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Jonkers, P.H.A.I.

Published in:

Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie

Publication date:

2008

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jonkers, P. H. A. I. (2008). Justifying Sacrifice. *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 50, 313-329.

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security forces. Ultimately, at least 334 hostages were killed, including 186 children. Hundreds more were wounded or missing.

The Beslan school hostage crisis confronts us in a harsh way with the reality of sacrifice, self-sacrifice, as well as the sacrifice of others. The fact that some of the hostage-takers were wearing explosive belts makes it clear that they were prepared to sacrifice their own lives if necessary. Furthermore, the fact that they killed some twenty hostages right at the outset of their action, started their operation by rigging the gym and the rest of the building with explosives, and prevented even the children from eating and drinking illustrate that they deliberately wanted to sacrifice the lives of as many hostages as possible. Finally, the Russian forces used excessive violence while storming the school building thereby being responsible for the vast majority of the death toll. This shows yet another aspect of the sacrifice of others. In fact, the Russian authorities were never willing to accept the demands of the militants; on the contrary, they were prepared to sacrifice the lives of the hostages if necessary. President Putin was heavily criticized for taking this decision and, of course, one can ask whether the storming of the school could not have been handled in such a way that less people would have been killed. But, in the end, as the outcome of many similar hostage-takings shows, no government, including Western democracies, is willing to comply with the demands of terrorists, especially when they are political, even if it implies the sacrifice of the lives of innocent people.

This concrete instance of sacrifice in a politico-religious context serves as the starting point for my discussion of whether self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others can be justified philosophically. But before starting to examine its possible justifications it is crucial to understand the mechanism of sacrifice. Especially in politico-religious contexts, people who sacrifice themselves are often venerated as martyrs and, when sacrificing the lives of others, are treated as heroes, while their victims are seen as legitimate means for a good cause. Moreover, the authorities defend themselves with similar arguments by saying that they had no other option than to sacrifice the lives of innocent people in order to prevent still more killing. They often get tacit support for such actions by the public opinion, even in democratic countries. Although reluctantly, the public admits that in some situations there seems to be no other option than sacrificing the lives of people for the sake of a higher purpose. This takes me to the central question I want to discuss in this article: Is there any 'sake' so sublime that it can justify the sacrifice of oneself, let alone that of others? Isn't such a praxis the opposite of justice and thus incapable of being justified by any means? The somewhat provocative title of this paper already indicates that, in my view, justice sometimes *does* require sacrifice. Hence, I think that sacrifice is not only, in fact, a tragic reality but also that it should be seen as an eventuality in all human relations.

Justifying Sacrifice¹

Prof. Dr. Peter Jonkers, Tilburg University, Faculty of Catholic Theology, Heidelberglaan 2, 3584 CS Utrecht, The Netherlands

In order to get a clear picture of the complexities of sacrifice in a politico-religious context, I will start with discussing one of its most startling recent examples, the Beslan school hostage crisis.

On September 1, 2004, at the traditional start of the Russian school year, a group of armed terrorists took more than 1,100 schoolchildren and adults hostage at School Number One (SNO) in the town of Beslan.² Right after gathering the hostages in the gym, the attackers singled out the 17 strongest adults they apparently thought might represent a threat and shot them, as well as three other adults who did not obey the orders of the hostage-takers. The attackers rigged the gym and the rest of the building with improvised explosive devices and surrounded it with tripwires. The captors prevented hostages from eating and drinking, calling it a "hunger strike." The Russian government announced that it would not use force to rescue the hostages, and negotiations towards a peaceful resolution took place on the first and second days. However, a secret headquarters was set up to prepare the assault on the school, while the "civilian" (official) headquarters was looking for a peaceful resolution of the situation through negotiations.

On the second day, the negotiations with the hostage-takers proved unsuccessful. They refused to allow food, water, and medicines to be taken in for the hostages, or for the bodies of the dead to be removed from the front of the school. The lack of food and water took its toll on the young children, many of whom were forced to stand for long periods in the hot, tightly-packed gym. As the day and night wore on, the combination of stress and sleep deprivation made the hostage takers increasingly hysterical and unpredictable. The crying of the children irritated them, and on several occasions crying children and their mothers were threatened with being shot if they would not stop crying.

On the third day of the standoff, Russian security forces stormed the building using tanks, thermobaric rockets, and other heavy weapons. A series of explosions shook the school, followed by a fire, which engulfed the building, and a chaotic gun battle between the hostage-takers and Russian

¹ I want to thank my colleague, Dr. Theo de Wit, for his stimulating discussions on this intriguing issue.

² The majority of the attackers were men and women from Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Russia, but there also were two Arabs among them, which makes it plausible that their motives were politico-religious.

After some preliminary remarks I will present two strong philosophical justifications of sacrifice. Thereafter, I will discuss both the mechanism of sacrifice and its philosophical justifications critically, especially with regard to their consequences for religion.³

I. Preliminary Remarks

When using the word sacrifice we usually think of the most extreme instances of sacrifice, namely, sacrificing one's own life or that of others. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that in the overall majority of cases sacrifice does not take such a radical turn and, therefore, its justification does not pose a real problem. To mention only one example: Parents sacrifice a lot of time, energy, and money for the sake of their children. Most of them do so without any hesitation and are even proud of it, so that the question of its justification is hardly ever raised. However, when people's lives are at stake, and especially when they are sacrificed against their own will, every justification is put to the test.

