

## Sacrifice, the Festival and the Principles of the Sacred World

### The Need that Is Met by Sacrifice and Its Principle

The first fruits of the harvest or a head of livestock are sacrificed in order to remove the plant and the animal, together with the farmer and the stock raiser, from the world of things.

The principle of sacrifice is destruction, but though it sometimes goes so far as to destroy completely (as in a holocaust), the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object's real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice. When the offered animal enters the circle in which the priest will immolate it, it passes from the world of things which are closed to man and are *nothing* to him, which he knows from the outside – to the world that is immanent to it, *intimate*, known as the wife is known in sexual consumption [*consumation charnelle*]. This assumes that it has ceased to be separated from its own intimacy, as it is in the subordination of labour. The sacrificer's prior separation from the world of things is necessary for the return to *intimacy*, of immanence between man and the world, between the subject and the object. The sacrificer needs the sacrifice in order to separate himself from the world of things and the victim could not be separated from it in turn if the sacrificer was not already separated in advance. The sacrificer declares:

*Intimately*, I belong to the sovereign world of the gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity, just as my wife belongs to my desires. I withdraw you, victim, from the world in which you were and could only be reduced to the condition of a thing, having a meaning that was foreign to your intimate nature. I call you back to the *intimacy* of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is.

The text is from *Theory of Religion*, tr. Robert Hurley (Zone Books, New York, 1992), pp. 43–61. Appearing in France in 1974 through Editions Gallimard, the text was written in 1948. See *OC*, 7, pp. 307–18.

### The Unreality of the Divine World

Of course this is a monologue and the victim can neither understand nor reply. Sacrifice essentially turns its back on real relations. If it took them into account, it would go against its own nature, which is precisely the opposite of that world of things on which distinct *reality* is founded. It could not destroy the animal as a thing without denying the animal's objective *reality*. This is what gives the world of sacrifice an appearance of puerile gratuitousness. But one cannot at the same time destroy the values that found reality and accept their limits. The return to immanent intimacy implies a beclouded consciousness: consciousness is tied to the positing of objects as such, grasped directly, apart from a vague perception, beyond the always unreal images of a thinking based on participation.

### The Ordinary Association of Death and Sacrifice

The puerile unconsciousness of sacrifice even goes so far that killing appears as a way of redressing the wrong done to the animal, miserably reduced to the condition of a thing. As a matter of fact, killing in the literal sense is not necessary. But the greatest negation of the real order is the one most favourable to the appearance of the mythical order. Moreover, sacrificial killing resolves the painful antinomy of life and death by means of a reversal. In fact death is nothing in immanence, but because it is nothing, a being is never truly separated from it. Because death has no meaning, because there is no difference between it and life, and there is no fear of it or defence against it, it invades everything without giving rise to any resistance. Duration ceases to have any value, or it is there only in order to produce the morbid delectation of anguish. On the contrary, the objective and in a sense transcendent (relative to the subject) positing of the world of things has duration as its foundation: no *thing* in fact has a separate existence, has a meaning, unless a subsequent time is posited, in view of which it is constituted as an object. The object is defined as an operative power only if its duration is implicitly understood. If it is destroyed as food or fuel is, the eater or the manufactured object preserves its value in duration; it has a lasting purpose like coal or bread. Future time constitutes this real world to such a degree that death no longer has a place in it. But it is for this very reason that death means everything to it. The weakness (the contradiction) of the world of things is that it imparts an unreal character to death even though man's membership in this world is tied to the positing of the body as a thing insofar as it is mortal.

