

Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice¹

I. The Aporia of Sacrifice

Strictly speaking, it should not be necessary to begin with sacrifice, at least in the sense of a noun, or of a substantive, since sacrifice (*sacrificium*) always results from the action of a verb, of the verb to make (*sacrum facere*): a sacrifice appears once an agent has returned something sacred, has set it apart from the profane and thereby consecrated it. Moreover, *sacrum facere* was rendered *sacrifiement* in old French, which meant distinctly the process of returning something sacred, more than the result of this process. So the question of sacrifice concerns first and above all the act of making something sacred and of snatching it from the profane (the act opposed to that of profanation), the act from which sacrifice only results and thus is content to record without explaining. This precision nevertheless raises another difficulty: how can we conceive the transition between two terms, the profane and the sacred, while their very distinction becomes, in the epoch of nihilism in which we live, indistinct, confused, if not totally wiped out. Everything happens as if the “death of God,” and above all what has provoked it—the realization that the highest values consist only in the valuation that confirms them, and thus are only worth what our valuations are worth—had abolished every difference between the sacred and the profane, thus every possibility of crossing over it by a *sacrifiement* (or on the contrary, by a profanation). Would not sacrifice disappear with the sacred that is effaced?

Nevertheless, that is not entirely the way it goes. We have a common, if not vulgar, sense of sacrifice: to sacrifice is equivalent to destroying; or, more precisely, to destroying what should not be, at least in the normal custom of the world, i.e. the useful, the being as used, as ready to use. In effect, being in the sense where I use it at hand (*zuhanden* being following the sense of Heidegger) is defined by the finality that sends it back not only to other ready-for-use beings, but, in the end, to my own intention, which gathers the subordinated finalities of these beings into a network of finalities, all oriented toward myself as the center of a surrounding world. This being, not only useful but at hand and used (*zuhanden*), refers to myself and, in to that extent, becomes for me my own world: it is good insofar as it is mine, it is a good in so far as it is my good. As a result, doing away with it would amount to me doing away with myself; and if, crossing a step further in the negation, I were to destroy it, then I would be destroyed myself. And yet such destruction of a good as good and even as my own, thus this destruction of myself, has not disappeared in our time and here still keeps, perhaps unduly, the title of sacrifice.

We experience the height of it even daily under the title of *terrorism*. Propaganda and public media appeal in effect to the semantics of sacrifice in order to name terrorist acts: the terrorist, it is said, *sacrifices himself* for his cause, or indeed, he *sacrifices* the

¹ This essay responds in some way to a preceding “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift,” which appeared in M. M. Olivetti, ed., *Filosofia della rivelazione* (Rome: Biblioteca dell’ *Archivio di Filosofia*, 1994).

life of his uncertain victims for the advertisement of his very cause, ideology or revendication. This way of speaking, as approximate and thus as abusive as it may be, nevertheless retains some pertinence: because pure violence, without any moral or even political justification, in its stupidity and its barbarism, arouses indeed a paralyzing dread, before an act that by definition no longer deals with the world of living beings or the community of reasonable people, but obeys the logic of another world, absurd in our own, which it denies and annihilates as well. Terrorism does away with goods, innocent people and the terrorist himself, because it accomplishes first and radically the destruction of all beings as useful and at hand (*zuhanden*), thus of the final organization of any world for us. Thus destroyed, the being at hand becomes the sacred insofar as it no longer belongs to the world where we can live, where it's a matter of living in the normality of the profane. So let us admit that terror, under its polymorphous figures (but without faces), remains today our last experience of the sacred, and that this figure of the sacred, as debased as it proves to be, nevertheless allows us a vulgar concept of sacrifice: that which renders a profane thing sacred, the *sacrifiement* thus consists in its destruction. The terrorist produces the sacred (under the figure of absurd horror) by *destroying* life, here including his own.² The process that makes the profane sacred, does not refrain from the destruction of the thing sacrificed in this way.³ At least, some access to sacrifice remains open to us, since the experience of terrorism guarantees us, although in a perverse way, the destruction of the good as such, of the world as ours.

Nevertheless, this first result, by allowing us an indisputable because perfectly negative access to the sacred and to the *sacrifiement*, only reinforces the aporia. For it is not only a question of discussing that destruction is the only figure of sacrifice left today, but above all of noticing how far, even in this figure, its intelligibility remains problematic. What, in effect, would destroying a good have to do with rendering it sacred? What does sacrifice do if it does only to undo? What can it consecrate if it contents itself with annihilating? To what or to whom can it give, since it annuls the content of any gift and is itself nullified as a possible giver? The definition of sacrifice as destruction of a good as such not only explains nothing of sacrifice, but it could explain its opposite – the auto-appropriation of autarchy. In effect, the wise man wants to get rid of any good by destroying it and thus becoming free of it; he alone can do this and prove it to himself by surviving what he destroys in himself: making a sacrifice of other goods (by askesis, renunciation, mutilation, etc.), he demonstrates to the other(s) his autarchy; or rather he proves at least to himself alone his autonomy and ataraxy. Sacrifice, if

² The same goes for anyone who puts his life in danger, possibly for nothing, or almost nothing (the “adventurer” or the so-called “extreme” athlete). The question is posed of knowing up to what point it is a matter here of an admittedly devalued figure, but fair heiress, of the master in the dialectics of recognition (the slave remaining in the domain of the profane, the one where he does not destroy himself).

