

Symphilologus

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Band 1

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

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© 2016 by new academic press, Wien
www.newacademicpress.at

ISBN: 978-3-7003-1846-0

Umschlaggestaltung: www.b3k-design.de
Satz: Peter Sachartschenko
Druck: Prime Rate, Budapest

Nicholas Brooks und Gregor Thuswaldner (Hg.)

Making Sacrifices
Opfer bringen
Visions of Sacrifice in European and
American Cultures
Opfervorstellungen in europäischen und
amerikanischen Kulturen

 new academic press

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Preface

This is the first installment of the “Symphilologus,” the book series of the Salzburg Institute of Religion, Culture and the Arts. The term “Symphilologus” is derived from Friedrich Creuzer’s notion of “Symphilologie.” For the influential German classics scholar Creuzer (1771-1858) and other academics and poets of the Romantic period, it was imperative to break out of the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and art forms in order to combine poetry, philosophy, religion, and philology for their poetic and academic projects. Inspired by this spirit of collaboration and interdisciplinarity, the Salzburg Institute’s “Symphilologus” book series explores timely topics from various perspectives. The contributors of the present volume work in diverse fields including literature, history, political studies, philosophy, theology, and art history.

The “Symphilologus” book series is edited by Armin Eidherr (University of Salzburg), Gregor Thuswaldner (Academic Director of the Salzburg Institute), and Jens Zimmermann (Scholar-in-Residence of the Salzburg Institute). The Salzburg Institute of Religion, Culture and the Arts is a non-profit institution that promotes an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas between scholars from diverse religious and ideological backgrounds in order to engage critically with significant questions arising from the intersections of religion, culture, and the arts.

This first “Symphilologus” volume, edited by Nicholas Brooks and Gregor Thuswaldner, deals with the complex and problematic concept of sacrifice and its numerous cultural manifestations. Even though notions of sacrifice are ubiquitous, their ideological and at times religious underpinnings often remain in the dark. The contributions to this first volume in our series attempts to shed light on this important element of our human experience and its manifold cultural representations.

Gregor Thuswaldner

Nicholas Brooks

Introduction

This book is a meditation on the meaning of sacrifice in modern European and American culture. While no single volume can claim to provide an exhaustive account of a phenomenon as complex and ancient as sacrifice, the present work offers important insight, from a number of angles, into the difficulties and aporias that attend thinking about sacrifices or, indeed, of making them. Before the reader passes on to consider the essays, some comment seems in order on the place and meaning of sacrifice in Western culture broadly, and a preview of the ways our contributors take up the topic.

While readers may readily concede that sacrifice, as ritual and idea, is an important aspect of traditional culture, the status of sacrifice in the modern West is somewhat less clear. After all, sacrifice evokes a range of images. Soldiers and soldiers' memorials are among the first such images. In train come such figures as philanthropists, caretakers, organ donors, and other servants of public and private good. Images of such people lend sacrifice a positive resonance and we are tempted to think that sacrifice attends what is best in society. We are tempted, furthermore, to suggest that sacrifice is crucial, for acts of sacrifice seem to play a key role in setting society to rights. We think this way, that is, until we notice the price of sacrifice. For when we focus on what is sacrificed, we see destruction and loss. In a word, we see the victim. Descended from the Latin *victima* referring to the being offered in the ceremonial sacrifices of the Roman-Hellenistic world, the victim is that which is dedicated, and sometimes destroyed, in the sacrifice. The thought that we must give away or even destroy something in order to perpetuate ourselves disturbs us. For, we might wonder what danger or flaw among us requires this renunciation. We wonder, furthermore, whether this sort of victimization is ever just. We come to the discomfiting conclusion that sacrifice is a necessary injustice with which we continually try to construct a just and coherent world – or repair a broken one. Sacrifice thus confronts us with a troubling duality, for as in the case of the German noun, *Opfer*, which means both offering and victim (the verb, *opfern*, means *to sacrifice* and *to victimize*), it leaves us stranded between a productive, wholesome sort of renunciation on one side and a regrettable and possibly morally suspect form of destruction on the other. Sacrifice, it seems, is both.

