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HEGEL AND THE GIFT OF SACRIFICE

“Death, if that is what we want to name this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. [...] But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather is the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative as when we say of something that it is nothing or that it is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.”¹

As Hegel wrote these words, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was already behind him. The process of “Absolute Knowledge” recognizing itself as the deployment of the comprehension and recognition of the totality of meaning as truth was accomplished. These words are informed by the entirety of this reconciled and reconciling movement which began with the “immediate” sense certainty of difference and culminated in the Absolute speculative identity of Spirit. This culmination, this reconciled and reconciling Absolute speculative identity is not however a simple crowning concept paving the way to the System of philosophy, signified by the threefold development of the *Logic*, of the *Philosophy of Nature* and of the *Philosophy of Spirit*. It is rather, for Hegel, the gift of the meaning of Spirit, the gift as recognition of identity always giving itself in its differentiation and of difference already giving itself through its comprehension as identity. It is the recognition of what Hegel also called Life.

When Hegel marks the idea of Life, as in the very end of the *Science of Logic*, most particularly in the Third Section where Hegel reveals the “syllogism” of the Absolute Concept in the determination of the idea of Life, he always marks it in a double determination. Hegel points out that Life is grasped as both the complete form of this syllogism and as a particular moment in and within this very syllogism. As we know, the first, and thus most immediate, determination of the Absolute Concept is defined as Life. The second determination is knowledge (the idea of truth and the idea of the Good) and the third, that is the Absolute in and for itself, the determination in which Spirit recognizes itself, re-appropriates and grasps itself in its infinity, is once more termed as Life. In this sense, in this syllogism, Life appears as the most immediate form of the Absolute Concept, its most formal, natural, abstract determination and at the end-point of the syllogism, precisely where the Absolute recognizes itself as Concept and as absolute totality by comprehending itself as infinite truth, Hegel determines once

¹ Hegel, *PhS*, translated by A. V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 19.

again the entire movement of the syllogism as Life, as “Absolute Life”, as unperishable and unalienable Life. “Only the Absolute idea is Being, writes Hegel, unperishable and unalienable Life; truth comprehending itself as Absolute Life”.

Which urges the following question: from one determination of Life to the other, from the beginning point of the syllogism to its completion, does Life have, here or there, its proper and own-most meaning? Or, in other words, is Life to be thought as the *immediate* determination of the Concept or as its Absolute reappropriation? For Hegel, there ought here not to be any *indecision*. Life does not have either here or there, in one or the other its particular meaning. Rather, Life is to be thought of as *both immediate and Absolute*, as the part and the whole – more precisely, Life, for Hegel, produces itself as a concept in the infinite circle of its own reappropriation, the infinite return of itself to itself before any particular meaning of itself. In this sense, thus, nothing will ever precede the return of Life to Life and everything occurs as if the Absolute Concept – and as the Absolute Concept is that which recognizes itself as itself – is simultaneously the affirmation of its immediate determination and the *Aufhebung* of its immediate form, the suppression and the conservation of its immediacy as “Absolute Life.” In truth, it is always Life which speaks of itself, in itself and for itself, as the double movement of incessant identification and differentiation. This double movement, which is grasped through the deployment of what Hegel entitled “speculative dialectic” marks the *donation* of Spirit itself. Indeed, the donation of Spirit, the “givenness” of Absolute meaning, is inherently rendered to its utmost actuality through its own-most speculative development and deployment. Which means, speculatively thinking: the Infinite always and already *gives* itself and thereby works, traverses, inhabits through the finite whereby the finite always recognizes that it is given, worked, traversed and inhabited by the Infinite.

For Hegel, this donation of Spirit bears the name of “History” and consequently History is always the manifestation of Spirit’s donation. Hence the question: what is at work in this donation? It is the process of naming History *as* Spirit, and thus naming both History and Spirit *as* the deployment of the incessant reconciliatory movement of signification each singular event in History already displays. For naming means – as our opening quotation hints at, albeit negatively – the process by which reconciliation is always and already the gift of speculative meaning. This is why Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* does not only *present* or *depict* the History of Spirit or Spirit as History, it *phrases* History and Spirit, phrases differentiation and identification, phrases thus their correlation which marks their reciprocity.

The consequence is double: on the one hand, it claims that the further History descends into the abyss of evil, the more powerful the *Aufhebung* of Spirit as History *is*, the more forceful is the affirmation of Absolute meaning assured and validated. And, on the other hand, it marks that in the process of this speculative dialectic, thinking does not forget or simply “move on” from the particular and singular historical moments of Spirit’s manifestation, but rather remembers and recalls how, and in which manner, these particular and singular historical events are comprehended within the deployment of an essence whose comprehension

marks how these events are what they are as always being expressions of their reconciliatory actuality.

