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Violence and the Sacred

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Sacrifice

 IN MANY RITUALS the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity.

To account for this dual aspect of ritual sacrifice—the legitimate and the illegitimate, the public and the all but covert—Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, in their “Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice,”¹ adduce the sacred character of the victim. Because the victim is sacred, it is criminal to kill him—but the victim is sacred only because he is to be killed. Here is a circular line of reasoning that at a somewhat later date would be dignified by the sonorous term *ambivalence*. Persuasive and authoritative as that term still appears, it has been so extraordinarily abused in our century that perhaps we may now recognize how little light it sheds on the subject of sacrifice. Certainly it provides no real explanation. When we speak of ambivalence, we are only pointing out a problem that remains to be solved.

If sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice—as Greek tragedy clearly reveals. It has often been observed that the tragic poets cast a glimmering veil of rhetoric over the sordid realities of life. True enough—but sacrifice and murder would not lend themselves to this game of reciprocal substitution if they were not in some way related. Although it is so obvious that it may hardly seem worth mentioning, where sacrifice is concerned first appearances count for little, are quickly brushed aside—and should therefore receive special attention. Once one has made up one’s mind that sacrifice is an institution essentially if not entirely symbolic, one can say anything whatsoever about it. It is a subject that lends itself to insubstantial theorizing.

Sacrifice contains an element of mystery. And if the pieties of classical humanists lull our curiosity to sleep, the company of the ancient

¹ Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago, 1968).

authors keeps it alert. The ancient mystery remains as impenetrable as ever. From the manner in which the moderns treat the subject of sacrifice, it would be hard to know whether distraction, detachment, or some sort of secret discretion shapes their thinking. There seems to be yet another mystery here. Why, for example, do we never explore the relationship between sacrifice and violence?

Recent studies suggest that the physiology of violence varies little from one individual to another, even from one culture to another. According to Anthony Storr, nothing resembles an angry cat or man so much as another angry cat or man.² If violence did indeed play a role in sacrifice, at least at one particular stage of the ritual, we would have a significant clue to the whole subject. Here would be a factor to some extent independent of those cultural variables that are often unknown to us, or only dimly known, or perhaps less familiar than we like to think.

Once aroused, the urge to violence triggers certain physical changes that prepare men's bodies for battle. This set toward violence lingers on; it should not be regarded as a simple reflex that ceases with the removal of the initial stimulus. Storr remarks that it is more difficult to quell an impulse toward violence than to rouse it, especially within the normal framework of social behavior.

Violence is frequently called irrational. It has its reasons, however, and can marshal some rather convincing ones when the need arises. Yet these reasons cannot be taken seriously, no matter how valid they may appear. Violence itself will discard them if the initial object remains persistently out of reach and continues to provoke hostility. When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand.

There are many indications that this tendency to seek out surrogate objects is not limited to human violence. Konrad Lorenz makes reference to a species of fish that, if deprived of its natural enemies (the male rivals with whom it habitually disputes territorial rights), turns its aggression against the members of its own family and destroys them.³ Joseph de Maistre discusses the choice of animal victims that display human characteristics—an attempt, as it were, to deceive the violent impulse: "The sacrificial animals were always those most prized for their usefulness: the gentlest, most innocent creatures, whose habits and instincts brought them most closely into harmony with man. . . .

² Anthony Storr, *Human Aggression* (New York, 1968).

³ Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York, 1966).

From the animal realm were chosen as victims those who were, if we might use the phrase, the most *human* in nature."⁴

Modern ethnology offers many examples of this sort of intuitive behavior. In some pastoral communities where sacrifice is practiced, the cattle are intimately associated with the daily life of the inhabitants. Two peoples of the Upper Nile, for example—the Nuers, observed by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and the Dinka, studied at a somewhat later date by Godfrey Lienhardt—maintain a bovine society in their midst that parallels their own and is structured in the same fashion.⁵

The Nuer vocabulary is rich in words describing the ways of cattle and covering the economic and practical, as well as the poetic and ritualistic, aspects of these beasts. This wealth of expression makes possible a precise and finely nuanced relationship between the cattle, on the one hand, and the human community on the other. The animals' color, the shape of their horns, their age, sex, and lineage are all duly noted and remembered, sometimes as far back as five generations. The cattle are thereby differentiated in such a way as to create a scale of values that approximates human distinctions and represents a virtual duplicate of human society. Among the names bestowed on each man is one that also belongs to the animal whose place in the herd is most similar to the place the man occupies in the tribe.

The quarrels between various subgroups of the tribes frequently involve cattle. All fines and interest payments are computed in terms of head of cattle, and dowries are apportioned in herds. In fact, Evans-Pritchard maintains that in order to understand the Nuer, one must "*chercher la vache*"—"look to the cows." A sort of "symbiosis" (the term is also Evans-Pritchard's) exists between this tribe and their cattle, offering an extreme and almost grotesque example of the closeness that characteristically prevails between pastoral peoples and their flocks.


Fieldwork and subsequent theoretical speculation lead us back to the hypothesis of substitution as the basis for the practice of sacrifice. This notion pervades ancient literature on the subject—which may be one reason, in fact, why many modern theorists reject the concept out of hand or give it only scant attention. Hubert and Mauss, for instance, view the idea with suspicion, undoubtedly because they feel that it

⁴ Joseph de Maistre, "Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices," *Les Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg* (Lyons, 1890), 2:341–42. Here, and throughout the book, translations are by Patrick Gregory unless an English-language reference is cited.

⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940); Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961).

introduces into the discussion religious and moral values that are incompatible with true scientific inquiry. And to be sure, Joseph de Maistre takes the view that the ritual victim is an "innocent" creature who pays a debt for the "guilty" party. I propose an hypothesis that does away with this moral distinction. As I see it, the relationship between the potential victim and the actual victim cannot be defined in terms of innocence or guilt. There is no question of "expiation." Rather, society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a "sacrificeable" victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect.

The qualities that lend violence its particular terror—its blind brutality, the fundamental absurdity of its manifestations—have a reverse side. With these qualities goes the strange propensity to seize upon surrogate victims, to actually conspire with the enemy and at the right moment toss him a morsel that will serve to satisfy his raging hunger. The fairy tales of childhood in which the wolf, ogre, or dragon gobbles up a large stone in place of a small child could well be said to have a sacrificial cast.

 VIOLENCE IS NOT TO BE DENIED, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into. Such, perhaps, is one of the meanings of the story of Cain and Abel. The Bible offers us no background on the two brothers except the bare fact that Cain is a tiller of the soil who gives the fruits of his labor to God, whereas Abel is a shepherd who regularly sacrifices the first-born of his herds. One of the brothers kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal. This difference between sacrificial and nonsacrificial cults determines, in effect, God's judgement in favor of Abel. To say that God accedes to Abel's sacrificial offerings but rejects the offerings of Cain is simply another way of saying—from the viewpoint of the divinity—that Cain is a murderer, whereas his brother is not.

A frequent motif in the Old Testament, as well as in Greek myth, is that of brothers at odds with one another. Their fatal penchant for violence can only be diverted by the intervention of a third party, the sacrificial victim or victims. Cain's "jealousy" of his brother is only another term for his one characteristic trait: his lack of a sacrificial outlet.

According to Moslem tradition, God delivered to Abraham the ram previously sacrificed by Abel. This ram was to take the place of Abraham's son Isaac; having already saved one human life, the same animal would now save another. What we have here is no mystical hocus-

pocus, but an intuitive insight into the essential function of sacrifice, gleaned exclusively from the scant references in the Bible.

Another familiar biblical scene takes on new meaning in the light of our theory of sacrificial substitution, and it can serve in turn to illuminate some aspects of the theory. The scene is that in which Jacob receives the blessing of his father Isaac.

Isaac is an old man. He senses the approach of death and summons his eldest son, Esau, on whom he intends to bestow his final blessing. First, however, he instructs Esau to bring back some venison from the hunt, so as to make a "savory meat." This request is overheard by the younger brother, Jacob, who hastens to report it to his mother, Rebekah. Rebekah takes two kids from the family flock, slaughters them, and prepares the savory meat dish, which Jacob, in the guise of his elder brother, then presents to his father.

Isaac is blind. Nevertheless Jacob fears he will be recognized, for he is a "smooth man," while his brother Esau is a "hairy man." "My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, not a blessing." Rebekah has the idea of covering Jacob's hands and the back of his neck with the skins of the slaughtered goats, and when the old man runs his hands over his younger son, he is completely taken in by the imposture. Jacob receives the blessing that Isaac had intended for Esau.

The kids serve in two different ways to dupe the father—or, in other terms, to divert from the son the violence directed toward him. In order to receive his father's blessing rather than his curse, Jacob must present to Isaac the freshly slaughtered kids made into a "savory meat." Then the son must seek refuge, literally, in the skins of the sacrificed animals. The animals thus interpose themselves between father and son. They serve as a sort of insulation, preventing the direct contact that could lead only to violence.

Two sorts of substitution are telescoped here: that of one brother for another, and that of an animal for a man. Only the first receives explicit recognition in the text; however, this first one serves as the screen upon which the shadow of the second is projected.


Once we have focused attention on the sacrificial victim, the object originally singled out for violence fades from view. Sacrificial substitution implies a degree of misunderstanding. Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim; without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy. The biblical passage dis-

cussed above meets both requirements. The narrative does not refer directly to the strange deception underlying the sacrificial substitution, nor does it allow this deception to pass entirely unnoticed. Rather, it mixes the act of substitution with another act of substitution, permitting us a fleeting, sidelong glimpse of the process. The narrative itself, then, might be said to partake of a sacrificial quality; it claims to reveal one act of substitution while employing this first substitution to half-conceal another. There is reason to believe that the narrative touches upon the mythic origins of the sacrificial system.

The figure of Jacob has long been linked with the devious character of sacrificial violence. In Greek culture Odysseus plays a similar role. The story of Jacob's benediction can be compared to the episode of the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*, where a splendidly executed ruse enables the hero to escape the clutches of a monster.

Odysseus and his shipmates are shut up in the Cyclops' cave. Every day the giant devours one of the crew; the survivors finally manage to blind their tormentor with a flaming stake. Mad with pain and anger, the Cyclops bars the entrance of the cave to prevent the men from escaping. However, he lets pass his flock of sheep, which go out daily to pasture. In a gesture reminiscent of the blind Isaac, the Cyclops runs his hands over the back of each sheep as it leaves the cave to make sure that it carries no passenger. Odysseus, however, has outwitted his captor, and he rides to freedom by clinging to the thick wool on the underside of one of the rams.

A comparison of the two scenes, one from Genesis and the other from the *Odyssey*, lends credence to the theory of their sacrificial origins. In each case an animal intervenes at the crucial moment to prevent violence from attaining its designated victim. The two texts are mutually revealing: the Cyclops of the *Odyssey* underlines the fearful menace that hangs over the hero (and that remains obscure in the Genesis story); and the slaughter of the kids in Genesis, along with the offering of the "savory meat," clearly implies the sacrificial character of the flock, an aspect that might go unnoticed in the *Odyssey*.

