Chapter 5

The Classical World: Sacrifice, Philosophy, and Religion

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A longstanding positivist tendency in Western philosophy taught us to think of the classical world as an age of cheerful rationality, ethical moderation, and enlightened philosophical reflections far removed from the darkness of sacrificial practices. Sacrifice, we might still be inclined to think, is not a sacred but a “barbaric” act, in the etymological sense of βάρβαρος, not Greek, and thus not Western—and through this rationalist gesture of exclusion we might still feel momentarily purified. Mimetic theory provides a correction to such ethnocentric reflexes by positing the horror of sacrificial violence at the origins of Western civilization.

There are numerous entries into the labyrinth of Greek religion and the staggering amount of specialized scholarship accumulated over the centuries makes it difficult to choose where to start. The interdisciplinary field of mimetic theory offers an unusually broad frame to approach the daunting topic of sacrifice in the classical Greek period (5th-4th C. BC). We shall thus start where René Girard started, follow his theoretical traces, and map genealogies that look back to ancient paths in mimetic theory in order to look ahead to new possible beginnings.

Beginning with Sacrifice: Girard’s Return to Tragedy

Girard first turned to investigate sacrifice in the classical world in order to develop a general theory of the origins of culture in *Violence and the Sacred*.¹ From an anthropological perspective, Girard’s choice to return to sacrifice amid the cultural relativism that dominated the 1960s and

1970s was untimely. This move was more reminiscent of *fin-de-siècle* figures like James Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille and, more recently, Joseph Campbell, who, despite their differences, posited the universality of sacrifice as the *via regia* to solve the riddle of the sacred.² And yet, from a philological perspective, Girard was not alone in returning to the sacrificial practices of the Greeks to make larger synchronic and diachronic claims about the violence of the sacred. Walter Burkert, for instance, published his influential account of sacrifice in Ancient Greek religion, *Homo Necans*, in 1972, the same year *Violence and the Sacred* appeared. In the English edition, Burkert acknowledges Girard's interpretation of the Greeks as "parallel in intent."³ Independently of Girard, in fact, Burkert argues that "in the formative period of our civilization...solidarity was achieved through a sacred crime,"⁴ thereby providing a philological confirmation of Girard's anthropological thesis.

What is this thesis? Building on his earlier literary investigations in the logic of mimetic desire and the violent rivalries it generates, Girard broadens the scope of his mimetic hypothesis by considering Greek tragedy as "the royal way to the great dilemmas of religious ethnology."⁵ That *violence* is central to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides is well known; and so is the fact that Greek religion was still based on the *sacrifice* of animals in view of establishing a connection with the Olympian gods. Girard's theoretical contribution is specific: it consists in articulating the mimetic relation between *tragic* violence and *ritual* violence. Girard, in fact, argues that the Greeks of the classical period were still too close to the "founding murder," which he posits at the origins of culture, to register the social function of sacrificial acts. These violent acts were most often directed against animals (pigs, bulls, and goats); yet, at times, they were also directed against humans who served as what Girard, following James Frazer, calls "scapegoats."⁶ As the classicist Jane Harrison explains, the Greeks called these men and women *pharmakoi*: figures who were expelled from the city and sometimes stoned to death "to relieve

the feelings of the beaters.”⁷ Girard builds on an anthropological/philological tradition that considers these practices sacrificial and thus views them as sacred acts (sacrifice from Latin, *sacer*, sacred and *ficium*, to do), periodically re-enacted during ritual festivals and subsequently re-presented in tragedies (from Greek *tragodia*, literally “goat-song”). In sum, for Girard, sacrificial representations that culminate in tragic scenes may have been twice removed from the original sacrificial crisis, yet they uncover the mimetic logic of sacrifice nonetheless: sacrifice channels mob violence against a single, arbitrary victim, or *pharmakos*, whose function is to purify the social body of a contagious violence that threatens to escalate to extremes.

The reader will by now be familiar with Girard’s general hypothesis concerning the sacrificial *pharmakos* as both a poison and a remedy and will find an articulation of his take on sacrifice in Greek tragedy and culture in his chapters devoted to Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides’ *Bacchae* in *Violence and the Sacred*, as well as in chapters six and seven of *The Scapegoat*.⁸ Less readily perceptible is that Girard’s theoretical account of the *cathartic* function of the *pharmakon* echoes a long philosophical tradition that goes all the way back to the origins of mimetic theory in ancient Greece.