³ This was besides the classical argument (forged by the Reformation, then taken up by the Enlightenment) against a peaceful but also radical figure of sacrifice—the monastic vows: renouncing power, riches, and reproduction amounts to destroying goods, which allows the world to live and to grow and even brings it into the field of the sacred, in this particular case in a life otherwise outside the world, or at least oriented eschatologically toward the alteration of this world.

understood that way, becomes the auto-celebration of the ascetic ideal, where the *ego* attains, by no longer owing anything to anyone (not even his own person to the world), a kind of *causa sui*. Sacrifice, understood as destruction of a good, can be reversed by a construction of the self, which sacrifices nothing of itself, save the world to itself.

II. Sacrifice According to Exchange

We must thus give up defining sacrifice only by the destruction of a good alone. In fact, it may become more appropriate to consider the sacrifice by introducing a third term, beyond that of the destroyer and the good destroyed – precisely the third, the other. Even in the most banal meaning of sacrifice (say the sacrifice of a pawn or of a figure in chess), already the other appears, be it under the minimum aspect of the mimetic rival, of the other myself, of my opponent: even if, in making this supposed present, I do not want to give up *my* position, it is a question of my position vis-à-vis *his* or her position, and I sacrifice this piece *to him or her*. In brief, my sacrifice always assumes the other as its horizon of possibility. The other determines the destruction of a good, then, either by gaining it as its new owner (I transfer it to him by giving it up), or by extending my own loss to my rival (I give it up in order to deprive him of it), in order to strengthen myself.

In this new sense, where it happens in the horizon of the other, does sacrifice become more intelligible than in the previous case, when understood as pure and simple destruction of a good? Without doubt, since we immediately notice that it is in fact no longer about destruction, but about a privation (with destruction, but also sometimes without). And this on both sides of the alternative. On one hand, let me give up a good, because I can do without it, and in this way strengthen my autonomy (autarchy, ataraxy, etc.); in other words, I deprive myself of a good, just to prove to myself that it has only an optional importance and that I remain myself even without it; in this way, by losing a good other than me, I win a more perfect possession of myself. On the other hand, let me give up a good, not at all because I would simply destroy it, but because by destroying it or by rendering it only unavailable to me, I want to disown it to the point that, by this definitive loss, others might possibly appropriate it in my place; in fact, I display this given up good, so that it becomes available for others to appropriate.

Nevertheless, clearly these two situations differ. In the first case, it is enough for me to deprive myself indeed of a good, in order to prove immediately its optional character and in this way demonstrate my autarchy: the sacrifice is accomplished perfectly by itself. In the second case, it is not so: admittedly, I manage to deprive myself of a good (I indeed achieve the sacrifice), but this renunciation cannot yet *as such* make anyone else take possession of what I have nevertheless deprived myself of; the sacrifice remains unachieved, unfinished: my renunciation only displays the good, which, though put in position, still remains at this point of the process in escheat; less given than given up. For even when I divest myself of a good, whether or not the other takes possession of it is not up to me; that depends only on the other. What is lost is not, just by that loss, already found: it can be lost and *not found yet*. So by my decision alone the sacrifice can only be accomplished halfway; its effectiveness is not within the reach of my dispossession, but awaits acceptance and agreement by the other, thus depends on another decision, on an *other* decision, coming from elsewhere. I can at best act *as if* my

dispossession *were* equivalent to taking possession by the other, but I can neither assure that nor assume it. Dispossession can only anticipate reception, not achieve it, because acceptance by the other can only come from the other and thus escapes me by definition. Sacrifice involves my dispossession, but my dispossession is not enough for sacrifice, which acceptance by the other others alone can ratify. Assuming that giving up is enough to begin the sacrifice, the accomplishment as a gift comes down to its acceptance by the other. This gap has nothing optional or secondary about it, but defines and marks the unyielding distance from me to the other, so that neither I, nor the other, can do away with it. It is part of the definition of sacrifice that, even when offered (or rather: precisely *because* offered), it can nevertheless be refused and mistaken on the part of the other – and *this* constitutes precisely the part the other plays. In this way, were it defined within the horizon of the other, the destruction or disappropriation of a good would not suffice to render a full account of the possibility of sacrifice.

