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Making Sacrifices
Opfer bringen

**Visions of Sacrifice in European and
American Cultures**

**Opfervorstellungen in europäischen und
amerikanischen Kulturen**

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The Rupture of the Normative and Descriptive: Two Modes of Avoiding Tragic Sacrifice in Drama and Politics

Sacrifice is central to tragedy, as is collision, frequently a collision between the normative world (things as they should be) and the descriptive world (thing as they are). Although it belongs to the idea of the normative that it should be realized, what should be and what is are not always in harmony. In what I call the tragedy of self-sacrifice, the hero cannot realize normative values without sacrificing her life.¹ In adhering to the divine law of the family, Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, violates the existing laws of the state and suffers the consequences.

Tragedy and sacrifice, however, need not always mean sacrificing one's life. The collision of two normative values can force one to sacrifice one's principles. We receive a contemporary lesson in such self-sacrifice in Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, where both Lincoln and abolitionist Thaddeus Stevens must compromise the purity of their ideas and actions in order to ensure that the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery, pass the House of Representatives. Success is important, not only that the individual follow the good but that the good be realized for many. To enact the good in this world, we must sometimes tragically sacrifice one principle, one good, for another; often this implies compromise.

A complex sacrifice of this kind may be even greater than the sacrifice we see in the tragedy of self-sacrifice, especially if the action ends with the hero's life intact: the hero's suffering will not be erased by the bliss of justification or the consciousness of death. Dora asserts in the final act of Camus' *Les Justes* (*The Just Assassins*): "it's easy, ever so much easier, to die of one's inner conflicts than to live with them" (Camus 1950: 141; Camus 1958: 297). The deepest suffering is moral, not physical. Instead of sacrificing her life, the hero of what I call the tragedy of awareness must sacrifice her naive belief in a simple world.

Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* exemplifies tragic awareness. The more interesting character in Anouilh's version is Creon. Antigone is presented as simplistic and impulsive, without maturity or a sense for the demands that come from living in a complex social world.² In her conversation with Ismene, Antigone makes clear her unwillingness to

consider alternatives: she argues that "it's best not to think too much," and she affirms that she doesn't want to see "Creon's point of view" (Anouilh 1946: 145; Anouilh 1987: 87). Antigone resembles Oedipus in her arrogance and stubbornness; in relation to truth and knowledge, however, Antigone and Oedipus are opposites. Oedipus wants to know all, and his search knows no bounds; Antigone seeks no other ideas but those she already has. Instead of arguing against Creon, she simply asserts her stance.

Creon offers Antigone her life. Responding that any life that is not immediately perfect and full is not for her, she insists on death and gives Creon, thereby, no alternative. While Antigone has simply renounced her life, Creon has relinquished a simple vision of the world. Whereas she easily and readily says no to life, he says yes to life in its complexities, including the assumption of power: "Someone has to say yes. Someone has to steer the ship. It's letting in water on all sides. It's full of crime and stupidity and suffering. The rudder's adrift" (Anouilh 1946: 184; Anouilh 1987: 115-16). Creon must act as he would not like and loses thereby Antigone, his son, and his wife. In this play Creon enacts the deepest tragic sacrifice.

In modernity we see a diminution of sacrifice and with that tragedy, arising from shifts in our conception of the relation between the normative and descriptive worlds. One way in which modernity tends to avoid tragedy is by relinquishing the normative realm altogether and focusing only on the descriptive world. When the normative is abandoned, tragedy is no longer possible, as collisions of values and the need for sacrifice for such values disappear. I explore in the first part of my essay this abandonment of the normative realm (I). The reverse way in which modernity avoids tragedy is by relinquishing the descriptive realm and with it the priority of realizing normative values in this world; instead of compromise, one chooses to remain normatively pure and unsullied by the world's imperfections. The avoidance of tragedy by abandoning the aspiration to realize the good in this world is the focus of the second part of my essay (II). In both sections, I offer some brief literary examples and then turn to contemporary politics.

at its Paris premiere in 1944 as expressing solidarity with the French resistance. But the reception in 1944 was ambiguous. While some critics viewed the play as an affirmation of Antigone, others felt that Creon's position was stronger and that the play deflated the idea of resistance. Some even speculated that it was the work of the German military. A detailed account of the immediate reception of the work is available in Manfred Flügge (Flügge 1982: 247-304), who notes that for many Creon was the more significant character and was interpreted as a man of good will. The resistance was upset by the play's apparent elevation of Creon and even more so by its portrayal of Antigone, the resister, as a total naysayer and radical skeptic. Flügge summarizes his account: "The resistance didn't recognize itself in this play and polemicized against it. The myth of *Antigone* as a resistance play, which was found so frequently after 1945, especially in foreign criticism, and which so greatly influenced the reception after the war, is based on a misconception" (Flügge 1982: 300).