Notwithstanding this troubling duality, however, the contributions in this volume converge at the point of demonstrating that sacrifice occupies a central position in

modern life. The frequency with which modern writers, thinkers, and artists continue to take up sacrifice is perhaps the best indication of its centrality. Consider too, the way that moderns have recurred to iconic images, tales, and ideas of sacrifice offered by the tradition. Greek and Roman tales of sacrifice have been the subject of countless works in the modern era. Thinkers, writers, and artists of the last few centuries have turned repeatedly to the Aeschylus' *Oresteia* cycle, for example. Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which take their point of departure in Aeschylus' tale of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis, attracted the attention of Racine, Goethe, and the composers, Gluck, Handel, and Richard Strauss.¹

Images of the biblical and Koranic traditions have cast a long shadow over modern reflections on sacrifice. The story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, which figures in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions (in the last, the story is traditionally understood as Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael, not Isaac), is perhaps the best known and most widely interpreted episode shared by these traditions. Studies in visual art abound of the moment at which Abraham, knife in hand, waits poised to strike his bound son. In the majority of these paintings, of which Rembrandt's famous *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635) is a well known example, that moment is rooted in the naive innocence of the victim, Isaac, whom heaven stands ready to spare. Caravaggio's remarkable version (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603), which appears on the cover of this book, however, seems to better represent the duality at the heart of sacrifice in the modern era. For, while the painting draws attention to Isaac's innocence, Caravaggio juxtaposes Isaac's passivity with Abraham's muscular determination to carry out the sacrifice and secure God's favor. The patriarch is so intent on his task, as Steven Shankman comments, that he appears "almost annoyed by the angel's sudden interference" (Shankman 2010: 9). Caravaggio thus holds the pain and violence of loss together with the desperate hope of gain. It is no coincidence that this set piece, in the conflicted spirit in which Caravaggio painted it, has occasioned intense reflection on the meaning of sacrifice by important modern philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida.²

Among the images of sacrifice handed down by the tradition, those of Christ's

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- 1 The works mentioned are Jean Racine, *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1674), Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1786), Johann Frideric Handel, *Oreste* (1734), Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774) and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) and Richard Strauss' 1899 rearrangement of Gluck's well-known *Iphigénie en Tauride*. On the long cultural history of the Iphigenia myth, see Edith Hall, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides Black Sea Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
 - 2 See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, and Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

death and resurrection occupy an especially important space in modern reflections on sacrifice. From the famous outer panels of the Isenheim Altarpiece to Bach's Passion oratorios, a veritable sea of works dealing with Christ's sacrifice and associated themes of suffering and death have poured forth in the modern age. If as Kathryn McClymond claims, sacrifice is often used as "a way of investing loss with meaning," we can perhaps understand why the death of Jesus has been such a common theme even into the modern age (McClymond 2008: 1). For, Christ has long been understood as an icon of deep but purposeful suffering; deep because Christians hold that he was God and thus both innocent and capable of escaping his humiliation, and purposeful because they see his death a self-sacrifice for all for humanity. Accordingly, many moderns have appealed to the icon of suffering Christ to probe the boundary between sacrifice and suffering, between meaning and meaninglessness.³

Perhaps the most important meaning read into Christ's death is that his was a sacrifice to end all sacrifices. For, within the Christian tradition, Christ is pictured as the last ritual sacrifice demanded by the heavens. In the *Letter to the Hebrews*, which contains perhaps the most important discussion of sacrifice in the New Testament, Christ is described as offering "for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:12) such that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Disregarding, if we may, the intricate theological arguments that buttress it, the basic claim is that because Jesus was God, his death was capable of satisfying the heavens in a way that usual sacrifices could not. After Christ, the world bears the flaws that hitherto obliged people to offer sacrifices, yet Christ's sacrifice makes amends for those flaws. With Christ's sacrifice, therefore, the relations between heaven and world, God and humankind, are so fundamentally altered that the hitherto existing sacrificial systems are rendered unnecessary. It may be true, as scholars have argued, that this article of Christian belief was the outcome, rather than the origin, of a shift away from ritual sacrifice already underway in the ancient world thanks to both the spread of monotheism and the emergence of forms of belief and ritual practices focused on the individual religionist.⁴ But whatever the origin of the shift, there is no arguing that Christ's sacrifice became the foremost vehicle for thinking of sacrifice within the Roman-Christian world that preceded the modern West.