Yet it happens that the most current explanation of sacrifice, produced by sociology and the sociology of religion in particular, presupposes exactly the opposite: that my dispossession of a good suffices for the effective accomplishment of sacrifice. Sacrifice would consist in making sure that the giving up of a good (by destruction or by devolution) for the profit of an other (divine or mortal, most often superior hierarchically), is such that he accepts it and consequently gives a counter-gift back to the one who initiated the sacrifice – with this reciprocal constituting the decisive presupposition. Obviously the efficacy of the sacrifice carried out by its initiator does not imply nor guarantee absolutely the acceptance of the good passed on, and even less the reciprocity of a counter-gift. Nevertheless, this interpretation of sacrifice imposes itself, prevails and remains. How has it come to this? By presupposing what it cannot demonstrate, namely that the acceptance and the counter-gift always (or at least in the majority of cases, as the normal situation) follow from dispossession (no matter whether with or without a destruction). But, once again, how does it legitimate this presupposition? By implicitly referring every explanation of sacrifice to the model of exchange.⁴ Moreover, in the majority of cases, we find the three terms of gift, of exchange and of sacrifice made equivalent, even indifferently substituted one for another. Just as the gift consists in giving up a good in order to obligate the other to give a counter-gift back (*do ut des*), so exchange implies that every good that passes from one to the other is compensated by a good (or a sum of money) passing from the other to the one, so also the sacrificer abandons a good (by dispossession, from exposure or destruction) in order that the supposedly superior other (divine or mortal) accept it,

⁴ The attempts to define sacrifice made by H. Hubert and M. Mauss in the famous *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (first in the *Année sociologique* 1929, then in M. Mauss, *Oeuvres*, V. Karady, ed, vol. 1, *Les fonctions sociales du sacré*, Paris, 1958) are characterized by their poverty and their silence on the central (in fact the only) problem of the function and the intrinsic logic of sacrifice (its signification, its intention, its mechanism of compensation, etc.), contrasting all the more with the wealth of details on the putting to work of sacrifice. So if we suppose that “Sacrifice [...] is originally a gift, that the savage [*sic*] made to supernatural forces that he had to bind himself to” (*op. cit* p. 193), it remains to be understood whether and how these “forces” tolerate being thus “bound.”

accepting it enter into a contract, and by contract return a good (real or symbolic). In the three cases, under the indistinct names of the gift, it is a matter of exchange and sacrifice in the same economy of the contract: I bind myself to you in untying myself from a good, *therefore* you bind yourself to me by accepting it, *therefore* you owe me an equivalent good in return. From then on, sacrifice no more destroys than the gift gives up, since both of them work to establish the exchange; or rather, when sacrifice destroys and when the gift gives up, they work in exactly the same way to establish the economy of reciprocity.

We must conclude that destruction or dispossession and even the horizon of the other still do not allow us to determine a concept of sacrifice. Except to confuse it with exchange, in the same imprecision that, moreover, obscures the gift in a similar confusion. In this context, one would call sacrifice, at best, the imprudence of an exchange still unaccomplished, where a gift given up still does not know if any acceptance is going to ratify it, at worst, the illusion of a contract that no one would ever have signed with the one to whom the sacrifice is made. Unless it is a matter of a plain lie, told to the other or to oneself: claiming to renounce without condition, hoping all the while, secretly or unconsciously, to receive a hundredfold what one loses only once. It would be better instead to consider the very term sacrifice an impropriety, an empty or contradictory concept, and to understand by sacrifice the contradiction that Derrida stigmatized in the gift: “The truth of the gift... is enough to annul the gift. The truth of the gift is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non-truth of the gift.”⁵ We will thus say that the truth of sacrifice ends up in exchange, that is to say in the non-truth of sacrifice, because it ought to consist precisely in giving up without return; so it would also amount to the truth of the non-gift par excellence, that is to say, to the confirmation that wherever one believes he speaks of sacrifice and makes it, in fact he always hopes for an exchange, and for an exchange earning all the more, as far as he claimed to have lost everything.

III. The Misunderstanding of the Gift

Nevertheless, a way could be opened through this very aporia and thanks to it. More precisely, the extension of the aporia of the gift to sacrifice might already indicate another path – by making us think sacrifice precisely in its relation to the gift. We would then be able to think it no longer only as the dispossession (or even destruction) of a good in the horizon of the other, but also as a moment of the more comprehensive phenomenon of the gift. For the phenomenon of the gift manifests right away much more than exchange: as we have attempted to describe elsewhere, the gift can and thus must be freed from exchange, by letting its natural meaning be reduced to givenness. For, while the economy (of exchange) makes an economy of the gift, the gift, if reduced to givenness, inversely excepts itself from the economy, by freeing itself from the rules of exchange. The gift in effect proves still able to be accomplished even and above all by reducing each of the terms of exchange: without a giver, or indeed without a givee – being freed therefore without reciprocity – and even without a thing given – being

⁵ J. Derrida, *Donner le temps. I: la fausse monnaie*, Paris, 1991, p. 42.

emancipated therefore from equality.⁶ As reduced to the givenness in it, the gift is accomplished then in an unconditioned immanence, which not only owes nothing to exchange, but abolishes its conditions of possibility. The reduced gift is performed by itself, with a freedom *unconditioned* – it never lacks anything, which would prohibit it from self-giving, since, even without putting to work the terms of exchange, it still achieves itself, and even better. But if the gift proves *unconditioned* in this way, would it not offer its most appropriate place to sacrifice, since this latter claims precisely (certainly yet without justifying its claim) to give and to give up *without condition*? In this hypothesis, the response to the aporia of sacrifice would come from the very same response found to the aporia of the gift – from the reduction of the gift to givenness. It will therefore be necessary for us to proceed to a reduction of sacrifice to givenness, in order to articulate, as one of its moments, the phenomenon of the reduced gift.