¹ For a fuller discussion of tragedy and comedy, with references to the literature, see *Tragedy and Comedy*, on which parts of my analysis build.

² A common view of Anouilh's *Antigone* would have us believe that the play was widely hailed

The turn to the merely descriptive realm begins with Niccolò Machiavelli, who essentially abandons the normative world of justice, reducing politics to an impressive analysis of the world as it is, to the logic of power. It is not by chance that as a dramatist, Machiavelli wrote only comedies and not also tragedies; he had no sensibility for the conflict between the normative and descriptive realms.

A world without norms is a comic world. Molière's *Tartuffe* is a Machiavellian cynic who brilliantly understands the descriptive world and knows how to manipulate it. He is the opposite of Orgon, the character he dupes, not only in his evil intentions but also in his sophisticated understanding of reality. Often the comic figure understands the world and cleverly manipulates it. He lacks moral scruples and easily shifts, as does *Tartuffe* in his rhetoric, from what would be upholding tragic renunciation to indulging his personal desires (III.iii.947-51). Instead of sacrificing, *Tartuffe* delights in *poneria*, the ability to get the advantage of somebody or some situation by virtue of an unscrupulous, but thoroughly enjoyable exercise of craft (Whitman 1964: 30).

Goldoni's *Il Burcardo* (*The Liar*) is an excellent example from the Italian tradition, and one of Germany's greatest comedies, Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Jug*), exemplifies this structure for German literature. In the 20th century, one might think of Thomas Mann's irrepressible Felix Krull. This is not of course to say that we do not encounter like-minded villains who cause great evil in tragedy. Iago is an example, but Iago himself cannot rise to tragic stature, even if the world in which he operates has, unlike the comic works above, tragic consequences.

Not only comedy but also tragicomedy, and not only literature, but also film, works with this elevation of the descriptive over the normative world. The concept that a recognition of harsh realities requires a bracketing of moral scruples is evident, for example, in Woody Allen's film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. The philosophy that "might is right" and that "history is written by the winners" is explicitly voiced by Judah's Aunt May and echoed by the film's other advocates of harsh reality: Jack, Lester, and eventually Judah. Their opposites in the film are the rabbi, who is moral but blind and so unaware of the full extent of Judah's crimes; the ineffectual Cliff; and the philosopher, who can no longer live in such a harsh world and so takes his own life. Allen comments on the rabbi: "I feel that his faith is blind, it will work, but it requires closing your eyes to reality" (Allen 1993: 225).

The film ends with a self-reflective discussion of the hero's inability to rise to tragic stature, to turn himself in for his crime and to enact a sacrifice worthy of a god who seems absent. In Allen's film the great moral individual is absent. Judah does not make real the Oedipus-like scenario Cliff proposes at the end of the film: "I would have had him turn himself in, because then, you see, then your story assumes tragic

proportions, because in the absence of a God or something he is forced to assume that responsibility himself; then you have tragedy." Judah's inability to reach for tragedy, to sacrifice himself for the good whatever it might cost him, underscores his distance from Oedipus.

The dominance of the real over the normative is visible in the public arena as well. Self-interest, and the suspension of any conscious sacrifice for the whole, has always defined capitalism, yet the idea of capitalism has been that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts: the invisible hand of Adam Smith suggests that my pursuit of prosperity is good for the commonwealth. This economic paradigm has functioned well when the state has guaranteed, beyond the driving force of self-interest, a certain concept of justice and rules of fairness, an insight that is central even to Mandeville's theories of economics (Mandeville 1728: 1.116).