Ancient *Pharmakoi*: Plato to Aristotle

Girard claims that Greek tragedy, rather than Greek philosophy, functions as the *via regia* to his theory of sacrifice; yet his incisive references to Plato and Aristotle at the end of *Violence of the Sacred*⁹ suggest that it is on the shoulders of the founders of philosophy that Girard’s theory of sacrifice actually rests. Mimetic theory is, in fact, a theoretical iceberg on which Girard stands, and this iceberg deserves to be brought to the surface if we want to go further. Already for Plato, for instance, *mimesis* cannot easily be dissociated from the ritual practices of sacrifice, if only

because both *mimesis* and the *pharmakos* (or scapegoat) operate as a *pharmakon*—that is as both poison and cure.

The key philosophical text that provides Girard with the paradoxical structure of the *pharmakos* qua *pharmakon* is Jacques Derrida's seminal essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," originally published in 1968.¹⁰ The opposition between Girard's mimetic theory and Derrida's deconstruction is as obvious as the opposition between sameness and difference, yet there are numerous mimetic continuities between these binary perspectives. The echoes are strong when it comes to Greek philosophical origins. The section Derrida devotes to the "*pharmakos*"¹¹ establishes an essential link between ancient and contemporary mimetic theories. Derrida writes: "The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion of the body (and out) of the city – these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual."¹² And relying on the classical work of Frazer, Harrison, Frye, Vernant, and others, Derrida adds: "The city's body *proper* thus reconstitutes its unity...by violently excluding from its territory the representative of an external threat or aggression."¹³ This is not an original thesis. Already for Plato, such a threat cannot be dissociated from the figure of the mimetic poet whose expulsion of the republic is carried out in the ritual guise of a *pharmakos* along lines that "explicitly" (Girard's term) anticipate mimetic theory.¹⁴ But Derrida also reminds us that "Socrates [is] affectionately called the *pharmakeus* in the dialogues of Plato,"¹⁵ thereby paving the way for Blake Tyrrell's recent identification of Socrates as scapegoat.¹⁶ In short, Girard tends to be critical of Plato's mimetic theory, just as Plato tends to be critical of mimetic poets, but behind such quarrels important continuities can be traced.

And yet, if Girard agrees (with Plato) that mimesis has violent and contagious implications, he agrees even more (with Aristotle) that tragic spectacles and the sacrifices they represent have a cathartic social function. In chapter 5 of *Poetics* Aristotle argues, *contra* Plato,

that the function of tragic spectacles, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, is not to contaminate the body politic but, rather, to provide a purification (*katharsis*) of mimetic emotions such as "pity" and "fear."¹⁷ This purification, as Freud later argued on the shoulders of Aristotle,¹⁸ can work at the level of collective or individual psychology; and since, for Girard, violence is also triggered by a triangular structure of Oedipal desire/rivalry, the parallels with Freud cannot be underestimated. For our purpose, suffice it to say that the fundamental philosophical conflict between Plato's critique of mimesis in *Republic*, and Aristotle's defense of poetry in *Poetics*, which determines the entire Western take on mimesis, continues to in-form (give form to) Girard's mimetic theory in general and his cathartic theory of the *pharmakos* in particular. Girard in fact, deftly incorporates both these competing philosophical theories in a single, unifying structural hypothesis that explains the contagious violence of mimesis (Plato) via the philosophical medium of Greek tragedy (Aristotle). Hence, the contemporary reader will benefit from rereading both these classical figures of mimetic theory in the company of modern mimetic theorists like Freud, Derrida, Girard, and other Dionysian philologists.