World history is full of practices of people sacrificing their own lives and the lives of others "for the sake of..." This 'sake', serving as the justification or excuse for sacrifice, has been given many names, such as the Kingdom of God, Allah, justice, one's country, nation, tribe or race, revolution, classless society, etc. This shows that sacrifice is by no means the exclusive privilege of religions and Churches but also characterises secular politics. Moreover, it is not only a common practice of fundamentalist religions or totalitarian political regimes. As the example given above illustrates, contemporary, democratic regimes are also prepared to sacrifice the lives of others and, in fact, get away with doing so. It is their common strategy to conceal these practices from the public opinion by inventing euphemisms for it, such as 'collateral damage'.

The fact that, even in our times, sacrifice is such a widespread reality should make us suspicious of a popular reaction to it: it is far too simple to reject self-sacrifice a priori as insane and the sacrifice of others as barbarian. Instead, and this makes things even more complicated, it is a praxis for which numerous justifications have been invented. According to a cynical remark of Michel Foucault, the decisive test for modern philosophy was its capacity to account for the massacres; whereas classical philosophy assisted

³ For a survey of the different kinds of sacrifice cf. Jean-Luc NANCY, "L'insacrifiable," in *IDEM, Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 65–106. However, I do not agree with his conclusion that "there is no 'true' sacrifice, that the truthful existence is insacrifiable, and finally that the truth of existence is to be insacrifiable." Cf. Jean-Luc NANCY, "L'insacrifiable," 105.

man in supporting his own death, modern philosophy helped humankind in accepting the death of others.⁴

This leads me to my last preliminary remark, which concerns the 'sake' for which people sacrifice their own life or the lives of others. As stated, this 'sake' has been given many different names, but all these names refer to an ultimate purpose, which transcends the persons involved. Therefore, this ultimate purpose is capable of serving as the final justification or excuse for sacrificing one's own life or the lives of others. However illusory or reprehensible this ultimate purpose may appear to outsiders, it counts as something essential for the person(s) who believe in it. It gives them the certainty that they sacrifice themselves for a just cause, and also entitles them to sacrifice the lives of others. In their view, the finite lives of humans are nothing compared to the sublime purpose. The actuality of this sake enables them to see both their self-sacrifice and their sacrificing of others as *sacrifices*, and not as plain suicide or murder.

II. Two Philosophical Justifications of Sacrifice

II.1. Hegel

One of the strongest philosophical justifications of sacrifice stems from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820), in particular, in the context of his notorious theory of war.⁵ In this context, Hegel discusses the issue of sacrifice.⁶

What is for us the most dreadful aspect of war, *viz.*, the fact that people are being sacrificed for the sake of their own country, is, in Hegel's eyes, necessary for the preservation of "the ethical health of nations."⁷ Why does

⁴ Cf. Michel FOUCAULT, "La grande colère des faits," in *Le nouvel observateur* 652 (1977), 84.
⁵ I do not intend to give a full account of Hegel's theory of war or to evaluate it in light of the great deal of controversy it has caused, especially since the publication of Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Popper charges Hegel with being a hired ideologue for Friedrich Wilhelm III and with being a central influence on the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, left and right. Popper sees in Hegel's philosophy an "identification of the moral with the healthy, of ethics with political hygiene, or of right with might" and, more specifically, a prescription of war as "good in itself." Cf. Karl POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx and the Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 1945), 65. However, most Hegel-experts consider Popper's virulent accusations against Hegel as untenable. Cf. e.g. Walter JAESCHKE, *Hegel-Handbuch. Leben, Werk, Schule* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler Verlag, 2003), 398ff.

⁶ An important preliminary question is whether Hegel's analysis offers a justification (in the prescriptive sense of the word) of sacrifice at all, or just a description of the course of events in (international) politics, an issue which has been the object of intense discussion among Hegel-specialists. For an overview cf. Ido GEIGER, *The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life. Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 94ff. In my view it is quite obvious that for Hegel, a description is never *just* a description but always has a normative implication.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (German original: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*), ed. by Allen W. WOOD; transl. by H.B. NISBET

he make this bold claim? To make things clear right from the start, he cannot be considered a 'bellicist' who would applaud war for its own sake: War "ought to come to an end," because it is a "condition of rightlessness, force and contingency,"⁸ in short, it is an evil. However, war "should not be regarded as an absolute evil," since it contains "an ethical moment." While reading this passage we are flabbergasted. Which good reasons can possibly be found for the deliberate decision of a state, claiming to be humane, to actualise the biblical proverb that everything is vanity by sacrificing the lives of individual people, and, moreover, for trying to justify this decision by calling it an *ethical* necessity?

In order to explain Hegel's argument I start from his well-known distinction between civil society and the state. As private individuals people live in the civil society and are fully entitled to do so. It is in the economical sphere of the free market that people look to their own private interests. In short, and this is essential, it is the sphere of all kinds of *symmetrical* relations between individuals. On the other hand, there is the state whose purpose it is to actualise the freedom of its members by law and justice. It is an organic, well-ordered whole in which its subjects participate. By doing so they are actually and concretely (not only in an abstract and therefore empty sense) free. Outside the state the law of the jungle reigns, leaving no room for real freedom. So the safety and sovereignty of the state are crucial for enabling its subjects to lead truly humane lives. Of course, the state also needs its subjects in order to actualise freedom at all. This implies that the state, as the guarantor of the public interest, transcends the private interests of its members and, hence, that the relation between these two is of an *asymmetrical* nature.

