

Sacrifice and the Body beyond Metaphysics

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Lecture and Conference Abstracts

Sacrifice and Natality: Surrogacy Structures

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Why do so many texts with no agenda on ‘gender’—created long before the rise of feminist theology and philosophy—force the mother into the foreground, next to or superimposed upon the sacrificial altar? The numerous examples (we will only be touching on a selection!) include Kierkegaard’s Attunement section in *Fear and Trembling*; early Christian Syriac poetry; and the strangely self-harming triptych of Genesis 21-23, where the doubled surrogate mothers, Hagar and Sarah, stand on either side of the ‘sacrifice’ (in inverted commas)—a sacrifice that is textualised, transformed, but infinitely reproductive nonetheless. Why have histories of sacrifice been so haunted (though ‘haunted’ is too thin a word for such visceral figures of birth and the maternal body) by the uncanny mimesis—and repulsion—between mortality and natality? And how does the strange kinship between sacrifice and birth affect the old theological/philosophical debate over the ends and edges of ‘man’, in his fragile position between animalplus and divinityminus (and distinct from ‘woman’—always elsewhere, somewhere). ‘Like’ birth, blood sacrifice is situated at, or just teetering over, life’s outer edge.

The Mourning Body

Caecilie Varslev Pedersen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

While Søren Kierkegaard was decidedly not a feminist, can his thinking nevertheless teach us something about embodied female sacrifice? In my presentation, I will offer a discussion of this question starting out from a reading of the four mysterious images of a weaning mother, which appear alongside four different imaginary variations of the *Binding of Isaac* in Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

I have previously argued that we can read these two sets of images as an allegory for two types of relations to the loss of pre-modern forms of authority. Drawing on Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, I suggest that Kierkegaard’s fourfold reimagining of Abraham’s violent (near) sacrifice of Isaac represents an attitude of melancholia—a repetitive and unproductive relation to what is lost. By contrast, the mother weaning her child represents a process of mourning, i.e., a sacrifice, in which a “productive” or acknowledging loss is involved, since the child gradually gains individuality.^[1]

In this presentation, I will reconsider this argument in light of the workshop's theme of embodied female sacrifice. The paper will attempt to weave together the themes of breastfeeding, weaning, sacrifice, and traumatic loss in and beyond Kierkegaard's text. I will draw on Vanessa Rumble's reading of the weaning passages in *Fear and Trembling*, as well as on the 3rd century saint Perpetua's descriptions of the pain and relief in her breasts, during the interruption and reestablishment of her breastfeeding, as she was imprisoned and later martyred in Carthage. I defend the thesis that breastfeeding is a sacrifice, yet one we ought to be careful not to uncritically glorify, and that weaning is the body in an ambiguous process of mourning.

Beyond the sacrificial Body. Law, Desire, and Gift

Isabella Guanzini, KU Linz, Austria

The Christian religious imaginary has been inhabited from its origins by the sacrificial fantasy, which finds its most radical symbol in the crucified body. According to the principle of *imitatio Christi*, the believer has always been called to share the pain of finite and mortal existence to elevate himself through his own self-sacrifice to the fullness of being in another world. Already the masters of suspicion condemned this ascetic-religious cult of sacrifice, showing its dehumanizing and superegoic side, dramatically linked to the violence of abuse, submission, and denial of life. However, this beneficial and liberating critique has removed the donative and not merely alienating aspect not of the sacrificial body, but of the symbolic sacrifice. Starting from a close dialogue between systematic theology and (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, this contribution aims to question both the sacrificial (religious) phantom in its alienating character and the equally superegoic drive of the imperative of unlimited enjoyment as reaction to any kind of symbolic limitation. In both cases, the total subjugation of the body corresponds to the exercise of a self-referential freedom, subservient to a law (be it "You must!" or "Enjoy!") that does not recognize any singularity. Against this background, an attempt will be made to think of a form of sacrifice that follows the logic of the gift (of the body), without being subjected to a logic of alienating exchange. This logic concerns the embodiment of a relational exchange (from pregnancy onwards), which the law makes recognizable in the limit assigned to self-referential desire.