Where then does the most evident aporia arise from, when the phenomenon of a gift opens up? Precisely when and where the gift given *appears*. For when what the giver gives (a thing, a being, a piece of information, a present, etc.) comes into full light, the gift inevitably starts to become blurred, then to disappear. In effect, the gift given, which gets its consistency (its *realitas* and so to speak its thickness) from the thing given, takes up the front of the phenomenal stage, so as to conceal or even exclude everything else there. Everything else, that is to say first the giver: for the giver disappears in his own gift: on the one hand, he must indeed give *something*, whatever that something would look like (a simple sign of good will or a real gift in itself, useful or useless, precious or trivial, initial or in return, etc.), otherwise he would not appear at all as a giver giving. But, exactly in so far as he gives his or her gift truly and irrevocably, i.e. as he or she gives it *up*, the giver lets his gift given untie itself from him, lay itself down as such, autonomous and thus available to the givee, who takes it up.

The gift not only becomes a phenomenon independent of the phenomenon of the giver, but it offends and obscures him, either by throwing him back into the phenomenal backstage, or by overshadowing him completely. This disappearance of the giver does not result from any faulty or perverse subjective disposition of this or that givee, but from the very definition of the gift given: ingratitude does not necessarily and always follow the concealment of the giver, but it can only happen, (when it is the case) from according to the phenomenality of the gift given, in itself exclusive, possessive and confiscatory. The giver *must* disappear (or at least his evidence diminish and his presence draw back) for the gift given to appear (or at least for its evidence to increase and present itself in the foreground) – this is a phenomenological rule. Otherwise, the gift given would not only not appear as such: it would simply not be found truly given at all: the givee would not dare approach it, or reach his hand out to it and would even hesitate to claim himself or herself the recipient, because the tutelary and overhanging presence of the giver would still cover it in a shadow of his possession. The givee cannot take the gift given for his own, so long as he still *sees* in it the face and the power of its previous owner. This owner (the giver) must disappear, so that the gift can start to appear as given; finally the

⁶ See *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, respectively §§9–10, Paris, 1996¹, 1997² (éd. corrigée) and first the “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift,” (*loc. cit.*, *supra*, note 1).

giver must disappear completely for the gift to appear as given definitively, that is to say given *up*.

There is more. In effect, as the gift appears only if the giver disappears, the gift given up in this way ends by masking in itself not only the giver, but the very overall process of the gift. If a gift appears as truly given only from the moment when the giver gives it up, the giving up is reversed: the gift given appears *because* it gives up its giver. But a gift without relation to any giver no longer bears the mark of any process of givenness, thus appears as indifferent to the gift in it. Paradoxically, a gift truly given disappears as given as well. It appears henceforth only as an object *found*: a thing, a being or an object, which is found there, before me, by chance and without reason, such that I can wonder on its occasion what status I should grant it: is it here on its own (as a piece of fruit fallen from the tree), by voluntary intention of the other (as an installation in a museum, a sign at the edge of the road, etc.), by involuntary accident (as a good lost by its distracted owner, or stolen), or even possibly set here by an anonymous giver for the profit either of whatever beneficiary there may be (as an emergency phone on the side of a freeway) or of an identified givee (a message in a mailbox), and, in that case, is it an other, or myself? The gift-character of the found object is thus no longer self-evident; it is only an hypothesis among others, and the least probable. At the limit, if my hermeneutic does not allow (or does not want) me to recognize it as given, the gift may completely disappear as such. So the peculiarity of the gift, once we admit that it implies giving up the giver and the process of giving in order to appear, consists in disappearing as given. And in letting appear only the neutral and anonymous presence, left without any origin, of a thing, of a being or of an object, coming only from itself, never from elsewhere – neither from a giver, nor from a process of giving. The major aporia of the gift is due to this paradox: the gift given can appear only by blotting out in its phenomenon its giver, the process of his gift and finally all its given character.

Two examples confirm this paradox without ambiguity. First, the one in which Saint Augustine analyses the case of "...a fiancé who gives a ring to his bride to be; but she loves the ring thus received more than the fiancé who gave it to her; does one not find her adulterous in the very gift her fiancé gives, even while she loves what her fiancé has given her? Certainly, she loved what her fiancé gave her, but if she were to say: 'this ring is enough for me, now I don't want to see his face again,' what would she be? Who would not hate this lunacy? Who would not convict her of adultery? You love gold instead of your husband, you love the ring instead of your fiancé; if you truly have in mind to love the ring in place of your fiancé and to not want to see him, the deposit that he gave you as the token of your love would become a sign of your loathing."⁷ Of course it is a question, for the theologian, in the case of this gross ingratitude, to condemn the sin