According to Hegel, there is a structural tension in the relations between the civil society, which are driven by the *private* interests of the individuals, and the state, whose purpose is to serve the *public* interest, the '*res publica*'. Hegel calls the individual, insofar as he is a member of the civil society, 'bourgeois', while, as a subject of the state, he is a 'citoyen'. Usually, and especially in times of peace, the tension between private and public interests is not problematic at all. However, after having lived in peace for a long period of time, the bourgeois can get the impression that the only purpose of the state is to promote his private interests; it may even enter his mind that he would be better off without the state, since he is convinced that he is more than capable of looking after his own interests. From the perspective of the bourgeois, the state "is simply equated with civil society, and [...] its ultimate end is seen merely as the *security of the life and property* of individuals." However, according to Hegel, this is "a grave mis-

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), § 324 A. Unless indicated otherwise all quotations in this section are taken from this §, and are given without further reference.

⁸ HEGEL (see above, n. 7), § 338.

calculation" because it is a reversal of the actual proportions between the individual and the state: it is not the purpose of the state to safeguard the life and property of the individuals (the bourgeois); rather, the task of the people (the citoyens) is "to preserve the independence and sovereignty of the state, even if their own life and property, as well as their opinions and all that naturally falls within the province of life, are endangered or sacrificed." Although the bourgeois is not always sufficiently convinced of this, these two aspects of the public interest – independence and sovereignty – are not some abstract or vague purposes, but something crucial that is worthy of being defended since the entire well-being of the people is largely dependent on it. In cases of conflict, the public interest has to surpass the private interests of the individuals.⁹ The universality of the state supersedes the individuals in such a way that they are simultaneously annihilated as *particular individuals* and retained insofar as they are *persons*, that is, particular manifestations of an *universal* spiritual principle.

At this point Hegel introduces the notion of sacrifice. To a large extent, this notion is an application of his famous theory of the double negation, the very essence of his dialectics. The attitude of the bourgeois implies, in fact, the negation of the state and its public interest since he sees it only in opposition and as subordinate to his own private interests. In order to recover the correct relationship between the individuals and the state, it is therefore necessary that the state, in turn, negate the bourgeois' negation of the state by subordinating his private interests to the public interest. When the life of the state itself is endangered, i.e., when the state is involved in a war, this negation takes on a very harsh shape, viz., the sacrifice of the property and even the lives of the individuals for the sake of the public interest, secured by the state. "War is that condition in which the vanity of temporal things and temporal goods [including the lives of the individuals] – which tends at other times to be merely a pious phrase – takes on a serious significance, and [...] becomes actuality." Thus, the ethical moment of war and, consequently, the justification of this kind of sacrifice, is a consequence of the asymmetry between the finite and contingent character of the property and lives of the individuals and the absoluteness of the purpose of the state. The ethical meaning of sacrifice is that the state explicitly posits, not only in theory but also in practice, the individual as what he is, a finite and contingent being. By doing so, the state 'dispossesses' the individual of the illusion that his particular existence would surpass the state. On the contrary, because a truly humane life is impossible outside the state, the finite individuals are subordinated to it and have to give up their property or lives

⁹ Cf. Ad PEPPERZAK, "Hegel over oorlog en vrede," in *Tijdschrift voor Diplomatie* 7 (1981), 685ff. Geiger completely misinterprets this crucial point by stating that the ordinary lives of the citizens embody the higher values of their state. Cf. GEIGER (see above, n. 6), 100ff.

for the sake of it.¹⁰ This asymmetry between the finite individual and the purpose of the state and the disposition of the former are essential for the justification of sacrifice. In an early text Hegel underscores this: "If one thing is sacrificed for another, both must be heterogeneous – property and existence only for honour, for freedom or beauty, for something eternal."¹¹

Hegel's justification of sacrifice also reveals another important aspect: there is a dialectic between self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others. The state deliberately sacrifices the bourgeois because he is unwilling to accept the consequences of the fact that he is nothing without the state. By contrast, the citizen, who is fully aware of his finiteness and of the essential nature of the state in order to actualise his freedom at all and his being a member of a humane society, is prepared to sacrifice himself in order to secure the state and its absolute purpose. In his view of the structure of the state Hegel even attributes a special position to this group of people, the 'estate of valour', which is the concretisation of the "*universal duty* [of] the sacrifice for the individuality of the state."¹²

II.2. *Levinas*

Levinas gives another justification of sacrifice, especially in connection with his discussion of the notions of hostage and substitution in his later work. Although these notions are not identical with sacrifice and have to be understood as metaphors, it is clear that my being taken hostage and my suffering by the other eventually implies my sacrifice for the sake of the other, and this not in a metaphorical but in the literal sense of the word. Levinas introduces these metaphors in order to subvert the concept of the autonomous, universal subject of traditional philosophy, which, in his view, is unable to found a truly humane ethics. In particular, this subject is incapable of conceiving the idea of an *infinite* responsibility, which does not start with my definition of the limits of my responsibility, nor asks whether I am prepared or even capable to assume it, but departs from the 'Goodness of the Good', "which choose[s] me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice."¹³ As we shall see below, this asymmetry of the Good with regard to me is Levinas' ultimate justification of

¹⁰ Again Geiger misinterprets Hegel's point by calling war the complete collapse of ethical life. Cf. GEIGER (see above, n. 6), 105.