As a matter of fact, that is a superficial view. What has no place in the world of things, what is unreal in the real world is not exactly death. Death

actually discloses the imposture of reality, not only in that the absence of duration gives the lie to it, but above all because death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck cry of life. The real order does not so much reject the negation of life that is death as it rejects the affirmation of intimate life, whose measureless violence is a danger to the stability of things, an affirmation that is fully revealed only in death. The real order must annul – neutralize – that intimate life and replace it with the thing that the individual is in the society of labour. But it cannot prevent life's disappearance in death from revealing the *invisible* brilliance of life that is not a *thing*. The power of death signifies that this real world can only have a neutral image of life, that life's intimacy does not reveal its dazzling consumption until the moment it gives out. No one knew *it* was there when it was; it was overlooked in favour of real things: death was one real thing among others. But death suddenly shows that the real society was lying. Then it is not the loss of the thing, of the useful member, that is taken into consideration. What the real society has lost is not a member but rather its truth. That intimate life, which had lost the ability to fully reach me, which I regarded primarily as a thing, is fully restored to my sensibility through its absence. Death reveals life in its plenitude and dissolves the real order. Henceforth it matters very little that this real order is the need for the duration of that which no longer exists. When an element escapes its demands, what remains is not an entity that suffers bereavement; all at once that entity, the real order, has completely dissipated. There is no more question of it and what death brings in tears is the useless consumption of the intimate order.

It is a naive opinion that links death closely to sorrow. The tears of the living, which respond to its coming, are themselves far from having a meaning opposite to joy. Far from being sorrowful, the tears are the expression of a keen awareness of shared life grasped in its intimacy. It is true that this awareness is never keener than at the moment when absence suddenly replaces presence, as in death or mere separation. And in this case, the consolation (in the strong sense the word has in the 'consolations' of the mystics) is in a sense bitterly tied to the fact that it cannot last, but it is precisely the disappearance of duration, and of the neutral behaviours associated with it, that uncovers a ground of things that is dazzlingly bright (in other words, it is clear that the need for duration conceals life from us, and that, only in theory, the impossibility of duration frees us). In other cases the tears respond instead to unexpected triumph, to good fortune that makes us exult, but always madly, far beyond the concern for a future time.

### The Consummation of Sacrifice

The power that death generally has illuminates the meaning of sacrifice, which functions like death in that it restores a lost value through a relin-

quishment of that value. But death is not necessarily linked to it, and the most solemn sacrifice may not be bloody. To sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give. Killing is only the exhibition of a deep meaning. What is important is to pass from a lasting order, in which all consumption of resources is subordinated to the need for duration, to the violence of an unconditional consumption; what is important is to leave a world of real things, whose reality derives from a long-term operation and never resides in the moment – a world that creates and preserves (that creates for the benefit of a lasting reality). Sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future; it is consumption that is concerned only with the moment. This is the sense in which it is gift and relinquishment, but what is given cannot be an object of preservation for the receiver: the gift of an offering makes it pass precisely into the world of abrupt consumption.

This is the meaning of 'sacrificing to the deity', whose sacred essence is comparable to a fire. To sacrifice is to give as one gives coal to the furnace. But the furnace ordinarily has an undeniable utility, to which the coal is subordinated, whereas in sacrifice the offering is rescued from all utility.

This is so clearly the precise meaning of sacrifice, that one sacrifices *what is useful*; one does not sacrifice luxurious objects. There could be no sacrifice if the offering were destroyed beforehand. Now, depriving the labour of manufacture of its usefulness at the outset, luxury has already *destroyed* that labour; it has dissipated it in vainglory; in the very moment, it has lost it for good. To sacrifice a luxury object would be to sacrifice the same object twice.

But neither could one sacrifice that which was not first withdrawn from immanence, that which, never having belonged to immanence, would not have been secondarily subjugated, domesticated and reduced to being a thing. Sacrifice is made of objects that could have been spirits, such as animals or plant substances, but that have become things and that need to be restored to the immanence whence they come, to the vague sphere of lost intimacy.

### The Individual, Anguish and Sacrifice

Intimacy cannot be expressed discursively.

