man a return to a so much freer life, to a so much prouder life, a life which could be called wild. There is within today's man a profound intolerance for the sense of humiliation which is demanded every day of our human nature and to which we submit everywhere: we submit in the office and in the street; we submit in the country. Everywhere men feel that human nature has been profoundly humiliated, and what is left of religion finally humiliates him in the face of God who, after all, is merely a hypostasis of work. I do not think that one could dream of denying this nostalgia . . . it is the nostalgia for a life which ceases to be humiliated; it is the nostalgia for a life which ceases to be separated from what lies behind the world. It is not a question of finding behind the world something which dominates it; there is nothing behind the world which dominates man, there is nothing that can humiliate him; behind the world, behind the poverty in which we live, behind the precise limits where we live, there is only a universe whose bursting open is incomparable, and behind this universe there is nothing.¹⁵

The claim here is that modern utilitarian life denies human beings their desire and destiny to be “le tout de l'univers” (OC VI 202). What is to be done? The rattling of the clunky chains by the ghosts of nothingness prevents Bataille from opposing the alienating effects of modernity in the way that Sartre did, by developing plans for the surpassing, dialectical or otherwise, of social limitations, whether through politics, art, or another supposedly “transcendent” action. There are two reasons for Bataille's rejection of engagement. The first has to do with Bataille's understanding of transcendence. Both Bataille and Sartre reject the possibility of a truly transcendent divinity; this means, then, that when they speak of transcendence, they are always speaking simply of an inner-worldly operation, which is necessarily grounded in the dynamics of worldly power, or violence. Bataille realizes this and, following Nietzsche, celebrates the inherent tragedy of the situation; Sartre holds instead to a vision of the will able in its freedom to shape the violence of power into a rational, acceptable order.¹⁶ For Bataille, then, death is the horizon of all being; no being transcends the nothingness of death. Death, or “le néant,” however, transcends individual being. When we perceive or imagine the annihilation of an immanent thing or a person (a “limited being”), that limited being becomes a sort of “given of

¹⁵ From a 1948 lecture entitled “The Problems of Surrealism,” in Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), 82-83; French text OC VII 395.

¹⁶ Stuart Kendall puts this well: “For Sartre, individuals are capable of willing their own values, of projecting their own values or cares in the world. The human being finds his or her meaning and passion in this projection. To fail to accept this responsibility for oneself is to fall into what Sartre calls bad faith. And for Sartre, this is precisely Bataille's failing” (Stuart Kendall, “Editor's Introduction,” in Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge*, trans. Michelle and Stuart Kendall [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001], xxvii).

the nothing” (“une donnée du néant”) and thus reveals to us the complete field of our existence, with its limits clearly defined, and heightens our desire to leap beyond into impersonal dissolution:

Les morts que nous imaginons lointaines, nous pouvons d’un élan nous jeter moins en elles qu’au-delà: cette femme, que j’étreins, est mourante et la perte infinie des êtres, incessamment coulant, glissant hors d’eux-mêmes, est MOI! (OC VI 155)

As we leap, it’s not so much perhaps that we’re flung out among the dead—whom we imagine as being far from us—as that we’re hurled beyond. The woman I am embracing is dying, and this infinite destruction of individual existences, incessantly flowing, incessantly escaping beyond them, is ME! (ON 136).¹⁷

Thus for Bataille, “le seul élément qui introduise l’existence dans l’univers est la mort” [death is the only element that introduces existence into the universe] (“L’amitié,” OC VI, 304-5), and the only beyond of individual existence (“l’au-delà de l’être,” OC VI, 45) is death. Bataille describes the welling up of the desire for an almost suicidal self-sacrifice (almost, because the suicidal for Bataille must always go unplanned, lest it become a project) as it emerges in response to the refusal to “reduce” existence to fit into the reality of servitude:

Il ne s’agit plus de réduire et d’assimiler l’ensemble de ce qui est à cette existence que nous avons paralysé de servitudes mais à la sauvage *impossibilité* de notre esprit qui ne peut pas éviter ses limites et ne peut pas non plus s’y tenir. Une *Unwissenheit*, une ignorance aimée, extatique, devient alors l’expression accomplie d’une sagesse que n’obère plus un vain espoir. A un point extrême de son développement, la pensée aspire à sa propre ‘mise à mort’: elle est précipitée comme par un saut dans la sphère du sacrifice et, de même qu’une émotion grandit jusqu’à l’instant irrésistible du sanglot, sa plénitude la porte jusqu’où siffle un vent qui l’abat, jusqu’où sévit la contradiction définitive des esprits. Partout, dans toute la réalité accessible et dans chaque être, il est nécessaire de trouver le lieu sacrificiel, la blessure.

¹⁷Bataille was challenged in his use of the terms “néant,” “transcendance,” and “immanence” during the “Discussion” by Hyppolite and Sartre—see the “Discussion” transcript, OC VI 337-341/US 51-54; he responded at greater length in an appendix to *Sur Nietzsche* with the following efforts at definition: “Le néant est pour moi la limite d’un être. Au-delà des limites définies—dans le temps, dans l’espace—un être n’est plus. Ce non-être est pour nous plein de sens: je sais qu’on peut m’anéantir. L’être limité n’est qu’un être particulier, mais la totalité de l’être (entendue comme une somme des êtres) existe-t-elle? La transcendance de l’être est fondamentalement ce néant. C’est s’il apparaît dans l’au-delà du néant, en un certain sens comme une donnée du néant, qu’un objet nous transcende. Dans la mesure au contraire où je saisis en lui l’extension de l’existence qui m’est d’abord révélée en moi, l’objet me devient *immanent*” (OC VI, 203).

Chaque être n'est touché qu'au point où il succombe, une femme sous sa robe, un dieu à la gorge de l'animal de sacrifice. (OC VI 295)

No longer is the question that of reducing and assimilating the whole of what is to this existence that we have paralyzed with servitude, but instead to the wild *impossibility* of our mind, which cannot avoid its limits and, yet, can no longer conform to them. An *Umwissenheit*, a beloved, ecstatic ignorance, then becomes the accomplished expression of a wisdom that no longer obeys a vain hope. At an extreme point of its development, thought aspires to its own 'execution': it is precipitated by a leap into the sphere of sacrifice and, just as an emotion grows to the point of the irresistible instant of a sob, thought's fullness brings it to the place where the wind blows that knocks it down, to the place where the definitive contradiction of minds reigns. Everywhere, in all accessible reality and in each being, the sacrificial place, the wound, must be found. Each being is affected only at the point where it succumbs: a woman under her dress, a god at the throat of the sacrificial animal.

The human need for sacrificial expenditure is universal, but the specific problem with modern life is that the utilitarian ethos has become so pervasive as to close the ego into individuality in an historically new way. Modern liberalism affords virtually no festive social means by which limited beings might approach the beyond of being. According to Bataille, the only modes of approach to the beyond of being available in modern life are things like war, crime, drunkenness, sexual perversion, slipshod work or other forms of failure (see OC VI 154: "Travailler mal, en désordre, est le seul moyen, souvent, *de ne pas devenir fonction*"), and the writing of poetry and the making of art—all decidedly marginal activities that purportedly resist becoming "useful."