¹¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL, *Early Theological Writings* (German original: *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*), transl. by T. M. KNOX (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 195.

¹² HEGEL (see above, n. 7), § 325.

¹³ Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (French original: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* [1978]), transl. by Alphonso LINGIS (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 122.

sacrifice: my sacrifice is needed for the sake of the 'good', the visage of the other being the trace of the good.

Levinas uses the metaphors of 'hostage' and 'substitution' to show how 'unnatural' this inversion is in the eyes of the autonomous, universal subject. Being taken hostage implies that I am substituted for the other, which means that I suffer by him and, ultimately, even have to sacrifice myself for his sake. This 'have to' is a categorical imperative, but not in the Kantian, autonomous sense; rather, sacrifice is inflicted upon me by the other. Hence, my autonomy is suddenly subverted and replaced by a radical heteronomy and passivity, by a dependence on the good. In this way, the subject is confronted "with something that precedes the beginning and the principle, something that is, an-archically, *despite* being, reverses or precedes being. [...] It is] a responsibility prior to freedom."¹⁴ Actually, Levinas introduces a new notion of passivity, which refers to a pre-original anteriority, which is not natural but meta-physical and thus ethical; it is "the passivity of 'enduring the good'."¹⁵

Furthermore, my being a hostage confronts me with the fact that the 'secure' universality of my subjectivity has suddenly become worthless: it concerns my strict, irreplaceable singularity, not only as a spiritual but especially as a corporeal being. "To be me thenceforth signifies being unable to escape from responsibility, as if the whole edifice of creation stood on my shoulders. [...] It confirms the uniqueness of the me. The uniqueness of the me is the fact that no one can answer in my stead."¹⁶

Finally, the other confronts me with a radical asymmetry: his 'epiphany' is not at all similar to the appearance of an equal partner in a mutually enriching dialogue, nor is he someone whom I like or love, but someone who intrudes into my intimacy. The alterity of the other is '*kath'auto*', i.e., more than the concrete features of his face. "The epiphany of the other bears its own significance, independent of the signification received from the world. The other not only comes to us from a context but signifies by itself, without mediation."¹⁷ In sum, he is a 'visage' which summons me: "Thou shalt not kill." This shows that the other is the trace of the Infinite and, therefore, is superior to me: he is in a position of accusing me, which implies an inversion of the nominative (the 'I' of the autonomous subject) into the accusative (me). I do not autonomously *take* my responsibility, but I am *being held* responsible. "The I can be accused despite its innocence [...] by the other who as such nevertheless 'obsesses' it and who, near or distant, imputes on it a responsibility, unimpugnably as a traumatism, a

¹⁴ Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (French original: *Humanisme de l'autre homme* [1972]), transl. by Nidra POLLER. Introduction by Richard A. COHEN (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 51f.

¹⁵ LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (see above, n. 14), 53f.

¹⁶ LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (see above, n. 14), 33.

¹⁷ LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (see above, n. 14), 31.

responsibility for which it made no decision but cannot escape. [...] Indecidable subject, precisely as irreplaceable *hostage* of the other."¹⁸ Levinas introduces the metaphors of substitution and hostage to make clear that the offensive way in which the other intrudes my singularity confronts me with a radical passivity: I am being taken hostage, I suffer by the other, without my consent first being asked for.

The move from me being taken hostage and my suffering to sacrifice is only a small step. "To suffer by the other is to take care of him, bear him, be in his place, consume oneself by him."¹⁹ Given my radical passivity, the sense of sacrifice is not that I voluntarily sacrifice myself, but that I am elected to sacrifice myself by the other, perhaps even against my will. Of course, although I should not, I can always decline it, since it is not a natural, but an ethical passivity. "Subjectivity is from the first moment substitution offered in place of another, but before the distinction between freedom and nonfreedom. Not a victim sacrificing itself in his place, which would suppose there is a reserved region of subjective will behind the subjectivity of substitution."²⁰ My sacrifice is the ethical consequence of the very intrusion of the other, without any intentionality from his side; it is a consequence of my radical passivity, as well as of the asymmetrical nature of the other with regard to me. I am elected to sacrifice myself for the sake of the Good. Only in a second instance can I accept it as mine.

There is still another consequence of the heteronomy of the subject, which, although it is inevitable, is nevertheless hard to accept: I always run the risk of being sacrificed for nothing. It is always possible that my suffering and sacrifice appears to be senseless and even absurd. Of course, I could rationally weigh up the pros and cons of my sacrifice against each other. But by doing so, I would again become master of the whole situation, thus annihilating the heteronomy which is vital to Levinas' idea of sacrifice.

In sum, Levinas' justification of sacrifice lies first of all in my infinite responsibility *for* the other and *by* the other. My responsibility *for* the other goes infinitely beyond the responsibility which is 'reasonable', and which I am willing and capable to assume; it goes as far as my sacrifice. My responsibility *by* the other refers to the fact that I do not autonomously choose whether or not I am responsible, but that my responsibility is immediately laid upon me by the other; it is pure passivity. "I approach the Infinite *by sacrificing myself. Sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of the approach.*"²¹

¹⁸ LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (see above, n. 14), 51.

¹⁹ LEVINAS, *Humanism of the Other* (see above, n. 14), 64.

²⁰ LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being* (see above, n. 13), 145.

²¹ Emmanuel LEVINAS, *En déconvolvement l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1988), 215. This quote stems from an earlier text of Levinas (originally published in 1949), in which the passivity of the I is not as explicit as in his later writings, such as *Otherwise than Being*.

