Community Unclaimed: Plurality and the Problem of Sovereignty in Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot

Gregory J. Grobmeier

University of Denver

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Abstract
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My aim in this study is threefold. First, I situate the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot within a larger problematic at the center of contemporary European political thought: namely, that of the antagonistic relationship between “community,” understood in terms of a constitutive relation to alterity and plurality (or “multiplicity”), and “sovereignty,” understood as the political claim to “ground” or “found” community in a unitary and uniform “communal subject” — e.g., the sovereign will of “a People,” whether conceived as the ostensibly free and egalitarian demos of liberal democracies, or the openly anti-democratic and populist Volk of fascist or neo-fascist authoritarianisms.

Second, given the strained appeal to Bataille in Nancy’s and Blanchot’s contrasting approaches to the question of community, I devote two chapters to Bataille with the aim of letting his writing and thinking speak for itself. I argue that it is impossible to claim or reclaim Bataille as a consummate thinker of community without giving equal weight to his obsession with sovereignty. Lastly, I return to the debate between Nancy and Blanchot, drawing attention to the philosophical rift between them. I argue that Blanchot’s insistence, following Levinas, that the question of community must cede priority to the ethical relation in which each “one” finds themselves responsible or accountable to every “other,” poses a fundamental challenge to Nancy’s Heideggerian ambition to think of community within the larger project of an “ontology of the common.”

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Thomas Nail

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Ted Vial
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Community Unclaimed:

Plurality and the Problem of Sovereignty in Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology
Joint PhD Program
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Gregory J. Grobmeier
June 2021
Advisor: Dr. Sarah Pessin
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This dissertation takes up the exchange between three prominent French thinkers on the question of “community”: Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Blanchot. Taken together, and starting with Bataille’s prewar writings and communitarian activism in the 1930s, the exchange between them now spans nearly a century. Georges Bataille’s importance as a political thinker and writer was brought out of relative obscurity with the publication of Jean-Luc Nancy’s “La Communauté désoeuvrée” in 1983. Less than a year after the appearance of Nancy’s inaugural essay, Maurice Blanchot, a close friend of the late Bataille, published La Communauté inavouable. Blanchot’s text was partly a response, at times a rejoinder, to both Nancy’s argument and his reading of Bataille.

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I would like to thank the members of my advisory committee for their guidance and support. Specifically, I’d like to thank Dr. Sarah Pessin, my committee chair and mentor, for her tireless encouragement and intellectual engagement at crucial stages of the project’s conception and composition. Dr. Thomas Nail’s prodigious knowledge of and enthusiasm for contemporary European philosophy and political thought was equally invaluable, as was Dr. Ted Vial’s insistence on clarity of argument and exposition.
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List of Abbreviations

Bataille

AS1  The Accursed Share, Volume 1
AS2/3  The Accursed Share, Volumes 2 and 3
BR  The Bataille Reader
CS  The College of Sociology 1937-39
E  Erotism: Death and Sensuality
EW  Georges Bataille: Essential Writings
F  “Friendship”
G  Guilty
IE  Inner Experience
OC  Oeuvres Completes, 12 vols.
ON  On Nietzsche
SC  The Sacred Conspiracy: The Internal Papers of the Secret Society of Acéphale and Lectures to the College of Sociology
ToR  “Toward Real Revolution”
TRR  Theory of Religion
USN  The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge
VE  Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939
Nancy

A  “La Communauté désœuvrée”

BB  “The being-with of being-there” / “L’être-avec de l’être-là”

BSP  Being Singular Plural / Être singulier pluriel

BH  The Banality of Heidegger / Banalité de Heidegger

CC1  “The Confronted Community” / La Communauté affrontée

CC2  “The Confronted Community,” in The Obsessions of George Bataille

CP  “The Compearance: From the Existence of “Communism” to the Community of “Existence” / “La Comparution”

CW  The Creation of the World or Globalization / La Création du monde ou la mondialisation

DC  The Disavowed Community / La Communauté désavouée

EF  The Experience of Freedom / L’Experience de la liberté

FT  A Finite Thinking / Une pensée finie

IC  The Inoperative Community / La Communauté désœuvrée


SPP  “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics’,” in Studies in Practical Philosophy

SV  “Sharing Voices” / Le partage des voix
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blanchot</td>
<td><strong>EI</strong> The Infinite Conversation / L’Entretien infini</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>MBR</strong> The Blanchot Reader</td>
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<td><strong>SL</strong> The Space of Literature / L’Espace littéraire</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>UC</strong> The Unavowable Community / La Communauté inavouable</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>WD</strong> The Writing of the Disaster / L’Écriture du désastre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Levinas</td>
<td><strong>EE</strong> Existence and Existents / De l’existence a l’existant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>ET</strong> “The Ego and the Totality” / “L’ego et la totalité”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>FC</strong> “Freedom and Command” / “Liberté et Commandement”</td>
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<td><strong>LBW</strong> Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings</td>
<td>Emmanuel Levinas: Écrits philosophiques</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>LEI</strong> Ethics and Infinity / Éthique et Infini</td>
<td>Éthique et Infinité</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>OE</strong> On Escape / De l’évasion</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>OTB</strong> Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence / Autrement qu’être, ou, Au-delà de l’essence</td>
<td>Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence / Autrement qu’être, ou, Au-delà de l’essence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>TO</strong> Time and the Other / Le temps et l’autre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heidegger</td>
<td><strong>BT</strong> Being and Time / Sein und Zeit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arendt</td>
<td><strong>HC</strong> The Human Condition</td>
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<td><strong>OT</strong> The Origins of Totalitarianism</td>
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Chapter One. Introduction: Community and the Sovereign Claim

1.1. Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot: “the community of those who have no community”

1.1.1. The Question of Community in Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot

This dissertation takes up the exchange between three prominent French thinkers on the question of “community”: Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Blanchot. Taken together, and starting with Bataille’s prewar writings and communitarian activism in the 1930s, the exchange between them now spans nearly a century. Georges Bataille’s importance as a political thinker and writer was brought out of relative obscurity with the publication of Jean-Luc Nancy’s “La Communauté désœuvrée” in 1983. Set against the historical and political backdrop of the impending collapse of the Soviet experiment in the eighties, and with it, the sense among a number of French theorists on the “left” that the emancipatory promise of communism had been betrayed by the “real” communism of the Soviets, Nancy looked to the recurring “motif of community” in Bataille with the hope of re-discovering a politics adequate to the

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irreducibly “plural,” “common,” or “shared” character of human coexistence. Less than a year after the appearance of Nancy’s inaugural essay, Maurice Blanchot, a close friend of the late Bataille, published *La Communauté inavouable.* Blanchot’s text was partly a response, at times a rejoinder, to both Nancy’s argument and his reading of Bataille.

While the exchange between Nancy and Blanchot was pivotal in setting the agenda for what Oliver Marchart has described as the “post-foundational” turn in contemporary European political thought, the subtleties of this exchange were largely lost on its audience. Specifically, as Robert Bernasconi had already perceived in 1993, the apparent agreement between Nancy and Blanchot obscured the many points of disagreement between them, including their significantly divergent readings of Bataille, and most notably, the profound conceptual rift between two radically different philosophical sensibilities. Where Nancy framed the question of community in terms of

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a Heideggerian ontology of “being-in-common” (être-en-commun, a reconfiguration of
Heidegger’s notion of Mitsein, or “being-with”),\(^8\) Blanchot would counter with a
Levinasian ethics of responsible relation to “the Other,” l’Autrui, the human “other”
encountered in the pressing immediacy of the “face-to-face.”\(^9\)

My aim in this study is threefold. (1) First, in this introductory chapter, I situate
the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot within a larger problematic at the
center of contemporary European political thought: namely, that of the antagonistic
relationship between “community,” understood in terms of a constitutive relation to
alterity and plurality, and “sovereignty,” understood as the political claim to “ground” or
“found” community in a unitary and uniform “communal subject” — e.g., the sovereign
will of a “people,” whether conceived as the ostensibly free and egalitarian demos of
liberal democracies, or the openly anti-democratic and populist Volk of fascist or neo-
fascist authoritarianisms. It’s my contention that an attentive grasp of the subtleties of the
exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot is indispensable to the possibility of
imagining a political pluralism, at the level of both theory and praxis, capable of

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\(^8\) See Nancy, IC, 8, 103-05; “Of Being-in-Common,” in Community at Loose Ends, trans. James Creech
and Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1-12, abbreviated
henceforth as OBC; The Experience of Freedom, trans. Bridget McDonal (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 1993), 66-95, abbreviated henceforth as EF; The Sense of the World, trans. Jeffrey S.
Librett (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 88-9, abbreviated henceforth as SW;
Being Singular Plural, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 2000), 1-99 translated henceforth as BSP; “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics,’” trans. Duncan
Large, Studies in Practical Philosophy 1, no. 1 (1999), 21, abbreviated henceforth as SPP; and “The Being-

\(^9\) See Blanchot, UC, 3, 40-3, 56; The Infinite Conversation, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN:
University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 49-82, abbreviated henceforth as EI; and The Writing of the Disaster,
trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 13, 18-28, 109, 119, 130,
abbreviated henceforth as WD.
contesting the “sacrificial violence” inherent to sovereign politics. I’ll frame the exchange between them as inhabiting a critical space of disillusion and dissent that attempts to think of “community,” following the totalitarian disasters of Stalinism and Hitlerism, against two recurring political tendencies that continue to dominate the current global political landscape: (i) political nihilism, or authoritarianism; and (ii) political cynicism, or liberalism. Where the former openly negates community in a unitary politics that valorizes violence and death, the latter consists of de-politicized or politically disinterested individuals who, in exchange for the freedom to satisfy their private self-interests with minimal outside interference, are content to leave the administration of violence and death to the State.

(2) Second, given the strained appeal to Bataille in Nancy’s and Blanchot’s contrasting approaches to the question of community, I devote Chapters 2 and 3 to Bataille’s thinking of community in his prewar, interwar, and postwar texts, with the aim of letting his writing and thinking speak for itself. I argue that it is impossible to claim or reclaim Bataille as a consummate thinker of community without giving equal weight to his obsession with sovereignty. Both prior to and after the war, Bataille will affirm an experience of sovereignty that coincides with the radical refusal and contestation of an existence compelled to serve the narrowly utilitarian aims of productive society — whether liberal democratic, communist, or fascist. This obsession with the possibility of an experience of sovereign refusal is precisely what motivates his concern for “community,” which he describes as an ecstatic mode of “being in relation” to an
innumerable plurality of human and extra-beings. Bataille affirms this experience of “being in relation,” moreover, as preceding and exceeding the “de facto” sovereignty of “unitary communities,” or those already constituted communities bound by the historical contingencies of race, language, creed, or nation. In Bataille, therefore, we find a desire for an experience of community that would itself be sovereign, as well as an experience of sovereignty that unfolds in and as a profound communication between and across two or more beings.

(3) Lastly, in Chapters 4 and 5, I return to the debate between Nancy and Blanchot, drawing attention to the philosophical divide between them. I argue that Blanchot’s insistence, following Levinas, that the question of community must cede priority to the ethical relation in which each “one” finds themselves responsible or accountable to every “other” — thereby doing justice to the radical alterity and plurality that constitutes “community” — poses a fundamental challenge to Nancy’s Heideggerian ambition to think of community within the larger project of an “ontology of the common.”

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12 See also Hill, Nancy, Blanchot, 103-4.
1.1.2. Community between Cynicism and Nihilism, Then and Now

In The Disavowed Community, Nancy speaks of the “profound disenchantment with democracy” characteristic of radical politics in the 1980s as being the common motivational impetus to both his and Blanchot’s response to the question of community in “La Communauté desoeuvrée” and La Communauté inavouable, respectively (DC, 12). This disenchantment followed as a consequence of two events whose political import was far-reaching. The first, initially unique to French politics, concerned the widespread civil unrest that led to the May 1968 protests against the nationalist Gaullist government, and which, for a moment, seemed to reawaken the emancipatory potential of a renewed communism. As Nancy notes, “May ’68” figured prominently in Blanchot’s response in La Communauté inavouable, which proceeded from an insistence to think of “community” in relation to a still unmet “communist exigency” (DC, 12-13; UC, 1-2, 29-33). The other event was the collapse of Soviet communism in the 1980s and early 90s, which was followed by insipid incantations about the “end of ideology” and the congratulatory pretense of a dubious global consensus on liberal democracy, wedded to neoliberal economic policy, as the only universally desirable or viable form of political organization (IC, xxxvii-viii, 2-3, 75, 122; DC, vii-xi, 12-13; CC1, 34).13

Nancy also notes in passing that this disenchantment with the prevailing political and economic order of modern liberal or neo-liberal societies is parallel to that of both Blanchot’s and Bataille’s in the 1930s (DC, 58, 65). This is partly what motivated

Nancy’s yearlong seminar on Bataille’s politics and the recurring “motif of community” in his writings, which in turn led to Nancy’s inaugural essay in 1983 (CC1, 28-9). Given that Bataille’s concern for community, as it figured in both his writings and his prewar communitarian activism, was motivated by the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of liberal individualism and the blatant hypocrisy of democratic society in the throes of crisis, as well as the inability of the various communist groups to combat, much less understand, the menacing threat of fascism, Nancy had hoped to find in Bataille a “politics” consisting of “new elements untouched by fascism or communism, and equally free of democratic or republican individualism” (CC1, 28-9). However, faced with a world powerless to halt its descent into catastrophic war, Bataille grew increasingly disillusioned with politics, which in part accounts for the consciously apolitical and contemplative turn to “inner experience” elaborated in his interwar writings. Thus, Nancy would not discover a “new politics” in Bataille. Instead he would confront a disavowal of “the political” as such — without, however, fully understanding the philosophical motivations and nuances attending this disavowal (CC1, 29-30).

It seems rather obvious to me that this disenchantment is very similar to our own. As Simon Critchley has perceptively argued, the possibility of a “politics” deserving of the name is stifled by a “motivational deficit at the heart of secular liberal democracy.”

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14 See for example Bataille’s farewell address to the College of Sociology in 1939, where he speaks quite directly and solemnly about the dissolution of the last of his communitarian efforts and announces his “philosophical” concern to leave politics behind so as to “tackle the central problem of metaphysics” (VE, 248; CS, 336).

This motivational deficit in turn coincides, on the one hand, with a general “slide into demotivated cynicism,”\textsuperscript{16} and on the other, a swell of extremist, nihilistic, illiberal, and largely authoritarian refusals of the prevailing liberal or neo-liberal democratic world order.\textsuperscript{17} Critchley also uses the word “anomie” to describe this aspect of liberalism generally.\textsuperscript{18} But aside from the etymological dissonance (a liberal society isn’t a-nomos or “lawless” — quite the opposite, it’s a society replete with laws and procedural codes; and if the liberal individual is bound or compelled by anything, it would be these), the word’s sociological and psychological connotations suggest an atomized and alienated society consisting of individuals that are deeply troubled by the disconnect between their individual self-interests and those pursued by the social group as a whole. I don’t think this is necessarily the case. Very little, I would argue, genuinely troubles the liberally disengaged and demotivated individual. Their “individuality” is, if anything, a supreme value, the significance of which consists in its remarkably untroubled character. To live in a “violently unjust world,”\textsuperscript{19} as Critchley describes it, in a more or less untroubled and self-satisfied condition — this strikes me as the very essence of “cynicism.”

It also seems as if this impasse between (1) political cynicism, characteristic of both liberalism generally and the life of the demotivated, cynical individual within liberal


\textsuperscript{17} Critchley, \textit{Infinitely Demanding}, 8-13.


\textsuperscript{19} Critchley, \textit{Infinitely Demanding}, 3. See also Peter Sloterdijk, \textit{Critique of Cynical Reason}, trans. Michael Eldrid, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 5-6, 20, 217, 546. In this sense, what I’m calling “political cynicism” is quite similar to Sloterdijk’s definition of modern, liberal cynicism as a kind of “enlightened false consciousness.”
democratic society, and (2) political nihilism, characteristic of the reactionary upsurge of various fundamentalisms, isolationist populisms, and fascist or neo-fascist authoritarianisms, presents us with a kind of “inertia” or “entropy” that repeatedly hamstring the possibility of a genuinely transformative politics. Or, put differently, it almost seems as if the inertia plaguing liberal democracies (experienced as political cynicism) “naturally” gives way to violent discontent and disdain for the prevailing liberal democratic order (experienced as political nihilism) as something like the resting state to which “the political” inexorably returns. However, unlike thermodynamic entropy, in which the elements of a given physical system tend toward dispersion and disorder, this political entropy tends toward a resting state in which the order or ordering of its human elements become concentrated and intensified into an hypostatized communal Subject — “the People,” however one wishes to understand this word. That said, it’s more likely that the “naturalness” of this tendency is only an apparent one. For when it comes to politics, as with all things human, we are dealing with mutable conventions rather than predetermined laws of nature; and the “nature” of political things, despite recurring tendencies that seem inevitable, is such that they are always capable of becoming otherwise. Once again, it’s my contention that an attentive grasp of the

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philosophical and theoretical subtleties at work in the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot is indispensable if we are to think what this “otherwise” might look like.21

1.1.3. Bataille Before and Beyond Nancy and Blanchot

However, an attentive grasp of the exchange between these three thinkers is immediately faced with the difficulty of negotiating two equally idiosyncratic and divergent readings of Bataille’s thinking of both community and sovereignty. And in the attempt to come to terms with how these themes figure in Bataille, one is immediately faced with the additional difficulty of situating them within the broader literary context of a prodigiously expansive and hybrid oeuvre, which, in the collected French, spans twelve volumes (consisting of poetry and erotic fiction; essays in politics, sociology, anthropology, art criticism, and critical reviews; previously unpublished notes, journals, and diaries; as well book length studies in philosophy, mysticism, eroticism, and political economy).22 There is simply no single text in which Bataille states definitively and unambiguously what he means by the word “community,” nor does his thinking of community remain constant or consistent. To the contrary, it soon becomes clear that the “motif of community” is highly ambiguous. It undergoes several reversals and transformations over the course of his career.

21 I’d like to thank Sarah Pessin, who suggested thinking of this relation between political cynicism and political nihilism in terms of “entropy.”

Sovereignty is equally ambiguous. In the prewar writings, it typically corresponds to the expressly political antagonism between what Bataille describes as the “imperative” or “peremptory” authority of the State (liberal, fascist, or otherwise) and the “deep subversion that continues to pursue the emancipation of human lives” (VE, 159), whose justification inheres in an essentially plural or communal experience of the “universal consciousness committed… to the struggle against war and to the hatred of the legacy of past constraints.”23 But already, this “deep subversion” and its “universal consciousness” is affirmed as a kind of sovereignty or counter-sovereignty in its own right, which, as already noted above, coincides with the radical refusal and contestation of an essentially “servile” existence reduced to “utility,” or an existence whose only meaning and value consists in its usefulness and its ability to serve as a means toward productive ends.24

This sovereign refusal is perhaps the only constant and consistent theme in Bataille. It is more than that — it is the central motif around which his thinking and writing as a whole coheres, and as such, it is impossible to get clear on what he means by “community” without fully appreciating the unconditional privilege he accords to sovereignty and the possibility of sovereign existence. Neither Nancy nor Blanchot manage to do justice to this aspect of Bataille’s desire for what I described above as a “sovereign experience of community,” or an ecstatic experience of “being in relation” that sovereignly refuses to accept the world as the measure of all things. In this consists


the non-metaphysical “otherworldliness” of Bataille’s interwar thinking of community, where both community and sovereignty cease to name the terms of political antagonism and come to name general features of human being, if not being as such. Given the philosophical importance of this shift in Bataille’s thinking, I found it necessary to trace its development as it shows itself in certain of his key prewar, interwar, and postwar texts. In Chapter 2, I look to his prewar writings as well as his antifascist, communitarian activism; and in Chapter 3, I focus on the turn away from politics and the corresponding shift toward “inner experience” that dominates his thinking during and after the war.

1.1.4. Blanchot contra Nancy: Doing Justice to the Other(s)

Their contentious and divergent readings of Bataille notwithstanding, the exchange between Nancy and Blanchot presents us with a philosophical divide that cuts to the quick and sheds essential light on what’s at stake in the question of “community.” As such, in Chapters 4 and 5, I suggest approaching this exchange less as a “debate” than a fortuitous confrontation between two closely related yet seemingly irreconcilable philosophical positions. Specifically, I suggest we approach this divide as a confrontation between: (1) Nancy’s commitment to a post-Heideggerian ontology of the irreducibly common or shared (partagé) character of existence, human or otherwise, articulated in terms of a “coexistential analytic” of “being-with” (Mitsein), “being-in-common” (être-en-commun), or “being singular plural” (être singulier pluriel); and (2) Blanchot’s commitment to a post-Levinasian ethics of responsible concern for the human “other”

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25 Nancy, IC, 8, 103-05; OBC, 1-12; EF, 66-95; SW, 88-9; BSP, 1-99; SPP, 21; BB, 1–15.
(l’autrui), who is irreducible to ontology insofar as they interrupt and contest the forward advance of another existence (ek-sistere, to take a stand or to stand out in one’s coming to be) in a mode rigorously “otherwise than” either being or its comprehension (onto-logia, discourse on the sense or meaning of “to be”).

The fundamental challenge Blanchot poses to Nancy is this: the radical alterity and irreducible plurality that constitutes something like “community” precedes and exceeds its articulation in an ontology, and as such, the question of community must cede priority to the ethical relation in which each “one” already finds themselves responsible or accountable for every “other.” If the relation at stake in the question of community is one of a “measureless responsibility,” as Nancy himself argues, then Blanchot suggests we have to look elsewhere than ontology to justify community, to open it to the possibility of justice or just relations between a measureless plurality of beings who are in each case singular. This is the basic drift of Blanchot’s “reproach” of Nancy’s argument in “La Communauté désœuvrée”: there needs to be a “work” (oeuvre) to justify the “unworking” (désœuvrement) in which Nancy finds the “common exigency” of our “being-in-common” as one of a shared existence. I suggest we understand this “work” in terms of what Levinas calls the “work of justice,” which, above all, is a “work of

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26 Blanchot, UC, 3, 40-3, 56; EI, 49-82; WD, 13, 18-28, 109, 119, 130.

economic justice,” or the task of responding to the other(s) in their material and bodily vulnerability.28

Both Nancy and Blanchot affirm this imperative to think of community as having to do with the sharing of our common “finitude” and “insufficiency” rather than “belonging” to the shared identity of a group. Or, pressed further, they both insist that “community” is not a matter of belonging, having, or even willing. It has nothing to do with what one has or doesn’t have, or to some group identity to which one belongs or doesn’t belong. It comes well before any sense of free initiative or mutually desired association. As such, it is just as irreducible to either the arbitrary existence of “de facto” communities (e.g., the hereditary and historical contingency of those bound by social, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or national ties) as it is to the volitional existence of “elective” communities (e.g., the free association of those bound by a common concern or engaged in the mutual struggle of some common endeavor).29 But beyond this basic agreement, I’ll argue that in dismissing Blanchot’s Levinasian answer to the question of community, rather uncharitably, as a “theologizing residue” of a tired and tiresome moralizing spiritualism, Nancy willfully distorts and rejects the only serious philosophical objection to his attempt to derive an “ethos” of responsible concern for oneself and the other(s) from a Heideggerian ontology of Mitsein, or “being-with.”30


29 Bataille, CS, 73-84; Blanchot, UC, 46-7.

30 Nancy, BSP, 45; DC, 23-8, 37-9, 61-5, 72-4.
1.2. The Sacrificial Logic of Sovereign Politics

1.2.1. The Presumed Coincidence of Community and Sovereignty

If the relationship between community and sovereignty in the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot is anything but clear, it’s even less clear when we consider the way in which these terms have been framed in the Western tradition of political thought. With respect to this tradition, both community and sovereignty, as it has often been said, are essentially contested ideas. As for “community,” its uncertain or contested status is at least twofold. On the one hand, it’s unclear whether community names an idea or a concept belonging to a particular discourse or discipline. If community names an essentially contested idea, this has to do, at least in part, with the fact that we’re dealing with a concept that isn’t only political, but also philosophical, juridical, theological, sociological, and geographical. From the Greek “koinonia,” to the Roman “civitas,” to the German “Gemeinschaft,” to the post-Westphalian “comity of nations,” to the debate within contemporary international relations concerning a “post-national” or “global community,” we see that the historical and conceptual articulation of community has always traversed multiple discourses.


32 To cite but an incomplete list of studies across various disciplines, some of them classics in several fields, that trace the development and transformations of “community” in the Western political tradition:
But on the other hand, and more importantly, the question of community goes beyond questions of its contested discursive status between and across disciplines over time. For to invoke the question of community is already to invoke a host of questions that are as decisive as they are undecidable: To what or to whom do we refer when we speak in its name? Does it name a specific group and the individual members of which that group consists? Or does it name a set of traditions and institutions to which various groups and individuals happen to belong? Who belongs and who is excluded? What does it mean to belong to a community and what does it mean to be excluded? And, perhaps the most decisive question of all: Who or what decides?

What concerns us here is the way in which this last question speaks directly to the external conceptual antagonisms that have a determining effect on the specifically political meaning of community. In other words, what merits our attention is the extent to which the meaning of community, as the Western political tradition generally conceives and frames it, is bound up with related conceptions and questions concerning the nature, scope, and exercise of political authority: Who or what is authorized to speak and act in

the name of a community? In what does this authority consist? From what or whom does it derive its legitimacy? And, once more: Who or what decides?

The same tradition’s answer to the question of decision — who or what decides? — thus leads straightaway to an equally contested idea: “sovereignty.”³³ And, at first glance, it seems as though the idea of sovereign authority and the concept of community are mutually constitutive. Where sovereignty names the decisive means, mechanism, or logic by which a community becomes politically distinct and authorized to act, the political community, in turn, serves to authorize or legitimate whomever or whatever it regards as sovereign. Important differences notwithstanding, the history of sovereignty as a political concept confirms that this mutuality is just as valid for absolutist or monarchical conceptions of sovereign authority as it is for parliamentary or liberal democratic ones. In other words, the sovereignty of the sovereign (whether it be that of a person, nation, people, or constitution) is relative to a community of subjects or citizens who authorize its claims. Short of this fundamental relation, the sovereign claim to found or ground a community is not only objectless but also meaningless.³⁴


However, upon closer consideration, and as the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot makes abundantly clear, we soon discover that the relation between community and sovereignty — a relation that is ontological well before it ever becomes conceptual — is not as mutually constitutive as it first appears. In fact, this mutuality only pertains to the relation between sovereignty and a distinctively political conception of community. All of this changes the moment we consider sovereignty’s relation to community as such, prior to or beyond all political distinctions. From this point forward, “community” names a basic ontological fact, which precedes and exceeds every sovereign ambition to found, ground, establish, order, and maintain a community. When we direct our attention to their pre- or extra-political sense, we encounter a fundamental antagonism between this fact and this ambition. From this point forward, the claims of sovereignty and the fact of community are mutually exclusive.

In what does this mutual exclusivity consist? Simply put: the sovereign ambition, in whatever form and whatever regime, is to make of community an organic and unified whole, despite the fact that “community” names, however imperfectly, the experience of an elemental and irreducible plurality. The fact of community is the fact of this plurality. In other words, community qua essential plurality names the ontologically basic fact that human being, if not being as such, is straightaway and in every instance experienced in common.

This “being-in-common,” to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s cumbersome yet precise phrase, belongs to none because it is shared by all. Indeed, as Nancy makes clear, community is this “sharing” — it names the “improper” or “inappropriable” character of existence as such (IC, 25-41; BSP, 72). It is not a “thing” to which one can lay claim, but rather the place where human being takes place — i.e., the original and uninterrupted event of being wherein each one is irrevocably delivered and exposed to all the others, prior to any free initiative or mutual sense of belonging. In the domain of human affairs, existence is always and already co-existence: to be human, or simply to be, is to be with all those others without whom none would be at all (IC, 14, 103-5; OBC, 1-12; EF, 66-95; SW, 88-9; BSP, 3, 10-13, 22-31, 42-5, 93-9).

1.2.2. Plurality, Politics, and the Sovereign Substitution of Making for Acting

Following Hannah Arendt, my contention is that sovereign politics confronts this fact as a regrettable contingency of being, and thus conceives it as a problem to be
solved. To the sovereign gaze, plurality is, admittedly, an elemental aspect of the human condition — but it needn’t be so indefinitely. Like any other defect of political life, the deficiency of life in common can be overcome. For the sovereign — whoever or whatever they happen to be — it is less a question of the elemental or improper as such than of the proper organization of elements to be consolidated, governed, and set aright. Consequently, community is compelled to become something that it is not and cannot be: “One.” The logic of sovereignty thus proves to be rigorously sacrificial: the sovereign claim substitutes an altogether derived and contrived unity for the original and essential plurality that community is.

We’ll come back to this sacrificial logic of the sovereign claim in the following section. But first, I’d like to suggest that Nancy’s thinking of community as being “unworked” or “unoccupied” (désoeuvrée), or as being irreducible to the sovereign attempt to claim it as its own “work” (oeuvre), finds a striking parallel in what Arendt describes in The Human Condition as the sovereign substitution of “making” for “acting.” The felicity of this parallel is such that it not only clarifies the kind of sacrificial logic that Nancy’s notion of “unworking” or the “unworked” community calls into question, but that it also disabuses the words désoeuvrement and désoeuvrée from their literal and more colloquial sense as denoting a kind of “uselessness” or “idleness.” Nancy’s “communauté désoeuvrée” doesn’t speak to an absence of activity, but rather, to


36 Amanda Macdonald translates désoeuvrée alternatively as “unoccupied” in Nancy, CC1, 36.

37 Arendt, HC, 220-30.
a mode of being-together or being-in-common that is irreducible to the *utility* by which
the compulsion to work, or the compulsion to *serve* the more or less economic ends of
laboring, productive activity, condemns human beings to a life of toil without
justification.

This is precisely the distinction we find in Arendt’s phenomenology of the “vita
activa,” which she describes in terms of three related and overlapping yet distinct kinds
of human activity: labor, work, and action.38 The life of “action,” as Arendt understands
it, is the activity in which the “humanness” of the human being most fully reveals itself.39
And since it is necessary that there be *others* to whom this “humanness” of the human
being is revealed, it is also the activity for which the existence of a plurality of human
*actors* is the condition of possibility.40 Neither the humanness nor the plurality of the
human condition, moreover, could show themselves if there wasn’t some common or
“public space of appearance,” wherein the quintessentially *political* fact of our being- and
acting-together becomes manifest.41 Which is to say that there needs to be a “world” in
which a plurality of human actors can appear to one another, and in which their action,

38 Arendt, HC, 7-9.


40 Ibid, 7: “Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things
or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality.”

41 Arendt, HC, 199-207, 244-5. On the “public” or “publicness” as a point of convergence in Arendt and
Nancy, see Kathleen Vandeputte and Ignaas Devisch, “Responsibility and Spatiality, or Can Jean-Luc
Nancy Sit on a Bench in Hannah Arendt’s Public Space?,” *Lumina* 22, no. 2 (2011); and Karen L.
Self” (Master of Arts, Philosophy, Toledo, OH, University of Toledo, 2009).
manifested by their “words and deeds,” acquires its full meaning.\textsuperscript{42} The human activity of “work,” in which the human being assumes the creative and productive role of \textit{homo faber}, is the activity that “makes” or “creates” the world, in the sense of the human artifice, consisting of the various useful and beautiful things whose tangibility mediates and gives a measure of durability to the intangible “web of relationships” that precariously hold between human beings.\textsuperscript{43} It’s by virtue of work that the world becomes the “public space of appearance,” and it’s because there is a world that human beings become free to act in a mode otherwise than “labor,” or the mode of activity in which the human animal, \textit{homo laborans}, is too busy satisfying the demands of vital necessity to leave the essential privacy of their laboring activity, which answers to these demands.\textsuperscript{44}

From this threefold distinction, Arendt submits the Western political tradition to thoroughgoing critique. From Plato onwards, she argues, this tradition tends to conceive of the “political” in the image of “rule” or “rulership.”\textsuperscript{45} This rule, in turn, confronts the political life of human beings as something that needs to be “made” or “fashioned” according to the image and intention of a sovereign will.\textsuperscript{46} The motivation for this sovereign substitution of “making” for “acting” comes from the fact that the action which results from a plurality of human actors, having its ontological basis in the spontaneity of

\textsuperscript{42} Arendt, HC, 198: “… the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds.’”

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 7-9, 136-74, 181-91.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 7-9, 79-135.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 32-3, 45, 220-9.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 220-35.
the human being, is essentially unpredictable.\textsuperscript{47} Once again, the sovereign gaze looks upon this spontaneity and unpredictability as a \textit{problem} requiring a solution. And the solution is to make action impossible by subordinating the task of politics, and hence of the ontologically basic fact of our “being together” or “being-in-common,” to the domain of work and production.\textsuperscript{48} In moving from the political idea or ideal of the \textit{polis}, where “community” (\textit{koinonia}) corresponds to the public space of a common or shared existence (\textit{koinonein}, “to share” or “to partake”), this antagonism between “making” and “acting” eventually gives way to a “political economy,” in which work is eclipsed by labor and the production of a “commonwealth,” scarcely “shared” and thus far from being “common,” increasingly corresponds to a society of laboring individuals.\textsuperscript{49}

This sovereign substitution of making for acting, or the substitution of the “work” of common-being for the “unworking” of being-in-common, is as true of the sovereignty that goes by the name of the “one true God” or the “crown” or the “nation” or the “party” as it is of that which goes by the name of the “people” — e.g., the sovereign will of the \textit{demos} in an ostensibly free and egalitarian democracy. This is one of the great conceptual innovations in Mill’s \textit{On Liberty}. There, we learn that the “people” conceals, under a false banner of unity and equality, profound divisions and inequalities between those groups that have succeeded in establishing themselves as a power \textit{majority} and those that make up an underprivileged or underrepresented \textit{minority}. The \textit{demos}, therefore, refers

\textsuperscript{47} Arendt, HC, 188-98, 243-7.  
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 220-9.  
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, 22-78, 109-35, 212-20, 320-6.
above all to the dominant groups in a democracy, who may very well “desire to oppress part of their number.”\textsuperscript{50} And for this reason, the sovereign “will of the people” is susceptible to a \textit{social tyranny} that, compared the outright but restricted political despotism of the old sovereigns, is \textit{all-encompassing} and thus quite possibly the greater threat to freedom and action.\textsuperscript{51}

But unlike Mill, and contrary to liberalism in general, my response to the latent tyranny of a “people” claiming to be sovereign, following Arendt as well as Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot, is not to assert the sovereignty of the “individual.” On this they all agree: the latter is every bit as much of an abstraction as the former. The experience of community in its pre- or extra-political sense confirms this in a very concrete way. Prior to any free initiative or sense of mutual belonging, I find myself in a world that I already share with others (VE, 171-7; IE, 85-100; IC, xxxvii; UC, 5-7). The force of this “already having to share the world” leaves me exposed and vulnerable to the sheer immensity of all that is \textit{not me}. At every turn, I am confronted by innumerable human and extra-human others who, by their mere existence, expose the lie of individual, indivisible, or isolated existence. Before all the others \textit{I am not} and do not experience myself as a self-sufficient “one” — much less as \textit{sovereign}. To the contrary: before all the others I come face to face with the fact of my \textit{insufficiency} (VE, 171-3; IE, 85-100; UC, 5-7). Which is to say that I am confronted with the fact of my \textit{non-sovereignty}. In a word, I find myself

\textsuperscript{50} John Stuart Mill, \textit{On Liberty}, Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
exposed to a *plurality* that precedes and exceeds every sovereign claim, whether
collective or communal or individual or otherwise.

If the *pathos* of this exposure to plurality — i.e., to community, to the existence
that I must share with all the others — if this *pathos* is the uneasiness and disquiet of
never being completely alone, then the *ethical* and *political* question is what to do with it.
The others with whom I must share the world place certain limitations on the exercise of
my freedom; other freedoms contest the arbitrariness of my own.52 As such, I suspect the
danger and temptation — not only of groups, but of each and every human being — is to
pass from uneasiness to *distress*, from distress to *contempt*, from contempt to *hatred*, and
from hatred to *rage* at having to share the world. The traditional name for this rage
against community is “tyranny” (which, at its extreme, mutates into the unfettered
“terror” that Arendt describes as the essence of totalitarian domination).53 The desire for
and claim to sovereignty is its political manifestation. Sovereignty, in other words, names
the tyrannical ambition to rid human coexistence of its “shared” or “common” character,
so as to overcome the human, all too human condition of “being always more than one.”

What interests me, finally, is this: the provocation to tyranny and the desire for
sovereignty is a quintessentially *human* phenomenon. We cannot reasonably expect to rid
ourselves of it any more than we can rid ourselves of our plurality. It is an inclination of

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human being as such. Again, the ethical and political question is what to do with it. What obligations do we have to one another — despite or even because of this inclination? How ought we organize ourselves politically so as to guard against the persistent threat of tyranny and injustice? How are we to do justice to the fact of our “always having to share the world”? If the “sovereign” takes it upon themselves to answer these questions once and for all, then any answers that have their justification in the plurality of human lives will have to look elsewhere than sovereignty. This refusal of sovereignty is the minimal condition of any political pluralism worthy of the name. To refuse every sovereign claim, to affirm the elemental plurality at the heart of being as such, human or otherwise — this is the shared exigency that, without consensus, unity or identity, delivers the disparate thinkers who inform the theoretical core of this study to “the community of those who have no community” (Bataille, IE, 228; OC 5, 483). Which is to say, once more, that community is not a matter of having or belonging, but rather has to do with a sharing far too radical and “improper” to make one’s own.

1.2.3. Sovereignty, Sacrifice, and the Unsacrificeable

Arendt’s phenomenological critique of the sovereign substitution of “making” for “acting” also sheds light on what Nancy describes as the tacit “immanentism” at work in the sovereign ambition to found or ground a community. By the term “immanentism,” Nancy is speaking to the way in which the sovereign claim on community substitutes an altogether mythic, metaphysical, or otherwise imagined common-being, -essence, -substance, or -identity, in which the community becomes fully “present” or “immanent” to itself as its own “work” (oeuvre), for the unassimilable excess that community, or
being-in-common, is (IC, xxxix-xl, 2-3, 6, 9-18, 31). This sovereign substitution of common-being for being-in-common leads Nancy to say of sovereignty that it inevitably sacrifices the very thing it attempts to found. And since sacrifice, in the precise historical-religious sense of the term, entails nothing less than the ritual production of “sacred things,” this means that community itself is made “sacred” — in the literal sense of the term, as something made separate, set apart, or excluded (sacer, “to cut” or “to remove”) by an act of sacrificial violence.54

But, as Nancy insists, the sacrificial violence that the sovereign claim unleashes on community — a “sacrifice,” moreover, devoid of all solemnity and rite — produces a “sacred stripped of the sacred,” or a sacred stripped bare of all sacredness, sanctity, or transcendence (IC, 35; FT, 84). Sovereignty makes of community an utterly desacralized “sacred,” unrecognizable as such because violently and totally expelled from view. If community “now occupies the place of the sacred,” as Nancy will say in his reading of Bataille, this is because the sacrificial logic of sovereign violence excludes the “common” or “shared” character of human coexistence from the unitary “essence,” “substance,” or “identity” claimed by an imagined communal Subject (nation, people, race, class, party, and so on), and thereby substitutes the dead and death-dealing substance of a “common-being” for the living fact of our “being-in-common” (IC, 35; SW, 161; BSP, 25; DC, viii, 1-3, 17, 52).

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Given the persistence of this sacrificial logic, without which sovereign politics would cease to be “sovereign” in the precise political sense that we are attempting to clarify, can we say with Nancy, in his agreement with a thinker like Giorgio Agamben,\(^{55}\) that our world is a world “lacking” in sacrifice (FT, 64)? Can we say that “homo sacer,” the indistinct juridical-political figure by which anyone at all can be subjected to the exclusionary violence of sovereign power, and who, in being reduced to an object of “bare life,” can be “killed but not sacrificed”?\(^{56}\) Once more, it seems to me that this is yet another instance in which we come across a deconstructive or genealogical equivocation that obscures more than it clarifies. To speak of what is sacrificed as “unsacrificeable” and what is excluded as inhabiting a “zone of indistinction” between inclusion and exclusion is certainly clever, but it’s rather doubtful that it makes for good theory.\(^{57}\)

To speak in openly partisan terms: it’s unlikely that these pseudo-theoretical slights of hand are successful in identifying the objective enemy of a life that would be lived and shared in common. Yes, there is undoubtedly an operative logic by which the sovereignty of sovereigns asserts its claim on the “common” or “shared” character of human coexistence as such. But in losing sight of the sovereigns — whether conceived as a person, people, law, constituted or constituent power, none would be affirmed as “sovereign” without someone or someones to authorize or enact its claims — the critical refusal of sovereign politics runs the risk of making an unassailable fetish of the very


\(^{56}\) Ibid, 81-6, 99-103, 112-15.

thing it sets out to disrupt and disavow. In Nancy: the problem has less to do with competing sovereignties, whose proprietary claims on the “common” make shared existence impossible, than the secret dialectic, logic, or “onto-theology” of “our civilization,” “our culture,” “our history” — the history, that is, of “the West” or “the Occident” (CC1, 23-36; CC2, 19-30; FT, 53-4, 82, 289; BSP, 22, 108; BB, 3, 12).58 “Sovereignty,” in other words, is not something enacted by specific human actors, but rather is the impersonal historical-political manifestation of a subterranean metaphysical undercurrent that drives history forward, as it were, behind the backs of the unsuspecting human herd. (For all his affirmation of the “common,” Nancy shares with Heidegger, despite protests to the contrary, a detectable disdain for the merely commonplace, populated as it is by so many unwitting dupes of history.) It seems rather clear to me that there’s a mythic fatalism inherent to this line of thinking that renders all opposition to this fetishized notion of “sovereignty” meaningless.59

And as for the genealogical, biopolitical, or political-theological equivocation that we find in Agamben: the object of sovereign violence is not the life or livelihoods of someone or someones, but of “bare life” as such, whose genealogy leads back to the “zone of indistinction” between, on the one hand, (1) the obscure juridical-political figure of homo sacer, the radically non-sovereign anybody and nobody who can be “killed but not sacrificed,” and (2) the juridical and political “exception” of sovereign power, which


59 We’ll return to this evasive recourse to a mythic fetishization of Western history in Chapter 5.
unleashes its rule from an Olympian no man’s land straddled between violence and law.\textsuperscript{60} To Nancy’s credit, he’ll question whether the object of sovereign violence is “bare life,” or whether the operative logic of sovereign power is one of “technological management of life.”\textsuperscript{61} This biopolitical reduction of the sovereign claim on human coexistence already “supposes that existence thus managed is no longer, tendentiously, an existence that engages anything else than its reproduction and its maintenance through finalities that remain secrets of power, unless they are simply blind or purposeless finalities of the eco-technological totality in motion” (CW, 94). Or stated otherwise, if the\textit{ bios} in “biopolitics” no longer refers to a politically distinct “form of life,” a life in which human actors have some measure of agency, however limited, but rather speaks to “bare life” in the zoological generality of the human organism\textit{(zoe)}, then the operative logic of sovereign power would be nothing other than this comprehensive\textit{ techne}, and the object of its domination would be nothing short of the planetary conditions of life as such\textit{(oikos)}.

Setting aside the fact that Nancy simply replaces this biopolitical finality with a metaphysical-historical one (i.e., the fateful history of “the West”), the discourse on “biopolitics” fails to acknowledge the extent to which the sovereign ambition to found, maintain, and impose an exclusive\textit{ identity} in which a portion of its “population” shares remains operative even today. The question of “life,” beyond its biopolitical abstraction,

\textsuperscript{60} Agamben,\textit{ Homo Sacer}, 6, 9, 64, 80-6.

is more often than not tied to the question of “race,” or of those exceptional “peoples” who are more qualified for or entitled to a politically privileged “form of life” than others (CW, 94-5). The very term “biopolitics” obscures this point insofar as it mistakes what is in reality a transformation and broadening of sovereignty (it is indeed global in scope in way that was inconceivable until the “globe” in its entirety became an object of technical management) for its disappearance or its retreat from the political into the occult legality of the sovereign “exception.” Or, we could say that the word itself obliquely refers to what it denies: life, irreducible to its reproduction and maintenance within an “eco-technological totality”; and politics, irreducible to management, control, discipline, regimentation, and so on. In the end, “biopolitics” has to do with neither a viable or desirable form of life (bios) nor a common space or spacing wherein this life can possibly be shared in common (politics). It is, if anything, an anti-politics of enlightened resignation before an inhuman or humanly indifferent figure of “sovereignty” that is grotesquely theological in its omnipotence. And it’s for precisely this reason that every “political theology” that proceeds from the genealogical discourse on biopolitics inevitably makes a fetish of the sovereign power it pretends to subvert (or else either openly affirms or secretly holds out hope for the coming of an otherworldly sovereignty, whose “divine violence” surpasses the inferior violence of all worldly sovereigns in both religious fascination and apocalyptic potential).62

1.3. Ecstasy, Exteriority, and the Minimal Plurality of the “Third Party”

1.3.1. Ecstasy and the Worldless “Community of Two”

Returning to the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot on the question of community, without which the claims of sovereign power are both objectless and meaningless, we see that in their combined attempt to think of the plurality and alterity that constitutes “community,” they will all differ on the nature of the relation at stake in these terms. The question with respect to plurality and alterity, it seems, is at once “how many?” and “how different?” How many? — if the plurality constitutive of community speaks to the fact that both human and extra-human being is in each case “more than one,” then does the relation between “two” suffice to make a community? How different? — if the alterity constitutive of the relation between the one and the other(s) speaks to the fact that community does not admit of communal fusion into the shared identity of a higher order “One,” in which the otherness of the other(s) is absorbed into the sameness of the same, then is the relation between “two” sufficient to maintain the radical distance and difference between them?

It’s along these lines that we catch sight of another recurring theme in all three of these thinkers: the dilation and contraction of plurality from the restricted “community of two” (e.g., the “community of lovers,” or the “literary community” between readers, writers, and artists) to the more expansive ethical or political community between oneself and all the others. Thus, in addition to alterity and plurality, the passage from the “1 + 1” to the “n + 1,” so to speak (I’ll complicate this numerical rendering of plurality shortly), hinges on a movement from (1) interiority, characteristic of the “community of two,”
hidden away from the demands of the world “outside,” toward (2) exteriority, characteristic of “community” in the strict sense, understood as an exposure to all the others with whom each one must share the world, regardless of preference or choice.

To efface this crucial phenomenological distinction between an experience of interiority and an experience of exteriority in the obfuscating, equivocating, deconstructive wordplay that speaks of them more or less interchangeably (as Nancy, following Derrida, is prone to do) is to fail to catch sight of the essential relation between “community” and the “world” — in the precise Arendtian sense of the term, where the “world” is coextensive with the “public” or “political” space of practical engagements enacted and experienced between and among a plurality of human actors. It’s to Bataille’s credit, in this regard, that after his retreat from politics just prior to and during the war, he never confuses “inner experience,” felt most acutely in the “ecstasy” or “ecstatic” movement in which oneself desires to lose their very “self” in communicating with another (e.g., in the contagion of laughter, anguish, erotic excess, and so on), with the world in its exteriority, which constantly intervenes on the solitude

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63 We find one of the more egregious, if not altogether incoherent, examples of this in Nancy’s *La Communauté désœuvrée*: “the ‘inner experience’ of which Bataille speaks is in no way ‘interior’ or ‘subjective,’ but is indissociable from the experience of… an incommensurable outside” (IC, 18). Yes, this experience is directed outward, but as we’ll see, Bataille’s insistence on the constitutive interiority of the “subject” and “subjectivity” makes such a claim wildly untenable. The fact that Nancy follows this claim with a critique of Bataille’s notion of the “subject” only adds to its incoherence. Nancy seems to have uncritically accepted Derrida’s equally tortuous, quasi-Hegelian reading of Bataille. See Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 272: “That which indicates itself as interior experience is not an experience, because it is related to no presence, to no plentitude, but only to the ‘impossible’ it ‘undergoes’ in torture. This experience above all is not interior: and if it seems to be such because it is related to nothing else, to no exterior (except in the modes of nonrelation, secrecy, and rupture), it is also completely exposed — to torture — naked, open to the exterior, with no interior reserve or feelings, profoundly superficial.”
that inner experience requires.\textsuperscript{64} To the extent that the full exteriority of the world makes the ecstasy of profound communication impossible (e.g., in subordinating all communication to discourse and all experience to useful activity), Bataille will privilege and affirm the apolitical if not anti-political passion of the literary or erotic “community of two” as a sovereign refusal or contestation of “a world brought down to the weight of utility.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{1.3.2. The Immediate Exteriority of the One-Facing-the-Other}

And yet, I will argue that duality is not yet plurality, and inner experience — sovereign experience — is not yet full exposure to an outside. “Community,” however, as Bataille himself notes again and again, is the name for this plurality. It already entails relation to a “third,” beyond the ecstatic coming together of “two,” who risk losing their singularity as well as their plurality in the oceanic Oneness of their communion. Community, as distinct from this “communion,” thus names a mode of “being in relation” (IE, 86; VE, 174) wherein each one is exposed to and contested by not only another, but all the others, that is, the world outside the world-less ecstasy of either literary or erotic passion.