 SACRIFICE HAS OFTEN BEEN DESCRIBED as an act of mediation between a sacrificer and a "deity." Because the very concept of a deity, much less a deity who receives blood sacrifices, has little reality in this day and age, the entire institution of sacrifice is relegated by most modern theorists to the realm of the imagination. The approach of Hubert and Mauss leads to the judgement of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée sauvage*: because sacrificial rites have no basis in reality, we have every reason to label them meaningless.

The attempt to link sacrifice to a nonexistent deity brings to mind

Paul Valéry's description of poetry as a purely solipsistic activity practiced by the more able solely out of love for art, while the less able persist in the belief that they are actually communicating with someone!

The two ancient narratives examined above make unmistakable reference to the act of sacrifice, but neither makes so much as a passing mention of a deity. If a god had intervened in either incident, its significance would have been diminished rather than increased, and the reader would have been led to conclude, in accordance with the beliefs common to late antiquity and to the modern world, that sacrifice has no real function in society. Divine intervention would have meant the elimination of the pervasive aura of dread, along with its firmly structured economy of violence. We would have then been thrown back upon a formalistic critical approach that would in no way further our understanding.

As we have seen, the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of *misunderstanding*. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the god who supposedly demands the victims; he alone, in principle, who savors the smoke from the altars and requisitions the slaughtered flesh. It is to appease his anger that the killing goes on, that the victims multiply. Interpreters who think they question the primacy of the divine sufficiently by declaring the whole affair "imaginary" may well remain the prisoners of the theology they have not really analyzed. The problem then becomes, how can a real institution be constructed on a purely illusory basis? It is not to be wondered at if the outer shell finally gives way, bringing down with it even the most solid aspects of the institution.

Instead of rejecting the theological basis outright, qua abstraction (which is the same, in effect, as passively accepting it), let us expose its assumptions to a critical examination. Let us try to uncover the societal conflicts that the sacrificial act and its theological interpretations at once dissimulate and appease. We must break with the formalistic tradition of Hubert and Mauss.

The interpretation of sacrifice as an act of violence inflicted on a surrogate victim has recently been advanced once again. Godfrey Lienhardt (in *Divinity and Experience*) and Victor Turner (in a number of works, especially *The Drums of Affliction*), drawing from fieldwork, portray sacrifice as practiced among the Dinka and the Ndembu as a deliberate act of collective substitution performed at the expense of the victim and absorbing all the internal tensions, feuds, and rivalries pent up within the community.

Sacrifice plays a very real role in these societies, and the problem of substitution concerns the entire community. The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.

If we turn our attention from the theological superstructure of the act—that is, from an interpretive version of the event that is often accepted as the final statement on sacrifice—we quickly perceive yet another level of religious discourse, in theory subordinated to the theological dimension, but in reality quite independent of it. This has to do with the social function of the act, an aspect far more accessible to the modern mind.

It is easy to ridicule a religion by concentrating on its more eccentric rites, rites such as the sacrifices performed to induce rain or bring fine weather. There is in fact no object or endeavor in whose name a sacrifice cannot be made, especially when the social basis of the act has begun to blur. Nevertheless, there is a common denominator that determines the efficacy of all sacrifices and that becomes increasingly apparent as the institution grows in vigor. This common denominator is internal violence—all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else derives from that. If once we take this fundamental approach to sacrifice, choosing the road that violence opens before us, we can see that there is no aspect of human existence foreign to the subject, not even material prosperity. When men no longer live in harmony with one another, the sun still shines and the rain falls, to be sure, but the fields are less well tended, the harvests less abundant.

The classic literature of China explicitly acknowledges the propitiatory function of sacrificial rites. Such practices “pacify the country and make the people settled. . . . It is through the sacrifices that the unity of the people is strengthened” (CH’U YU II, 2). The *Book of Rites* affirms that sacrificial ceremonies, music, punishments, and laws have one and the same end: to unite society and establish order.⁶

In attempting to formulate the fundamental principles of sacrifice

⁶ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Glencoe, Ill., 1952), p. 158.

without reference to the ritualistic framework in which the sacrifice takes place, we run the risk of appearing simplistic. Such an effort smacks strongly of "psychologizing." Clearly, it would be inexact to compare the sacrificial act to the spontaneous gesture of the man who kicks his dog because he dares not kick his wife or boss. However, there are Greek myths that are hardly more than colossal variants of such gestures. Such a one is the story of Ajax. Furious at the leaders of the Greek army, who refused to award him Achilles' weapons, Ajax slaughters the herd of sheep intended as provisions for the army. In his mad rage he mistakes these gentle creatures for the warriors on whom he means to vent his rage. The slaughtered animals belong to a species traditionally utilized by the Greeks for sacrificial purposes; but because the massacre takes place outside the ritual framework, Ajax is taken for a madman. The myth is not, strictly speaking, about the sacrificial process; but it is certainly not irrelevant to it. The institution of sacrifice is based on effects analogous to those produced by Ajax's anger—but structured, channeled and held in check by fixed laws.

In the ritualistic societies most familiar to us—those of the Jews and of the Greeks of the classical age—the sacrificial victims are almost always animals. However, there are other societies in which human victims are substituted for the individuals who are threatened by violence.

