

## **Response to Jean-Luc Marion's "Toward a Phenomenological Sketch of Sacrifice"**

Maybe, a reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis could be of some help in clarifying the notion of sacrifice: it adds two additional modes of sacrifice not covered by Marion's precise phenomenological description.

For Lacan, a sacrifice enacts the disavowal of the impotence of the big Other: at its most elementary, the subject does not offer his sacrifice to profit from it himself, but to fill in the lack *in the Other*, to sustain the appearance of the Other's omnipotence or, at least, consistency. Let me recall *Beau Geste*, the classic Hollywood adventure melodrama from 1938, in which the elder of the three brothers who live with their benevolent aunt, in what seems to be a gesture of excessive ungrateful cruelty, steals the enormously expensive diamond necklace which is the pride of the aunt's family, and disappears with it, knowing that his reputation is ruined, that he will be forever known as the ungracious embezzler of his benefactress - so why did he do it? At the end of the film, we learn that he did it in order to prevent the embarrassing disclosure that the necklace was a fake: unbeknownst to all others, he knew that, some time ago, the aunt had to sell the necklace to a rich maharaja in order to save the family from bankruptcy, and replaced it with a worthless imitation. Just prior to his "theft," he learned that a distant uncle who co-owned the necklace wanted it sold for financial gain; if the necklace were to be sold, the fact that it is a fake would undoubtedly be discovered, so the only way to retain the aunt's and thus the family's honor is to stage its theft... This is the proper deception of the crime of stealing: to occlude the fact that, ultimately, THERE IS NOTHING TO STEAL - this way, the constitutive lack of the Other is concealed, i.e. the illusion is maintained that the Other possessed what was stolen from it. If, in love, one gives what one doesn't possess, in a crime of love, one steals from the beloved Other what the Other doesn't possess... to this alludes the "beau geste" of the film's title. And therein resides also the meaning of sacrifice: one sacrifices oneself (one's honor and future in respectful society) to maintain the appearance of the Other's honor, to save the beloved Other from shame.

There is yet another, much more uncanny, dimension of sacrifice. Let me take another example from cinema, Jeannot Szwarc's *Enigma* (1981), the story of a dissident journalist-turned-spy who emigrated to the West and is then recruited by the CIA and sent to East Germany to get hold of a scrambling/descrambling computer chip whose possession enables the owner to read all communications between KGB headquarters and its outposts. Small signs tell the spy that there is something wrong with his mission, i.e. that East Germans and Russians were already in advance informed about his arrival - so what is going on? Is it that the Communists have a mole in the CIA headquarters who informed them of this secret mission? As we learn towards the film's end, the solution is much more ingenious: the CIA *already possesses* the scrambling chip, but, unfortunately, Russians suspect this fact, so they temporarily stopped using this computer network for their secret communications. The true aim of the operation was to convince the Russians that the CIA does not possess the chip: the CIA sent an agent to get it and, at the same time, deliberately let the Russians know that there is an operation going on to get the chip; of course, the CIA counts on the fact that the Russians will arrest the agent. The ultimate result will thus be that, by successfully preventing the mission, the Russians will be convinced that the Americans do not possess it and that it is therefore safe to use this communication link... The tragic aspect of the story, of course, is that the CIA *wants* the mission to fail: the dissident agent is sacrificed in advance for the higher goal of convincing the opponent that one doesn't possess his secret.

The strategy is here to stage a search operation in order to convince the Other (the enemy) that one does not already possess what one is looking for - in short, one feigns a lack, a want, in order to conceal from the Other that one already possesses the *agalma*, the Other's innermost secret. Is this structure not somehow connected with the basic paradox of symbolic castration as constitutive of desire, in which the object has to be lost in order to be regained on the inverse ladder of desire regulated by the Law? Symbolic castration is usually defined as the loss of something that one never possessed, i.e. the object-cause of desire is an object which emerges through the very gesture of its loss/withdrawal; however, what we encounter here is the obverse structure of feigning a loss. Insofar as the Other of the symbolic Law prohibits *jouissance*, the only way for the subject to enjoy is to feign that he lacks the object that provides *jouissance*, i.e. to conceal

from the Other's gaze its possession by way of staging the spectacle of the desperate search for it.

This also casts a new light on the topic of sacrifice: one sacrifices not in order to get something from the Other, but in order to dupe the Other, in order to convince him/it that one is still missing something, i.e. *jouissance*. This is why obsessionals experience the compulsion repeatedly to accomplish their compulsive rituals of sacrifice - in order to disavow their *jouissance* in the eyes of the Other.

So, insofar as, for Lacan, the big Other is one of the names of God, my question is: what do these two psychoanalytic versions of sacrifice mean for a theological perspective?

Slavoj Žižek