The modern experience of freedom is necessarily fleeting and lonely because, as Bataille understands it, the modern means-end oriented organization of life holds human being in so complete a bondage that even thought and language, those parts of ourselves that we typically believe are most interior and therefore the most likely tools we possess for escape from the claims of project, are completely subordinated to project because of their discursive essence: "Discursive, la pensée est toujours attention donnée à un point aux dépens des autres, elle arrache l'homme à lui-même, le réduit à un maillon de la chaîne qu'il est" [Discursive thought always implies that attention is paid to some single point at the expense of others, pulling man up out of himself, reducing him to a link in the chain that he is] (OC VI, 154/ON 135, trans. modified). Often in the "Discussion" and in *Sur Nietzsche*, Bataille remarks upon the "impossibility" of describing the "summit" of existence toward which the way of transgressive contestation of morally constituted limited being tends. When he speaks of the "summit" he is always careful to note that to speak of it is inevitably to decline from it, because language necessarily, in his view, brings about a discursive knowing of the 'thing' being spoken of, indeed makes of it a thing, and thus

incorporates it into a discursive project. In the tenth point of his presentation at the “Discussion” Bataille states, “*Formuler la critique est déjà décliner. Le fait de ‘parler’ d’une morale du sommet relève lui-même d’une morale du déclin*” [To formulate such criticism is already to decline. The act of ‘speaking’ of a morality of the summit itself arises from a morality of decline] (OC VI 321/US 32). In *Sur Nietzsche* he adds:

En vérité, le sommet proposé pour fin n’est plus le sommet: je le réduis à la recherche d’un profit *puisque j’en parle*. . . . Le débauché n’a chance d’accéder au sommet que s’il n’en a pas l’intention. Le moment extrême des sens exige une innocence authentique, l’absence de prétention morale et même, en contrecoup, la conscience du mal. (OC VI, 57)

Frankly put, the summit, when suggested as an end, is not the summit, since I’m reducing it to the search for advantage *when speaking of it*. . . . The dissolute man has the chance to reach the summit only by not intending it. The ultimate moment of the senses requires real innocence and absence of moral pretensions and, as a result, even a feeling of evil. (ON 37, 38, trans. modified)

Any “knowledge,” then, of the beyond of being is always negative—it is “non-savoir” which, as the fruit of “sin” understood as contestatory or ruinous “sacrificial” behavior, contests the integrity of the closed, enslaving mode of being that forms the foundation of all positive knowledge, bringing violated, and thus “open,” beings into an experience of communication that is barely articulable and never lasting.

The essential discursivity of thought and language makes any attempt at communication an experience of a double bind, an experience valorized by Bataille with the term contestation, which describes the dramatic search for and subsequent transgression—but never the definitive removal—of prohibitions. In the “Discussion,” as in other of Bataille’s texts from the 1940s (*L’expérience intérieure*, *Le coupable*), transgression and prohibition become so tightly bound to one another and so highly charged with emotion that, as Michel Foucault noted, they in a very real sense guarantee each other’s existence.¹⁸ The aporiae of self-contestation thus become for Bataille paradoxical signs of the truth of being; they mark out the nobility of being as a glorious sovereignty that flashes at moments in self-torturing sacrifice. This expression of the tortured nobility of authentic being provides Bataille with a rhetorical guarantee of his own sincerity and, hence, of his self-contesting authority. This sincerity is not virtuous as traditionally understood; rather

¹⁸ In his article “Préface à la transgression,” *Critique* no. 195-196 (1963), Michel Foucault characterizes Bataille’s understanding of the intimate linkage between transgression and prohibition as a “corkscrew relationship” [“un rapport en vrille”], in which the instant of transgression is similar to “the flash which gives a dense and dark being to that which it negates” [“l’éclair qui donne un être dense et noir à ce qu’il nie”].

it is a sincerity so sincere that it denounces traditional sincerity as contaminated by self-interest. Bataille's sincerity is thus impersonal, denouncing its own expression as lies in order to refuse any and all claims to virtue, and thus to appear "truer" because disinterested in anything remotely resembling a reward.¹⁹

For his audience, a key element in this impersonal nobility and sincerity of character—remarked upon by both Adamov and Massignon at the "Discussion" (OC VI 331, 334/US 44, 47)—lies in the seriousness with which Bataille contests God. Indeed, Bataille's notion of transcendence as non-being is intimately connected with his valorization of impersonality, which itself emerges as a dessicated fruit of the particular understanding of God that Bataille contests. This can be seen by looking closely at Bataille's discussion of the death of Jesus on the cross as he describes it in the text from the "Discussion" and elsewhere in *Sur Nietzsche*, supplemented by a look at the uses he makes of Christian mystical contemplation of the Crucifixion from other wartime texts. As we noted in our summary of Bataille's "Discussion" presentation, Bataille needs to interpret the crucifixion of Christ as a summit experience and the "most equivocal expression of evil" in order to make the implicit claim that only his understanding of transcendence fits with a proper understanding of being. (That his understanding of the limits of human being need not be the only understanding is a point Daniélou will pursue, as we shall see.) Bataille's understanding of the transcendence of being as nothingness is his primary argument for what he sees as an unacknowledged complicity between eroticism and Christian mystical experience, or between sin and Christian holiness.

Bataille's claim about Christian mysticism, and Christian experience more broadly, is that it is a form of "inner experience" (self-contestation) that has been truncated and falsified by the "morality of decline" into a "project" to attain salvation. If Christians did not artificially yoke their experience to Church dogma and the projected goal of salvation, thinks Bataille, they would experience the fullest summit experience and recognize the equivocal nature of evil: that evil—the violent tearing open of self and other—is the royal road to communion with other beings. Bataille argues for the pivotal role of evil in the experience of authentically open being through what we might see as a sociological perspective on the crucifixion in the text he read at the "Discussion," and follows this with a more interior perspective published later in *Sur Nietzsche*. What I am calling the sociological perspective is narrated with a certain perspective of detachment, and takes a schematic form: virtually all biblical detail has been stripped away, so that the reality of the Passion as historical event is muted.

La mise à mort du Christ porte atteinte à l'être de Dieu.

Les choses eurent lieu comme si les créatures ne pouvaient communiquer avec leur Créateur que par une blessure en déchirant l'intégrité.

¹⁹ François Warin, *Nietzsche et Bataille: la parodie à l'infini* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), 304-305 provides multiple references to Bataille's own statements about sincerity, all of which confirm this point; for Warin's expressions of admiration for Bataillean impersonality, see 22 and 136.