⁷ "Quemadmodum, fratres, si sponsus faceret sponsae suae anulum, et illa anulum plus diligeret quam sponsum qui illum fecit anulum, none in ipso dono sponsi adultera anima deprehenderetur, quamvis hoc amaret quod dedit sponsus. Certe hoc amaret quod dedit sponsus; tamen si diceret: sufficit mihi annulus iste, jam illius faciem nolo videre, quails esset? Quis non detestaretur hanc amentiam? Quis non adulterinum animum convinceret? Amas arum pro viro, amas anulum pro sponso; si hoc est in te, u tames anulum pro sponso tuo et nolis videre sponsum tuum, ad hoc tibi arrham dedit, ut non te oppigneraret, sed averteret," *Commentary on the First Letter of John*, II.11.

in general, as the attitude that leads us to love the gifts of God all the while rejecting God himself who gives them to us. But the phenomenological description of the gift remains no less pertinent here: the bride-to-be sees first the fiancé, the giver, then the gift, the ring; the intention of the fiancé consisted of course in the fact that by seeing the gift (the ring), the bride-to-be does not stop seeing his face, i.e. the face of the giver; he intended to benefit from a phenomenal structure of reference (*Hinweis*): the phenomenon of the ring offering its own visibility and, moreover, referring it to the (absent) visibility of the giver, who, by this indication, would benefit from a visibility to the second degree, a borrowed visibility. In this way, the giver, invisible as such, gives being to the visible gift, but in return the visible gift gives him a visibility by delegation. Yet this exchange (the gift of being to the given for the gift of appearing to the giver) is not phenomenally valid: in fact, the bride-to-be sees and wants to see only the ring, and not, by indication and reference, the *facies sponsi*, the face of the giver. The gift given, as such and straightaway (the ring), hoards all the visibility and condemns the giver to disappear from the visible stage. From then on, not only does the fiancé-giver no longer enter the phenomenon of the gift, but the gift-character of the given is blotted out: the ring becomes the possession of the bride-to-be, who sees nothing more than herself in it, possessing it. With the giver, the gift itself disappears.

In an entirely different context, but along the same descriptive line, Heidegger insists, by describing the *es gibt*, such that it determines the appearance of time and being – for neither one nor the other *are*, so with respect to them it is necessary to say *es gibt, it gives* – on the phenomenal characteristic of the gift, which gives (itself) in this *it gives*: “This [giving] withdraws itself, in favor of the gift (*zugunsten der Gabe*) that *it gives* [...]. Such a giving (*Geben*), which gives only its gift (*nur seine Gabe gibt*), is thus retained there and withdraws there (*zurückhält und entzieht*), such a giving we call a sending (*Shicken*).”⁸ We understand that the giving can precisely *not* itself give *itself*, more exactly *cannot* itself give *itself* in person, precisely because it gives its gift (gift given), makes it appear as such and, for it to succeed, must not only remain in retreat, but withdraw itself from visibility. The *es gibt*, because it gives (and displays) being as much as time, neither can nor should give itself. The giving gives only the given, it never itself gives *itself*. The giving cannot redouble itself, as in metaphysics it claims the *causa sui*, by a *donum sui*. Can we advance in the understanding of this fundamental impossibility? Possibly, by considering difference as such, namely the difference that Heidegger in this case no longer calls ontological (*ontologische Differenz*), but the different from the same, the dis-agreement (*der Unterschieden aus dem Selben, der Unter-Schied*). What differs here is called the unique *Austrag*, agreement, which is deployed at once as Being and as being, which are alike given in the same gesture, but precisely not in a similar posture: “Being is shown as the uncovering coming-over (*zeigt sich als entbergende Überkommnis*), the being appears as such in the mode of the arrived, which is covered in the uncovering (*erscheint in der Weise der in die Unverborgenheit sich bergende Ankunft*). [...] The difference of Being with the being is the dis-agreement of the coming-over [*survenue*] with the arrival (*Unter-schied von Überkommnis und*

⁸ *Zeit und Sein*, in *Zur Sache des Denkens*, GA 14, Frankfurt, 2007, p. 12.

Ankunft).”⁹ In fact, nothing is more clear than this phenomenological description of the *es gibt*: when this is given, or more precisely when *it gives* (understood in the trivial sense of the French: when it functions, it works, it performs), the being arrives in visibility, because it takes visibility over and confiscates it entirely (as the arrival of a train, *Ankunft* precisely in the banal sense of the term, fills the station and concentrates every glance on itself). But the visibility that it appropriates in this way, it can neither unleash it, nor prompt it: only Being can open it and uncover it, because it alone consists precisely in this display, because it alone comes over [*survient*] from coming-over [*survenue*] (*Überkommnis*) opening the site that an arrival (*Ankunft*) will possibly occupy. This arrival receives its site, but by occupying it, it masks it and also renders invisible the coming-over, which had opened it. The being, by occupying the entire scene, makes this very scene invisible. Being thus disappears in the evidence of the being, whose arrival recovers its nevertheless uncovering coming-over. So the being offends Being by a phenomenological necessity, which attests that Being never shows itself *without* the being, nor nevertheless *as* being, just as *Sein und Zeit* already repeated with a decisive insistence. The process of givenness of the giving is thus repeated, here ontologically, in the agreement of Being and the being according to the *es gibt*, the aporia of the gift in general, which Saint Augustine had described in a theological intention.