Even in fifth century Greece—the Athens of the great tragedians—human sacrifice had not, it seems, completely disappeared. The practice was perpetuated in the form of the *pharmakos*, maintained by the city at its own expense and slaughtered at the appointed festivals as well as at a moment of civic disaster. If examined closely for traces of human sacrifice, Greek tragedy offers some remarkable revelations. It is clear, for example, that the story of Medea parallels that of Ajax on the sacrificial level, although here we are dealing with human rather than with animal sacrifice. In Euripides' *Medea* the principle of human substitution of one victim for another appears in its most savage form. Frightened by the intensity of Medea's rage against her faithless husband, Jason, the nurse begs the children's tutor to keep his charges out of their mother's way:

I am sure her anger will not subside until it has found a victim. Let us pray that the victim is at least one of our enemies!⁷

Because the object of her hatred is out of reach, Medea substitutes her own children. It is difficult for us to see anything resembling a religious act in Medea's insane behavior. Nonetheless, infanticide has its

⁷ Here, and throughout the book, quotations from the Greek plays have been translated by Patrick Gregory, from the original Greek.

place among ritualistic practices; the practice is too well documented in too many cultures (including the Jewish and the ancient Greek) for us to exclude it from consideration here. Medea's crime is to ritual infanticide what the massacre of sheep in the *Ajax* is to animal sacrifice. Medea prepares for the death of her children like a priest preparing for a sacrifice. Before the fateful act, she issues the traditional ritual announcement: all those whose presence might in any way hinder the effectiveness of the ceremony are requested to remove themselves from the premises.

Medea, like Ajax, reminds us of a fundamental truth about violence; if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into "proper" channels.

Ajax has details that underline the close relationship between the sacrificial substitution of animals and of humans. Before he sets upon the flock of sheep, Ajax momentarily contemplates the sacrifice of his own son. The boy's mother does not take this threat lightly; she whisks the child away.

In a general study of sacrifice there is little reason to differentiate between human and animal victims. When the principle of the substitution is *physical resemblance* between the vicarious victim and its prototypes, the mere fact that both victims are human beings seems to suffice. Thus, it is hardly surprising that in some societies whole categories of human beings are systematically reserved for sacrificial purposes in order to protect other categories.

I do not mean to minimize the gap that exists between the societies that practice human sacrifice and those that do not. However, this gap should not prevent us from perceiving what they have in common. Strictly speaking, there is no essential difference between animal sacrifice and human sacrifice, and in many cases one is substituted for the other. Our tendency to insist on differences that have little reality when discussing the institution of sacrifice—our reluctance, for example, to equate animal with human sacrifice—is undoubtedly a factor in the extraordinary misunderstandings that still persist in that area of human culture.

This reluctance to consider all forms of sacrifice as a single phenomenon is nothing new. Joseph de Maistre, having defined the principle of sacrificial substitution, makes the bold and wholly unsubstantiated assertion that this principle does not apply to human sacrifice. One cannot, he insists, kill a man to save a man. Yet this assertion is repeatedly contradicted by Greek tragedy, implicitly in a play like *Medea*, and explicitly elsewhere in Euripides.

In Euripides' *Electra*, Clytemnestra explains that the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia would have been justified if it had been performed to save human lives. The tragedian thus enlightens us, by way of Clytemnestra, on the "normal" function of human sacrifice—the function de Maistre had refused to acknowledge. If, says Clytemnestra, Agamemnon had permitted his daughter to die:

. . . in order to prevent the sack of the city, to help his home, to rescue his children, sacrificing one to save the others, I could then have pardoned him. But for the sake of brazen Helen . . . !

Without ever expressly excluding the subject of human sacrifice from their research—and indeed, on what grounds could they do so?—modern scholars, notably Hubert and Mauss, mention it but rarely in their theoretical discussions. On the other hand, the scholars who do concern themselves with human sacrifice tend to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else, dwelling at length on the "sadistic" or "barbarous" aspects of the custom. Here, again, one particular form of sacrifice is isolated from the subject as a whole.

This dividing of sacrifice into two categories, human and animal, has itself a sacrificial character, in a strictly ritualistic sense. The division is based in effect on a value judgement, on the preconception that one category of victim—the human being—is quite unsuitable for sacrificial purposes, while another category—the animal—is eminently sacrificeable. We encounter here a survival of the sacrificial mode of thinking that perpetuates a misunderstanding about the institution as a whole. It is not a question of rejecting the value judgment on which this misunderstanding is based, but of putting it, so to speak, in parentheses, of recognizing that as far as the institution is concerned, such judgments are purely arbitrary. All reduction into categories, whether implicit or explicit, must be avoided; all victims, animal or human, must be treated in the same fashion if we wish to apprehend the criteria by which victims are selected (if indeed such criteria exist) and discover (if such a thing is possible) a universal principle for their selection.

We have remarked that all victims, even the animal ones, bear a certain *resemblance* to the object they replace; otherwise the violent impulse would remain unsatisfied. But this resemblance must not be carried to the extreme of complete assimilation, or it would lead to disastrous confusion. In the case of animal victims the difference is always clear, and no such confusion is possible. Although they do their best to empathize with their cattle, the Nuers never quite manage to mistake a man for a cow—the proof being that they always sacrifice the latter, never the former. I am not lapsing into the trap of Lévy

Bruhl's "primitive mentality." I am not saying that primitive man is less capable of making distinctions than we moderns.

In order for a species or category of living creature, human or animal, to appear suitable for sacrifice, it must bear a sharp resemblance to the *human* categories excluded from the ranks of the "sacrificeable," while still maintaining a degree of difference that forbids all possible confusion. As I have said, no mistake is possible in the case of animal sacrifice. But it is quite another case with human victims. If we look at the extremely wide spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies, the list seems heterogeneous, to say the least. It includes prisoners of war, slaves, small children, unmarried adolescents, and the handicapped; it ranges from the very dregs of society, such as the Greek *pharmakos*, to the king himself.

Is it possible to detect a unifying factor in this disparate group? We notice at first glance beings who are either outside or on the fringes of society: prisoners of war, slaves, *pharmakos*. In many primitive societies children who have not yet undergone the rites of initiation have no proper place in the community; their rights and duties are almost nonexistent. What we are dealing with, therefore, are exterior or marginal individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants. Their status as foreigners or enemies, their servile condition, or simply their age prevents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community.

