

Sacrifice Without Being

The greatest frustration in reading Jean-Luc Marion's "Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice" is not its rather tortuous prose, which seems to fulfill a desideratum of the French phenomenological tradition. Nor is it the fact that the reader is made to slash her way through the jungle of jargon in the hope of flooding light into the heart of darkness which is sacrifice. The greatest frustration in reading Marion's essay is that it has so little to do with what it purports to illuminate. In fact, Marion does much to obscure the phenomenon in question. Many things, in addition to the frustrations I've just named, contribute to this obfuscation; I will point to a few of the most salient.

> Evading Sacrifice: Refusing Exchange

Among the most urgent problems with Marion's essay is its refusal to engage other theories of sacrifice in any meaningful way. Granted, Marion is up to the specific task of developing a phenomenological concept of sacrifice that coheres with his theological work, and thus resorts to the distinctive methods and vocabulary of the tradition in which he's working. On the other hand, it's hard to comprehend why this essay seems so carefully to avoid engaging, in more than a superficial way, any other major theories of sacrifice. Marion mentions and then summarily dismisses the work on sacrifice done in discipline of the sociology of religion. In backing his claim, he cites but a single, if seminal, sociological study, Mauss and Hubert's *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice*, which he believes is characterized by the authors' "poverty and their silence on the central (in fact the only) problem of the function and the intrinsic logic of sacrifice, . . . contrasting all the more with the wealth of details on the putting to work of sacrifice" (p. 5). But whatever the shortcomings of the sociological approach, he might do well to afford it more consideration, in part for its "wealth of details" (a point to which I'll return). Moreover, the essay raises questions that would seem to bear on Marion's account. What, for instance, would Marion do with the sacrificial phenomenon of the potlatch? Or, to move beyond Mauss and Hubert, what would he make of more recent scholarship on non-agonistic gifting?

It may be that thinkers on sacrifice from Freud and Tyler to Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith are too involved with what Marion calls the "common, if not vulgar, sense of sacrifice,"

and thus simply aren't useful to his project. But, on the other hand, the common understanding of sacrifice that Marion seeks to correct with his phenomenological reduction of sacrifice to the gift betrays, I believe, a hygienic impulse, an apparent need to remove sacrifice from the domain of violence and loss without which it is largely unthinkable. Marion's tack thus seems to me to be not so much about phenomenological reduction as it is about willful sublimation – an observation underscored by the fact that Marion's sole datum, the one example of sacrifice upon which he hangs his theory, is taken from Genesis 22, where the initial sacrificial victim-to-be—Abraham's son, Isaac—is spared from death. He seems too eager to avoid and dismiss the fact that for the most part actual sacrifice *does* in fact destroy something—a point to which I'll return. In any case, in this essay, the attempt to define the logic of sacrifice does away with sacrifice altogether, a problem that might be corrected by further engagement with other theorists.

In particular, given Marion's philosophical pedigree, as well as his interest in the concepts of excess, his work on mysticism, his treatment of “the erotic phenomenon,” etc., I find it hard to understand why he all but ignores the crucial work of Georges Bataille, whose theory of sacrifice and work on the gift have helped to shape the conversation on these matters. (I'm thinking in particular of Bataille's essay on the potlatch and his three-volume *Accursed Share*, which elaborates a theory of “general economy” that Derrida treats in an essay that has become a kind of *locus classicus* in the study of the gift: “From Restricted to General Economy”). In the French version of Marion's “Sketch,” Bataille does appear parenthetically. But to the best of my knowledge, Marion provides little to no further acknowledgment of his predecessor, now widely recognized as a—and in some sense *the*—key figure behind much of the debates surrounding sacrifice, the gift, and general economy. (I once asked Marion directly about his avoidance of Bataille, but was met with an evasive non-answer.) Perhaps this avoidance is simply, but profoundly, about a clash of sensibilities? Or perhaps Marion, a conservative Catholic, fears that associating himself too closely with Bataille, whose works tend toward the scatological and pornographic, would be frowned upon by the churchly authorities who must make up a particularly watchful part of his audience?

Or perhaps Marion believes that he, like some analogue of the “gift” he describes, properly lies outside the field of exchange—in this case, the genuine exchange of ideas?

> **Representing Sacrifice: What Would J. Z. Do?**

A further problem presented by Marion's aloofness in this regard is his choice of data and the narrowness of what he counts as sacrifice. Marion does not—in this essay, anyway—account

for the fact that by and large *religious sacrifice is practiced as part of a tradition*, and occurs in a *ritual context*. That is to say, in focusing on a unique instance of near-sacrifice (Genesis 22), he fails to account for what ritual theorist and historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith calls the “relentlessly social character” of religion.