It pertains to the gift given to spontaneously conceal the givenness in it: thus it pertains to the phenomenon of the gift to hide itself as such. In this essential aporia of the phenomenality of the gift, can the phenomenon of sacrifice take place? And, by being articulated there, might it even be permitted to break through it?

IV. Erasing of the Given and the Raising of the Gift

By its visibility, the given constitutes an obstacle, even to that which makes this very visibility possible. So what makes the visibility of the gift possible, if not the process of givenness, whereby the giver sets it free as given by handing it over in its autonomous visibility?

We should here note carefully that the gift given does not mask only (nor even first) the giver, as an effect is detached from its efficient cause, or as the beneficiary of a favor out of ingratitude denies to recognize it. The gift given masks the very process of giving, in which the giver participates, but without constituting it intrinsically (he can be blurred as well without therefore nullifying the process of giving). For, as we have recalled above, a gift (reduced) can remain perfectly possible and even complete with an anonymous or uncertain giver, indeed without any giver. Here, in fact, it is a question of one of the cardinal figures of the reduction of the gift to givenness. The question therefore does not consist in returning from the given to the giver, but in letting appear even in the gift finally given (in what is reached in its arrival, *Ankunft*) the process of its coming-over, that which gives visibility to any visible, more generally the very taking place which sets phenomenally (the *Überkommnis* which uncovers the visible). What is here in question is *suspending* the gift given, so that it would let the process of its

⁹ *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, in *Identität und Differenz*, GA 11, Frankfurt, 2006, p. 71.

givenness, *i.e.* the given character of the gift (its givenality [*donnéité*],¹⁰ to translate literally *Gegebenheit*) appear in its own mode, instead of crushing it in the fall from the given to a found object. So it is not a question of *suppressing* the gift given, to the profit of the giver, but of making this gift transparent anew in its own process of givenness, by letting his giver appear here possibly, but first and always the process that delivers it in the visible. At stake here is the phenomenality of this very return: giving back to the gift given the phenomenality of its return, of the return that inscribes it in its visibility, as gift coming from elsewhere than from itself. The gift appears as such, in other words as arriving from somewhere other than itself, only if it appears in such a way that it does not stop being sent back to this elsewhere that gives it, and from which it found itself given to see.

That the gift given lets the return from which it comes appear, *this* defines the signification and the phenomenological function of *sacrifice*—such will be our hypothesis at least. To sacrifice does not signify parting with a good (by destruction or dispossession), though this be possibly in favor of the other, but consists in making the return from which it comes appear, by turning it back (by making it come back) toward the elsewhere, of which it bears, in so far as a gift given, the intrinsic, irrevocable and permanent mark.¹¹ Sacrifice presupposes a gift already given, since it is a question neither of destroying, nor of undoing, nor even of transferring to another owner, but of sending back to the givenness from which it comes, and whose mark it always had to bear. Sacrifice gives the gift back to the givenness, from which it comes, by returning it to the very return that originally constitutes it. Sacrifice does not leave the gift, but dwells in it totally. It manifests it by *re-giving* the gift its givenness, because it repeats it starting from its origin. The formula, which shows perfectly the conditions of possibility of the gift, is found in a verse from the Septuagint: ta; sa; ta; pavnta kai; ejk tw'n sw'n dedwvkamen soi, — “all things are yours and it is by taking from among what is yours that we have made gifts for you” (I *Chronicles* 19:14). Make a gift by taking from among gifts already given to re-give, make a gift to the second power by joining in the first gift itself, make a gift by turning the first gift back around toward the one who gives it, and thus make it appear from top to bottom as a given coming from elsewhere — that defines sacrifice precisely, which consists in making visible the gift as given according to the coming over of givenness. It is absolutely not a question of a counter-gift, as if the giver needed either recovering his due (exchange), or receiving a supplementary tribute (gratitude as a symbolic salary), but of recognizing the gift as such, by repeating in an inverse sense the process of givenness, reinstating the gift there, and rescuing it from its factual fall back to the rank (without givenness) of a found object, non-given, *un-given*, in order to make visible in the end not only the given, but the process of givenness itself (as coming-over, *Überkommnis*), otherwise left unnoticed, as though exiled outside any phenomenality.

¹⁰ [In this essay, I have translated *donation* as “givenness,” which already captures the literal sense of the German *Gegebenheit*, so it is unnecessary to resort to more unusual formulations, such as “givenality,” to capture the literal sense of *donnéité*, so long as this sense is noticed—trans.]

¹¹ Let us recall that it is a question here of three marks of the phenomenon as given (see *Etant donné*, §13, *op. cit.*, p. 170-1).