La blessure est voulue, désirée de Dieu.
Les hommes qui la lui font n'en sont pas moins coupables.
D'un côté—ce n'est pas le moins étrange—cette culpabilité est la blessure déchirant l'intégrité de chaque être coupable.
De cette façon, Dieu blessé par la culpabilité des hommes et les hommes que blesse leur culpabilité vis-à-vis de Dieu, trouvent, mais péniblement, l'unité qui semble leur fin.
S'ils avaient gardé leur intégrité respective, si les hommes n'avaient pas péché, Dieu d'un côté, les hommes de l'autre, auraient persévéré dans leur isolement. Une nuit de mort, où le Créateur et les créatures ensemble saignèrent, s'entre-déchirèrent et de toutes parts se mirent en cause—à l'extrême limite de la honte—s'est trouvée nécessaire à leur communion.
(OC VI, 42-43)

The putting to death of Christ injures the being of God.
Things took place as if creatures could not communicate with their Creator except through a wound, tearing apart his integrity.
The wound is willed, desired by God.
The men who do this to him are not less guilty.
From one angle—and this is not the least strange aspect—this guilt is the wound rending the integrity of each guilty being.
In this way, God wounded by the guilt of men and men wounded by their own guilt with respect to God, find, if painfully, the unity that seems their purpose.
If they had kept their respective integrity, if men had not sinned, God on one side, men on the other, would have persevered in their isolation.
A night of death, wherein Creator and creatures bled together, tore one another apart, and in every sense implicated themselves, at the extreme limits of shame: that is what was required for their communion. (ON 18, modified)

Here the height of communication, human “communion” with God in a frenzied “night of death,” is produced through a strange kind of mutually willed murder-suicide: God offers himself to be put to death, and men, through the “wounding” effect of their guilty acceptance of this offer, “at the extreme limits of shame,” tear open their integrity before one another and before God. The markers ‘good’ and ‘evil’ give way in this night of death and blood to the flow of complicitous transgression that brings about the fusional disintegration of previously closed beings.

At the “Discussion,” of course, Bataille offered this perspective on the crucifixion to a room containing several believing Christians; the intent here (which became fully manifest at the end of the ensuing discussion, when Bataille rejected an offer of friendship from his Christian co-discussants out of pure and simple “hostility” to “Christianity”—OC VI 358/US 73) was to affect the Christians’ spiritual relationship to the passion and death of Jesus, so that their inner spiritual

experience might be altered by Bataille's understanding of being and its horizon, and thus opened to "communication." This is made clear later in *Sur Nietzsche* when Bataille offers the counterpart to the perspective on the crucifixion offered in the "Discussion": the understanding from within of the crucifixion as "summit." God is now fully disclosed to be a kind of Feuerbachian projection constructed out of the mystic's guilty decline from the summit; as Amy Hollywood aptly puts it, the figure of Christ is "not a divine object of emulation but a projection of the self, a dramatization of the self's dissolution" (Hollywood 70), a "projection of human desire" (Hollywood 297, note 25). Bataille writes: "Abhorring bodily pollutions, mysticism hypostatizes the fear that grips it: this fear is the positive object engendered by and perceived within this movement that it calls God" (OC VI 150/ON 131, trans. modified). This "God," projected out of the ego's experience of horror at the apprehension of the signs of bodily death, contains within it the ambiguous attraction-repulsion Bataille finds in all experiences of disgust.²⁰ "Placed," then, "at the juncture point, [God] is on one hand the abyss (uncleanness, the terrible glimpsed in the abyss of innumerable depths—time. . .), and, on the other, massive negation of the abyss, sealed off (like pavement, tragically, embarrassedly, sealed off)" (OC VI 150/ON 131, trans. modified). Meditation upon Christ's crucifixion thus can afford the Bataillean mystic who refuses to falsify her vision by putting it to "work" for salvation (OC VI 56) a self-disintegrating experience in which her own fear of death gives way to reveal a longing for ideal sacrifice, the perfect—because unplanned—act of suicidal self-expenditure:

La naïveté humaine—la profondeur obtuse de l'intelligence—permet toutes sortes de tragiques sottises, de voyantes supercheries. Comme à une sainte exsangue on coudrait une verge de taureau, on n'hésite pas à *mettre en jeu* . . . l'absolu immuable! Dieu déchirant la nuit de l'univers d'un cri (*Eloi! lamma sabachtani?* de Jésus), n'est-ce pas un sommet de malice? Dieu lui-même s'écrie, s'adressant à Dieu: 'Pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné?' C'est-à-dire: 'Pourquoi me suis-je abandonné moi-même?' Ou plus précisément: 'Qu'arrive-t-il? me serai-je oublié au point de—*m'être mis moi-même en jeu?*' (OC VI, 151)

Human naïveté—the obtuse depth of the intelligence—allows all sorts of tragic follies, of garish frauds. Just like sewing a bull's pizzle on a bloodless saint, you wouldn't have any hesitation about questioning . . . the immutable absolute! God rending the night of the universe with a cry (the *Eloi! lamma sabachtani?* of Jesus), is this not a summit of malice? God himself cries out, addressing himself to God: "Why have you abandoned me?" Which is to say, "Why have I abandoned myself?" Or more precisely, "Is this really happening? Could I have

²⁰ See Gilles Ernst, *Georges Bataille: Analyse du récit de mort* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1993), 44-46 for an excellent discussion of the importance of necrophilia in Bataille's conception of being.

forgotten myself to the point of—*having put myself at risk?*” (ON, 132, trans. modified)

In the closing series of questions, Bataille systematically re-writes Christ’s cry of dereliction to the Father and the distance of freedom it marks, so that the infinite personhood of the Christian God—God in three Persons—is reduced to biologically limited human being, the value of which is not a personal value, but rather a concept: “communication.”

Bataille’s minimal use of biblical detail when he writes or speaks of Christ is, I believe, strategic: he provides a bit of it in the hopes of enticing his believing listeners to abandon, as it were, the Jesus of the Gospels for the Jesus of his text, a swap that might then lead them into “communication.” Hollywood, discussing the analogous maneuvers of substitution that Bataille performs in *L’expérience intérieure* on Angela of Foligno’s meditative descriptions of her own being conformed to the redemptive Passion of the God-Man, states that, for Bataille,

[w]hat is central about the cross. . . is neither who is on it, nor the salvific nature of his suffering, but the suffering itself, which serves as the projected image through which the subject experiences his or her own dissolution. What we cannot ruin directly in ourselves, Bataille argues, we can (must?) ruin through identification with the other’s bodily laceration. The torture of the other’s body serves as a dramatization that leads to greater ecstasy in the void. [In certain passages of *L’expérience intérieure*] we see the move from ecstasy before the object, parallel to Angela’s meditations on the figure of Christ, to ecstasy before the void, which is analogous to Angela’s account of the darkness of the divine. (Hollywood, 73-74)

Hollywood then quotes the following passage from *L’expérience intérieure*, which lays out quite clearly the itinerary on which Bataille would hope to lead his listeners. Note how the details that belong to the person of Jesus, labelled as “dogmatic,” are to be systematically “suppressed” through contestation so as to lead the meditator into impersonal self- and other-lacerating communication:

The movement prior to the ecstasy of non-knowledge is the ecstasy before an object (whether the latter be the pure point—as the renouncing of dogmatic beliefs would have it—or some upsetting image). If this ecstasy before the object is at first given (as a ‘possible’) and if I suppress afterwards the object—as ‘contestation’ inevitably does—if for this reason I enter into anguish—into horror, into the night of non-knowledge—ecstasy is near and, when it sets in, sends me further into ruin than anything imaginable. If I had not known of the ecstasy before the object, I would not have reached ecstasy in the night. But *initiated* as I was in the object—and my initiation had represented the furthest penetration of what is possible—I could, in night, only find

a deeper ecstasy. From that moment night, non-knowledge, will each time be the path of ecstasy into which I will lose myself. (OC V 144; IE 123-24)

The point to be made here—and it is one that Daniélou will develop quite powerfully—is that Bataille, in denying the Jesus of the Gospels in favor of the impersonal concept of “communication,” abandons the value of the person, turned into a mere object or “point.” As we have seen, Bataille critiques the enslaving experience of living as an “I” in the world of subjects, or egos, and the objects they constitute—a world where the human is simply a thing, an object in an economic process; but he also insists that it is impossible to escape this world in a way that would allow one to live and to flourish and to reason in a manner broader than rationalistic schemes will allow: escape, if it can be called that, comes only in fleeting sovereign instants (with all that the word “sovereign” implies for Bataille: tragedy, self-rendering, unknowing, suicidal sacrifice). Bataille is clearly dissatisfied with the enslavement he experiences within the world of objects and projects, but he refuses the possibility that, in its deep reality, the world might be otherwise than Cartesian. This refusal seems to prevent him from allowing Christ to be a person, with a history, a face, and a real presence, because to regard Christ as a person would be to shift from the “panoramic overview” of modernity, the standpoint of the ego and its objects, to the standpoint of a “witness” or “involved spectator.” I quote here from what I take to be two mutually enriching, complementary versions of a distinction between the point of view of the modern ego, on the one hand, and the involved or witnessing point of view, found in both ancient and contemporary philosophies that avoid the assumptions of the modern ego: Adriaan Peperzak describes the alternative between the “panoramic standpoint” and that of the “involved spectator,” while Jean-Louis Chrétien opposes the over-hanging description provided by the “spectator” to the “dramatic speech” of the witness.²¹ Because Bataille retains the “panoramic standpoint,” the Christ he imagines can only be a psycho-drama, or a socio-drama, and never a person to be encountered, and by whom one could be moved or “wounded”; instead, the only wounding to be had is self-inflicted, employing a self-constituted object with which to wound oneself. Peperzak explains well the limits of impersonality within which Bataille has enclosed himself:

Everything that can be seen and said from the standpoint of the modern *Ego Cogito* becomes necessarily a part of the panoramic universe that the philosopher tries to systematize. “The Said” (*le Dit*) indicates the economy of this ego’s world. Then, your provocative speaking and my response can no longer be heard differently than exchanges within the universal context of a world-constituting economy. From this perspective, my, the surveying philosopher’s, involvement in our conversation is only one of the many exchanges between the

²¹ See Adriaan Peperzak, “Retrieving Onto-Theo-Logy,” *Philosophy Between Faith and Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 97; and Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L’Arche de la parole* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998, 1999), 124, 127.

innumerable, essentially indifferent persons that make up the various groups, communities, peoples, nations, continents, and so on. Sociology and social philosophy in the modern style take over, whereas interpersonal and individuality vanish from the scene. . . . The divorce between philosophy and *real*, i.e., not only individual but unique, *lives* is then “justified.” (Peperzak, 99)

Christ’s speech cannot be heard in Bataille’s accounts of the crucifixion except as data to be fit into the psychological and/or sociological categories of expenditure and accumulation that structure his writing from beginning to end. A brief consideration of what Bataille does with Jesus’ cry of dereliction, “*Elie, elie, lamma sabachtani?*”, compared with Chrétien’s commentary on these same words, is instructive.

Chrétien, drawing on the teachings of the 17th century French school of Catholic mystics, speaks of the dereliction of Christ in terms of a forgetting (as does Bataille in the passage from *Sur Nietzsche* above), but does so in a way that finds the personhood of Christ, and of the Father and the Spirit, revealed, rather than obliterated, in their total intercommunicability:

la reconnaissance de Jésus comme Dieu a lieu *sub contraria specie*, par le cri même de dérélition: *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, pourquoi m’as-tu abandonné?* . . . Cet oubli, dans la conscience humaine de Jésus, “de ce qu’il était venu chercher” n’a rien d’une privation ni d’une éclipse: il est le moment de coïncidence et d’unité du don et du donateur, car le sacrifice de soi, s’il est parfait, ne laisse ni temps ni espace pour qu’on songe à ce sacrifice même. . . ce que la foi chrétienne commémore, sans pouvoir l’oublier, dans l’existence de Jésus, est qu’elle ne cesse d’être oublieuse de soi, dans le don parfait et le sacrifice plénier. Elle est la seule où la *memoria sui* ne soit pas excédée par la *memoria Dei*, et l’oubli de soi luit donc en elle comme le don inoubliable.

the recognition of Jesus as God takes place *sub contraria specie*, through the very cry of dereliction: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* . . . This forgetting in Jesus’ human consciousness, of “what he had come to seek,” is not at all a privation or an eclipse: it is the moment of coincidence and unity between the gift and the giver, for the sacrifice of self, if it is perfect, leaves neither time nor space to even think of this sacrifice. . . what the Christian faith commemorates in the existence of Jesus—and without possibility of forgetting this—is that he does not cease to be forgetful of self, even in the perfect gift and most complete sacrifice. It is there alone that *memoria sui* is not

exceeded by *memoria Dei*, and forgetfulness of self thus shines in it as the unforgettable gift.²²

The forgetting of self here is situated within a world structured—created and sustained through and through—by free gifts, whereas in Bataille’s vision of the world, gifts are only exchanged within a one-dimensional economic framework of competitive rivalry. Power and competition are the sole determinants of what is possible in Bataille’s vision of human being—what Daniélou during the “Discussion” calls Bataille’s “identification between greed and every value” (OC VI 354/US 69). For Bataille, the implacable horizon of death allows no possibility for sacrifice as pure gift.²³ If we look again at what I termed Bataille’s ‘sociological’ perspective on the crucifixion presented during the “Discussion,” we see that the passive construction in his closing sentence—“Une nuit de mort, où le Créateur et les créatures ensemble saignèrent, s’entre-déchirèrent et de toutes parts se mirent en cause—à l’extrême limite de la honte—s’est trouvée nécessaire à leur communion” —locates all the *necessary* agency operating in Christ’s death precisely in Bataille’s own *idea* of communication, figured as a communal contestatory “nuit de mort.”²⁴ From the perspective of the Gospels, the Christ of Bataille is quite clearly an idol, an exemplar that merely gives power to Bataille’s own ideal concept of sacrifice.

²² Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'inoubliable et l'espéré* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), 134, 136; *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 93-94.

²³ During the “Discussion,” Louis Massignon, in speaking of “two perspectives” on death revealed by Christ’s cry of dereliction on the cross, “the perspective of the separation of the body and the soul, the death of the body that is prefigured by ecstasy; and then this kind of death of the spirit that is anticipated by abandonment,” makes allusion to the extra-dimensionality of the world for Christ, and how it differs from Bataille’s one-dimensional view (OC VI 335/US 48 modified).