III. Understanding the mechanism of sacrifice

The strength of both Hegel's and Levinas' position is that they help us to understand the mechanism of sacrifice and its justification. Their ideas bewilder us because they run so counter to our popular ideas about this issue. If only because of this reason, they deserve our critical attention.

First, I want to focus on two ideas that, together, explain the mechanism of sacrifice, *viz.*, the dispossession of the self and the asymmetry between the individual and the sake for which he is sacrificed. They are of crucial importance to understand why sacrifice is clearly distinct from suicide and murder, at least in the eyes of its perpetrators. In spite of all their mutual differences, both Hegel and Levinas stress that the individual self is not the alpha and omega of a truly humane politics and ethics. As Hegel's bourgeois and Levinas' autonomous subject show, the individual can be the cause of many forms of injustice, both on a political and on a personal level. Of course, this does not mean that justice would lie completely outside the sphere of individual life, but it surely is not identical with the self's private interests, nor with its exact delimitation of the reach of its responsibilities. These quite evident truths explain why a dispossession of the self is necessary for justice. Justice demands putting a stop to the natural tendency of humans to be fully absorbed in their own daily affairs. As Hegel has pointed out clearly, if the individual himself is unaware of the legitimacy of this demand and hence repudiates such a dispossession of himself, justice requires that he *be* dispossessed. Also for Levinas, the individual's natural tendency is to extend its totalising way of being ever further, so that it can only be put to a stop by the appearance of the other, who dispossesses the individual's totality. The most extreme consequence of this is the sacrifice of someone's life, although less radical forms of sacrifice (see above) can also be understood as forms of dispossession. From this perspective it is incorrect to say that sacrifice – both self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others – is in all cases morally unacceptable, or to put it affirmatively, justice can in some instances legitimately require sacrifice.

This takes us to the second aspect of the mechanism of sacrifice, *viz.*, asymmetry. Every sacrifice presupposes an asymmetry between the (sacrifice of the) individual and the sake for which a sacrifice is demanded. For Hegel this sake is the public interest, whereas for Levinas it is the Good, or the idea of infinite responsibility for the other. This shows that the sake, which serves as the ultimate justification of sacrifice, has both an *ontological* and an *ethical* priority. This sake comes both from outside and above as something ontologically prior or radically transcendent with regard to the finite subject. The individual is not the origin of this sake and he even does not have to be willing to assume it voluntarily. Moreover, because both Hegel and Levinas identify this sake with the public interest or the Good, it also has an *ethical* priority, thus giving an ethical qualification to the idea of

asymmetry. As a result, dispossession and asymmetry help us to understand the mechanism of sacrifice and enable us to distinguish it from suicide and murder. In one sense or another, all perpetrators of sacrifice refer to this dispossessive and asymmetrical structure of its sake to justify their deeds and to distinguish them from suicide or murder. Whether or not this justification is correct or appropriate from a more general perspective is still another question.

The ideas of dispossession and asymmetry also show that there is a dialectic between self-sacrifice and being sacrificed. At first sight, they seem to be radically opposed to each other since in the former case a person is the *subject* of his own sacrifice, whereas in the latter case he or she is the *object* of sacrifice. Without wanting to say that the latter can be completely reduced to the former, this opposition is not so clear-cut as it seems. If I am convinced that God demands my sacrifice for the sake of His Kingdom, I can interpret my being sacrificed as my own free choice to fulfil God's will, thus turning the initial *being-sacrificed* into a *self-sacrifice*. This dialectic also includes the acceptance of the transcendent purpose of my sacrifice (the Kingdom of God) as my own, thus internalising the external and making concrete the promise that something is given in 'return' for my sacrifice. By sacrificing myself, I participate in the glory of the purpose – it reflects on me. An excellent example of this dialectic, which also highlights the dispossessive and asymmetrical nature of sacrifice, is given by Euripides. Agamemnon has to sacrifice his eldest daughter, Iphigenia, for the sake of Hellas and its army, that many-headed monster as he calls it. At first, in a moving passage, Iphigenia begs her father to spare her since she, as an individual young girl, has nothing to do with the affairs of the state, that is the marriage of Paris and Helen. This plea illustrates that she puts her own private interests first and is incapable of appreciating the dispossessive and asymmetrical nature of sacrifice:

Had I the eloquence of Orpheus, my father, to move the rocks by chanted spells to follow me, or to charm by speaking whom I would, I had resorted to it. But as it is, I'll bring my tears – the only art I know; for that I might attempt. And about thy knees, in suppliant wise, I twine my limbs these limbs thy wife here bore. Destroy me not before my time, for sweet is to look upon the light, and force me not to visit scenes below. I was the first to call thee father, thou the first to call me child; the first was I to sit upon thy knee and give and take the fond caress. [...] I remember all we said, 'tis thou who hast forgotten and now wouldst take my life. By Pelops, I entreat thee spare me, by thy father Atreus and my mother here, who suffers now a second time the pangs she felt before when bearing me! What have I to do with the marriage of Paris and Helen? why is his coming to prove my ruin, father? Look upon me; one glance, one kiss bestow, that this at least I may carry to my death as a memorial of thee, though thou heed not my pleading.²²

However, in the next scene, after having realised that her begging is in vain because of the army crying that her sacrifice is necessary, Iphigenia's

attitude takes a dramatic turn. She accepts her dispossession and assumes her being sacrificed as her own chosen self-sacrifice for the sake of Hellas' victory over Troy, so that part of the glory of her country will also be hers:

Listen, mother; hear what thoughts have passed across my mind. I am resolved to die; and this I fain would do with honour, dismissing from me what is mean. Towards this now, mother, turn thy thoughts, and with me weigh how well I speak; to me the whole of mighty Hellas looks; on me the passage o'er the sea depends; on me the sack of Troy; and in my power it lies to check henceforth barbarian raids on happy Hellas [...]. All this deliverance will my death insure, and my fame for setting Hellas free will be a happy one. Besides, I have no right at all to cling too fondly to my life; for thou didst not bear me for myself alone, but as a public blessing to all Hellas. What! shall countless warriors, armed with shields, those myriads sitting at the oar, find courage to attack the foe and die for Hellas, because their fatherland is wronged, and my one life prevent all this? What kind of justice is that? could I find a word in answer? [...] To Hellas I resign it [i.e. my body]; offer this sacrifice and make an utter end of Troy. This is my enduring monument; marriage, motherhood, and fame – all these is it to me.²³

This example shows, first of all, that being-sacrificed can turn into self-sacrifice, just as the external purpose can be internalised, thus superseding the initial opposition between these concepts. This implies that an easy way out of the tragedy of sacrifice is blocked right from the start. When confronted with the question whether sacrifice is morally acceptable or not, many people often make a clear-cut distinction between self-sacrifice and being-sacrificed, concluding that self-sacrifice is in principle acceptable because it only involves the perpetrator, whereas the sacrifice of others is *per se* unacceptable because it involves others. But when taking into account the dialectics mentioned above, it is clear that this popular way of thinking falls completely short of expectations. In spite of all the popular views about autonomy, our own will is not always as clearly distinct from the will of others as we like to think. Secondly, this example also shows that humans, as finite individuals, can never legitimately conceive their private interests as something absolute by abstracting them completely from their relation to a higher purpose, which, by itself, dispossesses their finiteness. In other words, as Euripides explicitly states, sacrifice is necessary for justice.

The ideas of Hegel and Levinas also offer us a clearer view on *religious* sacrifice. The essence of what religion is all about is so closely connected with both a dispossession of the self and the asymmetrical relation between God and the world that it is no wonder that religions have such a long-standing praxis of sacrifice. Thus, sacrifice is somehow part of the essence of religion. The most prominent example of this asymmetry, which also highlights the dialectic of self-sacrifice and being sacrificed, is the prayer of Jesus in Getsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, don't make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want."²⁴ Indeed, all the biographies of the Christian martyrs are based upon

²³ EURIPIDES (see above, n. 22), Act 4, scene 2.

²⁴ MATTHEW 26:39.

²² EURIPIDES, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Act 4, scene 1, in: *The Internet Classics Archive*, ed. by Daniel C. STEVENSON (Web Atomics, 1994–2000) <<http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/iphil.html>>

similar motives. One could only eradicate religious sacrifice by repudiating every kind of dispossession of the self as well as annihilating the structure of asymmetry, which would mean the end of religion as such.

IV. *Is sacrifice justified?*

After having explained the mechanism of sacrifice, we have to address the question whether it can be justified philosophically. Again, what prevents us from considering those who sacrifice themselves as clearly insane or those who sacrifice others as barbarian criminals or terrorists, regardless of whether they see themselves as true martyrs for the good cause or as agents of God's revenging justice? In this section, I propose three reasons for sacrifice, though I make no claim that these are exhaustive.

In order to be legitimate, it is first of all essential that the sake for which a sacrifice is demanded really has an ethical priority. We should be very suspicious about this point, as we all are too familiar with religious and secular rulers presenting their ideologically perverted ideas as true ethical purposes.²⁵ This suspicion is all the more necessary because it confronts us with one of the strongest motives for individuals to sacrifice themselves or others. If I contribute to the actualisation of a sublime purpose, I also participate in its glory, thus making both self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others morally acceptable, which somehow makes me 'feel good'. Without wanting to enter into detail here, the most problematic exploitation of this motive is the well-known strategy of totalitarian regimes: they make petty people feel themselves important.

Secondly, it is essential for sacrifice that there is some kind of a 'return'. In this respect, I agree with John Milbank that without the faith in the arrival of a divine gift (the necessity of a return), the whole idea of sacrifice becomes incomprehensible and even ethically impossible.²⁶ In my view, the question of the necessity of a 'return' is the most vital one for any justification of sacrifice. In order to answer it let us first examine the positions of Hegel and Levinas critically. I think they are both unable to answer the question of the return for sacrifice adequately, albeit for different reasons. For Hegel, the above-mentioned asymmetry implies that the universality and necessity of the state always prevails over the particularity and contingency of the individual. Although the state's purpose is to realise the freedom of the people, the importance and demands of the state always

²⁵ I take ideology here in the Marxist sense of the word, according to which ideology consists in a strategy to present the private interests of a particular class as the general or public interest.
²⁶ John MILBANK, "The Midwinter Sacrifice. A Sequel to 'Can Morality be Christian?'" in *Angelaki* 6, 2 (2001), 59. However, I disagree with his identification of the ethical character of sacrifice with the Christian idea of resurrection.

outweigh those of the individuals. This is but one of the consequences of what one could call the 'metaphysical prejudice' of the primacy of the eternal and the necessary over the temporary and the contingent.²⁷ People only count insofar as they contribute to the actualisation of (the freedom of) the universal world spirit. As individuals, i.e., in their strict finitude and temporality, they are of no value at all. From this perspective, the whole issue of sacrifice gets a dramatic turn: we should not be worried too much about the victims of war as long as its purpose, the securing of the sovereignty of the state, is realised. The atrocious consequences of this kind of dialectic become manifest in a famous saying of Stalin: the millions of people, sacrificed for the sake of revolution, are only statistical details and not really worth being taken notice of. In other words, although in Hegel's view there is a return for my sacrifice, it does not concern me as a finite individual.

