

## Research Article

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# Beyond the Sacrificial Fantasy: Body, Law, and Desire

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2024-0012>

received March 30, 2024; accepted June 14, 2024

**Abstract:** From its origins, the Christian religious imaginary has been inhabited by the sacrificial fantasy, which finds its most radical symbol in the crucified body. According to the principle of *imitatio Jesu*, believers have always been called to consider pain as an experience to be lived and shared with Christ, to be offered to him as a gift of self to the Other. Already the masters of suspicion condemned this ascetic-religious cult of sacrifice and showed its dehumanizing and superegoic side, characterized by the violence of abuse, authoritarianism, submission, and above all the 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) fantasy in its alienating character and the equally superegoic drive of the imperative of unlimited enjoyment as a reaction to any kind of symbolic limitation. 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.

**Keywords:** superegoic law, Lacan, Nancy, Jung, symbolic sacrifice, cross, mother

## 1 Introduction

The whole of humanity has practised something we call “sacrifice.” But we have come, at least in the West, to a cultural condition in which sacrifice has in a way been sacrificed. As Jean-Luc Nancy states, sacrifice is present in the form of an empty box, an absence, or an “ambiguous and indistinct presence”<sup>1</sup> that we can no longer understand. It is a “peculiar absence in us,” which in his opinion has been prepared in the past ten centuries by the prophets of Israel, Zoroaster, Confucius, the Buddha, and, finally, by philosophy and Christianity, which have “sublated, transfigured, or withdrawn” sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Nancy believes that Western culture did not just translate something pre-existing into Latin, rather it ushered in a new meaning – sacrifice. This word would, as it were, assimilate and at the same time sacrifice a previous semantic tradition, generating something new. Thus, it could be said that the word “sacrifice” is a perfect act of sublation. “There would be an obscure sacrifice of words within the word ‘sacrifice’.”<sup>3</sup>

This contemporary tendency towards a necessary sublimation or overcoming of sacrifice is a crucial issue within psychoanalytic theory and clinic, which I intend to briefly present in my contribution. I refer to the position of Freud, Lacan and Jung, through whom I try to offer an answer to the question posed by Nancy:

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 51.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 51–2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 53.

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“Isn’t it about time that we acknowledged the end of real sacrifice and the closure of its fantasy?”<sup>4</sup> This question betrays one fact in any case: albeit as an ambiguous presence or a spectral absence, the “spirit of sacrifice” continues to inscribe itself in new forms even in the bodies of post-traditional societies of the secular West.

## 2 The Religious Sacrificial Fantasy

Even if Hosea, Socrates, and Christ represent figures in Western culture who *decisively* distance themselves from sacrifice and propose a true metamorphosis, or transgression of it, the Christian religious imaginary has been inhabited from its origins by a sacrificial imaginary which finds its most radical symbol in the crucified body. Being or becoming like Jesus Christ is the goal of the Christian life, and Jesus Christ is the archetype and at the same time the model (*exemplum*) for the believer (Mark 2:14).

According to the principle of *imitatio Jesu*, believers have always been called to consider pain as an experience to be lived and shared with Christ, to be offered to him as a gift of self to the Other. Through such a gift, the believer participates in the sufferings of the crucified in anticipation of his own resurrection. One can consider, for example, the concept of *theosis* (*deificatio*) of the Eastern Church, that is, a process of transformation whose goal is a similarity to and union with God, not least through suffering “in Christ.” Therefore, sacrifice becomes a way of purification and atonement in God, with a view to a future fullness.

Thomas à Kempis (1379/80–1471), in his spiritual work *De imitatione Christi*, considered the most important devotional work in Catholic Christianity and published around 1425 in the context of the *devotio moderna*, invites the believer to become like Jesus, suffering with him.

Oh, that thou wert worthy to suffer something for the name of Jesus, how great glory should await thee, what rejoicing among all the saints of God, what bright example also to thy neighbour!<sup>5</sup>

The “royal way of the Holy Cross” (Chapter XII) will carry and lead the believer to the desired end, which is life in God. The author traces an ascetic path of detachment from the world, which takes up individual aspects of Jesus’ lifestyle and actions and is characterized by humility and self-loathing, service, obedience, and withdrawal from the world in favour of an inner spiritual life in a loving relationship with Christ.

