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### Existence is Sacrificeable, But It Is Not Sacrifice

It is difficult to define “sacrifice” in a way that encompasses all the acts and ideas that define themselves by that word, but I do not intend to exhaust the subject (if such a thing could be done) with this paper. I would like to expand on and respond to Georges Bataille’s seemingly overbroad claim that

the institution of sacrifice is practically universal, it is clear that Negativity, incarnated in Man’s death...has played a role in the spirit of the simplest men, without any common grounds comparable to those which are regulated once and for all by the ceremonies of a Church—but nonetheless in a univocal manner. It is striking to see that across the world a communal *Negativity* has maintained a strict parallelism in the development of rather stable institutions, which have the same form and the same effects. (Bataille, 19)

In order to understand the scope of Bataille’s claim, one must understand what he means by “man’s Negativity”. Bataille appropriated this word from Hegel, and uses it to mean

man's impulse toward opposition which finds its final significance in death. It is useful to think of this opposition as decay or dis-integration. The power of human philosophy, according to Hegel and Bataille, is differentiation and naming of entities through the destruction of previously indivisible (because undivided) parts. Death is the fruit and/or root of decay, which is the method of differentiation which is the power of philosophy. Sacrifice represented for Bataille that which allowed a man to experience the meaning of death, yet live. In his own words,

...Man has, in a sense, revealed and founded human truth by sacrificing; in sacrifice he destroyed the animal in himself, allowing himself and the animal to survive only as that noncorporeal truth which Hegel describes and which makes of man...a being unto death...death which lives a human life. (Bataille, 18)

The dilemma is that a dying man cannot find the fulfillment of this negative knowledge in his own death because he would have to die to find that fulfillment which would do him no good as a dead man:

The privileged manifestation of Negativity is death, but death, in fact, reveals nothing. In theory, it his natural, animal being whose death reveals Man to himself, but the revelation never takes place. For when the animal being supporting him dies, the human being himself ceases to be. (Bataille, 19)

By means of the “subterfuge” of sacrifice, man is able to overcome this obstacle in a limited sense, and can grasp the significance of death without himself dying. Bataille, then believes in the substitutionary significance of sacrifice. Substitution has given all sacrifice “the same form and the same effects.” In Bataille’s model, the sacrificial victim experiences the real death *for* the sacrificer, but in a strange twist, the point of the substitution is not so the sacrificer can escape death, but rather so he can embrace it without dying.

The further complication of Bataille’s theory of sacrifice is the sacrifice of sacrifice itself necessitated by the finiteness of each blood-letting. Since the sacrifice as a subterfuge must be repeated infinitely and will never yield the full knowledge of death, Bataille wishes to imagine a sacrifice that is not a subterfuge. He sees this as the real sacrifice, the infinite sacrifice. But he does not mean infinite in an indivisible way. He means it in the Totality of all dismemberment—the accumulation of the dismembered parts and repetitions into an undifferentiated and vast immanence. This distinction, though subtle, is important because it is the bridge between Bataille’s emphasis on immanence and immediacy and his longing for a completion of finiteness in a final end that would be a surrogate for, a replacement for the regent “transcendence.”

Only completed history and the spirit of the Sage (of Hegel)—in whom history revealed, then revealed in full, the development of being and the totality of its becoming—occupy a sovereign position, which God only provisionally occupies, as a regent. (Bataille, 12)

This completed history, the accumulation of all the distinguished things man's Negativity has been able to differentiate, would be an end to the mimetic subterfuge of endless repetition through the "sublation of sacrifice." Sublation, in Bataille's sense, is a pre-eminence and a removal at the same time—an overwhelming everything that can also be a nothing. If a page were covered in ink to the very edges and stretched to the limit of space, there would be no difference between itself and not itself, and it would, without any opposition that gave it specification or difference, either cease to be or be everything or both. This is the sublation of sacrifice, but Bataille can only imagine it. In this imagining, the significance of the real sacrifice is a rupture of finiteness, a suspended ecstatic agony of overwhelming meaning which at that point would be unmeaning. He must supplement the gap between his finiteness and his longing for Totality with the paradoxes that poetry and art relate. But he realizes that even these will need to be sacrificed to sacrifice. This is why Bataille chooses to have Rimbaud sacrificing poetry in the ecstatic climax of his *Inner Experience*.