The swelling to the bursting point, the malice that breaks out with clenched teeth and weeps; the sinking feeling that doesn't know where it comes from or what it's about; the fear that sings its head off in the dark; the white-eyed pallor, the sweet sadness, the rage and the vomiting . . . are so many evasions.

What is intimate, in the strong sense, is what has the passion of an absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty

limpidity of the sky: this is still a negative definition, from which the essential is missing.

These statements have the vague quality of inaccessible distances, but on the other hand articulated definitions substitute the tree for the forest, the distinct articulation for that which is articulated.

I will resort to articulation nevertheless.

Paradoxically, intimacy is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual. If one describes the individual in the operation of sacrifice, he is defined by anguish. But if sacrifice is distressing, the reason is that the individual takes part in it. The individual identifies with the victim in the sudden movement that restores it to immanence (to intimacy), but the assimilation that is linked to the return to immanence is nonetheless based on the fact that the victim is the thing, just as the sacrificer is the individual. The separate individual is of the same nature as the thing, or rather the anxiousness to remain personally alive that establishes the person's individuality is linked to the integration of existence into the world of things. To put it differently, work and the fear of dying are interdependent; the former implies the thing and vice versa. In fact it is not even necessary to work in order to be the *thing* of fear: man is an individual to the extent that his apprehension ties him to the results of labour. But man is not, as one might think, a thing because he is afraid. He would have no anguish if he were not the individual (the thing), and it is essentially the fact of being an individual that fuels his anguish. It is in order to satisfy the demands of the thing, it is insofar as the world of things has posited his duration as the basic condition of his worth, that he learns anguish. He is afraid of death as soon as he enters the system of projects that is the order of things. Death disturbs the order of things and the order of things holds us. Man is afraid of the intimate order that is not reconcilable with the order of things. Otherwise there would be no sacrifice, and there would be no mankind either. The intimate order would not reveal itself in the destruction and the sacred anguish of the individual. Because man is not squarely within that order, but only partakes of it through a thing that is threatened in its nature (in the projects that constitute it), intimacy, in the trembling of the individual, is holy, sacred and suffused with anguish.

### The Festival

The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking-loose, that is, into violence. It constantly threatens to break the dikes, to confront productive activity with the precipitate and conta-

gious movement of a purely glorious consumption. The sacred is exactly comparable to the flame that destroys the wood by consuming it. It is that opposite of a thing which an unlimited fire is; it spreads, it radiates heat and light, it suddenly inflames and blinds in turn. Sacrifice burns like the sun that slowly dies of the prodigious radiation whose brilliance our eyes cannot bear, but it is never isolated and, in a world of individuals, it calls for the general negation of individuals as such.

The divine world is contagious and its contagion is dangerous. In theory, what is started in the operation of sacrifice is like the action of lightning: in theory there is no limit to the conflagration. It favours human life and not animality; the resistance to immanence is what regulates its resurgence, so poignant in tears and so strong in the unavowable pleasure of anguish. But if man surrendered unreservedly to immanence, he would fall short of humanity; he would achieve it only to lose it and eventually life would return to the unconscious intimacy of animals. The constant problem posed by the impossibility of being human without being a thing and of escaping the limits of things without returning to animal slumber receives the limited solution of the festival.

The initial movement of the festival is given in elementary humanity, but it reaches the plenitude of an effusion only if the anguished concentration of sacrifice sets it loose. The festival assembles men whom the consumption of the contagious offering (communion) opens up to a conflagration, but one that is limited by a countervailing prudence: there is an aspiration for destruction that breaks out in the festival, but there is a conservative prudence that regulates and limits it. On the one hand, all the possibilities of consumption are brought together: dance and poetry, music and the different arts contribute to making the festival the place and the time of a spectacular letting-loose. But consciousness, awake in anguish, is disposed, in a reversal commanded by an inability to go along with the letting-loose, to subordinate it to the need that the order of things has – being fettered by nature and self-paralysed – to receive an impetus from the outside. Thus the letting-loose of the festival is finally, if not fettered, then at least confined to the limits of a reality of which it is the negation. The festival is tolerated to the extent that it reserves the necessities of the profane world.