Smith focuses on the prefix “re-” in emphasizing the fact that students of religion are engaged in an enterprise that “represent[s] those re-peated re-presentations embedded in the cultures and cultural formations that comprise our subject matter” (“A Twice-Told Tale”). Marion’s phenomenological sketch does nothing to account for the social nature of sacrifice, or for the fact that it is for the most part practiced as part of a tradition. Taking the story of Abraham and Isaac as the primary, and indeed exclusive, datum with which to test his concept (he mentions other biblical instances only in passing) is thus problematic on a couple of levels. First, the Genesis story is a *unique* occurrence of (near) sacrifice—not a typical instance, but a singular case, and thus hardly a useful datum for construing a phenomenological concept of sacrifice *in general*. Second, the Genesis 22 account does not figure as part of tradition so much as a puzzling byway, an errant departure from the dynamics that characterized Semitic sacrifice as actually practiced (on which topic, see Robertson Smith’s classic account, *The Religion of the Semites*). That is to say, in most cases, those who are offering the sacrifice are not personally called upon by God to slay their offspring, only to have an angel of the Lord appear to stay their hands; they are, rather, repeating ritual actions prescribed by a tradition.

Genesis 22 may have profound theological significance, but its usefulness as an example upon which to hang a phenomenological account of sacrifice is dubious at best, and, at worst, disingenuous; indeed, one suspects that Marion’s concept does not derive from a survey of the phenomenon of sacrifice, but is rather constructed with the aim of holding up the Genesis story as somehow exemplary; it thus imposes a theoretical template upon other instances of sacrifice at the expense of acknowledging their specificities—their social matrices and ritual contexts. This sketch, it seems to me, is meant to forward a theological agenda (though, sadly, with no mention of Kierkegaard’s cogitations in *Fear and Trembling*), rather than account of sacrifice as it actually appears in the world. This fact would be less problematic if it were made more explicit in the essay.

In short, Marion’s phenomenological reduction abets reductionism; the sketch misrepresents sacrifice as an actual practice in an attempt to reveal its inner “logic.” But if a phenomenological concept of sacrifice cannot account for what makes up, by and large, the features of sacrifice as it appears in the world—including its social nature, its ritual context—I’m not sure how much use it is for understanding the phenomenon. And would it make sense, for

example, to talk about the “re-giving” of the gift of sacrifice in the context of Aztec sacrificial practices? Does Marion’s concept have any traction as applied to Vedic sacrifice? Perhaps. But Marion’s choice of an idiosyncratic datum leaves the answer to such questions in the dark.

> **Bibfeldting Sacrifice: Sublimation and Suppression**

It is thus not clear that Marion is dealing with sacrifice so much as one peculiar story about sacrifice, which has arguable import as a “meaningful example” (p. 14). But the problem goes further, for at least two reasons that can be thought under two interrelated concepts: *sublimation* and *suppression*.

At the University of Chicago Divinity School, where Marion is Professor of the Philosophy of Religion and of Theology, there is a long-running inside joke revolving around Franz Bibfeldt, a fictional theologian fabricated by historian of Christianity Martin Marty. The Bibfeldt Lecture—an annual comical ritual—finds faculty and students gleefully elaborating the myth of Bibfeldt. In spring 2003, Marion accepted the invitation to deliver the Bibfeldt Lecture. In his talk, he worked in his characteristic idiom to argue for the existence of the patently fictional Bibfeldt. There are strange echoes of that self-parodying lecture in Marion’s essay on sacrifice.

In his “Sketch,” I fear sacrifice resembles Bibfeldt-in-reverse, or that there is a Bibfeldting of sacrifice: sacrifice—a real historical phenomenon, part of countless ritual practices—is not only idealized (insofar as Marion draws exclusively on the convenient account of Genesis 22 that conforms to his theological agenda); as an object of theory, it is also fictionalized. To some degree, any theory of sacrifice (or whatever else) will construct the phenomenon it attempts to explain. In the case of Marion’s concept, however, the fictionalizing idealization of sacrifice is particularly egregious, for he seems intent on sublimating the troubling and often sanguinary aspects of sacrifice by reducing sacrifice to a “moment in the phenomenon of the gift” and, moreover, eschewing the “common determination” of sacrifice, which emphasizes the “destruction or dispossession” of a thing (p. 14). He is sublimating sacrifice by cleaning it up, making it a suitable component of his theological discourse.