Two developments inspired by the idea of Christ's sacrifice are noteworthy for the way they foreground modern conceptions. The first is that the ritual sacrifice of physical objects – be they liquid, vegetal, cereal, or flesh – became marginalized in the

3 We think of the twentieth-century artists, the sculptor and painter Käthe Kollwitz and the painter Francis Bacon, who created figures of destruction, suffering, and loss by recurring to traditional visual tropes of Christ crucified, Christ wept over by Mary (i.e., Pietà), and lamentation over Christ.

4 See Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)

West. The second development, complementary to the first, is that sacrifice was redefined as an inner state of obedience. As for the first development, some scholars have suggested that early Christians did not seek to ban ritual sacrifice, but continued to accept it with some modification of meaning as a part of religious life.⁵ But as Christian leaders faced the important task of differentiating the core tenets of their faith from those of rival religions of the Roman-Hellenistic world, sacrifice became a point of contention between Christians and non-Christians that permitted little gray area. What we might think of as initial, tolerant posture toward ritual sacrifice, thus gave way to opposition. In the centuries after the initial emergence of Christianity, Western Christian leaders increasingly came to see ritual sacrifice as superstition and meaningless destruction at best, and a dangerous subversion of Christian truth at worst. Non-Christians offered sacrifices; while Christians, it was hoped, did not. Though the terms change somewhat in the modern era, the basic dichotomy between “we,” who do not offer such sacrifices, and “they,” who do, has continued to structure European and American conceptions of sacrifice.

Though the parameters of this essay prevent us from going into any great depth, we wish to draw attention to a few examples supporting the claim that the rise of Christianity coincided with the denouement of ritual sacrifice in the West. Firstly, we note the emergence of a divide, between sacrifice-less Christians and those – chiefly pagans, Jews, heretics -- who offered, or were suspected of offering, sacrifices.⁶ We note, correspondingly, how this divide was enforced in law codes that criminalized ritual sacrifice.⁷

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- 5 With sources in view that seem to show early Christians (including Paul and Peter) participating in various ways in the ritual-sacrificial systems of their day, scholars have recently argued that Christianity did not, at first, entail a unilateral rejection of all manner of ritual sacrifice. Rather, early Christians balanced a conception of Christ as the supreme sacrifice with some participation in traditional ritual life. See George Heyman, *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington DC: The Catholic University Press, 2007) and Daniel Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
 - 6 Take, for instance, the notorious blood libel brought by Christians against Jews beginning in the twelfth century. Jews were accused of holding homicidal, sacrificial rituals in which they drained the blood of Christian children for use in the Passover matzah. Considering that scholars believe that Jewish sacrifice ceased with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, blood-libel accusations seem to combine, among other things, deep-seated suspicion of Jews with Christians’ understanding of themselves as a people free from ritual sacrifice.
 - 7 Much of Hellenistic-Roman ritual sacrifice was outlawed as part of the fourth- and early fifth-century Roman law compiled in the Theodosian Code. See *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. Clyde Pharr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952). In his *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* of 785, a law code aimed at forcing Saxon pagans to become Christians, Charlemagne included two regulations against sacrifice, one punishable by a fine and another by death. Paul Edward Dutton, ed., *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), 66-69.

As the ritual that recalls Christ's sacrifice, the Christian Eucharist holds an important and curious place in the process by which ritual sacrifice was suppressed. For, by feasting on the body and blood offered on the altar, Christians would seem to take part in a ritual of sacrifice that sits close by similar rituals of the ancient Jewish and Roman-Hellenistic worlds. Accordingly, the clergy, theologians, scholars and others have long striven to distinguish the Eucharist from its ritual precursors. The theory of the transubstantiation of the elements, according to which the bread and wine become flesh and blood without losing the outward characteristics of bread and wine, might be seen as the fruit of a medieval attempt to distinguish the Eucharist from more conventional ritual sacrifices. Protestant polemics against the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist during the Reformation count as another attempt to come to a clean separation between Christianity and religions of sacrifice. For, Protestant leaders interested to separate what they took as the essential Christianity from its various borrowings and accretions via the tradition insisted that the Eucharist must be sharply distinguished from a ritual sacrifice in which the attending priest achieves expiation through the offering of body and blood. Holding that God himself – and not a priest – brought the sacrifice (of Himself) at a point in time now past, Protestants moved to de-ritualize, as it were, the Eucharist. In the Reformed Church, where the Eucharist was most transformed, it was so purged of its ritual-sacrificial elements that it was reduced to a thankful commemoration of Christ's onetime sacrifice attended by bread and wine understood to be merely suggestive of Christ's actual body and blood.⁸ Thus, the Reformers could be seen as contributing to the longstanding Western project of distinguishing Christ's sacrifice from pre-Christian ritual sacrifice.