Our opening quote thus symbolizes the modality of this recognition, the inherent and immanent Law to which the entire movement of the Absolute remains subjected to. It symbolizes this Law as the self-recognition of Spirit and History as an incessant *sacrifice*.² To go to the limit of this claim, we ought to say that the History of Spirit is that of its infinite sacrifice. Hegel indeed refers constantly to the necessity of sacrifice as the inherent modality, immanent necessity and signification of History as Spirit whereby each moment in this development, from Greek tragedy to Golgotha, to the French Terror following the Revolution, each and every singular moment in the development of History symbolizes the necessary sacrifice Spirit operates on itself and through which is revealed its own-most presence. And no one “event,” no one “moment” can restrain or restrict, throw it out of sync or disjoin this movement of signified essence: History as Spirit is the theatre of a sacrifice incessantly offering the rhythm, the cadence, the pulse whereby meaning occurs and through which the possibility of “naming” is given. This is why Hegel warns, in our opening quote, that the force of Spirit is not to “close its eyes to the negative,” but only by the long and sustained gaze in the face of nothingness transform, transpose, alter and transfer it, ultimately negate it and thus relieve it into its own end which is its own truth, testifying thus that the “negative” reflects that it was already and always a name, amongst others, of the “infinite life” of Spirit.

This point needs here to be marked as it clearly demonstrates the inherent necessity in Hegel’s speculative dialectic to think the essential movement of a negation which retains and reappropriates the truth of that which it negates. And such is the speculative definition of sacrifice: to retain whilst negating, to keep the actuality of that which is abandoned, to preserve the essence of that which is annihilated. The question, for Hegel, is what is being retained here whilst at the same time being dispensed? What is this actuality which is being preserved, what is this essence which is being kept in the incessant process of its sacrificial negation? The answer is: violence. What remains, what is kept, what is preserved, is the incessant sacrificial violence of Spirit. For this sacrificial violence organizes Spirit itself, that is it consecrates the essence of Spirit. Which means: without its sacrificial violence, there would not be Spirit. And the thesis could not be more radical. Not simply because the violence of sacrifice reveals Spirit, but also because sacrificial violence preserves Spirit, and thus guards the “we” from the worst. It preserves our “we” from what Hegel called the *terror*, the indistinct void where all singular individualities are engulfed in the pure negation of an Absolute substance so indifferent that it voids all identification.

Hegel analyses this substantial void in the sub-section of Chapter VI, *Spirit*, of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled *Absolute freedom and Terror*.³ In this sub-section, although negation wishes to realize itself, it encounters a moment which is not a moment. It faces an event which surpasses and overflows its identification or its

² For an analysis of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* as sacrifice, see our *Le sacrifice de Hegel*, Paris, Galilée, 2007.

³ Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *op. cit.*, p. 355 sq.

name. That is, it encounters a point of rupture where everything is put into question, and where law, faith, State, the “world above,” the “world of the past” and the possibility of a “future world,” everything sinks effortlessly, without work or being worked, into nothingness. It is not that “we” have stepped out of History, but rather that History itself shows itself here as a pure void in the very process and deployment of its realization and determination. Spirit, in the face of this void, mobilizes, as always, the violence of sacrifice. As if to signify that there always needs to be a violence in order to circumscribe the void. And thus, the violence of sacrifice needs to operate, to function, to deploy itself, the entire process of the negation and the “negation of the negation,” in order to preserve itself from the purest violence, in order to keep itself from falling into the barbarity of a pure night without essence, the an-historical meaninglessness of brute forces where indifferenciation remains the only Law, a Law of void obscurity, of indetermination, where is eroded the very History of Man, the very possibility for Man to have a History. In this sense, Spirit always expresses itself as the necessity of a violence which sacrifices the singularity of the other, the singularity of the self, in the name of neither the self nor the other, but of that which allows for the *place* in which both the self and the other recognize and reconcile each other. What Hegel called the “community.” Which means that the sacrifice of the other is *for* the other, the sacrifice of the self is *for* the self, that is *for* the other’s and the self’s *future* and for what, in the future, can come *between* both the other and the self. To want to close one’s eyes to this sacrificial violence would be in fact to return to a state of the worst violence. A state where, without the economy of sacrificial violence, the History of Spirit would be riveted to a violence where no self and no other could or would subsist.