Learn now to die to the world, so shalt thou begin to live with Christ. Learn now to condemn all earthly things, and then mayest thou freely go unto Christ. Keep under thy body by penitence, and then shalt thou be able to have a sure confidence.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, humility (*humilitas*) and being humble (*humilis*), as well as suffering (*pati*), become the decisive experiences for following Jesus, since Jesus is perceived in his earthly life above all in his suffering: “Christ was willing to suffer and be despised, and darest thou complain of any?”<sup>7</sup> In their struggle against their desires, to imitate Christ in their journey of suffering, believers must in humility and obedience take up their cross daily. Only following the cross leads to a moral and spiritual life on a par with the Christian life. Indeed, the “whole life of Christ was a cross and martyrdom, and dost thou seek for thyself rest and joy?”<sup>8</sup>

Thomas à Kempis certainly did not invent the concept of imitating Christ, but his writing reworks biblical references and spiritual tradition, internalizing and concentrating them in the figure of Christ.<sup>9</sup> *De imitatione Christi* developed a form of *imitatio*-piety that, although initially intended for monastic life, later – thanks also to translations from Latin into vernacular languages – had a rapid and widespread reception, influencing

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *The Imitation of Christ*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>9</sup> Treusch, “De imitatione Christi,” 396.

modern Christian spirituality according to the leitmotif of humility, suffering, obedience, and withdrawal from the world.

This spiritual tradition – not the only one within the landscape of Western Christianity – could be considered a paradigmatic example of “sacrificial fantasy.” This primordial narrative tends to subject the believer’s life to the moral or religious ideal of sacrifice in order to attain a life in fullness. Renunciation of earthly enjoyment, of worldly goods, is a path to the true riches of life in Christ. Within this horizon, the loss of self (in Christ) represents a gain, which is achieved above all through renunciation and suffering. This sacrificial fantasy that inhabits the religious subject is thus based on a mere economy of exchange: earthly obedience, suffering, and sacrifice correspond to the “counterfeit money” offered to God’s omnipotence in order to secure otherworldly salvation. Nietzsche emblematically revealed and criticized the essence of this sacrificial economy:

You still want to be paid, you virtuous! Want to have reward for virtue, and heaven for earth, and eternity for your today? ... For this is your truth: you are too *pure* for the filth of the words revenge, punishment, reward, retribution. You love your virtue as the mother her child; but when did anyone ever hear that a mother wanted to be paid for her love?<sup>10</sup>

The exchange between earth and heaven, between today and eternity, guarantees compensation with great interest as repayment of a debt. This is what Žižek calls “the perverse solution that forms the very core of ‘really existing Christianity’ .... God first threw humanity into Sin in order to create the opportunity for saving it through Christ’s sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup> In this dialectic of debt/credit, God is transformed into a creditor who, through the gift of the Son, offers himself to his *debtor* to settle the *debt*. In the sense of *imitation Christi*, human sacrifice should repeat this gesture: one immolates oneself on this earth in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

There is no doubt that there is a karst, ascetic-mystical current running through the history of Christianity in which the life of the body, its drives and impulses, has been condemned, repressed, and denied. The life of the body has always been perceived – and is still perceived today – as a constant threat that must be neutralized, removed, and tamed through the most diverse ascetic practices and spiritual exercises. The ungovernable excess of human drives (especially female drives) has always disturbed the psychic economy of religious subjects, who have sought to protect themselves and their corporeity through forms of individual and communal anaesthesia and sterilization. Typical of this is the anorexic asceticism of some of the central figures of Christian monasticism, for whom the sacrifice of the body, the desensitization of the body, became a way of mastering it. The superegoic and sacrificial drift of faith characterized many penitential follies as a method of extinguishing appetites and drives, all in the name of faith in a strict, demanding, and merciless God. Deprived of any connection with pleasure, food was merely a means of survival: the body, as the mirror of a corruptible and putrescent universe, was to lose flesh in order to become spiritual. Religious desire then turned to the hope of the afterlife and the blissful impassibility of sanctified and incorruptible flesh.<sup>12</sup> The life of the body – in the whirlwind of its perception, its governance, and its transformations – is the object of a daily fabrication under the banner of deprivation, control, and escape from all libidinal disturbances.

