



Sacrifice

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

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Jacopo da Ponte, called Bassano, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1574-75, oil on canvas, 10 5/16 x 13 1/4 in.

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, The Suida-Manning Collection, 1999

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Sacrifice is an ancient and powerful idea, rich with contradictions. These days it can seem ubiquitous: from the rhetorical mobilizations of one war after the other, to the ideological pressures of austerity, to the “necessary” disruptions of life in neoliberal democracies, to the urgent adjustments demanded (and ignored) for a changing climate. Everywhere you turn, it seems, some form of sacrifice is rearing its head, demanding tribute. The history of the concept runs deep, open to many readings. Here I will parse it as violence, because I think that today this is how sacrifice presents itself most forcefully as a problem.

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In some forms, sacrifice does aspire to selflessness, to the perfect surrender that anticipates no return—but more often than not, it is governed by an algebra of expected returns: this for that, wealth for merit, my life for the death of the Other.¹ At its simplest, sacrifice condenses as a violence that places itself in relation to a desired effect, such that the latter—the gain or benefit—is entailed by the loss or destruction of *something*; call this “something” the offering. Destruction for gain. Sacrifice links the two, calibrating them in a commensuration mediated by destructive violence. I say “at its simplest,” but there is nothing simple about this. The offering might be a black rooster or a packet of tobacco, but it could just as well be a species, a landscape, the heart of a captured enemy, the youth of a nation. What matters is the necessity of this destruction, within a logic that renders the destruction intelligible—and worthwhile—as a means to some higher gain. Thus understood, sacrifice constitutes itself around a central node of agentive violence. Somewhere, at some point, a return is posited, a calculation made, a decision executed.

This requires more framing. Here I will discuss five points of reference:

- First there is Abraham, in the desert, binding Isaac—paradigm of an averted sacrifice that depends as much on Abraham’s will to take morality beyond ethics and the law,² as it does on an *entitlement*, on the implicit right of Abraham to dispose over Isaac. This offering is mine to give, the loss is mine to suffer. In his subservience, Abraham consults no one. Was Isaac really “his” to destroy? Was this river really “theirs” to dam, this landscape “yours” to irradiate?
- Second there is Burkert, who spun the story of sacrifice as a “comedy of innocence”—a pantomime of consent that exonerates violence.³ The sacrificial bull walks to the altar by itself, offering its throat to be slit. As long as the willingness of the victim can be construed, the integrity of the rite is preserved. Here the efficacy hinges on an appearance of consent, on devices that conceal the exercise of force. In a liminal space between murder and surrender, sacrifice draws power from both; the blood is necessary, but so is the *masquerade*. The violence circumscribes itself, presents as something else while still drawing power from its destructive efficacy. An active kernel, wrapped in a public secret.⁴
- Entitlement, and masquerade; a third term is *uncertainty*. Will the sacrifice work? Will it be accepted?⁵ Will it prove my devotion, will the crops grow, will the promised jobs materialise, will the return be effected? In the consummation of its violence, before the return manifests, sacrifice opens itself to an uncertain, unknowable future—to the hope of an effect that may (or may not) follow its violence. Sacrifice is thus almost always a contingency, disguised—more or less well, more or less efficiently—as mechanism. Overtly or not, sacrifice orients itself within a space of hope: the question is, whose?

¹ Michel Foucault, “Society must be Defended,” *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76* (New York: Picador, 2003), 255.

² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).

³ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁴ Michael Taussig, *Defacement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁵ Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

- A fourth term—and here things start to get complicated—is *value*. To be sacrificable is to be destructible—to *have been made* destructible—for the sake of something else. Sometimes the terms are blunt, issuing as a judgment: this species is common, uninteresting or of “least concern”—it can be culled; this landscape is worthless, remote or uninhabited—it can be destroyed. The minimal value of what stands to be destroyed will be recovered, many times over, in the projected return—and in the end, in the perfected future of sacrificial love,⁶ *there will have been* no loss. Loss and gain will have been commensurated, the balance settled (usually with a net surplus) and the disjunctions—trading a mountain for jobs in the mining sector; a forest for a highway and a faster commute—glossed. This is the mechanism of the Promised Kingdom; today, the idea of economic value does its work admirably.
- Such operations do not exhaust the problem of sacrificial value, of course; nowhere near. Yes, the sacrificial offering must be destructible—but also, it cannot be worthless; if anything it must be exalted, because the destruction of its value is what renders the sacrifice worthy, even heroic. Sacrifice infuses the destruction of value with value: justifying itself not only in the prospect of a return, but also in the inherent nobility of surrender. Here the idea becomes not just dangerous, but insidious—continuously threatening to identify destructive surrender not just as moral action, but as the very ground of morality. To be good—to be a good citizen, a good person—is to surrender what you value, what you love, for a “higher” cause. Sacrifice is also a problem of moral control.

Sacrificial violence is pervasive, and cosmological—just pay attention to the arguments that weave through the next road development, the next culled species, the next hydroelectric dam, the next military intervention, the next welfare cut. The imperatives that animate and justify such exercises must be questioned, and more often than not resisted: their equivalences disassembled, their logics revealed and demystified, their mechanisms rendered with the clarity required to make them unbearable.⁷ Just as vitally, I think, sacrifice must also be *estranged*, the destructions it commands rendered in the full weight of their strangeness. “For the good of the nation,” “there will be jobs”—if only *this* is surrendered, *this* precious thing destroyed. Strange translations are in play here, mediated by violence. The coolest calculations echo with millennial atavisms of blood, suffering and loss—because sacrifice is a holy word, with complex but undeniable purchase on the present. Its equivalences fold into mystery and unfold again, in a violence that plays out between the abject and transcendent, murder and surrender, awe and horror. Animated by this richness, a sacrificial analytic opens violence—and the contemporary moment—to new and increasingly urgent questions. So pause for a moment, at the next “justified” destruction, the next “trade-off,” and dwell on this: you may be in the presence of something more primordial than you thought—something mysterious, that veils itself in obviousness, hiding among the lines of spreadsheet calculations. Likely as not, you will find yourself asking questions. Who has the right? Where is the violence, how does it hide? Whose hopes stand to be fulfilled, really, and whose losses compelled? Could we think this all otherwise? *How?*

⁶ Elisabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011).

⁷ René Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

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