Hegel punctuates the entire process of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by these moments where the entirety of the movement of Spirit recognizing itself risks its own voiding. And as always, precisely in order to restrain this auto-destruction of Spirit, the incessant “logic” of its own development *as* sacrifice retains Spirit from losing itself. What must retain attention however, as we have just noted, is the sovereignty of the auto-protection of meaning deployed through Spirit’s incessant sacrifice. As if Spirit’s incessant sacrifice always sought to protect Spirit from its own negation. As if what protects Spirit from itself is always the sacrificial process of its negation. Without this safeguard in itself and for itself against itself, Spirit would be engaged uncontrollably in its own auto-destruction where “we” would be engulfed in the pure void of an absence where no meaning could ever arise. Everything thus happens here as if the inherent necessity of Spirit’s sacrificial violence protects us from a sacrifice *without* violence. That is, protects us from being entrapped in the pure and irretrievable sacrifice of Spirit itself: a sacrifice which would be so Absolute that it would not even bear its name and would reduce to ashes the very name of Spirit.

This sacrifice *without* the irretrievable economy of sacrificial violence, this sacrifice *without* sacrifice—Hegel does typify it in the first moment of the first section of the Chapter V, *Religion*, entitled *Natural Religion*. This moment marks the luminous essence where Spirit is but its own form, and where this own-most form engulfs everything and anything in its very exposition. This form of Spirit is, for Hegel, the deployment of its abstract indetermination. It remains simply in itself and uniquely closed in on itself. It is fully and entirely identified with itself

without regard for any mediation. Hegel labels it the “pure night” of its own essence. What is capital in Hegel’s demonstration is that, at the very opening of the Chapter V, *Religion*, and thus situated after the accomplishment of the ethical sphere – that sphere which grasps the “inherent necessity” to circumscribe the pure violence of the “night” in order for the self and the other to recognize themselves in the community – we are witnessing the scene of a pure sacrifice which gives nothing except “nihilation,” annihilation, and which is entirely identified with Spirit itself leaving nothing outside Spirit’s own “nihilitating annihilation.” That is, in a certain sense, we are witnessing the release of a sacrifice so Absolute that it occurs through Spirit itself as it also consumes Spirit altogether along with the very possibility of its historical deployment. As we have marked it, this is an abstract, empty form of Spirit. However, the question which we shall see emerge from this “essenceless” form of Spirit will risk projecting the entire modality of Spirit as History elsewhere and otherwise than in its own affirmation or expression.

Be it as it may, in this first moment of Natural Religion, which reveals the innermost secret of Spirit, Spirit refers and reports to itself according to a “simple relation,” a relation without mediation or determination. Spirit is radically and unfathomably undetermined; it appears as such, purely, immediately, and thus appears as “pure light,” simple transparency where nothing appears, except the blinding light of appearance itself, that is the complete and sheer, unadulterated and unwavering “light of the sun.” This first figure of the *Natural Religion* figures thus the voiding of all figuration. It remains faithful to itself, sustains itself only as a purely visible and thus radically invisible sun. Ultimately this first figure is that of a light that shows itself without showing anything and thus consumes everything in its presence. This first figure is a light which incinerates everything and anything it presentifies. As it portrays itself as an endless and “essenceless” play of light, it is a “holocaust” which never determines, nor even seeks to determine itself. Hegel typifies this sacrifice of Spirit as a pure consummation consuming all and levelling all that is in the vacuity of a destructive indifference: “The movements of its own externalization, its creations in the unresisting element of its otherness, are torrents of light.”⁴

Pure and “essenceless” play without limits – the question is not so much what is retained, but how can Spirit ever find itself, that is determine itself within this figure without figure? How is this “holocaust” constricted, so as to determine itself and take on a stable subsistence whereby something could be retained from its “all-burning” release? For Hegel, it is however always the same Law: this sacrifice of Spirit, this sacrifice *without* sacrifice so radically indifferent that it even engulfs the sacrificial violence of Spirit, and consequently risks of incinerating Spirit itself, cannot be left to itself, cannot remain in its “in itself.” It *must become* its contrary:

However, this reeling, unconstrained Life must determine itself as being for self and endow its vanishing shapes with an enduring subsistence. The immediate being in which it stands in antithesis to its consciousness is itself the negative power which dissolves its distinctions. It is thus in

⁴ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

truth the Self; and Spirit therefore passes on to know itself in the form of the self. The Pure light disperses its unitary nature into an infinity of forms and offers up itself as a sacrifice to being for self so that from its substance the individual may take an enduring existence for itself.⁵