²⁴ This disclosure of authentic being as impersonal through the projected experience of the “death of God” is described by Bataille in the context of erotic encounters, as well—which of course makes sense, since Bataille’s point is to insist, “*pas de mur entre érotisme et mystique!*” (OC VI, 150). In *Sur Nietzsche* he envisages a personal God as “une putain,” available to all (OC VI 150), thus forcing the notion of an external, non-projected, encounterable God into the guise of the erotic other which, for Bataille, is always anonymously impersonal. Eroticism is at its most “sacrificial” for Bataille when it involves a prostitute, a “fille publique,” whose status as nobody brings about his “ruin”: “si je cède dans des conditions méprisables—ainsi payant une fille publique—ne mourant pas, je serai cependant ruiné, déchu à mon propre jugement: l’obscénité crue rongera l’être en moi, sur moi sa nature excrémentielle déteindra, ce néant que porte avec elle l’ordure, qu’à tout prix j’aurais dû rejeter, séparer de moi, je serai sans défense, désarmé devant lui, je m’ouvrirai à lui par une épuisante blessure” (OC VI 47/ON 24). A line from “Le petit” can stand in here for many such lines to be found elsewhere in Bataille’s texts (*Madame Edwarda* is, unsurprisingly, particularly full of them), where the “decomposing” effects on the male of the impersonality of the female sexual partner is always analogous to the encounter with the impersonal God: “Je me jette à l’impossible sans biais: livré aux autres—uni intimement—écrivant ventre-nu. Comme une fille révoltée, les yeux blancs, sans existence personnelle” (OC III, 43). See Hollywood on Bataille’s view of prostitutes as “dead objects” (OC VIII 124), *Sensible Ecstasy*, 117-118.

Epektasis: Human Being Dilated

Daniélou begins his response to Bataille's presentation by agreeing to adopt, at least to a certain degree, Bataille's meaning-loaded concept of the "sacred." Daniélou agrees with Bataille that the sinner and the mystic represent on a hierarchy of values two antagonistic extremes that each, in their risk-taking and pursuit of paths outside a rule-governed norm, leave behind them a closed life governed by the sphere of morals and instead enter the domain of the sacred. But this point of agreement allows for distinctions that signal a deeper disagreement, rooted in competing understandings of human being and transcendence. Daniélou explains that the mystic passes beyond moralism because she is led along unknown paths by God, following without seeing where she is being led, and in the process submitting to a "theopathy" that raises her above herself (US 35 modified/OC VI, 323). This "theopathy" and its implications for the meaning and nature of limited human being will be our central concern in what follows.

Daniélou's major disagreement with Bataille is not with Bataille's view that the sacred realm, understood as the level where life is animated by the fundamentally erotic pursuit of answers to fundamental questions about ultimate meaning, is superior to the 'moral' realm of prohibitions; rather, he takes issue with Bataille's equivocations about evil and guilt, which depend on the view that sin, rather than holiness—a life that develops out of human attraction to and adoration of the good—is the privileged means of access to the sacred. Daniélou surmises that Bataille privileges sin out of a horror at any conception of being as sufficient unto itself:

M. Bataille garde une défiance à l'égard de l'extase des mystiques considérée par lui comme étant gauchie par un désir de salut, si bien qu'elle risque de se solidifier en possession close. Le péché, au contraire, comporte toujours un désespoir qui empêche de se replier sur soi, qui maintient la blessure béante. (OC VI 324)

M. Bataille mistrusts the ecstasy of the mystics, considered by him as warped by a desire for salvation, so much so that this ecstasy risks solidifying into a closed-off possession. Sin, by contrast, always bears with it a despair which prevents closing in on oneself, and maintains the wound gaping open. (US 35-36 modified)

Approving this rejection of possessive self-sufficiency, Daniélou argues that Bataille is nevertheless mistaken to see human being as closed into self-sufficiency by a desire for salvation.

Bataille's view that salvation is best understood as a human project is so unquestioningly shared by those who write about Bataille that it seems worth exploring Daniélou's counter-claim at some length. For Daniélou, desire is not to be hastily equated with a project; nor is salvation the end-goal of a project or a job (as Bataille portrays it in section 9 of his presentation, OC VI, 56); rather, both the desire for God and salvation itself are God's gifts, graces that he gives entirely

independent of any creaturely project. Those who desire salvation and strive to follow its path thus live lives of constant disruption, states Daniélou, because their desire is not something that originates in them or that they possess.²⁵ They are subjects whose selves are radically “decentered” because constantly moved to respond to God’s call. Daniélou writes:

Rien n’est moins installé que le mystique, que Dieu dérange perpétuellement et empêche de se replier sur lui-même, dont toute la vie est progrès et qui réalise dans l’extase ce décentrement total de soi qui est en effet ce à quoi nous tendons—et qui rend totalement communicable aux autres. (OC VI, 324)

Nothing is less settled than the mystic, whom God perpetually disturbs and prevents from turning back onto himself, whose whole life is progress and who realizes in ecstasy the total decentering of the self that is, in fact, what we tend toward—and which makes the mystic totally communicable to others. (US 36 modified)

The Christian understanding of desire as divine gift radically overturns the dualities that structure Bataille’s thought; in the Christian understanding of life, there is effectively no moment in time, no substance, no human act of will that cannot be used by God to bring the human being closer to him, should the individual turn freely to God. Bataille’s divisions between sacred and profane and his distinction between discursive and non-discursive language simply are not in play in Christianity in the way that he claims them to be.

Taking up the question of the role of sin in life, Daniélou explains that the faithful Christian’s progressive journey along this path of decentering ecstasy is marked and in a certain sense even propelled by his response to the experience of his own sinfulness. Sin, says Daniélou, works as a path to the sacred precisely because the experience of one’s sinfulness is the experience of one’s inability to save oneself from nothingness. When one faces one’s own sinfulness with the proper attitude (detestation), sin “establishes a tragic duality in the soul,” revealing to the soul her “alienation from herself, which becomes a means to salvation,” insofar as sin manifests to the subject an incapacity to save oneself, and thus “provokes the return to God as source of desired grace” (OC VI 325/US 37 modified).