### Limitation, the Utilitarian Interpretation of the Festival and the Positing of the Group

The festival is the fusion of human life. For the thing and the individual, it is the crucible where distinctions melt in the intense heat of intimate life. But its intimacy is dissolved in the real and individualized positing of the

ensemble that is at stake in the rituals. For the sake of a *real* community, of a social fact that is given as a thing – of a common operation in view of a future time – the festival is limited: it is itself integrated as a link in the concatenation of useful works. As drunkenness, chaos, sexual orgy, that which it tends to be, it drowns everything in immanence in a sense; it then even exceeds the limits of the hybrid world of spirits, but its ritual movements slip into the world of immanence only through the mediation of spirits. To the spirits borne by the festival, to whom the sacrifice is offered, and to whose intimacy the victims are restored, an operative power is attributed in the same way it is attributed to things. In the end the festival itself is viewed as an operation and its effectiveness is not questioned. The possibility of producing, of fecundating the fields and the herds is given to rites whose least servile operative forms are aimed, through a concession, at cutting the losses from the dreadful violence of the divine world. In any case, positively in fecundation, negatively in propitiation, the community first appears in the festival as a thing, a definite individualization and a shared project with a view to duration. The festival is not a true return to immanence but rather an amicable reconciliation, full of anguish, between the incompatible necessities.

Of course the community in the festival is not posited simply as an object, but more generally as a spirit (as a subject-object), but its positing has the value of a limit to the immanence of the festival and, for this reason, the thing aspect is accentuated. If the festival is not yet, or no longer, under way, the community link to the festival is given in operative forms, whose chief ends are the products of labour, the crops and the herds. There is no clear *consciousness* of what the festival *actually* is (of what it is at the moment of its letting-loose) and the festival is not situated distinctly in consciousness except as it is integrated into the duration of the community. This is what the festival (incendiary sacrifice and the outbreak of fire) is consciously (subordinated to that duration of the common thing, which prevents it from enduring), but this shows the festival's peculiar impossibility and man's limit, tied as he is to clear consciousness. So it is not humanity – insofar as clear consciousness rightly opposes it to animality – restored to immanence. The virtue of the festival is not integrated into its nature and conversely the letting loose of the festival has been possible only because of this powerlessness of consciousness to take it for what it is. The basic problem of religion is given in this fatal misunderstanding of sacrifice. Man is the being that has lost, and even rejected, that which he obscurely is, a vague intimacy. Consciousness could not have become clear in the course of time if it had not turned away from its awkward contents, but clear consciousness is itself looking for what it has itself lost, and what it must lose again as it draws near to it. Of course what it has lost is not outside it;

consciousness turns away from the obscure intimacy of consciousness itself. Religion, whose essence is the search for lost intimacy, comes down to the effort of clear consciousness which wants to be a complete self-consciousness: but this effort is futile, since consciousness of intimacy is possible only at a level where consciousness is no longer an operation whose outcome implies duration, that is, at the level where clarity, which is the effect of the operation, is no longer given.

### War: The Illusions of the Unleashing of Violence to the Outside

A society's individuality, which the fusion of the festival dissolves, is defined first of all in terms of real works – of agrarian production – that integrate sacrifice into the world of things. But the unity of a group thus has the ability to direct destructive violence to the outside.

As a matter of fact, external violence is antithetical to sacrifice or the festival, whose violence works havoc within. Only religion ensures a consumption that destroys the very substance of those whom it moves. Armed action destroys others or the wealth of others. It can be exerted individually, within a group, but the constituted group can bring it to bear on the outside and it is then that it begins to develop its consequences.