But what about the king? Is he not at the very heart of the community? Undoubtedly—but it is precisely his position at the center that serves to isolate him from his fellow men, to render him casteless. He escapes from society, so to speak, via the roof, just as the *pharmakos* escapes through the cellar. The king has a sort of foil, however, in the person of his fool. The fool shares his master's status as an outsider—an isolation whose literal truth is often of greater significance than the easily reversible symbolic values often attributed to it. From every point of view the fool is eminently "sacrificeable," and the king can use him to vent his own anger. But it sometimes happens that the king himself is sacrificed, and that (among certain African societies) in a thoroughly regulated and highly ritualistic manner.⁸

It is clearly legitimate to define the difference between sacrificeable and nonsacrificeable individuals in terms of their degree of integration, but such a definition is not yet sufficient. In many cultures women are not considered full-fledged members of their society; yet women are never, or rarely, selected as sacrificial victims. There may be a simple explanation for this fact. The married woman retains her ties with her

⁸ Cf. Chapter 4, pp. 104–10.

parents' clan even after she has become in some respects the property of her husband and his family. To kill her would be to run the risk of one of the two groups' interpreting her sacrifice as an act of murder committing it to a reciprocal act of revenge. The notion of vengeance casts a new light on the matter. All our sacrificial victims, whether chosen from one of the human categories enumerated above or, *a fortiori*, from the animal realm, are invariably distinguishable from the nonsacrificeable beings by one essential characteristic: between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance.

The considerable importance this freedom from reprisal has for the sacrificial process makes us understand that sacrifice is primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance. We also understand the paradox—not without its comic aspects on occasion—of the frequent references to vengeance in the course of sacrificial rites, the veritable obsession with vengeance when no chance of vengeance exists:

For the act they were about to commit elaborate excuses were offered; they shuddered at the prospect of the sheep's death, they wept over it as though they were its parents. Before the blow was struck, they implored the beast's forgiveness. They then addressed themselves to the species to which the beast belonged, as if addressing a large family clan, beseeching it not to seek vengeance for the act that was about to be inflicted on one of its members. In the same vein the actual murderer was punished in some manner, either beaten or sent into exile.⁹

It is the entire species *considered as a large family clan* that the sacrificers beseech not to seek vengeance. By incorporating the element of reprisal into the ceremony, the participants are hinting broadly at the true function of the rite, the kind of action it was designed to circumvent and the criteria that determined the choice of victim. The desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict; we must divert that impulse, therefore, toward the sacrificial victim, the creature we can strike down without fear of reprisal, since he lacks a champion.

Like everything that touches on the essential nature of the sacrificial act, the true distinction between the sacrificeable and the nonsacrificeable is never clearly articulated. Oddities and inexplicable anomalies confuse the picture. For instance, some animal species will be formally excluded from sacrifice, but the exclusion of members of the community is never mentioned. In constantly drawing attention to the truly maniacal aspects of sacrifice, modern theorists only serve to per-

⁹ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 33.

petuate an old misunderstanding in new terms. Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment. When they banish sacrificial practices from the "real," everyday world, modern theorists continue to misrepresent the violence of sacrifice.

The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting. Yet societies like our own, which do not, strictly speaking, practice sacrificial rites, seem to get along without them. Violence undoubtedly exists within our society, but not to such an extent that the society itself is threatened with extinction. The simple fact that sacrificial practices, and other rites as well, can disappear without catastrophic results should in part explain the failure of ethnology and theology to come to grips with these cultural phenomena, and explain as well our modern reluctance to attribute a real function to them. After all, it is hard to maintain that institutions for which, as it seems, we have no need are actually indispensable.

It may be that a basic difference exists between a society like ours and societies imbued with religion—a difference that is partially hidden from us by rites, particularly by rites of sacrifice, that play a compensatory role. This difference would help explain why the actual function of sacrifice still eludes us.

When internal strife, previously sublimated by means of sacrificial practices, rises to the surface, it manifests itself in interfamily vendettas or blood feuds. This kind of violence is virtually nonexistent in our own culture. And perhaps it is here that we should look for the fundamental difference between primitive societies and our own; we should examine the specific ailments to which we are immune and which sacrifice manages to control, if not to eliminate.

Why does the spirit of revenge, wherever it breaks out, constitute such an intolerable menace? Perhaps because the only satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer; and in the blood feud there is no clear distinction between the act for which the killer is being punished and the punishment itself. Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the act of vengeance addresses itself is almost never an unprecedented offense; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime.

Vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to

involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. The multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of a society in jeopardy, and that is why it is universally proscribed.

Curiously enough, it is in the very communities where the proscription is most strictly enforced that vengeance seems to hold sway. Even when it remains in the background, its role in the community unacknowledged, the specter of vengeance plays an important role in shaping the relationships among individuals. That is not to say that the prohibition against acts of vengeance is taken lightly. Precisely because murder inspires horror and because men must be forcibly restrained from murder, vengeance is inflicted on all those who commit it. The obligation never to shed blood cannot be distinguished from the obligation to exact vengeance on those who shed it. If men wish to prevent an interminable outbreak of vengeance (just as today we wish to prevent nuclear war), it is not enough to convince their fellows that violence is detestable—for it is precisely because they detest violence that men make a duty of vengeance.

In a world still haunted by the specter of vengeance it is difficult to theorize about vengeance without resorting to equivocations or paradoxes. In Greek tragedy, for instance, there is not—and cannot be—any consistent stand on the subject. To attempt to extract a coherent theory of vengeance from the drama is to miss the essence of tragedy. For in tragedy each character passionately embraces or rejects vengeance depending on the position he occupies at any given moment in the scheme of the drama.

Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmised. For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits it to a single act of reprisal, enacted by a sovereign authority specializing in this particular function. The decisions of the judiciary are invariably presented as the final word on vengeance.

Vocabulary is perhaps more revealing here than judicial theories. Once the concept of interminable revenge has been formally rejected, it is referred to as *private* vengeance. The term implies the existence of a *public* vengeance, a counterpart never made explicit. By definition, primitive societies have only private vengeance. Thus, public vengeance is the exclusive property of well-policed societies, and our society calls it the judicial system.

Our penal system operates according to principles of justice that are in no real conflict with the concept of revenge. The same principle is at work in all systems of violent retribution. Either the principle is just, and justice is therefore inherent in the idea of vengeance, or there is no justice to be found anywhere. He who exacts his own vengeance is said to "take the law into his own hands." There is no difference of principle between private and public vengeance; but on the social level, the difference is enormous. Under the public system, an act of vengeance is no longer avenged; the process is terminated, the danger of escalation averted.

The absence of a judicial system in primitive societies has been confirmed by ethnologists. Malinowski concludes that "the 'criminal' aspect of law in savage communities is perhaps even vaguer than the civil one; the idea of 'justice' in our sense [is] hardly applicable and the means of restoring a disturbed tribal equilibrium [are] slow and cumbersome."¹⁰

Radcliffe-Brown's conclusions are identical, and summon up, as such conclusions must, the specter of perpetual vengeance: "Thus, though the Andaman Islanders had a well-developed social conscience, that is, a system of moral notions as to what is right and wrong, there was no such thing as punishment of a crime by the society. If one person injured another it was left to the injured one to seek vengeance if he wished and if he dared. There were probably always some who would side with the criminal, their attachment to him overcoming their disapproval of his actions."¹¹

The anthropologist Robert Lowie speaks of the "administering of justice" in reference to primitive societies. He distinguishes two types of societies, those that possess a "central authority," and those that do not. Among the latter it is the parental group, he declares, that exercises the judicial power, and *this group confronts the other group in the same way that a sovereign state confronts the outside world*. There can be no true "administering of justice," no judicial system without a superior tribunal capable of arbitrating between even the most powerful groups. Only that superior tribunal can remove the possibility of blood feud or perpetual vendetta. Lowie himself recognizes that this condition is not always met: "From the supreme law of group solidarity it follows that when an individual has injured a member of another group, his own group shield him while the opposing group support the injured man's claims for compensation or revenge. Thence there may develop blood-feuds and civil wars. . . . The Chukchi generally make

¹⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (Totowa, N.J., 1967), p. 94.

¹¹ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders* (New York, 1964), p. 52.

peace after the first act of retribution, but among the Ifugao the struggle may go on almost interminably. . . ."¹²

To speak here of the "administering of justice" is to abuse the meaning of the words. The desire to find in primitive societies virtues equal or superior to our own as regards the control of violence must not lead us to minimize the differences. Lowie's terminology simply perpetuates a widely accepted way of thinking by which the right to vengeance *takes the place* of a judicial system wherever such a system is lacking. This theory, which seems securely anchored to common sense, is in fact erroneous and gives rise to an infinite number of errors. Such thinking reflects the ignorance of a society—our own—that has been the beneficiary of a judicial system for so many years that it is no longer conscious of the system's real achievements.

If vengeance is an unending process it can hardly be invoked to restrain the violent impulses of society. In fact, it is vengeance itself that must be restrained. Lowie bears witness to the truth of this proposition every time he gives an example of the "administering of justice," even in those societies that, according to him, possess a "central authority." It is not the lack of any abstract principle of justice that is important, but the fact that the so-called legal reprisals are always in the hands of the victims themselves and those near to them. As long as there exists no sovereign and independent body capable of taking the place of the injured party and taking upon itself the responsibility for revenge, the danger of interminable escalation remains. Efforts to modify the punishment or to hold vengeance in check can only result in a situation that is precarious at best. Such efforts ultimately require a spirit of conciliation that may indeed be present, but may equally well be lacking. As I have said, it is inexact to speak of the administering of justice, even in connection with such institutional concepts as "an eye for an eye" or the various forms of trial by combat. In such cases it seems wise to adhere to Malinowski's conclusion: "The means of restoring a disturbed tribal equilibrium [are] slow and cumbersome. . . . We have not found any arrangement or usage which could be classed as a form of 'administration of justice,' according to a code and by fixed methods."¹³

If primitive societies have no tried and true remedies for dealing with an outbreak of violence, no certain cure once the social equilibrium has been upset, we can assume that *preventive* measures will play an essential role. Here again I return to the concept of sacrifice as I earlier defined it: an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence.

¹² Robert Lowie, *Primitive Society* (New York, 1970), p. 400.

¹³ Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, pp. 94, 98.

In a universe where the slightest dispute can lead to disaster—just as a slight cut can prove fatal to a hemophiliac—the rites of sacrifice serve to polarize the community's aggressive impulses and redirect them toward victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but that are always incapable of propagating further vengeance. The sacrificial process furnishes an outlet for those violent impulses that cannot be mastered by self-restraint; a partial outlet, to be sure, but always renewable, and one whose efficacy has been attested by an impressive number of reliable witnesses. The sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check.

In societies that practice sacrifice there is no critical situation to which the rites are not applicable, but there are certain crises that seem to be particularly amenable to sacrificial mediation. In these crises the social fabric of the community is threatened; dissension and discord are rife. The more critical the situation, the more "precious" the sacrificial victim must be.