Bataille realizes the "impasse of sacrifice." Jean-Luc Nancy problematizes this impasse even further in his essay *The Unsacrificeable*:

More precisely, art comes to supplement, to relay or to sublimate, the impasse of sacrifice. This impasse is linked to the following: 'If the subject is not truly destroyed, everything is still equivocal. And if it is destroyed, the equivocal is resolved, but in the void where everything is obliterated' (Bataille, *OC* 12:485). So the choice is between

simulacrum and nothingness... ‘But’—Bataille continues—‘out of this double impasse arises a sense of the moment of art, which, putting us on the track of utter extinction—leaving us suspended there for a time—proposes to man a ravishing without repose.’... There is ravishing inasmuch as art preserves us “suspended” on the edge of extinction, which is one way of recognizing a new form of simulacrum here. But it is “without repose”, because it brings along the intense agitation of an emotion that accedes to extinction. (Nancy, 28, 29)

Nancy asserts that Bataille’s fascination (or obsession) with sacrifice stems from his desire to acquire a transcendental Other outside the existence of man. Nancy maps Bataille’s successive emanations of sacrificial simulacrums as the desire to find something or someone to whom Bataille can offer himself as sacrifice. Nancy writes “that if we have to say that existence is sacrificed, it is not in any case sacrificed by anyone, nor is it sacrificed to anything” (Nancy, 36). This is in direct opposition to Bataille’s emphasis on self-sacrifice and his “trans-appropriation” of the economy of the “old” sacrifices, all of which assumed a Being to whom one offered sacrifice. Bataille was clear that he did not offer the sacrifice of himself to a Being, but rather offered sacrifice to Nothing. The entity Nothing was, in a way, Negativity as a being, and so the offering of the self could be sacrificed to the Negativity of the self. In this way, Bataille hoped to sacrifice himself to himself, but to rupture the self in the act of sacrifice so that he was also sacrificing to something beyond existence. If one sacrifices existence (within the established proportions of sacrifice) there must be something outside of existence to

receive the sacrifice. Nancy sees through these semantic “trans-appropriations” of sacrifice. Nancy calls this Nothing beyond existence the “obscure God.” Nancy calls for a thinking-apart from sacrifice. He does not wish to replace the transcendent God with the Totality of finitude. He says “Western sacrifice has almost always known, and almost always been ready to say, that it sacrificed to nothing” (Nancy, 38). Not Nothing. Just nothing. To Nancy, “veritable existence is unsacrificeable...the truth of existence *is* that it cannot be sacrificed” (Nancy, 38) The reason for this assertion should be obvious. Nancy does not believe there is anything or anyone outside humanity to whom one *could* offer sacrifice.

This is why Nancy believes Bataille needs to be “relentlessly corrected” (Nancy, 36). He believes that Bataille is opening the door for the haunting of the “Outside of finitude” (Nancy, 37). He believes “there is no ‘outside.’ The event of existence, the ‘there is,’ means that there is *nothing else*” (Nancy, 37). In his estimation, Bataille has arrived at the precipice of sacrifice’s religious significance, but Nancy desires to draw back from that precipice by reminding Bataille of one of their shared and fundamental beliefs. That existence is defined by man’s Negativity, and man is all there is to define existence. Existence is drawn from man’s being. Fundamentally, Bataille does not disagree with this concept:

...natural knowledge is incomplete, it does not and cannot envisage any but abstract entities, isolated from a whole, from an indissoluble totality, which alone is concrete. Knowledge must at the same time be anthropological...of course, this anthropology does not

envisage Man as do the modern sciences but as a movement impossible to isolate from the heart of the totality. In a sense, it is actually a theology, where man has taken the place of God. (Bataille, 12)

Bataille is a firm believer in the “philosophy of death” which he says is the “philosophy of atheism.” That is why Nancy is so bold as to say Bataille must be corrected for his longing for the Outside. According to Nancy, Bataille is coming dangerously close to necessitating an outside existence (or a transcendence) with his theory of sacrifice.