\textsuperscript{64} I return to theme of solitude in Bataille in Chapter 3.1.2. and 3.3.4.

\textsuperscript{65} Bataille, \textit{Theory of Religion}, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 59, abbreviated henceforth as ToR. It’s also important to note that, against the many false equivalences that Nancy draws between Bataille and Heidegger, Bataille’s thinking of “ecstasy” is entirely at odds with the ek-stasis of ek-sistence in Heideggerian ontology: the former speaks to a generous forgetfulness of “self,” indifferent to the future realization of oneself in and as a “project,” whereas the latter is the “resolute” assertion and projection of oneself against a temporal horizon, and whose final term corresponds to the anxious futurity of Dasein’s “being-toward-death.”
And from this, following Blanchot, I will argue that “community is not the place of Sovereignty,” whether conceived in terms of Bataille’s inner experience of insubordination or the sovereign claim that subordinates community to the unitary logic of communion (UC, 12). Rather, to cite Blanchot once more, community “is what exposes by exposing itself. It includes the exteriority of being that excludes [sovereignty] — an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech” (UC, 12). Death, the other, and speech — these are all figures of exteriority, without which something like “community” would be impossible. Their exteriority proceeds from a non-assumable excess that resists and contests every sovereign ambition to subsume this excess within the pure interiority of a communal Subject. Short of this exteriority, death, always given and experienced in the death of others, becomes the organizing principle and shared destiny of a “people” (pure interiority), realized most fully in the struggle against “other peoples” (pure exteriority).66 The relation of infinite distance and separation between oneself and the other(s) is annulled through the sacrificial violence (at once physical and metaphysical) that effaces every other in the social-political homogeneity and identity of the same. And speech, which traverses this relation of distance and separation without collapsing it, is reduced to idiom and dialect, or the manner of speaking “proper” to the communal intimacy of linguistic and cultural belonging.

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66 See Nancy’s critique of Heidegger’s antagonistic framing of Mitsein/Mitdasein in “The being-with of being-there” (BB, 9).
Following Blanchot and Levinas, I will argue that this dimension of exteriority is opened in the *ethical immediacy* of the “face-to-face” relation to *l’autrui*, the human “other” who faces me.67 This relation is “immediate” insofar as it escapes any dialectic or ontology that might stand as an inter-mediary between “the-one-facing-the-other.”68 It is “ethical,” in a rigorously non-sanctimonious and non-moralizing sense, insofar as the mere presence of the other calls my presumed “right to be” radically into question, confronting me instead with an imperative or an obligation preceding and exceeding whatever rights or liberties I might claim for myself.69 From this it follows that the immediate exteriority of this relation is experienced in a mode otherwise than either ecstasy, in Bataille’s sense of the sovereign “two” world-lessly losing themselves in each other, or existence, in the ontological sense affirmed by Heidegger and Nancy as the essential movement of *ek-sistence*, which entails nothing short of *taking a stand or standing out* in the forward advance of one’s coming to be. The ethical relation to the other, as Blanchot describes it, is a “relation of the third kind” — just as irreducible to mystical intuition and erotic fusion as it is to objective knowledge and the appropriative grasp of comprehension (EI, 66-74).

The “face,” or more precisely, the other who *faces* and *confronts* me, is less a matter of brute physiognomy than of immediate exposure to the other in the passivity of their material, bodily, and sensible vulnerability, encountered concretely as a constitutive

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68 See Blanchot, EI, 10, 47, 51, 54, 57-8, 64, 69.

“susceptibility to wounding and outrage.” Its “epiphany,” in no way a revelation or manifestation of either a being or the truth of Being itself, is interruptive of the ontological movement of both ecstasy and existence. Before the other who faces me, I am called into a relation that contests the ek-static play of passion that negates the world in retreating from its demands just as much as the ek-sistent projection of oneself against the temporal horizon that the world brings into view. With Blanchot and Levinas and against Nancy and Heidegger, therefore, I will argue that neither ecstasy nor existence, on their own, are able to establish an unmediated relation to exteriority, which calls the presumed identity of the same (self, individual, people, race, communion, nation, fatherland, etc.) radically into question. Nor are they able to justify a relation of responsibility between oneself and the other(s) — and as a consequence, they are unable to raise the “common” or “shared” character of human coexistence beyond its brute ontological status as a fait accompli, or a mere fact of being, to an ethical or political imperative to share the world in a way that contests the proprietary politics, or the politics of the “proper,” that goes by the name of “sovereignty.”


71 On the “the other” as an “interruption” or “disruption” vis-à-vis ontology, see Blanchot, EI, 58, 68-79. See also Kris Sealey, “The Primacy of Disruption in Levinas’ Account of Transcendence,” Research in Phenomenology 40 (2010): 363–77; and Sarah Pessin, “From Mystery to Laughter to Trembling Generosity: Agono-Pluralistic Ethics in Connolly v. Levinas (and the Possibilities for Atheist-Theist Respect),” International Journal for Philosophical Studies, 2016, 1–24.

72 I say “against Nancy and Heidegger” and not Bataille for the simple reason that Bataille never attempts to derive an ethics from the inner experience of ecstasy.
If there is indeed an abyss between “is” and “ought” (which I’m inclined to affirm), then it is precisely the ethical relation to the other that crosses it. And with Blanchot, we could say that “alterity,” the radical asymmetry or dissymmetry between the one facing the other, opens or exposes community to its “respiration,” introducing the necessary interval between its dilation and contraction from the singular to the plural and back again (EI, 75-9). The logos of ontology, or what Nancy calls the sense (sens) of being (être), does indeed transpire between the singular and the plural — but it does not breathe. In the breathless “sharing of sense” or “sharing of voices,” there is no respiration, there is no pause, no interval, no time other than the relentless forward advance of “ek-sistence” to rescue these voices from a common asphyxiation. The response demanded in the ethical relation of “one facing the other” cannot transpire without this respiration, without an interruption of the “being-in-common” of a plurality of singular existents who confront each other in a mode otherwise than either ek-stasis or ek-sistence. It is necessary, in other words, for “this hiatus… that introduces waiting,” to which the “interruption in language itself responds” (EI, 77), to arrest us from the reflexive assertion of our “right to be,” thereby intervening on the antagonism between competing or clashing “rights” to which this assertion inevitably leads.74


74 This is one possible interpretation of Levinas’ argument in Otherwise Than Being, Chapter 1, “Essence and Disinterest,” where he describes the “inter-esse,” or the ontological articulation of the common space between beings, as one of ruthless self-interest (OTB, 4-5).
1.3.3. The “Third Party” and the Mediated Exteriority of the World

The ethical relation to the other, then, opens a dimension of immediate or non-mediated exteriority that interrupts both the ecstasy of inner experience (Bataille) and the very being or existence of singular yet plural beings (Nancy, Heidegger) who face and confront one another in a mode of radical questioning and contestation (Blanchot, Levinas). And while this being called to account is in an important sense “prior to the community” and its “work,” or is the interruption that demands of the community that it always take up the “work of justice” anew, the ethical immediacy of the one-facing-the-other already anticipates the full exteriority of the world — where the “world,” understood in the precise Arendtian sense of the term, is coextensive with the “public space of appearance” common to a plurality of human actors.75 Or, with both Blanchot and Levinas, we could say that ethics already anticipates politics, insofar as the ethical exteriority of the singular other, which ultimately pertains to every other, opens straightaway to the mediated, political exteriority of the world, where the intervening presence of a “third party” ensures that neither I nor the other remain untouched and untroubled by the world and its demands for very long.76 That there is always a “third,”

75 See Arendt, HC, 52: “... the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”

76 See Levinas, ET, 41: “The absence of a common plane, transcendence, is characteristic of speech. The content communicated is, to be sure, common — or more exactly, it becomes common through language. The invocation is prior to the community.” And yet Levinas is precisely concerned, as is Arendt, with the presence of all the others, who make up the public contours of a world shared in common, prior to any sense of mutual belonging or voluntary association. The point, however, is that the “community” — as a
that it is never I alone nor I alone with the other, that countless others constantly trouble the solitary existence of the “one” and the world-less ecstasy of the “two” — this fact alone suffices to confirm the sheer fiction of every sovereign pretense to total fusion, whether erotic or communal or otherwise.77

1.4. Critical Pluralism and the “Post-Foundational” Turn: A Note on Method

1.4.1. Situating the Exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot

In his study on the “post-foundational” turn in contemporary political thought, Oliver Marchart takes up the notion of “political difference,” or the much discussed distinction between “politics” (la politique in French and Politik in German) and “the political” (le politique and das Politische).78 Initially unique to radical politics as it figured in certain French theorists in their critical engagement with emblematic (and problematic) German thinkers such as Carl Schmitt and Heidegger, Marchart makes the argument that this “difference” or distinction effectively sets the agenda for any attempt work and not merely a fait accompli — derives its urgency from what Levinas calls the “invocation” of the other who faces me, and in facing me, calls my freedom into question. Hence, he will say elsewhere that politics without ethics, where the universality of “rights” and “liberties” have priority over the particularity of obligations between singular beings, inevitably devolves into tyranny: “In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the … relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia” (TI, 300).

77 On Levinas’ notion of the “third party” as the point where ethics and politics intersect and complicate one another, see ET, 25-45; TI, 213, 251, 280, 305; and OTB, 16, 81-3, 128, 150, 157-69. See also Robert Bernasconi, “The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology 30, no. 1 (1999): 76–97; Bettina Bergo, Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty That Adorns the Earth (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 163-4, 177-84, 207-8; and Pessin, “From Mystery to Laughter to Trembling Generosity,” 6-7.

78 See Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, 35-60.
to think of “the political,” at the level of both theory and practice, beyond the foundational logic of any given “politics” that presumes to ground society in the largely uncontested claims (whether de facto or de jure) of an already existing regime. Looking to thinkers as diverse as Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, Chantel Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and others, Marchart traces the genealogy of this “political difference” to the efforts on the part of various “Heideggerians of the Left” to radicalize Heidegger’s “ontic-ontological difference” as a rigorous philosophical critique of foundational thinking in whatever form (i.e., any thinking underwritten by metaphysical figures of foundation and ground such as “totality,” “universality,” “essence,” “substance,” “identity,” and so on).79

Where “politics” clearly parallels the unquestioned or unthought status of the “ontic” in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, having to do with ready-made or ready-to-hand “political things” such as already constituted laws, policies, and institutions, “the political” speaks to the ontological movement of a disruptive “moment” or “event” in which politics as it stands, and with it, the self-evident finality of its foundations, is radically displaced by a questioning of the “grounds” for its continued existence.80 And crucially, against “anti-foundationalism,” amounting to little more than a politically naïve and non-committal postmodern relativism, this “post-foundational” turn does not coincide with the refusal or absence of grounds or foundations as such.81 Rather, the

79 Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, 11-34.
80 Ibid, 8-9, 14-25.
theoretical and practical concern is to submit the founding act of grounding society in a
given politics to an interrogation of the conditions under which such an act becomes
possible. These conditions, Marchart argues, have their ontological basis in the
contingency of human existence, political or otherwise, and as such, the possibility of a
genuinely disruptive and transformative politics hinges on a “political ontology” that
thinks according to this constitutive lack of “finality.” Simply put, in the domain of
human affairs, there is no final ground that would render “the political” disruption and
contestation of “politics” unnecessary. Any claim to the contrary only confirms the
necessity of maintaining this “difference.”

My reservations about the philosophical, ethical, or political legitimacy of a
progressive “Heideggerianism of the Left,” much less a “political ontology” derived from
Heideggerian premises (and with it, hasty affirmations of “event,” “decision,” “conflict,”
and “struggle,” essentially antagonistic notions that are just as amenable to an archi-
fascist “Heideggerianism of the Right”), will become apparent when I return to the debate
between Nancy and Blanchot in Chapters 4 and 5. That said, I think Marchart’s general
characterization of contemporary political thought (whether in its original European
setting or its recent influence on Anglo-American theory) as “post-foundational” is an
auspicious one. It also seems rather clear to me that the debate on “community” and its
contested relation to “sovereignty,” sparked by the exchange between Nancy and

84 Ibid, 2, 7, 14-17, 26, 31, 61.
Blanchot and subsequently amplified and reverberated in thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito,85 fits squarely, if not centrally, within this historical and theoretical context.86

1.4.2. Contesting the Managerial Paradigm

I’d also like to suggest that this post-foundational turn presents us with what we could describe as a “critical pluralism,” which contests the prevailing managerial or “problem solving” paradigm that cuts across mainstream political theory, political science, and international relations theory.87 A cursory review of the literature produced in and across these fields is sufficient to confirm a general tendency to frame “community” and “sovereignty” within a naive political realism that speaks of them as though they were some kind of incontestable or quasi-natural given. The absence of any genuinely critical interrogation of the political as such is a distinctive feature of this paradigm, limited as it is to a quasi-scientific enumeration of already constituted political, legal, and economic policies and practices, the overriding concern of which is to maximize the efficiency of their technical management and reproduction.

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86 See especially Marchart, Post-Foundational Political Thought, Chapter 3, “Retracing the Political Difference: Jean-Luc Nancy,” 61-84.

It’s also possible to divide this managerial paradigm into the following subgroups or “ideal types,” given that there’s inevitably some overlap between them: (1) managerial statism, (2) managerial humanitarianism, and (3) managerial cynicism. All three share, on the one hand, the *ontological* presupposition that the sovereign state system is an empirically uncontested given of domestic and international political experience, and on the other, the *normative* aim of preserving the functional integrity (i.e., the “foundations”) of this system. We could summarize the main differences as follows.

(1) The managerial statist approach privileges the sovereign authority and autonomy of the State over and above what we might call “centripetal” forces (social, economic, civic, or political) and “centrifugal” forces (interactions with other states, international and intergovernmental bodies, global markets, conflicts with non-state actors, etc.) that tend to contest or weaken this authority/autonomy. Domestically, these countervailing forces would include democratic struggles for social and economic equality, and the recognition and protection of civil and human rights. Internationally, these would include diplomatic or military interventions vis-à-vis other states, capital flows across global and trans-national markets, migration of displaced and stateless populations, border crises, and perceived security threats attributed to “terrorism.”  

The aim of the managerial statist, then, is at least threefold: (i) to “defend” the hegemonic authority and autonomy of the sovereign state from all counter-hegemonic “threats”;  

(ii) to assert the moral and normative supremacy of the sovereign state system as such; and as a corollary, (iii) to denigrate all other political options as “impractical,” “idealistic,” “utopian,” “socialist,” “Marxist,” “communist,” “leftist,” “anarchist,” “extremist,” “terrorist,” and so on. 89

(2) The managerial humanitarian approach is characteristic of international and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN and the ICISS (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty) and their professional or technocratic apologists (e.g., academics, legal scholars, international and human rights lawyers).

Contrary to managerial statism, this view privileges the international relationships between states over the domestic concerns of individual states — specifically, the protection of universal human rights over particular state interests. Where the managerial statist tends toward an authoritarian and nationalist militarism, the managerial humanitarian tends toward a liberal democratic and cosmopolitan interventionism. But in either case, “sovereignty” or “sovereign statehood” is employed as both an organizing and legitimizing principle of intervention, whether diplomatic or military. Where the managerial statist will frame this in terms of security and defense (i.e., whatever poses a

threat to the integrity and security of the state effectively invokes and legitimizes its sovereign “right” to self-defense and self-preservation), the managerial humanitarian will couch this same legitimating logic in terms of human rights violations and crises (i.e., whatever poses a threat to the integrity and security of universal human rights invokes and thereby legitimizes the sovereign “duty” or “responsibility” to protect vulnerable populations).\(^90\)

(3) Lastly, what I’m describing as managerial cynicism is perhaps best expressed by Stephen Krasner’s characterization of the sovereign state system as “organized hypocrisy,” which assumes as a theoretical principle that the normative and ideological aims of sovereignty (e.g., the right to self-determination and non-intervention, territorial authority and autonomy, international legal recognition, etc.) widely diverge from the empirical consequences of the power politics constitutive of the state system.\(^91\) In other words, the managerial cynic maintains a sharp distinction between political “ideas” or

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“ideals” and political “reality,” and straightaway decides on the latter’s primacy over the former. The various elements of this “reality,” which if left unregulated would devolve into chaos (or so it’s assumed), lead the managerial cynic to assert and defend the superior economic, legal, and political efficacy of the sovereign state system over less feasible alternatives.92

Underlying this assumption, it seems, is a kind of negative utilitarianism: i.e., the sovereign state system, while deeply flawed and perhaps philosophically and theoretically incoherent, is the best available option among undesirable alternatives. This, in turn, assumes that “politics,” the business of living with a plurality of other human beings, is little more than a “necessary evil” beset with varying degrees of conflict and violence. The professional role of the managerial cynic, therefore, takes the form of threat assessment and risk management. And as in the financialization of the economy, this concern for identifying and mitigating potential vulnerabilities presupposes that both sovereignty and the international state system have achieved a level of abstraction which necessitates the “expertise” of specialists capable of forecasting and manipulating this abstract system through the ad hoc implementation of various advisory and policy techniques. In practice, this entails a mix of political realism and legal positivism: i.e., human beings are dangerous, and as such, their relationships need to be regulated; and the

existing legal-normative structures and institutions assigned to this task are more or less adequate. Questions as to their moral or ethical appropriateness — i.e., the justice of these institutions and structures — are set aside as unanswerable or unimportant. The overriding concern is one of pure pragmatism: all things considered, the sovereign state system works, and this functional “operativity” is enough to verify its truth. With respect to the presupposed operativity of this system, the theoretical and practical task is simply one of maintenance, and wherever possible, marginal improvement.\(^\text{93}\)

All of this is to say that the prevailing paradigm of political theory and practice tacitly or explicitly conceives of “community” as little more than an object of technical management and governance, and from this, looks to the sovereign state system as the only viable or desirable means of regulating the legal, economic, and political relationships that hold between human beings in society. If there is a dominant “politics” in need of “political” disruption and displacement, then surely this would be it. Despite or even because of their pluralism, each of the thinkers that Marchart groups under the general rubric of “post-foundational political thought” call the founding presumptions at work in sovereign politics radically into question. Where the managerial paradigm is willing to accept the violence inherent to sovereign politics as an inevitable or even a “natural” feature of political life, or the necessary “cost of doing business,” as it were, post-foundational thinking counters with a critical pluralism intent on exposing both the metaphysical assumptions subtending this violence (e.g., that plurality is less an

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elemental condition of any politics deserving of the name than a problem in need of unitary or unilateral correction) and the utter contingency that disproves its claims to “naturalness” and “inevitability.”

And once again, it’s my contention that the exchange between Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot brings this post-foundational interrogation of sovereign politics to bear on the question of “community” with unmatched philosophical, ethical, and political urgency. Bataille’s prewar antifascism and communitarian activism alerts us to the profound affective forces at stake in the human desire for “community,” to which the counter-sovereignty of “deep subversion” must respond if it is to free human beings from the “legacy of past constraints” (VE, 159; TRR, 40). Nancy’s distinction between “community,” understood as the ontologically basic fact of our being or existing straightway “in common” with an innumerable plurality of others with whom we must share the world, and “communion,” understood as the violent attempt to efface this plurality in the mythic substance of a unitary communal Subject, makes it plain that the “work” of sovereignty is ultimately a “work of death,” and that sovereign politics, therefore, inevitably takes the form of a death-dealing thanato- or necro-politics (IC, 15-20, 82, 60, 75). And Blanchot, finally, holds our thinking of community accountable to the relation of responsible concern between human beings, without which the “common” or “shared” condition of human coexistence remains a brute ontological fact devoid of justification (UC, 3-7, 17, 21, 43, 56).
1.4.3. Thinking of the Numerous otherwise than Numerically

Lastly, given the proximity of the concern for plurality shared by Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot to the discourse on “multiplicity” in prominent post-foundational thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou, I’d like to conclude this introduction by briefly differentiating my more or less phenomenological approach (for lack of better term) from their respective positions. By “phenomenological” I’m simply speaking to the fact that my concern, as it is for Bataille, Nancy, and Blanchot, is to prioritize experience over “discourse.” The aim in doing so is to prevent the concepts and terms by which we set out to understand the question of community and its problematic relation to sovereignty from straying too far into abstraction. At the risk of generalization, and important distinctions notwithstanding, we could say that where Agamben’s genealogical and political-theological approach deals in juridical, discursive, and textual abstractions, the related biopolitical approach of Hardt and Negri,\(^\text{94}\) as well as the mathematical-ontological approach of Deleuze\(^\text{95}\) and Badiou,\(^\text{96}\) tend to deal with numerical or geometrical aggregates — bodies (with or without organs),

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populations, multitudes, assemblages, multiple sets, and so on. What gets lost therein is the relation between an innumerable plurality of singular “someones,” to speak like Nancy,\textsuperscript{97} who constitute a non-mathematical and non-totalizable plurality.

We see this most conspicuously in Blanchot, for whom the relation at stake in the question of community is not and could never become one of addition, multiplication, or summation. Neither the ethical nor even the erotic relation between the one and the other constitutes a simple (or even a complex) multiplicity, nor does the political relation between oneself and all the others refer to the “bad infinity” of an indeterminately numerous “n +1.” If anything, it has to do with the “n – 1,” a plural relation that subtracts itself from totality just as much as from multiplicity (WD, 128-9).

This numerical or geometrical multiplicity, moreover, is inevitably “counted as one,”\textsuperscript{98} that is, as comprising a higher order “univocity”\textsuperscript{99} or “universality,”\textsuperscript{100} even if this operation doesn’t derive from some metaphysical “One” that precedes, surpasses, or encompasses the “Many.” If the alterity and plurality constitutive of “community” can be treated numerically, then it’s by way of its subtraction from the univocal and the universal — radically anterior to number, numbering, and every sovereign count that effectively reduces the “common” to a calculable and purely conceptual totality. Or, put

\textsuperscript{97} See Nancy, IC, 6-7, 25, 76; SW, 68-75; BSP, 21, 75-6.

\textsuperscript{98} See Badiou, Being and Event, 89-92.

\textsuperscript{99} See Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 35-42, 66, 303-4; The Logic of Sense, 175-80, 194, 241, 300.

differently, we could say that alterity is no more reducible to duality than plurality is to multiplicity, both of which speak less to a relation between the singularity of the one and the plurality of the other(s) than a doubling or a multiplication of commensurable instantiations that are more or less the same. But ultimately, and strictly speaking, alterity and plurality — and therefore community — are not numerical but relational. It’s for this reason that both exceed the sovereign count that reduces the incommensurable and measureless relation between human beings to one of number, or the numbering of a faceless multitude within an ontological order that lends itself to total comprehension (WD, 129-30).

101 Nancy will tend to speak of “community” or the “common” in terms of “number” and the “numerous,” and as such, tends to use the words plurality and multiplicity more or less interchangeably. This is one of the more conspicuous instances in which Blanchot seems to understand the ethical nature of the relation that constitutes “plurality” in a way that escapes Nancy, beholden as he is to a Heideggerian ontology of Mitsein/Mitdasein, which, as I argue in Chapter 5, is fatally compromised by Heidegger’s “archi-fascism” and “metaphysical anti-Semitism.” There is simply no way one can derive an ethics of responsible concern for the other(s) from an ontology that equates the privileged status of Mitsein/Mitdasein with that of an historically superior “people” (Volk) destined to struggle against other, inferior peoples. Nancy’s attempt to do so is unconvincing at best, disingenuous at worst. See, for example, Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 436-43, where Heidegger unambiguously finds in the German Volksgemeinschaft and its “destiny” the historically privileged instance of Miteinandersein (“being together” or “togetherness”). See also Nancy’s critique of Heidegger’s “archi-fascism” and “metaphysical anti-Semitism” in “The being-with of being-there” (BB) and The Banality of Heidegger (BH). In both texts Nancy’s critique of Heidegger stops short of outright condemnation.
Chapter Two. Ambiguities of the Sacred:
Community and Sovereignty in Bataille’s Prewar Writings and Activism

2.1. Community and Sovereignty from Political Praxis to Sacred Experience

2.1.1. Thinking and Excess

Georges Bataille is often described as the consummate thinker of excess.¹ His own reflections on the intimate link between thinking and excess confirms as much: “Thought itself, reflection… is only fulfilled in excess” (E, 268). Thinking, in other words, directs itself toward that which essentially exceeds and surpasses its aim. To say that thinking is “fulfilled in excess,” therefore, is to say that it desires its own incompleteness.² For Bataille, an object wholly adequate to the thought that thinks it is not only undesirable but unworthy of reflection, for the simple reason that such an object

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would bring thought to an untimely end. Short of excess, thinking, as opposed to mere cognition or intellection, is soon emptied of its content as well as its motivation. This motivating excess figures in Bataille’s thinking under various signs: heterogeneity, expenditure, the sacred, sacrifice, ecstasy, community, communication, inner experience, sovereignty, eroticism, impossibility, unknowing, as well as the constant slippages and displacements of meaning that pass from one to the other. These various figures of excess traverse nearly as many discourses: politics, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, theology, religion, literature, art history, and, crucially, the indistinct margins that cut across and between each of these. While it would be easy to dismiss this eclecticism out of hand as the surest sign of an undisciplined dilettante, it’s important to approach Bataille as a thinker who, in principle, refuses to submit to the narrow disciplinary constraints of discursive thinking. The objects that he takes up for reflection are expressive of a sense or meaning that radically exceeds and contests these constraints; and so his theoretical and methodological pluralism is perfectly justified.

2.1.2. Community, Sovereignty, and the Sacred

It’s along these lines that this and the following chapter focus on “community” and “sovereignty” as the privileged figures of excess to which Bataille’s thinking most

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3 Bataille contrasts “experience,” as both a mode of being and thinking that touches on the “unknowable” and the “impossible,” to “discourse,” which is limited to articulate language and the acquisition of knowledge limited to the “possible” (e.g., feasible, practical, useful, and so on). The distinction is central to the privilege accorded to “inner experience” in IE, G, ON, and F.
obsessively and consistently returns.\textsuperscript{4} More precisely, I want to suggest that when Bataille speaks of either sovereignty or community, he is attempting to trace an experience of “the sacred” that is as ambiguous as it is excessive.\textsuperscript{5} In other words, community and sovereignty, as the privileged figures of a sacred excess, are charged with a certain heterogeneity, such that their sense or meaning is irreducible to any homogeneous or unambiguous order of things.\textsuperscript{6} In fact, it is precisely their resistance to and disruption of the homogeneity characteristic of life in modern society — i.e., profane existence, life devoid of any real sense of the sacred — that attracts and provokes Bataille’s thinking in the first place.\textsuperscript{7}


\textsuperscript{6} Regarding the “sacred” as a “restricted form of the heterogeneous,” see Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” VE, 141-2.

\textsuperscript{7} Regarding liberal society as both “homogeneous” and “profane,” see Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” VE, 116-29.
To this end, my aim in what follows is to trace the development of Bataille’s use of these terms in certain of his key theoretical texts written prior to the Second World War and in the wake of its aftermath.

Prior to the war, Bataille initially frames community and sovereignty in terms of an irreconcilable political antagonism between heterogeneous authoritarian and emancipatory impulses that contest the narrowly utilitarian imperatives of the liberal State. Thus, in these early texts, Bataille speaks of community and sovereignty primarily as political phenomena, that is, as terms corresponding to the aims of political praxis. There, we see that “sovereignty” names an authoritarian ambition toward social cohesion that is fundamentally antagonistic to the plurality constitutive of “community,” or human being as such. The rise and threat of fascism is the political reality that occasions this distinction. Fascism, Bataille argues, is the crystallization of what he calls “unitary

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9 As we’ll see, Bataille will speak of this plurality in terms of an irreducible “being in relation,” on which all communication and social composition depends. See “The Labyrinth,” VE, 171-7; and “The Labyrinth (or the Composition of Beings),” IE, 85-94.

politics” or “political unitarism,” which, in turn, is already a consequence of the social homogeneity at work in the liberal State.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus the exegetical task with respect to Bataille’s prewar writings is threefold. First, we have to consider the material and psychological conditions that Bataille presents as leading to the dissolution of the homogeneity characteristic of life in liberal societies, which the liberal State has an interest in maintaining but lacks the resources to do so in times of crisis.\textsuperscript{12} Second, we have to articulate the means by which fascism contests and appropriates the existing State apparatus to achieve what Bataille calls “the sovereign form of sovereignty” (VE, 153). Lastly, we have to unpack Bataille’s affirmation of “community” as being composed of an essentially subversive — and therefore potentially revolutionary — plurality of actors and forces that contest the imperative claims of sovereign authority.\textsuperscript{13} Bataille’s participation in several revolutionary groups of the left-wing avant-garde, from which these texts derive their urgency, is the clearest expression of this affirmation.\textsuperscript{14}

However, leading up to and following the onset of the war, Bataille’s communitarian militancy recedes into the background as sovereignty increasingly

\textsuperscript{11} Bataille, “Propositions,” VE, 197-201.


\textsuperscript{13} Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix \textit{Sur} in the Words \textit{Surhomme} [Superman] and \textit{Surrealist}” and “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” VE, 32-44, 137-60.

\textsuperscript{14} Bataille’s communitarian engagements have been extensively documented. See Allan Stoekl’s introduction and bibliographic commentary in \textit{Visions of Excess}; Kendall, \textit{Georges Bataille}; and Surya, \textit{Georges Bataille}.  

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becomes the central motif around which his work as a whole coheres. Whereas in the prewar texts sovereignty generally figures as the object of a radically anti-fascist and anti-authoritarian critique, it now figures in the interwar and postwar texts as an object of unreserved affirmation. The principle aim of the final section of this chapter and the opening section of Chapter 3, therefore, is to frame this affirmation of sovereignty as a response to the historical failure of community as the promised site of political revolution. Contrary to Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, who both claim to varying degrees that Bataille’s thinking remains “political” to the very end (Chapter 4), I argue that his thinking becomes consciously apolitical — that is, unconcerned or indifferent to the myopic demands of an existence wholly devoted to the strategic aims of political praxis.15 This apolitical turn is not a failure of nerve or a regrettable lapse into idealism. Rather, it marks a significant achievement of hard-won philosophical insight. Where community and sovereignty previously named countervailing terms of an expressly political antagonism, they now converge to express an ontological possibility of human being as such, as well as the desire for an experience (by turns described as “sovereign,” “inner,” “ecstatic,” “sacred,” “religious,” and even “mystical”) that is intensely alive to this possibility.16

15 See for example Maurice Blanchot, who contends “that the political exigency was never absent from his thought, though it took on different shapes depending on the interior or exterior urgency.” Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, Trans. Pierre Joris, (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988), 4.

2.1.3. The Sovereign Plurality of Being(s)

What is this possibility? — Nothing less than the refusal to be an isolated function in the service of inhuman and inhumane ends.\textsuperscript{17} Which ends are these? — Nothing other than those governing a social, economic, and political order of things that isolates and degrades human beings so as to mobilize them as effective instruments of violence, war, and death.\textsuperscript{18} To be sovereign is to cease to serve these ends; and the desire for sovereignty unfolds as the refusal of servility in all its forms: e.g., unquestioning deference to the demands of biological or even rational necessity, social and economic utility, prevailing moral sentiment, legal and political expediency, and so on.

This sovereign experience of refusal, moreover, contests the self-enclosed and self-referential “ipseity” of the isolated individual.\textsuperscript{19} It affirms the ontologically basic fact that to be human, or “to be” at all, is straightaway and in every instance to stand \emph{in relation} to a plurality of human and extra-human others.\textsuperscript{20} As such, sovereignty, in the


\textsuperscript{18} While Bataille does not shy away from violence and death (they are, after all, inherent to the movement and expenditure of living matter itself), he is resolutely opposed to the violence and death that war pursues, insofar as it is \emph{instrumentalized} to serve the interests of the State. I return to this theme in Chapter 3, section 3.1.1.

\textsuperscript{19} The critique of “ipseity,” or isolated “selfhood,” is a recurrent theme in Bataille. See Bataille, “The Labyrinth,” VE, 173-5. See also Bataille, IE, G, and ON, all of which reconceive of the “subject” as radically exceeding the confines of “ipse” or “self” insofar as human being, and being as such, is always one of “being in relation.” I return to Bataille’s pluralist ontology of the subject in Chapter 3, section 3.2.4.

\textsuperscript{20} Bataille, “The Labyrinth,” VE, 171-7; “The Labyrinth (or the Composition of Beings),” IE, 85-94.
sense that Bataille affirms, already presupposes something like “community.” More to the point: sovereignty not only presupposes a plurality of interrelated beings, but also entails an ecstatic experience of and exposure to this plurality, wherein the solitary “self” or “subject” desires another and thereby expends and takes leave of itself.\footnote{Bataille, IE, where his thinking of such terms as “ecstasy” (ek-stasis), “exposure” (ex-poser), and “experience” (ex-periri) is elaborated with unmatched phenomenological precision. We’ll return to these themes in Chapter 3.}

“Community,” or “communication,” names this desire.\footnote{Bataille, IE, G, ON, and E. See also Bataille, The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3: The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty, trans. Robert Hurley, Reprint edition (New York: Zone Books, 1993), abbreviated henceforth as AS2/3.} In other words, the desire for community is itself sovereign; and “sovereignty” names the experience of an intense communication between and across two or more beings who, at least for a moment, cease to serve an impoverished existence constrained by and reduced to the demands of naked self-interest (whether biological, social, economic, political, or otherwise).

Thus, by the end of his career, Bataille’s thinking of these terms not only shifts and deepens — it comes full circle. To be sovereign is to contest all claims to authority that compel and constrain existence to serve ends external to itself; and to exist in community is to affirm the sovereign plurality of beings who stand always in relation to one another. In this way, we move from an authoritarian conception of sovereignty that exerts its claims on community “from above” (as the etymology of the word itself suggests) to a sovereign experience of community that resists these claims “from below.”\footnote{Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist” and “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” VE, 32-44, 144-8, 157-9.}
2.2. Revolutionary Communities and the Confrontation with Fascism

The tension between these concerns is at the core of Bataille’s political activity in the thirties, just prior to and at the onset of the war. While “community” has yet to become a distinct object of theoretical reflection, Bataille’s participation in several revolutionary groups of the far-left avant-garde attests to deep-seated communitarian commitments. These commitments stand in direct opposition to all statist and organicist conceptions of sovereignty, for the simple reason that the latter imply an authoritarian drive to subordinate the political community to a unitary and homogenous totality of which the “sovereign” is the head. To this authoritarian and “monocephalic” conception of sovereignty, Bataille will oppose a subversive conception of sovereignty that is “acephalic” or headless, and which has its ontological basis in the plurality of human existence as such.

The struggle against fascism characterizes each of the groups with which Bataille was involved during this period. Concerning his involvement with such groups as the Democratic Communist Circle and Counterattack, this struggle takes the form of an expressly (but by no means orthodox) Marxist and revolutionary politics. With the


27 Ibid.
founding of the College of Sociology and Acéphale (both the secret society and the companion journal by the same name), this struggle extends beyond the sphere of politics and culminates in a Nietzschean antifascism that is self-described as “ferociously religious” (SC, 124). As we’ll see, these latter groups signal Bataille’s frustration with and eventual withdrawal from the strategic and ultimately ineffectual aims of radical politics.28

2.2.1. The Problem of the State and the Revolutionary Passion

Despite their eclecticism, the theoretical writings from this early period of political and religious experimentation in alternative forms of community all converge on the following insight: fascism is not a political or historical aberration, but is rather an organic consequence of profound affective tendencies already at work in liberal societies.29 The revolutionary aspirations of the left condemn themselves to political irrelevance and ineptitude to the degree that they fail to appreciate fascism’s ability to harness and mobilize these tendencies for coordinated action.30 One of Bataille’s principal theoretical and political concerns during this period is thus to understand and


29 Bataille, “Propositions,” VE, 197-201. See also Bataille and Roger Callois, TRR, 32-41 and CS, 9-11, 73-84, 189-98, 302-3, 327-8, 333-41, 397.

30 Bataille, “Popular Front in the Street,” VE, 162: “As much as they can, certain professional revolutionary activists would like to eliminate, from the human tragedy that the Revolution necessarily is, all its emotional resources, the brutal convulsion of the masses….”; and VE, 166: “What interests us above all—the analysis of the economic bases of society having been accomplished, its results having proven, moreover, to be limited—are the emotions that give the human masses the surges of power that tear them away from the domination of those who only know how to lead them on to poverty and to the slaughterhouse.” See also Bataille, TRR, 32-41.
delineate the conditions under which the organic and affective tendencies of society lend themselves to authoritarian and fascist appropriation.

From the start, Bataille is keen to show that the problem of fascism is indissoluble from the problem of the State. That is, the sovereign nation-state is the context, if not the necessary condition, within which something like fascism comes into being. Bataille insists that both the modern State and the fascist appropriation of its sovereignty are an affront to revolutionary consciousness. This consciousness is, above all, alive to the struggle and demand for human freedom; whereas the imperative logic of State sovereignty is essentially one of “constraint.” While this constraint assumes a conspicuously totalitarian logic in fascism and dictatorial socialism, Bataille suggests that this is symptomatic of authoritarian tendencies inherent to statism in whatever form:

… every living force today takes the form of the totalitarian State. Revolutionary consciousness, which awakens to this world of constraint, is thus led to consider itself historically as meaningless [non-sens].\(^\text{31}\) It has become, to use the old formulas of Hegel, torn consciousness [conscience déchirée] and unhappy consciousness [conscience malheureuse]…. This consciousness… is by its very nature… consciousness of an unacceptable existence…. Even more so, it is necessarily bound up with the tragic character of present circumstances: it is thus brought back to the realization and the anguish of a desperate situation as its own necessity.\(^\text{32}\) (OC 1, 332-3)

Bataille leaves it to the apologists of the liberal status quo to lament this turn of events as a tragic assault on democratic institutions (OC 1, 332). Confronted with the totalitarian logic of the sovereign State, which comes to a head in fascism, revolutionary consciousness awakens to an anguish commensurate with the violent death and

\(^{31}\) Given the context, non-sens could just as easily be translated as “directionless” or “disoriented.”

\(^{32}\) *Le problème de l’État*, OC 1, 332-6, my translation.
dissolution fascism pursues, and thereby achieves a kind of political sobriety (OC 1, 333). Through this anguish, the revolutionary passion is brought back to its affective source — i.e., “consciousness of an unacceptable existence,” visceral alertness to the life and death stakes of emancipatory combat (OC 1, 332-3).

The question that Bataille is attempting to answer can be stated as follows: If both statism and fascism are an affront to revolutionary consciousness, then how, exactly, does the obsession with authority that they mobilize usurp the struggle for freedom? This question brings us to the heart of Bataille’s obsession with the question of sovereignty. This obsession, in turn, is at the core of what we could describe as Bataille’s political ontology, which speaks to the broader philosophical ambition to reclaim sovereignty for the radical demand for freedom that Bataille insists the human being is. Thus, if the analytical or critical question pertains to the statist and fascist appropriation of the revolutionary passion, the practical or political question pertains to the concern to wrest the concept of sovereignty from all imperative and authoritarian “claims from above” (VE, 32-6, 39, 42-3, 153-9). In other words, Bataille’s critique of the sovereignty of the State, whether liberal or fascist or otherwise, fundamentally contests any conception of sovereignty linked to political projects that constrain existence according to a unitary and totalizing logic of enclosure.

Bataille’s critical and philosophical motivations during this period thus already suggest that sovereignty is a profoundly ambiguous concept. The answer to Bataille’s question proceeds directly from the attempt to describe this ambiguity. The revolutionary passion lends itself to authoritarian and fascist appropriation because “sovereignty”
names two countervailing human impulses. On the one hand, and especially in its statist and fascist iterations, sovereignty is expressive of an impulse to domination and the imposition of social order from “above” (VE, 144-8). Yet, on the other hand, sovereignty also speaks to an impulse to subversion and the overthrowing of an oppressive or outmoded social order from “below” (VE, 32-3, 39, 43, 153, 157-9). In this sense, Bataille’s question is the same question at the core of any genuinely critical theory of society: Why do human beings desire their own subjugation? And why does the failure of revolutions appear as so many abdications?

2.2.2. Productive Society and Non-Productive Expenditure

Bataille’s attempt at an answer comes to us most clearly in two texts from 1933 and 1934, published in three successive issues of La Critique sociale, the journal associated with the Democratic Communist Circle. In “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille submits the political and spiritual malaise of liberal society to a damning economic and philosophical critique of its utilitarian foundations (VE, 116-29). In “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” Bataille follows this critique with a methodical analysis of fascism as a mendacious yet compelling political, military, and quasi-religious answer to this malaise (VE, 137-60).

The argument in “The Notion of Expenditure” introduces us to a recurring theme at the moral core of Bataille’s thinking: the unbearably unfree and servile character of life subordinated to the demands of useful, productive activity. Life reduced to utility, existence consigned to the satisfaction of material needs and the production and acquisition of “goods” conducive to this end — here is the organizing principle of liberal
society, and Bataille never tires of condemning it as the source of this society’s moral and spiritual rot. Be that as it may, the utilitarian imperatives governing liberal society are merely symptomatic of the deep complicity between the presumed merit of utility and the question of society as such. “Every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word *useful* — in other words, every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised,” Bataille argues, “it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily warped and that the fundamental question is eluded” (VE, 116). By assigning it a “fundamental value,” liberal society conceives of utility as an incontestable fact of social life, and thereby assumes the very thin explanation and justification. But as clichéd and moralizing appeals to principles situated “beyond utility” readily attest (e.g., honor, duty, God, family, country, and so on), this justification is always left wanting (VE, 116).

The dogmatic utilitarianism which comes to a head in liberal society, Bataille goes on to argue, leads to a “flat and untenable conception of existence” (VE, 117). From this “miserable conception” follows a judgment according to which “all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (VE, 117). But even if we were to grant production and conservation as imperative to the continued existence of social life, it does not follow that they exhaust the imperatives of life itself. Quite the contrary. Life, as Bataille conceives it, is the exuberant tumult at the heart of existence, the prodigality with which being *exceeds itself in losing itself* (AS1, 9-14, 19-41; EW, 74-9). In the end, “life” is indistinguishable from a series of *unproductive* expenditures; production and conservation are merely the middle
terms of an ephemeral convulsion destined for exhaustion and death — the costliest expense of all (AS1, 21-4, 32-5; AS2/3, 79-86, 103-19; EW, 202-9). The “principle of utility,” ascribed to a living reality that disproves it at every turn, is the ideological means by which liberal society combats, or rather denies the violence inherent to life’s unproductive excess. Thus, from this principle we arrive at a conception of existence that, insofar as it conceives of life as a mere means to a social order devoid of real ends, is as laughably unjustifiable as it is flat and untenable: “The most appreciable share of life is given as the condition — sometimes even as the regrettable condition — of productive social activity” (VE, 117).

To the principle of utility, Bataille will contrast a “principle of loss,” according to which the irreducibility of human activity “to processes of production and conservation” becomes manifest (VE, 118). Economic calculations based on the principle of utility fail to account for privileged moments of consumption in which the surplus accretions of a society’s productive energies are spent without profit. To be sure, the liberal economist also accounts for costs lost to consumption; but only insofar as they have already reduced “consumption” to “the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the individuals’ productive activity” (VE, 118). Reduced in this way, consumption is merely given as “the fundamental condition of productive activity” — that is, as a means and not an end (VE, 118). Thus, Bataille is concerned to distinguish this reduced mode of consumption from “unproductive expenditures,” or “unconditional” modes of consumption that “have no end beyond themselves” (VE, 118). Bataille cites the social value ascribed to “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary
monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity,” and, above all, the practice of sacrifice and the ritual production of sacred things, as clear evidence of the social function of these distinctively unproductive forms of expenditure (VE, 118-20). In each of these forms, “the accent is placed,” not on the conservation, but rather on “a loss that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning” (VE, 118). In these privileged moments of loss, the life of the community is charged with an affective value that frees it from an otherwise total subordination to the reign of useful things.

Thus, we see that Bataille’s true aim is to link the explosive movements of a natural order that endlessly squanders itself with those animating the nonproductive needs of human society. The lack of a utilitarian justification for a social order devoted entirely to utility is not merely a consequence of living nature, but of the nature of social life as well. In other words, Bataille’s aim is to prove the lie to the claims of a society that, by virtue of its productive efficiency, regards itself as the inevitable apogee of civilization. On this point, Bataille’s critique is perfectly Nietzschean: what claims to be a triumphant advance to the summit is in fact the surest sign of decline.33 Liberal society, in which the accumulation of wealth comes to a head, is, ironically, and for this very reason, the most impoverished, the society most lacking a reason for being — or, whose raison d’être is the “hatred of expenditure” (VE, 124, 146-7). Compared to the splendor of societies gone by, it is an aberration, and a shameful one at that.

33 See also Bataille, “Nietzschean Chronicle,” VE, 202-12; ON, 29-57; and Giulia Agostini, “Nietzsche,” in Georges Bataille: Key Concepts, 61-72.
The shamefulness of this decline inheres in what Bataille describes as the “functional expenditure of the wealthy classes,” or the “fundamental obligation of wealth” (VE, 123). Bataille argues that “ostentatious loss” is “universally linked to wealth, as its ultimate function” (VE, 123). Again, appealing to the example of pre-industrial society, Bataille notes that social rank has historically been “linked to the possession of a fortune, but only on the condition that the fortune be partially sacrificed in unproductive social expenditures such as festivals, spectacles, and games” (VE, 123). In other words, the social function and obligation attending wealth requires that it be spent lavishly, that it escape a cycle of production and conservation that would otherwise entrust it to unchecked accumulation.

Even so, Bataille is quick to acknowledge that the human need for unproductive expenditure and the accumulation of wealth has always been an agonistic source of social division and exclusion. One passage in particular is worth quoting in full:

As dreadful as it is, human poverty has never had a strong enough hold on societies to cause the concern for conservation — which gives production the appearance of an end — to dominate the concern for unproductive expenditure. In order to maintain this preeminence, since power is exercised by the classes that expend, poverty was excluded from all social activity. And the poor have no other way of reentering the circle of power than through the revolutionary destruction of the classes occupying the circle — in other words, through a bloody and in no way limited social expenditure. (VE, 120-1, my emphasis)

It’s precisely here that the novelty of Bataille’s critique and the radical nature of his revolutionary ethic come to light. Social unrest and the hostility between the impoverished and wealthy classes have their roots in the exclusion of the former by the latter from the means of expenditure. The bourgeoisie’s exclusion of the working classes from the means of production is secondary to a series of social and economic upheavals
through which the functional expenditure and obligation of wealth has all but disappeared (VE, 124-5). This disappearance is the material basis of and moral justification for revolution. Bataille’s uncompromising stance can be summed up as follows: Wealth exists in order to be generously squandered. Through this squandering the productive system serves the human need to transcend the social and economic compulsion to work. To this end, wealth is obliged to serve the unproductive needs of the human community – without whom this wealth would not exist. The refusal of this obligation justifies the impoverished classes in their revolt against the wealthy classes who, in refusing to destroy (i.e., spend, give, lose, share) their wealth without reciprocity, incite the impoverished to hasten their destruction.