Daniélou’s account of the “decentered,” restless spiritual progress of the created being drawn onward through the gift of desire given by the excess that characterizes divine being is clearly shaped by his extensive study of the thought of the fourth-century Cappadocian Church Father, St. Gregory of Nyssa. Particularly important here is Gregory’s notion of *epektasis*, the word he uses to describe the

²⁵ Gabriel Marcel will make the same point in his essay on Bataille’s *L’expérience intérieure*: see *Homo viator: prolegomènes à une métaphysique de l’espérance*, nouvelle édition (Paris: Aubier/Éditions Montaigne, 1944), 259; the point is echoed several times during the “Discussion” by Louis Massignon, OC VI 334, 335/US 47, 48.

soul's never-ending movement of spiritual ascendance to God.²⁶ This notion is key to Daniélou's critique of Bataille, because by presenting human desire as a gift from God, the Desirable who always exceeds human desire, the figure of *epektasis* offers a way to understand how human being can be expanded outside of its apparent limits so as to receive more, greater being. Out of desire for God alone, and no other action, God makes the "trans-ascending" human being able to jettison one after the other the categorical concepts he uses to represent God to himself, waiting with tensed desire to receive through grace an ever truer vision or knowledge of God.²⁷ Daniélou's friend Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his 1942 book on the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, *Présence et pensée: Essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nyssa*, gives an excellent elaboration of this "total decentering of self" that Daniélou says characterizes the human being's relationship with God:

if the character of representation is only the subjective limit of the object [God] in itself unlimited, there is a possibility, interior to this same limitation, of an unlimited progress. The manifestations of God, even though they do not deliver him to us without a veil, nevertheless do not oppose themselves to him like the detached results of an action—they are this action itself, and in this way God himself. In other words: one cannot say that we see God, nor that we do not see him. Only one thing can be categorically affirmed: as soon as the intelligence closes itself in on the evidence of the representation, it no longer sees. "To see" is thus the very *movement* which surpasses the soul, while the *content* (static) from which desire launches itself, is precisely not the vision. And these terms are essentially relative: each vision is, in relation to the superior vision, a nonvision.²⁸

A movement that resembles contestation is being described here, but it is contestation of self-satisfaction that is given and encouraged by God through the gift of desire, rather than a will-driven project against project:

²⁶ Regarding Gregory of Nyssa and Daniélou's scholarly work on him, the scholar of mysticism Bernard McGinn writes: "Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of Basil, the great Cappadocian monastic legislator and anti-Arian bishop, was born about 335 and died about 395. Research of the past decades, beginning with Jean Daniélou's *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyssa* (1944), has vindicated for Gregory a position as one of the most penetrating and original thinkers of Greek Christianity and one of the major mystical theorists of the ancient church" (Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism, vol. 1: The Foundations of Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 139).

²⁷ See Daniélou's summary of "epectase" in his introduction to Gregory of Nyssa's *Contemplation sur la Vie de Moïse*, Sources Chrétiennes I (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1941), 27-44, and in Daniélou's magisterial study of Gregory of Nyssa, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyssa*, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée [Paris: Aubier, 1944, 1953], especially 292-307. See also Gregory's own descriptions, *Contemplation*, 137-148.

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Présence et pensée: essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nyssa* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne et ses fils, 1942), 69 (my translation).

From the static point of view one must always say that the soul does not see God: her representation not being God, she is each time “as if she had not even begun” to see, and God for his part remains at “the same distance above” her. The vision finds itself entirely in the *élan* itself that surpasses each representation: “whoever does not seek, will never find that which is accorded only to those who seek,” [says Gregory,] because the search itself is the vision: “there is only one way to know the transcendent power: that is never to stop oneself at what one has understood, but to reach without rest beyond the known.” Desire in effect is a grace far superior to enjoyment, because in it alone we see God, as much as we can. (*Présence*, 70)

In the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, the dynamic of the desire for God, what von Balthasar above calls the “*élan* . . . that surpasses each representation,” makes any account of God as a static metaphysical object of knowledge—what Daniélou in the “Discussion,” referring to Bataille’s account of God, calls, after Pascal, “the God of the philosophers” (OC VI 326/US 38)—an unworkable model. Rather, the Christian God is a God in three persons—transcendent of all human representations because Creator and sustainer of all earthly being. God always exceeds the human being’s grasp, yet in the movement of desire that he gives, the human being is rendered capable of—in the sense of “made capacious for”—God. The radical difference from Bataille’s understanding of God and desire is thus quite stark: in Christian experience the divine truly transcends the world as an un-possessable excess of being. Accordingly, the only way the human being can acknowledge God’s excess of being is through faithful “longing,” desiring,²⁹ because faith’s object and source is first and foremost not concepts but God himself, who calls human beings to him.

Thus the distance between human being and God, marked by the human being’s sense of the inaccessibility or unseizability of God’s perfection through the categories of human reason, paradoxically makes authentic knowledge of God possible, because such distance makes faith the only possible way for a human being to receive God’s gift of himself. The primacy of faith, driven by and expressed as desire, does not in any way lead to the falsification of God. Referring again to

²⁹ See St. Augustine’s famous comments in the fourth tractate, paragraph 6, of his *Tractates on the First Epistle of John*, where he writes, “The whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing. But what you long for you do not yet see, but by longing you are made capacious so that when what you are to see has come, you may be filled. For just as, if you should wish to fill a pocket, and you know how big the object that will be put in is, you stretch the pocket, whether made of sackcloth or leather or any thing—you know how large a thing you will place there, and you see that the pocket is narrow. By stretching you make it more capacious. So God, by postponing, stretches the longing, by longing stretches the soul [*animum*], by stretching makes it capacious” (Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 112-24; *Tractates on the First Epistle of John*, trans. John W. Rettig [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995], 179). Augustine anchors this insight in Philippians 3, 12-14, where St. Paul speaks of “stretching forward with all my being” toward God. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La Joie spacieuse. Essai sur la dilatation* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), 43-44 offers precious commentary on the centrality of this passage for both Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory's notion of *epektasis*, von Balthasar notes that spiritual desire for God, unlike bodily desire, is insatiable and never sickens of its divine 'object,' precisely because that desire is given: spiritual desire "augments as it participates in the thing loved, it blooms at the same moment as it is slaked" (*Présence* 71). In his 1944 thesis *Platonisme et théologie mystique: doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, which so clearly informs his response to Bataille in the "Discussion," Daniélou makes the further point that the spiritual goods acquired in this participation are unlike corporal nourishment, where there is something "useless" left over (waste); instead, these goods "are transformed entirely into the substance of the one who receives them. As a result, spiritual growth presents itself under a more rapid form than bodily growth."³⁰ This spiritual reality is, nevertheless, a reality, because God's transcendence of all human concepts is an actual human experience communicated through events. Explaining further Gregory's account of God's theopathic interaction with man through desire, Daniélou writes that humans are only able to come to know God if God "dilates" both their desire and their reason in proportion to the always excessive revelation of himself that he offers; in this way God increases the human being's capacity for God:

Le Verbe en se communiquant à l'âme dans chacune de ses théophanies, de ses naissances, par là même qu'il augmente la vie divine de l'âme, dilate sa capacité. Ainsi en la comblant et du fait même qu'il la comble, il fait naître en elle de nouveaux désirs. L'âme est ainsi toujours à la fois comblée et assoiffée; comblée en tant qu'elle possède réellement le Verbe en elle, assoiffée en tant qu'elle ne possède pas tout le Verbe en elle. Il y a ainsi une double disposition d'intériorité et d'extériorité, d'instase et d'extase, qui est le trait caractéristique de la vie mystique. « Il y a échange de l'un à l'autre, Dieu venant dans l'âme et l'âme à nouveau émigrant en Dieu » (XLIV, 889 D). (*Platonisme* 294-95)

The Word, by communicating itself to the soul in each of its theophanies, its births, and thus augmenting the divine life of the soul, dilates its capacity. In this way, by fulfilling the soul and by the very fact that it fulfills it, the Word causes new desires to be born in it. The soul is thus always both fulfilled and thirsty; fulfilled inasmuch as it truly possesses the Word within itself, thirsty inasmuch as it does not possess all of the Word within itself. There is, then, a double disposition of interiority and exteriority, of instasy and ecstasy, which is the characteristic trait of the mystical life. "There is an exchange between the two, God coming into the soul and the soul once again emigrating toward God." (XLIV, 889 D)

³⁰ Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, nouvelle édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Aubier, 1944, 1953), 295.