What Nancy admits is that “strictly speaking we know nothing decisive about the old sacrifice” and that “the Western economy of sacrifice has come to a close...it is closed by the decomposition of the sacrificial apparatus itself” (Nancy, 35). These confessions are significant because it indicates the fear that Nancy has of appropriating a symbol which has a remainder and a vector he cannot predict or control. What Bataille wanted from sacrifice was one thing, but Nancy fears that sacrifice carries its own valence. It is like the art that accedes to extinction, but suspends above it indefinitely. The force to accede to extinction is not guaranteed to suspend. The force that Bataille borrows from sacrifice is not guaranteed to behave in the way atheism dictates. Nancy reasserts that Western sacrifice always knew it sacrificed to nothing, but this latent knowledge makes the institution of sacrifice absurd, and Nancy is not willing to deny that sacrifice “sustained and gave meaning to billions of individual and collective existences” (Nancy, 35) What Nancy fears is this ignorance. He knows he does not understand the significance of the old sacrifice. If sacrifice was to no one and everyone knew it; why

was and is it so universal and why have so many been tempted into believing its significance?

But if one assumes that there is no one to whom one sacrifices, Bataille may not use sacrifice as the centerpiece of his philosophy because if sacrifice is not to anyone, it is not truly significant. If it is not significant or meaningful, it has no power. It becomes comedic. And it becomes massacre. That is why Nancy spends much of his time talking about the sacrifice of the Jews at Auschwitz. Without over-determining the significance, the sacrifice becomes a genocide or a holocaust. Bataille is trapped between two uncomfortable positions—let the blood continue to spill to make sacrifice real and significant and concrete, or deny the death the status of sacrifice, which in Bataille’s mind, would be to deny its realization. Nancy asks if Bataille’s “dialectical negativity expunges blood or whether, on the contrary, blood must ineluctably continue to spurt” (Nancy, 27). If Bataille spiritualizes sacrifice, it no longer has the power of real death, the concreteness of finiteness and the ability to rupture finitude. But if Bataille insists on the real death, he necessitates the constant spilling of blood in mimetic repetition until history is completed in the Sage.

But denying the significance of sacrifice altogether, or asserting its obsolescence as a significant economy for Western thought, leaves one in Nancy’s position—unable to explain why it is so universal and so tempting if it is in fact so meaningless. The temptation of sacrifice was one which Bataille could not resist. Nancy only resisted it by a reassertion of fundamental atheist claims that did not and, by Nancy’s own admission, *could not* explain sacrifice’s temptation, economy, or risk. I think that Bataille’s sacrifice can be thought of in a different way. Nancy admits that neither he nor Bataille can

understand the significance of the “old” sacrifice. I intend to explicate that significance and show that Bataille straddled an edge of belief, almost grasping a paradox which is the bloody heart of sacrifice and the mystery of the Gospel.

Nancy remarks on four major ways that Western sacrifice trans-appropriates the meanings and economy of “old” sacrifice. He uses the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus Christ as the two figure-heads of the “ontotheological” Western sacrificial system. In the case of Socrates and Christ, their sacrifices have four common characteristics: their sacrifices are unique and synochdotal self-sacrifices that sublimate all finite sacrifices into their infinity.

Sacrifice is always of the lesser to the greater. Nancy rejects the sacrifice of existence, because existence is all there is. Human existence apparently has no higher existence to which it could be sacrificed. This is an assumption that Bataille’s “error” illuminates. Nancy’s materialism could not cope with the inevitable conclusions of the economy of sacrifice. Nancy wants “clarity without God” (Nancy, 37). But can he gain it? What Bataille’s double impasse showed was the eventual failure of Negativity to explain its own existence or any existence. Sacrifice means there has to be something greater. Bataille came up against it. He came up against the awful choice between bloody blood for the rest of bloody history, or an acceptance of transcendence. The attachment to materialism became the main constraining force in the creation of this false bifurcation.