Though there is no single ruling conception of sacrifice in contemporary European and American cultures, moderns have followed in the footsteps of their ancient and medieval predecessors by viewing ritual sacrifice with suspicion, if not also revulsion. The modern attitude may first be detected among Enlightenment-era thinkers and writers, who seem to have taken up but transformed the terms of the foregoing critique of ritual sacrifice. Overwhelmingly, writers and thinkers of the Enlightenment described ritual sacrifice as pointless violence unbecoming a civilized, rational person. Ritual sacrifice is, in the view of its enlightened critics, a practice of benighted and cruel peoples. Bernard Picart and Jean Frédéric Bernard's much-read *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Several Nations of the Known World* (1723-1737), for example, is full of amused and horrified accounts of the sacrifice rituals of Native Americans, and Africans. These sacrifices occur, as Picart and Bernard imply, because of the ignorance of non-Europeans and the avarice of their religious and political lead-

8 On Zwingli's interpretation of the meaning of the Eucharist, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: a History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 146-8.

ers. In his *Encyclopédie* entry on the human victim [victime humaine], Louis de Jancourt presented human sacrifice as a practice common to communities stricken by “religious superstition;” the murderous outcome of such communities’ misguided attempts to appease God (Diderot 1755 Vol. 17: 240). Naturally, Jancourt’s point is that whether people or other beings are victimized, ritual sacrifice is pointless. Taking an approach followed by many other Enlightenment writers, Jancourt used the issue of human sacrifice to draw attention to the immorality and absurdity of ritual sacrifice in general. Jancourt’s contemporaries accordingly produced myriad tales in which sacrificial violence – and often human sacrifice -- is prevented by the persuasions of reason. This plotline figures at the center of Voltaire’s plays *Les Lois de Minos* and *Les Guèbres*, in which, as Marvin Carlson summarizes, “a maiden is threatened with religious sacrifice and a philosophic secular leader saves her by confronting the power of fanaticism” (Carlson 1998: 143). Thus with their ancient and medieval predecessors, Enlightenment figures would seem to share a deep suspicion of ritual sacrifice. But unlike their predecessors, perhaps, thinkers of the Enlightenment do not acknowledge or, at any rate, think highly of the notion that such sacrifices were ever necessary or justified. Thus one finds Enlightenment-era writers arguing that even Jesus’ brutal end was unnecessary save as a vindication of the universal, moral principles that he preached during his life.

If ritual sacrifice has long been condemned in the West and pushed to the margins, the contributions in this volume attest to the emergence of another, more complex kind of sacrifice – sacrifice as inner obedience – in its place. The roots of this sort of sacrifice can be traced back to early Christianity and the Roman-Christian world of late antiquity that succeeded it. In his *De Civitate Dei*, for instance, Augustine argued that Christ’s sacrifice necessarily shifts sacrifice from the outer world to the inner world of conscience for the very reason that Christ’s extraordinary death shows that God will not be mollified by offerings of blood, flesh, and “possessions.” “God does not want the sacrifice of a slaughtered animal,” reasons Augustine, but “the sacrifice of a broken heart” (Augustine 1984: 378). Consequently, “when we lift up our hearts to him, our heart is his altar” (Augustine 1984: 375). Before a God that cannot be bought off by anything that one can give, Augustine concludes, the only option is to turn one’s volition and thoughts from their course in order to follow God’s thoughts and volition. Naturally, from the Desert Fathers to Meister Eckhart, much speculation and discussion has attended questions of what God’s will consists in and how one can submit to it. But however these are defined, the inner sacrifice seems to consist in bringing oneself before a transcendent standard or obligation of some sort. Facing this obligation entails sacrifice for the simple reason that one is obliged to hold to a principle or course of action that runs counter to one’s most immediate desires and impulses. One is called to withstand the inner disruptions – “the conflicts of the soul” as Tertullian colorfully called them – to which our attempts to conform to the stand-

ard give birth (Tertullian 1870: 230). The sacrifice is not explicitly of one's possessions, blood, or flesh – though these might turn out to be necessary too – but an inward sacrifice of obedience. It is thus a sacrifice all the deeper and total.

