

Cognition as Communication : ‘The Accursed Share’ by Georges Bataille as a
Contribution to the Study of Fundamental Informatics

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Georges Bataille stated in *The Accursed Share*¹ – *the limit of the utility* — “Communication is ... *full cognition*.”² What does this mean? It seems to give us a rich suggestion to consider what human cognition is. In this presentation, I will consider the mechanism of cognition by examining the meaning of this statement.

Bataille classifies human cognition into two kinds.³ One is “objective cognition” and the other “communicative cognition.” In reading Bataille’s writings, one can regard the former as cognition by reason and the latter as intuitive cognition. More concretely, the latter is cognition which is not based on induction or deduction. Bataille positions it as what occurs only in limited cases because it is cognition which is activated only by

¹ “The Accursed Share” is things forbidden and regarded as taboo by our reason (sexual act, death, etc.) and also is our inner part of life which transcends reason which is wholly connected to such things. (See Bataille, G. (1991), *L'histoire de l'érotisme : la part maudite : essai d'économie générale, tome 2*, H. Yuasa and Y. Nakaji (trans.), Tokyo: Tetsugakushobo.)

² Bataille, G. (2006), *La limite de l'utile*, G. Nakayama (trans.), Tokyo: Chikumashobo, p. 246.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

an experience in which we feel as though our identity as individuals is being lost.⁴ The identity of an individual is a product of human reason: it is not anything other than a rational self. Therefore, losing identity equals losing reason. So ‘communicative cognition’ is cognition as an event which occurs in a (critical) moment not controlled by reason. It belongs to the realm of affect which transcends reason or occurs due to the drive of affect. According to Bataille, the sense of an individual losing identity is also what characterizes communication with the other. From this point, Bataille’s statement that communication is full cognition was born.

As I have already mentioned, Bataille thought this rarely occurs. However, it still seems to provide us with greater insight into the functioning of human cognition in everyday life than can be gained through the concept of ‘objective cognition’. Looking at the problem in this way, we may find that human cognition is not reason-centered, but that reason-centered inference is a means by which one gains a final or fixed conclusion. In more specific terms, cognition may involve a continuous process of analogical association whose media are images, sounds of words themselves, and so on, of which formal logic and rational understanding are only one part.

What Bataille called “Communicative cognition” is what occurs in a moment when one completely transcends reason, when overcome by an intense affect such as desire for the other, extreme laughter, experiencing fear or anguish of the unknown (or the unknowable), and so on. What one cognizes at that moment is beyond understanding by language. On the other hand, cognition as analogical association is not always led by intense affect and is far from being an uncommon experience. On this point the two experiences are certainly very different from each other. However, at the same time, they are similar in that both of them are forms of un-reason-centered cognition. Therefore, on this point, I may be able to position the uncommon experience of cognition treated by Bataille as a special example of the analogical cognition process.

⁴ Specifically, eroticism, laughter in a moment by one person or between individuals and so on are given as examples by Bataille.

Now I will consider more in detail about the process of cognition implied by Bataille's statement. In order to do so, I will use the ideas of Fundamental Informatics proposed by Toru Nishigaki in a book of the same title published in 2004 which offers a useful theoretical framework for the examination of the nature of human cognition.

One of main aims of Fundamental Informatics is "to explore informatics of life,"⁵ that is, to study "the characteristics of the ways in which living beings interpret meanings."⁶ Fundamental Informatics treats the basic characteristics of cognition (i.e., interpretations of meanings) by using such theoretical supports as the 'abduction' model in semiotics and the 'autopoiesis' theory in life system studies. The expression "informatics of life" may seem confusing because information has generally been understood only as a kind of signal which is treated through machines and, in the process, its meaning is not considered important. Informatics has also generally been thought of as what considers such information. However, Fundamental Informatics extends such concepts of information to the way living beings interpret information and its meaning. Information is meaning which is produced between the subject of interpretation and the object, so it changes in different cases, and is not a physical entity with a fixed meaning. Fundamental Informatics as an "informatics of life" considers how living beings interpret meaning on the basis of such a concept of information.

Fundamental Informatics positions a broad concept of living things which includes human beings as the subject of interpretation of meaning. However, in this presentation, I will limit the subject to human beings to consider the importance of the realm of affect which transcends reason in human cognition as implied by Bataille's statement.