Dionysian Philologists: Nietzsche to the Cambridge Ritualists

Philologists tend to agree that Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* provides ample examples of animal sacrifices to the Olympian gods which were pervasive in the ancient world and were festive and communal in nature. However, the introduction of the new god Dionysus – the presiding deity of Greek theater – also introduces a darker, more chthonic and violent insight into sacrificial rituals. As Girard notes, this violence is dramatized in Euripides's *Bacchae*, a play that culminates with the human sacrifice of Pentheus, the king of Thebes, whose body is violently torn to pieces by the Maenads in the manner of the Dionysian *sparagmos*.¹⁹ In emphasizing

Dionysus as the god that uncovers the mimetic link between violence and the sacred Girard aligns himself with a philological and philosophical tradition that goes from Erwin Rohde to Friedrich Nietzsche, Jane Harrison to E. R. Dodds, among others.

Girard relies directly on Rohde's philological account of the "Dionysiac Religion in Greece" in *Psyche*, a text that also stresses the "epidemic" contagion of "Dionysian fever" and the "purgation" it entails;²⁰ yet, he is much more critical of Nietzsche's more philosophically-oriented account of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche and Girard, in fact, read Dionysian sacrifice from opposed perspectives: Nietzsche's hypothesis concerns the birth of Greek tragedy out of Dionysian rituals – hence his aesthetic celebration of Dionysian art; Girard, on the other hand, reads Greek tragedy to unmask the founding violence of the Dionysian crisis – hence his anthropological condemnation of Dionysian violence.²¹ If their evaluations of the Dionysian differ, however, both Nietzsche and Girard remain fundamentally Platonic in their connection between Dionysian art and Dionysian rituals. As I have shown elsewhere, it is in fact Plato who originally compared poetic "enthusiasm" to Dionysian dances along lines resonant with both Nietzsche and mimetic theory.²²

In a general sense, philological accounts of Dionysian sacrifice continue to be part of a Platonic tradition which Girard furthers by relying on more recent classical scholars of the Dionysian, such as Jean-Pierre Vernant and Henri Jeanmaire. And yet, in a more specific sense, another philological tradition needs to be signaled to reveal a function of sacrifice Girard intuitively but does not fully articulate. If Girard emphasizes the all too human violence at the heart of ritual sacrifice, the so-called Cambridge Ritualists were attentive to frame the ritual practices of the ancient Greeks in the context of natural fertility rites. At the turn of the century, philologists like Gilbert Murray and Jane Harrison articulated the relation between ritual sacrifice and Greek tragedy by relying on anthropologists such as James Frazer along lines that both anticipate

Girard's anthropocentric interest in art and ritual and supplement it from an ecocentric perspective.

In *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Jane Harrison develops the mimetic hypothesis that tragic art is born out of a mimetic representation of sacrificial rituals. Building on her account of the *pharmakos* in *Prolegomena*, she argues that tragic spectacles (or dramas) are rooted in sacrificial rituals (or *dromena*) whose original functions was to mimetically induce – by sympathetic magic – the coming of spring essential for human survival during fertility rites (or Dithyramb). Drama, Harrison reminds us is, in fact, an “action,” a *dromenon* or “thing done.”²³ And what sacrificial dramas still do, for the Greeks, first in mimetic rituals in which they affectively participate, then in the artistic spectacles they watch from a distance, is re-enact a contest (*agon*) between life and death that re-presents the conflict between winter and spring, showing that out of death life is born. Thus, Harrison argues that the killing of a bull in honor of Dionysus does not only serve as a catharsis of deadly human violence but also, and above all, stimulates natural fertility necessary for human survival.²⁴ From this perspective, the emphasis on sacrificial death in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – performed at the festival of the *Great Dionysia* in the Theater of Dionysus in Athens – entails an anthropomorphic representation of fertility rituals based on the death-and resurrection motif that – even in post-sacrificial religions – is still with us.

The Return of the Sacred: Sacrifice to *Homo Sacer*

Universalist accounts of sacrifice that propose a unifying hypothesis of the origin of art, religion, and culture have not been popular in the twentieth century, yet the growing interest in *homo sacer* is currently recuperating the ancient link between the sacred and sacrifice. Along with Girard, the French theorist Georges Bataille has been one of the main figures responsible for keeping alive

philosophical and anthropological interest in sacrifice along lines that are both past and future oriented. On the one hand, Bataille lends support to Harrison's (Nietzschean) thesis that ancient art (Greek tragedy) and, more recently, modern writing (the novel) are born out of sacrificial rituals insofar as they represent sacred acts which were previously enacted.²⁵ On the other hand, Bataille's emphasis on inner experiences paves the way for more recent philosophers interested in classical antiquity, like Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, who reframe ancient Greeks philosophy and religion in terms of a lived experience concerned with "spiritual exercises," techniques of the self, and the cultivation of the *souci de soi*.²⁶