It is significant that sacrifice has languished in societies with a firmly established judicial system—ancient Greece and Rome, for example. In such societies the essential purpose of sacrifice has disappeared. It may still be practiced for a while, but in diminished and debilitated form. And it is precisely under such circumstances that sacrifice usually comes to our notice, and our doubts as to the "real" function of religious institutions are only reinforced.

Our original proposition stands: ritual in general, and sacrificial rites in particular, assume essential roles in societies that lack a firm judicial system. It must not be assumed, however, that sacrifice simply "replaces" a judicial system. One can scarcely speak of replacing something that never existed to begin with. Then, too, a judicial system is ultimately irreplaceable, short of a unanimous and entirely voluntary renunciation of all violent actions.

When we minimize the dangers implicit in vengeance we risk losing sight of the true function of sacrifice. Because revenge is rarely encountered in our society, we seldom have occasion to consider how societies lacking a judicial system of punishment manage to hold it in check. Our ignorance engages us in a false line of thought that is seldom, if ever, challenged. Certainly we have no need of religion to help us solve a problem, runaway vengeance, whose very existence eludes us. And because we have no need for it, religion itself appears senseless. The efficiency of our judicial solution conceals the problem, and the elimination of the problem conceals from us the role played by religion.

The air of mystery that primitive societies acquire for us is undoubtedly due in large part to this misunderstanding. It is undoubtedly

responsible for our extreme views of these societies, our insistence on portraying them alternately as vastly superior or flagrantly inferior to our own. One factor alone might well be responsible for our oscillation between extremes, our radical evaluations: the absence in such societies of a judicial system. No one can assess with certainty the amount of violence present in another individual, much less in another society. We can be sure, however, that in a society lacking a judicial system the violence will not appear in the same places or take the same forms as in our own. We generally limit our area of inquiry to the most conspicuous and accessible aspects of these societies. Thus, it is not unnatural that they should seem to us either horribly barbarous or blissfully utopian.

In primitive societies the risk of unleashed violence is so great and the cure so problematic that the emphasis naturally falls on prevention. The preventive measures naturally fall within the domain of religion, where they can on occasion assume a violent character. Violence and the sacred are inseparable. But the covert appropriation by sacrifice of certain properties of violence—particularly the ability of violence to move from one object to another—is hidden from sight by the awesome machinery of ritual.

Primitive societies are not given over to violence. Nor are they necessarily less violent or less "hypocritical" than our own society. Of course, to be truly comprehensive we ought to take into consideration *all* forms of violence, more or less ritualized, that divert a menace from nearby objects to more distant objects. We ought, for instance, to consider war. War is clearly not restricted to one particular type of society. Yet the multiplication of new weapons and techniques does not constitute a fundamental difference between primitive and modern warfare. On the other hand, if we compare societies that adhere to a judicial system with societies that practise sacrificial rites, the difference between the two is such that we can indeed consider the absence or presence of these institutions as a basis for distinguishing primitive societies from "civilized" ones. These are the institutions we must scrutinize in order to arrive, not at some sort of value judgement, but at an objective knowledge of the respective societies to which they belong.

In primitive societies the exercise of preventive measures is not confined exclusively to the domain of religion. The way in which these measures are made manifest in normal social intercourse made a lasting impression on the minds and imaginations of the first European observers and established a prototype of "primitive" psychology and behavior which, if not universally applicable, is still not wholly illusory.

When the least false step can have dire consequences, human relationships may well be marked by a prudence that seems to us excessive and accompanied by precautions that appear incomprehensible. It is in this sense that we must understand the lengthy palavers that precede any undertaking not sanctified by custom, in this sense that we must understand primitive man's reluctance to engage in nonritualized games or contests. In a society where every action or gesture may have irreparable consequences it is not surprising that the members should display a "noble gravity" of bearing beside which our own demeanor appears ridiculous. The commercial, administrative, or ideological concerns that make such overwhelming demands on our time and attention seem utterly frivolous in comparison to primitive man's primary concerns.

Primitive societies do not have built into their structure an automatic brake against violence; but we do, in the form of powerful institutions whose grip grows progressively tighter as their role grows progressively less apparent. The constant presence of a restraining force allows modern man safely to transgress the limits imposed on primitive peoples without even being aware of the fact. In "policed" societies the relationships between individuals, including total strangers, is characterized by an extraordinary air of informality, flexibility, and even audacity.

Religion invariably strives to subdue violence, to keep it from running wild. Paradoxically, the religious and moral authorities in a community attempt to instill nonviolence, as an active force into daily life and as a mediating force into ritual life, through the application of violence. Sacrificial rites serve to connect the moral and religious aspects of daily life, but only by means of a lengthy and hazardous detour. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that the efficacy of the rites depends on their being performed in the spirit of *pietas*, which marks all aspects of religious life. We are beginning to understand why the sacrificial act appears as both sinful and saintly, an illegal as well as a legitimate exercise of violence. However, we are still far from a full understanding of the act itself.

Primitive religion tames, trains, arms, and directs violent impulses as a defensive force against those forms of violence that society regards as inadmissible. It postulates a strange mixture of violence and nonviolence. The same can perhaps be said of our own judicial system of control.

There may be a certain connection between all the various methods employed by man since the beginning of time to avoid being caught up in an interminable round of revenge. They can be grouped into three general categories: (1) preventive measures in which sacrificial rites

divert the spirit of revenge into other channels; (2) the harnessing or hobbling of vengeance by means of compensatory measures, trials by combat, etc., whose curative effects remain precarious; (3) the establishment of a judicial system—the most efficient of all curative procedures.