Sacrifice does not give the given back to the giver, by robbing him of the givee: it makes givenness visible by re-giving the gift. Sacrifice makes a redundancy of the gift. As a result, sacrifice loses nothing, above all not the gift that it re-gives; on the contrary, it regains – it wins back the gift that it keeps, especially since it makes it appear for the first time as such, as a gift given, finally safeguarded in its givenness (*Gegebenheit*). Sacrifice wins, but without having to play the game of who wins or loses (as in the alleged pure love of God), as if it were necessary to lose a lot in order to win still more by retribution. Sacrifice wins by redundancy: it conquers the true phenomenon of the gift by restoring to it, through the act of re-giving, the phenomenality of givenness. Sacrifice re-gives the gift starting from the givee and makes the gift appear as such in the light of its givenness and, sometimes, for the glory of the giver. In so doing, it answers to forgiveness: forgiveness re-gives the gift as well, but starting from the giver, who confirms it in the light of givenness for the sake of the givee. Forgiveness and sacrifice match one other in this way, so as to make the phenomenality of givenness appear by the double redundancy of the gift, either from the givee, or from the giver.

V. The Confirmation of Abraham

We have thus determined sacrifice according to its phenomenality by inscribing it within the framework of a phenomenology of the gift: it has to make appear what the gift, once given, never fails to conceal and offend, the process of givenness itself, so that, from the recall of this process, the giver possibly becomes visible again as well. Can we confirm this determination of sacrifice by a meaningful example? Indeed, if we consider the episode of the sacrifice of Abraham, or rather of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham related in *Genesis* 22:1-19. Without omitting the radically theological status (how can we do otherwise?), we shall sketch an interpretation of it first with the guiding thread of the phenomenality of sacrifice.

It is a question indeed of a sacrifice – specified as such, “You will offer [your son Isaac] by a sacrifice on a mountain that I will show you” (22:2) – but of a sacrifice that eventually does *not* take place, at least if one holds to the common determination of sacrifice (a destruction or dispossession allowing an exchange within the framework of a contract). Understanding this sacrifice presupposes here paradoxically understanding why Isaac has *not* been sacrificed (“Abraham went to take the ram and offered it in sacrifice in the place of his son,” 22:13). Or more precisely, understanding why, while there was no sacrifice following the common determination (no destruction of Isaac), according to the biblical account there was indeed satisfaction, since God acknowledges: “I know now that you fear God” (22:12). Now this is possible only if we admit that this account does not obey the common determination of sacrifice, but its phenomenological concept – that of a sacrifice thought starting from the gift, and from the gift reduced to givenness; we must therefore locate it here. A first moment seems evident: God demands of Abraham a sacrifice, and even a consuming sacrifice (where the victim disappears through the fire, leaving nothing common to divide between God, the priest and the offering, contrary to other sacrifices). This demand of sacrifice falls upon Isaac, the only and therefore first son of Abraham. Is it a question of a sacrifice in the sense of the common concept? Let us notice that God asks nothing special of Abraham: he goes

through no special contract with him either; he simply and justifiably takes back Isaac, who already belongs to him, and even by a double title. First, evidently, because all firstborns belong to God by right: “You will give me the firstborn of all your sons. You will do the same for the small and the large ram. The firstborn remains for seven days alongside his mother, then, on the eighth day, you will give him to me” (*Exodus* 22:28-29). Or again: “Consecrate every firstborn to me, first fruits of the maternal breast, among the children of Israel. Man or domestic animal, he belongs to me” (*Exodus* 13:2). The question does not only consist in knowing what this belonging and this consecration really imply. The response varies, from the effective putting to death (in the case of the plague of Egypt on the firstborn, *Exodus* 12:29-30), of the ritual sacrifice in the Temple of animals as far as the expiation of the firstborn of Israel, prescribed explicitly by God (*Exodus* 13: 11-15; 34:19; *Numbers* 18:14), who forbids human sacrifices.¹² In this sense, Isaac belongs first to God, before belonging to his father (in this case Abraham), in the same exact way as any other firstborn of Israel indeed, but the same for all other people.

God has nevertheless another title to possession of Isaac, radical in another way: Isaac in effect does *not* belong to Abraham, who cannot, neither he, nor his wife, give birth to him by himself, (“Now Abraham and Sarah were old and advanced in age and what happens ordinarily for women had ceased for Sarah,” *Genesis* 18:11). So Isaac belongs originally and as a miracle to God alone: “Nothing, neither word nor deed, is impossible for God. At the same season next year, I will return to your home and Sarah will have a son.”¹³ And in fact, “God visited Sara as he had said and did for her as he had promised. Sara conceives and bore Abraham a son in her old age, at the time that God had indicated” (21:1-2). In this way, by right, Isaac, son of the promise by divine omnipotence, comes to Abraham only as a pure gift, unexpected because beyond every hope, entirely as what he would have possessed or engendered on his own. But this gift nevertheless disappears as soon as Isaac appears as such, that is to say as the son of Abraham, more precisely as what Abraham claims under the title of his son: “To the son who was born to him, given birth by Sara, Abraham gave the name Isaac. [...] The child grew and was weaned and Abraham made a large banquet when they weaned Isaac” (21:3, 8). In effect, Sarah appropriates Isaac as *her* son just as much (“I have given a son in his old age!” 21:7), since she drives out as a competitor the other natural born son, who Abraham had with Hagar (21:9-14). And the call that God addresses to Abraham only aims at denouncing explicitly this abusive appropriation: “Take your son, your only, the one that you cherish” – because Isaac precisely *is not* the possession of Abraham, who therefore does not have to cherish him as such. The demand of a sacrifice opposes to this illegitimate appropriation, which denies the gift given into a possession, the most ordinary right of the giver to have his gift acknowledged as a gift given, that is to say: simply conceded by always provisional, transferable, alienable usufruct: “Go to the land of Moriah and there you will offer him in sacrifice” (22:2). Abraham hears him asking

¹² See the analysis of R. de Vaux, *Les sacrifices de l'Ancien Testament*, Paris, 1964. In another sense, if one grants that Ishmael is the true firstborn, though born of a servant, he too is found rendered to God by the sending into the desert (*Genesis* 21:9ff).