I will introduce theoretical supports for Fundamental Informatics to treat basic characteristics of cognition, that is, interpretation of meaning. They are the 'abduction'

⁵ Nishigaki, T. (2004), *Fundamental Informatics*, NTT shuppan, p.34.

⁶ *Ibid.*

model in Semiotics and the ‘autopoiesis’ theory in life system studies. I will explain them briefly.

First, Charles Sanders Peirce, an American pragmatic philosopher at the end of 19th century proposed the concept of ‘abduction’ as part of a consideration of Semiotics. It is a model of a process of thought or cognition by human beings which has been understood as a kind of working of signs and is expressed by the relation between three elements -- sign (or representamen), object (or referent) which is substituted by sign, and interpretant by which one understands a relation between sign and object.⁷ To explain the latter simply, Interpretant is a meaning of a sign formed inside an interpreter. ‘Abduction’ is a meaning-forming process arises due to the emergence of an image (i.e. an interpretant) which continuously gives rise to a new image (i.e. a new interpretant). The new interpretant becomes an object by which new meaning is formed. With this process, the formation of meaning endlessly continues. One of contributions which the ‘abduction’ model makes towards the understanding of cognition is that it is not a reason-centered inference.

To understand how cognition works, it is also necessary to consider the way life is lived rather than considering cognition in isolation. Life system studies regards life as a system which exists inseparably from its environment. For a living being, the environment is a kind of the other. The central concept of life system studies is the ‘autopoiesis’ theory proposed in 1970s by Chilean biological philosophers Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, which gives us another key model for examining this question. This theory is a model of a life system and ‘autopoiesis’ is a coinage made from two Greek words ‘auto’ and ‘poiesis’ meaning self and becoming respectively. This concept explains that a life system forms itself. That is, a life system exists by continuously forming the self ceaselessly and simultaneously making a boundary between the self and the environment (or the other).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The life system is applied to consideration of human cognition. Human cognition (or thought in more rational cognition) can be regarded as a system. So, life system study implies these two important points for consideration of human cognition: first, the system of thought based on life system studies exists inseparably from the other, as a life system is defined as being inseparable from the other or the environment. For a cognition system, the other is the environment which provokes cognition or makes cognition possible. It is also some thing or matter that is found within the environment.⁸ Second, the cognition system exists by continuously forming cognition just as a life system exists by continuously forming the self. That is, here, ‘autopoiesis’ occurs by which cognition produces cognition.

In Fundamental Informatics, Semiotics is positioned as what is complemented by life system studies. Presenting a cognition model (or a model of interpretation of meaning), Semiotics contributes to an understanding of the process of cognition while life system studies contribute to an understanding of how a cognition system works.⁹ The former describes a scheme of a process of interpretation of meaning from a point of view that is outside a living being. Life system studies provides a point of view inside a living being by describing working of a system.¹⁰ On this point, life system studies complements Semiotics.

What they share is that both suggest a un-reason-centered way of cognition. Semiotics offers a model which includes unpredictable moments in the cognition process which transcends a realm of rational inference. ‘Autopoiesis’ suggests that the way human cognition exists is through a system which continues producing a new

⁸ Here, the environment does not mean conditions of human thought such as language. The moment itself when thought is born is important.

⁹ The working of a system is a process. Therefore, this sentence (in the text) implies the possibility of treating both of them on the same basis, rather than the difference between them.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

cognition in relation to an other which is the environment or things which surround the subject.

I will reconsider Bataille's statement here. What characterizes "communication" with others by Bataille is a sense of the loss of the rational self as a result of intense affect. As I have already mentioned, this is a special case where the intensity of affect underlying cognition has greatly increased. However, as we have seen, the relation to the other is essential also for more general, un-reason-centered human cognition which was proposed by two theoretical frameworks of cognition developed by Fundamental Informatics. A process of change within a system in relation to the other is cognition.¹¹ Bataille's statement implies that cognition is what is experienced as an event which fundamentally has the nature of communication, from the inner point of view of the subject of cognition.

¹¹ Communication which Bataille considers is the case where a change of the self led by affect is at the extreme point of loss of his or her identity.

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