What’s perhaps most remarkable about Bataille’s militancy is the fervently religious value he attributes to the revolutionary stirrings of the impoverished. Before Christianity attached itself to the imperial ambitions of Rome and, following the Reformation, the privatization of wealth, religion offered “the provoked poor” (i.e., the socially expended) a compelling means of refusing “all moral participation in a system in which men oppress men” (VE, 126). “[T]hrough the use of symbols even more striking than reality,” Bataille argues, the social need for unproductive expenditure found an “exceptional outlet” in “religious despair,” specifically in Christianity’s mythic identification of “social ignominy and the cadaverous degradation of the torture victim with the divine splendor” (VE, 127). The problem, however, is that the religious revolt against the “expenditure of classes” only attains “a mental agonistic orgy practiced at the expense of the real struggle” (VE, 127, my emphasis). In modern liberal society, shaped
in no small part by the Christian legacy, nothing short of Revolution can satisfy the religious despair of the dehumanized and sacrificed masses; and class struggle can have no other end than “the loss of those who have worked to lose ‘human nature’” (VE, 127-8).

In other words, “Revolution” names the only acceptable form of unproductive expenditure commensurate to a desperately unacceptable situation. What looks like a lucid demand for social and economic justice is in fact the “spasmodic convulsion” of a religious exigency (VE, 127). Why is this exigency religious? Because it responds to the refusal and transcendence of a crushing immanence wherein all things are subordinated to a profane order of productive means devoid of human ends. The only act of insubordination that would answer this exigency is the “creation of unproductive values” irreducible to the balancing of accounts, values “that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for” — in a word, excessive, resplendent values like glory (VE, 128-9). An absurd value, a crude anachronism, no doubt, but one nevertheless capable of making “the people the most rapacious” (VE, 128). Such values have no place in a society where a thing’s value, worth, and meaning depends entirely on its utility, on its capacity to serve always as a means and never as an end. Fascism, as we know, takes this seriously. And it’s for this very reason that Bataille takes fascism seriously.

2.2.3. Homogeneity, Heterogeneity, and the Unmediated Sovereignty of the Fascist State

And, so, we return to the question: why do human beings, specifically, those living in modern liberal democracies, desire their own subjugation? What accounts for
their illiberal fascination with authority? And how, exactly, does fascism take full advantage of this fascination?

Well, thus far, Bataille’s answer is twofold. First of all, the operative logic of the State, liberal democratic or otherwise, is already one of constraint. The revolutionary passion it awakens, assuming it doesn’t stay dormant, is one of anguish before an unacceptable existence. Secondly, and more precisely, life in liberal society is constrained by a utilitarian logic of production, conservation, and accumulation that, in principle, denies human beings an acceptable outlet for unproductive expenditure. The dogmatic utilitarianism of productive society, in other words, denies the human need for excess and transcendence, exuberant release from the compulsion to work. Consequently, liberal society fashions itself according to a “flat,” “untenable,” and “miserable conception” of existence; and life therein is reduced to an impoverished caricature, deprived of splendor and devoid of genuinely human ends.

Taken together, then, Bataille would have us see that the liberal democratic State imposes and maintains an order of things that is hardly free, scarcely alive, and desperately lacking any meaningful justification for its continued existence. Bataille’s analysis of fascism proceeds directly from this critique and the moral and spiritual malaise it brings to light. This malaise, in turn, is the existential basis upon which fascism directs its appeal; and in “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” Bataille sets out to show exactly why and how this appeal succeeds in making itself heard.

Bataille frames his analysis in terms of a broader social psychology consisting of “homogeneous” and “heterogeneous” elements. This conceptual division speaks to a
simple fact of social life: namely, that “society” consists of (1) a more or less uniform array of practices, behaviors, and experiences conforming to the prevailing norms and attitudes of a group; but also, and no less importantly, (2) all of those practices, behaviors, and experiences that either deviate from or transgress the norm, and for this reason, are prohibited, repressed, excluded, or otherwise hidden from view. By definition, the homogeneous aspect of society is the dominant one (VE, 137-8). Bataille argues that it is “linked by essential ties” to the interests of the dominant social group; and it should come as no surprise that he finds its material basis in productive activity (VE, 138). “Homogeneous society,” in other words, “is productive society, namely, useful society” (VE, 138). It thus stands to reason that useless or unproductive elements are excluded from this part of society (VE, 138). All that exceeds the bounds of productive, useful activity, therefore, constitutes the heterogeneous aspects of existence; and the term “heterogeneous” refers to those useless and unproductive elements that are excluded from homogeneous society because they are, by definition, “impossible to assimilate”—impossible, that is, to homogenize (VE, 140).

The social homogeneity peculiar to the liberal democratic State, moreover, is at once complete and precarious. Bataille’s analysis suggests that it is precarious precisely because of its completeness. The productive activity of liberal society presupposes, in principle, total exclusion of all forms of violence capable of bringing the productive system to a halt (VE, 138). The State’s principal function is to safeguard the productive system, on which the homogeneity of liberal society depends, against the potentially violent disruption of heterogeneous elements (VE, 139). And yet Bataille insists that the
social homogeneity guaranteed by the State is nonetheless “at the mercy of violence and even of internal dissent” (VE, 139). The fact remains that social homogeneity, which has its basis in productive activity and serves the interests of the dominant social group, rests on a fundamental contradiction. Production, and thus social homogeneity itself, depends on the unstable inclusion of unassimilable heterogeneous elements — the inclusion, namely, of the working and impoverished classes who, at the same time, are excluded from the material and social benefits of a productive system they are compelled to serve. The total homogeneity of liberal society depends, in other words, on the inclusion of an entire segment of the population that is excluded “not from work but from profit” (VE, 138). The peace, stability, and prosperity of homogeneous society is thus won at the expense of a constitutive sacrifice. Only this is a perverse sacrifice, a consecration neither solemn nor holy, and the “sacred” thing produced is nothing other than the human being condemned to labor and toil — a veritable homo sacer, existing simultaneously at the center and periphery of the profane world they help bring into being.\textsuperscript{34} It’s precisely such heterogeneous, sacred figures as these who make up the “provoked poor,” the socially expendable and expended “human nature” for whom fascist violence will come “to signify a solution to the problem posed by the contradictions of homogeneity” (VE, 156).

These contradictions are made manifest “whenever the State is shown to be at the service of a threatened homogeneity” (VE, 139). The protection of this threatened homogeneity, moreover, rests on the State’s “recourse to imperative elements that are

capable of obliterating the various unruly forces or bringing them under the control of order” (VE, 139). Simply put: the contradictions inherent to liberal society are impossible to ignore the moment the illiberal and authoritarian (i.e., “imperative”) foundations of State violence make themselves known. The homogeneity of liberal society is precarious, therefore, not only because it is “at the mercy of violence” and “internal dissent,” but also because violence — instrumental insofar as it is adapted to serve productive ends — is the fundamental, though unacknowledged condition of its existence (VE, 139-40).

Contradiction precipitates crisis, Bataille argues, because the authority with which the liberal State administers violence is not self-evident. Its sovereignty, in other words, is unconvincing. If the State’s “recourse to imperative elements” appears arbitrary, this is because the “State is not itself one of these imperative elements” (VE, 139). But sovereignty is one of these elements, and it derives its imperative force of attraction from the heterogeneous quality of the past historical forms with which it is most closely associated — namely, the condensation and concentration of religious authority and military power in a single sovereign agency that is distinctively royal or imperial in nature (VE, 139, 146-52). The modern State is distinct from these past sovereign forms. If its sovereignty is unconvincing this is because it is borrowed; and the State, strictly speaking, is not sovereign. Rather, it is “an intermediary formation between the homogeneous classes [i.e., the socially dominant classes] and the sovereign agencies from which it must borrow its obligatory character” (VE, 139).

So, what then, are these “sovereign agencies”? What is the “principle of sovereignty” from which the liberal democratic State derives its imperative or obligatory
character? Bataille says that it is the “nation” (VE, 139). But the sovereignty attached to
the nation, he argues, is fragmented and compromised insofar as it is compelled to serve
the private interests of “isolated individuals” (VE, 139). National sovereignty is
compromised, in other words, to the extent that it is rendered \textit{subordinate} to the
competing individual self-interests of which social homogeneity is composed. In this
way, the sovereign “agency” or “principle” on which the imperative force of the State’s
authority depends proves to be a mere function of the utilitarian imperatives governing
productive, homogeneous society (VE, 139). It is reduced to a means and thus ceases to
be an \textit{end} — which is to say that it \textit{ceases to be sovereign}.

Thus reduced to social homogeneity, the peremptory and essentially
heterogeneous character of sovereign authority becomes so attenuated and atrophied as to
effectively disappear (VE, 158). And devoid of any sovereignty worthy of the name, the
liberal State finds itself powerless to preempt the dissolution of homogeneous society in
the throes of crisis (VE, 140). No wonder, then, that its legitimacy as well as its
monopoly on violence are so easily contested — or, in the case of fascism, adapted to
serve openly illiberal and antidemocratic motives.

The fact that fascism succeeds in harnessing precisely these motives to the
existing framework of the decomposed liberal State confirms a key insight of what we
might describe as Bataille’s social psychology of political crisis (VE, 154-6). In an
important sense, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” is a focused and sustained
attempt to articulate this insight. But just a few years later, in “Toward Real Revolution”
(1936), Bataille sharpens this insight into a concise theoretical principle. This principle
states that crises in democratic regimes “develop differently and in a radically contrary direction from those within autocracy” (TRR, 35). Whereas in an autocracy, “it is authority which grows intolerable,” in a democracy, “it is the absence of authority” that weighs on the hearts and minds of the disaffected (TRR, 35, my emphasis). We’ll return to this point shortly. But for now, it’s sufficient to note that fascism presents itself as a solution to this vacuum and takes full advantage of the human, all too human need for authority. It does so, Bataille argues, by awakening and reactivating the attractive force and value of past forms of sovereignty: religious, military, and royal (VE, 153-4). This, in turn, has its basis in what Bataille describes as the “fundamental dualism of the heterogeneous world” (VE, 144-5).

As we’ve seen, homogeneous society has a strained relationship with heterogeneity. On the one hand, it condemns the socially expendable and expended classes to a degraded existence that, according to prevailing norms and attitudes, is essentially repulsive (VE, 144). These are the impoverished forms of heterogeneous existence, which are for the most part excluded from homogeneous society. But on the other hand, these impoverished forms are only excluded from the material benefits of social homogeneity; the existence of the latter depends on the forced and unstable inclusion of the former into the productive system.

Homogeneous society finds itself in a similar situation with what Bataille calls imperative forms of heterogeneous existence, of which sovereignty is the supreme value. Contrary to impoverished forms, which are associated with disgust and repulsion, the affective value with which imperative forms such as sovereignty are charged is
essentially one of attraction (VE, 145-8). This force of attraction is what accounts for its authority — which, crucially, is “sovereign” insofar as it is perceived as being an end in itself, situated “above,” “beyond,” or “outside” the ordinary course of homogeneous existence, where utilitarian calculation and the competing claims of individual self-interests play themselves out (VE, 148). The liberal State’s ability to impose and maintain order depends on this heterogeneous and non-utilitarian force of attraction. But in the end, the State defers to the utilitarian imperatives of homogeneous society. It is unable, according to its own internal logic, to provide a justification for the exercise of its sovereign authority.

What proves to be an insoluble problem for the liberal State is, for fascism, a founding principle: the heterogeneous, imperative force of sovereign authority requires no justification; to the extent that its attractive value is intensely felt and unconditionally affirmed, it is beyond reproach. This affirmation finds its objective basis in the fascist State, whose sovereignty is direct and unmediated (VE, 153-6). Unlike the borrowed, fragmented, and compromised sovereignty of the liberal State, the sovereignty of the fascist State is its own end. And contrary to the impersonal and diminished sovereignty of the democratic “nation” (or even the abstract moral sovereignty of the autonomous “individual”), the sovereignty of the fascist State is incarnated in the uniquely charismatic person of the fascist leader (VE, 153-6). It’s precisely in the exalted personality of the leader, who is “manifestly treated by their followers as sacred,” that fascism succeeds in uniting the aspirations of the impoverished (i.e., heterogeneous forms associated with

35 See also Bataille, Essai de définition du fascisme, OC 2, 214-16.
social ignominy, degradation, and inferiority) with imperative forces of attraction (i.e., heterogeneous forms associated with nobility, exaltation, and superiority). In this way, the fascist State offers the disaffected classes a sovereign share in its glorification (VE, 154-5). Rooted in an unconditional affirmation of authority as the supreme end and organizing truth of a “people” rapacious for glory, this unification of impoverished and imperative forms, results in a recomposed social homogeneity characterized by total oppression and the systematic exclusion of the potentially corrupting influence of subversive elements (VE, 148-9, 155-9).

But notice how the recomposed homogeneity of fascist society acknowledges, precisely by what it excludes, the existence of subversive forms of heterogeneous existence (VE, 157-9). The sovereign gaze, attenuated in the liberal State and reactivated in its fascist appropriation, looks upon the irreducible heterogeneity of human existence as something to be ordered, unified, and homogenized. And it’s precisely here that the fascist unification of impoverished and imperative forms reveals what liberal society, marked by a conspicuous and distressing absence of authority, effectively concealed: the need for subversion, the equally human impulse toward contestation and refusal of all imperative claims made on existence as if from above (VE, 157-9).

The political problem, conspicuous in fascist society but less clear in liberal society, thus has to do with double bind in which impoverished existence finds itself held hostage. Alive to the unhappy consciousness of a demoralizing and unacceptable existence, the disaffected are caught between the competing claims of diametrically opposed protests against the lifeless homogeneity maintained by the liberal establishment
Where the fascist protest directs its appeal to the need for authority, the socialist protest directs its appeal to the need for subversion (VE, 158-9).

The clear advantage of the latter, Bataille will insist, is that it has ontological confirmation in the elemental plurality of human existence — the heterogeneous, non-homogenizable excess of being par excellence. This is the potentially revolutionary wellspring of “deep subversion that continues to pursue the emancipation of human lives” (VE, 159). However, where socialism offers the impoverished classes a decisive and morally justified share in the means of production, fascism promises them, through participation in collective outbursts of internal and external violence, an emotionally cathartic share in the means of expenditure. The problem of Revolution thus has to do with the fact that, psychologically speaking, the economic and political rationalism of the socialist project pales in comparison to the attractive force and value with which the fascist appeal to violence is affectively charged. A sobering discovery, to be sure, but one uniquely equipped to answer why, when “given the choice between subversive or imperative solutions, the majority have opted for the imperative” (VE, 159).

These severe conclusions could very well be interpreted as an enlightened apologia for political resignation. But to understand the superior forces of attraction that the enemy has at its disposal is not to resign to their inevitable victory. Quite the contrary. “The fact of fascism,” Bataille argues, “clearly demonstrates what can be expected from a timely recourse to reawakened affective forces” (VE, 159). The stakes are simply too high to let fascism’s claim on these forces go unchallenged. However unlikely, another direction is possible. Faced with the threat of catastrophic war, “an organized
understanding” of these reawakened forces “starkly presents itself as a weapon” (VE, 159). But before it can be weaponized to combat the fascist threat, the political exigency of such an understanding first has to be taken seriously.

2.2.4. Revolution and the Truth of Fascism

Prior to 1937, Bataille’s political militancy is still very much alive. In “Toward Real Revolution,” Bataille applies the lessons of fascism to the historical and psychological conditions attending political revolution. The argument is simple: while the moral idealism and rationalism characteristic of “classical” or “liberal” revolutions proved to be effective instruments against the outright tyranny of past autocratic regimes, this is no longer the case under the political and economic conditions at work in established democracies (TRR, 33). Under these new conditions, the instruments of classical revolution have lost their affective force of attraction: idealism and rationalism are as flat and untenable as the morally bankrupt world they helped inaugurate. In a word, they are incapable of creating the solidarity necessary for real revolution. The fact remains that a profound weakening of affective bonds between human beings is at the root of the moral and spiritual malaise characteristic of liberal society in crisis (TRR, 39).

The cause of universal emancipation, which affirms the subversive value of the exploited in revolt against the exploiters, is doomed to failure so long as it doesn’t seek first to deliver the solitary “individual” from their isolation. This is the hard truth of fascism: human beings want to belong more than they want to be free. Even more intolerable than authority, as in an autocracy, or its absence, as in a democracy, is the conspicuous absence of community to which the isolated individual finds themselves abandoned.
“Community,” therefore, is the common exigency to which both the subversive claims of the emancipatory left as well as the imperative claims of the authoritarian right direct their appeal (TRR, 38-9). Its absence is existentially more pressing than either the liberal project of personal autonomy or the socialist project of universal emancipation. So long as the affective bonds between isolated individuals continue to atrophy, abstract appeals to either “autonomy” or “emancipation” will fall on deaf and disillusioned ears. A reawakening of these bonds is both the psychological and political condition of possibility for “real revolution” (TRR, 39-41; VE, 161-8). Thus, in an important sense, the need to belong which precedes the desire to be free isn’t necessarily evidence of an underlying human need for authority. The fascist appeal to authority succeeds in making itself heard because it promises to deliver the atomized and alienated individual from their isolation. It remains to be seen whether this absence of community leads to submission as a matter of course. There remains the possibility, however slight, that the profound need this absence awakens can be mobilized in the direction of the “deep subversion that continues to pursue the emancipation of human lives” (VE, 159).

Even so, if the revolutionary aspirations of the left are to confront the hard truth of fascism, the question of authority can no more be abdicated to the conservative and reactionary forces of the right than can the question of community (TRR, 35). Subversion alone is inadequate to the task (TRR, 35). The success of both the liberal and Bolshevik revolutions of the past depended largely on the existence of a “crowned head,” whose conspicuous abuse of authority was motivation enough to incite and sustain popular revolt (TRR, 33, 36). In an established democracy, however, the absence of such a
“crowned head” is precisely the problem (TRR, 33-5). Bataille argues that democratic society in crisis suffers from a witch’s brew of parliamentary incompetence, corruption, and impotence (TRR, 35, 41; VE, 161-8). In such an atmosphere of general distrust and powerlessness, the human need for authority emerges as more than a simple readiness to obey. What is actually intolerable about this absence of authority, in other words, is the pervasive sense of powerlessness it engenders (TRR, 33, 35-7; VE, 161-2). This powerlessness, moreover, is inseparable from the inhuman loneliness of the isolated and politically immobilized individual (VE, 164). Here we see that the human need to feel powerful is just as fundamental as the human need to belong. The isolated individual longs to experience not only the affective bonds of community — they also desire a sovereign share in its power and authority (TRR, 38-9, 41). Fascism’s force of attraction is thus twofold: it promises to reawaken the affective bonds constitutive of community, and from this reawakening, offers the reintegrated individual an active role in the reconstitution of its authority (TRR, 36-8).

This collective demand for power is a general feature, Bataille argues, of the “organic movements” characteristic of a new era of mass politics, which differ from the “shapeless uprisings” of past revolutions (TRR, 38-9). These movements proceed “less from a program shaped by strictly defined interests than from a state of intense emotion” (TRR, 38). “This emotion,” Bataille continues, “at once takes on value as a sudden consciousness of superiority” (TRR, 38). The result is an organized “union of the exploited who… behave from the start like masters” (TRR, 38). And while the consequences of these movements have proven to be disastrous for the revolutionary
aspirations of the Left, Bataille insists that those who take up the cause of universal emancipation must “bear in mind the fact that these movements have usually carried their protagonists to power” (TRR, 39). Once again, the task at hand is to “learn how to use for the liberation of the exploited those weapons that were forged for their greater enslavement” (TRR, 38). What is required, in other words, is an organic antifascist movement that would learn the hard truth of fascism in order to more effectively combat it (TRR, 39-40). Bataille suggests that the political conditions in France prior to the war favor both the possibility and effectiveness of such a movement (TRR, 40). The existence of the antiwar movement indicates that the “vital interests” of the French people are “linked to peace” (TRR, 40). And unlike the aggrieved and humiliated consciousness of the German Volk, Bataille notes that the French haven’t suffered from “the imperialism of their neighbors” (TRR, 40). As such, Bataille concludes that there is reason to be hopeful for the emergence of an organic antifascist movement — i.e., a movement “not of national consciousness and moral slavery, but of the universal consciousness committed only to the struggle against war and the hatred of the legacy of past constraints” (TRR, 40).

An organic movement of this sort emerged in 1934 with the rise of the Popular Front; and when it finally came to power in 1936, it seemed for a moment to give real political coherence to the “impoverished majesty” of countless workers bound in solidarity by their common opposition to fascism (VE, 163).36 Here we find a spontaneous antifascist coalition of the communist, centrist, and social democratic left,

and Bataille is cautiously optimistic that it will overcome both “the horror of human
impotence” as well as “the isolation of the absurdly involuted individual” (VE, 161, 164).
But if the Popular Front is to achieve the unity of action needed to combat the fascist
threat, its leaders need to recognize and harness the intense surge of emotion responsible
for the movement’s initial force of attraction (VE, 165-8). In other words, the Popular
Front needs to mobilize the passion of “this ocean of men in revolt” to which it owes its
existence as an organic movement, a movement demanding nothing less than the “total
power of the people” (VE, 162, 168). In terms of praxis, then, the movement needs to
transcend the lifeless deliberations and laborious tedium of party politics and assert itself
as a Popular Front in the street, where the demand for power makes itself heard (VE,
161-6, 168; TRR, 32, 37). Bataille’s fear is that the political maneuvering of “certain
professional revolutionary activists” and the “poisoned atmosphere of professional
congresses and committees” will end up sapping the movement of “all its emotional
resources” (VE, 162-3). Already we begin to see Bataille’s frustration with politics, and
with the dissolution of the Popular Front in 1938, his fears about the political inertia
plaguing the Left are confirmed.37

37 For a comprehensive history of the Popular Front in France, see Julian Jackson, The Popular Front in
France: Defending Democracy, 1934-8, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). One should note,
however, in response to Jackson’s subtitle, that the desirability and viability of “democracy,” given its
essential ties to the crises of political and economic liberalism, was a point of contention among the various
left-wing groups that comprised the Popular Front, as Bataille’s disdain for “bourgeois” or “parliamentary”
politics makes clear (TRR, 32, 35; VE, 166). In fact, Bataille opens his “Popular Front in the Street” with
an indictment of the coalition’s “abandonment of the anticapitalist offensive” in favor of a much more
socially conservative “move to the simple defense of democracy,” and goes on to argue that “in all
likelihood, the democratic regime, which struggles amidst mortal contradictions, cannot be saved” (VE,
164, 168).
2.3. We are FEROCIOUSLY RELIGIOUS\textsuperscript{38}

2.3.1. The Religious Turn Away from Politics

Bataille’s impatience with the disarray and incompetence of the various leftist movements finds its most forceful expression in \textit{Acéphale}, the short-lived journal associated with the secret society by the same name, and the College of Sociology, each of them founded and spearheaded by Bataille.\textsuperscript{39} The journal’s subtitle, “Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie,” and the College’s ambition to found a comprehensive “science of the sacred,” signal a crucial shift beyond the countless disappointments and false starts of “political agitation” (VE, 179; SC, 123).\textsuperscript{40} If Bataille’s political writings set out to understand fascism’s ascendancy over both the liberal democratic status quo and the ineffectual rationalism of the far left, the writings comprising the majority of the four issues of \textit{Acéphale}, as well as the lectures delivered to the College, articulate a militant, antifascist, anticommunist, and “ferociously religious” critique of a world powerless to halt its descent into catastrophic war (VE, 178-81; SC, 123-6).

The desire for “universal community” — i.e., an experience of community beyond the restrictive claims of a Nation, Party, or People — and the recovery of a lost sense of the “sacred” are at the core of this ferocious religiosity (SC, 137). Taken


\textsuperscript{39} See Bataille et al, CS and SC. See also Kendall, \textit{Georges Bataille}, 129-50; and Surya, \textit{Georges Bataille}, 231-53, 261-70.

\textsuperscript{40} See also Bataille’s “Autobiographical Note” in \textit{The Bataille Reader}, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 113-17, abbreviated henceforth as BR.
together, we can see the essentially religious aim as being threefold: (1) contest the total subordination of life to the demands of utility and the compulsion to work, which profane/liberal society elevates to a supreme value; (2) reject socialism’s stifling economic and political rationalism, which denies the emotional force of the revolutionary passion; and (3) reclaim a universal and communal sense of the “sacred” from its fascist appropriation, which ultimately betrays it insofar as it reduces both community and the sacred to mere means in the service of profane ends (e.g., military conquest, territorial expansion, national security, social and racial homogeneity, economic prosperity, etc.). In each case, the religious exigency is to refuse a miserable state of affairs that profanes and deforms human beings into laboring animals condemned to toil, exhaustion, and meaningless death.

Crucially, and put more succinctly, this “religious turn” announces an obsession that will figure prominently in Bataille’s thinking for the rest of his career — namely, an obsession with the possibility of a sovereign experience of community. And it’s precisely here that Bataille’s thinking shifts from an analysis of “sovereignty” and “community” as political phenomena to an understanding of them as general features of being as such. In other words, with these texts and lectures, as well as the communitarian activity of the groups themselves, we begin to see Bataille’s previous theoretical experiments in political ontology cohere into a nascent ontology in the strict sense — i.e., a coherent articulation of existence in its entirety, of which the “political” is but one (and hardly the most essential) mode or expression.
The way in which Bataille reframes the existential and ideological threat brings this combined religious and ontological shift into focus. In a letter from the internal papers of the secret society, Bataille reminds the members of Acéphale of their common enemy — the “tricephalous monster,” an enemy he describes as having “three hostile heads: Christianity, Socialism and Fascism” (SC, 368). And what is the object of this “tricephalous” hostility? — Nothing short of being in its headless, acephalous plurality. Commitment to an intense experience of “being in relation,” fidelity to a sovereignly “avid will to be” experienced in common — this was the singular concern Bataille and his co-conspirators hoped Acéphale would bring to fulfillment (VE, 174, 179, 229-30; SC, 137, 300-1). Hence the imperative to combat each of the three heads, whose monstrous claim on being is not only hostile but total. For despite their profound ideological differences, each of these heads attempts to subsume existence within a single, unifying, and uniform substance or essence. “Christianity, Socialism and Fascism” — each one looks upon being’s acephalous plurality as an ontological defect in need of correction and transubstantiation. The Christian community, the ekklesia of the faithful bound in a common hope of final salvation, finds its perfection in a “communion” of self-abasing souls who transfigure themselves in becoming one with the divine substance. Socialism’s more this-worldly (but no less eschatological) devotion to communism’s inevitable triumph over bourgeois liberalism reduces community to a homogeneous collective of “workers” and “laborers,” whose bonds are contrived and economic rather than organic and affective. And fascism, through a political-theological sleight of hand nearly identical to Christianity, awakens the affective bonds of community only to
submerge them in the nocturnal virulence and national *ressentiment* of an aggrieved
People — which quite literally comes to a head in the communal fusion and servile
identification of the social body with the exalted person of the fascist Leader.

The fact that Christianity is named as the first among these three monstrous heads
sheds further light on the specifically religious character of Bataille’s opposition to all
unitary claims on community. For both Acéphale and the College of Sociology,
influenced in no small part by Durkheim’s conception of “religion” as a set of social
practices structured around a communal experience of the “sacred,”
Christianity is
understood as being inimical to community insofar as it imposes its unitary claim on the
sacred as such (VE, 242-5). Christianity’s claim on the sacred, which reduces it to an
object of abstract theological knowledge rather than intense communal feeling, gradually
empties it of its affective force and value — robs it, in other words, of the very thing that
makes it *sacred* (VE, 241-5; F, 10-11). It does so, Bataille argues, by making the sacred
an enduring “*substance* that withstands the test of time” (VE, 241). Christianity thereby
betrays the sacred as a fleeting experience that is by its very nature “ungraspable” and
therefore *insubstantial*: “… the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a
moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled” (VE, 240). The
Christian claim on the sacred thus amounts to a “will to fix such instants” in an enduring
soul-substance, whose final fulfillment — not here and now but in a *hereafter* — depends
entirely on its eternal repose in the divine substance (VE, 241). For Bataille, however, the

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University Press, 2008). See also Richman, “The sacred group: A Durkheimian perspective on the Collège
de sociologie,” in *Georges Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, 59-76.
sense of the sacred can’t be fixed in time (or eternity) any more than it can be divorced from a *sovereign experience of community* — i.e., a shared sense and ecstatic experience of existing entirely in the present moment, through which life ceases to serve as a means in the expectation of future ends. This shared “sense of the sacred,” therefore, coincides with a sovereign release from servility in all its forms; and Christianity’s original sin is to have reduced the sacred, by way of its “transubstantiation,” to a servile function within a divine economy of eternal rewards and punishments (F, 11).  

2.3.2. *Nietzsche and the Antifascist Critique of Unitary Politics*

With Acéphale, we thus move from a political-economic demand for universal emancipation to a religious-philosophical desire for a sovereign “transvaluation of values.” Specifically, we move from a Marxian analysis of “use value,” which has its productive basis in the alienated existence of the laboring masses and is itself productive of the “surplus value” that contributes to their further enslavement, to a Nietzscbean rejection of use value as such.  

From this point forward, the only values worthy of affirmation are those that transcend utility altogether — political, economic, religious or otherwise. The desire is to “establish a community for the creation of values, values for the creation of cohesion,” a desire that has its ontological justification in “universal existence,” or being in its sovereign refusal to *serve* as the “head” of any unitary ordering of the world (VE, 180-1; SC, 125-6, 137). And from this desire we can discern a

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42 Bataille submits this economized “sacred” to critique in *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 33-6, 52-7, 84-92, abbreviated henceforth as ToR.

43 See Stoekl’s introduction to VE, xix.
philosophical principle at the core of Bataille’s thinking: a movement of thought commensurate with the sovereign movement of being must itself be sovereign — i.e., free from the *unthinking* tendency to fix and stabilize existence within a homogeneous, knowable, and calculable order of things amenable to predetermined interests. Bataille finds precisely this sovereign movement of thought in Nietzsche, who will increasingly figure in Bataille’s work as the paradigmatic thinker of sovereign existence.

But if Nietzsche is to provide Bataille with a compelling philosophical basis from which to combat all unitary claims on existence, it’s incumbent on him to reclaim Nietzsche’s thought from its fascist appropriation and falsification. Bataille’s argument is simple: “Fascism and Nietzscheanism are mutually exclusive, and are even violently mutually exclusive, as soon as each of them is considered in its totality” (VE, 186). Where socialism is bound by a desiccated “system of rational and administrative measurements,” fascism proceeds from an “irrational enslavement to the past” (VE, 193-4). Bataille insists that Nietzsche rejects both of these positions, and that as a result, “it would have to be impossible to use his teachings in any given orientation” (VE, 184-5).

In Nietzsche, Bataille finds a sovereign movement of thought addressed to “free spirits, incapable of letting themselves be used” — those who, with Nietzsche, desire to create “a free human destiny” (VE, 184, 194). And what else are we to make of a thinker who regarded utilitarianism as a pseudo-philosophy fit for moralizing slaves and calculating

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frogs, and who, by his own admission, saw in antisemitism, racism, and nationalism the bitter fruits of a festering ressentiment? What are we to make of the fact that this same thinker counted himself among the “stateless” and “homeless,” or that his hope in a “children of the future” demanded he refuse loyalty to some imagined “fatherland”? In any event, Bataille is convinced that in Nietzsche we find a movement of thought that is impossible to enslave (VE, 184). It cannot be “used” to further the aims of any political project or ideology — it can only be lived (VE, 184). Whatever “revalued values” happen to follow, it’s imperative that they “not be reduced to use value” (VE, 194).

This “ferociously religious,” Nietzschean turn informs Bataille’s antifascism in at least three important ways. Specifically, Nietzsche gives philosophical nuance and force to (1) Bataille’s religious protest against the prevailing democratic order, which readies society for fascist organization; (2) his affirmation of the sovereignly acephalous-headless-unconstrained character of “universal existence,” or being as such; and (3) his

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47 Perhaps no other passage speaks more forcefully to the incommensurability between Nietzsche’s thinking and fascist nostalgia for the imagined lost greatness of a nationally or racially privileged “people” than § 377 of *The Joyous Science*, “We Homeless Ones,” 274-6: “We children of the future, how could we feel at home these days?… We are not ‘conservatives’ about anything, nor do wish to return to some earlier age… We homeless ones… we are too manifold and mixed in race and descent, and are consequently little tempted to participate in the mendacious racial self-admiration and indecency which parades about nowadays in Germany as a sign of German sensibility, and which for the people of the ‘historical sense’ seems doubly dishonest and obscene.”
desire for “universal community,” or community free from nostalgic enslavement to the past.

First, Nietzsche’s proclamation of the “death of god” provides Bataille with something like a political theology of fascism’s ascendance over democratic society in the final stages of its decomposition. More precisely, Bataille sees in the “death of God” both (1) an interpretive key to understanding the “unitary politics” or “political unitarism” according to which fascism attempts to recompose and organize society, and (2) a compelling philosophical-religious justification for the violent struggle against it.48

For Bataille, as for any discerning reader of Nietzsche, the “death of God” is hardly the slogan of some crude form of atheism. It has little to do with unbelief in the existence of an all-powerful Deity. Rather, it speaks to both the historical decline and philosophical-religious refusal of a certain concept of “God” that is inseparable from a value-judgment leveled against earthly existence, or life as it is lived “here below.” The “death of God,” in other words, signals the arrival of what Nietzsche describes as “the uncanniest of all guests” — nihilism, world-weary denial of life as worthless and meaningless in and of itself, devaluation of this-worldly existence insofar as its value and meaning lacks the final guarantee of an otherworldly “beyond.” In an age that has grown incredulous of the very notion of a supra-sensual “beyond” situated “above” or “behind” the scenes of this world here and now, the God who dies is among the “highest values”

that “devalue themselves,” values that prove to be narcotic and necrotic abstractions unworthy of assent and affirmation.\textsuperscript{49}

As with any great “unitary construction,” the God who dies is the metaphysical reflection of an image of being as something inherently imperfect, disordered, and incomplete, an image of existence desperately in need of correction and completion (VE, 198; SC, 200). But the death of this God abhors a vacuum; and it’s on this point that Bataille’s political theology of fascism comes into view. Just as the unitary and immutable God of the philosophers and theologians represents “the most perfect organization of the universe,”\textsuperscript{50} so does the fascist recomposition of society represent “the most closed form of organization; in other words, the form of human existence closest to the eternal God” (VE, 197). Fascism is quite simply a modern political transmutation of an age-old theological nihilism. From the very start, well before the onset of the “divine decomposition,”\textsuperscript{51} the God who dies is intimately bound up with death — hostile negation of life in its tumultuous and non-assumable excess. Fascism is the perverse resurrection and apotheosis of this hostility: it elevates death to an organizing principle of social existence and affirms it as its highest value. In this way, the


\textsuperscript{50} Bataille is paraphrasing Nietzsche, see \textit{The Will to Power}, § 712, 379-80.

“thanato-political” or “necro-political” ambitions of the fascist project deftly manage to usurp the long-vacated throne of a lifeless and life-denying Sovereign.52

Fascism’s quasi-theological nihilism would never translate into political success if not for the fact that a lingering desire for a “beyond” still persists in enlightened democratic society. More precisely, the fascist appeal to the human desire for an earthly beyond promises to deliver the disaffected individual from their “closed and stifling” existence within the prevailing democratic order (VE, 198-9).53 Fascism thus takes full advantage of the fact that the desire for an existence situated beyond the unhappy headlessness of democratic society readies human beings for collective participation in the God-like, monocephalic organization of a “unitary community” (VE, 198).

This brings us to Bataille’s Nietzschean affirmation of the “acephalic character of existence” (VE, 199). Here the “death of God” names not only the symptom of nihilistic

52 The terms “thanatopolitics” and “necropolitics” are typically used within the broader discourse on “biopolitics,” and all three terms derive largely from Michel Foucault’s notion of “biopower.” See for example Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978, trans. Graham Burchell, (New York: Picador, 2007); and The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979, trans. Graham Burchell, (New York: Picador, 2008). See also Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, trans. Steve Corcoran, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); and Stuart J. Murray, “Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life,” Polygraph: An International Journal of Politics and Culture 18 (2006): 191-215. While there are certainly finer points of distinction to made between these terms, I only refer to them tangentially and use them more or less interchangeably. In the context of the fascist “will to death” (to speak like Nietzsche), one could frame the distinction as follows: As a form of governance or rule, and under the unitary construction of the “people” or “nation,” fascism mobilizes the political body as an instrument of communal violence and death, to which it openly and avidly assigns a fundamental value. In this sense it is thanatopolitical in aim and motivation — it elevates acts of destruction, murder, torture, etc. to political virtues in service of the life of the political community. To the extent that it realizes these aims in its seizure and exercise of power, its consequences or effects are necropolitical — e.g., in the case of Nazi Germany, the transport of entire populations to ghettos, camps, and ultimately, as Hannah Arendt describes it in her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, murder administered methodically and at the scale of the mass “fabrication of corpses.” See The Portable Hannah Arendt, ed. Peter Baehr, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 14.

53 See also Bataille, “The College of Sociology,” SC, 444: “That there is something beyond, I mean a terrestrial beyond that belongs to the man of today, is a truth it is difficult to dispute.”
decline and decay, but also “the principle of the struggle against unitary political systems” (VE, 199, my emphasis), systems that are themselves symptomatic of a *monocephalic* rage against “universal existence,” or being as such (VE, 201). Again, Bataille insists: “To be free means not to be a function” (VE, 199). Fascism, in its open hostility to human freedom, fails to make good on its promise to create a world *beyond* democratic society’s bondage to “servile necessity.” Insofar as “the very principle of the head is the reduction to unity, the *reduction* of the world to God,” — that is, reduction of the world to a mere *means* in the service of this “hostile head” — monocephalic society is servility deified: “The head, conscious authority or God, represents one of the servile functions that gives itself as, and takes itself to be, an end; consequently, it must be the object of the most inveterate aversion” (VE, 199). Bataille frames this *antifascist* aversion in the mythological image of “*acephalic man,*” the headless figure of a “free human destiny,” who “expresses sovereignty committed to destruction and the death of God…” (VE, 199). In this sense, the “death of God” is not an accomplished fact so much as the *movement* of “universal existence” in violent revolt against all forms of unitary nihilism, whether theological or political or otherwise.

The philosophical-religious desire that corresponds to this *movement of being* is the desire for “universal community.” Bataille is convinced that the “search for God, for the absence of movement, for *tranquility,* is the fear that has scuttled all attempts” at achieving it (VE, 201; SC, 325). Another penetrating insight: *fear* is the *affect* at the root of every nihilistic disavowal of universal existence in its acephalic sovereignty, fear of infinite being “endlessly creating and destroying particular finite beings” (VE, 201). And
isn’t fear among the unhappiest of the “passive affects”? Isn’t it perhaps the most “reactive” of the passions, the one most likely to drive incomplete beings trembling deeper into the comforting security and anonymity of the human herd? Isn’t fear the passion least conducive to freedom and joy? Is it any wonder, then, that fear reactivates nostalgia for a lost sense of communal intimacy and thereby enslaves community to “the legacy of past constraints” (TRR, 40)? For it is certainly “easier to restore than to create” (VE, 204), less fearful to use ready-made values from an earlier age than to risk the creation of new values demanding the destruction of an inhuman world devoid of human ends — the creation of sovereign values that are themselves creative of an uncertain freedom won in common or not at all.

Nonetheless, the fascist “solution” to the decomposition of social cohesion touches on something essential about communal existence. Death is indeed among the “lacerating truths” that bind human beings in their finitude. Bataille goes so far as to assert that it is the most profoundly “emotional element that gives an obsessive value to communal life” (VE, 210). Death, in other words, is the common passion and destiny that charges human existence with an explosively religious intensity and urgency (SC, 438-41). However, the shared experience of this truth is ordinarily repressed in a society that subordinates life to the demands of productive activity and is therefore narrowly


concerned with life’s conservation and reproduction. Once again, we see that death is precisely one of the sacred elements excluded from the life of profane society (SC, 440). At every moment, death names a sacred excess that threatens to bring all useful and productive dealings between human beings to an end. The final truth of the matter is that social and economic relations restricted to the domain of vital necessity and useful production remain secondary to the eternal movement of a general economy, wherein the life and existence of each discrete being is tenuously won at the expense of the death and dissolution of another (SC, 437; AS1, 19-41; AS2/3, 79-80; E, 11-25, 55-62, 94-108). Death is thus the “communifying” event par excellence, the “bleeding wound” that endlessly passes from one lacerated being to another without ever coming to a head — that is, without ever delivering incomplete beings to a lasting state of completion in some immortal or otherwise “deathless” substance, whether conceived as a God, Leader, People, or Party (VE, 201; SC, 433, 438-41, 450). In this sense, death is the sacred bond between mortal beings bound by a common tragedy. “Universal community,” Bataille argues, is the shared experience of this tragedy, the mode of “being in relation” that dramatizes death (e.g., in myths, mourning and funerary rites, festivals, sacrifices, etc.) so as to bring it close to life — “LIFE, IN OTHER WORDS, TRAGEDY” (VE, 205). In profane society, marked by the denial of death and the retreat of the sacred, the tragedy falls on the isolated individual who dies alone. Fascism, however, draws death out of the shadows and places it at the center of communal life. The fascist recomposition of society restores death’s sacred value, and its affective force of attraction comes back to fascism’s promise to deliver the individual from their isolation. We thus see that this promise to
restore the affective bonds between human beings is itself rooted in the desire to make death, once more, a shared experience of social cohesion and communal intimacy.

The problem, however, is that fascism robs death of its tragic relationship to life. It valorizes death as a triumphal means of overcoming life in its finitude. Stated more forcefully: the fascist glorification of death amounts to a grotesquely chauvinistic hatred of tragedy as such. Its sacred image of death is bound up with the political-theological delusions of the royal, imperial, and military Sovereigns of the past. It is obsessed with the restoration of a “Caesarian Head,” who looks upon the unruly plurality and tragic mortality of finite beings with contempt (VE, 204, 210). Fascism attempts to efface all traces of this finitude in the infinite, invulnerable substance of a “unitary community” — i.e., in the total organization of a glorified and uniform People rapacious for war.

Turning to a thinker like Hannah Arendt, we could say that Bataille’s desire for “universal community” affirms not only the tragic mortality but also the joyous natality at the heart of human existence.56 The death and disappearance of finite beings generously clears the way for the constant influx of all the newcomers born into the world.57 Their arrival, in turn, is generative of the miraculous and spontaneous

56 On the notion of “natality,” see Arendt, HC, 8-9: “... the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiation, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.”

57 See Bataille, IE, 27: “I can only bear the weight of the future on one condition: that others, always others, live there — and that death washes us, then washes these others without end.”
appearance of the new and the unforeseen.\textsuperscript{58} With the birth of each and every newcomer a radical break from “the legacy of past constraints” emerges as a real possibility. These newcomers are none other than the “children of the future” for whom Bataille, following Nietzsche, holds out hope for the coming of a life-affirming KINDERLAND (VE, 193, 206).\textsuperscript{59} Is this merely the wishful thinking of a childlike utopianism? Not in the least. The hope is not for the coming of an idyllic non-place (\textit{u-topos}) untouched by tragedy and conflict.\textsuperscript{60} Rather, this hope has its ontological basis in the universal “being together” of those who struggle in common to free the new from the oppressive patrimony of every decrepit VATERLAND that refuses to die (VE, 206). A hope, in other words, without the guarantee of a happy ending — but, for this very reason, all the more worthy of unconditional affirmation.

### 2.3.3. The Eve of War and the Twilight of Community

Bataille’s communal efforts would come to an end just two months before the world’s descent into total war. The attempt to take the fight against fascism beyond the failures of “political agitation” finally gives way to religious despair. Acéphale and the College of Sociology disband and dissolve, and with them, so does the hope of “universal community.” Failure and despair, yes — but not without a certain irony. In his isolation,

\textsuperscript{58} Arendt, HC, 246-7: “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope…..”

\textsuperscript{59} See Nietzsche, \textit{The Joyous Science}, § 377.

\textsuperscript{60} See Bataille, “The Threat of War,” SC, 429: “Conflict and life are one and the same thing.”
Bataille’s desire for community intensifies (SC, 443, 446-8). Faced with death, he gives himself over to an unflinching and disciplined practice of joy (SC, 431-7). The break from politics is definitive (SC, 440). The ontological and metaphysical drift of his thinking sharpens (SC, 444-5, 448-50). And obsessed with the possibility of an ecstatic loss of self, even his religious activity cedes to a contemplative mode of being situated “somewhere between mysticism and madness” (SC, 433, 444, 449).

Isolation was nothing new for Bataille. As early as 1929 or 1930, he found himself at odds with the Surrealists, most notably André Breton, with whom he was closely but contentiously associated for a short time (OC 2, 49-109). In an “open letter” addressed to his fellow “comrades” (VE, 91-102; OC 2, 54-69), he states his position clearly and forcefully: “one does not address a chorus in order to convince or rally it, and certainly one does not submit to the judgment of destiny without revolting, when it condemns the declarant to the saddest isolation” (VE, 91). He continues: “This isolation, as far as I am concerned, is moreover in part voluntary, since I would agree to come out of it only on certain hard-to-meet conditions” (VE, 91). The refusal to submit either his thinking or his desire for community to the ideological straitjacket of a faddish aesthetic and literary clique would surely count among the hardest of these “hard-to-meet conditions.” In his final address to the College of Sociology on July 4th, 1939, Bataille comes back to this austere position, but this time with more solemnity and sadness than defiance: “No one is more eager than I am to discover the virtues this association may

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61 See “The College of Sociology,” SC, 443, where Bataille addresses Michel Leiris’ concern that the College was itself in danger of “creating the worst sort of literary clique.”
have, none more fearful than I of the imposture which is the basis of individual isolation; however the love of human destiny is strong enough in me to give only secondary importance to the forms through which it may come forward” (SC, 443).

These efforts in new forms of community, at once “universal” and “elective,” free from the exclusionary and “de facto” claims of creed, nation, race, or fatherland (CS, 73, 81-2) — these may have ended in failure and disappointment, but Bataille’s search for an experience surpassing his own isolation in both truth and intensity had only just begun.

Faced with the absence of this or that particular instance of communal existence, Bataille will ultimately “insist on the idea of negative community: the community of those who have no community” (IE, 281; OC 5, 483). This insistence, which at first blush reads like a clever proto-postmodern play on words, is in fact rigorously Hegelian.62 “Community” isn’t a static Substance fully formed in its essence and perfectly fitted to some final end or purpose. Nor does it belong to a Subject who claims to appropriate it without remainder. It is not a “thing” at all and therefore has nothing to do with having or belonging. Rather, for Bataille, “community” names an experience corresponding to a restless movement of being and thinking, a movement that endlessly negates and thereby

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exceeds every attempt to possess and fix it in place. In this sense, the “idea of negative community” is the negation of the negation — that is, the refusal of anything short of community in either its universal articulation or its sovereign excess.
Chapter Three. Community and Sovereignty Beyond Politics: Bataille’s Turn to Inner Experience

3.1. The war put an end to my “activity”

What are we to make of the fact that the outbreak of war was formative of Bataille’s contemplative and resolutely *apolitical* turn to “inner experience”? Did he simply approach the war as an occasion to meditate on the anguish of a trembling, solitary being destined for the nothingness of a death that, in the end, is as fatefully certain as it is utterly unknowable (IE, 4)? And how, exactly, did this meditative turn away from the world of practical engagements inform his thinking about “community” and “sovereignty”? We’ll return to this question shortly. But before we wager an answer,

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1 We thus continue a line of argument introduced in the previous chapter, namely, that Bataille’s thinking, as it develops just prior to, during, and the war, unfolds as a sovereign refusal of politics — without, however, abandoning the question of community, or even a set of concerns that we could describe as “public.” Compare this to Blanchot, who contends in *La communauté inavouable*, “that the political exigency was never absent from his thought, though it took on different shapes depending on the interior or exterior urgency” (UC, 4). This tendency to cast Bataille as a political thinker to the very end, despite having no solid textual basis in the wartime and postwar writings, is pervasive in the secondary scholarship. Michel Surya, for example, having painstakingly chronicled Bataille’s turn away from politics leading up to the war, returns to the question of a “political” Bataille in the postwar years. See Surya, *Georges Bataille*, where the author reads into Bataille’s turn to “inner experience” in 1945/6 sure of evidence of a renewed sense of political engagement (368-75). While Surya admits this fact alone doesn’t “mean Bataille would continue to be committed in the way he often had been before the war,” he nonetheless mischaracterizes Bataille’s public engagements as “political, in the sense in which he continued to create platforms from which he spoke (among other things about politics) and let others speak, from which ideas could be debated” (368). But speaking publicly *about* politics does not make one a political thinker or reveal underlying political motivations. Rather, during and after the war, when Bataille does speak of politics (which is infrequent), it’s to distinguish if not distance the prevailing concerns of the day from his own. Part Three of *On Nietzsche*, for example, consists of Bataille’s diaries. They chronicle, among other things, his experience of the war — radio broadcasts, news reports, conversations with friends, bombings, and so on. But one could hardly describe the mixture of meditation, mysticism, and poetry that follows as “political.”
we first have to appreciate the full extent of Bataille’s longstanding aversion to war as an instance of “communal violence” unleashed and directed toward an illusory “outside” (ToR, 57-61).