Because the relationship between the human being and God is not a static one in which human being as ‘subject’ and God as ‘object’ are fixed conceptual entities, as they so often are in modern philosophy, the difference from Bataille’s contestatory relationship with God is stark. For Bataille, there is no way out of the cycle of domination and humiliation that defines all knowledge; the ideal of violent fusion between the subjects and objects involved is simply that, an ideal that stands in for the end of an agony that will never be available to consciousness. For Daniélou, by contrast, drawing on Gregory, longing for the transcendent God affords a way of communing with the absolute and of being in the truth. Such longing originates in the respect of transcendent distance—distance between God and human beings, distance between the human thought of God and God’s own reality. Love is not “communication” achieved through mutual destruction; rather, union is enhanced through an ever-new deepening of this difference between finite creature and infinite Creator. The beyond of being for Daniélou is not death but more being—the creative grace of God—and human being, if it is to become truly free, unfettered by human limitations (above all, by any idea of ‘communicative’ annihilation), begins by acknowledging its admiration for this beyond of being.

Indeed, in the Christian conception of human being, longing adoration is the foundation of all action and of all agency, because it involves a fundamental posture of receptivity toward the possible gift of more being. In the “Discussion,” Daniélou depicts this receptivity in christological terms, showing how personhood is maintained in the process of divinization in Christ of the human being (OC VI 326/US 38).³¹ He picks up here quite clearly from a passage in *Platonisme et théologie mystique* in which *epektasis*, the longing-driven, dynamic stretching toward God, is shown to be not merely a stage in the Christian life but the definitive figure for the grace God offers to human beings:

En effet, pour Grégoire, Dieu et l’homme font également partie du monde intelligible. Or l’esprit est de soi illimité. En ceci, Dieu et l’âme sont de même ordre. Mais la différence essentielle est que Dieu est infini en acte, tandis que l’âme est infinie en devenir. Sa divinité, c’est de se transformer en Dieu. On comprend dès lors pourquoi dans cette perspective le progrès est constitutif de l’âme même. En effet, si elle est un infini en devenir, la création doit pour elle prendre nécessairement la forme d’une croissance, sans quoi elle serait simplement finie, ce qui caractérise le monde matériel. Ainsi la grâce, qui est cette perpétuelle adjonction de biens nouveaux, c’est précisément l’épectase, qui la maintient toujours tournée vers un au-delà d’elle-même. Nous arrivons donc ici à cette conclusion que l’épectase est la condition même de l’âme. Il ne s’agit donc plus d’une étape particulière de la vie spirituelle. Nous avons d’abord considéré cette « tension » comme un

³¹ This “christification,” “in which man receives new modes of being that fundamentally constitute his person more than they add to it,” is developed in theology after the Council of Calcedon. See Paul McPartlan, “Personne,” in Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Dictionnaire critique de la théologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 896.

fait. Nous découvrons maintenant qu'elle constitue le retour même de l'âme à sa vraie nature. Son essence, c'est de se recevoir à chaque instant de Dieu tout entière, d'être perpétuellement créée, comme le dit admirablement Grégoire. L'épektase est la ratification même par la volonté libre de sa condition réelle, la reconnaissance de ce qu'elle est. Si c'est donc l'expression de sa nature la plus profonde, nous ne nous étonnerons pas de voir Grégoire affirmer qu'il s'agit là d'une attitude permanente qui se retrouve tout au long de la vie spirituelle et qui persistera dans la vie éternelle. (*Platonisme*, 299)

Indeed, for Gregory, God and man equally belong to the intelligible world. Now, then, the spirit is in itself unlimited. Thus God and the soul are of the same order. But the essential difference is that God is infinite in action, while the soul is infinite in becoming. Its divinity lies in its transforming itself into God. Thus we understand why in this perspective progress is constitutive of the soul itself. Indeed, if the soul is infinite in becoming, creation must necessarily take for it the form of growth, without which it would be merely finite, like the material world. Thus grace, which is this perpetual addition of new goods, is precisely epektasis, which keeps the soul always turned toward what is beyond itself. We thus come to this conclusion: epektasis is the very condition of the soul. It is, then, no longer a particular stage in the spiritual life. We first considered this "tension" as a fact. We now discover that it constitutes the very return of the soul to its true nature. Its essence is to receive itself entirely in every instant from God, to be perpetually created, as Gregory puts it so well. Epektasis is the very ratification through the free will of the soul's real condition, the recognition of what it is. If this, then, is the expression of its deepest nature, we will not be astonished to see Gregory asserting that this has to do with a permanent attitude that is found throughout the spiritual life, and that will continue into eternal life.

In the "Discussion," Daniélou describes the connection between receptivity and personhood in the course of explaining why Bataille insists that sin must necessarily be present in the midst of grace (as in, for instance, Bataille's thought that the crime of crucifying Christ, rather than Christ's willing self-offering, is the agent of "communion"). Bataille, says Daniélou, believes that the triumph of one of the elements involved in the flow of summit and decline—for instance, of grace over sin—"would lead to a sort of stopping point, a reconstitution of being—and thus the end of this state of disintegration, of dissolution, which is the very condition for communication, if communication is constituted precisely by the suppression of beings insofar as they are separated existences" (OC VI, 325-26/US 37-38, modified). Daniélou links Bataille's fear of a stopping point to his understanding of God: Bataille abhors, says Daniélou, the prospect of being enclosed within any sort of defined order, and understands God as the foundation of any such order; thus, as

we have seen, ‘God’ appears in Bataille’s writings as a projected fixed limit to be contested—guiltily sinned against—in order for the contemplating subject momentarily to break out of that order into exuberant communication. Daniélou points out that this understanding of God as projection (the “*dieu des philosophes, qui en effet apparaît comme suffisance parfaite à soi-même,*” 326) demonstrates the inability of secular thought to conceive, on the one hand, of the absence of limits and, on the other, of total communicability outside of sin. In contrast, the event of the Resurrection “represents the realization of this existence without limit, the surpassing of the limits of biological individuality, a corporal state that is, in a sense, liquid and thus totally permeable and transparent” (OC VI 326/US 38 modified).