In order to maintain his account, Marion also has to *suppress* the reality of sacrifice, the historical specificity of what he’s studying, in ways I’ve gestured to above. In doing so, a whole range of real problems relating to sacrifice is obscured—for his concept precludes examination of the *political* dimensions of sacrifice. For example, Marion’s reduction of sacrifice to the gift renders impossible any analysis of the power relations that so often drive sacrifice. (On this point, I’d love to see, for example, Bruce Lincoln—materialist thinker, critic of religion, and

colleague of Marion—respond to the question of power in relation to Marion’s phenomenological concept.)

I would also pose the question of a *textual* suppression in Marion’s sketch. Marion claims that “by sparing Isaac, [who is] from now on recognized (by Abraham) as a gift (of God), God re-gives him to him, gives him a second time ... by presenting a gift by a redundancy, which consecrates it definitively as a gift from now on common and in the end opening between the giver and the givee” (p. 18). But why does Marion fail to discuss the fact that, subsequent to being relieved of the demand to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham still sacrifices a ram as a substitute for his son? That is, if Abraham thinks sacrifice in its phenomenological concept as Marion claims (p. 17), if what is important is that he acknowledges God as the ultimate giver, why exactly the further redundancy of sacrificing the ram?

Moreover, Marion makes no mention of anything beyond verse 12 of Genesis 22. Is this because verses 15-18 of that chapter complicate, and perhaps refute, the notion that (Abraham’s) sacrifice-as-gift escapes economies of exchange? Does God in fact reinscribe sacrifice within the realm of exchange in that verse?:

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

> Re:Gifting Sacrifice: Unconcluding Expectations, or The Horns of the Ram Caught in the Thicket

As a phenomenological thinker, perhaps Marion should take more seriously actual appearances, surfaces, what’s available to the eye. Perhaps he should consider, say, ethnographic evidences from across cultures in formulating a phenomenology of sacrifice. And while Marion’s aims are clearly far different from those of someone like Jonathan Z. Smith, he might do well to consider Smith’s ruminations about uses of evidence in constructing theory. “For me,” Smith writes, “things are surface: there simply is no depth...and there is no concealment” (*Violent Origins*, p. 211).

But of course, Marion is not a scholar of sacrifice, nor a ritual theorist, nor an historian of religions. He is a philosopher and a theologian, and in this essay, his phenomenology is in the service of a constructive theology. If that’s the case, however, the essay should not be presented

as a sketch of a phenomenological concept of sacrifice as such; it should be clear that this is the work of a theologian exegeting a particular passage of Scripture.

In closing, I want to proffer a very brief series of counter-hypotheses and queries that may complicate Marion's philosophical/theological project. The hypotheses are admittedly untested and perhaps untenable, and the questions might rightly strike readers as gesturing toward the preposterous, supercilious, and enigmatic—but they may also open up further paths for thinking about the phenomenon of sacrifice: its history, its logic, its politics, and its poetics.

- It is not the case that sacrifice is reducible to a moment of the gift. Rather, the gift is a moment of sacrifice.
- Adapting Slavoj Žižek's concept of "the parallax view" (as elaborated in his book of that title), might it be the case that the "truth" of sacrifice does not lie behind its appearance, but rather in the irreducible gap between the "common understanding" of sacrifice and the phenomenological concept developed by Marion?
- And might not that gap be internal to the vulgar, common concept of sacrifice?
- In other words, might not the common concept of sacrifice be the encompassing dimension of sacrifice, rather than the phenomenological concept?
- This is to suggest that sacrifice is an anamorphic phenomenon, graspable from no single point of view.
- The sacrificial narrative of Genesis 22 can (and should?) not only be thought as the (near) sacrifice of Isaac, but also as the sacrifice of Abraham. Kierkegaard as a starting point. Also: the logic of identification between sacrificer and victim. Cf. Bataille, *Theory of Religion*.
- With apologies for being simplistic: Should not a theological account of Judeo-Christian sacrifice, and perhaps particularly the sacrifice of Christ (mentioned in footnote 14 of Marion's essay, p. 18), ask why God would demand such a gruelingly tortuous and gruesomely torturous means for making himself visible? Can Marion's account speak to this problem in any way? A question of theodicy(?).
- Why, in his account of technology in "The Question Concerning Technology," does Heidegger take as his example of a manufactured object a chalice, a "sacrificial vessel"? Might pursuing this question in Heidegger further inform Marion's account by casting sacrifice itself as a techno-theological?
- What of the ram as a sacrificial substitute to fulfill God's satisfaction in the Genesis 22 narrative? The ram: a suppressed question mark in Marion's essay.

- The ram says that the purported need to give back to God what is already God's in order to make God visible ("giving [the gift of Isaac] back to its giver," p. 17) is an absurdity. The ram undermines Marion's phenomenological concept of sacrifice. The ram says what we all know: that re-giving, or re-gifting, is a *faux pas*.

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