3.1.1. In the infinite horror of war . . .

This might sound strange, even disingenuous, given Bataille’s almost religious fascination with the violence inherent to both life in its tumultuous excess, whose terminal aim is the death and dissolution of living beings, and the irrational convulsions of human societies burning for periodic release from the demands of productive activity in destructive forms of “nonproductive expenditure” — e.g., the bloody spectacle of games, sacrifice, festivals, revolutions, and, of course, war. The affective force of attraction attending violence and death, Bataille had long argued, was the unacknowledged nucleus and gravitational center of social existence (VE, 208-10; CS, 103-24, 322-8; SC, 438-41). Bataille never tired, moreover, of condemning the feigned peace and prosperity of liberal society as a provocation to violence on the part of the impoverished masses condemned to toil, isolation, and meaningless death. His affirmation of violence against the “bourgeois world as it exists” (BR, 115), morally justified in his eyes by the intolerable fact of human degradation, coupled with his resolve to understand the undeniable appeal and success of fascism’s ability to harness this violence as an effective means of social cohesion — these were just some of the reasons that led Bataille’s fiercest critics to malign him as a reckless and irresponsible “sur-fasciste” (VE, xviii).
Aside from the fact that this charge of “sur-fascism” is immediately disproved by the philosophical nuance and religious militancy of Bataille’s antifascist writings and activism in the thirties (Chapter 2), his own admissions at various points in his career confirm the extreme distance separating his (largely sociological, philosophical, literary, and even theological) attraction to violence as an enduring aspect of the human condition from fascism’s virulently nationalist and militarist fascination with modern, mechanized warfare. In an “Autobiographical Note,” Bataille expressly states that, “at least since Counterattack” (that is, since the mid-thirties), he is convinced that this “fascination” with collective outbursts of violence “can lead to the worst” (BR, 115).3 His misgivings about the modern fascination with war are far less ambiguous. Consider the following comment dating back to his tenure with the College of Sociology in the late thirties:

When I say that I have not liked war, I mean above all that I have never been sensitive to that sort of release, the pursuit of which war constitutes. The exhilaration and bursting pride it offers conquering regiments would have been denied me, even if the occasion presented itself, I think. For me, anything resembling these feelings (or having an affinity with them) is stifled the moment I am called on in person. I have discussed these things in order to understand them from the outside. (CS, 139)

We find yet another example in his review of Roger Callois’ *Man and the Sacred*, where Bataille offers several forceful observations on the intimate relationship between the

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2 Here, he also addresses the charge of a “supposed pro-fascist tendency on the part of certain of Bataille’s friends, and, to a lesser degree, of Bataille himself” (BR, 115).

3 The note is dated c.1958

“sacred” and ritual forms of communal violence (e.g., sacrifice, festivals, etc.). At one point, he concedes to Callois’ argument that modern warfare constitutes something like a “return of the repressed,” a violent irruption of the sacred into a profane order of things that systematically denies human beings the need for cathartic release from the demands of productive activity (AM, 118-22). “Without the sacred,” Bataille argues, “the totality of the plenitude of being escapes man; he would no longer be anything but incomplete” (AM, 122). He then concludes, without equivocation: “But the sacred, if it takes the form of war, threatens him with complete extinction” (AM, 122).

The interwar writings, however, reveal a tragically isolated man tortured by the “infinite horror of war,” wherein “man has access en masse to the extreme point that terrifies him” (IE, 50). In his isolation, perhaps even delirium, he goes so far to say that “No one takes on the war as madly: I am the only one who can; others don’t love life with as torturous a drunkenness, cannot recognize themselves in the shadows of a bad dream” (G, 10). No wonder, then, that this same lover of life found himself cut off from a world hell-bent on its own destruction, a world in which he increasingly came to experience himself “in the position of a stranger” (G, 3). No wonder, then, that he was so “disgusted by the tastes of those who love fighting” (G, 49).

Yes, Bataille is the first to admit war attracts him — but because it “provokes anguish,” and because anguish is precisely an inner experience through which the human being is laid bare and, suddenly finding themselves “disintoxicated,” comes face to face

with the truth of what they are (G, 49; IE, 4, 19-20). Those who mindlessly and enthusiastically give themselves over to war, the so-called “war professionals,” Bataille argues, “are foreign to such feelings” (G, 49). For them, “[w]ar is an activity responding to their needs” (G, 49). And what is this need? Nothing short of the insane demand “to be everything” (IE, 4, 39), a demand that is traceable to an impotent rage against a universe that proves, at every turn, the human being’s radical incompleteness and insufficiency (VE, 171-7; IE, 85-94). The “warrior” finds in war a means of evading their powerlessness by subordinating “violence to the most complete reduction of mankind to the order of things,” with the result that the “sacred prestige he arrogates to himself” is, in reality, little more than “the false pretense of a world brought down to the weight of utility” (ToR, 59). The warrior’s self-proclaimed “nobility,” therefore, “is like a prostitute’s smile, the truth of which is self-interest” (ToR, 59).

In the end, this rage “at not being everything,” exemplified by the abhorrently pathological “tastes of those who love fighting,” is immediately countered by the violent movements of an immense, cosmic totality that confirms, without exception, that we are not everything (IE, 4). But “to no longer want to be everything” — Bataille insists that this is the extreme point at which one begins “to question everything” (IE, 4, 19, 35), including and especially the death-dealing ambitions of military conquest and nationalist expansion. To renounce “the desire to be everything”: this is the fateful moment one finally faces up to themselves without a “narcotic” (IE, 4, 28), without recourse — crucially and above all else — to the narcotic delusion of attaining lasting fulfillment in the monstrous disaster of total war.
3.1.2... solitude

And, so, we return to our initial question: Why was the war decisive for Bataille’s contemplative and meditative turn to “inner experience,” and how did this experience of war inform his thinking on “community” and “sovereignty”?

On the one hand, it seems unsurprising to the point of banality that the war would force Bataille into an objective state of isolation. That the war would put an end to his “activity” seems rather obvious (IE, 95). Of course his communal efforts, while serious and admirable in their own right, would ultimately dissolve and yield to an existential threat that, in hindsight, makes these efforts appear trivial in comparison. As Hannah Arendt perceptively notes in The Origins of Totalitarianism, “[i]solation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed.”

But on the other hand, what is significant is that Bataille will now speak of this isolation in terms of solitude: “No one can know the extent of the solitude that comes to a man touched by destiny… I am deaf in my solitude, where the chaos exceeds that of war” (G, 52-4). Again, from his “Autobiographical Note”: “It was in complete solitude that he began, in the opening days of the war, to write Le Coupable, in which he describes a mystical experience of a heterodoxical nature in the course of development and, at the same time, some of his reactions to the events then taking place” (BR, 116). In other words, what commands our attention is the novel way in which Bataille will speak of these “events” in terms of an inner experience rather than the cruel objectivity by

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6 Arendt, OT, 474.
which war isolates human beings and thereby makes action impossible — for the simple reason that the capacity to act, as a thinker like Arendt makes clear, depends on the “being together” of a plurality of human actors within a distinctively political or public “space of appearance.” 7 Another crucial observation from Arendt: “solitude,” phenomenologically distinct from either isolation or loneliness, “requires being alone,” and in this aloneness, the “solitary man… ‘can be together with himself’ since men have the capacity of ‘talking with themselves.’” 8 Arendt continues, offering a line of thinking that, as we’ll see, Bataille’s turn to “inner experience” exemplifies in a singular way:

In solitude, in other words, I am “by myself,” together with my self, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness I am actually one, deserted by all others. All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of solitude is that this two-in-one needs the others…. For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it… saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person. 9

If we understand Bataille’s experience of solitude in this precise phenomenological sense, the apparent paradox of his meditations on “friendship” in the forced isolation of war ceases to be a paradox: “My complicit friendship: here is all my character can bring to

7 Arendt, HC, 7-8, 199-207.

8 Arendt, OT, 476, my emphasis.

9 Arendt, OT, 476, my emphasis. See also the following from Bataille: “… I know myself to be the reflection of the multitude and the sum of its anguish…. inner experience is… as such for others! … it loses itself in human communication…. I only do it for others!” (IE, 65-6); “The foundation of one’s thought is the thought of another…” (ToR, 9); and “Every human is connected to other humans, is only the expression of others. Whatever his ambition might be, a writer is never more than an expression of the human past, present, and future” (USN, 236).
“Existence,” or the specifically human mode of being, Bataille argues, is quite simply “not possible wherever men consider themselves in isolation: it begins with conversations, shared laughter, friendship… that is to say, it only takes place when being is passed from one to the other” (F, 13). Once again, this time stated more forcefully: “Confronting the agitation, I offer my solitude to everyone” (G, 53).

Bataille’s restless desire to offer himself to others, by virtue of a thinking forged in the crucible of solitude, thus leads the movement of his thought ever closer to “the object of its search” (IE, 95). Yes, the war may have put an end to his “activity.” But in the ensuing turn to the solitude of inner experience, “It became possible,” finally, “to link oneself to the inexorable, crystalline fragility of things” (IE, 95). It became possible, in other words, for Bataille to give himself and his thinking, wholly without reservation, to the violent movement of being in its frightening totality, to lose his solitary “self” in anguished contemplation of an ontological excess endlessly passed — that is, communicated — from one fragile being to another.

3.2. Inner Experience

3.2.1. Interiority, Plurality, and the “Community of Two”

The essential ties between the forced isolation of war and the solitude of inner experience should make at least one thing clear: namely, that when Bataille speaks of this experience as “inner” or “interior” [l’expérience intérieure] he does so for a reason (IE,

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10 See also Bataille, IE, 47-9.
Contrary to the interpretive liberties taken by some of his better known admirers (e.g., Derrida, Blanchot, and Nancy), the constitutive \textit{interiority} of inner experience is not some clever postmodern, deconstructive cipher for either “exteriority” or the collapse of any meaningful distinction between “inside” and “outside.” As Stuart Kendall emphatically notes in the introduction to his translation of \textit{Le Coupable}, Bataille is a difficult, challenging writer, but he is anything but imprecise (G, xvi). Yes, as we’ll see, inner experience names a kind of \textit{ecstasy} or \textit{ekstasis}, an experience laid bare and directed outward (IE, 5, 19, 57, 63-5; F, 6-7; G, 15, 26-35, 69, 127). But the exteriority of this \textit{outward} is, crucially, not the same as the exteriority belonging to the world of human affairs. The ecstasy achieved by inner experience, as already indicated above, presupposes and even demands \textit{withdrawal} from

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\textsuperscript{11} A few examples: “These statements [on inner experience] have an obscure theoretical appearance and I see no remedy to this other than to say: ‘one must grasp the meaning from within…. It is only from within, lived to the point of a trance, that it appears to unify what discursive thought must separate.” (IE, 15); “... the mind enters into a non-discursive interiority” (IE, 117); and “The ‘searing need to lose oneself’ is the part of reality that is the most interior” (F, 10).

\textsuperscript{12} We find one of the more egregious, if not altogether incoherent, misinterpretations in Nancy’s \textit{La Communauté désœuvrée}: “the ‘inner experience’ of which Bataille speaks is in no way ‘interior’ or ‘subjective,’ but is indissociable from the experience of… an incommeasurable outside” (IC, 18). Yes, this experience is directed outward, but as we’ll see, Bataille’s insistence on the constitutive \textit{interiority} of the “subject” and “subjectivity” makes such a claim wildly untenable. The fact that Nancy follows this claim with a critique of Bataille’s notion of the “subject” only adds to its incoherence. Nancy seems to have uncritically accepted Derrida’s equally tortuous, quasi-Hegelian reading of Bataille. See Derrida, “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve,” in \textit{Writing and Difference}, trans. Alan Baas, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 272: “That which \textit{indicates} itself as interior experience is not an experience, because it is related to no presence, to no plentitude, but only to the ‘impossible’ it ‘undergoes’ in torture. This experience above all is not interior: and if it seems to be such because it is related to nothing else, to no exterior (except in the modes of nonrelation, secrecy, and rupture), it is also completely \underline{exposed} — to torture — naked, open to the exterior, with no interior reserve or feelings, profoundly superficial.” See also Blanchot in \textit{La Communauté inavouable}: “‘The Inner Experience’ says the opposite of what it seems to say” (UC, 16). Blanchot correctly notes that for Bataille, inner experience entails a “movement of contestation” of the subject in its exposure to and “relationship with the other,” but then inscribes this relation in a Levinasian notion of ethical “responsibility” that is very distant from the kind of \textit{ecstasy} at issue for Bataille (UC, 16-17).
the world of practical engagements and political activity (IE, 51-2, 189-98, 201-2; AS2/3, 157-64, 177, 187-91; E, 252-64). It is, in an avowedly paradoxical sense, the opposite, if not the outright refusal, of action and project, which requires a world in which to act: “I come to this position: inner experience is the opposite of action” (IE, 51); “Principle of inner experience: to get out through a project of the realm of project” (IE, 52). The turn to inner experience clears the way for what Bataille will describe as “existence without delay,” escape from the essentially servile temporality of a life devoted to “the realm of project,” which subordinates and defers existence, here and now, to goals always yet to be realized in a future that, strictly speaking, does not exist and may never come to pass (IE, 33, 52, 63-4). It thus coincides with an intensely religious experience that Bataille himself describes (not without hesitation) as mystical (IE, 9, 46, 202, 211; F, 13; G, 10, 39; AS2/3, 208; BR, 116). This religious intensity is precisely what makes it sovereign: it does not derive its authority or its value from anything beyond itself, neither the world nor the future for which the world itself stands as an abiding guarantee (IE, 13-16, 198). And, yes, while this sovereign experience unfolds as a kind of communication between oneself and another, I will ultimately argue that, as Bataille’s thinking develops during the war and after, this “communication” does not extend beyond a “community of two”

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13 Once again, an admission that runs counter to Derrida’s forced misreading of Bataille’s turn to inner experience in Writing and Difference, 272: “That which indicates itself as mysticism, in order to shake the security of discursive knowledge, refers beyond the opposition of the mystic and the rational. Bataille above all is not a new mystic.” Yes, as we’ll see, Bataille hesitates to use the words “mystic,” “mysticism,” and “mystical” — but for the traditional religious and ascetic connotations they evoke, not because of some presumed dialectical, deconstructive, or semiotic deficiency. The fact remains that Bataille uses these words because they are the closest approximation to the sovereign experience he sets out to describe. See for example Bataille’s Method of Meditation, IE, 193: “The least inexact image of a sovereign operation is the ecstasy of the saints.” I return to this notion of the “sovereign operation” in section 3.3.1.
— e.g., the “literary community” between artists, writers, thinkers, and readers (IE, 33-4; ON, 19, 23-4; AS2/3, 365-430), or the “erotic community” between lovers (AS2/3, 119, 157-63, 419; E, 21).

Thus, this chapter poses the question: is the “community of two” a community at all? To which I respond: duality is not yet plurality, and inner experience — sovereign experience — is not yet full exposure to an outside. “Community,” however, as Bataille himself notes here and elsewhere, is the name for this plurality. It already entails relation to a “third,” beyond the ecstatic coming together of “two,” who risk losing their singularity as well as their plurality in the oceanic Oneness of their communion. Community, as distinct from this “communion,” thus names a mode of “being in relation” (IE, 86; VE, 174) wherein each one is exposed to and contested by not only another, but all the others, that is, the world outside the world-less ecstasy of either literary or erotic passion.

With the turn to inner experience, therefore, we touch on an irreducible tension at the heart of Bataille’s thinking about community and sovereignty. On the one hand, this turn deepens Bataille’s affirmation of community, or “being in relation,” as ontologically coextensive with and constitutive of both human and extra-human being(s) in its (their) plurality. On the other, this affirmation condenses into a desire for sovereignty that is

14 We’ll return to this distinction between “community” and “communion” in Chapter 4, when we take up Nancy’s reading of Bataille in The Inoperative Community (IC).

15 This is perhaps Blanchot’s most significant contribution and philosophical advance beyond both Bataille and Nancy — namely, following Levinas, to find in the minimal plurality and alterity of the “third party” the ethical and political imperative to which something like “community” must respond. See also Levinas’s phenomenology of the “third party” in “The Ego and the Totality” (ET). We’ll return to this feature of Blanchot’s thinking in Chapters 4 and 5.
phenomenologically coextensive with and constitutive of an inner experience communicated between oneself and another, hidden from both the exteriority of the world and the plurality of all the others who make their appearance therein. But before I return to this argument, we need first to understand Bataille’s re-articulation of community on its own terms. Which is to say that we need to bring our thinking into community with his.

3.2.2. Experience and Unknowing

So, what does Bataille mean by “inner experience,” exactly? Well, given that Bataille is a difficult but precise thinker, perhaps we do well to begin with the definition he himself provides:

By Inner Experience, I understand what one usually calls mystical experience: states of ravishment, at least of mediated emotion. But I am thinking less of confessional experience, to which one has had to hold oneself hitherto, than of a bare experience, free of ties [my emphasis], even of an origin, to any confession whatever. This is why I don’t like the word mystical (IE, 9).

The influence of mysticism on Bataille’s thinking recurs again and again in his wartime and postwar writings (IE, 9, 46, 202, 211; F, 13; G, 10, 39; AS2/3, 208; BR, 116; E, 23-4, 221-51, 256, 268-9, 273). He’s the first to acknowledge this influence and, at times, even voice his admiration of the great mystics, going so far as to declare his own aspiration of becoming a “saint” (IE, 193). But as the above passage makes clear, to the extent that mysticism adheres to the teachings of a particular religious tradition (no matter how heterodox or heretical it might be), Bataille is intent on distancing “the object of [his] search” from its uneasy proximity to the object of mystical experience: namely the “unknown” or the “unknowable” interpreted — that is, known, understood — as a
“divine substance” or “God” (IE, 10; G, 35, 127; AS2/3, 208). Again, in a clarifying note to the above passage, Bataille stresses this point:

Can one not free from its religious antecedents the possibility of mystical experience, which remains open, no matter how it seems, for the nonbeliever? Free it from the asceticism of dogma and from the atmosphere of religions? Free it in a word from mysticism…? (IE, 211)

For Bataille, then, the possibility of an experience of the unknown, of being(s) in its (their) unknowable excess, “is less a question of contemplation [which is itself already a “beholding” and thus a kind of comprehension] than of laceration” (IE, 46). The “object” of inner experience, in other words, is not the incandescent glory of a “God” who comforts, consoles, and assures salvation to anxious souls longing for lasting peace and rest (IE, 63).

Quite the contrary. The experience Bataille is after is not one of rapture. It is, in his own words, one of “ravishment” and “laceration” — the splitting open of the wound of anguish that the ecstatic “subject” is. His is not a desire for rest and repose in the saving countenance of the divine majesty (IE, 202).16 Rather, the experience he is after is rooted in a restless, breathless desire “to lose oneself and in no way save oneself (IE, 29).” Bataille insists: “What characterizes such an experience” is that it “does not proceed from a revelation, wherein nothing is revealed if not the unknown” — and,

16 He does, however, speak of it as “divine”: “There every possibility is exhausted, the possible slips away, and the impossible reigns. To face the impossible — exorbitant, indubitale — when nothing is possible any longer is in my eyes to have an experience of the divine; it is analogous to torture (IE, 39).” See also the following from Le Coupable: “If I offer my life to life itself, to the life to be lived and the life to be lost (I don’t like to say it: to mystical experience), I open my eyes on a world wherein I have no meaning but wounded, lacerated, sacrificed, where the divinity, in the same way, is only laceration, execution, sacrifice” (G, 39).
crucially, that this lacerating exposure to an unknown and unknowable reality “never provides anything calming” (IE, 4).

To name the unknown, to call it “God,” effectively reducing it to an object of theological discourse, is to disarm it, to fill “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces”\(^\text{17}\) that terrify with a divine whisper that soothes and pacifies.\(^\text{18}\) If something like a mystical “vision” attends this experience, all the honest mystic can say is: “what I have seen escapes understanding,” and staying true to this blinding flash of incomprehension, confess that “God, the absolute, the depths of the world are nothing if they are not categories of understanding” (IE, 10). Bataille takes the consequences of this incomprehension to their extreme limit. Of his own “lacerating” experience of the unknown, he will say, with a decisive, anguished austerity: “I grasp in sinking that the only truth of man, finally glimpsed, is to be a supplication without response” (IE, 20).

\(^{17}\) See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W.F. Trotter, §III, 206. Of course, this “eternal silence,” along with the cosmic instability and improbability of existence (§III, 212, 237), as well as the incomprehensibility of the divine (§III, 230, 233), was in the end too much for Pascal, compelling him to make his famous wager: “Let us then examine this point, and say, ‘God is, or He is not.’ But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions…. Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional” (§III, 233).

\(^{18}\) Going even further than Pascal, Bataille offers his own, decidedly *atheological* “pensées” on the paradox of even naming the *experience* of the faltering of words before the unknown “silence,” let alone “God.” For example: “This is the work of discourse within us. And this extreme difficulty is expressed in this way: the *word silence is still a sound*, to speak is in itself to imagine knowing, and to no longer know, it would be necessary to no longer speak…. Discourse, if it wants, can blow up a storm, whatever effort I make, the wind cannot chill by the fireside. The difference between inner experience and philosophy resides principally in that, in experience, the statement is nothing, if not a means and even, as much as a means, an obstacle; what counts is not the statement of the wind, it’s the wind.” (IE, 20); and again, stated more succinctly, this time stressing the paradox: “Silence is a word that is not a word and breath an object that is not an object” (IE, 233).
Thus, by “inner experience,” Bataille is describing an ecstatic movement of both thought and emotion that delivers its “subject” to an “object” wholly beyond the limits not only of theological discourse, but of discourse as such (IE, 15-6, 20-3, 39, 42, 52, 55, 60, 63, 84, 100, 117). This is why Bataille will say that the “essential” movement at stake in inner experience is the subject’s advance to “the extremity of the possible” (IE, 28, 34-5, 42-3, 48, 55, 182, 184-5; ON, 23). For it is precisely discursive reasoning, knowledge mediated by words, that determines (rigorously, scientifically) what is humanly possible to say, think, and know. All that exceeds this discursive determination, therefore, is not only unknowable but impossible. As such, Bataille’s desire for the unknown is also, and more radically, a desire for the impossible (IE, 39, 56, 184; G, 127).

Inner experience, desire for the unknowable and the impossible, then, is essentially an experience of contestation (IE, 19, 85, 175-85, 195-6). It strains for the “extremity of the possible” and thereby contests, questions, and tests its limits:

“Experience is questioning (testing), in fever and anguish, what man knows of the facts of being” (IE, 9). The etymology of the word itself suggests as much: ex-periri, “to test out” or “to put to the test.” And that which is “contested,” “questioned,” and “put to the test” is ultimately the subject itself. Beyond the limits of all possible knowledge, inner experience encroaches on the limits of the knowing subject in its ipseity or “selfhood,” constrained as it is by the “possibility” that discourse imposes and maintains (ON, 23, 33). These limits correspond, unsurprisingly, to an understanding of the “self” as an isolated and solitary monad, who stands against a world of passive and knowable
“things” amenable to its reifying grasp. But as for this self — what it claims to know and what it claims to be — the mere existence of all that is other can’t help but call it radically into question. This questioning, moreover, doesn’t merely contest the subject in the interrogative, but also and especially in the imperative. “To face the impossible” is to find oneself summoned by all that is other than one’s “self” (ON, 23, 33). “Experience at the extremity of the possible,” therefore, is the ecstatic ordeal of unknowing wherein the subject finds itself called outside of its pretense to complete (or, at least, completable) knowledge and self-sufficiency (IE, 28). Or, with Bataille, we could say that “the passion of the self,” to the extent that it is not altogether illusory, is such that it “is only liberated outside of itself” (IE, 77). The instant this passion is “unleashed” from the bonds of the self, “the necessity of getting out of oneself” suddenly “becomes urgent” (IE, 119).

Where the mystic finds their liberation in the otherness of a God who saves those who are lost but eager to be found, “experience,” as Bataille describes it, exposes the subject to the otherness of an unknowable reality in which they “will never cease to be lost” (IE, 97). From the start, the “liberation” (that is, sovereignty, freedom from all that serves) at stake in inner experience is precisely liberation from the “self” and its need, not only to be found, but also and more fundamentally, to be bound: bound to knowledge of

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19 In a clarifying note, Bataille distinguishes between scientific “objectivity,” which grasps what is “other” in order to draw it into the grasp of consciousness, to “experience,” which is drawn out of the discursive confines of “self”: “Science apprehends objects in order to distinguish them, one from another, and in order to grasp the constant relationships between them. ‘Experience’ flees from knowledge of this order: it distinguishes itself most clearly from discursive thought....” (IE, 219).

20 See Bataille’s lecture, Le mal dans le platonisme et dans le sadisme, where he talks about “the unleashing of the passions” [le déchaînement des passions] from the discursive chains of reason and morality (OC, 365-80).
itself as a “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*), to the enduring substance of the world of
knowable things (*res extensa*), and to its ontological confirmation and completion in the
infinite substance (*res infinita*) of an all-knowing God.\(^{21}\)

However, all that is other than oneself — prior to its reduction to an object of
possible knowledge — confronts the *incompletable* desire for the unknown and the
impossible as a *way out*, as an *escape* from “the egoism inherent in despair" (IE, 43).

Consider the following, where Bataille recalls a conversation with Maurice Blanchot:

Blanchot asked me: why not pursue my inner experience as if I were the last
man?… However, I know myself to be the reflection of the multitude and the sum
of its anguish. In another sense, if I were the last man, the anguish would be the
most insane imaginable! I could in no way escape, I would remain before infinite
annihilation, thrown back into myself, or again: empty, indifferent. But inner
experience is… for others!… it loses itself in human communication, insofar as
the subject throws itself outside itself, it ruins itself in an indefinite crowd of
possible existences. But if the crowd were absent, if the possible were dead, if I
were . . . the last? Would I have to renounce leaving myself, remaining enclosed
in this self as in the depths of a tomb?… I can imagine again . . . (I only do it for
others!): it is possible that already alive, I am enshrouded in this tomb — the tomb
of the last one, of this being in distress, unleashing being in himself. (IE, 65-6)

Thus, beyond the ambiguity of the “unknown” and the “impossible,” inner experience,
the ecstatic movement outside of oneself, is inseparable from a *desire for community* and
the *need to communicate* with others. For it’s in these others that the subject —
questioned, contested — experiences *liberation from self*. We’ll return to this point in the
final section of this chapter. But already we see that “inner experience,” taken to its
“extremity,” unleashes the desire for a *sovereign experience of community*. And what is

\(^{21}\) I’m referring, of course, to Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*. See *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II, trans. John Cottingham et al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). We’ll return to Bataille’s reading of Descartes and his novel interpretation of the *cogito* as a moment of
“sovereign experience” shortly in section 3.3.1.
this desire if not the *passion* of “existence without delay,” a passion belonging to none because it is, at every instant, sovereignly “passed from one being to another” (F, 13)?

### 3.2.3. Community, Communication, and Ecstasy

Inner experience, then, is inseparable from the desire for community and the need to communicate with others. This theme runs like a red thread through Bataille’s interwar writings. And these texts, in turn, *communicate* the passion — that is, the *suffering* and *undergoing* — of a man desperately reaching for a way out of his solitude.

Early on, Bataille argues that the “value” and “authority” of experience — as opposed to either the “use value” that reigns in the world of action and project, or the “scientific authority” by which discourse imposes its claim on the knowable and the possible — already “imply the rigor of a method, the existence of a community” (IE, 14). In other words, Bataille argues that what makes experience its own value (beyond utility) and authority (beyond discourse) is the manner in which it proceeds (beyond knowledge) toward the “object of [its] search”: i.e., *communication* with all the others, in which or in whom this search discovers its ontological basis and justification. As such, Bataille will say of experience, its value and its authority, that “One can only seek it in common” (IE, 221). He will also say that it constitutes the “principle” of both the “method” from which it proceeds and the “community” in which it discovers the object of its search. That is, he will insist that experience, in and of itself, is the sole starting point (principle) from which the ecstatic subject sets out to question and test the limits of their individual being (method) as it stands *in relation to* an innumerable plurality of others (community), whose very existence immediately contests and calls this “individual being” into question.
(IE, 17-35). Bataille traces the discovery of this “principle” to his own ecstatic experience with Nietzsche:

I have spoken of community as existing: Nietzsche related his affirmations about it but remained alone. In relation to him, I burn... with a feeling of anxious fidelity.... The desire to communicate was born in me from a feeling of community linking me to Nietzsche, not from an isolated originality.... In experience, existence is no longer limited. A man cannot distinguish himself from others here in any way: in him what is torrential in others is lost. Such a simple commandment: “be that ocean,” linked to the extremity, makes man at once a multitude and a desert. It is an expression that summarizes and makes precise the sense of a community. I know how to respond to Nietzsche’s desire speaking of a community having no object but experience.... (IE, 33-4)

“Community,” therefore, is one name for the “outside” to which experience clears the way. And Bataille’s sense of community with Nietzsche puts us in a better position to see that when he speaks of “communication,” he is attempting to name an experience of community: ecstatic movement between or across two or more beings (IE, 5, 57, 63-5, 85-100, 117-20, 129-31, 134-5, 170, 181, 184; F, 6-8; G, 26-35, 127; ON, 8, 19, 22-5, 34, 39, 135-7).

In fact, the moment Bataille sets out to describe “communication,” it becomes quite clear that communication is ecstasy, and vice versa (G, 26). In either case, Bataille speaks of a movement directed outward (ex-), opposed to the stability and equanimity of a static “substance” (-stasis) peacefully at rest in itself: “ecstasy is thus born of disequilibrium” (IE, 65, my emphasis). It proceeds from “the part of reality that is the most interior but also the most remote living and turbulent part,” an exorbitant reality that

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23 See also The Accursed Share, Volume III, “Sovereignty,” where Bataille traces his desire for “sovereignty” or “sovereign subjectivity” to his sense of community with Nietzsche (AS2/3, 365-430).
“has nothing to do with a presumed substance” (F, 10, my emphasis; see also G, 30). It has to do, in other words, with the “searing need to lose oneself” in a reality surpassing one’s own necessarily limited and incomplete existence (F, 6-7, 10; G, 22-3, 26, 30). In communication, or ecstasy, “oneself” desires to overcome the illusion of being nothing more than an isolated “individual” (IE, 16, 29; F, 13; G, 21-2, 39, 146). It thus names the desire to make contact — to communicate — with an “outside,” to encounter another or several others, and, as a consequence, to pass beyond the “ipseity” of the “self,” who otherwise remains enclosed in its separate selfhood (IE, 56-7, 65-6, 77, 117; F, 6; G, 75, 102). The “other” in which or in whom this “self” loses itself in communication and ecstasy, moreover, can be either “indefinite” or “particular.” That is, the “oneself” who seeks to lose themselves does so in communication with either (1) the otherness of being/existence in its impersonal and unknowable totality, or (2) another singular being/existence or several of these others, who also communicate and thereby lose (give, offer, expend) themselves in turn (IE, 117; G, 127; ON, 33). It’s fitting, therefore, that Bataille describes this movement beyond “oneself” in terms of a constitutive openness, exposure, and vulnerability at the heart of human existence: incompletion (F, 6-7; G, 22, 26), laceration (IE, 46, 63; F, 7; G, 26, 29, 39, 57, 145; ON, 33), wound (F, 6-7; G, 22, 26-7, 39), sacrifice (IE, 5, 56, 117; G, 39, 127; ON, 34); but also passion (IE, 77), eroticism (IE, 5, 117; F, 13; G, 39), love (IE, 64, 77; F, 8, 13; G, 39, 46; ON, 33-4).

As such, communication would be impossible if not for the fact that the subject is already, in its essence, an extreme “point of ecstasy”: “‘Oneself’ is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of subject and
object” (IE, 16). The movement beyond oneself is possible — or, this movement, stated more precisely, is the “extremity of the possible,” passage to the limit of both oneself and being/existence in its unknowable excess — because “communication is a fact that is in no way added on to human existence, but constitutes it” (IE, 31). Isolation, the “egoism inherent in despair,” born in “indifference to communication” (IE, 43-4), thus proves to be a lie, an illusion, a perverse deception (with Bataille, we could go so far as to say it’s the lie, the illusion, the deception that defines our “modern” or “postmodern” age and its obsession with “identity,” despite the inane clamor about “difference” that usually attends this obsession). In the ecstasy of communication — existence beyond the deceit of isolated being(s), and yet withdrawn from the full exteriority of the world, wherein each one is exposed to the plurality of all the others in a mode otherwise than ecstasy²⁴ — the “subject” experiences the truth of what they are (F, 39).

Communication — inner experience, ecstasy — is therefore an ontology (IE, 5). The very “sense” or “meaning” (logos)²⁵ of being(s) (ontos) is to lose itself (themselves), to gratuitously expend itself (themselves) without reserve. As an “ontology” — that is, as a discourse concerning the sense and meaning of being(s) — it unites “two kinds of understanding” (IE, 5). Specifically, it puts in play a double movement of thought that is at once (1) “communal and… emotional” as well as (2) “discursive,” thus lending itself to articulation in speech and language, however strained and incomplete (IE, 5). This last

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²⁴ Once again, here Bataille’s notion of ecstasy is very far from the concerns we find in thinkers like Levinas, Arendt, Blanchot, and Nancy, each of whom stress, to varying degrees, the specifically ethical and political dimensions of both the exteriority of the world and the plurality of all the others.

²⁵ Of course, the most direct translation of logos is simply “speech”: i.e., communication in the mode of “discourse” directed toward another.
point is essential. Bataille does not merely desire “inner experience.” He also desires to 
*communicate* it to *us*, his readers, to render *intelligible* an experience that is, in the end, 
*unknowable*: “this experience, born of nonknowledge…. is not ineffable, one does not 
betray it if one speaks of it, but to questions of knowledge, it steals from the mind the 
answers it already had” (IE, 9).

### 3.2.4. Being in Relation: Bataille’s Pluralist Ontology of the Subject

We thus move from the experience of the subject in ecstatic communication with 
another to an account of what or who this “subject” *is*. We move, in other words, from a 
phenomenology of the subject to its ontological delineation. And it should come as no 
surprise that this ontology is essentially *pluralist*: “man is several, solitude the void, 
uselessness, lies” (IE, 55). This pluralist perspective allows us “to look at the world as the 
fusion of a subject and an object, in which the subject, the object and their fusion would 
not cease to change, such that between the subject and the object several forms of identity 
would exist” (G, 37). When Bataille speaks of the “fusion” of subject and object, 
therefore, he isn’t talking about their *confusion*. That is, the coming together or the mode 
of “being in relation” shared between both subject and object has nothing to do with their 
“sublation” in some higher order Identity superseding their relative identities. Rather, the 
subject *is* such as to always stand *in relation* to something or someone else, even when 
the “object” of this relation “cannot be distinguished *from the subject at its boiling point*” 
(AS1, 10) — for example, the ecstasy of *erotic* excess, whether physical or emotional, in 
which the subject assents “to life even in death” (E, 11, 23-4).
This “communication” — fusion of subject and object, passage from oneself to another — has its ontological basis in what Bataille identifies as a “principle of insufficiency” at the heart of human existence (IE, 85; VE, 172). Starting from this “principle,” he sets out to show that the presumed “sufficiency” of each and every discrete, particular being is “contested endlessly” by its fellow beings, human and extra-human alike (IE, 85; VE, 172). The subject’s claim to being complete in and of itself, Bataille argues, is disproved at every turn by the sheer immensity of being in its impersonal totality and the incalculable multitude of beings that ceaselessly arise and fall therein. Thus confronted with being(s) in its (their) infinitely ungraspable and multitudinous totality, the subject finds their very being or existence called into question. They discover not only their radical insufficiency, but also the profound uncertainty and improbability of their ever having come “to be” at all (IE, 88; VE, 130-6). There is simply no good answer as to why they exist rather than not. Which is to say that there is no “principle of sufficient reason” that could possibly make the chance occurrence of their existence, by way of some mathematical or metaphysical alchemy, the least bit certain and necessary.

But this is a fact of being that makes us tremble. For the most part, Bataille argues, it is too much for us. We evade and deny it anxiously and relentlessly. And one of the surest ways to do so is to find in “God” or some “divine substance” a perfectly necessary and complete Being at the summit and origin of being(s) in its (their) entirety (IE, 85). These trembling, anxious, incomplete beings thus find in this divinely self-sufficient Being the very ground and organizing principle of their existence. In a word,
they find in this Being their *reason* for being. And for a while, at least, they evade — or, rather *forget* — their constitutive insufficiency.

We are, then, in our particular being, irredeemably insufficient, improbable, and incomplete. But we are *particular*, which is to say that the existence of each and every being is itself a singular *part* of a larger whole (IE, 87-8; VE, 174). Singular, yes, but not *simple*: “What one calls a ‘being’ is never simple, and if it has a single enduring unity, it only possesses it imperfectly” (IE, 96). The imperfect singularity of a being is constantly “undermined by its profound inner division, it remains poorly closed and, at certain points, open to attack from the outside” (IE, 96). Thus, to our radical insufficiency, Bataille argues, we need to add a *complexity* that is at once “elemental” and “extreme” (IE, 86; VE, 173).

Each particular being, in its relative “ipseity,” does in fact manage to enclose being in its *ipse* or “self” (IE, 86; VE, 173-5). But this *ipse*, while “indivisible” in the sense that if divided further it would become something else and thereby cease to “be” the thing it is, is itself already a *composite* (IE, 86; VE, 173-5). Bataille cites the elemental complexity of the atom, which “despite its name, is a composite” of subatomic particles: e.g., the electron (IE, 86; VE, 173-4). Physics has since gone farther than Bataille could have imagined, shattering the elemental complexity of these subatomic particles into an ever more elemental array of quantum particles. Consequently, “the number of particles that compose a being intervenes in the constitution of its ‘ipseity’” (IE, 86). And the mind’s reflection on this complexity, “raised degree by degree” — from the infinitesimally elemental to the extreme complexity of living organisms, societies, the
formation of stars, planets, entire galaxies, etc. — inevitably loses itself in “a labyrinth in which it wanders endlessly” (IE, 86, my emphasis).

The relative “ipseity” or “identity” or “autonomy” or “oneness” of a thing, therefore, is already a tenuous and fortuitous coming together of innumerable chance occurrences and circumstances; and this cosmic play of chance is generative of a complexity that is at once too elemental and too extreme “to be determined ipsely” (VE, 173). The movement between the elemental and the extreme, moreover, is bidirectional. It tends simultaneously toward the composition of increasingly complex wholes (what we might describe as aggregation) and the decomposition of these wholes into their constituent parts (disaggregation or dispersion). As for the “subject,” then, this means that they too are “A PARTICLE INSERTED INTO UNSTABLE AND TANGLED ENSEMBLES” (IE, 87). “Plurality,” therefore, names both the eternal movement between the elemental and the extreme as well as the complexity common to parts and wholes alike. If this is indeed the case, then the contrary of being(s) in its (their) doubly complex plurality is not only “unity” so much as simplicity: i.e., a unified whole in which the constituent parts cease to be parts, or the condensation of complex being into a simplex, stable, and self-sufficient One.

But this very “subject,” in its relative and imperfect ipseity, is the only being who demands of being(s) an impossible and illusory simplicity. They are the only being on earth, if not the entire universe, who seeks first to enclose themselves in the walls of their ipseity, and from this self-enclosure, to impose their “ipse” on being(s) in its (their) entirety (IE, 88, 97). They are the only being, in other words, who desires to make their
relative *ipseity* all-encompassing and absolute, to make their “self” commensurate with the universe, and thus to reduce the plurality and complexity of being(s) to the feigned simplicity of their own individual identity (IE, 88, 91-4).

We thus arrive at the ontological source of the subject’s desire “to become everything”: anguished flight from the distressing fact of our insufficiency (IE, 28-9, 57-9, 88, 93-4). Our being in its relative *ipseity*, “itself composed of parts and, as such, as result, unpredictable chance, enters into the universe as will to autonomy” (IE, 88). “Spurred by anguish,” this will to autonomy “seeks to dominate” (IE, 88). It sets out to occupy the “center” of the labyrinth, to raise this center to the “summit,” and from this “sovereign” vantage point, to submit the whole of being(s) to its own law (IE, 88, 92). The will to autonomy, “its ascension toward a summit,” thus establishes the “self” as the *nomos* of the universe (IE, 92). Infinitesimal and incidental, this will “surrenders to the desire…. to be other” than what it is: “everything and necessary” (IE, 88). But in the end, this is little more than error and illusion, rooted in “an exasperated attempt to complete being” (IE, 91). Being and its movement, endlessly driving incomplete beings, like the throw of dice, into “unstable and tangled ensembles” destined for death and decomposition — this movement “eludes itself in us”; and the desperate “will to arrest” it is inescapably, fatefully “cursed” (IE, 87, 93-4).

So, there is no escape from our constitutive insufficiency (IE, 94). But there is, Bataille insists, a way out of “the fragile walls of [our] isolation” — *communication* with an outside, contact with another insufficiency (IE, 94, 97). In other words, “communication” names the *opening* beyond *ipse*, beyond the confines of “self” (IE, 94),
that the human being is: “I am and you are, in the vast flux of things, only a stopping point favorable to a resurgence” (IE, 97).

Bataille notes that language is perhaps the most familiar instance of this resurgent flow of communication between momentary stopping points (IE, 87). In language, our being is “mediated by words, which,” while in a sense arbitrary (i.e., there is no essential tie between a given word and what it signifies), nonetheless “give themselves… profoundly as ‘being in relation to’” (IE, 86). Language, beyond the arbitrary “autonomy” of idiom and dialect, puts being(s) in relation to one another — both with the extra-linguistic reality of the world, translated into words (and thereby transformed into an object of knowledge), and the others with whom we communicate discursive understanding of this reality. “It suffices,” Bataille argues, “to follow for a short time the trace, the repeated course of words, to perceive, in a kind of vision, the labyrinthine construction of being” (IE, 87).

Consequently, and despite his influence on post-structuralism, it’s important to stress that Bataille is in no way a panlinguistic thinker who reduces our experience of being(s) to a “text.” What is essential for him, as should be clear by now, is direct, nondiscursive, unmediated experience of an unknowable reality that escapes the mediation of words, symbols, and even images, however constitutive these might be of our subjectivity (i.e., our sense of “self” and “other,” whether conscious or unconscious).

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26 Compare this to Derrida’s cryptic and controversial phrase, “There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text; il n’y a pas de hors-texte],” which effectively reduces the relationship between writer and reader to an insular system of discourse bereft of the extra-discursive experience Bataille finds in “communication.” See Of Grammatology, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.
In a Lacanian register, we could say that for Bataille, language does not encroach upon either the Real or the “spasmodic convulsions” of the subject’s desire, both of which precede, exceed, and resist translation into the “discursive real” of symbolization and signification.28

Thus, beyond the familiar mode of “being in relation” that language puts in motion, Bataille will speak of the “intense communication” constitutive of the subject’s existence in terms of an extra-linguistic “contagion” transmitted from one perishable being to another:

*What you are* comes from the activity that links the countless elements that compose you to the *intense communication* of these elements among themselves. These are *contagions* of energy, movement, heat, or transfers of elements, which constitute internally the life of your organic being. Life is never situated in one particular point: it passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or a kind of electrical stream. Thus, where you would like to grasp your nontemporal substance, you only encounter a slippage, only the poorly coordinated play of your perishable elements (IE, 96-7, my emphasis).

Yes, “words, books, monuments, symbols,” but also the asignifying excess of an infectious experience like “laughter,” constitute “so many paths of this contagion, of these passages” between beings who, at every “point” of their momentary being, exist in *relation to* countless others:

We can only discover *in others* how to dispose of the light exuberance of things. Hardly have we grasped the vanity of our opposition than we are carried away by the movement; it suffices that we cease to oppose ourselves, we communicate

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27 Bataille, VE, 172.

28 Bataille does not speak of the “Real,” but of the “night” into which the “game” of discourse dissolves and nullifies itself: “If a place in the history of thought were granted to me, I think it would be for having discerned the effects, in our human life, of the ‘disappearance of the discursive real,’ and for having drawn from the description of these effects a fading light: this light is perhaps blinding, but it announces the opacity of the night; it announces only the night” (IE, 205).
with the unlimited world of those who laugh. But we communicate without anguish, full of joy, imagining not giving ourselves over to the movement that will, however, have us at its disposal, some day, with a definite rigor (IE, 99, emphasis in original).

From this it follows, Bataille concludes, that “existence is communication,” and therefore, that “every representation of life, of being, and generally of ‘something’ must be reconsidered in this light” (IE, 100). The attempt to communicate this truth of being(s) in language — discourse, knowledge — is, in the end, “of secondary importance, given the foundation, the ecstatic experience from which” the subject sets out to discover it (IE, 100). Phenomenology and ontology, the twin logoi by which the subject briefly and partially captures “the object of its search” in the diaphanous weaves and lattices of words, thus prove to be imperfect means in the service of the experience itself (IE, 95). Simply put: the experience alone — “being as subject nonknowledge, as object the unknown” — is sovereign (IE, 16, 167-202).

3.3. Sovereignty is NOTHING

3.3.1. The Sovereign Operation

And yet, we inevitably come back to the paradox inherent to Bataille’s desire for a sovereign experience, namely, the attempt “to get out through a project of the realm of project” (IE, 52). We come back, in other words, to the simple fact that Bataille wishes to communicate this experience to others through the imperfect means of language and discourse. Bataille is acutely aware of the impasse: “. . . some words! Exhaust me without respite: I will nonetheless go to the end of the miserable possibility of words… There I want to find that which reintroduces — in a point — the sovereign silence that interrupts
articulate language” (IE, 185). Thus, the question remains: is it possible for discourse to communicate a movement of thought and emotion that would be its own end, and thereby draw us, its community of readers, into an experience of thinking and feeling that is itself sovereign? Or, stated differently: if discourse typically serves ends other than itself (e.g., the production of knowledge, the determination of the limits and goals to which it subordinates its activity, and so on), and if these “ends” themselves, once reached, are immediately transformed into ever more means, then is it possible to free discourse from its servile attachment to a purely operative and instrumental logic of means and ends?

The question, in other words, is how to speak of “sovereignty” — both the sovereignty of being(s) in its (their) unknowable excess and the sovereignty of the thought that thinks this excess — without reducing it to either a mere object of discursive reasoning or a practical goal of useful activity.