This philosophical return to sacred experiences among the Greeks provides an important correction to rationalist tendencies in philosophy, yet it emphasizes individual practices, rather than collective ones, the care of the self rather than the dismemberment of bodies. Guy Stroumsa in *The End of Sacrifice* balances this point. Supplementing Foucault's and Hadot's take on the classical world, Stroumsa stresses the role of Judaism in the religious transformation of Late Antiquity (2nd- 4th C. AD) marked by both the abolition of ("pagan") sacrifice and a (Judeo-Christian and, later, Islamic) concern with the afterlife, and reminds us: "There is no need to accept the total mimetic theory of René Girard to grant him the primordial character of the institution of sacrifice in ancient cultures."²⁷ In recent years, the ancient link between religion, sacrifice, and violence has prompted a new theological return to the sacred. Thus, figures as diverse as Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben have recently revisited the ambiguity of what the Greeks called *pharmakos* and the Romans called *homo sacer* (a sacred/accursed man deprived of legal rights) in order to emphasize the fragility of human lives that, during states of exceptions though not only, are increasingly naked and precarious.²⁸ These lines of inquiry are not without echoes with Girard's theory of the scapegoat: the duality of *homo sacer* mimics the duality of the *pharmakos*. They also reveal that in the wake of the horrors of the

twentieth century sacrificial violence has lost its cathartic power – which does not mean that mimetic theory has lost its power to articulate possible cures.²⁹

Further Reading

Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1987.

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¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

² For a contextualization of Girard's anthropological take on ritual, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-16.

³ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, tr. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), xiii.

⁴ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, xiv.

⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 55.

⁶ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1981), 210-217.

⁷ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Salem NH: Ayer Company, Publishers, 1992), 101; see also 95-106.

⁸ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). See also David Dawson, *Flesh Becomes Word: A Lexicography of the Scapegoat, Or the History of an Idea* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 292-297.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61-171.

¹¹ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 128-134.

¹² Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 130.

¹³ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 133.

¹⁴ In Book 2 of *Republic* Plato writes: "if there were some necessity for relating them (mimetic stories), only a very small audience should be admitted under the pledge of secrecy and after sacrificing, not a pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim, to the end that as few as possible should have heard these tales." Plato, *Republic, The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, tr. Lane Cooper et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 576-844, 624-625. On Plato and sacrifice, see Girard, *Scapegoat*, 76-78. For a philosophical account of Girard's debt to Plato's "expulsion of the *pharmakos*," see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Typography," in *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* ed. Christopher Fynsk (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) 103, 102-117.

¹⁵ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 133.

¹⁶ See Tyrrell, Wm. Blake, *The Sacrifice of Socrates: Athens, Plato, Girard* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), chapter 2.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, tr. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press), 37.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud under the influence of his wife's uncle, Jakob Bernays (a classicist specialized in Aristotle), derived his notion of cathartic cure from Aristotle's *Poetics*.

¹⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 119-142.

²⁰ Ervin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and the Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 286; see also chapters 8 and 9.

²¹ For a Nietzschean account of Dionysian sacrifice in both its aesthetic and ritual manifestations, see Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. II The Way of the Seeded Earth, Part I: The Sacrifice* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 46-52.

²² Nidesh Lawtoo, *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 56-63.

²³ Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, 35.

²⁴ Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, 99-104.

²⁵ Georges Bataille, "Hegel, la mort, le sacrifice," in *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. xii, 326-345,

²⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 66; Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité III : Le souci de soi* (Paris : Gallimard, 1984).

²⁷ Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*, tr. Susan Emanuel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 57; see chapter 2.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁹ Stroumsa offers this methodological advice: "What matters in any scholarly essay is to avoid both teleological and ideological approaches that identify a single transcendent factor that is supposed to explain something, and also to avoid generalizing, which prevents recognizing the great lines of evolution." Stroumsa, *End of Sacrifice*, xiii.