Nancy says, “spiritual sacrifice will only be sacrifice in a figurative sense” (Nancy, 24). Notice that Nancy equates “spiritual” with “figurative.” This is a common materialist ploy and a common misconception of reality. Existence does not have to be physical and figurative things are no less real than the paper you hold in your hands, and

spiritual things are not necessarily any more figurative than physical things. It is the equation between figurative and spiritual that devalues (defaces) sacrifice, and causes Nancy to both misunderstand the old sacrifice and castigate Bataille for coming closer to understanding it.

Within the Biblical construct, created things are corrupt and decaying. Created things include everything that Nancy calls existence. But these things do not appropriate existence from themselves. Existence implies difference. The beauty of any transcendent theory of existence is that it contains an Other for all things to differentiate from. Bataille and all materialists do not have this Other as a standard of difference and a way to demarcate existence. So they must fully embrace materialism and immanence. The only way that immanent theories of existence can differentiate is through the difference produced by decay. An example: current quantum mechanics theories assert that all energy and matter can and once were unified. Our separation of different forces or of different bodies is not arbitrary but neither is it constant. These bodies and forces have precipitated from an initial unity through decay.

The materialists believe that created existence has always been this way—that this is the way things are, but the Scriptures speak of a time when there was no death or decay. In the Scriptural system, sacrifice is a representation of the wages of sin which is death. In the Hebrew sacrificial system, the sacrifice was a making right of death and decay through death and decay. It was a sign of the death of death. If death is the only way that immanent materialists can demarcate existence, than they cannot embrace the death of death as Bataille tried to do. Nancy understands what is at stake, and that is why he says and possibly believes that he cannot understand the “old” sacrifice. He cannot understand

it because he is unwilling to believe that the death of death, the loss of Negativity, is not the end of existence because we do not draw our existence from what is created, but rather from the One who created it.

The blood-letting of the Jewish sacrifices being copies of the truth, were not enough to change reality, to truly kill death. That is why they had to continue and re-iterate. It is as if a ball rolling into a valley were continually trying to get to the precipice from which it rolled, but could never return to that same point. Just like a bowling ball on a pendulum that is released (not pushed) near your nose will never hit your face. All of this is because of decay. Death necessitates death. But what if there was a possibility for a hand to push the ball up the hill? This is the hope of the believer—that there is an Outside. But it is not only transcendence that one needs, because sacrifice by its very nature speaks to real concrete needs. The Pragmatists understood this fatal flaw of all strictly transcendental perspectives on existence. If the God is “obscure”, He could not reach us to tell us the truth. But a strictly immanent God would not do man much good either because he would not know anything that man could not know. He would in fact be man. Man is the strictly immanent God.

The answer to the dilemma was staring at Bataille in his fascination with sacrifice. The sacrifice of Jesus was the moment that all things were returned to God. We don't know it yet because we live in time. But in Reality, God reconciled Himself to reality through Jesus Christ, who filled all things. Since all things were contained in Christ, all things were sacrificed on His cross. Paul says,

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him [Jesus], and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Col. 1:20)

This is what Bataille continued to come up against, and what Nancy rejects. Can existence be sacrificed? Define existence as everything that is created, and the answer is yes, and it has already been done. In this sense, one can see how Jesus as God was actually sacrificed, and yet did not cease to be. There is no difference, as Bataille knew, between an all-encompassing immanence and an transcendence. There is no difference between  $\pi$  and 3.14159... all the way until the last digit. At the "consummation of the ages" which is "today", God made good on an eternal covenant, and brought all things into Himself. Being in God is inevitable, but it is not pleasant for those who are not in Christ. Without the rest one has in Christ, man experiences the full knowledge of death without being able to die for eternity. The full knowledge of death, that "rapture without repose" that Bataille seems to want, is actually coming to a "blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them" (Heb. 12:18-19). When joining into the sacrifice of everything in an eternal moment, it is best to hold to that existence which cannot be shaken. Because we are all part of the everything joined into Christ in His sacrifice. Those of us that hold fast our hope to the end will find that Jesus Christ is the incorruptible God, and God's existence as the root of existence, is unsacrificeable. But those that hold to everything that is

created rather than Christ *will* experience everything's eternal sacrifice...but it is only foolish pride that would make someone long for *that* full realization.

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