For Hegel, thus, the “all-burning holocaust” *must* determine itself. It *must* because this Law is also its own-most and inherent commandment. Here lies the implacable work of sacrifice, of Spirit as sacrifice and of the sacrificial violence of Spirit as History. To be that which it is, the “all-burning holocaust” must become its *other*, its contrary, it must retain itself, guard itself from itself, and thus know when, where, how to extinguish itself, bind itself, stricture and therefore restrict itself. Ultimately, the “all-burning holocaust” must not be left to itself, and thus keep, retain, preserve its own truth, or its own *nameable* truth, as sacrifice and its own recognizable essence, as violence. The sacrifice *without* sacrifice, this pure indistinct void of “all-burning” indifference must therefore reappropriate itself as a sacrifice and thereby sacrifice itself, that is, ultimately reengage the movement of the sacrificial violence in and as History.

Here however one can regard two inseparable processes: the “all burning holocaust” as burning everything, Spirit itself, and the “all-burning holocaust” as extinguishing itself. In this sense, we would be called to rephrase this inherent necessity as a “double bind,” to take Derrida’s term: that of a “holocaust” which burns everything including itself thereby leaving no other trace of itself, a sacrifice so present, so devastating that it would be *without* sacrifice, an absolute expenditure and occurrence before it inevitably appears, before it constricts itself to an economy of speculative thought capable of naming it as such AND that of a “holocaust” which, to be what it is, to hold a name for itself, would extinguish itself as “all-burning” and present itself *within* the economy of sacrificial violence. Such is the *risk* opened by Hegel: that of a “double bind” so powerfully *aporetic* that it risks of projecting speculative dialectic towards an impossible decision between sacrificing itself or recognizing itself as sacrifice. But such is also perhaps its *gift*: that of an *undecidable* risk, a radical indecision between a sacrifice *without* sacrifice, a sacrifice that would consume itself by voiding, incinerating, destroying Spirit itself, its sacrifice, its violence AND a sacrifice which operates always in the name of Spirit, which assumes, recognizes, acquiesces itself as a sacrifice. Hegel’s *gift* is perhaps the radical indecision between the sacrifice *without* sacrifice AND the perpetually reiterated sacrificial violence of Spirit.

This indecision, between the “all-burning” as burning everything, including itself and therefore being what is otherwise than speculative dialectic AND the “all-burning” as extinguishing itself and therefore becoming a moment of speculative dialectic – this *indecision*, no one could philosophically determine whether or not Hegel *did* or *did not* think it. It remains a *remainder* to the History of Spirit that cannot be entirely reappropriated by and within that History. It is, so to speak, a *remainder* which suspends, without destroying or negating, the development and the deployment of the History of Spirit. In this sense, it opens in this historical deployment of sacrifice the incessant supplement of an irreducible “other” where

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 420.

would proliferate performatives capable *suspending* the performance of this phenomenology of the gift. *This indecision is perhaps the gift in Hegel's phenomenology of the gift.*

I would be tempted here to call it the *gift of a justice without sacrifice*. Perhaps, this is what remains to be thought beyond what Hegel left unthought: the gift of a justice without sacrifice, that is a justice which remains radically undecided and ambiguous and thus heterogeneous to the accomplishment or the truth of sacrifice. For what this justice without sacrifice retracts from is the *achievement* and therefore the success of sacrifice. In this manner, it is oriented, this *indecision* by another call than that of sacrifice. Perhaps it also remains oriented by another call than that of donation. For this justice, not solely concerned with the accomplishing truth of the gift as sacrifice, would perhaps also open to yet another possibility: that of interrupting the truth of sacrifice from realizing itself, accomplishing itself, completing itself. For what this justice knows, before sacrifice, before the truth of sacrifice, is that the accomplishment of sacrifice is always and already the *impossibility* of justice. And therefore this justice works not towards sacrifice, not towards the gift, but towards the keeping and safekeeping of the secret of the other, that which cannot and must not be given over to presence but remains always and already foreign to the logic and economy of the gift. To give would perhaps here mean *not to give* but *to keep*, *to safekeep*, to guard and safeguard, that which cannot be given – the secret of the other.

This justice of *keeping* more than *giving* would mean to guard and safeguard the death of the other in one's self – that is, assuming, without sacrifice, the death of the other by always and already being the *survivor* of the other, already mourning the other and without the possibility of giving the other the promise of a salvation but rather of already being the other's keeper.

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