Inner sacrifice in the sense just defined has become a familiar notion in the modern West. Dennis Keenan accordingly writes that, “in the genealogy of Western sacrifice one can trace an increasing interiorization, spiritualization, and dialecticization of sacrifice” (Keenan 2005: 1). While our contributors offer a fuller accounting of some of the ways that some modern thinkers have parsed out the meaning of this sort of sacrifice, Immanuel Kant's formulation of sacrifice might serve as an example here. Kant's notion of sacrifice resembles Augustine's, though the former specifically transposes sacrifice to the moral realm. Sacrifice accordingly becomes the cost we incur for the sake of consistent ethical thinking. For, according to Kant, ethics requires that we measure our actions by universal standards of morality. Thus whatever may be in our self-interest and whatever else we desire, must be subordinated to the dictates of practical (i.e., ethical) reason. In the *Critique of Pure Practical Reason*, Kant argues that while it would help us to see how the requirements of universal reason coincide with our personal interest, they will not always appear to coincide and only thinking according to “unchangeable maxims” will allow man to “tear himself from all sensible attachments so far as they want to rule over him, and find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he makes in the independence of his rational nature” (Kant 1996: 262). In Kant's view, therefore, moral reasoning entails sacrifice precisely because we are called to obey a standard of morality that is transcendent to our personal, “sensible” self.

Just as Kant relocates sacrifice to the area of tension between the realm of individual existence and the realm of universal reason, other thinkers of the modern era have thought of inner, self sacrifice as a consequence of the moral duty that one owes to one's community, one's country, or some other value. In these cases, the character of the sacrifice – self-abnegation before some standard or absolute – has remained the same while that to which one sacrifices has varied widely. One sacrifices for the sake of one's national community or for the greater good of society. Modern philanthropy seems to belong here, as do the terms of modern political rhetoric from J. G. Fichte's call for sacrifice in the *Addresses to the German Nation*, to John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration speech, to the admonishments to financial sacrifice offered by politicians in Europe and the United States on the heels of the recent financial crisis. Sacrifice has also figured in revolutionary visions, such as those offered by the French Revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks, and their Fascist counterparts on the Right. Though as Hannah Arendt pointed out in *On Revolution*, the standard to which revolutionaries most often appealed was not the sort of timeless standard that Kant imagined, but something more akin to the Hegelian absolute that comes to light in history (Arendt 2006, 42). In the eyes of the revolutionary, therefore, history is transformed into what He-

gel once described as the “slaughter [Schlachtbank], at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and virtue of individuals has been sacrificed” (Hegel 1848: 27). In this vision, the present state of things is that which is sacrificed for the sake of a brighter, purer future. Whether pictured in Kantian, Hegelian, or other terms, sacrifice has figured at the center of modern attempts to think through the relation between the individual and his or her obligations to collectivities and ideals that lie above or ahead.

But while invocations of sacrifice are rife in the modern era, they have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, while Westerners have long harbored suspicions of ritual sacrifice, inner sacrifice seems to have fallen into question only relatively recently. There are, doubtless, a number of reasons why this has occurred, but we will mention only a few of the most important. First, is the emergence of modern theories of political and economic life that seem to marginalize sacrifice by making the progress of society depend on channeling -- rather than denying -- people’s rational self-interest. One thinks of Thomas Hobbes’ argument in *The Leviathan* that individuals concede to state authority through a rational but fundamentally egoistic calculation of what will bring the individual the most pleasure and the least injury. One thinks also of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s argument in *On the Social Contract* that political authority is legitimate only if it reflects the “general will,” which Rousseau, in turn, defines as that which is in the shared interest of each member of the community (Rousseau 1987: 31-2). With their emphasis on individual gain and security, such theories would seem to increase the importance of self-interest at the expense of sacrificial self-denial. Much the same could be said of important strains of modern economic theory. Adam Smith, for example, held that people do and ought to sacrifice their personal gain for the good of others. But Smith’s major contribution to modern economics is rooted in his claim that economic development is fundamentally driven by the pursuit of self-interest.⁹ Such theories have thus made it possible to think of society, politics, and the economy in ways that render inner sacrifice – self-denial before an ideal – largely unnecessary.