For Levinas, a Hegelian dialectic between the finite and the infinite, the sensuous and the spiritual, the me (accusative) and the other is out of the question, since he considers this a typical aspect of the totalising tendency of Western philosophy. However, his position creates even more fundamental problems. The asymmetry between the me and the other is so radical that there can be no return for my sacrifice at all. Precisely because Levinas explicitly refuses any dialectical mediation, the demands of the other not only are but also have to remain infinite, so that I can never comply with them. Precisely because of his radical infinity and exteriority the other becomes abstract, formless; he has a 'visage' but no concrete face; he has too much of the Other and too little of the other. Thus, he eventually loses his character of a concrete needy, wretched person. As a result, the other either does not pose a real demand on me any more, or poses such an infinite demand that even the sacrifice of my life looks ridiculous in comparison to it. As the other is a *trace* of the Infinite, it is an illusion to think that, through my ethical deeds, I would be able to come any closer to him.²⁸ In the end, for Levinas, even my *hope* for a return ignores my radical passivity and betrays the radical asymmetry of the other with regard to the me (accusative). Hence, some have called the Levinasian ethics "pathological in its obliteration of the possibility of *consummation*, or of the beginning of beatitude in a time simply to be enjoyed."²⁹

So, the question of whether there is a return for my sacrifice remains in all its complexity. First of all, given its dispossession and asymmetrical nature it is essential to realise that the issue of a possible return for my sac-

²⁷ Cf. Ludwig STIER, "Anerkennung zwischen Individuen und Kulturen" (unpublished paper, presented at a conference at Tilburg University, The Netherlands, Dec. 13, 2007).

²⁸ For a very accurate analysis of this central problem in the philosophy of Levinas cf. Rudi VISKER, "Dispossession. How to remain silent 'after' Levinas," in *Emmanuel Levinas. Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers. Volume I: Levinas, Phenomenology and His Critics*, ed. by Claire KATZ and Lara TROUT (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 360–386, here 375ff.

²⁹ Cf. MILBANK (see above, n. 26), 53.

rifice is clearly distinct from a return in the ordinary, economical sense of the word. When selling a product, there is always a symmetry between the product sold and the money which is paid for it in return. There is also reciprocity between the two in the sense that the person who sells the product can count on receiving money in return. Therefore, in the economical sphere it does not make sense to speak of dispossession in the strict sense of the word. But in the case of sacrifice, which presupposes both asymmetry and dispossession, is there a return at all, and if so, what would its nature be?

In most of the above-mentioned examples of sacrifice, *viz.*, parents raising children, Iphigeneia, Jesus, and even in Hegel's philosophy of the state, there is a hope for a return involved in them. As said above, if any hope for a return would fade away, sacrifice becomes pointless, as I have shown with regard to Levinas. In my view, the very fact that people always *hope* for a return hints at an interesting answer to the question of its nature. First of all, the category of hope differs in a crucial sense from economic accountability: given its eschatological character, it leaves the asymmetrical character of the relation between a sacrifice and its sake intact, whereas all relations in the economical sphere are characterised by symmetrical reciprocity. Hoping for a return for my sacrifice is something other than counting on it and securing it through a contract. Phrased in religious terms: if my sacrifice for the sake of God would have the character of a (symmetrical) contract on which I could count, my faith in God would be a form of magic and would downplay his transcendence. Eventually, it would imply giving up my faith due to breach of contract by God! Because a return for my sacrifice is only hoped for and cannot be counted on, it preserves the asymmetry which is essential for any sacrifice.

Secondly, the element of the dispossession changes the nature of the return in comparison to what has been sacrificed. The return for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia's life is her participation in the glory of Hellas; the return for Jesus' sacrifice is the Kingdom of God; the return for people being sacrificed in a war is the security and independence of the state and thus of their fellow-citizens; and the return for parents sacrificing themselves for their children is not that the latter will be grateful to them, but that they in their turn will raise their own children. In all these instances there really is a return, although it differs qualitatively from what has been sacrificed; in particular, it implies a dispossession with regard to the individual person who has sacrificed himself or has been sacrificed. To phrase it again in religious terms: "Whoever loses his life for me will find it."³⁰ The life which is found implies a dispossession in comparison to the life which is lost or sacrificed for God's sake, but not its complete annihilation. Although this kind of dispossession may imply the complete annihilation of the finite individual, as is the case for Hegel, this is not inevitably so. Especially in the

³⁰ MATTHEW 16:25.

case of a religious dispossession, at least in Christianity, the finite and particular character of one's individuality is not annihilated but maintained in some sense, so that the sake of my sacrifice returns to me as an individual. From a Christian perspective my sacrifice for God's sake simultaneously dispossesses *and* saves me.