In deadly battles, in massacres and pillages, it has a meaning akin to that of festivals, in that the enemy is not treated as a thing. But war is not limited to these explosive forces and, within these very limits, it is not a slow action as sacrifice is, conducted with a view to a return to lost intimacy. It is a disorderly eruption whose external direction robs the warrior of the intimacy he attains. And if it is true that warfare tends in its own way to dissolve the individual through a negative wagering of the value of his own life, it cannot help but enhance his value in the course of time by making the surviving individual the beneficiary of the wager.

War determines the development of the individual beyond the individual-as-thing in the glorious individuality of the warrior. The glorious individual introduces, through a first negation of individuality, the divine order into the category of the individual (which expresses the order of things in a basic way). He has the contradictory will to make the negation of duration durable. Thus his strength is in part a strength to lie. War represents a bold advance, but it is the crudest kind of advance: one needs as much naïveté – or stupidity – as strength to be indifferent to that which one overvalues and to take pride in having deemed oneself of no value.

### From the Unfettered Violence of Wars to the Fettering of Man-as-Commodity

This false and superficial character has serious consequences. War is not limited to forms of uncalculated havoc. Although he remains dimly aware of a calling that rules out the self-seeking behaviour of work, the warrior reduces his fellow men to servitude. He thus subordinates violence to the most complete reduction of mankind to the order of things. Doubtless the warrior is not the initiator of the reduction. The operation that makes the slave a thing presupposed the prior institution of work. But the free worker was a thing voluntarily and for a given time. Only the slave, whom the military order has made a commodity, draws out the complete consequences of the reduction. (Indeed, it is necessary to specify that without slavery the world of things would not have achieved its plenitude.) Thus the crude unconsciousness of the warrior mainly works in favour of a predominance of the real order. The sacred prestige he arrogates to himself is the false pretence of a world brought down to the weight of utility. The warrior's nobility is like a prostitute's smile, the truth of which is self-interest.

### Human Sacrifice

The sacrifices of slaves illustrate the principle according to which *what is useful* is destined for sacrifice. Sacrifice surrenders the slave, whose servitude accentuates the degradation of the human order, to the baleful intimacy of unfettered violence.

In general, human sacrifice is the acute stage of a dispute setting the movement of a measureless violence against the real order and duration. It is the most radical contestation of the primacy of utility. It is at the same time the highest degree of an unleashing of internal violence. The society in which this sacrifice rages mainly affirms the rejection of a disequilibrium of the two violences. He who unleashes his forces of destruction on the outside cannot be sparing of his resources. If he reduces the enemy to slavery, he must, in a spectacular fashion, make a glorious use of this new source of wealth. He must partly destroy these things that serve him, for there is nothing useful around him that can fail to satisfy, first of all, the mythical order's demand for consumption. Thus a continual surpassing toward destruction denies, at the same time that it affirms, the individual status of the group.

But this demand for consumption is brought to bear on the slave insofar as the latter is *his* property and *his* thing. It should not be confused with the movements of violence that have the outside, the enemy, as their object. In

this respect the sacrifice of a slave is far from being pure. In a sense it is an extension of military combat, and internal violence, the essence of sacrifice, is not satisfied by it. Intense consumption requires victims at the top who are not only the useful wealth of a people, but this people itself; or at least, elements that signify it and that will be destined for sacrifice, this time not owing to an alienation from the sacred world – a fall – but, quite the contrary, owing to an exceptional proximity, such as the sovereign or the children (whose killing finally realizes the performance of a sacrifice twice over).

One could not go further in the desire to consume the life substance. Indeed, one could not go more recklessly than this. Such an intense movement of consumption responds to a movement of malaise by creating a greater malaise. It is not the apogee of a religious system, but rather the moment when it condemns itself: when the old forms have lost part of their virtue, it can maintain itself only through excesses, through innovations that are too onerous. Numerous signs indicate that these cruel demands were not easily tolerated. Trickery replaced the king with a slave on whom a temporary royalty was conferred. The primacy of consumption could not resist that of military force.