Second, is the role played by the thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of the sort that Paul Ricoeur famously deemed the masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. For, according to Ricoeur, thinkers of this type question the ability of a subject (i.e., the “I”) to reflect on itself in a transparent way. For, the

9 Samuel Fleischacker explains that “the reason Smith assumes that economic agents are mostly motivated by self-interest is not that he thinks most people are incapable of benevolence, but that he considers that *wide* benevolence by which we might care for anonymous others, throughout our nation or throughout the circles we buy and sell, to be very weak, not normally strong enough to motivate economic transactions.” Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 67.

masters all maintain that the subject is determined by forces that exist at such a deep, subterranean level – as does the Freudian unconscious, for example – that the real motive at work in any given situation remains largely obscure (Ricoeur 1974: 99). This “hermeneutic of suspicion,” as Ricoeur famously called it, is significant for conceptions of sacrifice and especially the modern notion of inner sacrifice, precisely because the imperative to sacrifice oneself depends so heavily on one’s having a clear sense of duty before an ideal of some sort. Those who think in light of the hermeneutic of suspicion deny this clarity and simplicity. According to Nietzsche, for instance, the exhortation to sacrifice oneself for an ideal is either the product of philosophical error or a tactic of dark institutions intent on subjugation (or perhaps both). It turns out, therefore, that sacrifice is self-annihilation in the service of some misbegotten ideal. “Nothing works more profound ruin,” Nietzsche rails, “than any ‘impersonal’ duty, any sacrifice to the Moloch of abstraction” (Nietzsche 2003, 134). Far from ensuring a purposeful life, writes Nietzsche, “Kant’s categorical imperative should have been felt as *mortally dangerous*” (Nietzsche 2003, 134). Though Nietzsche’s opinion of sacrifice is ultimately much more complex and ambivalent than his above condemnation of Kantian sacrifice would indicate, our point is only to suggest that modern approaches to thinking about sacrifice rooted in suspicion have done much to throw the meaning of sacrifice into question.¹⁰

Third and lastly, notions of inner sacrifice have been challenged through their association with the revolutionary politics of the European twentieth century. From the perspective of a twenty-first century observer, the history of the twentieth century is, as Tony Judt once called it, a “Chamber of Historical Horrors” bookended on one side by the massive bloodletting of the First World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union on the other (Judt 2008: 4). In between, of course, sit the cruel histories of National Socialism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust. This history places sacrifice in question because of the intensity with which these regimes used the rhetoric of sacrifice to rally people to their blood-stained banners. In times of war or revolutionary struggle, sacrifice named the highest commitment to one’s people, Kultur, race, or the project of “building socialism.” But as the history of the twentieth century makes abundantly clear, far from serving wholesome moral purposes, such calls to sacrifice lent themselves to extreme instances of cruelty. With the example of the Nazis or Bolsheviks before our eyes, it can appear that sacrificing – rather than refraining from sacrifice – ought to be counted as the true moral failing. We wonder, as Moshe Halbertal put it in his recent book *On Sacrifice*, whether “*misguided self-transcendence is morally more problematic and lethal than a disproportionate attachment to self-interest*” [italics his] (Halbertal 2012: 78). For, the call to sacrifice has lent itself so

10 For a fuller treatment of Nietzsche’s reinterpretation of sacrifice, see Keenan’s discussion in *The Question of Sacrifice*, 59–73.

many times over to the most vicious sorts of oppression and violence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have learned to worry as William Butler Yeats did that “the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity” (Yeats 2000: 76).

What, then, is the meaning of sacrifice in modern European and American cultures? Based on what we have demonstrated above, it seems clear that no universally- acclaimed definition of sacrifice exists. And just as writers and thinkers have disagreed about the content of sacrifice, they have also disagreed about whether sacrifice is essential to life, inessential to it, salutary, or worthy of condemnation. Nonetheless, we have striven to show that sacrifice has been – and continues to be – a central topic of discussion in the modern West. Sacrifice seems to be everywhere, we might say, and yet everywhere disputed. Thus we return to the idea with which we began, that modern thought seems caught in a dualism between, on one side, sacrifice as a necessary and productive offering on one side and a destructive renunciation of life on the other. Perhaps never has sacrifice promised so much and seemed so vital while at the same time seemed so unclear and threatening to us. This book strives to offer a timely reappraisal.

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