What has changed of late? In the United States, the economic paradigm of self-interest has been transferred to politics, and self-interest has begun to take over the political arena as well (Hösle 2011: 436-440). The *descriptive* world of economic self-interest has usurped the *normative* world of political justice. We see a series of trends in the U.S.:

- special interest groups pursuing their own agenda at the expense of the whole;
- a liberalization of campaign finance laws that permits the freedom virtually to buy votes for one's own interests;
- a bracketing of the universal prohibition on torture, that is, self-interest at the national level;
- the belief that a nation can ensure security and engage in war without expecting sacrifices of any kind, universal conscription, for example, or higher taxes;
- the idea that we can exhaust resources, externalize costs, and run up debt without thinking through the distant effects on others, including future generations;
- a development whereby politicians have themselves been allowed to benefit economically from their own decisions;
- and a resulting loss of social trust.

The abandonment of sacrifice and with it the sense of a greater whole represents the loss of central human values essential for a mature society. Here tragedy is avoided because the descriptive world, the world of rational actors pursuing their own self-interests, is not guided by a normative concept of the higher good, which lies beyond the descriptive and the particular and necessarily involves some level of sacrifice.

II

The reverse way in which modernity avoids tragedy, as I have noted, is by elevating normative values at the cost of their realization. This is the realm of Hegel's beautiful soul, which lacks the power to endure existence, for it lives always in dread of staining the purity of its inner life (Hegel 1978: 3.483-84). The preoccupation with moral rectitude overrides the willingness to engage with opponents in a serious and strategic effort to bridge the normative and descriptive worlds. Success in this world is irrelevant. Though closer to tragedy, this singular elevation of the moral also easily shifts into comedy.

The position is illustrated in some ways by Alceste in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (*The Misanthrope*), a figure who rightly abhors the superficiality and dishonesty of his society but has no capacity or desire to be effective.³ Where the tragic hero pursues an end consistently, sacrificing his life for it, the comic hero is inconsistent, wanting success but neither fully sacrificing himself nor recognizing the means necessary to change it. Moreover, the strategies the hero employs to realize the good are insufficient not only because of the difficulties of the situation but also because of particular contingencies on the part of the hero—and this is comic. Because of his high moral standards, Alceste must fail; he cannot possibly deal with those who are selfish, unjust, and hypocritical. Like the tragic hero, he will not compromise. Yet, Alceste lacks tact and with this success, and so he is nonetheless the object of our laughter. Alceste must be candid and outspoken when he might have been elusive or silent. Moreover, Alceste revels too greatly in his martyrdom; the play parodies, as much as identifies with, the hero's suffering.

A fascinating structure of Alceste's misanthropy is that if he loses in his efforts to reform humanity, he can justify his pessimism. To have success would be to deny his position (as misanthrope); there is thus an existential desire for him to fail and so keep his identity intact. Alceste's high standards, when contrasted with reality, trigger his misanthropy. But the reverse side of our admiration for these standards is our sense that the misanthrope's view of humankind is naive. The play's various allusions to the hero's self-deceit reinforce this point.

In tragedies that carry submerged comic moments, we can sometimes see a distance from reality, whereby a focus on the normative obscures the demands of reality. In Franz Grillparzer's *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg* (*A Fraternal Quarrel in the House of Habsburg*), Rudolf is a figure not at home in the modern world of unbridled subjectivity;

3 The two paradigmatic structures we find in *Tartuffe* and *Alceste* are also visible, *mutatis mutandis*, in the picaresque novel. Consider Grimmelhausen's *Simplicissimus*, a realist who undertakes a pilgrimage with peas in his shoes but cooks the peas first to eliminate any element of sacrifice, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, whose lofty ideals awaken our admiration but who lives outside the realm of reality and is so predestined to inefficacy.

“Nicht ich, nur Gott” (Not I, only God) is his motto (l. 1221). His eyes are fixed on the transcendent realm. He is an intellectual, not unlike Shakespeare's artistic Richard II and saintly Henry VI. Rudolf's inability or unwillingness to act in a complicated world serves to ensure that power passes over into the opportunism and ruthless power positivism of Klesel and the fanaticism of Ferdinand. As with Alceste, Rudolf penetrates reality (he understands his brother Mathias better than Mathias himself), but Rudolf's insight does not help him act strategically.

Despite the sadness and severity of Rudolf's recognizing a set of problems and being unable to find a solution, Grillparzer's work has many hidden comic structures and moments—such as Rudolf's repeated calls to be left alone and in peace precisely when action is necessary along with the repetition of this gesture when Mathias gains power; Rudolf's complaints about not knowing what he has forbidden others to tell him; his reflections on the whole when the particular and the immediate call for his attention; the increasing length of his speeches as time presses and political intrigues advance along with his talking in monologues even when others are present; and Ferdinand's references to a short campaign while the audience knows the war will last thirty years. Just as the hero who abandons norms for pure reality is not capable of tragedy and can easily be rendered comic, so can the hero who thinks but cannot act or even attempt success be seen—at least partly—from a comic light.