### 3 The “Real” of Superego

The masters of suspicion condemned this ascetic-religious cult of sacrifice and showed its dehumanizing and superegoic side, characterized by the violence of abuse, authoritarianism, submission, and above all the denial of life. Nietzsche showed, perhaps more clearly than others, the masochistic dimension of sacrificial fantasy,

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Camporesi, *Le officine dei sensi*; Camporesi, *La carne impassibile*.

understood as the religious subject's pathological subordination to ascetic values and ideals. The figure of the camel is a symbol of obedience and dependence because it is an animal forced to carry many burdens. The camel does not dare to claim what it wants, so it is an image of an existence that humiliates itself and deserts its cause when it celebrates its triumph. Above all, it is the embodiment of the spirit of sacrifice, which is why it is for Nietzsche the animal most similar to the human being, who paradoxically enjoys his slavery, often preferring it to freedom.

And we – we faithfully lug what is imparted to us on hard shoulders and over rough mountains! And if we sweat, then we are told: “Yes, life is a heavy burden!” But only the human being is a heavy burden to himself! This is because he lugs too much that is foreign to him. Like a camel he kneels down and allows himself to be well burdened. Especially the strong human being who is eager to hear and inherently reverent: too many *foreign* words and values he loads upon himself – now life seems a desert to him!<sup>13</sup>

The weight of extraneous laws and imposed duties bends the back of the ascetic subject, who displays an excessive reverence for values that mortify existence. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that the ascetic ideal regards earthly human existence as “nothing” compared to supposed otherworldly values and truths, and justifies worldly suffering in the light of an otherworldly reality.<sup>14</sup> Religion, morality, and metaphysics are considered devices for devaluing existence, for diminishing its transient and vulnerable nature in relation to some higher entity or state of unconditional value. Nietzsche considers the ascetic life “a self-contradiction,” a “life against life” [...] “a personified will to contradiction and counter-nature,” and an attempt “to use power to block the sources of the power.”<sup>15</sup>

He constantly criticizes the loss of vitality and self-assertion, the weakening of healthy instincts that results from the valorization of altruism, obedience, and dependence on authority. Such devaluation generates in fact what Nietzsche calls the spirit of resentment, which expresses exactly the tension between desire and powerlessness. At the same time, Nietzsche emphasizes the creative power of the ascetic ideal, since it has historically been able to transform the virtues of warrior and hero into new moral values and conceptions of the good and to impose a new form of life.

In the analysis of sacrifice and its ambivalence, one can indeed identify the Nietzschean inheritance in Freud's thinking. Indeed, psychoanalysis has developed a systematic critique of sacrificial morality, clinically analysing and diagnosing Nietzsche's subversion of the ascetic ideal, which gains and exerts its power by giving meaning to suffering. Freud interprets indeed the law of the camel as a direct emanation of the superego, the psychic instance to which the neurotic is subservient, which imposes to sacrifice desire to the law. Just as the camel does not dare to affirm what it desires and is a symbol of an existence that humiliates itself, so the superego corresponds to the sacrificial fantasy that drives the subject, in a kind of hypertrophy of moral consciousness, to its own mortification. This aspect of the superego does not correspond to the moral instance or to the Ego-ideal, to the big Other or to the symbolic order of language and law, but takes on the features of an inhuman agency, which loses its relationship with the word, manifesting itself as a pure voice of command or as a pure gaze of reproach and contempt. Thus, for Lacan, superego “has nothing to do with moral conscience as far as its most obligatory demands are concerned.” On the contrary, the superego is an ethical betrayal, an unconscious law that presupposes a subject who is always guilty (Kafka and Orwell): it is an anti-ethical agency that has detached itself from the subject and acts against his or her desire in a persecutory manner, without redemption. It is in fact impossible to escape the invasive gaze of the superego, because it does not come from outside but from within oneself (for Lacan, the drive objects of the gaze and the voice are in the foreground).<sup>16</sup> The gaze of the superego has the characteristic of not being intermittent – it does not know eclipses, interruptions, or pauses, but is always vigilant, omnipresent, “since nothing is hidden from the superego, not even thoughts ... The super-ego torments the sinful ego with the same feeling of dread

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness*, 223–44.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 86–7.