In his Method of Meditation,29 we find Bataille’s attempt at an answer in what he describes as the “sovereign operation” (IE, 169, 178, 190-3, 197-8). There, Bataille distinguishes an experience of thinking and feeling put in motion by a “sovereign moment” (e.g., laughter, intoxication, eroticism, poetry) from the “subordinate operation” of ordinary discourse and action (IE, 169, 178, 189-191). By the phrase “subordinate operation,” Bataille is speaking to the fact that thought is usually subordinated to the limits and goals set by discursive reasoning and useful activity. “Servility,” Bataille argues, “ordinarily specifies [thought’s] limits,” such as positive contribution to the

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29 Method of Meditation was originally published in 1947 by Éditions Fontaines, and was reprinted in the 1954 re-edition of Inner Experience by Gallimard.
sciences and their advancement (IE, 178). However, if thought, as it passes from one limit to another, happens to experience itself as touching upon the extremity of what discourse deems “possible,” the situation can arise in which thought suddenly finds itself “at the summit” (IE, 178). From there, Bataille argues, thought “comes to pose... some sovereign operation” capable of opening it to an experience of thinking and being situated beyond utility (IE, 178; AS2/3, 198). The “sovereign operation,” in other words, releases thought from its subordination to the reign of the merely possible (i.e., conceivable, feasible, practical, useful) and raises it to the “height of the impossible” (IE, 184). Thus raised, thought coincides with a moment of “sovereign existence,” in which it experiences itself and the object of its thought as being irreducible and insubordinate to either the “miserable possibility of words” or the calculated expedience of deeds (IE, 184-5).

Aside from the ecstatic “effusions” of sovereign moments like laughter and intoxication, or even the mystical “ecstasy of the saints” (which he cites as the “least inexact image of a sovereign operation”), Bataille also argues that thought, in and of itself, before it is compelled to serve the productive aims of either discourse or work, is already sovereign (IE, 190-4). Only now Bataille doesn’t look to Nietzsche as an exemplar of sovereign thought, as we might expect, but rather to Descartes (IE, 190). Bataille argues that the cogito, as it initially figures in Descartes’ method of radical doubt (which, notably, is itself a “method of meditation”), is clearly “linked, despite everything, to our consciousness of not being subordinated” (IE, 190). For it’s precisely in the cogito, in the simple fact of the “I think,” that thought experiences itself as sovereign — that is,
as radically free to question its limits, to refuse anything whatsoever, to reject as false all that it claims to know, even the presumed “certainty” of its own existence. Before it subordinates itself to the work of the “thing,” before it builds up an edifice of “indubitable” truths about itself (res cogitans), the world (res extensa), and God (res infinita) — truths that are useful insofar as they make all subsequent knowledge possible — the “I think” is at once the operation and the moment in which the thinking subject is sovereignly free to say No!30

The example of the “I think” as a “conscious coincidence of a sovereign moment and an operation of thought” (IE, 192) makes clear, if it wasn’t clear enough already, that when Bataille speaks of “sovereignty” he is not attempting to grasp something or someone for which or for whom “sovereign” would name an essential property or attribute. Far from it. As we’ve already seen, Bataille is determined to free experience from the delusional attempt to fix being(s) in an enduring “substance” that withstands the passage of time. The same goes for sovereignty (IE, 191). As Bataille states in what is perhaps his most cited and least understood refrain, “sovereignty,” insofar as it is the opposite of substance, “is NOTHING” (AS2/3, 256, 430).31 This refrain is as concise and precise as it is intentionally obscure. It means, at the very least, that sovereignty is not


31 For example, in La communauté désœuvrée, Nancy, in almost the same breath, mires this refrain in a convoluted Heideggerian jargon about the finite being’s “abandonment” to the “not” or “nothing” of “Being,” and from this, makes the claim that Bataille’s inner experience “is in no way ‘interior’ or ‘subjective,’ but is indissociable from the experience of this relation to an incommensurable outside” (IC, 18). As we’ve already noted, this “outside” — while certainly “incommensurable” with any notion of a “subject” who would claim to appropriate it without remainder (already a “metaphysics of the subject” that Bataille rejects) — this outside does not deliver the subject of inner experience to living contact with the full exteriority of the world.
and could never be grasped as a “thing” because it is a lived experience of contestation and refusal (IE, 195-6; AS2/3, 392; EW, 188-201; USN, 185). “Sovereignty is NOTHING,” in other words, because it is the contestation and refusal, specifically, of being’s reduction to thinghood. To live sovereignly, therefore, is to live in open revolt against the entire useful “order of things,” wherein beings (human and extra-human alike) are compelled to serve as means devoid of real ends (IE, 184, 196; ToR, 93-4, 101; AS2/3, 16, 24, 112, 214, 218, 223, 239, 256, 367-8, 421; BR, 116-17).

To say that sovereign existence is the contestation of the established “order of things” inevitably leads to the question of power (IE, 196). And if we had any lingering doubts about Bataille’s resolutely apolitical stance, he specifies the object of this sovereign experience of refusal as the political attempt to equate sovereignty with the exercise of power:

The major positions of political sovereignties… were, no less than the minor ones, inserted into the sphere of activity. The classical idea of sovereignty is linked to that of commandment. The sovereignty of the gods, of God, of monarchs, submits itself to all activity…. For engaging the order of things became its meaning…. In these conditions, the sovereignty that would like to remain sovereign quickly abandons power to those who want to maintain it… (IE, 196).

This distinction between “authentic” sovereignty (revolt, refusal) and “classical” or “political” sovereignty (power, command) is just one example of what Bataille will describe elsewhere as the “sovereignty of servitude” (ToR, 77, 93-4) and the world of “denied” or “fallen” sovereignty (AS2/3, 228, 256, 291-308). Sovereignty ceases to be sovereign, Bataille argues, the moment one attempts to establish it, to render it stable within the world of useful and productive activity (EW, 188-201). The irony: what begins
as a sovereign attitude of refusal and release from the servile reign of “things” inevitably devolves into compulsory dominion over them. It devolves, in other words, from the freedom of refusal into the exercise of power. From that moment forward, reduced to little more than naked self-interest and the necessity of self-preservation, whatever or whoever claims to be “sovereign” chains itself to a world that it needs to dominate. Its “sovereignty” becomes necessary and useful. This “sovereign” claim on being(s), therefore, substitutes power for freedom, miserly conservation and accumulation for joyous prodigality and expenditure, and as a result, nullifies itself (IE, 191).

3.3.2. General Subjectivity

Once again, we move from an experience — sovereign refusal and release from the merely possible, knowable, and useful — to the attempt to say what sovereignty is, to communicate in discourse and knowledge what it means to be authentically sovereign. To this end, as the above distinction between “authentic” and “political” sovereignty demonstrates, Bataille’s primary concern after the war is to reclaim the concept of sovereignty from its past and present historical-political manifestations. In Sovereignty, the third volume of The Accursed Share, Bataille sets out to articulate a theory of sovereignty as a general feature of both being(s) in its (their) entirety, described here and elsewhere in terms of an “unrestricted” or “general economy,” and the human subject,

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32 See Bataille, AS2/3, 226: “Nothing sovereign must ever submit to the useful.”

33 Originally published in OC 8 as La Souveraineté.

34 All three volumes of The Accursed Share are the culmination of Bataille’s ambitious work on “general economy,” which differs from the “restricted” sphere of political economy insofar as it is concerned less...
described in terms of a “deep” or “general subjectivity” (AS2/3, 112, 237, 419). This theoretical shift continues the apolitical turn announced in the texts written during the war. Bataille stresses this point in the opening lines: “The sovereignty I speak of has little to do with the sovereignty of States, as international law defines it. I speak in general of an aspect that is opposed to the servile and the subordinate” (AS2/3, 197). In the postwar texts, we thus move from the mystic’s retreat into the ecstasy of inner experience to the theoretician’s speculative attempt to distance his thinking from the world in order to better understand what that world’s ceaseless activity ordinarily obscures.35

History affords Bataille one such means of theoretical detachment. Yes, “sovereignty” as it stands today, is little more than a necessary and useful institution at the disposal of those in power. It is an instrument, Bataille argues, of “servile man,” whose monopoly on power is generally uncontested, despite the fact that this power coincides with a “failure of humanity” that can only be described as “monstrous” (AS2/3, 14-15). One can clamor on and on about sovereignty’s abstract basis in some fetishized “state of exception,” but in the end, the political and juridical “sovereignty of States, as

with the movement of capital within and across global markets than the unrestricted movement of matter and energy that animates both the universe in its cosmic totality and the earth in its terrestrial singularity. See the Preface and Theoretical Introduction to the first volume of The Accursed Share (AS1, 9-41) for Bataille’s extended definition of “general economy” as both a method and object of inquiry.

35 In a brief note on method, Bataille mentions his debt to several disciplines: the history of religions, sociology, political economy, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. Of the latter, he says that he is both familiar with its “demands” and that he contributes a “new element” (AS2/3, 201). As his analysis of sovereignty unfolds, Bataille makes good on his word. The phenomenological “demand”: he recovers what we could describe as sovereignty’s “intentional structure,” or its primary, pre-theoretical orientation to itself and the world. And the “new element”: he identifies this “intentionality” with the structure of subjectivity as such.
international law defines it” (AS2/3, 197), is hardly exceptional.\(^{36}\) It is the norm and the rule: the *nomos* it “decides” is coextensive with the law already at work in “a world brought down to the weight of utility” (ToR, 59).\(^{37}\) Sovereignty, as it exists today, in other words, is “sovereign” in name only. As such, it offers the theoretician absolutely no clues in their search for what is authentically sovereign.

But “archaic” forms of past sovereignty, Bataille argues, while doomed to failure for the reasons cited above (i.e., in their attempt to make sovereignty an enduring “thing” that withstands the passage of time), were nonetheless enshrined in extravagant religious, military, royal, and imperial institutions (AS1, 23, 25, 45-61, 63-77; AS2/3, 226-35, 241-50). In stark contrast to the impoverished utilitarianism of their modern counterparts, these archaic institutions *objectively* manifested the human need to affirm and glorify a reality situated *beyond* productive activity and esteemed as being axiologically superior to the entire profane order of useful things (ToR, 43-61; AS2/3, 226-35). Archaic sovereignty was, in essence, an objective glorification of the *sacred* (ToR, 43-61; AS2/3, 213-15, 230, 233). It was embodied in the exalted visage of the sovereign and the nonproductive splendor (e.g., the public spectacle of games, festivals, sumptuary monuments, basilicas, churches, cathedrals, etc.) for which the sovereign’s power and wealth were merely *means* (AS1, 23, 25, 38, 63-77; AS2/3, 241-7, 280). Again, the

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power of past sovereigns was inseparable from what Bataille had previously identified, in “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), as the social obligation and justification of wealth: namely, that it be spent lavishly and squandered generously, without concern for profit or reciprocation (VE, 122-5). But insofar as these “sacred” and communal instances of nonproductive expenditure have all but disappeared from a world devoted solely to the production, accumulation, and conservation of private wealth, so has the “objective” sovereignty that once made the sacred visible. Or, we could say that as “sovereignty” gradually came to assume the work of the “thing,” finding itself increasingly tethered and subordinated to a political and juridical institution whose interests are essentially profane (e.g., “national interests” like security, territory, military strength, economic prosperity, and so on), the “sacred” it once visibly manifested ceased to have an objective presence in the world. Thus, Bataille will say of this historically “objective” sovereignty that “we can no longer find it on the outside” (AS2/3, 233). Rather, in a world reduced to the total reign of utility (i.e., reduced, quite literally, to a “sovereignty of servitude”), we must look within, in the “deep” structures of subjective experience, to rediscover what can rightfully be called “sovereign” (AS2/3, 234, 237).

To be sure, the interiority of the “subject” is, in the course of everyday cognition, inseparable from an exteriority given to consciousness as a world of discrete “objects.” The interiority of the subject, moreover, is given to other subjects as an “object,” as something communicated externally from one subject to another. But the subject also experiences itself as an “object,” whose bodily movements are, at times and to a certain

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38 See Chapter 2.2.2. “Productive Society and Unproductive Expenditure.”
degree, subordinate to its “will.” There are instances, in other words, in which the subject no longer regards itself as a subordinate thing among other things, but rather as consciously inhabiting a mode of “preeminence,” that is, as standing above and before (praemineere) a world of objects that serve its needs (AS2/3, 238-9). Thus, even at the surface, in the habitual routine of ordinary consciousness, the subject is capable of experiencing itself as sovereign, as having an entire order, however limited, of “servile objects” at their disposal (AS2/3, 199, 238-9).

But when we move past the surface of conscious experience, in which the subject continually stands in anticipation of satisfying their needs, Bataille would have us direct our attention to rare, privileged moments in which the subject is unexpectedly delivered from the entire order of useful things. In these moments, the need to subordinate “servile objects” to one’s will, and with it, the subject’s implicit subordination to the demands of useful activity, disappear. The flow of conscious anticipation suddenly dissolves into “nothing” (AS2/3, 203). It’s precisely in these privileged instants, Bataille argues, that the subject encounters something like the “miraculous” — that is, the sudden, unanticipated coming into being of what was, until that very moment, considered “impossible” (AS2/3, 202-11).

In the “miraculous instant,” the subject’s release from the reign of conscious and useful activity — i.e., their sovereignty — is “communicated from subject to subject through a sensible, emotional contact” (AS2/3, 242). Bataille provides us with a striking description of this sovereign moment, given to a subjectivity experienced in common:

… it is communicated in this way in laughter, in tears, in the commotion of the festival…. The emotion designated by the word sovereignty is glimpsed as a
contagious subjectivity (like an intimate tidal wave sweeping through the crowd)…. But, on the one hand, I experience this emotion separately when I have a strong sensation of my subjectivity, which appears to me in a miraculous way, at the end of thought sequences that ordinarily rivet me to objects; and on the other hand, in the thrill of a crowd on the miraculous appearance of a king I recognize the same sensation, less intense in each one of those who form the crowd, at the same time more intense because of the immensity of the crowd that reverberates it: what must be exclaimed each time is “Impossible, yet there it is!” What appears each time is in fact the subject, always unexpected, relieved of the heaviness that the world of utility imposes on us, of the tasks in which the world of objects mires us down (AS2/3, 242-3).

To be sovereign is to transgress the limits of the merely possible. Hence the “miracle” of the sovereign moment, which is, according to the presumed logic of the world, “impossible” — until it arrives. Its arrival isn’t supposed to be. It shouldn’t exist. It defies calculation and dissolves every anticipation into nothing. Yet there it is, plain as day, a miracle. And it is in the presence of others, moreover, with whom they experience the unanticipated reign of the “miraculous,” that the subject is delivered to the “inner truth” of their subjectivity (AS2/3, 247). They are delivered, in other words, to the deep truth of their sovereign irreducibility to either a knowable “object” of ordinary consciousness or a productive “thing” subordinate to the demands of necessity and utility.

The fact that this miraculous instant of sovereign excess is shared also reveals to the subject a general feature of their existence, such that the one who experiences it can now say of themselves, lucidly and in full confidence, “my being is never myself alone; it is always myself and my fellow beings (AS2/3, 253). The truth of subjectivity, discovered in the shared miracle of the instant, thus coincides with what we’ve already identified as Bataille’s life-long obsession: to lose oneself in a profoundly sovereign experience of community. Which is to say that the “miracle” of subjectivity, in its depth as well as its
breadth, comes back to the ecstasy of an inner experience: the subject in communication with the plurality of being(s) in its (their) sovereign excess.

If this kind of experience strikes us as impossible, this is because the harsh objectivity of the world, in deciding what is possible, also decides what is visible. The world of things, the world of denied sovereignty — in which the present moment is constantly deferred to the anticipated result of useful activity — precludes the experience of whatever is not and could never be a “thing.” It is for this very reason that the unanticipated arrival of the “miraculous,” sovereignly irreducible to the work of the thing, ordinarily goes unseen.

But there is an experience, contrary to both need and desire, that regularly interrupts the ordinary course of things. Referring to Goethe’s description of death as “an impossibility that suddenly changes into a reality” (AS2/3, 209), Bataille cites the death of others as a negative instance of the “miraculous”:

This miraculous element that, each time tears rose to my eyes, I recognized in amazement, was not lacking in unhappiness. The death that deprived me of my fellow man, of the very one in whom I had recognized being — what was it if not, in a negative form, the unanticipated, the miracle that takes one’s breath away? Impossible, yet there it is — what better way to cry out the feeling that death inspires in men? May we not say of death that in it, in a sense, we discover the negative analogue of a miracle, something we find all the harder to believe as death strikes down the one we love, the one who is closest to us, something we could not believe, if it, if death were not there [?] (AS2/3, 206-7)

The “miracle” that befalls me in death opens my eyes to the nonobjective, unrepeatable, unexchangeable singularity of someone, sovereignly irreducible to the order of “things,” who is no longer. I suffer the other’s death as a pure event, a rupture in time, stretched out and dilated without beginning or end, imp passive to the productive clamor of the world
and the steady tick-toc of its incessant activity. In that non-subjugated instant, I alone am sovereign in being alone with death. All my expectations dissolve, without remainder, into the black effulgence of an abyss whose dizzying absence of sense exceeds every possible sense I might give it. In the “negative miracle” of death, therefore, I abandon the merely “possible” and come face to face with the impossible: to make sense of the senseless, to reconcile life to its tragic end, to go on living in a world that, from this moment on, bares so many traces of all those others who no longer are. The death that overtakes me, that each time proves the lie of my individual self-sufficiency, exposes me to the deep, lacerating truth of subjectivity — namely, that “I am and you are, in the vast flux of things, only a stopping point favorable to a resurgence” (IE, 97). This, then, is the mortal truth to which each and every subject is ultimately delivered: I am and you are, in the surge and swell of the sovereign instant, an opening susceptible to “wounding and outrage,” an ecstatic point of communication endlessly passed from one vulnerable being to another... We’d be remiss if we didn’t return Bataille’s desire for sovereignty to the unconditional love of life he attributes to his profound sense of community with Nietzsche (AS2/3, 365-430). In the final pages of Sovereignty, Bataille comes to the following conclusion: “Nietzsche’s gift,” the generosity inherent to an ardent movement of thought burning to communicate its incandescence to others, is nothing less than “the sovereign gift, that of subjectivity” (AS2/3, 371).

39 The phrase belongs to Levinas. See “Substitution,” Basic Philosophical Writings, 86: “The ego is an irritability, a susceptibility, or an exposure to wounding and outrage, delineating a passivity more passive still than any passivity relating to an effect.” See also Otherwise Than Being, 108: “…susceptibility or exposedness to wounds and outrage characterizes its passivity....”
Bataille comes to this conclusion after returning to the question of politics, specifically the question raised by communism (AS2/3, 365). Both the communist exigency and the thought of Nietzsche confront the tragedy of human degradation and insist on the priority of life in a world that fundamentally devalues and disfigures it. Where Nietzsche insists on its unconditional affirmation, communism insists on each human being’s unconditional “right to live,” a right denied them “in part by the juridical system in force” (AS2/3, 365). Communism, Bataille argues, also “challenges the right to live of those who benefit from the advantages of bourgeois society,” including those who, like Nietzsche and even Bataille himself, benefit from those advantages “in order to write” (AS2/3, 366). Thus Bataille recognizes that the communist exigency, “whether we welcome or reject it,” poses a “life-and-death question” to anyone concerned with the human being’s emancipation from a world that enslaves (AS2/3, 366).

Nonetheless, Bataille asserts of Nietzsche’s thought “that it is actually no less important, or more important, than communism” (AS2/3, 366). Despite its unwavering affirmation of the human being’s unconditional right to live, the communist militant commits themselves unquestioningly to the objective realization of human equality, in which the human subject, by virtue of a universality they share with all the others, would no longer experience themselves nor any other as “sovereign” (i.e., singular, exceptional). In its commitment to the human being’s freedom from the autonomous reign of useful things, and thus in its ambition to reinstall the human subject to a position of objective mastery over their productive power, communism effectively reduces the human being to an object (however privileged) existing exclusively within a world of other objects.
But for Nietzsche,” Bataille argues, “a world deprived of what I call sovereign would no longer be bearable” (AS2/3, 367). Granted, concerning “traditional” or “political” sovereignty, Nietzsche “had the same attitude as the communists” (AS2/3, 367). But the thought of Nietzsche (and thus Bataille himself: “I am the only one who thinks of himself not as a commentator of Nietzsche but as being the same as he”) proves to be incommensurable with communism insofar as Nietzsche “could not accept a world in which man — in which each man — would be a means and not the end of some common endeavor” (AS2/3, 367). Given this incommensurability, Bataille contends that “today there are only two admissible positions remaining in the world” — either communism, which affirms the human being as the object of universal emancipation and equality, or “the attitude of Nietzsche,” which affirms the human being as the subject of sovereign experience and excess (AS2/3, 368). In a sense, Bataille’s thinking anxiously inhabits both of these positions simultaneously. Despite their incommensurability, both communism and Nietzsche are concerned to “free the subject… of the limits imposed on it by the past and of the objectivity of the present” (AS2/3, 368). But in the end, Bataille will refuse the communist reduction of the human subject to an objective means, and not the sovereign end, of its common endeavor.

Bataille is quite simply unwilling to renounce the existence of “the sovereign writer or artist,” who is conspicuously and violently “banished from communism” (AS2/3, 411). We have only to look to the stark example of Soviet society, in which “the writer and the artist are in the service of leaders who are not sovereign… except in the renunciation of sovereignty” (AS2/3, 411). From this sober observation, we could argue
that it is precisely through his sense of community (if not identity) with Nietzsche, who figures in Bataille’s thinking as the sovereign writer and artist par excellence, that Bataille will justify his retreat from the uncompromising objectivity of radical politics into the sovereign subjectivity expressed in art and literature. It is perhaps Nietzsche, above all others, who allows Bataille to glorify literary and artistic genius as the rightful “heir to the sovereignty of the kings and of God” (AS2/3, 419). If the sovereign writer or artist is indeed the rightful heir to the vacated throne of these imaginary sovereigns, “this is because sovereignty never had anything in it but general subjectivity” (AS2/3, 419). In our community with the sovereign writer or artist, Bataille argues, we experience “a subjectivity that we have in common with that indeterminate fellow being to whom literature appeals, and who makes us alive to that subjectivity” whenever we communicate it in return (AS2/3, 420). In that moment, writer, artist, and the “indeterminate fellow being to whom” they direct their appeal experience the common truth of their shared existence; and together, they can give voice to “the last word of sovereign subjectivity” — “I am NOTHING” (AS2/3, 421). In this way, they affirm their shared, sovereign irreducibility to the servile reign of “things.”

3.3.3. Eroticism, or the Sovereign Domain

Bataille’s argument in all three volumes of The Accursed Share (the standard English translation of La part maudite) can be summed up as follows. According to the measure of the world, the slightest share of existence that appears “useless” to the estimation of its servile gaze is necessarily cursed. The world confronts whatever refuses to serve its imperatives as an unwelcome irritant, and thus treats it as an invasive foreign
body in need of quarantine and expulsion. With respect to the “miraculous” appearance of the sovereign instant, therefore, the world is generally an unwelcoming and inhospitable place. But for those who refuse the world as the measure of all things, the question is how to welcome the chance occurrence of an experience that, measured against the instrumental logic of the world, appears altogether otherworldly. The question, in other words, has to do with where one is to look, either in or out of the world, if their desire is to reclaim a share (une part) of what the world summarily rejects as “accursed” (maudite) and restore it to its rightful status as sovereign. Bataille’s thinking, as it develops toward the end of his career, is quite clear on this point. If there is a share of sovereignty that remains unassailable to the very end, it is to be found in the domain of eroticism (AS2/3, 13-18; E, 273-6).

With Bataille’s affirmation of eroticism as the sovereign domain par excellence, we return to the exuberance of life in its nonproductive excess (E, 11). We thus move beyond the negative miracle of death and the mournful solitude that follows in its wake. We also move beyond the “sovereign subjectivity” communicated in art and literature, and hence beyond the “literary community” of writers, artists, thinkers, and readers, each bound by a sacred intimacy hidden away from the empty chatter of the profane world. We move, in other words, beyond an entire domain of asynchronous instants communicated across a temporal divide that separates the past from the present, the living

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40 Bataille’s fascination with the “accursed” nature of life in its erotic excess dates at least as far back as his 1933 essay on “The Notion of Expenditure.” There he argues that, according to the instrumental logic of the bourgeois world, “The most appreciable share of life is given as the condition — sometimes even as the regrettable condition — of productive social activity” (VE, 117). See my discussion of this text in Chapter 2.2.2., “Productive Society and Unproductive Expenditure.”
from the dead, and the lover from the beloved irrevocably lost to death. Beyond these privileged instances of “negative community,” and thus on the hither side of an absence common to “those who have no community” (IE, 281; OC 5, 483), we return to the visceral proximity of a sovereign experience shared between contemporaries who live. More precisely: in the lived immediacy of eroticism, we chance upon the “erotic community” shared between lovers (CS, 18-21; VE, 228-31; SC, 297-300; AS2/3, 157-66; E, 19-21). There the “reign of the moment” unfolds in the impassioned communication of a “sensible, emotional contact” between those who — each one losing themselves in the other — sovereignly assent “to life even in death” (E, 11, 23).

Eroticism, for Bataille, is nearly synonymous with life itself — insofar as life is perhaps the most prodigiously excessive event to emerge from a cosmic totality in which the expanse of inorganic matter may very well be infinite. Against the silent backdrop of an impassive and insensate immanence, the emergence of life, let alone the existence of living beings who feel life’s exuberance surge through the vital stirrings of their organism, appears very much like a “miracle.” That the convulsions of life should return living beings to an immanence that is their common origin and destiny seems equally excessive. Life appears — miraculously, in an instant — only to expend itself in a death that, humanly speaking, is no less miraculous. Thus before the astronomical improbability of this cosmic accident, it makes perfect sense that Bataille will define eroticism as “assenting to life up to the point of death” (E, 11, 23). Starting from this assent, the domain of eroticism — as an inner experience of being(s) in its (their)
sovereign excess — confronts the awestruck lover of life as “the most potent track which allows us to live in the instant” (EW, 220; E, 29-39).

Bataille describes this erotic play between life and death in terms of a broader ontological movement between “continuity” and “discontinuity” (E, 12-25, 82-3, 90-1, 96-104, 118-20, 129-32, 140-6, 176, 275-6). Bataille grounds this distinction in the simple observation of sexual reproduction, which “implies the existence of discontinuous beings” (E, 12). Living beings that spring into existence in this way “are distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents” (E, 12). Each one comes into the world “distinct from all the others,” where their existence unfolds in the singularity of a birth, a life, and a death that is as unexchangeable and unrepeatable as it is cosmically improbable. Each being, distinct from all the others, is “born alone” and “dies alone”; and “[b]etween one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity” (E, 12).

Still, we can communicate across this gulf. And while “no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference,” it can nonetheless inspire the feeling that this discontinuity — this distinction and separation between me and my fellow beings — “is not the whole truth of the matter” (E, 12-13). Before and beyond the discrete and separate existence of discontinuous beings, who exist just once and for but a short time, is the primordial continuity of a timeless immanence that precedes and exceeds them without measure. And where the birth and reproduction of living beings implies discontinuity, their dissolution and disappearance in death implies a return to continuity (E, 13, 81-8, 94-108). The inner experience of eroticism, “assenting to life up to the point of death,” puts the discontinuous being in contact with this continuity.
the charge of an electrical current, it is communicated most intensely from one
discontinuous being to another whenever they experience the fervent life that surges
between them. Proximity to death, Bataille argues, incites a fascination with this vast
continuity of being that surpasses our own limited existence (E, 13). From this
fascination follows the desire to communicate it to others, to experience it in common, to
lose ourselves in it, and thus “to substitute for the individual isolated discontinuity a
feeling of profound continuity” with the totality of being(s) in its (their) sovereign excess
(E, 15, 273-6).

This fascination with and yearning for a lost continuity, Bataille argues, is the
very essence of eroticism (E, 13). The search for it can be either physical, emotional,
religious, or a mixture of all three (E, 15). At the very least, it implies an emotional
element that exceeds the merely physical or sensual (E, 19-20). Eroticism, beyond mere
hedonism, entails an affective intensity capable of charging existence with enough
passion to carry its protagonist to the dizzying heights of their search: loss of “self” in
limitless continuity (E, 17-20). The intensely emotional ecstasy of the mystics and saints,
for example, goes beyond the domain of sensuality altogether (E, 221-51). Theirs is a
religious eroticism that aspires to fusion with a divine continuity by way of a feverish
asceticism that shudders before the visceral excesses of the “voluptuary” (E, 7). For
earthly beings in living contact with one another, however, the sensual eroticism of the
voluptuary and the visceral, touching upon the shared continuity between those who
desire to lose themselves in one another, “like the waves of a stormy sea” (E, 21), is
perhaps “the most potent track which allows us to live in the instant” (EW, 220). And
while erotic love is in no way commensurate with the sovereign domain in its entirety, it is and remains, arguably, eroticism’s most universally accessible point of entry.

Erotic love, as is the case for eroticism in general, has its basis in the *transgression* of the useful order and the limits that order imposes on the conduct of the discontinuous individual (e.g., in the form of taboos, prohibitions, and the compulsion to work). In the transgressive intimacy of the “erotic community,” lovers expend themselves in a physical and emotional continuity that is *sovereign* insofar as it serves *nothing whatsoever* — all the more so to the degree that the pleasure to which they heedlessly give themselves is either opposed or indifferent to the biological imperatives of sexual reproduction (E, 10-11).

The sovereignly insubordinate character of the “erotic community” between lovers is one of Bataille’s most repeated affirmations. As far back as 1938, during his tenure with the College of Sociology, and thus when his communitarian activism was still in full force, he opposed the sovereign world of lovers to the fragmented world of politics:

The lovers’ world is no less *true* than the political world. The whole of existence is consumed by it, and politics cannot do this. It is characterized not by traits of the fragmentary, empty world of practical action but by those belonging to *human existence* before it has become reduced to servility: The lovers’ world, like life, is built on a set of accidents that give an avid, powerful will to be the response it desires (CS, 20).

These lines were written at a time when the “political world,” powerless to halt its descent into total war, was manifestly tied to a “world in dissolution.” Under these circumstances, Bataille proclaims:
… The BELOVED has become the only force in this world in dissolution that has kept the power to bring us back to fervent life. If this world were not endlessly traversed by the convulsive movements of beings in search of each other, if it were not transfigured by the face “whose absence is painful,” it would seem to present a mockery to those sprung from it (CS, 18).

Long after the war, Bataille will return to the apolitical sovereignty by which lovers oppose themselves to the world, where politics, inseparable from the economic imperatives of global markets and the indefinite accumulation of wealth, assumes the false pretense of a sovereign value. Those “committed to political struggle,” Bataille insists, are beholden to the world in its fragmentation (i.e., in its discontinuity), and as such, “will never be able to yield to the truth of eroticism” (AS2/3, 191). One can only assent to this truth — that of life lived up to the point of death, and thus touching on the sovereign continuity of being — “in defiance of politics” (AS2/3, 191). In the resolute otherworldliness of the erotic community, trembling bodies, stripped bare and free of all pretense, generously give themselves without the slightest concern for self-preservation — without, however, giving death (loss of “self” in its ontological finality) the final say.41 There, lovers oppose their desire to the political and economic imperatives at work in the world. They are bound therein by a love that joins them “only in order to spend, to go from pleasure to pleasure, from delight to delight” (AS2/3, 162-3). Thus, Bataille will say of the erotic community, shared between lovers of life who sovereignty refuse the world as the measure of all things, that “ theirs is a society of consumption, as against the State, which is a society of acquisition” (AS2/3, 162-63).

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41 “Continuity is what we’re after, but generally only if that continuity which the death of discontinuous beings can alone establish is not the victor in the long run” (E, 18-19).
3.3.4. Eroticism and Solitude

As we leave Bataille and turn to the debate between Nancy and Blanchot in the remaining chapters, I think it’s fitting to conclude with a few remarks on a theme that was in an important sense our key point of entry into Bataille’s turn to “inner experience” — namely, solitude. The war put an abrupt end to his “activity” — it suspended the communitarian engagements that put he and his fellows into living contact with the world in its full exteriority. And while his desire for community only intensified, he nevertheless had to contend with an objective state of forced isolation. Rather than simply yield to this fateful turn of events without protest, Bataille chose, quite deliberately and self-consciously, to inhabit this isolation in a contemplative mode of solitude. He chose, in other words, to respond to the cruel objectivity of war from the position of a subject in revolt — in revolt against an entire order of things that isolates and degrades human beings, in revolt against a world that compels them at every turn to serve monstrously inhuman and inhumane ends. I have tried to show that both the sovereignty and interiority of “inner experience” consist precisely in this revolt.

Still, the war would end and Bataille’s thinking would engage the world and his fellows once more. But the lessons of inner experience remained indelible. It should thus come as no surprise that Bataille revisited the theme of solitude in “Sanctity, Eroticism and Solitude,” a lecture given to the Collège Philosophique in 1955 (E, 252-64). There he opposes the limit experience or “experience of extremes” that defines both sensual eroticism and saintly mysticism to the specialized and disciplined standpoint of the “philosophical attitude” (E, 252, 264).
The attitude Bataille has in mind is decidedly Hegelian: “philosophy can only be the sum of the possibles in the sense of a synthesis, or nothing” (E, 254). And as we’ve already seen, the “possible,” for Bataille, is above all a category of discourse and utility. In terms of discourse, the “possible” corresponds to whatever is knowable or conceivable; in terms of utility to whatever is feasible or expedient. But life lived at the extremes — lived, that is, “at the extremity of the possible” — consists of experiences that exceed the bounds of the merely knowable or useful. Which is to say it consists of experiences that exceed the merely possible and thus touch upon the impossible — i.e., that which is, in terms of discourse, unknown and unknowable, and in terms of utility, wildly and prodigally inefficient (E, 256). Eroticism and sanctity, the sensual and the saintly, despite their profound differences, exemplify for Bataille the extremes of a life fervently desirous of the impossible, lived beyond all discursive knowledge and beyond every useful activity (E, 258-61). Thus, concerning philosophy understood as a specialized yet universal synthesis of the sum total of human possibilities, Bataille will ask whether such sweeping “reflections of mankind upon himself and on being in general” amount to anything of real significance “if they take no account of the intense emotional states” in which life experiences itself as most fully alive (E, 254). If our concern is for the latter, then we have to venture beyond the limits of discourse, philosophical or otherwise — and with it, beyond the world in which every discourse articulates and addresses itself to others.

It’s precisely here that eroticism opens onto solitude. And if eroticism gives us access to an experience beyond discourse and beyond the world in which all speech and
every activity remains subordinate to some ulterior end, Bataille will say that it is “accessible on one condition only, that we leave the world we now inhabit to shut ourselves up in solitude” (E, 252). Eroticism, Bataille insists, “is defined by secrecy” — quite unlike whatever shows itself in the world, “[i]t cannot be public” (E, 252). Beyond every deed by which action becomes visible and beyond every word by which speech becomes audible, the solitude that eroticism demands of those it carries “to pinnacles of intensity” also commits them to silence (E, 262, 264). And yet this silence is no more reducible to a privation of speech than solitude is to isolation, the privation of others. In the solitude and silence that defines eroticism, one is finally, if only for a moment, delivered from the constant noise and frenzied chatter of the world. As such, it remains inaccessible to those “whose very presence in the world is a pure denial of silence, a chattering, a neglect of potential solitude” (E, 264). But for those who can quiet the imperiousness of discourse within themselves and abide in solitude, eroticism affords a sovereign release from an otherwise servile existence, “detaching us from the ground on which we were groveling, in the concatenation of useful activity” (AS2/3, 203).
Chapter Four. The (Non)Sovereign Exposure of Being(s):
Nancy’s Reading of Bataille in The Inoperative Community

4.1. Nancy, Blanchot, and the Question of Community after Bataille

NIETZSCHE’S DOCTRINE CANNOT BE ENSLAVED.
It can only be followed. To place it behind or in the service of anything else is a betrayal deserving the kind of contempt that wolves have for dogs.
DOES NIETZSCHE’S LIFE MAKE IT SEEM LIKELY THAT HE CAN HAVE HIS “WINGS CLIPPED” BY ANYONE AT ALL?
Whether it be anti-Semitism, fascism — or socialism — there is only use. Nietzsche addressed free spirits, incapable of letting themselves be used. […] The very movement of Nietzsche’s thought implies a destruction of the different possible foundations of current political positions. Groups of the right base their action on an emotional attachment to the past. Groups of the left on rational principles. Now attachment to the past and to rational principles (justice, social equality) are both rejected by Nietzsche. Thus it would have to be impossible to use his teachings in any given orientation.

— Georges Bataille, “Nietzsche and the Fascists” (VE, 184-5)

I am the only one who thinks of himself not as a commentator of Nietzsche but as being the same as he.

— Georges Bataille (AS2/3, 367)

4.1.1. Désoeuvrement and Defection, or Putting Bataille’s “Œuvre” to Work

I would like to say at the outset, in no uncertain and openly partisan terms, that compared to the force and urgency with which Bataille gave voice to a breathless

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1 “Nietzsche et Les Fascistes,” Acéphale 2 (January 1937): 4-5; OC 1, 450-1.
2 La Souveraineté, OC 8, 401.
movement of thought that can only be described as sovereign in its refusal to submit to the world as the measure of all things, the manner in which his thinking has been put to use by his devotees appears indistinguishable from a kind of defection. And who are these “devotees,” exactly? In this and the following chapter I limit my discussion to two key thinkers and writers central to the contemporary debate on the question of “community”: Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot. Nancy: a professional philosopher whose work in fundamental ontology is, by his own admission, an attempt to “reinitialise” and thereby radicalize the sense and meaning of Heidegger’s fugitive notion of Mitsein, or “being-with” (IC, 8, 103-05; OBC, 1-12; SW, 88-9; BSP, 1-99; SPP, 21; BB, 1-14). Blanchot: an esteemed literary professional with an unsavory nationalist and far right political past — but also, and no less significantly, Bataille’s close friend and intellectual confidant. Their combined appeal and strained allegiance to the enduring relevance of Bataille’s heterodox communitarian efforts, at the level of both theory and

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3 My “partisan” response to Nancy and Blanchot is partly a rejoinder to Leslie Hill’s own “tetchily partisan” defense of Blanchot in his recent book, *Nancy, Blanchot: A Serious Controversy*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 7-8: “Crucial to the exchange between the [Nancy and Blanchot] was the question of how best to understand the thought of Bataille which features centrally both in “La Communauté désœuvrée” and in *La Communauté inavouable*. This too has prompted diverse responses on the part of critics. Some take the view that Nancy’s philosophical reading of Bataille is by that token unacceptably reductive, or even that it risks falling victim to the very problems it sought to overcome. Yet another group, in often tetchily partisan or defensive terms, claims that Blanchot’s nuanced commentary on Bataille’s work is in fact entirely at odds with the latter’s pre- and postwar thinking, more revealing of Blanchot’s own supposedly compromised political past and allegedly pious ethical concerns from the 1960s than of the violently subversive thinking of his late friend.”

praxis, has effectively placed the question of community at the forefront of “post-foundational” political thought.\(^5\) Thus, just as Blanchot says of the troubled legacy and countless ideological abuses attending the word itself, the undeniable significance of his and Nancy’s contribution to the current attempt to rethink the question of community anew does “not permit us to calmly refuse or refute them.” Rather, it may very well be the case that, for better or worse, “we are linked to them precisely because of their defection” (UC, 1-2).\(^6\)

Friendships and professed allegiances aside, in Nancy and Blanchot we find two figures whose respective philosophical and literary projects are clearly situated in the French intellectual and academic mainstream, and as such, who are incomparably distant from the transgressive margins at which Bataille’s thinking of community, inseparable from his thinking of sovereignty, “exerts an irresistible attraction.”\(^7\) I leave it to others to


\(^6\) The full quote from *La Communauté inavouable*: “Communism, community: such terms are indeed terms insofar as history, the grandiose miscalculations of history, reveals them to us against a background of disaster that goes much further than mere ruin. Dishonored or betrayed concepts do not exist, but concepts that are not ‘appropriate’ without their proper-improper abandonment (which is not simple negation) — these do not permit us to calmly refuse or refute them. No matter what we want, we are linked to them precisely because of their defection.”

\(^7\) Taken from *La Souveraineté*, the unfinished third volume of *La Part maudite*, where Bataille affirms the superior importance of Nietzsche’s thought vis-a-vis the “endeavor of communism,” which reduces its “militants” to means in the service of political and economic goals to be realized in an ill-defined future: “… Nietzsche’s work exerts an irresistible attraction…. These dazzling books are like a liquor that excites and illuminates, but leaves a basic way of thinking intact” (AS2/3, 365); “Concerning Nietzsche’s thought, I am free to believe or say that it is actually no less important, or more important, than communism” (AS2/3, 366); “The communists are opposed to what seems sovereign to them. But for Nietzsche, a world deprived of what I call sovereign would no longer be bearable…. he could not accept a world in which man — in which each man — would be a means and not the end of some common endeavor…. The refusal to serve (to be useful) is the principle of Nietzsche’s thought, as it is of his work” (AS2/3, 367-8). See my discussion on this point in Chapter 3.3.2, “General Subjectivity.”
decide whether the debate between Nancy and Blanchot on the question of community exerts a similar attraction. We’ll turn to the finer points of this debate shortly.

Specifically, we’ll pose the question: in what ways do Nancy and Blanchot affirm, complement, augment, contradict, detract from or otherwise fail to do justice to the profound originality of Bataille’s thinking? Before we do, however, given Bataille’s uncompromising disavowal of politics (or “the political,” le as opposed to la politique, as if the change of an article would fundamentally change Bataille’s overall position) as the authentic domain of either community or sovereignty, I suggest we approach this debate with a healthy dose of skepticism. At the very least, we should be critically alert in our assessment of a debate that is by turns nostalgic in its fidelity to an unfulfilled “communist exigency” (even while denouncing this “nostalgia” for “lost” or “betrayed” community) and effusive about the possibility of “literary communism” (IC, 9, 26, 71-81; UC, 1-4, 21-3), a debate in which both parties speak incessantly about the “unworking” (désœuvrement) of community, its irreducibility to the collective “work” (œuvre) of its “members” (IC, 2-3, 14-19, 31, 46, 67; UC, 33, 46, 56; CC1, 30-4; DC, ix, 8, 11, 17-22, 27-8, 31, 36, 44, 53, 59, 64, 67-8, 70-4), only to subordinate Bataille’s sovereign desire for community to the interminable work of discourse and project.

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Their contentious “use” of Bataille notwithstanding, the exchange between Nancy and Blanchot presents us with a philosophical divide that cuts to the quick and sheds essential light on what’s at stake in the question of “community.” As such, I suggest we approach this exchange less as a “debate” than a fortuitous confrontation between two closely related yet seemingly irreconcilable philosophical positions. Specifically, I suggest we approach this divide as a confrontation between: (1) Nancy’s commitment to a post-Heideggerian ontology of the irreducibly common or shared (partagé) character of existence, human or otherwise, articulated in terms of a “co-existential analytic” of “being-with” (Mitsein), “being-in-common” (être-en-commun), or “being singular plural” (être singulier pluriel); and (2) Blanchot’s commitment to a post-Levinasian ethics of responsible concern for the human “Other” (l’autrui), who is irreducible to ontology insofar as they interrupt and contest the forward advance of another existence (ex-sistere, to take a stand or to stand out in one’s coming to be) in a mode rigorously “otherwise than” either being or its comprehension (onto-logia, discourse on the sense or meaning of “to be”).

Robert Bernasconi was the first to perceive and press this distinction in his short article, “On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West: The Debate between Nancy and Blanchot,” Research in Phenomenology, (January 1, 1993), 23: 3-20 (abbreviated henceforth as NCW), shortly after the translation of Nancy’s La Communauté désœuvrée (1986) into English as The Inoperative Community (1991). At the time, Bernasconi’s emphasis was Nancy’s “deconstruction” of the tacit metaphysics underpinning the nostalgia for community as it figures in Western political and philosophical thought. In order to fully appreciate the implications of Nancy’s project, Bernasconi argued it was necessary first to emphasize the philosophical divide announced in Blanchot’s response to Nancy in La Communauté inavouable (1983), which for many, gave the false impression of Blanchot’s “total agreement” with Nancy’s thinking of “community without communion.” However, Bernasconi makes it clear that Blanchot’s profound disagreement with Nancy was largely lost on readers unfamiliar with the subtleties of critical engagement characteristic of French debate. From this, Bernasconi states his intention to “disrupt” the apparent agreement between them, going so far as to say that “one must choose” between Nancy’s...
Clearly, it would be unjustifiably reductive to insist that either of these positions has the final say. But their confrontation does pose the question(s): is the relation between oneself and another — and already from this singular “other” the irreducible plurality of all the others — is this relation primarily ontological? Is the logos of this relation, its sense and its meaning — is it primarily a matter of “being” in its verbal declension and delineation? Or does the logos of this relation, the mode of communication it puts in play between beings — does it already precede and exceed the semantic placing or spacing of the “there is” (il y a) and the “to be” (être), which renders this relation intelligible always after the fact? Is the sense or sensibility of this relation essentially one of intelligibility (UC, 1)? Or is it perhaps already a demand, a call to respond in a manner otherwise than understanding, an imperative too urgent to await a response in articulate language (UC, 43)? Does one immediately and inevitably disavow

Heideggerian thinking of community, which denies the “radical alterity” of “the Other,” and Blanchot’s Levinasian critique of Nancy, which boils down precisely to this failure to give due consideration to ethical dissymmetry” attending this alterity, which in a sense precedes the question of the ontological or political status of community as consisting of the reciprocity of a “shared” [partagé] finitude between oneself and the others. We’ll return to this argument in Chapter 5, and ask if this stark incommensurability between Nancy and Blanchot is indeed the case. If so, it might also be the case that this is precisely what makes their respective answers to the question of community indispensably complementary to one another. See also Hill, Nancy, Blanchot, 7; Marie-Eve Morin, Jean-Luc Nancy, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 83-7; and Ian James, “Naming the Nothing: Nancy and Blanchot on Community,” Culture, Theory and Critique, 51, no. 2 (2010): 171–87.

10 Blanchot shares this skepticism toward “ontology as first philosophy” with Levinas, and both thinkers will insist on the sense or meaning of the relation between oneself and another as preceding and exceeding that of intelligibility, comprehension, or knowledge. The logos of “ontology,” for Levinas, is above all one of comprehension, of reducing what is irreducible to the appropriative grasp of a knowing subject, even if this “subject” isn’t couched in expressly intellectualist or epistemological terms (e.g., Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein, whose self-understanding is largely pre-theoretical and unreflective but who nonetheless makes sense of itself and its world by comprehending or grasping things that are “ready to hand” in their everyday familiarity, including the everyday experience of “being-with” [Mitsein] or “being-there-with” [Mitdasein] other Daseins). See for example, Levinas, LBW, 1-10, 33-77, 97-107, 149-59; TI, 42-8; OTB, 61-4; and LEI, 38, 57-8, 60-2, 75-7, 88, 108.
and betray this demand in avowing it (UC, 56)? And, lastly, must we choose? Is existence not already a matter of singular beings who confront and contest one another in a sense that is just as irreducibly and excessively polysemous as the relation between them, at once or by turns sensible and intelligible, erotic and ethical, hospitable and hostile, proximate and distant, foreign and familiar . . . avowable and unavowable? Nancy: “finitude” — that is, existence as such — “is the truth of which the infinite is the sense” (SW, 29).