Indeed, the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ as witnessed to and preached by the Church manifests truths about God and humans that point to a mode of human being involving both the absence of limits and total communicability: Daniélou calls this mode “personhood,” and its origins lie in the life of the Trinity itself, God as Three Persons, “who communicate themselves totally to one another, such that none possesses anything for himself, but all possess in common their nature. We have here,” continues Daniélou, “the ideal model itself of communication, in which everything that is communicable is communicated, and where only the distinction of persons persists, because these alone are necessary to make communication possible” (OC VI 326/US 38-39, modified). To the possible objection that precisely this remainder of personhood would prevent communication in the sense that Bataille means it, Daniélou implicitly pushes Bataille to be more precise about how it is, exactly, that, as Bataille puts it in *Sur Nietzsche*, “*Toute «communication» participe du suicide et du crime?*” (49) [*All ‘communication’ participates in suicide, in crime*] (ON 26). That is, Daniélou asks Bataille explicitly, How do we communicate if communication is, as you suggest, ideally a mutual destruction, or, short of the ideal, impersonal? “[I]t seems to me that in such a case [where there is dissolution of the persons themselves] there would no longer be communication, in the sense that, for there to be a placing in common, there must be someone to do the placing—and for the integrity of a being to be destroyed, the wounded being must persist” (OC VI 327/US 39 modified). Daniélou states that this difference, regarding the necessity of the person for communication, is the most fundamental point of difference between the Christian viewpoint on the being of the open subject—the soul in *epektasis*—and that of Bataille:

Pour M. Bataille, . . . la personnalité est conçue comme une limite qui empêche la communication. Il y a identité entre la destruction des limites et la destruction du moi, l’existence de celui-ci étant un obstacle au passage où n’existe plus qu’un état de fusion qui est la communication, où il n’y a plus d’existants séparés. Toute personne est égoïsme et l’égoïsme ne peut être totalement vaincu qu’avec la disparition de la personne; d’où le péché qui désintègre celle-ci, qui atteint à son intégrité—et par là même la rend communicable. Il y a là une équation que je rejette entre la personne et la limite. L’individualité biologique est close, mais non la personne qui peut être totalement

communiquée, qui est sans limite, qui peut être totalement immanente à un autre. (OC VI 327)

For Mr. Bataille, . . . the personality is conceived as a limit that prevents communication. There is identity between the destruction of the limits and the destruction of the ego, the existence of the ego being an obstacle to the passage wherein nothing exists but a state of fusion that is communication, where there are no longer any separately existing beings. Every person is egoistic and egoism can only be conquered completely with the disappearance of the person; thus sin disintegrates someone, strikes at his integrity—and through this renders him communicable. Here there is an equation, which I reject, between the person and the limit. Biological individuality is closed, but not the person who can communicate completely, who is limitless, who can be totally immanent to another. (US 39 modified)

The distinction Daniélou draws here between the contestatory encounter of “egos” of the sort found in Bataille’s thought, on the one hand, and the graced communion of “persons” in Christian life, on the other, clarifies the difference between the positions of the two men, and enables us to draw some conclusions that will, in turn, allow us to reflect finally on the larger achievement of this “Discussion.” First: it seems clear that Bataille and the Christians he encountered in Moré’s apartment agree that human desire must be allowed to pursue its movement to its end, and, therefore, that moralistic attempts to reduce and limit the magnitude and impetus of human desire deserve strong criticism. It also seems that there was complete agreement on the importance of relating the magnitude and impetus of human desire to the question of God—eros is clearly not something to be diagnosed and treated with medications, but instead leads to the fullness of human life or being. The big disagreements, however, hinge upon the identification of the source of desire—Creator God, or impersonal forces of accumulation and destruction?—and the characterization of the nature of God—projection, or infinite person encounterable in events of revelation? Stemming, finally, from these disagreements is, of course, the consequent disagreement about how to live desire: Bataille urges contestation, while Daniélou proposes a desire-driven striving for progressive union with God, figured by the name *epektasis*. And in the background of this final accounting it is important to note that the God Bataille repeatedly claimed that Christians conceive of as the basis for their Christian experience is not a God they recognized. Bataille’s characterization of the nature of God, because it is such an essential motivator for his activity of contestation, requires an opposing authoritative characterization of God to contest, and Bataille assigned this God to the Christians present. They not only denied it but, at several points, clearly refuted it with contrary evidence from Christian experience and the Christian tradition.

The “Discussion sur le péché” ends with an exchange that shows what is ultimately at stake in this encounter: the possibility of friendship between people committed to a truly religious pursuit of the answer to their human desire. The

exchange emerges at the end of the debate, when Bataille makes some remarks about his use of Christian references and terms, and reflects on his motives for seeking the opportunity to present his view to the audience present.

G. BATAILLE: It seemed to me that most of my friends decided to refer to an exclusively non-Christian world, if you will, to poetic experiences. It seemed to me that I succeeded in escaping this narrow-mindedness through frequent references to the Christian world and by perceiving, by not hesitating to perceive, possible connections, in spite of an opposition that I believe is fundamental and that seems to have been underlined quite violently, because, all things considered, with the exception of a very small number of representatives of the church and of Christianity in general, I doubt that anyone could calmly hear what I was able to say today.

However, whatever this difference, to which I still attribute the greatest importance, might be, I don't regret that the possibility of a bridge over an otherwise extremely deep abyss might have appeared possible today, the possibility of a bridge across which we might pass—it isn't a question of passing from one side of the abyss to the other—but of a bridge that we might reconcile with itself, which would permit the perception of the continuity of an ongoing human experience, a continuity from the pre-Christian era to Christianity, and from Christianity to other possibilities.

M. DE GANDILLAC: Doesn't this bridge, which you are completely correct in perceiving, imply a form of communication that is precisely the one that we are testing in this moment, which is completely different from the one that you described as the only possible form of communication, another communication than that of mutual destruction?

G. BATAILLE: This doesn't exclude mutual destruction.

M. DE GANDILLAC: Is friendship a possible thing for you?

G. BATAILLE: Certainly not. Friendship on the plain we're talking about isn't possible. My relations with Christianity can't be friendly relations; they are purely and simply hostile.

M. DE GANDILLAC: I was talking about friendship in a much more general sense.

G. BATAILLE: Why not? A little friendship in the awareness of a complicity.

FATHER DANIÉLOU: All the same, it seems to me that there are a certain number of things that we reject together and that permit the unity of the debate.

G. BATAILLE: The unity of the debate depends on your placing mystical life before the church, which is at bottom the main point of my position.

FATHER DANIÉLOU: Yes, in the sense that you oppose mystical life and the church, as that which is open and that which is closed.

But this formula is obviously unacceptable if we grant these words their true meaning. . . (US 72-73; OC VI 357-358)

The nervous comments that crop up here—Bataille’s desperate assertion, also made several times previously during the debate, that the Christians before him listening to him and engaging with his ideas are not truly representative of Christianity, or de Gandillac’s step back from his strong question about “a form of communication. . . completely different from the one you described as the only possible form” to a weak offer of “friendship in a much more general sense”—may be beside the point, but they signal to us that something great is at stake here. This closing exchange raises, at a properly existential level, the question that runs through the mind of anyone who encounters the texts of Bataille, or the claims of authentic Christianity: how does someone with a truly religious commitment, in the sense of a commitment to a totalizing account of reality, come to change his or her mind? How does someone unsatisfied with the limits placed on authentic human being make an unalienated choice of way of life? What, in the end, is *true* openness to something or someone outside of oneself? And what, or better, who, can elicit it?