<sup>16</sup> Recalcati, *Contro il sacrificio*, 92–6.

and watches for opportunities whereby the outer world can be made to punish it.”<sup>17</sup> Its agency is therefore sadistic, punishing, and revengeful: “The Law of the Superego springs from a merely patibular interpretation of the Law. It is not by chance that Lacan defines it as a ‘misrecognition’, an ‘aberration’ of the Law.”<sup>18</sup> This is why Lacan can say in “Seminar 1” that the “super-ego is at one and the same time the law and its destruction.”<sup>19</sup>

In Lacanian terms, this is the “Real” of the superego, that is, the cruel and insatiable agency in whose eyes I am all the more guilty the more I try to suppress my “sinful” desires and satisfy its demands.<sup>20</sup>

As Žižek states in *The Metastases of Enjoyment*:

Superego draws the energy of the pressure it exerts on the subject from the fact that the subject was not faithful to his desire, that he gave it up. Our sacrificing to the superego, our paying tribute to it, only corroborates our guilt. For that reason, our debt to the superego is unredeemable: the more we pay it off, the more we owe. Superego is like the extortioner slowly bleeding us to death – the more he gets, the stronger his hold on us.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, the superego can be defined as a tyrannical “*sacrificial distortion*”<sup>22</sup> of the law in its totalitarian drift. In this fierce aspect of the superego, with its stern gaze and grand voice, one can find the charismatic gaze of the fascist leader, the leader of the masses. It is no coincidence that Freud refers to the dreaded primordial father for whom the only form of law is violence without limits. In the psychology of the masses, the life of the particular is sacrificed to the Ideal Instance of the Cause (race, blood, country and God), which transcends all instincts of preservation and subjective interests. As Jean-Luc Nancy states:

The Aryan is basically one who sacrifices himself for the community, for the race; that is, one who gives his blood for the greater Aryan Blood. He is thus not merely one who sacrifices himself but is, in essence, sacrifice *itself*, sacrifice *as such*. Of course, there’s nothing to be sacrificed here; he has only to eliminate what is not himself, what is not living sacrifice.<sup>23</sup>

The Aryan is thus a living sacrifice who submits their life to duty and to a universal Cause that overrides the individual character of existence. In this perspective, the protection of individuality represents a betrayal of the human, a petty choice of preservation of the particular against the glory of the universal. The annihilation of oneself, even to the point of martyrdom for the Cause – which is repeated in terrorist attacks, in the spirit of every dictatorship, and/or in the nihilism of many religious sects – is a eulogy of sacrifice against the impurity of an existence that takes care of the singularity and enjoys life. It is the renunciation of the absolute singularity and the negation of the “unsacrificeable”<sup>24</sup> of life.

## 4 Kant *avec* Sade (or the Two Faces of the Superego)

Freud and Lacan (following Schopenhauer and Nietzsche) aim to dismantle the established order of moral values by unmasking it as repressive, as a system of barriers that aim to distance life from the singular and anarchic experiences of desire and enjoyment. They aim, at the same time, to unmask the link between self-sacrifice and the narcissistic dimension. Renunciation confers a superior status on the subject and asserts itself as a form of enjoyment in which life turns against itself and *enjoys its own mortification*. In the logic of the sacrificial fantasy, sacrifice becomes the paradoxical goal of the drive: I do not sacrifice myself in view of a

<sup>17</sup> Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Recalcati, *Contro il sacrificio*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I*, 102.

<sup>20</sup> Žižek, “The Vagaries of the Superego,” 1–2, 13–31; Balibar, “The Invention of the Superego,” 227–55.

<sup>21</sup> Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> Recalcati, *Contro il sacrificio*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 70.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable,” 20–38.

goal, because *sacrifice is itself the goal*.<sup>25</sup> Law, duty, renunciation, and sacrifice become the object of enjoyment.

As Freud shows, this enjoyment that takes the form of self-sacrifice is the moral essence of masochism,<sup>26</sup> which continually sabotages the subject's desire, generating envy and resentment towards those who enjoy life instead.

From these analyses, it is possible to show that our late modern age has secularized sacrifice, renounced the animal body, but continued to permeate Western existence in other forms. In the context of global metropolitan life, the life of the neurotic subject seems to be entirely consecrated to the passion of sacrifice in which one erases oneself, *abdicates one's desire*, and submits to a master, systematically satisfying the demand of the Other:

The movement that the world we live in is caught up in, of wanting to establish the universal spread of the service of goods as far as conceivably possible, implies an amputation, sacrifices, indeed a kind of puritanism in the relationship to desire that has occurred historically. [...] The essential point is 'Carry on working. Work must go on.' Which, of course, means: 'Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire.'