Thus, in the confrontation between Nancy and Blanchot, we return to a double movement similar to the one we find in Bataille: namely, the ecstatic movement, beyond the confines of “oneself,” of an experience preceding and exceeding the limits of discourse and project. In this sense, we can say with Blanchot that the question of community, the question of the relation at stake in this unquestionably imperfect and imprecise word, touches on an experience of the “unavowable” and the “impossible” (UC, 1-2, 25). But also, and crucially, this experience already entails the desire to communicate it to others, to risk its avowal in words so that the horizons of possibility that constrain our thinking of community might extend beyond the restricted domain of belonging and having (IC, xl, 1, 8-9, 25-6; UC, 46; WD, 98-9; EI, 49-82; MBR, 202-4). We must risk saying what community “is,” in other words, so that we might think beyond every disavowal that unthinkingly consigns it to the reign of the merely “possible” — e.g., beyond mythic and incestuous nostalgia for a lost sense of communal intimacy (IC, 9-12, 43-70; DC, l0, 36-40, 43-50, 65, 74-5; UC, 5-8, 10-11, 13-14, 16-19, 37, 49; EI, 38, 51, 66, 74, 300; MBR, 220-1); beyond a more or less economic and impersonal
association of mutually self-interested and separate wills, each one tenaciously jealous of their individual right to life, liberty, and property (IC, xli); beyond a life- and world-weary nihilism that binds the present and future alike to the imagined greatness of past that never was (VE, 193, 202-11; IC, 19-25; MBR, 32, 200-5); and beyond an enlightened and liberally minded cynicism that is content to leave the question of community to the managerial and administrative technics of political experts, who see in “community” little more than the demographic and proprietary valences of nations, states, territories, borders, and the expedient governance of the various populations subject to their presumed authority (IC, xxxvii-viii, xli, 3).

4.1.3. Community and the Political: Plurality and the (Non)Sovereign Exposure of Being(s)

This confrontation between Nancy’s ontological and Blanchot’s ethical approach to the question of community presents us with another fruitful tension at the heart of their exchange: i.e., their common concern for the political contours of the relation at stake in the words like “community” and “communism” (IC, xxxvii-xl, 40-1; UC, 1-4, 31-3, 56). Yes, this concern reflects the analytic and quasi-transcendental distinction between “politics” (la politique) and “the political” (le politique), a distinction specific to the historical and intellectual context of the attempt on the part of certain French theorists to reclaim the possibility of genuinely transformative political thought and action (le politique) from its “retreat” into a politics, ostensibly “democratic,” that in all reality
serves the prevailing interests of economic and technocratic calculation (*la politique*).\(^{11}\)

But what interests me is the way in which the confrontation between Nancy and Blanchot converges on another double movement that we find in Bataille: namely, the dilation and contraction of community from the innumerable plurality of *all* the others to the sovereign dyad of oneself and another. More precisely, the confrontation between Nancy and Blanchot recasts the common or shared nature of human coexistence in terms of a constitutive exposure to exteriority — the exposure, that is, of each and every singular being to a plurality of beings *beyond* or *outside* the intimacy and interiority of the “community of two,” where these “two” risk submerging their plurality as well as their singularity in the oceanic Oneness of their *communion* (IC, 36-40; UC, 6-7, 10-11, 17, 49; DC, 10-12, 36-40, 43-50, 65, 74-5).\(^{12}\) In this way, a tension that was implicit and perhaps unacknowledged in Bataille’s thinking of community becomes an explicit ontological, ethical, and political concern.

With Nancy and Blanchot, we thus arrive at thinking of community that places it in living contact with the *world*, coextensive with the plural existence of all the others who make their public appearance therein, and thus beyond the world-less privacy and sovereign ecstasy of Bataille’s inner experience. As we’ll see, the double movement between the intimate duality of the “two” and the minimal plurality of the “third party” persists in Nancy and Blanchot. In fact, this is a key point of distinction and disagreement

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12 See Chapter 3.2.1, Interiority, Exteriority, and the “Community of Two,” where I discuss the interiority of both Bataille’s “inner experience” and his thinking of community in his inter- and post-war writings.
between them (DC, ix-x, 7, 10-12, 28, 34-5, 41-2). But in the course of their attempt to
catch sight of what’s at stake in this movement to and from the world in its full
exteriority, they both arrive at a similar conclusion, one that takes the question of
community further than Bataille was either willing or concerned to take it. If Bataille
desired above all an experience of an existence that was unconditionally sovereign, born
of “an effort to escape, an effort to release toward a freedom that is direct” (BR, 117),
Nancy and Blanchot will cede priority to the experience and fact of finding oneself
always before another or others, where this singular “someone” exists in a mode of
exposition and contestation that is otherwise than sovereign (IC, 6-7, 19-25, 25-31; UC,
11-12, 24-5; WD, 18, 89-90, 128-31; EI, 66).

And yet, this non-sovereign someone, prior to either the free initiative of the
“individual” or their sense of belonging to the shared identity of a group, is equally
irreducible to the servility of the useful and productive “thing,” separate from all the
others and enclosed in the isolated self- or thing-hood of its “ipseity” (IC, 26-31; UC, 5-
7). Before either another or all the others, Nancy and Blanchot thus suggest that we are
confronted with a manner of being that is at once non-sovereign and non-servile. And
while the desire for community, for existence beyond the individual in their isolation and
beyond the reign of naked self-interest that presupposes this isolation, the ex-perience of
community, ex-posure to the full plurality of all the others, beyond the ecstasy of either
literary or artistic or erotic passion — this desire does not culminate in a sovereign
release from the world. Rather, it delivers the one who desires it all the more inexorably
to an imperative or an exigency that calls every desire either to be or claim to be sovereign radically into question.

Doesn’t ordinary experience confirm this in a radical way? And doesn’t Bataille already arrive at this confirmation, even if he leaves it unspoken and unavowed? The fact remains, regardless of desire or will or decision, and even in an objective state of isolation or solitude, that I always find myself in a world that I already share with others (VE, 171-7; IE, 85-100; IC, xxxvii; UC, 5-7). The force of this “already having to share the world” leaves me exposed and vulnerable to the sheer immensity of all that is not me. At every turn, I am confronted by innumerable human and extra-human others who, by their mere existence, expose the lie of individual, indivisible, or isolated existence. Before all the others I am not and do not experience myself as a self-sufficient “one” — much less as sovereign. To the contrary: before all the others I come face to face with the fact of my insufficiency (VE, 171-3; IE, 85-100; UC, 5-7). Which is to say that I am confronted with the fact of my non-sovereignty, the fact of my never being wholly absolved of my “already having to share the world,” of having to contend with being always contested. Nancy: beyond the “1 + 1,” sovereign experience between oneself and another in retreat from the world and its demands, there is already the “n + 1,” naked exposure of oneself before all the others with whom each one must share the world and thereby do justice to the plurality that constitutes it (DC, 7, 42). “Justice” — a theme conspicuously absent in Bataille’s desire for sovereignty: “Behaving like a master means that one is never accountable to anyone, that one is averse to giving any explanation about one’s behaviour.”; “Sovereignty is either silent or disposed. Something is corrupt
when the ‘sovereign’ gives explanations and tries to draw inspiration from justice.”; “I could never suggest any justice.” (F, 12).13

As we take up the question of community after Bataille, therefore, we do well to ask, following Nancy, if this “sharing” (partage) isn’t precisely the demand or the imperative that issues straightaway from our always “being in relation to…,” the furtive “ought” already implicated in the simple fact — already something like a sovereign “miracle” — of every “is” (IC, 25-8). We do well to ask, in other words, if the “exigency of community” has to do less with the experience of a “sovereign existence” than the imperative of a “shared sovereignty,” an imperative issuing from our existing always in relation without ever having chosen it, less with the desire for an otherworldly “release” savored in the secrecy of the sovereign “two” than the demand of a “sovereign share” belonging to none because common to all (IC, 25).

Thus, in what follows, I turn first to Nancy’s argument in The Inoperative Community. This argument centers on a crucial distinction between “community” and “communion,” and proceeds as a critique of what Nancy designates as “immanentism” (IC, xxxix-xl, 3-4, 12-14). After considering the way in which Nancy’s thinking of community is informed by a strained yet subtle synthesis of Heidegger and Bataille,14 I

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13 See also Bataille, Guilty, 35. This isn’t to say that Bataille is lacking a sense of concern for or obligation to others. The passage immediately following the one quoted above reads, “My complicit friendship: here is all my character can bring to other men” (F, 12). The “justice” Bataille rejects is clothed in moralizing garb, having to do more with either sanctimonious religiosity or utilitarian calculation and compromise between self-interest and the interest due to others than any genuine concern for another that would challenge or contest the domain of “interests” altogether. Be that as it may, aside from a few passing comments on the need for a more equitable and generous economy in La Part maudite, the question of justice in a broader ethical or political sense is clearly secondary to his overriding concern for an experience of sovereignty situated beyond either ethics or politics.

14 On the Nancy’s strained appeal to both Bataille and Heidegger, see Bernasconi, NCW, 5-6.
emphasize that his critique of “immanentism” returns us to a conception of “sovereignty” that is at once incommensurable with and antagonistic to “community.” I’ll argue that the political and metaphysical assumptions attending this antagonism reveal an underlying “onto-theo-logic” of sacrifice, which substitutes the “work” of a unitary “communal Subject” for the non-assumable relation between plural beings that “community” names (IC, 12-18, 31, 39, 60). Finally, returning to Bataille’s desire for a sovereign experience of community, as well as his thinking of community as being inseparable from an experience of “the sacred,” I’ll conclude by arguing with and against Nancy that the work of communion entails what we could describe as the “making-sacred” of community (IC, 32-5). From there we’ll transition to Chapter 5, which takes up Blanchot’s reply to Nancy in *The Unavowable Community* as well as Nancy’s critical reading of Blanchot in *The Disavowed Community*.

4.2. Nancy Thinking with (and against) Bataille and Heidegger

4.2.1. Neither Having Nor Belonging: Community from Politics to Political Economy

Nancy’s text is marked by a deceptive peculiarity. On the one hand, the concerns that mobilize its argument are clearly peculiar to its intellectual and historical setting: the product of Nancy’s seminars “devoted to… the various motifs of community in Bataille” (DC, 6); the state of radical politics in France during the eighties; the sense shared by many French theorists on the left that the promise of communism had had been betrayed by the “real” communism of the Soviets (IC, 1-3; CC1, 28-9; DC, vii, 2, 8-9); the collapse of the Soviet experiment in the late eighties and early nineties, followed by
insipid incantations about the “end of ideology” and the congratulatory pretense of a dubious global consensus on liberal democracy, wedded to neoliberal economic policy, as the only universally desirable and viable form of political organization15 (IC, xxxvi-xli; CC1, 24; CC2, 27-30). But on the other hand, this text presents us with a highly original work of political philosophy whose relevance continues to be surprisingly contemporary. Beyond its peculiarity, Nancy’s text stands as a fundamental challenge to the Western political tradition in its entirety — insofar as the philosophical, metaphysical, and ideological tendency of this tradition is to conceive of “community” in terms of a unitary “essence,” “substance,” or “identity” common to those who happen to belong to a particular religious, political, social, or ethnic group (e.g., that of a church, people, race, nation, class, and so on).

This isn’t to say that either this tradition or the various attempts to define the “essence” of community that make up its history are uniform. As Nancy suggests in the Preface to the English edition of The Inoperative Community, it’s possible to see in this tradition and its history a conceptual rift between two camps: (1) those who think of community in terms of the common or shared nature of human existence generally; and (2) those who conceive of community in terms of the exclusive nature of the proper or proprietary association that holds between its individual members (IC, xxxviii).

15 A view summed up most famously (or perhaps infamously) by Francis Fukuyama in The End of History and the Last Man, (New York: Free Press, 1992).
Nancy briefly cites Aristotle as an early example of the first camp (IC, xxxviii). The *bios theoretikos* or the “political way of life” that Aristotle describes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, Nancy argues, entails something like “the sharing of a *logos,*” or the shared sense (“sense” or “meaning” being one translation of the Greek *logos*) of human being- and living-together in the common space of the polis (IC, xxxviii). The example of Aristotle is a compelling one, given that the *polis* is precisely the “public space of appearance”17 wherein human beings live together “not for reasons of need,” as in their private lives, “but for a higher reason, itself without reason, namely, to ‘live well’ (*eu zein*)” (IC, xxxviii). This “living well,” moreover, “means neither a comfort nor a having” (IC, xxxviii). It has nothing to do, in other words, with the fellow feeling of family or tribe.18 And if the recognition of one’s fellows and some degree of material prosperity are amenable to “living well” (*eu zein*) or “happiness” (*eudaemonia*), they count for nothing, politically speaking, so long as one’s good fortune does not translate into a concern for the well-being of those others with whom one shares

16 Nancy’s cites Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx as modern examples. Regarding Nancy’s appeal to these thinkers as philosophers of the “common,” see BSP, 24, 34, 50-2, 60, 70; and CP, 371-98. See also Kevin Inston, “Finite Community: Reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau with Jean-Luc Nancy,” The European Legacy, 21, no. 2 (2016): 184–204; and Bernasconi, NCW, 16.

17 Arendt, HC, 199. Notably, Arendt also appeals to “another tradition” in Western political thought that maps very closely to Nancy’s distinction, namely the Greek notion of “isonomia” and the Roman *civitas* as examples of a concept of “power” rooted in the human capacity to act in common, as opposed to counter-tendency to equate power with the “rule” of One over the Many. See Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1970), 40.

18 Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, Chapters 1 through 3.
(koinonein, “to share” or “to partake”) in the being-together of the human community
(koinonia).\textsuperscript{19}

It’s not long after Aristotle, however, that the political ideal of “living well” and
the ancient Greek notion of the polis as the common space or spacing of the shared nature
of a genuinely human mode of existence gives way to a conception of community rooted
in a desire or a demand for having and belonging. The Christian transubstantiation of the
Greek koinonia, or political community, into the apolitical community of the faithful
ekklesia in holy communion with the divine majesty, is perhaps the clearest example of
this shift (IC, 9-13, 17, 143).\textsuperscript{20} Beyond its religious or theological formations in antiquity,
however, politics and the “political way of life” eventually cede to the restricted order or
ordering of “political economy,” comprised of the competing claims of private self-
interests that somehow — magically, by the providential guidance of an “invisible hand,”
or some other mysterious force at work behind the scenes of human history — coalesce
into the “common-wealth” of individuals and nations alike (IC, xxxviii). Bodin, Grotius,
Hobbes, Locke, Smith — here are some of the “proper” names that signal a definitive
shift in direction to which we are still very much the living heirs.\textsuperscript{21}

And yet it would be a mistake to read into this “rift” between two radically
different conceptions of community the nostalgic lament for a bygone ideal of communal

\textsuperscript{19} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Book 5, Chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{20} We’ll return to Nancy’s distinction between “community” and “communion” in section 4.2.3.

\textsuperscript{21} It’s worth noting that Nancy, having cited Aristotle, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Marx as thinkers of the
“common,” does not cite any of these figures, who we might justifiably call theorists of the “proper,” the
non-common or anti-common as such.
existence, political or religious or otherwise. Nancy is keen to point out that despite this conceptual rift, the Western political tradition is beset by a persistent and essentially mythic nostalgia for a “lost” sense of community (IC, 9-12, 57). We’ll return to this point shortly. But first, we need to unpack the philosophical and theoretical approach that informs Nancy’s attempt to think of “community” beyond or without some common-essence, -substance, or -identity that effectively reduces it to a “thing” (e.g., res publica) belonging to whoever or whatever claims to found and fashion it according to the sacrificial logic of a “sovereign” will (IC, xxxvii-xl, 12).

4.2.2. Being Beyond Knowing: Nancy, Bataille, and the “Banality” of Heidegger

While the general “motif” of Nancy’s text owes its inspiration to Bataille, his ontological articulation of “community” in terms of “being-in-common” (être-en-commun) clearly owes its philosophical and conceptual underpinnings to Heidegger. We should also note that this is one of the more significant points of distinction between Nancy and Bataille. For while Heidegger praised Bataille as “one of France’s best minds,” the sentiment was far from mutual.

Bataille did acknowledge the proximity of his intellectual concerns to those of Heidegger — e.g., to think of being as exceeding the metaphysical, epistemological, and

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22 Although Bernasconi convincingly argues that this “nostalgia” is not entirely absent from Nancy’s thinking (NCW, 16-18).

23 Again, see Bernasconi, NCW, 3-21.

24 See Bruce Boone’s English translation of Bataille’s On Nietzsche, (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1992), where Heidegger’s “endorsement” on the back cover precedes Michel Foucault’s and Jean-Paul Sartre’s.
conceptual straitjacket that reduces existence to the abstract and lifeless order of knowable objects. But either despite or because of this proximity, Bataille was intent on distancing himself from both the Teutonic seriousness and political cowardice of the eminent German thinker. And even without the incriminating posthumous testimony of the latter’s infamous Black Notebooks, Bataille was perceptive enough to frame his proposed but unfinished “Critique of Heidegger” as a “critique of a philosophy of fascism.”

Beyond radically opposed political sensibilities, the real disparity between Bataille’s and Heidegger’s thinking was and remains philosophical. In his Method of Meditation, where Bataille attempts to articulate the possibility of a “sovereign thought” commensurate with the inner experience of a “sovereign moment,” and shortly after

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27 See Chapter 3.3.1
describing intoxication as one of the more intense and readily available instances of this experience, he acknowledges the “parallelism” between his thinking and Heidegger’s but promptly makes the following qualification:

... I want to indicate these notable differences:
— I set out from laughter and not, as Heidegger does... from anxiety: some consequences perhaps result, precisely on the level of sovereignty (anxiety is a sovereign moment, but in flight from itself, negative);
— Heidegger’s published oeuvre, so it seems to me, is more a fabrication than a glass of alcohol (it is even only a treatise on fabrication); it is a professional work, whose subordinated method remains glued to its results: what counts, on the other hand, in my eyes, is the moment of detachment, what I teach... is an intoxication, this is not a philosophy: I am not a philosopher but a saint, perhaps a madman.

(IE, 193)

Heidegger, in other words, was a “professional thinker” and wrote as one; whereas Bataille wrote from an inner exigency that was irreducible to the discursive barriers of an esoteric jargon.

Nancy is quick to overlook this disparity, and in one passage in particular (IC, 21-22) forces a false point of agreement between the two when he approvingly cites the following quote from Bataille’s *Inner Experience*: “there can be no knowledge without a community of researchers, nor any inner experience without the community of those who live it... communication is a fact that is in no way added on to existence, but constitutes it” (IE, 31). Nancy omits the broader intertextual context that frames Bataille’s reference to the “knowledge” pursued by this “community of researchers.” Specifically, Bataille is referring to being “struck” by a phrase from Heidegger’s *Was ist Metaphysik?* Here is the passage immediately preceding the one cited by Nancy: “‘Our existence (unseres Dasein),’ says Heidegger, ‘— in the community of researchers, teachers, and students —
is determined by knowledge” (IE, 31). Bataille continues: “Undoubtedly in this way stumbles a philosophy whose meaning should be linked to a human existence determined by inner experience” (IE, 31). What “strikes” Bataille, in other words, is that while Heidegger’s thinking “stumbles” upon a truth that should draw its meaning from an experience situated beyond knowledge and discourse, ultimately, it fails to do so. Thus, despite their proximity, the fact remains that the desire for “community” or “communication” that issues from Bataille’s inner experience is entirely at odds with the discursive knowledge that binds Heidegger’s thinking to the professional ties constituting “the community of researchers, teachers, and students.” If we had any doubts, Bataille explicitly confirms this disparity in an earlier passage:

> For some time already, the only living philosophy, that of the German school, tended to make knowledge the final extension of inner experience. But this *phenomenology* gives knowledge the value of a goal that one reaches through experience. This is a brittle alloy: the share given to experience is at once too much and not enough…. What preserves the appearance of philosophy is the lack of acuity of the experiences from which the phenomenologists set out. This absence of equilibrium [i.e., between knowledge and inner experience] does not survive the play of experience going to the end of the possible. When going to the end of the possible means at least this: the limit that is knowledge must be crossed. (IE, 15)

To Nancy’s credit, his reading of Heidegger is in no way a deferential capitulation or justification of either Heidegger’s philosophical myopia or political ignominy. In fact, in *The Banality of Heidegger*, Nancy takes up Hannah Arendt’s notion of “banality” to confront the long shadow cast by Heidegger’s crude antisemitism and fateful acquiescence to Nazism, as laid bare in the still unfolding publication and translation of

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Heidegger’s *Schwarze Hefte*, or “Black Notebooks.”

And as Marie-Eve Morin and Peter Gratton note in their introduction to *The Nancy Dictionary*, Nancy’s “texts are littered with snide asides concerning Heideggerian pieties and the high priests of Heideggerianism.”

They also note that “[d]espite disagreements with Heidegger’s destinal thinking — foremost his disastrous politics,” Nancy nonetheless thinks simultaneously with and against Heidegger, intent to “reinitialise” and thereby radicalize a discovery that Heidegger himself either dismissed or disavowed. In its strained but subtle synthesis of Bataille and Heidegger, Nancy’s thinking of community deftly proceeds from the ontologically “primordial” fact that our “being-with” (*Mitsein*) a plurality of others — before or beyond the “historial” consanguinity of a “People” (*Volk*) — is “equiprimordial” with and thus inseparable from the “being-there” (*Dasein*) of each and every singular being (IC, 14, 103-5; OBC, 1-12; SW, 88; BSP, 26-7, 31, 44; SPP, 21; BB, 1-15).

### 4.2.3. Against Communion: Thinking of Community without “Essence”

Nancy’s attempt to think of community without “essence” brings together two conceptual distinctions from Bataille and Heidegger that are, in fact, strikingly parallel. From Heidegger, prior to radicalizing the notion of “being-with” (*Mitsein*), Nancy will affirm the “ontological-ontic difference” between Being (*Sein*, the sense or meaning of

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31 Ibid.
sein, “to be”) and beings (Seiende, considered either in their totality or in the discrete and particular existence of ein Seiende, “a being,” “an entity,” or that which “is”). And while he doesn’t state it explicitly, it’s quite evident that his distinction between “community” and “communion” mirrors Bataille’s pre-war distinction between “universal” and “unitary” community. In either case, Nancy is concerned to shift our thinking of community from its nominative (ontic) designation as a communal (unitary) 
“subject” to the “verbal sonority” of an (ontological, universal) occurrence or movement that precedes and exceeds its reification in a static “essence,” “substance,” or “identity” exclusive to the “members” belonging to a particular group (IC, xxxviii-xl, 4, 6, 9-12, 27).

That said, it’s important to stress once more that Nancy not only thinks with but also against and beyond both Heidegger and Bataille. Against and beyond Bataille: “community” is not a matter of having, belonging, or willing, and thus is irreducible to either the arbitrary existence of “de facto” communities (e.g., the hereditary and historical contingency of those bound by social, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, or national ties) or the volitional existence of “elective” communities (e.g., the free association of those bound

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33 See Bataille, VE, 198, 201.

34 See Emmanuel Levinas, God, Death, and Time, trans. Bettina Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 23: “...Heidegger reawakens the verbal sonority of being in its difference from beings (beings we understand as the substantive meaning of “being,” that which one can show and thematize; in grammatical terms, the noun, the substantive).”
by a common concern or engaged in the mutual struggle of some common endeavor). Against and beyond Heidegger: given that the “being-there” (Dasein) of the human being is already, and more profoundly, a “being-with” (Mitsein) or a “being-in-common” (être-en-commun) shared (partagé) between an irreducible plurality of beings (Seiende), their existence is in every case a co-existence, radically anterior to the singular event of their suddenly “coming- and ceasing-to-be” (IC, 14, 25-35, 58-81, 103-5; OBC, 1-12; SW, 88; BSP, 26-7, 31, 44; SPP, 21; BB, 1-15).

This being-with or being-in-common, Nancy argues, not only precedes and exceeds but also constitutes the “being-self” — the singularity or uniqueness — of each and every particular being (IC, xxxvii, 6, 25-35, 58-81, 103-5). He describes the experience of this “being-self” before all the others as simultaneously one of “exposure,” “exposition,” “facing,” and “sharing” — which, crucially, “do not make up an essence” (IC, xxxvii-xxxviii, 6, 9, 25-41). And, with Bataille, Nancy sees in each of these articulations of experiencing oneself before others the ecstasy or ek-stasis of a profound communication, an ecstatic movement cutting (i.e., “lacerating”) between and across a plurality of singular “someones” who are “always exposed to others, always turned toward an other… never facing” themselves (IC, xxxvii-viii, 6, 19-25, 30-2, 34-7, 39-41, 58, 60-1, 64-5, 67, 73, 76, 78, 79, 80, 92). The “question of community,” Nancy argues, is thus “inseparable from the question of ecstasy” (IC, 6). And this question, in turn, is inseparable from “the question of Being considered as something other than the totality

35 See Bataille, CS, 73, 81-2. See also Blanchot’s interpretation of “elective” community in UC, 46-8.

36 Aristotle, Physics, Book V, Chapters 1 and 2; Metaphysics, Book XI, Chapter 12.
of beings”: “Communication, or the being-ecstatic of Being itself? That would be the question” (IC, 6).³⁷

The denial or refusal of this ecstatic communication shared between mutually exposed beings, a denial or a refusal which effectively encloses community in an involuted “essence” that is either impassive, indifferent, or openly hostile to its contestation by the ex-sistence of an inappropriable “outside” — this denial or refusal is what Nancy means by “common-being” or “communion” (IC, 6, 21-2). Which is to say that it “is in effect the closure” of community in the “political” or “improper” sense of the shared or common ex-position of beings in their finitude:

… I start out from the idea that such a thinking — the thinking of community as essence — is in effect the closure of the political. Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a common being, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is in common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being in common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being in common means, to the contrary, no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this … lack of identity.” (IC, xxxviii)

“Finitude, or the infinite lack of infinite identity,” Nancy continues, is precisely “what makes community” (IC, xxxviii).³⁸ The attempt to “produce” this identity, and thereby overcome the finiteness (or “insufficiency”) of human coexistence — to overcome, that is, the constitutive vulnerability of our being abandoned and exposed to all the others with whom we must share the world — this essentially sacrificial ambition

³⁷ Again, this is but one of Nancy’s many dubious equivalences between Heidegger and Bataille, who both mean something very different by “ecstasy.”

³⁸ See Blanchot, UC, 9: “That is what founds community. There could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last event which in everyone ceases to be able to be just that (birth, death).”
to efface finite being in the infinite identity of a communal “Subject” is what Nancy calls
the “work” (œuvre) of communion (IC, 14-15, 35). Community, however, the fact of
being-in-common, which is not and never could become a thing, “retreats” from the work
that attempts to sublate it in the feigned identity of a common-essence or -substance:

The community that becomes a single thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader . . . )
necessarily loses the in of being-in-common. Or, it loses the with or the together
that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being of togetherness. The truth of
community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being. Community is
made of what retreats from it: the hypostasis of the “common,” and its work. The
retreat opens, and continues to keep open, this strange being-the-one-with-the-
other to which we are exposed. (IC, xxxix)

Nancy suggests that Nazi Germany’s death-dealing nostalgia for Gemeinschaft —
“community” conceived as an original or originary experience of communal intimacy and
mutual belonging, as opposed to Gesellschaft or “society,” consisting of the impersonal
associations and divisions of labor that structure the economic relations between
atomized individuals39 — is the clearest example of the sacrificial “logic of this being of
togetherness” (IC, xxxix, 11).

We’ll return to this last point when we consider Nancy’s argument that the work
of communion inevitably culminates in the “work of death” (IC, 15, 20). First, however,
it’s important to note that the “work” of communion isn’t limited to either fascist or Nazi
ideology.40 We also see it in the communist ideal of society as the objective production
and incarnation of human effort and struggle, an ideal in which human beings are

39 Nancy is of course referring to Ferdinand Tönnies’ famous distinction in Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft

40 See also Bernasconi, NCW, 16.
themselves defined in essence as laborers, workers, and producers (IC, 1-3, 7-9, 16, 51, 60, 71-81; BSP, 24; DC, 2-3, 17). That said, the will to achieve a common-essence, - substance, or -identity in and as the “work” of the community, Nancy argues, is not limited to “certain types of societies or regimes.” Rather, it constitutes “the general horizon of our time, encompassing both democracies and their fragile juridical parapets” (IC, 3).

Nancy makes this clear when he states the “principle” from which he sets out to think of community without or beyond “essence”:

… community does not consist in the transcendence (nor in the transcendental) of a being supposedly immanent to community. It consists on the contrary in the immanence of a “transcendence” — that of finite existence as such, which is to say, of its “exposition.” Exposition, precisely, is not a ‘being’ that one can ‘suppose’ (like a sub-stance) to be in community. Community is presuppositionless: this is why it is haunted by such ambiguous ideas as foundation and sovereignty, which are at once ideas of what would be completely suppositionless and ideas of what would always be presupposed. But community cannot be presupposed. It is only exposed.” (IC, xxxix)

The reversal or rejection of this “principle,” Nancy argues, results in “totalitarianism” (IC, xxxix, 3, 56-7), whereas its dismissal, in a mode of indifference or cynical disinterest, reduces community to an object of “management and power” (IC, xxxix; CC1, 23-36; DC, x, 12, 17).

Thus, as we turn to the sacrificial logic at work in the will to substitute the fiction of communion for the fact of community, I suggest we think of both this rejection and this dismissal, respectively, in terms of: (1) political nihilism, or authoritarianism; and (2) political cynicism, or liberalism. Where the former openly negates community in a unitary politics of violence and death, the latter consists of de-politicized or politically
dis-interested individuals who, in exchange for the freedom to satisfy their private self-interests with minimal outside interference, are content to leave the administration of violence and death to the State.\textsuperscript{41} We could say that each of these disavowals of the common or shared character of human coexistence are but two sides of what Nancy calls “immanentism” (IC, 3, 56). In either case, we confront a will to realize an “essence,” whether individual or communal, which is wholly immanent to itself (i.e., “foundation and sovereignty”), refusing or rejecting the “right to be” of anything that transcends its exclusive or exclusionary claim on being(s) — as evident in either that of the autonomous individual’s cynical complicity with the sovereign State, as in liberalism, or of an ideologically unified social body, as in authoritarian nihilism.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{4.2.4. Sovereignty and the Sacrificial Logos of Onto-Logy}

In Nancy’s critique of the tacit “immanentism” at work in every attempt to fix community in the imagined essence, substance, or identity of an impossible communion, we thus return to a conception of “sovereignty” that is irremediably antagonistic to community. And to return to an idea introduced in Chapter 1, we see that this sovereign claim on community isn’t only political but also and more radically “ontotheological.”


I’m referring, of course, to Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology in “The Onto-Theo-
Logical Constitution of Metaphysics.”43 Both this notion and this critique inform Nancy’s
ontology as a whole (SW, 32, 51, 54; FT, 52, 55-6, BSP, 60), and figures most
prominently in his long-standing attempt at a “deconstruction of Christianity.”44

Heidegger coins the term “ontotheology” to name what he interprets as the
general tendency at work in the history of Western philosophy. This tendency, he argues,
is to think of being (Sein, the sense and meaning of sein, “to be,” given in the simple of
fact our Dasein, the fact of our “being-there” or existing) in terms of the “totality of
beings” (die Seienden), and from there, to subsume the infinite plurality of finite beings
that make up this “totality” in the infinite substance of an all-encompassing “Being” (das
Seiende, the being in which all beings derive both their existence and their reason for
being).45 Given this tendency, Heidegger suggests that “Western metaphysics since its
beginning with the Greeks has eminently been both ontology and theology, still without
being tied to these rubrics.”46 This “metaphysics” takes up the question of the defining
nature or essence of “beings as such and as a whole.”47 The “wholeness of this whole” is
defined as “the unity of all beings,” and thus “as the generative ground” or unifying sub-


44 See Nancy, Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity, trans. Bettina Bergo et al, (New York:
Fordham University Press, 2008); and Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II, trans. John

45 See also Heidegger, BT, 17-64; and “What is Metaphysics?”, 93-110.


47 Ibid.
stance in which all beings are grounded. To those who can read,” Heidegger concludes, in an emphatically professorial tone, “this means: metaphysics is onto-theology.” In other words, the *meta* in meta-physics, the “before, beyond, and after” of all that is (*physis*), refers both to a “totality of beings” (*ontos*) and a Being par excellence (*theos*), which is at once the cause, foundation, and governing principle from which this totality derives the first and final “reason” (*logos*) for its “coming- and ceasing-to-be.”

To those who can read (if we can be so bold), this means: the hidden *logos* or logic of onto-theo-logy is already one of *sacrifice*. Finite beings only fully realize the reason for their being in *ceasing to be*, in returning to the immanence of the infinite Being that is their common origin and destiny. They are given to be in order to *give themselves* to that which eternally transcends, begets, and reclaims them. Anaximander’s *apeiron*, the sovereignly boundless *arche*, “whence beings have their origin” — the telos of this *arche* ordains their immolation from the start: “for they give justice and compensation to one another for their injustice according to the ordering of time.”

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49 Ibid.


51 Fragment DK 12A9/B1 in Simplicius’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*: “ἀρχὴ ... τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἀπειρον ... ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστι τοῖς οὐσί, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών· διδόναι γὰρ ἀυτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλων τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν. Αθάνατον [...] καὶ ἀνώλεθρον.” See also Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, Chapter 2, “Anaximander,” (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Heidegger offers his own comically Delphic translation of Anaximander’s already cryptic fragment in *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 81: “Whence emergence is for what respectively presences also an eluding into this (as into the Same), emerges accordingly the compelling need; there is namely what presences itself (from itself), the fit, and each is respected (acknowledged) by the other, (all of this) from overcoming the unfit according to the allotment of temporalizing time.” Might I suggest that this “translation” already contains something like a philosophy of
living beings this means that they are given to live in order to die, that being dead is the completion, perfection, and justification of being alive. The “work” this logic pursues, therefore, is already a “work of death.” And to the extent that the history of the Western political tradition and its nostalgia for a “lost community” unfold in tandem with the history of Western metaphysics,\textsuperscript{52} it makes perfect sense that the work of communion — the “sovereign” ambition to found and ground beings in a common essence — employs the same onto-theo-logic of sacrifice, the same sacrificial logos that substitutes the dead substance of an imagined unity, which never was nor could be, for the living plurality that community is.

4.3. The “Work” of Communion, or the Substitution of Common-Being for Being-in-Common

4.3.1. Immanence and the Work of Death

While Nancy doesn’t expressly frame his critique of “communion” in terms of an underlying critique of “ontotheology,” his argument clearly traces a similar path. Put somewhat differently, we could say that his argument sets off along one path, informed primarily by his thinking with and against Heidegger, and veers toward another that...
returns the question of community to his thinking with and against Bataille. Tracing both, we see Nancy’s critique unfold in the following points of argument.

First, Nancy argues that immanence is only achieved in death (IC, 12). As the foregoing remarks on the ontotheological assumptions underlying every “sovereign” claim on community already make clear, the same will to immanence at work in the sacrificial logic of “communion” is essentially a will to death. And that which is sacrificed is the common or shared character of existence. If the work of communion were to realize itself in the pure immanence of a unitary communal “Subject,” Nancy argues, this “immanence… would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such” (IC, 12). Framing “immanence” in terms of the “continuity of being” that Bataille equates with the death and dissolution of discontinuous beings such as ourselves, Nancy notes that death isn’t only an example of this suppression, but also its truth:

In death, at least if one considers in it what brings about immanence (decomposition leading back to nature — “everything returns to the ground and becomes part of the cycle” — or else the paradisal versions of the same “cycle”) and if one forgets what makes it always irreducibly singular, there is no longer any community or communication: there is only the continuous identity of atoms. (IC, 12)

The sacrificial logic of communion, which pursues an immanence that can only be fully realized in death, thus commits the community that binds itself to its cause to the collective work of suicide (IC, 12). It’s for this reason that “political or collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death”; and the logic of immanence, of “communal fusion, contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it” (IC, 12). The operative politics of communion, which assumes the life of the community as its “work,” is thus
already a “thanato-” or “necro-politics” — whether coming from the right or the left, fascism or communism, authoritarian nihilism or liberal cynicism.

The death that reveals itself in community, however, is in each case that of a singular being, and even if their death is explicitly affirmed as one of “sacrifice” (for or against the community, in a mode of refusal or submission, voluntary or coerced) it is not “sublated” or “transubstantiated” in the work of communion (IC, 13). Here, Nancy is referring to revolutionary and utopian aspirations of countless “citizens and militants, of workers and servants of the States,” who in one way or another “imagined their death reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence” (IC, 13). Hence, the healing “wounds of the Spirit,” which, as Hegel assures the clear consciousness before death, “leave no scars behind”: “The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it… straightway vanishes. The self that carries out the action, the form of its act, is only a moment of the whole.”

In reality, however, this “sublation” amounts to a sovereign closure, forgetting, and refusal of “Spirit” in the lived singularity of its “moments” — that is, in the singularity of a birth, a life, and a death that is at once irreplaceable and unrepeatable. Thus closed and covered up, the “wounds of the Spirit” do not heal, but fester. And the “clear consciousness” before death is, in the end, “nothing more than the bitter consciousness of the increasing remoteness of such a community,” which would somehow redeem the death of those irrevocably lost to its work, “be it the people, the

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nation, or the society of producers” (IC, 13). However noble or justified these deaths might be, however admirably they might stand “as rejoinder to the intolerable,” they nonetheless “are not sublated: no dialectic, no salvation leads these deaths to any other immanence than that of … death (cessation, or decomposition, which forms only the parody or reverse of immanence)” (IC, 13).

From this impossibility of death’s “sublation,” Nancy argues that the death revealed in community — always in the singular, always revealed from one to the other as the “mortal truth” of their shared finitude — exceeds the metaphysics of the subject, and as such, resists and retreats from the collective “work” of a communal Subject (IC, 15). Like Bataille, Nancy will affirm death as being “indissociable from community, for it is through death,” which reveals the mortal truth of our shared finitude, “that the community reveals itself — and reciprocally” (IC, 14). But the fact remains that I never experience my own death (IC, 15). Rather, this “I” or the “ego,” and with it the “transcendence” by which it assumes the role of “subject” in relation to a world of “objects,” this is precisely what disappears in death and thus always proves to be something of a fiction (IC, 15). Before and beyond “the resources of a metaphysics of the subject,” however, there is nevertheless “someone” who, in their singularity, never experiences their own death but only ever the death of others (IC, 14-15). And as we’ve already seen, neither this singular someone nor the “mortal truth” they share with all the others is sublated into the work of a communal Subject: “Community does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects (no more than it is itself woven of the inferior bonds of a consubstantiality of blood or of an association of needs)” (IC,
14). The death revealed in community, therefore, confirms the impossibility of communion, “the impossibility of its own immanence,” and thus of every “communitarian being in the form of a subject” (IC, 15).

4.3.2. Nancy, Bataille, and the “Immense Failure” of Community

This sacrificial logic of communion, rooted in a metaphysics or an ontotheology of the subject, finds confirmation in Bataille’s confrontation with both communism and fascism in the thirties. Nancy brings his argument to bear on several key aspects of this confrontation.

First, he suggests that Bataille was among those on the antifascist left that “went through the ordeal of seeing communism ‘betrayed’” (IC, 16). While there’s certainly some truth to this, Bataille’s heterodox appeal to Marx and Marxism, informed by his equally idiosyncratic reading of Durkheim, Mauss, Nietzsche, de Sade and others, put him at odds with Marxist orthodoxy, with the result that his strained relationship to the various communist groups in prewar France was almost always one of mutual suspicion. In fact, if Bataille experienced a “betrayal,” it was that of the “revolutionary passion” at the hands of communist party officials — that is, a betrayal on the part of those who condemned both the revolutionary promise of emancipatory subversion and the passion that was its living justification to the “immense failure” of political maneuvering and strategic ineptitude. 54

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54 See my treatment of these themes in Chapter 2.
Nancy briefly touches on this last point, and correctly notes that it was precisely because of this “immense failure” that Bataille would eventually come to the conclusion “that this betrayal was not to be corrected or made up for” (IC, 16). Rather, the problem, for Bataille, had to do with the fact “that communism, having taken man as its end, meaning the production of man and man as producer, was linked in its principle to a negation of the sovereignty of man, that is to say to a negation of what in man is irreducible to human immanence, or to a negation of the sovereign excess of finitude” (IC, 16).

As we saw in Chapter 2, Bataille’s fascination with sovereignty coincides with “a fascination with fascism inasmuch as it seemed to indicate the direction, if not the reality, of an intense community, devoted to excess” (IC, 16-17). However, in opposing this fascination to “a revolutionary impulse that sought to give back to the [revolutionary passion] the incandescence that the Bolshevik State had stolen from it,” Nancy fails to recognize that Bataille’s confrontation with fascism was motivated precisely by this very impulse (IC, 16-17). Again, as we saw in Chapter 2, Bataille saw in fascism a “truth” that was too important to leave to the enemy — namely, that the possibility of “real revolution,” and thus of freedom from “the legacy of past constraints,” hinges on an affective reawakening of the bonds of solidarity between human beings reduced to the status of isolated “individuals” (TRR, 40). Fascism’s ability to weaponize nostalgia for a lost sense of belonging convinced Bataille that the communist appeal to universal emancipation would continue to fall on deaf and disillusioned ears so long as it didn’t
seek first to free “the absurdly involuted individual” from their profound sense of isolation and powerlessness (VE, 164).

What interests Nancy, however, is the way in which this fascination leads Bataille to the realization that “nostalgia for a communal being,” which fascism sought to restore to its former religious, military, royal, and imperial glory, “was at the same time the desire for a work of death” (IC, 17). From this realization, Nancy argues, Bataille eventually comes to “understand the ridiculous nature of all nostalgia for communion” (IC, 17). This was indeed a recurring observation in Bataille’s antifascist critique of “unitary politics” or “political unitarism,” which always sought to restore rather than create “a renewed social cohesion… in the form of a return to the past” (VE, 204). And Bataille did in fact regard this fascist return to the past, which binds the present and future alike to the decrepit patrimony of a “fatherland” that refuses to die, as being bound not only to death, but more radically, to the negation of death in its tragic relationship to life (VE, 205). The “work of death” to which this nostalgia for communion inevitably leads, therefore, attempts to harness death as a means of overcoming life in its finitude. Of course, this communal will to an immortal or “deathless” immanence is doomed to fail (IC, 17). But not before it accomplishes its work of death, “at least to a relative degree, in the form of the domination, oppression, extermination, and exploitation” of all those it deems unworthy of sharing in the “superior, immortal, or transmortal life” of an impossible communal fusion (IC, 14, 17-18).
4.3.3. Sovereignty, Sacrifice, and the Sacred

Thus, what I described in Chapter 2 as Bataille’s desire for a “sovereign experience community,” as evinced in his antifascist writing and activism prior to the war, gives way to frustration and ultimately failure. Communism proves to be both a theoretical and political dead end, insofar as it denies human existence any share of sovereignty deserving of the name. Fascism, to the contrary, affirms sovereignty only to enslave it to the past. These radically opposed betrayals of sovereignty, both ending in an “immense failure” of community — Nancy suggests all of this leads to Bataille’s refusal of politics and eventual retreat to “inner experience” (IC, 18; CC1, 29; DC, 10, 15-16)

This refusal and retreat, Nancy argues, leads Bataille to discover the truth of inner experience: “Sovereignty is NOTHING” (IC, 18; AS2/3, 256, 430). Nancy interprets this “nothing” to mean “that sovereignty is the sovereign exposure to an excess… that does not present itself and does not let itself be appropriated… that does not even give itself — but rather to which being is abandoned” (IC, 18). This non-appropriable “excess” is precisely the “being in relation” or “being-in-common” that “community” names, which is itself “sovereign” insofar as it exceeds, and precedes, every attempt to subordinate it to the work of communion. Sovereignty negates itself, betrays its no-thing-ness, in other words, the moment it claims to appropriate this excess as its work. Which is to say that no “thing” and no “being,” individual or collective or otherwise, is or ever could be the sovereign ground or foundation of community.

“Sovereignty is NOTHING” — it does not name the interiority of a Subject secure in the pure immanence of its “essence,” “substance,” or “identity.” It does not
name anything at all. That which is sovereign, irreducible to the work of the thing, loses itself, forfeits its position or supposition in its ex-position, in being ex-posed to an “exteriority that is impossible to recapture” (IC, 19). If sovereignty exists, it consists in the “sharing” of this truth: namely, that the living plurality of finite beings precedes and exceeds every sovereign claim on being (IC, 25).

Finally, Nancy returns his argument to Bataille’s thinking of “community” as being inseparable from an experience of “the sacred” (IC, 32). Specifically, Nancy argues that the “unworking of community takes place around what Bataille for a very long time called the sacred,” with the added emphasis on Bataille’s shift in thinking in his later works, where he will say of the sacred that it “is fundamentally nothing other than the unleashing of passions” (IC, 32; OC 7, 371). The sacred, experienced in “the unleashing of passions,” thus names a kind ecstasy or ek-stasis that only takes place in something like “community.” And if community takes place around the sacred, “a name that is perhaps purely pedantic,” but which nevertheless names this ecstasy, this is to say that it entails the communication between and across a plurality of singular beings (IC, 32-6; OC 7, 371). With Nancy, therefore, we can stress once more that this communication between and across finite beings also entails their ex-posure to an “outside,” to an exteriority that cannot be subsumed or sublated in the pure interiority or immanence of a communal Subject.

Returning to a point introduced in Chapter 1, let me conclude by arguing with and against Nancy that the work of communion, in every case a “work of death,” entails what
we could describe as the “making-sacred” of community.\(^{55}\) The result, however, is that this “sacred,” in being \textit{put to use} and thus reduced to the \textit{profane} order of productive activity, and in what appears to be a paradox, is ultimately “stripped of the sacred” (IC, 35). But the apparent paradox of this “sacred stripped of the sacred” is precisely that. It ceases to be one when we see that the work of communion produces “the sacred” in the literal sense of the term, as something made separate, set apart, or excluded (\textit{sacer}, “to cut” or “to remove”) by an act of sacrificial violence — i.e., “sacrifice” in the restricted historical-religious sense, which simply means the ritual production of “sacred things” (IC, 35). If community “now occupies the place of the sacred,” this is because the sacrificial logic of communion violently excludes the common or shared character of human coexistence from the unitary “essence,” “substance,” or “identity” claimed by an imagined communal Subject (nation, people, race, class, party, and so on), and thereby substitutes the dead substance of a “common-being” for the living fact of our “being-in-common” (IC, 35).

But as in every attempt to reduce what is not and never could be grasped as a “thing” to the metaphysical and ontotheological fiction of a unifying and unitary substance, this “sacrifice” proves to be a delusion — but is no less deadly for all that. The “sacred” that takes place in and as the “unworking” of community is “made up of nothing other than the sharing of community,” and thus cannot be “made” as one produces or makes a work (IC, 35).\(^{56}\) Just as with Bataille’s thinking of sovereignty, when it comes to

\(^{55}\) See Chapter 1.2.3. “Sovereignty, Sacrifice, and the Unsacrificeable.”

\(^{56}\) Although, as we’ll see in the next Chapter, Blanchot will complicate this last point.
the relation at stake in the question of community, “inseparable from the question of ecstasy,” one does not find any “thing” at all: “There is neither an entity nor a sacred hypostasis of community — there is the ‘unleashing of passions,’ the sharing of singular beings, and the communication of finitude” (IC, 6, 35).
Chapter Five. The Unavowable and the Disavowed: 
The Debate Between Nancy and Blanchot

5.1. Blanchot’s Reply to Nancy in The Unavowable Community

— Even more than Being, even more than the Same, the rigor of the One holds thought captive. And surely it is not some gentle madness that will free us from the One; nor are we in any way rejecting this work toward unity — on the contrary, we are working as much as is in our power toward the affirmation and the accomplishment of the world considered as a unity of the whole. And as we will continue to repeat, this is the task of each one in working and speaking. But each time, too, we will add: we must try to think the Other, try to speak in referring to the Other without reference to the One and without reference to the Same.

— We must try; and in this way will we turn toward the third kind of relation, a relation about which one must simply say: it does not tend toward unity, it is not a relation from the perspective of unity or with unity in view, not a relation of unification. The One is not the ultimate horizon (even if beyond every horizon), any more than is Being, thought always (even in its retreat) as the continuity, the gathering, or the unity of being.