¹³ We translate *Genesis* 18:14 following the version of the Septuagint (mh; ajduntei' para; tw'` qew'` rJh'ma), in conformity with *Luke* 1:37, which quotes it (oujk ;ajdunthsei' para; tw'` qew pan'` rJh'ma).

not so much to kill his son, to lose him and to give possession of him back to God (according to the common concept of the gift), as, first and above all, to give back to him his status as a gift, precisely to return him to his status as a gift given by reducing it (taking it back) to givenness.

And Abraham accomplishes this in as explicit and clear a manner as one can imagine. Isaac, who still reasons following the common concept of the gift, notices of course that his father does not have (that is to say, does not *possess*) any good available to sacrifice (to destroy and to exchange in the framework of a contract): “But where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” (22:7). Abraham, who already reasons with him according to the phenomenological concept of sacrifice as gift given reduced to givenness, answers that “God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice” (22:8) – which means that God decides everything, here including what one will offer him; thus that neither Abraham, nor even Isaac will not be able to give anything to God, save what God will have first himself and in the first place given to them; in a word, that every gift made to God will come first from God as a gift given to us. The place of sacrifice is thus called “God provides” (22:14). We must remark here that the Hebrew says אָרָה *yirha* (from the root רָאָה, to see, to foresee, to see to it), but that the Septuagint understands first, for the name Abraham attaches to the mountain, *God saw*, εἶδεν (2nd aorist οἶδρα), then, for the name that it always keeps, ἐφάνη, *God appeared* (passive aorist of οἶδρα). So everything happens as if the fact that God sees and provides, thus obviously *gives* the offering of the sacrifice, *i.e.* that God *gives the gift to give*, *i.e.* makes the gift appear as such, given by the giver, were equivalent to the appearing of the giver, to the fact that God *shows himself*. So God shows himself as he gives originally, as he shows that every gift comes from him. He appears as the giver that the gifts manifest by returning to him, from whom they come.

Abraham, and he alone (not Isaac), thus sees that God alone gives the gift of the sacrifice, so that as a result God appears to him. But he had already recognized God as the giver of gifts as soon as he had finally agreed to recognize Isaac as for him the principal among gifts given by God and thus due to God. So it no longer matters whether Abraham kills, eliminates and exchanges his son to the profit of God in order to accomplish the sacrifice demanded (according to the common concept of sacrifice); it matters rather and exclusively (according to the phenomenological concept of the gift) that he acknowledge his son as a gift, that he accomplish this recognition of the gift by giving it back to its giver and, thus, that he let God appear through his gift, rightly recognized *as a gift given*. And in this way God does hear him by sparing Isaac. On the condition of seeing indeed that by restraining him from killing Isaac, God precisely *does not* refuse the sacrifice of Abraham, but annuls only his being put to death, because that does not belong to the essence of sacrifice: the actual death of Isaac would only have satisfied sacrifice in its common concept (destruction, dispossession, exchange and contract). In fact, God lets Abraham go just to the point of sacrifice, but understood in the sense of its phenomenological concept: the recognition of Isaac as a gift received from God and due to God. And in order to recognize it, it is only necessary for Abraham to admit the loss of Isaac, an acknowledgement accomplished perfectly without his being put to death, but from his acceptance as a boundless gift: “The angel said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand over the child! Do no harm to him! I know now that you fear God: you have not refused me your one and only son’” (22:12). By refusing to let Isaac be put to

death, God does not thereby refuse acknowledgement of the gift presented by Abraham. Rather, God acknowledges and thus accepts the sacrifice all the more, understood this time in the strict phenomenological sense. By sparing Isaac from now on recognized (by Abraham) as a gift (of God), God re-gives him to him, gives him a second time and by presenting a gift by a redundancy, which consecrates it definitively as a gift from now on common and in the end open between the giver and the givee. The sacrifice redoubles the gift and confirms it as such for the first time.¹⁴

¹⁴ The death of the Christ accomplishes a sacrifice in *this* sense (more than in the common sense): by returning his spirit to the Father, who gives it to him, Jesus prompts the veil of the Temple (which separates God from men and makes him invisible to them) to be torn, and at once appears himself as “truly the son of God” (Matthew 27:51, 54), thus making not himself appear but the invisible Father. The gift given thus lets the giver be seen and thus here the process (here Trinitarian) of givenness. See our sketch in “The Recognition of the Gift,” *Revue catholique internationale Communio*, XXXIII/1, January 2008.