Lacan describes the bourgeois ethical "puritan" condition that revolves around the "service of goods," in which work, order, and security of existence have absolute primacy over the question of subjective desire, which finds itself amputated, misunderstood, and sacrificed. Furthermore, Lacan points out the dialectic within the so-called capitalist discourse that also revolves around a dialectics of sacrifice. On the one hand, in late capitalist societies, the ascetic-religious cult of sacrifice seems to vanish, replaced by an unlimited enjoyment that refuses any renunciation or regulation. On the other hand, on closer inspection, this new "libertine" urges to enjoy shares with the old morality of sacrificing the ideal of a law that towers above the subject, erasing its singularity.

Lacan questions both the moral superegoic imperative in its impersonal and alienating character (referring to Kant's categorical imperative) and the equally superegoic drive of the imperative of unlimited enjoyment as a reaction to any kind of symbolic limitation (referring to the Marquis de Sade's philosophy of sex). Losing everything (sacrificing one's whole life) and not wanting to lose anything (enjoying everything and refusing all forms of sacrifice) are two sides of the same coin. Losing everything is a neurotic strategy to lose nothing, to take one's existence away from its missing and finite character. In fact, the rejection of loss is the basis of the sacrificial fantasy.

In the language of psychoanalysis, this law, at once libertine ("Enjoy!") and sacrificial ("You must!"), is identified with the superego, so that the statement "Kant is Sade" represents the "infinite judgement" of modern ethics.<sup>27</sup> These two faces of the superego – the moral obligation and the obligation of transgression – define a vicious circle within which the neurotic's life is consumed: to obey the law by sacrificing one's entire life to it, or to obey compulsive enjoyment by sacrificing the truth of one's desire to it.

The superegoic commandment sharply severed any link between Law and desire by attaching itself to the equally mutilating alternative of Law without desire (Kant) or desire without Law (Sade). Kant's pure practical reason (*reine praktische Vernunft*), which guides actions independently of any empirical conditions or affective demands, is mirrored in Sadian carnal empiricism, which becomes a law unto itself beyond all rational morality. If for Freud the superego corresponds to the incarnation of an inflexible and whipping law that would like to sanction life judged in itself as guilty, for Lacan the other side of this Law is precisely the libertine passion that elects *jouissance* as the only possible form of the Law. This is what Lacan points out when he states that the obligation to sacrifice the superego is no different from the compulsive obligation to enjoy: "Nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* – Enjoy!"<sup>28</sup> Desire is submerged by *jouissance*, so that the prohibition to enjoy is paradoxically reversed into the

<sup>25</sup> Recalcati, *Contro il sacrificio*, 105–6.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," 157–70.

<sup>27</sup> Žizek, "Kant and Sade."

<sup>28</sup> Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, 3. See Žizek, *For They Know Not What They Do*; McGowan, "Superego and Law," 139–50.



prohibition *not* to enjoy, which is no longer organized on the guilt complex, but on the sense of inadequacy. In our era, even the superego, in fact, as Lacan understood, functions not only as a prohibition but above all as an imperative of *jouissance*. The paradoxical consequence is an unbridled social pressure to enjoy, which nevertheless results in the impossibility of enjoyment, since the superego always demands more.

This Kantian–Sadian superegoic law thus conceals a double sacrificial value, since it drives the subject either to mortify desire or to compulsively pursue an enjoyment that only apparently opposes sacrifice. In both cases, it is the singular desire that is misconceived, removed, and annihilated, leaving the subjects at the mercy of their neuroses. Every singularity is suppressed in the name of a delirious universality.

## 5 Symbolic Sacrifice: Civilization and Drive Renunciation

However, in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis – but also in the biblical tradition – the law can and must also take another form, which is associated with another way of understanding and experiencing sacrifice (if we want to keep this category). At the centre is a form of dedication or self-giving that interrupts the superegoic sacrificial economy, where one enjoys loss and suffering while waiting for a reward or *quid pro quo*. In what follows, I would like to present this other, non-sacrificial – non-mortifying – form of sacrifice.