— Maurice Blanchot (EI, 67)

5.1.1. Response, Rejoinder, or Reproach?

Since Blanchot’s reply to Nancy in La Communauté inavouable, published in December 1983, shortly after the inaugural publication Nancy’s “La Communauté désoeuvrée” in February earlier that year (which Nancy later modified and expanded into the book by the same title in 1986),¹ a number of studies have taken up the various points

¹ Some thirty years later, in La communauté désavouée, Nancy will speak of his “astonishment” and “bewilderment” at the speed and urgency of Blanchot’s reply (DC, 4-5).
of agreement and disagreement between the two.\textsuperscript{2} Of these, however, perhaps none chronicle the many subtle philosophical, literary, historical, and other contextual intricacies of this debate more meticulously than Leslie Hill in his recent study, \textit{Nancy, Blanchot: A Serious Controversy}.\textsuperscript{3} That said, Hill’s account of this debate is by no means a neutral survey or intellectual history, but rather takes the form of an extended polemic in defense of Blanchot. Drawing attention to the glaring “one sidedness” of the exchange, Hill sets out to redress what he regards as a series of uncharitable distortions on Nancy’s part.\textsuperscript{4}

The most serious and unmerited of these, Hill argues, is Nancy’s misreading and mischaracterization of Blanchot’s thinking of community as being haunted by “a lingering fascination with pseudoreligious communion, manifest… in [his] unthought, residual Catholicism and in the guilty memory of his prewar extremist politics.”\textsuperscript{5} Hill also takes issue with the way in which Blanchot serves as something of a foil to the “Olympian” immodesty motivating Nancy’s broader “project of an ontology of the

\begin{itemize}


\item \textsuperscript{4} Hill, \textit{Nancy, Blanchot}, 10.

\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid, 116.
\end{itemize}
common.” An adequate response to either Blanchot’s philosophical-religious-political biography or Hill’s litany of grievances with Nancy (many of which, as we’ll see, are textually and contextually justified) would take us well beyond the scope of the present chapter. Nonetheless, confirming what Robert Bernasconi had already shown nearly thirty years ago, Hill’s comprehensive study makes at least one thing clear: appearances to the contrary, Blanchot’s text is not simply a reply, nor even a congenial rejoinder, but rather an earnest reproach which presents us with a thinking of community that, in the end, is quite possibly irreconcilable with Nancy’s.

Neither this reproach nor the dissenting view it put forth were lost on Nancy. In La Communauté affrontée (2001), Nancy recalls being “gripped by the fact that Blanchot’s response was simultaneously an echo, an amplification and a riposte, a reservation, and, for that matter, in some ways a reproach” (CC, 30). We’ll consider Nancy’s answer to this reproach in the second half of this chapter. We’ll also reconsider the seeming incommensurability of their respective answers to the question of community, and ask whether they are in fact irreconcilable. But first I think it’s only

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6 Hill, Nancy, Blanchot, 103, 240.

7 Once again, Bernasconi is the first to make this argument: “The trajectory that Nancy has followed and the extent to which he believes that the task to think community can be met only by an ontology, and specifically an ontology of largely Heideggerian inspiration, has served to strengthen the extent to which one is obliged to choose between the alternatives set out by Blanchot at the beginning of The Unavowable Community…. Furthermore, this trajectory has given added resonance to a passage in “The Community of Lovers” where Blanchot seemed to side decidedly with Levinas against the dominance of ontology” (NCW, 11).
fitting, for now, to leave all subsequent commentary aside and confront Blanchot’s thinking — of community, but also of disaster, death, and above all, the Other — on its own terms.

5.1.2. The Absence of Community

The Unavowable Community consists of two parts. In the first, “The Negative Community,” Blanchot responds to the question of community by way of a fragment, specifically, Bataille’s fragmentary note on the “absence of community” and the “idea of negative community” (UC, 1-26; IE, 281). The second part, “The Community of Lovers,” in what appears to be a Levinasian reading of Marguerite Duras’ short erotic narrative, The Malady of Death, is in fact a meditation on the possibility or impossibility of different instances of community: from the restricted community of two, as in the case of lovers; to the ethical relation with “the Other,” in which the presence of a “third person” already intervenes; to the more expansive political community of a “people,” bound by ties that are either “traditional” or “elective”; and finally, to the impossible relation of “mortal substitution” demanded of the “the dying person’s fellow creature,” called to share in the unshareable singularity of the Other’s death (UC, 29-60). In each case Blanchot thinks of these different instances of “relation” as irreducibly plural, such that


9 Blanchot will also speak of death as plural insofar it pertains to all the others, and as such, contrary to the Heidegger conception, is never “mine” (MBR, 290).
the relation as such, even in the “eucharistic” intimacy of the “community of lovers,”\textsuperscript{10} precludes the possibility of its dissolution in communal unity — whether erotic, spiritual, mythic, political, or otherwise (UC, 45, 49).\textsuperscript{11} This last point is essential. We’ll return to it when we consider Nancy’s belated reply to Blanchot in The Disavowed Community.

As for the first half of Blanchot’s text, “The Negative Community,” by its heading alone, already stands as something of a refutation. The fact that it is Bataille who speaks first, and not Blanchot, signals that Blanchot’s text is no mere commentary, but rather a response to a demand contained in Bataille’s fragment: “The community of those who do not have a community” (UC, 1). It’s perhaps not insignificant that this is already a fragment of a fragment, which is to say that it is already an interpretation, if not an argument or counter-argument. The full passage reads, “Reconsider in particular the absence of community and insist on the idea of negative community: the community of

\textsuperscript{10} Nancy’s clearly misses this point in his “eucharistic” reading of Blanchot, which he cites as evidence of the latter’s tendency toward mythic “communion,” in The Disavowed Community (DC, 48-9).

\textsuperscript{11} Suspicion of mythic, mystical, spiritual, or even erotic desire for fusion into a higher unity is a recurring feature in Blanchot. See for example, this line from The Infinite Conversation, where Blanchot speaks of an experience of human existence as a “question” escaping all attempts at fleeing from the uncertainty of our condition into the assurances of such grand answers as God, Being, and the One: “This is an experience that, even while escaping all dialectical possibility, refuses to fall into some realm of evidency or into an immediate grasp, just as it has nothing to do with a mystical participation. An experience, therefore, in which the disputes of the mediate and the immediate, subject and object, intuitive knowledge and discursive knowledge, the cognitive relation and the love relation, are not transcended but left aside” (EI, 24). Or again, see the following, where Blanchot speaks of an experience excluding “everything immediate: this means all direct relation, all mystical fusion, and all sensible contact, just as it excludes itself — renounces its own immediacy — each time it must submit to the mediation of an intermediary in order to offer access” (EI, 38). Following Levinas, Blanchot will insist that this applies above all to “the experience of the Other, not as a strange relation with a man like myself, but as man in his strangeness — that which escapes all identification, be it that of an impersonal knowledge, of a mediation, or of a mystical fusion: the outside or the unknown that is always already beyond the aim of my sight, the non-visible that speech bears” (EI, 74). The “Other,” finally, calls into question the fusional aim of erotic desire: “Eros is still the nostalgic desire for lost unity, the movement of return toward true Being. Metaphysical desire is desire for that with which one has never been united, the desire of a self not only separated but happy with the separation that makes it a self, and yet still in relation with that from which it remains separated and of which it has no need: the unknown, the foreign, autrui” (EI, 53).
those who have no community” (IE, 281). In either case, the demand is clear: community is not a matter of having. Or, stated in the imperative: do not think of community as something one has or doesn’t have, as that to which one belongs or doesn’t belong. Rather, think of it as having to do with an absence, or as that which *absents* itself from every attempt to posit community as something present, as something already “there,” and in this way as resisting every aim to grasp it as a tractable presence lending itself to comprehension and appropriation (UC, 1; EI, 43-4, 48, 50-3, 73, 207-8, 302).

This sense of absence, moreover, is entirely absent from Nancy’s original text, “La Communauté Désoeuvrée.” Nancy includes it in the second chapter of *The Inoperative Community*, but three years after the publication of Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, where it already figures as a reluctant concession.\(^\text{12}\) Even then, Nancy speaks of it in relation to Bataille’s writing on the “absence of myth,” interpreting it as an instance of community’s retreat from the nostalgic and mythic work to restore community in the fullness or fulfillment of a lost sense of communal intimacy (IC, 59-60).

And yet the absence with which Blanchot is concerned doesn’t merely signify something lost or missing, something that, while “not there” now, might yet be found or summoned into being,\(^\text{13}\) even if its mode of being is not that of a communal essence: “The absence of community is not the failure of community: absence belongs to community as its extreme moment or as the ordeal that exposes it to its necessary

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\(^{12}\) See Nancy, “Myth Interrupted,” in IC, 43-70.

\(^{13}\) See also Bernasconi, NCW, 7.
disappearance” (UC, 15). Absence, absent (absentia, abesse) — that which ab-sconds or steals away from that which “is,” refusing to surrender its sense to the regime of signification maintained in and by the sense of “to be” (esse). The absence of community, prompting an insistence on and hence an affirmation of negation, but situated elsewhere than the dialectic between being and non-being, and thus beyond the reach of the metaphysical alchemy by which absence is surreptitiously turned into a higher order Presence, non-being into the full manifestation of Being — this is the extreme difficulty that Blanchot’s thinking of community puts in motion.14 Community is not a matter of having or belonging, yes — on this point Blanchot is in perfect agreement with Nancy. But insofar as having is a mode of being, perhaps even a tendency inherent to existence as such (ek-sistere, a “standing out” that is already the taking of a stance), Blanchot will have us question whether this “absence of community” demands that we renounce “our facile reverence for ontology,” no matter how fundamental this ontology claims to be, no matter how radically it sets out to think of Being as inseparable from “being-with” (EI, 51-2; UC, 43). Or, as Blanchot says elsewhere, in his thinking of human existence as silently posing “the most profound question,” a question that evades the unitary work of dialectical and ontological thinking:

When we speak of man as a non-unitary possibility, this does not mean that there would remain in him some brute existence, some obscure nature irreducible to unity and to the labor of dialectics: this is out of the question here. It means that,

14 Another example of Blanchot’s suspicion of dialectical thinking: “In a dialectical relation, the I-subject, either dividing itself or dividing the Other, affirms the Other as an intermediary and realizes itself in it (in such a way that the I is able to reduce the Other to the truth of the Subject). In this new relation the absolutely Other and Self immediately unite: this relation is one of coincidence and participation, sometimes obtained through methods of immediation. The Self and the Other lose themselves in one another: there is ecstasy, fusion, fruition. But here the “I” ceases to be sovereign; sovereignty is in the Other who is the sole absolute” (EI, 66).
through man… it may be that an entirely different relation announces itself — a relation that challenges the notion of being as continuity or as a unity or gathering of beings; a relation that would except itself from the problematic of being and would pose a question that is not one of being. Thus, in this questioning, we would leave dialectics, but also ontology. (EI, 9-10)

5.1.3. A Relation Otherwise than Being, Beholding, or… Sharing?

And so, we come back to the question: how to think of the relation at stake in the question of “community”? It’s precisely on this point, in our thinking of the “relation,” of the between and across, the passage from the one to the other — it’s on this point that Blanchot’s answer to the question of community does indeed appear to be irreconcilable to Nancy’s. At the very least it poses a fundamental challenge not easily reconciled to Nancy’s thinking of community. We thus return to a confrontation between two closely related yet radically different philosophical sensibilities: Nancy’s ambition to radicalize a Heideggerian ontology of being-with (Mitsein) recast as being-in-common (être-en-commun), matched by Blanchot’s commitment to a Levinasian ethics of relation that can only be described, with extreme linguistic and conceptual difficulty, as radically “otherwise than being” (autrement qu’être) (IC, 8, 103-05; OBC, 1-12; SW, 88-9; BSP, 1-99; SPP, 21; BB, 1-14; UC, 43; WD, 23-4; EI, 10, 47, 51, 54, 58, 209).15

15 See Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence, which more than any of his works, confronts this difficulty head on: “To be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned. The statement of being’s other, of the otherwise than being, claims to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness — the very difference of the beyond, the difference of transcendence. But one immediately wonders if in the formula ‘otherwise than being’ the adverb ‘otherwise’ does not inevitably refer to the verb to be, which simply has been avoided by an artificially elliptical turn of phrase. Then what is signified by the verb to be would be ineluctable in everything said, thought and felt. Our languages woven about the verb to be would be would not only reflect this undethronable royalty, stronger than that of the gods; they would be the very purple of this royalty. But then no transcendence other than the factitious transcendence of worlds behind the scenes, of the Heavenly City gravitating in the skies over the terrestrial city, would have meaning. The Being of beings and of worlds,
To be sure, Nancy thinks of the shared or common character of existence as being otherwise than a common-being or -essence, and thus opposes the metaphysical or ontotheological tendency to think of community as the work of an hypostatized communal Subject (IC, xxxix-xl, 14, 29, 35, 75). In this sense, and once more, Blanchot and Nancy are in perfect agreement. Concerning the relation at stake in the question of community, Blanchot will insist that it does not lend itself to unification. It does not lend itself to a thinking with a view to unity whatsoever (EI, 67). If community is irreducible to the work of communion, this is because it names a plurality that resists unity absolutely — a plurality that absolves itself, as it were, from every unifying impulse, whether that of thought, reason, knowledge, or the struggle for power that goes by the name of politics (EI, 67, 80-2, 155-6, 215-16, 312, 400, 409; UC, 5-7).

However, as already indicated above, Blanchot’s objection is more radical still. Blanchot doesn’t simply object to the “defection” implied in a word as imprecise and imperfect as “community” — he objects to a defection or a defect in language as such (UC, 2). Specifically, Blanchot’s objection has to do with a certain violence inherent to our Western languages, a violence rooted in an unspoken metaphysics that structures and delimits our speech (or writing) as well as our thought (EI, xii, xxvi-xxvii, 13, 28, 42-3,

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however different among themselves they may be, weaves among incomparables a common fate; it puts them in conjunction, even if the unity of Being that assembles them is but an analogical unity. Every attempt to disjoin the conjunction and the conjuncture but emphasizes them” (OTB, 3-4) […] “What shows itself under the name being? This name is not unequivocal. Is it a noun or a verb? Does the word being designate an entity, ideal or real, that is, or this entity’s process of being, its essence? And does this word designate? No doubt it does designate. But does it only designate? For if it only designates, then, even taken as a verb, it is a noun. And the process captured by the designation, even if it is a movement, shows itself, but is immobilized and fixed in the said. Does the mystery of being and entities, their difference, disturb us already?” (OTB, 23).
52, 60-2, 81, 132, 184-7, 212, 311).\textsuperscript{16} If Blanchot objects to “our facile reverence for ontology,” this is because he objects to the imperiousness with which the copula, the predicative force of the verb “to be” and its sovereign nomination of “beings” (this \textit{is} that, and that’s all there is to say), tacitly subsumes all speech within the appropriative grasp of comprehension (EI, 41-58, 67-8, 73, 77, 187, 207-8, 302, 399, 405; UC, 56). The \textit{logos} of ontology, however radically it frees itself from the epistemological pretenses of a knowing subject who stands before a world of knowable objects in the position of a master, nonetheless gathers beings together in order to comprehend them, and thus gathered, to discern in their manifold ways of being the “truth,” interpreted as an “unveiling” (\textit{aletheia}), of Being itself (EI, xviii-xix, 10, 16, 27-30, 34, 43, 52, 59, 67, 90, 154-5, 235, 261, 300, 440; WD, 94-8, 103-4).\textsuperscript{17}

Heidegger’s “ontological-ontic difference” between Being (\textit{Sein}) and beings (\textit{Seiende}) thus conceals an underlying drive toward unity, or a unifying impulse underlying the question of Being in whatever form.\textsuperscript{18} And while this unity of beings, disclosed in the truth of Being, does not inhere in some metaphysical or ontotheological substance situated above or beyond the world, it nonetheless brings them back to their origin — that of the “event” of Being itself, for which Heidegger uses the word \textit{Ereignis}. The temporality of \textit{Ereignis}, moreover, doesn’t name some distant origin lost to the mists


\textsuperscript{17} See Heidegger, BT, 49-61, 256-73.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 23, 28-35.
of time\textsuperscript{19} so much as the very \textit{timing of time}, the indefinite temporal horizon in or according to which the rhythm and tempo of the “to be” is tuned and calibrated.\textsuperscript{20} It’s in this sense that the event of Being is the “originary” occurrence or recurrence in which beings are not merely “given” so much as \textit{compelled} to be.\textsuperscript{21} As if our abandonment to the brute fact of Being, the incessant indifference by which the “it is given” (\textit{es gibt}) or the “there is” (\textit{il y a}) fastens us to the insomnia of an existence without rest and without pause — as if any of this had anything to do with generosity (WD, 109-10; EI, 9-10, 75-9; MBR, 272-8).\textsuperscript{22} Blanchot will say to the contrary that it is impossible to speak of this “gift” of Being, and with it the “donation of meanings” that makes us “come into our ‘own most’ being” (WD, 102), without also speaking of the “disaster” that haunts it as its unnamed and unwelcome double: “The disaster is the gift; it gives disaster: as if it took no account of being or not-being” (WD, 5). Compelled to be, made to be, always having to be by decree of the faceless, anonymous “sovereignty of the

\textsuperscript{19} But, as we’ll see when we return to Nancy, this “origin” is no less mythic for all that.


\textsuperscript{21} See Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism,” trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, \textit{Pathmarks}, ed. William McNeil, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): “Thinking…lets itself be claimed by being” (239); “Before he speaks the human being must first let himself be claimed again by being…”; “…the human being essentially occurs in his essence only where he is claimed by being…. Such standing in the clearing of being I call the ek-sistence of human beings…. Ek-sistence can be said only of the essence of the human being, that is, only of the human way ‘to be.’ For as far as our experience shows, only the human being is admitted to the destiny of ek-sistence” (247); “Being comes to its destiny in that It, being, gives itself” (255). On the “gift” or “givenness” of being, see also Heidegger, BT, 255.

\textsuperscript{22} The “brutality” and “incessancy” of existence conceived in terms of “being” or “essence” is a recurring feature in Levinas. See, for example: OE, 49-56; TO, 44-51; EE, 5-25, 51-63; TI, 22; OTB, 4-5, 162-5; LEI, 47-52; LBW, 110-11. On Nancy’s Heideggerian notion of “abandonment” or “abandoned being,” see \textit{The Birth to Presence}, trans. Brian Holmes et al (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 36-47.
accidental” — that which “gives” itself in the disaster is an existence exposed to abject passivity (WD, 3, 14-18, 28, 30-3, 47, 120). This “passivity,” says Blanchot, “is measureless: for it exceeds being; it is being when being is worn down past the nub” (WD, 17). It exceeds being, and thus escapes knowing (WD, 23-6, 82). But we can nonetheless “evoke situations of passivity” in which the disaster is temporarily drawn out of its obscurity. We sense the disaster is near, for example, in the “affliction” of ordinary pain and suffering (WD, 17; EI, 120). It becomes strangely conspicuous, however, as a kind of “night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light” (WD, 2), whenever it inscribes itself into history, or when history itself, through an inversion or perversion of time, becomes the immemorial site of the disaster — as in “the final, crushing force of the totalitarian State, with its camps; the servitude of the slave bereft of a master, fallen beneath need; or dying, as forgetfulness of death” (WD, 17). “In all of these cases,” Blanchot argues, “we recognize, even though it be with a falsifying, approximating knowledge, common traits: loss of self; loss of all sovereignty but also of all subordination; utter uprootedness, exile, the impossibility of presence, dispersion (separation)” (WD, 17-18).

We’ll come back to this notion of passivity exceeding being. But this brief detour through the “disaster” attending Being in its inescapable “givenness” calls attention to the fact that the logos of every ontology that thinks and speaks according to its measure is already a reverential “beholding” of Being, a captivation or a “being held captive” by the evental truth of Being in the advent of its “coming to presence” (WD, 101-4, 109-10,
An ontology of this sort stands in awe before this event (*Ereignis*) as the presentation of a truth that belongs solely to Being and its destinal unfolding in history, a truth authentically and properly (*eigentlich*) its own (*eigen*), belonging to the horizon of visibility and intelligibility in or against which Being itself becomes manifest (WD, 97-9, 101-4, 109-10; EI, 25-32, 38, 45-6, 55-57, 127, 160-8, 250-6). And what does this “truth” bring out of concealment? — That the horizon of Being is total, that it circumscribes the existence to which each and every existent is “given” in a way that admits of absolutely no “outside” (EI, 45-6). The *logos* of this ontology, therefore, is at once comprehending and comprehensive; and that it turns out to be quite amenable to the logic of totalitarianism appears rather unsurprising.

We thus have every right, if not a mortal obligation, to stand before the evental *logos*, already of itself the upsurge of a concealed *mythos* pretending to be philosophy, with irreverent vigilance, as if facing the false gleam of an idol (MBR, 218, 225, 245). Or, with Levinas, we could say that the religious-prophetic injunction against idolatry finds its philosophical analogue in the radical questioning that *thinking* demands of those who think, starting with the faceless brutality, the brute givenness, by which Being compels beings to be — wholly without cause, reason, or justification. In this sense,

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24 See Bernasconi’s critique of Nancy’s historiography in NCW, 13-18. While not “destinal” in a strictly Heideggerian sense, Bernasconi argues that Nancy, like Heidegger, is still beholden to the myth of Being as belonging to the philosophical patrimony of “the West” or “the Occident.”

25 Again, on the inherent violence implied in an ontology of ek-sistence, see Levinas, ET, 25-45. I appeal to the “prophetic” in a sense very similar to Levinas. See for example: TI, 22-5; OTB, 149-52.
Heidegger’s “piety of thought” is manifestly a contradiction in terms.²⁶ Thinking is not pious, but skeptical.²⁷ In much the same way that Socrates questions the elder Cephalus and the younger Polemarchus in the opening scene of The Republic, where piety and patrimony are the first obstacles the thinking concern for justice must overcome,²⁸ the skepticism “proper” to the impropriety of thought remains obstinately distrustful of every “truth” derived from the unjustified authority of what is merely given, bypassing or effacing “the movement of sense” between a plurality of mortal interlocutors. As Blanchot argues, this “plural speech” is the only logos, the only “true speech” (EI, 43), capable of contesting the de facto reign of the given, and with it, the groundless sovereignty of the disaster:

"The holocaust, the absolute event of history, historically dated, that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of Sense was swallowed up, where the gift, which knows nothing of pardon or of consent, shattered without giving place to anything that can be affirmed, that can be denied — gift of every passivity, gift of what cannot be given. How can it be kept safe, even by thought? How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including the safekeeping of thought?

In the mortal intensity, the fleeing silence of the countless cry."²⁹


²⁷ See Levinas, OTB, 165-71.


²⁹ Blanchot, WD, 47; MBR, 248; translation modified. See L’Écriture du désastre, 80:

"L’holocauste, événement absolu de l’histoire, historiquement daté, cette toute-brûlure où toute l’histoire s’est embrasée, où le mouvement du Sens s’est abîmé, où le don, sans pardon, sans consentement, s’est ruiné sans donner lieu à rien qui puisse s’armer, se nier, don de la passivité même, don de ce qui ne peut se donner. Comment le garder, fût-ce dans la pensée, comment faire de la pensée ce qui garderait l’holocauste où tout s’est perdu, y compris la pensée gardienne?

Dans l’intensité mortelle, le silence fuyant du cri innombrable."
So, to return to the question of community, we see that both Blanchot and Nancy, in their strained community with Bataille, agree that community is neither a matter of having nor belonging. We also see that Blanchot’s “reproach” consists in an affirmation of absence that refuses or resists the presumed authority of ontology, whose unifying logos appears to leave little room for a plurality exceeding the sense of Being and the presentation or “coming to presence” of its “eventual truth.” But does this reproach still find purchase in an ontology that thinks of Being, its sense and its truth, as irreducibly plural? Nancy: “finitude is the truth of which the infinite is the sense” (SW, 29). Does his objection still hold when this ontology thinks less of Being in a reverential mode of beholding than of the relation between an infinite plurality of finite beings, whose existence is in every case a coexistence (BSP, 3, 10-11, 29-31, 41-5, 66-9, 75-9, 88, 93-9)?

Even so, a profound opposition still persists. For where Nancy speaks of the relation at stake in the question of “community” — the in of “being-in-common” — as one of “sharing” (partage) or “shared” (partagé) existence between an infinite plurality of finite beings who confront each other in a mode of mutual “exposure” and “abandonment” (IC, xxxviii, 25, 28, 39, 64, 66, 69, 70, 77; OBC, 1, 3-8; BSP, 2-3, 29-30, 61, 72-4, 98; FT, 298; SPP, 34; BB, 13-14; DC, 1, 9, 19), Blanchot will insist that this relation is not one of mutuality or reciprocity or even proximity (UC, 43; WD, 19, 22-5, 120).

Rather, Blanchot, in an unmistakably Levinasian register, will describe this

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30 See also Bernasconi, NCW, 8, 10.
relation as one of extreme distance and dissymmetry between oneself and “the Other,” before whom the very being-self of this “oneself” is called radically into question (UC, 9-10; WD, 1, 4, 19-26; EI, 5, 8, 51-2, 56, 59-68, 71-4, 76-9, 129-35). It’s crucial to stress that Blanchot, following Levinas, is speaking of l’autrui, the human other in their specificity; as opposed to l’autre, the generic or indeterminate other, whatever is not le même or “the same” (UC, 3, 5-6). When we return to Nancy’s thinking of community after Blanchot, we’ll see that the privilege accorded to the other qua l’autrui is one of the more glaring points of contention between them. For Blanchot, this relation to l’autrui, irreducible to the logos of ontology, effectively places the very question of “community” in question:

However, if the relation of man with man ceases to be that of the Same with the Same, but rather introduces the Other as irreducible and — given the equality between them — always in a situation of dissymmetry in relation to the one looking at that Other, then a completely different relationship imposes itself and imposes another form of society which one would hardly dare call a “community.” Or else one accepts the idea of naming it thus, while asking oneself what is at stake in the concept of a community and whether the community, no matter if it has existed or not, does not in the end always posit the absence of community. (UC, 3)

31 See Levinas, TO, 108; TI, 35, 53-81, 215-16, 220.

32 For Blanchot, the urgency of this “being called into question” is no more conspicuous than when faced with the Other’s death: “What, then, calls me into question most radically? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community” (UC, 9). This is just one example of Blanchot’s extreme distance from every philosophical ambition to master death, including and especially Heidegger’s valorization of “being-toward-death” as the solitary Dasein’s “own most possibility” (BT, 279-311).

33 See Bernasconi, NCW, 12.
Before this relation is one of sharing, Blanchot will argue that it is already one of an a priori responsibility, a relation between oneself and the other whose mere presence (which is not the presence or presentation of “a being” or even of their being/existing, but rather the presence of that which entails a certain withdrawal and retreat from Being) demands a response: “An ethics is possible only when — with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking the backseat — an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self... feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself” (UC, 43).

Before I can share the world with another or all the others — who are they? Isn’t the indefiniteness of this “an” and this “all” or even of “some-one” marked by a certain indifference or disregard for the profound difference separating the one from the other? — I am called to account by the other who faces me, and whose look comes to me straightaway as a questioning and contesting (UC, 5-6, 8-9). Bataille: “The sufficiency of each being is contested endlessly by his neighbors. Even a look expressing admiration is attached to me like a doubt” (IE, 85; UC, 5-6). What my “neighbor” contests is my unquestioned claim on the world, starting with my uncontested “right to be” (UC, 2-3, 44; WD, 22, 130). What they call into question, in other words, is the arbitrariness of the freedom by which I assert my being in the mode of a Subject or a Self, whose relation

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34 See Blanchot, EI, 53-4, 65, 71; WD, 13, 18-28, 109, 130.

35 See Blanchot, EI, 38, 45-74.

to the world is usually one of comprehension and grasping, of subjecting all that is other than me to the forward advance my existence (again: ek-sistere, to take a stand and stand out in one’s coming to be).

If this relation is one of exposure, which it certainly is, Blanchot will say that it consists in my exposure to a demand too urgent to await a response in articulate language (UC, 1, 41, 43-4; EI, 10, 51-2, 64-71). This means that I am already exposed to a relation of responsibility preceding and exceeding ontology — a “responsibility,” moreover, that precedes and exceeds either my avowal or disavowal, my assent or refusal, my sense of being or not being responsible, of having or not having to respond (WD, 22, 25-6). With Levinas, Blanchot would have us question, therefore, if the logos of ontology adequately speaks to the sense or meaning at stake in this relation (UC, 43; EI, 10, 47, 51, 54, 58).37 Which is to say that we should ask whether this relation, experienced in a mode otherwise than being or having or willing or even sharing, has anything to do with “community” or “being-in-common” or any “common measure” whatsoever (UC, 1, 5, 8; EI, 47-8, 52, 55, 57, 63-4, 71, 77). We are justified in asking, in other words, if this relation is primarily a matter of what is shared between beings, of whatever they happen to share in the mere fact (or “facticity”) of their being-with or being-together (SPP, 20, 31, 34; BB, 1-15). For it might be the case that sharing, and hence being-in-common, is already a possessing, already a partitioning and apportioning (IC, xxxviii, 25, 28, 39, 64, 66, 69, 70, 77; OBC, 1, 3-8; BSP, 2-3, 29-30, 61, 72-4, 98; FT, 298; SPP, 34; BB, 13-14; DC, 1, 9, 19),

37 See Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” (LBW, 1-10).
however radical or just or equitable (CP, 371-98), between and among those who claim to have a share in what they presume to hold in common.\(^{38}\)

### 5.1.4. The Work of Community

Does this mean that Blanchot is opposed to the very notion of community, shared existence, the sharing of what is common to human beings? No, of course it doesn’t.\(^{39}\) Blanchot’s concern, it seems to me, is to “ground”\(^{40}\) the question of community in the relation to l’autrui, the other before me, insofar as this relation not only precedes and exceeds its ontological delineation, but also opens the dimension of exteriority by which responsibility for the singular other is extended to all the others. Ethics precedes and exceeds ontology but also politics.\(^{41}\) Or, we could say that the ontological articulation of

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\(^{38}\) See also the following in Levinas: “…the other in Heidegger appears in the essential situation of Miteinandersein, reciprocally being with one another…. The preposition mit (with) here describes the relationship. It is thus an association of side by side, around something, around a common term and, more precisely, for Heidegger, around the truth. It is not the face-to-face relationship…. I hope to show, for my part, that it is not the preposition mit that should describe the original relationship with the other” (TO, 40-1); “Miteinandersein… remains the collectivity of the ‘with,’ and is revealed in its authentic form around the truth. It is a collectivity around something in common…. Against this collectivity of the side-by-side, I have tried to oppose…. a collectivity that is not a communion. It is the face-to-face without intermediary….’’ (TO, 93-4).

\(^{39}\) We need only briefly reflect on Blanchot’s engagement with communism: “Communism: that which excludes (and is itself excluded from) any already constituted community. The proletarian class: a community with no other common denominator than penury, lack of satisfaction, lack in every sense” (MBR, 203); “This is also what communism is, this incommensurable communication in which everything public — and in this case everything is public — binds us to the other (to others) through what is closest to us” (MBR, 301). See also Blanchot, Political Writings, 1953-1993, trans. Zakir Paul, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

\(^{40}\) Without, however, attempting anything like the Heideggerian “grounding” of Mitsein or Miteinandersein in some primordial ontological event, or Ereignis.

\(^{41}\) On the priority of ethics over politics in Levinas, see ET, 25-45; FC, 15-23; TI, 300; OTB, 121. See also Bernasconi, “The Third Party. Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political,” Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 30, no. 1 (1999): 76–97; Bettina Bergo, Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty That Adorns the Earth, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999); Howard Caygill, Levinas and
the political relation to all the others with whom each and every “one” must share the
world derives its urgency from the anterior ethical relation to \(l’autrui\). It’s by way of this
relation that the sharing of existence between a plurality of beings makes itself felt as a
demand or an imperative, and thereby ceases to be a mere fact of being.

If there is indeed a chasm between “is” and “ought,” then it’s precisely the ethical
relation to \(l’autrui\) that crosses it. Thus crossed, the “in” of being-in-common, the sharing
of existence between a plurality of singular existents, beyond its ontological status as a
\(fait accompli\),\(^{42}\) becomes a task or a work to be accomplished, however imperfectly. This
is perhaps the “work toward unity” to which Blanchot alludes in the epigraph to this
chapter (EI, 67). If Blanchot understands this as “the task of each one in working and
speaking,” then surely it proceeds from an affirmation of the irreducible plurality, and
radical \(alterity\), that precedes it (EI, 67). This relation to alterity and plurality is precisely
what Blanchot calls the “relation of the third kind” (EI, 66-74). It is irreducible to either
the work or the speech that subordinates the other according to “the law of the same” (EI,
66). Nor does it pertain to the sovereign release from working and speaking attained in
the ecstatic fusion of lovers wordlessly “losing themselves in one another” (EI, 66).
Rather, it has to do with the imperative implied in the question of “the human
‘community,’ when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man

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\(^{42}\) See Nancy in “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics,’ where he effectively reduces “ethics” to the
“accomplishment…of Being” (SPP, 15).
— a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation,” which the “experience of language leads one to sense” (EI, 71).

The work of community is thus quite similar to what Levinas describes as the “work of justice,” which transpires in the mediated exteriority of the world, beyond the immediate exteriority of the “face,” as it were (EI, 45-8, 54-7, 77).43 In this sense, Blanchot is justified in saying of Nancy’s “inoperative” or “unworked” (désoeuvrée) community, that this “unworking” (désoeuvrement) is meaningless without the anterior exigency of a “work” (oeuvre) that would justify it (UC, 20, 56).44 And unlike the “work of communion,” in which the “members” of a community strive to overcome their insufficiency in the full presence or immanence of a unitary communal Subject, the work of community, and the plurality that constitutes it, is to affirm this insufficiency (which, for living beings, is always bound to the constitutive vulnerability of bodies, or the mortal exposure to injury and destruction that the body is), not as an ontological defect, but as an infinite call to responsibility.45

This call to responsibility is “infinite” in a number of senses that are as rigorously non-metaphorical as they are non-sentimental46 (EI, 49-82). The relation to l’autrui, of the one to the other, is itself infinite, insofar as the other as other precedes and exceeds

43 See Levinas, ET, 25-45; TI, 28, 78; OTB, 160.

44 See also Hill, Nancy, Blanchot, 11, 110.

45 See also Bernasconi, NCW, 4: “…this refusal of the Other threatens… to transform the idea of a community without communion to a community without remainder.”

46 Like Levinas, Blanchot is critical of any view that sentimentalizes or otherwise spiritualizes the relationship to l’autri. See for example his reservations about Martin Buber in MBR, 245-6. Compare this to Nancy’s dismissal of any talk of an “Other” as little more than a “theologizing residue” (BSP, 45).
my grasp (comprehension, knowledge, power) as well as any “common measure” that would annul their alterity after the fact: e.g., in a mutual experience of empathy or sympathy; or in establishing moral or legal or political relations of reciprocity, as in the so-called “social contract” between equals (EI, 63-4, 71, 77, 93). As already indicated above, the imperative that issues from this relation is equally inexhaustible, insofar it precedes and exceeds my sense of having or not having to respond, of being or not being responsible, such that I could never respond (whether in a mode of assent, refusal, or indifference) in a way that would absolve me of the relation (EI, 72, 130; WD, 13, 18, 21-7, 109, 120). In yet another sense, which we might call political or pre-political, the presence of a “third party” already intervenes in this relation insofar as it ultimately pertains to every other (WD, 13, 18, 23-6, 28; EI, 71). This is precisely how Blanchot understands Levinas’ notion of “substitution.” The relation to l’autrui — who could be any other — contests and suspends my sense of “self” as unique and irreplaceable: “I am not indispensable; in me anyone at all is called by the other — anyone at all as the one who owes him aid” (WD, 13). Before l’autrui, who absolves me of the reflexive attachment to “myself,” the very identity of the “I” is displaced by the “un-unique, always the substitute” (WD, 13). And finally, concerning the material and bodily

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47 Levinas’ thinking of compassion as distinct from empathy, sympathy, or even pity, and as establishing social relationships of reciprocity by preceding them.


49 See Levinas, OTB, 99-129; LBW, 79-95.

50 Contrast this to Nancy’s claim that “responsibility to oneself” is the “proper” relation of the “I” towards its own existence (SPP, 30-3).
presence of these others, in their being born and living and dying, I am confronted with
the persistence of an innumerable plurality of needs that only ever admit of partial
satisfaction: e.g., those of hunger and thirst, of injury and illness, pain and suffering and
the cry for merciful aid; but also release from solitude in love and friendship (EI, 44-5;
WD, 27-9, 101).

All of this is to say that this call to responsibility and the “work” it demands is
precisely what absents itself from the community — as if to interrupt a tendency toward
communion already inherent to being-in-common (UC, 5-7; EI, 75-9).\footnote{Regarding
Levinas’ thinking of l’autrui as an “interruption” or “disruption,” see Kris Sealey, “The
Primacy of Disruption in Levinas’ Account of Transcendence,” \textit{Research in Phenomenology},
40 (2010): 363–77.} For what is “communion” if not the communal expression of the singular being’s tendency to close in
on itself, to see in the insufficiency of the other or the others confirmation of (or a
perceived threat to) one’s superior sufficiency? Blanchot: “Left on its own, a being closes
itself, falls asleep and calms down” (UC, 5). And yet this sleep never goes uninterrupted
for very long: “A being is either alone or knows itself to be alone only when it is not”
(UC, 5).

The final impossibility of either untroubled solitude or complete sufficiency is
perhaps what the word “community” speaks to, or is the impossibility that community
names: “The existence of every being thus summons the other or a plurality of others…. It
therefore summons a community: a finite community, for it in turn has its principle in
the finitude of the beings which form it and which would not tolerate that it (the
community) forget to carry the finitude constituting those beings to a higher degree of
tension” (UC, 6). This plurality to which each being is somehow held hostage,\(^{52}\) endlessly exposing the lie of solitary existence, thus confronts each being less as a brute ontological fact than an insoluble problem. The communal “solution” to this problem, in the same way that the self-sufficiency of the “individual” is the instinctive solution to their exposure to insufficiency, presents itself in the community’s “tendency towards a communion, even a fusion, that is to say an effervescence assembling the elements only to give rise to a unity (a supra-individuality) that would expose itself to the same objections arising from the simple consideration of the single individual, locked in his immanence” (UC, 7).\(^{53}\) And that which or they who objects is l’autrui, the other before me — the stranger who, interrupting my relation to the familiar as well as every communal tendency toward the familial, confronts me with a relation of distance and separation that can only be annulled through violence (EI, 52-7, 60-5, 68, 77; WD, 22). Before l’autrui, whose face resists violence by not resisting it — naked, exposed, vulnerable, “susceptible to wounding and outrage”\(^{54}\) — the will to immanence does indeed prove to be a will to death, for the only act capable of achieving it completely is murder: violent negation of the other’s transcendence as other (EI, 54, 60-3; WD, 30).

\(^{52}\) On the notion of being held “hostage” to l’autrui, see the following in Levinas: “I am responsible to the point of being a hostage” (OTB, 59); “It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity…. The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity” (OTB, 117); “Peace then is under my responsibility. I am a hostage, for I am alone to wage it, running a fine risk, dangerously” (OTB, 167).

\(^{53}\) Bernasconi stresses this implicit tendency toward communal immanence in Nancy (NCW, 12).

\(^{54}\) Levinas, LBW, 86: “The ego is… a susceptibility, or an exposure to wounding and outrage…."

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The “work” to be accomplished, therefore, the “work of justice,” or the work that justifies the mere fact of being-in-common, is to answer the call to responsibility that retreats from the community’s tendency toward communal violence by interrupting and contesting it. We thus return to Blanchot’s notion of a “passivity exceeding being” (WD, 17). Only now it doesn’t name the “disaster,” but rather l’autrui, the other whose passivity confronts Being, or the implicit violence by which beings are compelled to persevere in their being, as a provocation to disaster — destruction, slaughter, annihilation, holocaust (UC, 1; WD, 31). Thus Blanchot will say that “what absolutely exceeds me,” the passivity exceeding being that comes to me in the “visage” of l’autrui, doesn’t announce itself without a certain “gravity” or even “terror,” for this passivity “is absolutely at my mercy” (EI, 60). From this, Blanchot concedes, “One would have to say… that man facing man like this has no choice but to speak” — thereby affirming the infinite distance that separates the one from the other by way of a logos that traverses without collapsing it — “or to kill” (EI, 60-1). The “work of community” is thus twofold: to confront the disaster inherent to the brute fact of being-with, which tends toward murderous immanence; and to affirm the ethical priority of a passivity exceeding being, safeguarding it from disaster (WD, 47, 120-1).

Just as Blanchot will say that the literary work (oeuvre), in its relation to every reader, demands its own “unworking” (désoeuvrement), that was written or said retreat

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55 Spinoza’s conatus is, for Levinas, precisely the relentless forward advance of being or existing that l’autrui disrupts and calls into question (OTB, 4-5, 18, 54, 70-9, 92, 127, 142). Compare this to Nancy, who interprets the conatus as “the effort and desire to maintain oneself as ‘with’ and, as a consequence, to maintain something which, in itself, is not a stable and permanent substance, but rather a sharing and a crossing through” (BSP, 87).
from the work in saying always more than can be communicated in words (SL, 190-207), so does the work of justice retreat from the community with each birth and each death: “That is what founds community. There could not be a community without the sharing of that first and last event which in every case ceases to be able to be just that (birth, death)” (UC, 9). The continuously discontinuous appearance and disappearance of every other demands the work always be taken up anew — always inadequate to the urgency of the call that demands it, without any guarantee that it will be answered or even heard, forever incomplete and incompletatable. The unworking of this work, in other words, demands of the community that it always justify itself, that it never claim or proclaim justice as an accomplished work. It is thus a work without end — but also without project, since it receives its directives not from goals to be realized in the future, but from an imperative that always comes to it as already past (EI, 46-7, 74). And having nothing to do with means, it is opposed in principle to the principle of utility, which demands toil without justification, giving priority instead to a principle of generous loss and expenditure. Which is to say that the work is to be shared, that it be

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56 In this sense, Blanchot’s thinking mirrors Levinas distinction between the “saying” and the “said” (OTB, 5-9).

57 Regarding Blanchot’s notion of “mortal substitution,” see Bernasconi, NCW, 10.

58 See Levinas, ET, 44-5.

59 See the following Levinas: “Responsibility is anterior to all logical deliberation summoned by reasoned decision…. In the ethical anteriority of responsibility… there is a past irreducible to presence that it must have been” (TO, 111).

60 See Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure” (VE, 116-29).
always taken up in common, never by oneself or for oneself alone, but always with and
for the others, whoever they happen to be.

In responding to the question of community, Blanchot gives Bataille the first
word. It only seems fitting, then, as we leave Blanchot and turn to Nancy once more, to
give him the last: “Thus I speak, everything in me gives itself to others!” (IE, 131).

5.2. Nancy’s Thinking of Community after Blanchot: A Polemic

In their disparate plurality, even though they belong to the multiple and are real only as
multiple, they remain strangers, separate from one another, crossing paths without
meeting: this is their solitude, a plurality that constitutes them neither out of their own
singularity nor in view of a superior unity.

— Maurice Blanchot (SNB, 34)

But the infinite — and it is precisely this that distances me from Blanchot — does not
simply consist in escape and vanishing. It is all this in a much more present and concrete
manner — in the efficacy of relation, proximity, contact.

— Jean-Luc Nancy (DC, 78)

The trajectory that Nancy has followed and the extent to which he believes that the task
to think community can be met only by an ontology of largely Heideggerian inspiration,
has served to strengthen the extent to which one is obliged to choose between the
alternatives set out by Blanchot….⁶¹

— Robert Bernasconi (NCW, 11)

5.2.1. Blanchot’s Fundamental Challenge to Nancy’s “Ontology of the Common”

In the opening pages to Nancy’s belated reply to Blanchot in The Disavowed
Community (2014), Nancy briefly remarks on the “distinctive” way in which The

⁶¹ My emphasis
Unavowable Community figures in Blanchot’s body of work (DC, 2-3). Given the expressly fragmentary style of the latter’s prodigiously hybrid oeuvre, “which, in addition to fictional texts, is almost entirely composed of books made up of fragments and collections of essays or other texts that are fragmented formally,” and correlatively, the rarity as well as brevity of “[b]ooks with a single a focus,” Blanchot’s sustained argument in The Unavowable Community alerts us to the fact that it demands to be taken seriously (DC, 3). But that Blanchot’s text “constitutes a hapax⁶²… which is at once practical, political, and ontological,” makes responding to this demand all the more onerous (DC, 3). This is certainly the case. For while the question of community determines Nancy’s oeuvre in a conspicuous and singular way, the task of deciphering Blanchot’s only work devoted entirely to this single theme is immediately faced with the additional task of reading it against the broader contextual backdrop of disparately related themes as they sporadically come in and out of view in his thinking and writing as a whole.⁶³

We’ll return to Nancy’s critical reading of Blanchot in the final section of this chapter. I’ll contend that Nancy falls short of the interpretive challenge he himself identifies, with the result that his reading of Blanchot presents us with a hurried and at times snide caricature rather than a textually and contextually justified critique. First, however, I’d like to argue that Blanchot’s disagreement with Nancy was decisive insofar

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⁶² As in hapax legomenon, the single occurrence of an idiosyncratic word or phrase encountered in the reconstruction and interpretation of ancient texts, the pastoral epistles in the New Testament being a notable example.

⁶³ This is also why I’ve largely limited myself to those texts where Blanchot’s focus is more expressly theoretical and philosophical than literary, having made the rather arbitrary decision to leave his works of fiction and literary criticism aside.

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as the ensuing trajectory that Nancy’s thinking of community follows from 1986 onwards repeatedly bears the traces of their initial exchange. If the theme of community figures as a veritable “hapax” in Blanchot, this solitary invocation was certainly received, if only gradually or belatedly or begrudgingly, as something of a provocation. Framed in this way, it’s possible to read Nancy’s ambition to situate the question of community within a broader “ontology of the common” as an attempt (whether acknowledged directly or indirectly, left unavowed or openly disavowed) to refute his one-time accuser — whose objection to such an ambition, philosophically speaking, couldn’t be more cutting.

Clearly, it would be disingenuous to describe Blanchot’s “reproach” of Nancy as a model of clarity, at least not the kind of clarity that leads a certain anglophone style of philosophy to dismiss a writer like Blanchot out of hand as needlessly obscurantist (and there’s certainly some truth to this). But Blanchot’s objection to Nancy’s subordination of the alterity and plurality at stake in the question of community to the sovereign logos of ontology is as incisive as it is confounding. If this is hard to see, as I attempted to demonstrate in the first half of this chapter (hopefully with a minimal degree of success), the problem has less to do with idiosyncrasies of style than the extreme difficulty in voicing an objection to “our facile reverence for ontology” within the grammatical and conceptual parameters of a language determined by ontology. This difficulty cuts to the quick, so to speak, of the philosophical divide between Nancy and Blanchot. The fundamental challenge Blanchot poses to Nancy is this: the radical alterity and irreducible

plurality that constitutes something like “community” precedes and exceeds its articulation in an ontology, and as such, the question of community must cede priority to the ethical relation in which each “one” finds themselves responsible or accountable for every “other.” If the relation at stake in the question of community is one of a “measureless responsibility” (FT, 290-1, 296), as Nancy himself argues, then one has to look elsewhere than ontology to justify community, to open it to the possibility of justice or just relations between a measureless plurality of beings who are in each case singular.

With Blanchot, we could say that “alterity,” the radical asymmetry or dissymmetry between the one facing the other, opens or exposes community to its “respiration,” introducing the necessary interval between its dilation and contraction from the singular to the plural and vice versa (EI, 76). The logos of ontology, or what Nancy calls the “sense” (sens) of being (être), in its circulation and dissemination, which constitutes the “world” as the common space or spacing wherein sense and meaning take place (SW, 1-9, 12-15, 27-8, 54-8, 68-80, 154-65), does indeed transpire between the singular and the plural — but it does not breathe. In the breathless “sharing of sense” or “sharing of voices,”65 there is no respiration, there is no pause, no interval, no time other than the relentless forward advance of “ek-sistence” to rescue these voices from a common asphyxiation. The response demanded in the ethical relation of “one facing the other” cannot transpire without this respiration, without an interruption of the “being-in-common” of a plurality of singular existents who confront each other in a mode otherwise than ek-sistence. It is necessary, in other words, for “this hiatus… that introduces

waiting,” to which the “interruption in language itself responds” (EI, 77), to arrest us from the reflexive assertion of our “right to be,” thereby intervening on the antagonism between competing or clashing “rights” to which this assertion inevitably leads.66 In a sense, this responsibility demands nothing less than a momentary ceasing to be. This isn’t to suggest some nihilistic descent into nothingness or non-being, but rather speaks to a stopping or a yielding to the demand that I temporarily suspend my “perseverance in being” — the conatus in which Spinoza discovers the very essence of existence67 — and give due consideration to the other before me.