This takes us to a final problem concerning the sacrifice of others, both in a religious and a secular setting. If we accept the idea that a sacrifice can only be demanded if an ethically truly prior sake is at stake, and if there has to be a return of this sake to the individuals sacrificed, the question immediately arises as to which religious or secular person or institution is entitled to speak 'in the name of' this sublime sake so the sacrifice of other people can legitimately be demanded. There is an inevitable gap between the fundamental justification of sacrifice and the concrete situations in which it is to be applied. Persons (e.g., a religious leader) or institutions (e.g., a government) have to decide whether or not it is justified to sacrifice other people in a particular situation. Especially when the lives of people are at stake, such a decision is both almost impossible to take and nevertheless inevitable. It is a hard test for any concrete justification of the sacrifice of others. In these situations we sometimes see that (religious) leaders try to bridge this gap by seeing themselves as the incarnation of this sublime purpose, thus leaving no room whatsoever for diverging perspectives whether this or that sacrifice is justified or not. When I interpret myself and my decisions as the incarnation of God's Own Will or of secular forms of Human Salvation, then both I myself and my decisions become infallible so that eventually any discussion about justifying sacrifice becomes senseless. Acting as if one were the incarnation of a sublime sake paves the way for the most atrocious forms of sacrificing other people, of which both secular and religious history is full. Nevertheless, running away from one's responsibility to take a decision 'in the name of...' is no option either. Therefore, in order to be able to justify the sacrifice of others at all, it is essential that the idea of incarnation is replaced by that of representation. Decision-makers can never legitimately incarnate but can only represent a sublime purpose, thus maintaining the essential and unbridgeable transcendence of the ultimate purpose with regard to its human representatives.³¹ It makes them aware of the inevitable deficit that characterises every justification of sacrifice, and thus leaves room for discussing and developing less 'sacrificial' ways to fulfil God's will or to pursue the public interest.

³¹ For an interesting analysis of this problem cf. Theo de Witt, "De sluiers van de democratie. Over volkssoevereiniteit en politieke representatie" in: *Verloren presenties. Over de representatiecrisis in religie, kunst, media en politiek*, ed. by Ilse N. BULHOF and Ruud WELTEN (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1996), 125–151.

SUMMARY

In most answers to the question whether (self)sacrifice is justified, the 'sake' for which a sacrifice is demanded plays a crucial role. Furthermore, this sake is essential in order to be able to distinguish sacrifice from plain suicide or murder. I start with examining two strong philosophical justifications of sacrifice. According to Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*, the notion of sacrifice is vital for the preservation of the ethical health of nations insofar as it makes the individuals aware of the fact that they are nothing without the state. Levinas introduces the notion of sacrifice in connection with his idea of hostageship: my hostageship means that I am elected by the other to sacrifice myself for the sake of the good. The analysis of these two positions shows that the notions of asymmetry and dispossession are essential to every form of sacrifice. The fact that these notions also belong to the essence of religion explains why sacrifice plays such a predominant role in religious contexts. However, explaining the mechanism of sacrifice is not identical with its justification. I focus on three justificational grounds: the ethical priority of the sake of sacrifice; the necessity of a hope for a 'return' for my sacrifice, while simultaneously maintaining its asymmetrical and dispossessive nature; and, finally, the need for a reasonable discussion on the legitimacy of the sake of sacrifice, presupposing that nobody can rightfully claim to incarnate this sake but can only represent it.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In den meisten Antworten auf die Frage, ob (Selbst)aufopferung berechtigt sei, spielt die Frage, 'um welcher Sache oder Person willen' das Opfer verlangt wird eine wichtige Rolle. Dieses 'um... willen' ist außerdem dafür wesentlich, um (Selbst)aufopferung von Selbstmord oder Mord unterscheiden zu können. Zuerst untersuche ich zwei starke Rechtfertigungen von Aufopferung, die von Hegel und Levinas entwickelt worden sind. Nach Hegels *Rechtsphilosophie* ist Aufopferung wesentlich für die sittliche Gesundheit der Völker, weil sie die Individuen bewusst werden lässt, dass sie vom Staat abhängig sind: Ohne den Staat sind die Individuen nichts. Levinas führt den Begriff der Aufopferung im Zusammenhang mit seiner Idee des 'jemanden zur Geisel nehmen' ein: Dass ich zur Geisel genommen werde bedeutet, dass ich durch den Anderen auserwählt werde, um mich um des Guten willen aufzuopfern. Die Analyse dieser zwei Rechtfertigungen zeigt, dass die Begriffe der Asymmetrie und der Enteignung für jede Art von Aufopferung wesentlich sind. Die Tatsache, dass diese beiden Begriffe auch in der Religion eine so wichtige Rolle spielen, erklärt, warum so häufig in religiösen Kontexten vom Opfer die Rede ist. Die Darlegung des Mechanismus der Aufopferung ist aber nicht identisch mit ihrer Rechtfertigung. Ich konzentriere mich auf drei Aspekte einer philosophischen Rechtfertigung: Die ethische Priorität der Sache, um deren willen das Opfer verlangt wird; die Notwendigkeit der Hoffnung auf ein 'Wiedergutmachen' meiner Aufopferung, ohne aber dadurch den asymmetrischen und enteignenden Charakter des Opfers aufzuheben; und schließlich das Bedürfnis einer vernünftigen Diskussion über die Legitimität des 'um... willen' der Aufopferung, wobei man sich dessen bewusst sein muss, dass keiner dieses 'um... willen' legitim inkarnieren, sondern nur repräsentieren kann.