Freud stated that sacrifice, understood as the renunciation of a part of one's own drive satisfaction, is the condition of possibility not only of every civilization, but also of human life itself. It can be said that sacrifice, understood symbolically, is in fact the threshold to the process of humanizing life, since the renunciation or loss of part of the drive satisfaction is the price one must pay to gain access to civilization. The civilization process imposes a “drive renunciation” – a sacrifice of enjoyment – as a condition for the subject's entry into the human community. This symbolic status of sacrifice, if not exasperated and neurotically perverted, does not generate any sacrificial fantasy or superegoic *jouissance*. On the contrary, it is this anthropogenic instance that introduces the subject to the proper dimension of desire. In fact, this symbolic sacrifice is a necessary and inescapable experience for every human being as a *parlêtre*: indeed, there is no form of human life that is not subject to the structure of language and its laws. This means that when we enter the realm of language, we lose direct contact with our libidinal body, since, as Lacan states, “the word is the murder of the Thing.”<sup>29</sup> This means that in the symbolization, that is, in the transition from nature to culture, something dies in the real, because the introduction of language creates a separation between words and things and the language cannot represent the Thing as such. Consequently, “*jouissance* is prohibited to whoever speaks, as such.”<sup>30</sup>

This seems foolish, and to go without saying. But you still have to say it and reflect on it. Because it is in so far as the symbol allows this inversion, that is to say cancels the existing thing, that it opens up the world of negativity, which constitutes both the discourse of the human subject and the reality of his world in so far as it is human.<sup>31</sup>

Human life is marked by the irreversible loss of a part of one's being, to be constantly at a distance and divided from itself, with no possibility of coinciding with its own being, of realizing, without any deferment, the programme of the drive. Consequently, it is necessary that human life encounters the dimension of loss, what psychoanalysis defines as castration or the loss of *jouissance*: this means that the form of life we call human is not entirely crushed by the immediacy of instinct, nor is it destined to a dimension of totality. The encounter with the symbolic law of language, by denying incestuous *jouissance* with its destructive pursuit of totality, introduces into the subject a lack that first forms the human being as subject. Lacan interprets this “castration” not merely as the threat of emasculation but as a symbolic interdict that interrupts the fantasies of

<sup>29</sup> “The symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire.” (Lacan, “Function and the Field of the Word and Language in Psychoanalysis,” 77).

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” 696.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I*, 174.

the pleasure principle and simultaneously introduces the subject into the experience of the limit, that is, of desire.

The decisive theme in Lacanian psychoanalysis is the condition of human desire as the possibility of distancing oneself from the (maternal) Thing. Castration is therefore a binding condition for the subject as a symbolic, speaking being. It concerns not only submission to the symbolic order represented by the father, but also the child's possibility of becoming a desiring subject. In this perspective, the original interruption of incestuous enjoyment is the condition for the possibility of the foundation of a social reality. The natural-biological bond is to be sublimated into a social bond that is open to symbolic exchange. As Lacan states: "Castration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire."<sup>32</sup> The symbolic sacrifice imposed by the civilization programme forces the drive to take a "longer" ride than the immediate enjoyment of the "Thing."

The error of perversion is that of not grasping the difference between sacrifice as an expression of castration and sacrifice imposed by morality or the values of tradition. One systematically confuses these two distinct planes of debt by confusing the law of castration with the sacrificial law of the superego. However, the subject who opposes all symbolic sacrifice and pursues the mirage of a totality free of lack and desire heads towards a mortal *jouissance* (*jouissance mortelle*) typical of perversion – the *jouissance* of the father of the primal horde described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*.

For Lacan, the "law of castration" does not simply represent the limitation of *jouissance*, the prohibition of the incestuous drive, the interruption of symbiotic and destructive fusion, but it also corresponds to the very gift of language allied with desire. Castration is traumatic insofar as it deprives the subject of the object of *jouissance*, but at the same time it is wholesome, because the existence of the law has the purpose of making desire possible. In this sense, Recalcati affirms that the experience of the impossible first enables the possibility of desire.<sup>33</sup>

In his decisive "Seminar 7" on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan recognizes a single moral imperative or a single moral question that must guide subjective action (since "ethics essentially consists in a judgment of our action"):

And it is because we know better than those who went before how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience, that a reconsideration of ethics is possible, that a form of ethical judgment is possible, of a kind that gives this question the force of a Last Judgment: Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you? <sup>34</sup>