"The Remedy for a World Without Transcendence": Georges Bataille on Sacrifice and the Theology of Transgression

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Georges Bataille's philosophy is profoundly shaped by the quest to overcome the mundane aspects of a world burdened by the absence of a divine presence. He holds that the only way out of this stifling condition lies in the radical act of sacrifice, famously stating, "Sacrifice is the remedy for a world without transcendence"

Bataille's conception of sacrifice goes beyond the theoretical or the occasional; his entire thought is intimately bound up with notions of excess, transgression, and boundary crossing. For him, a sacrifice is not simply the renunciation of something valuable, but a rupture, a violent disruption of the normative order. It involves transgressing the boundaries of the self and social constraints in order to embrace the irrational and primal. This act of transgressive sacrifice is best understood in the context of a general economy characterized not by investment and scarcity but by unproductive expenditure or expenditure without return. He contends that societies have surplus energy beyond what is necessary for survival and suggests that this surplus should be spent in acts of excess—often symbolically or wastefully—rather than channeled into productive or practical activities. Such spending or sacrifice upsets the normal order and reminds individuals of their primal, uncontrollable nature. Bataille's writings present sacrifice as a complex and ambiguous act that challenges conventional interpretations. He strives to uncover profound and troubling aspects of human nature and challenges us to rethink our notions of morality, meaning, and the limits of our existence. Through his exploration of sacrifice, Bataille asks us to confront the abyss within ourselves and to recognize the profound and mysterious depths of the human psyche.

This lecture attempts to place Bataille's philosophy in the context of the broader spectrum of Western notions of sacrifice that have developed through gradual processes of demythologization, spiritualization, and the subsequent abolition of sacrifice. His thinking can thus be understood both as nostalgia for the times when there were still possibilities for the sacrificial production of the sacred, and as an attempt to restore sacrifice to the center of the Western spiritual tradition. The aim of the lecture is to re-evaluate his "atheological" thought and compare it with mystical and other radical expressions of Christian reflections.

Blood Lines: Biopolitics, Patriarchy, Myth

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Classical traditions are filled with stories about fathers killing children, children killing parents etc. From Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, to the binding of Isaac, to the killing of Jephthah's unnamed daughter, a common thread connecting many of these stories is the exercise of the power of life and death, which ritually speaking is the power to sacrifice, a power usually accorded in the classical Mediterranean world to the patriarch or *paterfamilias*. There is a "family resemblance" (pun intended) that links these stories to a whole complex of dynamics, including sovereign authority, social and textual reproduction (and their undoing), and the divine human economy. My contribution will explore some of these linkages, and will focus in particular on the reasons for the masculinist slant of many of these tales, drawing on such scholars as Nancy Jay and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The tension that Lévi-Strauss argued is central to myth -- namely, the contradiction between birth from one (autochtony) and birth from two (sexual reproduction), or between consanguinity (endogamy) and affinity (exogamy) -- is not merely a logical puzzle, but an existential struggle over the scarce goods of the original economy: that of the family or household. And in many traditions, including Christianity, our inherited traditions have rigged this struggle in favor of the male.

Guilt and Atonement: Violence and Sacrifice in the Work of Robert Bresson and Michael Haneke

Dietmar Regensburger, University of Innsbruck, Austria

Sacrifice is a troublesome and ambiguous concept. René Girard has claimed in his writings that biblical revelation has deprived humanity slowly of its last sacrificial clutches. The human flaws and weaknesses that threaten human coexistence and communal peace still exist, without our being able to resort to the unconscious sacrificial practices of archaic religions for reconciliation. In my paper, I will address the question whether we finally should get rid of the concept of (religious) sacrifice or how and in which sense we can transform it nowadays. For this purpose I will focus on two film classics, which are exploring cinematically the question of violence, sacrifice and reconciliation: Robert Bresson's

AU HASARD BALTHAZAR and Michael Haneke's THE WHITE RIBBON. Both films show disturbing acts of violence, including physical torture and sexual abuse. As religion plays an important role in both films I will focus also on the question whether and how religious beliefs are interfering here with violence, sacrifice and reconciliation.

Through Thick and Thin: Shapes of women's bodies and oral sacrifice

Gertrud Koch, Free University Berlin, Germany

Dolls, models and other externalisations of the self are predecessors of the screen images of the female body and its outlooks. These technical substitutes function as media of animation for the spectators. The somatic needs of the human body in terms of nurture, fluids etc. going in and out are often either absent or objects. Todd Haines' *The Carpenter Story*, entirely directed with Barbie dolls, *Barbie* (the new film about the doll) and Leo Carax' animated doll in his musical *Annette* are all playing with the difference between the imagined and the physical body. At its center is a reference to oral sacrifice and the question if a filmic body can swallow and digest. Animated from René Girard's theory of sacrifice and his essayistic remarks on anorexia and bulimia the lecture will explore the tension between image and imaginability in cinematic models.