This interruption, moreover, has to do with space just as much as time. For without “the pause that permits exchange, the wait that measures infinite distance” (EI, 79), there is no room for the other, much less all the others, who infinitely precede and exceed the arbitrary egoism (little more than an ontological reflex in need of justification) inherent to my tacit claim on being as “properly” (eigenlicht) mine and mine alone (mein or meine). That Heidegger’s “destinal” ontology of an historically privileged “people” (Volk) tasked with sheltering the “event of Being”68 (Ereignis) corresponds to a totalitarian politics of conquest and expansion, which effectively denies the “right to be”

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66 This is one possible interpretation of Levinas’ argument in Otherwise Than Being, Chapter 1, “Essence and Disinterest,” where he describes the “inter-esse,” or the ontological articulation of the common space between beings, as one of ruthless self-interest (OTB, 4-5).

67 Spinoza, Ethics, IV.P22-25.

of other “peoples,” is no aberration. Rather, it is the logical (which isn’t to say “reasonable”) extension of the attempt to subordinate the question of community to an ontology of “being-with” (Mitsein) or “being-with-one-another” (Miteinandersein) — which, given its articulation in the pure interiority of an exemplary Volk bound together in the communal intimacy of an exclusive Gemeinschaft (which already connotes a common appropriation: Ge-mein-schaft, literally a relation of common ownership; or the common ownership of a single “essence,” as in Gemeinwesen), should perhaps be translated as “being-one-with-another.”

Thus, in what follows, I shift our attention to Nancy’s attempt to derive or recover an ethics of responsibility from Heidegger’s underdeveloped notion of Mitsein by way of a radicalized “coexistential analytic” of “being-with” (BSP, 93-9). We’ll then consider the “apocalyptic turn” in Nancy’s thinking, where the precariously “common” or “shared” character of human coexistence is framed against the auto-destruction or deconstruction of “the West” and the globalization of its sacrificial paradigm of sovereign violence (CC1, 23-36; CC2, 19-30; BSP, xi-xvi, 101-43). Reading Nancy against the grain of his labored attempt to salvage Heidegger’s ontology from both the “archi-

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69 Nancy is astute enough to see in Being and Time a bellicose notion of “authentic being-with”: “…it is a matter of a common cause for which it is necessary to fight, which supposes that the people gives itself first and foremost in a conflict with other people” (BB, 9). And yet elsewhere he is quick to dismiss Heidegger’s lapse into Nazism as precisely an “aberration” (SPP, 14) or a mere “shortfall in thinking” (BB, 5).

70 See Heidegger, BT, 149-68, 436-43.

fascism” (BB, 5; BH, 13)\(^{72}\) and metaphysical or “historial anti-Semitism” (BH, 10, 52) that calls his entire oeuvre into question, I’ll elaborate three main points of criticism.

(1) First, in his caricature of Blanchot and Levinas as sanctimonious guardians of the “grand Other” (SV, 245), derided or dismissed as a “theological residue” of a tired, moralizing spiritualism (BSP, 45; DC, 23-8, 37-9, 61-5, 72-4), Nancy rejects the only serious philosophical challenge to his Heideggerian commitments, and as a result, is unable fully to extricate himself from the ponderous failings he nonetheless attributes to Heidegger. (2) Second, in his critique of Heidegger’s mythic obsession with origins, foundations, and the “coming to presence” of a new beginning in “the event of Being,” realized in the common destiny of an historically exceptional “people,” Nancy remains beholden to the mythic and essentializing figure of the “the West” or “the Occident,” speaking of its metaphysical, theological, and political historicity as though it were a monolithic entity with an identifiable origin and inevitable end (as in \textit{occident}, “decline”) (BB, 1-15; BH, 5-62). (3) Lastly, before I conclude by returning to his critical reading of Blanchot in \textit{The Disavowed Community}, I’ll argue that the logic of sacrificial violence that plays itself out between competing sovereignties, which Nancy emphatically opposes to the philosophical, ethical, and political imperative to think of our common condition as demanding to be shared in a mode otherwise than sovereign politics allows (BSP, 101-43), is precisely if not “properly” the political correlate of an ontology bereft of an ethics capable of responding to the radical alterity and plurality at stake in the possibility (or

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“impossibility,” in the precise sense in which Blanchot and Bataille speak of an experience or a demand touching on the “extremity of the possible,” thereby contesting the arbitrary limits of what is merely conceivable, feasible, practicable, or useful) of an existence shared without sovereignty.

5.2.2. Nancy’s Attempt at a Heideggerian Ethics of the Common

Nancy announces his ambition to think through the possibility, already affirmed as philosophical necessity, of being and of existence as essentially “shared,” as early as 1982 in La partage des voix, an essay on the phenomenological and ontological turn in philosophical and theological hermeneutics initiated by Heidegger in Being and Time (SV, 211-59). There he voices the need to redress a profound shortfall in the history of Western philosophy, which by and large, fails to give due consideration to a constitutive aspect of the human condition deserving of rigorous philosophical analysis. In its fascination with the “universal,” philosophy overlooks the fact that “interpretation of the universal” only ever transpires in “its division in singular voices, in singular scenes, infinitely approaching and infinitely isolating [i.e., singularizing] the one from the others” (SV, 245). Before it offers itself as a task of interpretation or understanding, the hermēneia announced in every discourse is already a “dialogue,” the communication of a logos from one to the other (SV, 243-8). Which is to say that the very sense of this logos, or the very sense of sense, consists in its sharing, or rather, is nothing other than this sharing (SV, 244-8). But our philosophical and theological tradition tends to speak of this sharing of sense “as a provisional necessity,” and thus stops short of “multiplying voices” beyond a dialogue between two (SV, 247). Once again, without opening onto a plurality...
of voices that make up a community, the sense communicated between beings tends toward *communion*, the merging of voices into a single, monological voice that speaks in unison (SV, 247). But the sharing of singular voices does not admit of their addition or summation into a superior “One.” The philosophical task remains, therefore, to think of “community… according to the sharing of the *logos*” — a *logos* that endlessly divides and multiplies itself, carrying its sense beyond any “hermeneutic circle” that would otherwise appropriate it within the bounds of a constrained interpretive horizon (SV, 247-8).

To be sure, there have been dissenting voices along the way. Hannah Arendt, for example, one of the more notable or notorious of Heidegger’s Jewish proteges, is perhaps the thinker of “plurality” par excellence. Even so, when thinkers such as Arendt do voice their dissent they tend to speak from or against the margins of philosophy. Arendt had long insisted that she was not a philosopher, but a *political* thinker — that is, a thinker of the *polis*, the “public space of appearance” wherein the *vita activa*, shared between a plurality of human actors, takes priority over the *vita contemplativa*, in which the solitary thinker removes themselves from the world of practical engagements in order to wordlessly behold the superior brilliance of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Bataille, the great affirmer of ecstatic communication between an infinite plurality of beings, human and extra-human alike, in distancing himself from his uncomfortable

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74 See Arendt, *HC*, 7-21, 199-205.
proximity to a morally and politically compromised thinker like Heidegger, would remain steadfast in his refusal to submit his thinking to the disciplinary and discursive constraints of the philosophical enterprise. And while Blanchot’s thinking engages the intellectual and literary history of philosophy with unmatched interpretive mastery, he would hardly be willing to call himself a “philosopher.”

As such, given the centuries old neglect of a fundamental aspect of human being, if not being as such, an aspect that constitutes an “a posteriori more ancient than any a priori” (to borrow a phrase from Levinas), Nancy’s insistence that the plurality of being(s) become a priority for philosophy merits our respect and even admiration. If I take issue with Nancy, it’s not due to his “Olympian” immodesty in this regard. It’s doubtful that modesty has ever been a philosophical virtue. In fact, one could go so far as to define philosophy, at least as it figures in those who aspire to think according to a totality that exceeds all thinking and knowing without measure, as the very immodesty of thought. My issue with Nancy, to stress once more, has to do with his one-sidedness and his uncharitable dismissal of a dissenting philosophical position that fundamentally challenges his own.

That said, and returning to the task at hand, this ambition to think of the “common” within the purview of the history of philosophy begins to acquire its full

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77 As it is for Leslie Hill, in his haste to shield Blanchot against valid criticism (of his prewar politics, for example). See Hill, 240.
momentum after the initial exchange with Blanchot. The resolve to “reinitialize”
Heidegger’s fugitive notion of *Mitsein* is explicitly outlined as early as 1986 in “Of
Being-in-Common” (OBC, 2, 6), the fourth chapter of *La Communauté désœuvrée*.78
Nancy makes it quite clear that his intention is to think of “community” and the
“common” as exceeding the restricted domain of politics or even a political ontology
(OBC, 8, 10-12). He will certainly stop along the way to trace its troubled political
legacy, especially as this legacy figures in the history of communism. But even then, his
aim remains philosophical, as in “La Comparution” (1992),79 where he sets out to reclaim
Marx from Marxism in order to reinstall him within the history of philosophy as the first
systematic philosopher of the “common.” This is also one of the first texts where Nancy
brings the question of community to bear on explicitly ethical concerns, speaking of the
“working of injustice” as being “always, in some manner, an exclusion” of certain others
from our “common condition,” and in light of this exclusion, the need to think according
to the common burden of “sharing justice and injustice” in a world increasingly fraught
with interminable wars and scores of regional conflicts (CP, 371-2, 391-2).

But it’s not until 1996, with the publication of *Être singulier pluriel*, where we
find his radicalized “coexistential analytic” of Heidegger’s *Mitsein* and *Mitdasein*
(“being-there-with”), that Nancy will articulate the ontologically “primordial” or
“equiprimordial” fact of “being-with” or “being singular plural” as the very structure of
being as such, arguing that it requires nothing short of a new ontology (an ontology,

78 The book length version of his inaugural essay by the same name (A).
79 See Nancy, CP, 371-98.
moreover, of which “the political” is but one of its many possible senses) (BSP, 1-99; BT, 149-68). This is also where Nancy’s “apocalyptic turn” announces itself most forcefully. Set against the backdrop of a bloody resurgence of ethnic cleansings in Central America, the Baltic States, and the Middle East, Nancy’s “ontology of the common” responds to a global crisis in which the economic and juridical “technics” or “ecotechnics” of the Western political paradigm of sovereign violence, having nothing short of the whole of planetary existence (the terrestrial oikos in its entirety) for its object, threatens to suture the “common” within an absolute closure (BSP, xi-iv, 101-43). “This is the ‘earth’ we are supposed to ‘inhabit’ today,” says Nancy, with discernibly mournful indignation, “the earth for which the name Sarajevo will become the martyr-name, the testimonial-name: this is us, we who are supposed to say we as if we know what we are saying and who we are talking about” (BSP, xiii). “This earth,” devastated by a civilization rending itself to shreds, “is anything but a sharing of humanity” (BSP, xiii).

To the contrary:

It is a world that does not even manage to constitute a world; it is a world lacking in world, and lacking in the meaning [sens] of world. It is an enumeration that brings to light the sheer number and proliferation of these various poles of attraction and repulsion. It is an endless list, and everything happens in such a way that one is reduced to keeping accounts but never taking the final toll. It is a litany, a prayer of pure sorrow and pure loss, the plea that falls from the lips of millions of refugees every day: whether they be deportees, people besieged, those who are mutilated, people who starve, who are raped, ostracized, excluded, exiled, expelled. (BSP, xiii)

The apocalyptic gravity that weighs on these words testifies to the ethical sincerity of Nancy’s plea for a “compassion” or “co-suffering” that would make the pain of this world at war with itself the shared experience of our common condition:
What I am talking about here is compassion, but not compassion as a pity that feels sorry for itself and feeds on itself. Compassion is the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification; it is the disturbance of violent relatedness. (BSP, xiii)

All of this is to say that Nancy’s attempt at an ethics of the common is no idle exercise in “moral philosophy” (FT, 289-99; SPP, 13-14, 29). The exigency to which it responds or corresponds, this profound and unpardonable failure of humanity, is the same exigency that we find in Blanchot and Levinas, for whom the incalculable horrors of the Holocaust were definitive in deciding the philosophical, ethical, and political priority they cede to the radical alterity of the human other.

The motif of an ethics of responsibility figures most prominently in two essays published in 1999. In “Responding to Existence,” Nancy explicitly frames this exigency in terms of a “measureless responsibility” or “co-responsibility” that coincides with the ontological fact of our always and already “being-with” countless others with whom we must share the world, a world in which the very possibility of sharing anything resembling a “world” steadily retreats from every horizon of possibility (FT, 289-99). The philosophical scaffolding for this ontological articulation of responsibility is outlined in “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics,” which makes the argument that Heidegger’s thinking of the “sense of Being” already entails an “ethos” of responsible “comportment” or “conduct” toward oneself and others (SPP, 13-35).

In both cases, Nancy’s intention to distance himself from an “ethics of alterity,” or a call to responsibility originating in “the Other,” or an “otherwise than being,” is abundantly clear. The result is an “ethics” that contrasts with the thinking of responsibility that we find in Blanchot and Levinas in almost every crucial aspect: e.g.,
the primacy of action over passivity, of promising over responding, of thinking over speaking, of grace over law, of proximity over distance, of “ek-sisting” over waiting, of presence over pause, of the future over the past, of “unlimited interdependence” over infinite asymmetry and non-reciprocity — and of course, a relation of mutual sharing over one of exposure to an unshareable alterity (SPP, 2-12, 15-20, 22-4; FT, 291-8). Simply put, the result is a responsibility, not to the singular other who confronts me face-to-face, but rather, “a responsibility… that faces no one but ourselves” (FT, 289). Nancy presents us with a responsibility, in other words, which oddly corresponds less to a “community” or to the sharing of a common plurality than to an “autistic multiplicity” — whose impending closure, and with it, the obliteration of the “common,” Nancy feels obligated to preempt (BSP, xiii).

Perhaps the most serious challenge standing in the way of Nancy’s attempt to derive an ethics of responsibility from a Heideggerian ontology of “being-with” consists in the infamous debacle of “Heidegger’s Nazi engagement,” above all “his almost complete silence on the camps,” both of which compromise his philosophical legacy in ways that are as fundamental as they are indefensible (SPP, 12). To Nancy’s credit, his critique of Heidegger’s philosophical, moral, and political failings has come a long way since the publication of “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics’” (we’ll return to this shift in Nancy’s thinking shortly). But this text clearly reads as the labored effort, replete with one equivocation after another, of a disciple in distress straining to salvage a fractured philosophical edifice from the wreckage of his master’s fatally compromised past. If Nancy’s “texts are littered with snide asides concerning Heideggerian pieties and the high
priests of Heideggerianism,” as Marie-Eve Morin and Peter Gratton suggest, this most certainly isn’t one of them.\(^8\) For despite prefacing his re-reading of Heidegger’s ethics as “striving to be as strictly faithful as possible, while avoiding piety,” the entire argument hinges on an “ethics” that is comically sanctimonious in way that makes Blanchot’s and Levinas’ alleged moralizing and theologizing spiritualism of the “grand Other” appear irreverently and dispassionately sober (or “disintoxicated,” as Bataille would say) by comparison (SPP, 14).

What else are to make of the great German thinker, who speaks of the “proper dignity” of man as consisting in his privileged nomination as “the shepherd of Being,” tasked with “guarding its truth,” and finding in this truth nothing less than the “liberation of man for the dignity of his \textit{humanitas}” (SPP, 18, 23-4)?\(^8\) How can we not regard Nancy as disingenuous when he insists “[t]here is nothing mystical about this,” or that “[t]his ethics is no more an aesthetics than it is a mysticism” (SP, 30-1)? And how are we not to detect the most flagrantly pious of “Heideggerian pieties” when Nancy himself affirms this ethics of resolute being as a matter of “upholding oneself” and “bearing oneself,” of conducting oneself “in a way befitting of the injunction of Being — which is an injunction to be-eksistent” (SPP, 32-3)? What could be more piously Heideggerian (or ponderously masculine), than to describe the ethos proper to this “ek-sistence” in the following terms: “Conduct, dignity, is a matter of bearing. One must bear oneself: bear up before the responsibility for making-sense which has unfolded unreservedly. Man

\(^8\) Gratton and Morin, eds., \textit{The Nancy Dictionary}, 8.

must understand himself according to this responsibility.” (SPP, 33)? And, how, finally, are we to believe that one can possibly retrieve an ethics of responsible concern for another, in a mode otherwise than magnanimous condescension or concession before the common human herd, from this ontological injunction to hold fast in one’s resolve to conduct oneself in a manner “proper” to their Dasein, the dignity proper to “man,” ever the faithfully receptive site (Da) where Being (Sein) “gives itself” in its essential dignitas?

5.2.3. Nancy contra Nancy: The Sovereign Brutality of Being

In “The being-with of being-there” (2003/08, BB) and The Banality of Heidegger (2015/17, BH), Nancy confronts Heidegger’s philosophical, moral, and political failings head on, submitting his “destinal” thinking to thoroughgoing critique. The former was written well before the posthumous publication of Heidegger’s private Black Notebooks in 2014. There his concern is to initiate a radical re-reading and re-configuration of Heidegger’s Being and Time, with the aim of rescuing or restoring the “unthought” priority and possibility of the “with” (Mitsein, Midasein) that Heidegger himself had discovered, only to erase or efface it in an “archi-fascist” ontology of an historically privileged “people” (BB, 5). In The Banality of Heidegger, Nancy appeals to Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil” so as to read the “metaphysical anti-Semitism” revealed in the Black Notebooks against the backdrop of the ideological and juridical “banality” by which anti-Semitism embedded itself in the cultural fabric of respectable European society, arguing that Heidegger took up this anti-Semitism, “banal and unthinking by
definition,” without ever thinking to question either its blatant stupidity or dubious historical provenance (BH, 6, 52).

As for the argument in “The being-with of being-there,” Nancy frames his critique in terms of Heidegger’s reduction of Mitsein and Mitdasein to a quasi-dialectical antagonism between the “proper” and “improper,” or the “authentic” and the “inauthentic” (BB, 6-11, 14). Again, the problem has to do with the fact that Heidegger affirms Mitsein/Mitdasein as being constitutive of the very essence of Dasein, or human being as such (BB, 4; BT, 149). And this “shortfall in thinking” is not only that the “with” in Mitsein/Mitdasein remains “unthought,” or even that Heidegger, acknowledging at the outset that this “being-with” is “equiprimordial” or “co-originary” with the privileged ontological status of “being-there,” fails to treat it with the same rigor that he does in the existential analytic (BB, 5; BT, 149). Rather, the problem is endemic, so to speak, to the way in which Heidegger thinks of the relation between Dasein, the mode of existence “proper” to the individual human being, and Mitsein/Mitdasein, the mode of co-existence proper to communal being or being-in-community (Gemeinschaft), as essentially one of struggle and conflict (BB, 9, 11; BT, 436-43).

This antagonism is already at work in the Dasein analytic, where Heidegger speaks of Mitsein/Mitdasein in terms of his existential interpretation of “everydayness” and the inauthentic-improper existence of the “Anyone” or the anonymous “They” (BB, 5-11; BT, 163-8). This “Anyone” corresponds to the “banal being-alongside” characteristic of the “commonplace,” or the “vulgar” commonness of the “common crowd” (BB, 4; BT, 165). It’s precisely against the pedestrian backdrop of this crude everydayness that the
resolute *Dasein* rises up to distinguish itself from the faceless mass of unremarkable humanity. It should thus come as no surprise that the communal articulation of *Dasein*’s ontological superiority is to be found in the “collaboration” of a superior *Mitsein/Mitdasein*, who, in their authentic being-together, constitute “a unique and exclusive ‘there’” (BB, 10; BT, 436-43). Nor should we be surprised that this proper-authentic mode of “being-with” or “being-there-with” fully realizes itself in an exceptional people (*Volk*) tasked with the “co-propriation” of an exclusive community (*Gemeinschaft*) that distinguishes itself from the inauthentic-improper vulgarity of the masses (BB, 6-7; BT, 436-43). The result of this ontological antagonism between the proper-authentic and the improper-inauthentic, Nancy argues, is “pure exteriority [the “Anyone”] and pure interiority [the “People”] at both extremes” (BB, 4).

Within this antagonism between two radically opposing modes of *Mitsein/Mitdasein*, Heidegger’s existential analysis of “being-towards-death” will also undergo a parallel transformation. In the proper-authentic movement from the singular to the plural, death will be eclipsed by destiny (BB, 7-8; BT, 436-43). For it’s precisely in its being-toward-death that *Dasein* resolves to take up its mortal destiny — to bear it, courageously, heroically, as is befitting of its essential dignity — as its “own most possibility” (BB, 13; BT, 279-311). To this singular “I,” who “dies alone,” Heidegger opposes the common death of the inauthentic-improper individual, who, being “anyone” and “no one,” does not die so much as “perish,” or merely cease to be, without leaving so much as a trace of their ever having been (BB, 8; BT, 291). *Dasein*, having resolved itself to death as properly its own, thereby readies itself for the “co-destiny” to be
authentically-properly realized in the *Mitsein/Mitdasein* of an historically privileged people (BB, 7-8; BT, 436-43).

This “people,” bound by a common fate, tasked with receiving and sheltering the forgotten Truth of Being so as to guard against its descent back into oblivion, finds itself “destined to possibility,” or a “hyper-possibility,” “through which history happens” (BB, 8-10; BT, 436-43). It will thus have to take care to guard itself from those inferior “peoples” who are lacking or “deficient in historicity” (BB, 6). And where *Dasein* resolves to face death heroically, the *Mitsein/Mitdasein* belonging to the people must ready itself for a “shared” death in the common “sacrifice” [*Selbstaufgabe*] and common “struggle” [*Kampf*] that requires a community (BB, 11; BT, 436-43).

The message the people receives from Being thus proves to be “the message of struggle,” and what binds them in the shared destiny of their being-together is “a common cause for which it is necessary to fight, which supposes that the people gives itself [*sacrifices itself*] first and foremost in a conflict with other people” (BB, 9; BT, 436-43).

At this point Nancy will stop to ask, why? Why did Heidegger give himself and his thinking over to this “archi-fascist” and patently “mythic” nonsense (BB, 3, 5, 12)? Despite the acuity of the foregoing critique, however, Nancy will answer with what is perhaps a signature equivocation, saying that the question is not so much why this

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82 Nancy translates Heidegger’s German as “sacrifice.” Marie-Eve Morin’s explanatory note to her translation of Nancy’s text is worth citing: “Concerning the word ‘sacrifice,’ it must be noted that it is used here to translate the German words *Aufgabe* or *Selbstaufgabe* [normally, a task to which one devotes oneself], which differ from the religious terms *Opfer*, *Aufopferung* or *Selbstaufopferung*. It is somewhat excessive to use ‘sacrifice’: it is more a matter of ‘self-renunciation’ or ‘self-resignation’ in favor of the *Mitsein* and its *Mitgeschick*. However, none of these terms is sufficient to render the movement of handing over one’s own singular fate to the destiny of the people. And insofar as it is a matter of ‘struggle’… it is judicious to use ‘sacrifice’ here — on the condition that a longer commentary be developed elsewhere” (BB, 11).
happened to Heidegger as why it happened to “us,” to “our history,” the history, that is, of “the West” (BB, 3, 12). He’ll repeat this evasion elsewhere (BSP, 22, 108; CC1, 23-36; CC2, 19-30; FT, 53-4, 82, 289). But it’s no more incongruous than in *The Banality of Heidegger*, where, in submitting Heidegger’s *Notebooks* to a critique that is as brilliant as it is incriminating, Nancy’s reluctance to call a spade a spade appears all the more strained and disingenuous. In other words, instead of addressing the human, all too human failure of this particular human being — whose deeds and misdeeds are “properly” and incontestably his and his alone — Nancy will invoke the mythic figure of “the West” or “the Occident” as a kind of historical-metaphysical scapegoat upon which the collective sins of “European humanity” are writ large (BH, 61-2).

Where *The Banality of Heidegger* begins with Arendt, “The being-with of being-there” concludes with a tangential reflection on the famed illicit romance between Arendt and Heidegger. Nancy suggests the “love” that figures in their correspondence from 1925 to 1928 might be thought of as bridging the gap between the “proper” and the “improper” (BB, 14). For in this “thinking love,” what is “given” in the “being-with” shared between two singular beings is nothing but the sharing of what is neither “mine” nor “thine,” but rather “ours” in a way that does not admit of violent appropriation or co-appropriation (BB, 14).

Perhaps. But perhaps it would have been more fitting, more “proper,” as it were, for Nancy to engage Arendt’s thinking *after* the disaster of total war and *after* the

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unpardonable human or inhuman terror that culminated in the “mass fabrication of human corpses.” If he had, perhaps he would have refrained from disburdening Heidegger’s personal failure onto the rather banal and morally empty notion of “collective guilt.”

Perhaps he would have seen that where all are guilty none are responsible, with the result that no one can be called to account for their deeds or misdeeds. Perhaps he would have seen that “our history” is not some mysterious force (as in the “History” of “the West,” a capitalized “grand Other” if ever there was one) working behind the backs of the unsuspecting human herd. And perhaps he would have seen, finally, that what we call “history” is the contingent and unpredictable outcome of a plurality of human actors who, beyond the brute fact of their “being together,” only ever reveal themselves in speaking and acting, and because of this, in judging their words and deeds according to the common measure of their common condition and common action — always enacted in the singular, even when done with and alongside others who, in acting together, act with a view to a common cause.

At this point I’d like to pause and stress that my argument does not at question the philosophical sincerity of Nancy’s attempt to rescue an ethics of responsibility from the “ontological arrogance” and high-minded idiocy that led Heidegger to subordinate his

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84 Arendt, OT, 441-53.


86 Ibid, 21.

87 Arendt, OT, 460-79; HC, 301-7.

88 Arendt, HC, 123, 162, 179, 244, On Violence, 44.
thinking to the fascist and anti-Semitic banalities of a mythically exalted “people”
destined to combat “other peoples” unfit to receive “the first and highest gift of beyng”\textsuperscript{89}
(BB, 6; BH, 8, 16, 25, 30). Nancy’s critique, especially in his adept reading of
Heidegger’s \textit{Notebooks}, is nothing short of masterful. My argument concerning Nancy’s
relation to Heidegger boils down to these three points of criticism. (1) As already
indicated above, Nancy is unable fully to extricate himself from the shortfalls he
attributes to Heidegger, above all his mythic and evental thinking of origin and decline.
Where Heidegger eagerly stands in wishful anticipation of the ontologically necessary
destruction of Western humanity, Nancy bemoans it as an apocalyptic inevitability
inherent to “a civilization endowed with an unheard of violence that places it in a position
to destroy itself” (BH, 44). (2) Heidegger’s \textit{Notebooks} confirm that his “archi-fascism”
and “metaphysical anti-Semitism,” and therefore his “Nazi engagement” as wells as “his
almost complete silence on the camps,” was no aberration, but rather is perfectly
consistent with his antagonistic framing of the historial-sacrificial dialectic between
waring modes of “being-with” (SPP, 3; BB, 5; BH, 5-13, 40-1, 52). On the one side:
Beyng’s nomination of a destinal “people” appropriate to the task of “another beginning”;
and on the other: the requisite destruction of a “groundless,” “worldless,” “historyless,”
“peopleless” people — the Jewish people — whose only “use” consists in hastening the
decline of an errant humanity wholly improper and inadequate to the evental glory of
what’s yet to come (BH, 8-10, 15-30, 53). (3) From this it follows, short of
philosophically untenable and morally disingenuous equivocations, that one has to look

\textsuperscript{89} Heidegger, \textit{Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)}, 190.
elsewhere than Heidegger for an ethics of responsible concern for others — an ethics, moreover, that cedes priority to the non-appropriable alterity and plurality that constitutes “community” in a mode otherwise than the resolute and pitiless “bearing” proper to being and ex-sisting.

Before we conclude with Nancy’s critical reading of Blanchot, I’d like to briefly consider Nancy’s analysis of the globalization of the Western paradigm of sovereign violence in “War, Right, Sovereignty—Technē” (1991; BSP, 101-44). Looking to Levinas’ reflections on “the ontology of war” in the Preface to Totality and Infinity as an interpretive key, I think it’s possible to read Nancy against the grain of the sacrificial logic of sovereignty he sets out to expose and condemn as both unjust and unjustifiable (TI, 22). It’s my contention that approaching Nancy’s contestation of sovereign politics in this way allows us to see that, in light of the preceding objections, his refusal of an ethics of alterity precludes the possibility of convincingly refuting the sacrificial logic by which competing sovereignties assert and maintain themselves in and as violent exclusion of disparate alterities and pluralities from the “human” as well as the “common” (BSP, xiii, 105, 137). This isn’t merely because Nancy lacks the philosophical resources to counter this sovereign act of sacrificial exclusion — to the contrary: this exclusionary violence is consequent of the “unthought” ontological violence to which his thinking of the “common” unthinkingly or unavowedly commits itself.

The parallels between Nancy’s and Levinas’ reflections on the brutal logic of war are striking. The first thing we notice is that, for both, the ever present possibility of total war is the common exigency to which thought must respond, and that it must do so by
ceding *philosophical* priority to an ethics capable of contesting war’s total claim on the human being (TI, 21-4; BSP, 101). We also notice that this ethics must distinguish itself from all traditional notions of morality and moral conduct, of which the brute fact of war makes a mockery (TI, 21-2; BSP, 124-8). For Levinas and Nancy alike, “politics,” reduced to a calculating technics or “ecotechnics” of warfare, “is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté” (TI, 21; BSP, 129-33).

But this common need to ask whether the banal fact of war “renders morality diserisory” is where the parallels between them give way to deeper dissymmetries (TI, 21). First of all, Levinas will see in war the objective manifestation of Being itself (TI, 21). In an oblique yet conspicuously impious reference to Heidegger’s inane fascination with the Delphic musings of the pre-Socratics, Levinas will say that “[w]e do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very latency, or the truth, of the real” (TI, 21). Rather, the constant threat of war imposes a “lucidity” on the mind with such “harshness” that one can’t help but see in it “the pure experience of pure being” (TI, 21). War coincides with “an objective order from which there is no escape” and from which “no one can keep his distance,” and as such, does not admit of any exteriority (TI, 21). “War does not manifest the exteriority of the other as other,” but rather manifests a “visage of being… fixed in the concept of totality” — a concept, moreover, “which dominates Western philosophy” (TI, 21).

Enclosed therein, human beings “are reduced to being the bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves” (TI, 21). This totality, coinciding or
coextensive with Being and its horizon of visibility and intelligibility, determines the
meaning and sense of human beings absolutely (TI, 22). And against this absolute
horizon, which is above all a temporal horizon, “[t]he unicity of each present is
incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to” as the event or advent in which “the
ultimate meaning” of being fully realizes itself (TI, 22). For it’s by way of this
ontological finality alone that beings come to be what they truly and properly are: “They
are what they will appear to be in the already plastic forms of the epic” (TI, 22).

Against this “ontology of war,” to which philosophical thought and language
remains beholden, Levinas, drawing from the Judaic resources of “prophetic” language
— acutely aware that “[p]hilosophers distrust it” — will affirm an “eschatology of
messianic peace” (TI, 22). If Heidegger’s disdain for the figure of “the Jew” has to do
with their being “historyless,” Levinas will affirm this as Judaism’s moral contribution to
philosophical thinking, which, at least since Hegel, makes of history — the history,
specifically, of “the West” — a metaphysical fetish (BH, 61-2). For the fact remains that
there is more than one history. Which is to say that there is more than one temporality.
Where the “ontology of war” rushes headlong toward a future that acquires its full
meaning from past sacrifices, the “eschatology of peace” disrupts or interrupts the
forward advance of Being in its relentless historicity by calling it to account (TI, 22-3).

The time of the eschaton, moreover, as opposed to that of Ereignis, is neither some
obscure arche to come nor some destinal telos that justifies history retroactively. And its
logos is not that of an ontos whose essential meaning is historical. Rather, the time of the
eschaton is that of the already and ever present past that submits “history as a whole to
judgment, exterior to the very wars that mark its end” (TI, 23). Thus called to account, the *logos* of the *eschaton* is one of *response* or responsibility for keeping the promise (at once past, present, and future, spoken or unspoken, avowed or unavowed) to restore “to each instant” — sacrificed to the “epic” of Being and its destinal unfolding — “its full signification in that very instant” (TI, 23). For it’s in the instant of promise (*eschaton*) that one is called to account (*logos*) before “all the causes” — before all the claimants lost to history, unable to make their case on their own — that “are ready to be heard” (TI, 23). The *eschaton* that demands responsible speech, the “instant” that calls one to give an account, is thus not the time of “the last judgement,” but rather the “the judgment of all the instants in time, when the living are judged” (TI, 23).

It’s quite likely that Nancy is among those philosophers who Levinas expects will meet this “eschatology of peace” with distrust and derision. In his analysis of the globalization of sovereign violence that institutes a permanent state of war, he can’t help but regard the “question of the public Good and of Peace” as a tired and tiresome philosophical, moral, and political dead end (BSP, 124-27). And in doing so he’d likely fail to see that this “eschatology of peace” has nothing to do with the temporary suspension between wars that defines “the peace of empires” (TI, 22). To the contrary, this eschatological peace that opposes the “work of justice” to the “work of injustice” that is war’s essence “does not take place in the objective history disclosed by war, as the end of that war or as the end of history” (TI, 24, 28).

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90 Which is precisely the response we see Nancy’s critique of Blanchot’s so-called of messianism in *The Disavowed Community* (DC, 36-7).
Nonetheless, this “eschatology,” or something like it, is precisely the logos that Nancy requires to justify his affirmation of a “common” existence that demands to be shared in a way that sovereign politics makes impossible. For the sacrificial logic of sovereign violence, and the techne in which this logos enacts itself, is the political analogue of the “ontology of war” underlying every sovereign claim on the “common” relation between human beings. One cannot reasonably expect to combat this logic with an ontology that already contains a logos of Being, which, despite constant equivocations between its “giving” and “abandoning” them to being, its “making”/“commanding” and “letting”/“requesting” beings come into their being, or its “coming to presence” and its “withdrawal”/“retreat” from beings, is essentially one of violent self-assertion, however one chooses to understand this “self” — e.g., as Dasein, Mitsein, Mitdasein, Miteinandersein, or some other privileged individual or communal “Subject.”

A few examples from “War, Right, Sovereignty — Technē” will suffice to show that the essentially bellicose logic of sovereignty is expressive of the same ontolog of war to which Heidegger openly affirms and from which Nancy is unable to extricate his thinking. Straightaway Nancy argues that the “ecotechnical” framing of the global oikos that sovereignty institutes and maintains is not some defect or abuse of the political authority with which it is entrusted. Rather, this total claim on the planetary conditions of the global “commons” is a “habitus” and a “way of being, a disposition of mores, an ethos” (BSP, 106). It is the ethos, to be clear, that Nancy affirms as being coextensive

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with human being as such, at once *Dasein* and *Mitsein*, in “Heidegger’s ‘Originary Ethics’” (SPP, 13-35). Sovereignty in its globalized and totalizing articulation is thus “the *ethos* of war itself; it is the disposition of mores, civilizations, and thinking that affirms war not only as the means of a politics but also as an end cosubstantial with the exercise of sovereignty [exercised, we should add, in the name of a “people,” coming from either the left or the right, whether that of the *demos* of a democracy or the *Volk* of fascisms, neo-fascisms, and totalitarianisms], which alone holds the exceptional [American, Germanic, European, or otherwise] right to it” (BSP, 106).

From this it follows, and alluding to the juridico-political-theological jargon of “exception” that we find in the sovereign politics of Carl Schmitt as well as Giorgio Agamben’s genealogy of this politics,92 that “[t]he right to wage war excepts itself from law at the very point where it belongs to it both as an origin and as an end” (BSP, 107). This sovereign *archetelos*, “is a point of foundation, insofar as we are incapable of thinking of foundation without sovereignty, or of sovereignty itself without thinking in terms of exception and excess” (BSP, 207). “The right to wage war,” Nancy continues, “excepts itself from law at a point replete with sovereign brilliance” — no less incandescent that the brilliance of Being itself — which brings into relief the banal fact that the law of the global “commons,” which, impersonal, universal, and groundless, lacking foundational justification in the exceptional status of an exception people, “does

not possess this brilliance, but needs its light, and its founding event” (BSP, 107). Which is to say that “War is also the Event par excellence,” and like the singular excellence of Ereignis, “it is not an event in some ‘history of events’ that consists in reciting, one by one, the dates of wars, victories, and treaties, but the Event that suspends and reopens the course of history, the sovereign-event” (BSP, 107).

Thus, like the Event of being that commands an historically privileged people to give themselves to the coming of its reign from on high (its sovereignty, as it were), the sovereign-event requires subjects, or beings given to be subjected to its aims and its ends, which it and it alone has the sovereign right to command into being. And once more, displacing and disburdening the “Warlords” who sovereignly compel these subjects to bear its death-dealing wages, Nancy will suggest that if the brute fact of inhabiting this oikos accomplished in and as the “art of war,” the sovereign techne to which it alone can rightfully lay claim — if this makes us uneasy or anxious, it has less to do with the sovereigns themselves than the “persistence of sovereignty in us” (BSP, 102, 108, 118-20). It has less to do, in other words, with the actual agents of war, than with the persistence of the sovereign violence that makes up “our history,” the history of “our civilization,” which constitutes the very historicity of “the West.”

5.2.4. Nancy’s Critical Reading of Blanchot in The Disavowed Community

Aside from a few oblique references to Blanchot in The Confronted Community (2001/02; CC1, 23, 27, 30-2; CC2, 30), which, written shortly after the coordinated attacks on September 11, 2001, is also prompted by a world locked into permanent state of war, it’s not until 2014, in The Disavowed Community, some three decades after their
initial exchange, that Nancy directly answers Blanchot’s “reproach” to his ontological articulation of community in “La communauté désœuvrée.” Again, as already stated above in 5.2.1., despite acknowledging that the unique position *The Unavowed Community* occupies in Blanchot’s prodigiously hybrid oeuvre demands that it be taken seriously, and that doing so would require situating this text within the broader context of his thinking and writing as a whole, Nancy fails to adhere to the interpretive challenge he sets for himself. The result is a reading of Blanchot that presents us with an unstudied and uncharitable caricature rather than a textually and contextually justified critique. His belated answer to Blanchot’s reproach thus hovers between dismissal and derision, adorned with repeated mischaracterizations of Blanchot’s Levinasian thinking of “the Other” as being little more than the “theologizing residue” of a moralizing spiritualism (BSP, 45; SV, 245; DC, 23-8, 37-9, 61-5, 72-4).

Nancy does, however, acknowledge the points of agreement between his and Blanchot’s respective arguments. Most importantly, Nancy will say that they both agree that “community” has nothing to do with some reified common-being, -essence, -substance, or -identity (DC, 17). Nancy reiterates that the refusal to reduce community to the work of a hypostatized communal Subject is precisely what he means by the “unworking” (*désœuvrement*) of community, or community as “unworked” (*désœuvrée*) (DC, 17). And on this point, he also agrees with Blanchot that this “unworking” must respond to the prior exigency of a “work” (*œuvre*) or a common task that would justify it (DC, ix, 8, 18, 24-5, 52-3, 72). He also notes in passing that, despite their diverging readings of Bataille, the motif of “death,” specifically the death of others, as being
inseparable from the sharing of community in its essential finitude, is central to his as well as Bataille’s and Blanchot’s respective re-articulations of community (DC, 17).

As for his disagreement with Blanchot, Nancy’s critique of *The Unavowable Community* elaborates on the following points of argument. (1) First, as already indicated above, from 1986 onward, Nancy’s “ontology of the common” sets out to think of the “common” or “community” beyond the restricted domain of politics or “the political,” and he make sure to confirm this ambition once more (DC, x-xi, 6, 34, 75). Blanchot’s text, Nancy argues, which starts off with an affirmation of an unmet “communist exigency,” “did not truly propose a ‘thinking of community’” (DC, 8). As a consequence, Blanchot’s thinking of community remains limited to politics, even if this politics turns out to be a “politics beyond politics” or an “ultrapolitics” (DC, ix, 16). (2) This politics, Nancy argues, is essentially mythical, mystical, and spiritual, insofar as it attempts to ground or found itself in the *communional* relation between “two,” whether conceived as the ethical relation between oneself and the other, or the erotic relation between lovers (DC, ix-x, 7, 16, 23, 28, 33-5, 39-42, 48-9). (3) This fascination with communion, Nancy suggests, proves Blanchot’s unspoken and unbroken fidelity to his prewar extremist politics, which sought something similar in a renewed and revitalized French nationalism, motivated by an “aristocratic” or “monarchic” disdain for the “common” (DC, 16, 33, 57-8, 71). (4) Lastly, and most importantly, this “ultrapolitics” turns out to be an “ultratheology,” insofar as the communion it affirms is “eucharistic,” informed by an uneasy mixture of Christian mysticism and Jewish messianism, and caught between an eroticized notion of grace and an ethical obligation to law, both of
which contest the de facto authority of the already constituted laws and institutions that structure the relations between alienated individuals in society (DC, 23, 28, 37-8, 42-4, 48-9, 65, 73).

As for the first charge, that Blanchot’s thinking of community remains political, this may very well be the case. When Blanchot takes up the question of community, he does indeed bring it to bear on the question of communism, whose “exigency” has to do with the possibility of another way of living in society, one that would seek to establish relations of economic and political equality between human beings (UC, 1-3, 30-3; MBR, 202-4, 301). Once more, if Blanchot comes back to this communist exigency, it is because this exigency demands nothing short of the “work of justice,” which, with Levinas, Blanchot affirms as imperative if we are to do justice to the relation of plurality and alterity that constitutes the common existence of human beings in society.

Whether this political thinking of community entails a “politics beyond politics” or an “ultrapolitics” is another matter entirely. To justify this claim one would have to engage the full extent of Blanchot’s political extremism as it figures in his writing and journalism in the thirties prior to the war.93 This is certainly a valid concern, and we shouldn’t overlook the moral or philosophical implications of Blanchot’s past political engagements any more than we should overlook Heidegger’s. I will say, however, that Nancy’s largely ad hominem appeal to Blanchot’s prewar politics has absolutely no textual basis in The Unavowed Community, nor in any of his writings after the war. And

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one can’t help but also see it as wildly disproportionate to Nancy’s unwillingness to condemn Heidegger’s outright fascism and political nihilism full stop, which culminated in a totalitarian and genocidal logic of annihilating sacrifice. If there’s an extremist thinking of the “common” that merits the name “ultrapolitics,” than Heidegger’s archifascism and metaphysical anti-Semitism is certainly it. The same goes for Blanchot’s ostensibly “aristocratic” or “archi-aristocratic” disdain for the “common,” which, besides having no textual confirmation after the war, pales in comparison to Heidegger’s utter contempt for the common human herd (DC, 58-60, 65, 71). And taking care not to justify Blanchot’s politics, it seems rather obvious that neither “aristocratic anarchism” nor nationalist “monarchism” are on anywhere near the same footing as the thanatopo- or necro-political ambitions of fascist and totalitarian domination.

Beyond the question of Blanchot’s compromised political past, Nancy’s argument that Blanchot’s thinking of community is essentially one of “eucharistic” communion, and that this thinking is essentially the mythical, mystical, and spiritual expression of an underlying “ultratheology,” seems to me to be the most untenable. If it has any textual basis, Nancy derives it from his overdetermined interpretation of Blanchot’s Levinasian reading of Marguerite Duras’ *The Malady of Death*94 in “The Community of Lovers,” the second half of *The Unavowable Community* (UC, 29-56). Blanchot does indeed use the Christo-theological language of the eucharist, but he does so to stress the *impossibility* of total communion achieved in some “mystical” or “spiritual” unity — even in the communal fusion to which lovers aspire (UC, 49). Blanchot argues that this is precisely

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what Duras’ epigrammatic and enigmatic “récit,” the narrative of a desperately involuted man who pays a young woman to spend several days with him in a hotel by the sea in the hope that she will “teach him how to love,” manages to say on its own, as if it to obviate the need for interpretation entirely (UC, 29-56). Having already annulled the “grace” he seeks in the eucharistic body and sacred substance of the “absolute feminine” by purchasing it, thereby reducing the other qua other to an economic relation of transactional exchange, he is unable to love, he is unable either to receive or respond to the call of the other, who can only be approached in a mode of self-forgetfulness and in taking leave of the erotic narcissism that, in absorbing the other into the identity of the same, annuls the distance between them. He is thus unable to cure himself of his mortal solitude, with the result that his sickness is ultimately a sickness unto death (UC, 34-45).

The charge of “eucharistic” communion proves to be altogether unfounded, however, when we move beyond Blanchot’s book, hors-texte, as it were. When we take into account Blanchot’s thinking and writing as it figures in disparately related themes in his other texts, we see that both myth and mysticism are treated with the utmost suspicion. A few examples, which require no additional commentary, should suffice to make this clear.

Concerning the annihilating violence of fascist and totalitarian politics: “In the Jew, in the ‘myth of the Jew’, what Hitler wanted to annihilate was, precisely, man freed of myths. Whether or not he was fully aware of it, he chose the right target and accurately defined his struggle” (MBR, 221). Concerning the philosophical relation to the

95 My emphasis
unknown: “a relation that excludes... ecstatic confusion... mystical participation, but also appropriation, every form of conquest, and even, when all is taken into account, the seizing that comprehension always is” (EI, 51); “In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we should make it clear that if this relation with the unknown sets itself apart from objective knowledge, it does so no less from a knowledge that would arise out of intuition or a mystical fusion. The unknown... supposes a relation that is foreign to every exigency of identity, of unity, even of presence” (EI, 300). And concerning the ethical relation to the other: “I undergo the experience of the Other, not as a strange relation with a man like myself, but as man in his strangeness — that which escapes all identification, be it that of an impersonal knowledge, of a mediation, or of a mystical fusion” (EI, 74).

Nancy’s overriding disagreement with Blanchot, it seems to me, has to do with the ethical priority, which Blanchot will speak of in terms of both love and responsibility, that he cedes to relation between the one and the other. And in dismissing this ethics of alterity out of hand, it’s arguable that Nancy establishes a false equivalence between (1) this radically assymetrical relation of distance and separation between the “two” and (2) the communional fusion of the “1+1” into a higher order mystical or spiritual unity. He thus fails to see that the relation that concerns Blanchot is not and could never become one of addition or summation. Neither the ethical nor even the erotic relation between the one and the other constitutes a simple multiplicity, nor does the political relation between oneself and all the others refer to the “bad infinity” of an indeterminately numerous “n +1.” If anything, it has to do with the “n – 1,” a plural relation that subtracts itself from
the unity of a numerical aggregate (WD, 128-9). Or, put differently, we could say that alterity is no more reducible to duality than plurality is to multiplicity, both of which speak less to a relation between the singularity of the one and the plurality of the other(s) than a doubling or a multiplication of commensurable instantiations that are more or less the same. Strictly speaking, alterity and plurality are not numerical but relational. Both exceed the sovereign count that reduces the incommensurable and measureless relation between human beings to one of number, or the numbering of a faceless multitude within an ontological order of total comprehension (WD, 129-30).

Still, it’s also arguable that, in the end, Nancy and Blanchot agree on what’s most essential. Nancy concludes his reading of Blanchot with the following, which, ironically, reads very much like it could have been written by Blanchot: “Any ontology is too limited [court] that cannot be traced back to a relation prior to being. And all politics that seeks to found itself ontologically is too much [longue]” (DC, 75).
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