Here, we have a new configuration of duty that takes the form of desire. This perspective subverts the sacrificial ghost and places desire in relation to the law in its anti-sacrificial scope: it is a law that does not enjoy – like the superego – destroying desire but acts as its essential support. Here, it is possible to translate the Freudian *Wunsch* in the sense of a vow (*voeu*) or vocation. "Not giving in on one's desire" is the anti-sacrificial perspective of the ethics of psychoanalysis. One gives in on one's own desire when one sacrifices one's singularity to the imperative demand of the Other (God, Father, State, Mother, and Family) through absolute obedience to the merciless law of the superego, which represses the force of desire and distances the subject from its most proper vocation. Following Nancy, the singular finiteness of human life should always define – against all fanaticism of the Cause – the insuperable threshold of the unsacrificeable. That is why Nancy's formula "sacrifice sacrifice"<sup>35</sup> could well describe the ultimate (even clinical) goal of an analysis. It is a matter of disarticulating the sacrificial fantasy and bringing the subject face to face with the responsibility of individually assuming the truth of his or her own desire.

Within this horizon, another eminent disciple of Freud offers fundamental considerations for understanding the meaning of sacrifice beyond the sacrificial ghost. Indeed, in many works of Carl Gustav Jung,

<sup>32</sup> Lacan, "Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," 700. "Castration as symbolic sacrifice centers the whole organization of the desires through the framework of the fundamental drives" (Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI*, 90).

<sup>33</sup> Recalcati, *Jacques Lacan*, 239–335.

<sup>34</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII*, 314.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 66.



space is also given to the question of sacrifice, both regarding the historical–mythological analysis of its meaning and its effects within psychoanalytic practice.

In his work *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Jung analyses the psychological meaning of sacrifice, defining it in practical terms as the (positive) renunciation of something that belongs to one's ego, i.e. one's unconscious projections and selfish claims. He insists on the distinction between voluntary and forced sacrifice as a fundamental prerequisite in the discovery of unconscious desire and the maturation of the personality, understood as the transition from a limited to a full conception of the self. Indeed, writes Jung,

sacrifice proves that you possess yourself, for it does not mean just letting yourself be passively taken: it is a conscious and deliberate self-surrender, which proves that you have full control of yourself, that is, of your ego.<sup>36</sup>

For this reason, he interprets sacrifice as a blessing, as it challenges the ego personality, leading it onto the path of the self, from the unconscious to consciousness, from potentiality to actuality. “Hence it is the self that causes me to make the sacrifice; nay more, it compels me to make it.”<sup>37</sup>

Through a psychoanalytic perspective, Jung argues that sacrifice belongs to the spirit of the deep, where order and disorder, finite and infinite, fear and trembling coexist. In his work *The Red Book*, in which Jung undertakes, through what he calls “active imagination,” a kind of journey to the underworld in search of those universal mechanisms of the soul known as archetypes, the theme of sacrifice occupies a central place. He writes: “No one can or should halt sacrifice. Sacrifice is not destruction; sacrifice is the foundation stone of what is to come.”<sup>38</sup> What one decides to sacrifice is in fact one's own selfish claim and, in doing so, one renounces oneself, in a process of “integration or humanization of the self.”<sup>39</sup> Jung therefore does not hesitate to affirm that any step forward along the path of individuation is only achieved at the price of renouncing one's own unconscious masks, projections, and protections, which cannot occur without suffering.

Against this background, Jung reinterprets Christ's sacrifice from a secular perspective, emphasising the transformative and psychic processes it implies. In his psychoanalytic perspective, torture and cross inflicted on the body of Christ do not represent “a punishment but the indispensable means of leading him towards his destiny.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, they do not correspond at all to a passively suffered sacrifice, but to a free choice of self-offering. Indeed, “Christ offers himself freely as a sacrifice”<sup>41</sup> with a view to a new and more effective humanity. According to Jung, through his sacrifice, Christ “corresponds to the total personality that transcends consciousness,”<sup>42</sup> i.e. the self.

Jung therefore understands Christ's invitation to deny oneself and lose one's life in the sense of a renunciation of the ego as a necessary condition for getting in touch with our inner divinity. In this respect, reference can be made to the Gospel of Luke: “For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?” (Luke 9:25).

Consequently, it is possible to speak of a symbolic sacrifice of the ego necessary in any psychic process of individuation, as occurs emblematically, according to Jung, in the *imitatio Christi* and the Christian liturgy, which include the believer in a process of transformation. Indeed, the psychoanalyst interprets the Mass as a sacrificial gift, in which “the *rite of the individuation process*” is fulfilled through a “*participation mystique*”<sup>43</sup> in Christ's sacrifice as a way of liberation from the closure of the ego.