The idea—of being morally pure but either unwilling or unable to compromise and to work with reality as it is in order to be effective—is also visible in contemporary politics. Here embracing the normative supplants a sense of reality. Although Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (*The Prince*) landed on the papal list of banned books, Machiavelli was right that it is important to understand how the world works; such knowledge is necessary if one wants to *realize* the good.

As an example of a purely normative contemporary focus, consider a certain direction in American politics and religion, which is scornful of compromise and unpersuaded by reality. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopts, in my eyes, many correct positions but seems too often unwilling to engage the world effectively for change. Not surprisingly, about a third of American bishops protested President Barack Obama's presence at the University of Notre Dame's graduation ceremony in 2009, despite the great opportunity to engage the President also on differences with the Catholic Church. Indeed, at the graduation ceremony itself and in the presence of Obama, Catholic intellectual John T. Noonan spoke eloquently of the historical development of a clear moral vision. He noted that President Abraham Lincoln came slowly to the Emancipation Proclamation. Noonan drew a parallel to today's conflicting positions on abortion and encouraged engagement and empathetic dialogue with those who have opposing views; this can be done, argued Noonan, with serene trust that truth will ultimately prevail.

Many bishops support, in some ways quite openly, the Republican party, above all

because of its focus on sexual ethics. They fail thereby to recognize three important points. First, no Catholic can be purely aligned with either the Republicans or the Democrats. The Republican Party overlaps with Catholicism in its opposition to abortion and the destruction of embryos for stem-cell research as well as its support of various faith-based initiatives. But the Democratic Party lines up with Catholic positions on the conditions for just war and opposition to capital punishment as well as support of universal health care, environmental stewardship, a just welfare state, and an equitable tax structure. This conflict in normative positions is completely overlooked (Roche, "Voting Our Conscience.")

Second, in the wake of sexual scandals in the Church, an unrelenting focus on the sexual ethics of others may not only overstate the relative importance of at least some of these issues, it is also strategically counter-productive.

Third, support of Republicans because of abortion seems to be evidence of a certain indifference concerning reality. Many Republican supporters, bishops among them, continue to speak of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, but there is a disconnect between campaign expectations and political results. If a vacancy on the Supreme Court were to arise, would a Republican president nominate an unambiguously pro-life candidate? Would such a nominee receive Senate approval? If the person were appointed, would *Roe* be revisited? If so, would the new justice vote in predictable ways? It is worth recalling that a majority of the Supreme Court justices have for some time been Republican appointees. And if *Roe* were overturned, the most likely scenario would involve not a federal prohibition but a return to state control. With the possibility of travel between states, to what extent would abortion be curtailed? Because the existence of the embryo is not public knowledge, how easily could abortion be policed? Finally, data from other countries make evident that there is no meaningful correlation between the practice of abortion and its legality (Henshaw et al). The world's lowest abortion rates have traditionally been in Belgium and the Netherlands, where abortion is legal but where the welfare state is strong (Henshaw et al). Latin America, where almost all abortions are illegal, has the highest rate in the world (Sedgh et al).

In short, some of our religious leaders have chosen the path of ignoring the descriptive world and expressing disdain for the world as it is. They are the opposite of Machiavelli, but with him share an avoidance of tragic sacrifice.⁴

4 The alternative to these two frames involves sacrifice and compromise, both of which have tended to recede from our contemporary horizon. One need only note the contrast between the prudence of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism, which recognized the value of combining the insights of "moralists and political realists" (Niebuhr 1932: 231), and what goes by the name of Christian politics today. The latter tends to fall into what Gutmann and Thompson have recently described as the "uncompromising mindset" (Gutmann and Thompson 2012: 3). Compromise requires of course sacrifice and an interest in realizing the good. Mann

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and Ornstein have convincingly analyzed the recent political developments that engendered movement away from compromise and have resulted in America's inability to govern effectively. For two short essays on issues of particular interest to Christians that seek to map out areas where compromise and common ground should be embraced, see my "Religion and Politics" and "A Way to Common Ground."