<sup>36</sup> Jung, “Psychology and Religion,” 257–8.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>38</sup> Jung, *The Red Book*, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Jung, “Psychology and Religion,” 263.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## 6 Conclusion

Following these different psychoanalytic perspectives, it is therefore necessary to speak of two distinct economies: the economy of the “sacrificial fantasy” and the economy of symbolic sacrifice. The former is what Nietzsche sees being realized in the ascetic man or the camel of the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The camel is a part of the subject, that is, when it interprets the law only in its persecutory form, only as a burden that overtakes life, in the prospective illusion of repayment, of compensation, of symmetry between giving – i.e. sacrificing – and having.

Instead, my friends, I wish you would grow weary of the old words you have learned from the fools and liars:

Grow weary of the words “reward,” “retribution,” “punishment,” “revenge in justice” –

Grow weary of saying: “What makes a deed good is that it is selfless.”

Oh my friends! I wish *your* self were in the deed like the mother is in the child: let that be *your* word on virtue!<sup>44</sup>

In the symbolic sacrifice, we can find an economy of gift and superabundance. When the mother sacrifices her time, her body, her life, and her interests for the sake of the child, she does not do so expecting repayment or compensation. There is no doubt that the mother’s act of self-giving is *realized entirely in itself*. In this sense, it is an *unconditional act*. And even the whole enigma, the mystery of the cross, can be interpreted as an act of self-offering: no one takes my life from me, it is me who offers it. This offering completely unhinges the mirage of the sacrificial fantasy.

Can an anti-penitential and anti-sacrificial line of Christianity be imagined, as the Lacanian-Žižekian and Jungian perspectives seem to suggest? If it is true that Jesus’ preaching aims to bring the law to fulfilment (Matt 5:17), it is possible to imagine a form of fulfilment in which the law is freed from the sacrificial fantasy in its reactive, penal, and retributive form, which is based on mirror symmetry, like the law of retribution.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, it means liberating the law from its superegoic drift, in which sacrifice becomes the very end of action. This is why Jesus strikes at the purification rites and the rules that seek to regulate outward behaviour. The impure is not outside, but inside, that is, in the relationship the subject has with their own desire. The subversion of the sacrificial fantasy occurs through the image of a God who demands only mercy, not sacrifice (Matt 9:13; 12:7), as the prophets of Israel had already preached (Hosea 6:6).

Augustine states this emblematically in the *Confessions* (cf. Conf. I,12) when he maintains that if one does good unwillingly, that act is not an act of good. “For no man does well against his will, even if that which he does be well.” It is a radically anti-sacrificial formula: if the act separates itself from desire and assumes a merely sacrificial form, in view of an end that transcends it (even the kingdom of heaven thought of only in terms of compensation or unlimited repayment), that act is not good. On the contrary, the good of the act is *all in the act*: this is the radical proposal that Jesus makes, and which can be found symbolically, as Nietzsche states, in the gift that a mother makes of her body to her child. It is an unsparing donation of oneself, expecting nothing from the other, even without appearing as a gift. The value of the gift is in the act of giving itself and not in what it enables us to obtain from the other. In this sense, the symbolic sacrifice here becomes another name for a form of gift that interrupts the sacrificial economy and goes beyond “the idea of exchange, of circulation, of return.”<sup>46</sup>

In this perspective, even the cross could take on a profoundly anti-sacrificial significance. For in the crucified body, one can find a form of absolute giving and exposure that exceeds any form of calculation. “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:18).<sup>47</sup> The crucified Jesus is thus not the symbol of sacrifice, but that of its definitive abandonment, of the crossing of the sacrificial fantasy, of the

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Mt 17: 38-42).

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Jesus’ choice to become the sacrificial victim, to be the immolated lamb, to assume the position of victim in order to free men from the sacrificial fantasy, is a well-known thesis of René Girard. Jesus reveals the lying character of all bloody sacrifices, that is, the essence of the sacrificial ghost, in the desire to interrupt it. See Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

“sacrifice of sacrifice.” The gift of the body corresponds to the fulfilment of Jesus’ vocation, which is to free believers from all idolatrous illusions and sacrificial fantasies, and to lay down his body of his own accord since he does not want to give in to his own desire.

**Funding information:** Author states no funding involved.

**Author contribution:** The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results and manuscript preparation.

**Conflict of interest:** Author states no conflict of interest.

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