We have listed the methods in ascending order of effectiveness. The evolution from preventive to curative procedures is reflected in the course of history or, at any rate, in the course of the history of the Western world. The initial curative procedures mark an intermediary stage between a purely religious orientation and the recognition of a judicial system's superior efficiency. These methods are inherently ritualistic in character, and are often associated with sacrificial practices.

The curative procedures employed by primitive societies appear rudimentary to us. We tend to regard them as fumbling efforts to improvise a judicial system. Certainly their pragmatic aspects are clearly visible, oriented as they are not toward the guilty parties, but toward the victims—since it is the latter who pose the most immediate threat. The injured parties must be accorded a careful measure of satisfaction, just enough to appease their own desire for revenge but not so much as to awaken the desire elsewhere. It is not a question of codifying good and evil or of inspiring respect for some abstract concept of justice; rather, it is a question of securing the safety of the group by checking the impulse for revenge. The preferred method involves a reconciliation between parties based on some sort of mutual compensation. If reconciliation is impossible, however, an armed encounter can be arranged in such a manner that the violence is wholly self-contained. This encounter can take place within an enclosed space and can involve prescribed regulations and specifically designated combatants. Its purpose is to cut violence short.

To be sure, all these curative measures are steps in the direction of a legal system. But the evolution, if indeed evolution is the proper term, is not continuous. The break comes at the moment when the intervention of an independent legal authority becomes *constraining*. Only then are men freed from the terrible obligations of vengeance. Retribution in its judicial guise loses its terrible urgency. Its meaning remains the same, but this meaning becomes increasingly indistinct or even fades from view. In fact, the system functions best when everyone concerned is least aware that it involves retribution. The system can—and as soon as it can it will—reorganize itself around the accused and the concept of guilt. In fact, retribution still holds sway, but forged into a principle of abstract justice that all men are obliged to uphold and respect.

We have seen that the "curative" measures, ostensibly designed to temper the impulse toward vengeance, become increasingly mysterious in their workings as they progress in efficiency. As the focal point of the system shifts away from religion and the preventive approach is translated into judicial retribution, the aura of misunderstanding that has always formed a protective veil around the institution of sacrifice shifts as well, and becomes associated in turn with the machinery of the law.

As soon as the judicial system gains supremacy, its machinery disappears from sight. Like sacrifice, it conceals—even as it also reveals—its resemblance to vengeance, differing only in that it is not self-perpetuating and its decisions discourage reprisals. In the case of sacrifice, the designated victim does not become the object of vengeance because he is a replacement, is not the "right" victim. In the judicial system the violence does indeed fall on the "right" victim; but it falls with such force, such resounding authority, that no retort is possible.

It can be argued that the function of the judicial system is not really concealed; and we can hardly be unaware that the judicial process is more concerned with the general security of the community than with any abstract notion of justice. Nonetheless, we believe that the system is founded on a unique principle of justice unknown to primitive societies. The scholarly literature on the subject seems to bear out this belief. It has long been assumed that a decisive difference between primitive and civilized man is the former's general inability to identify the guilty party and to adhere to the principle of guilt. Such an assumption only confuses the issue. If primitive man insists on averting his attention from the wrongdoer, with an obstinacy that strikes us as either idiotic or perverse, it is because he wishes above all to avoid fueling the fires of vengeance.

If our own system seems more rational, it is because it conforms more strictly to the principle of vengeance. Its insistence on the punishment of the guilty party underlines this fact. Instead of following the example of religion and attempting to forestall acts of revenge, to mitigate or sabotage its effects or to redirect them to secondary objects, our judicial system *rationalizes* revenge and succeeds in limiting and isolating its effects in accordance with social demands. The system treats the disease without fear of contagion and provides a highly effective technique for the cure and, as a secondary effect, the prevention of violence.

This rationalistic approach to vengeance might seem to stem from a peculiarly intimate relationship between the community and the judicial system. In fact, it is the result not of any familiar interchange between the two, but of the recognition of the sovereignty and inde-

pendence of the judiciary, whose decisions no group, not even the collectivity as a body, can challenge. (At least, that is the principle.) The judicial authority is beholden to no one. It is thus at the disposal of everyone, and it is universally respected. The judicial system never hesitates to confront violence head on, because it possesses a monopoly on the means of revenge. Thanks to this monopoly, the system generally succeeds in stifling the impulse to vengeance rather than spreading or aggravating it, as a similar intervention on the part of the aggrieved party would invariably do.

In the final analysis, then, the judicial system and the institution of sacrifice share the same function, but the judicial system is infinitely more effective. However, it can only exist in conjunction with a firmly established political power. And like all modern technological advances, it is a two-edged sword, which can be used to oppress as well as to liberate. Certainly that is the way it is seen by primitive cultures, whose view on the matter is indubitably more objective than our own.

If the function of the system has now become apparent, that is because it no longer enjoys the obscurity it needs to operate effectively. A clear view of the inner workings indicates a crisis in the system; it is a sign of disintegration. No matter how sturdy it may seem, the apparatus that serves to hide the true nature of legal and illegal violence from view eventually wears thin. The underlying truth breaks through, and we find ourselves face to face with the specter of reciprocal reprisal. This is not a purely theoretical concept belonging to the intellectual and scholarly realm, but a sinister reality; a vicious circle we thought we had escaped, but one we find has tightened itself, all unsuspected, around us.

The procedures that keep men's violence in bounds have one thing in common: they are no strangers to the ways of violence. There is reason to believe that they are all rooted in religion. As we have seen, the various forms of prevention go hand in hand with religious practices. The curative procedures are also imbued with religious concepts—both the rudimentary sacrificial rites and the more advanced judicial forms. *Religion* in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence. It is that enigmatic quality that pervades the judicial system when that system replaces sacrifice. This obscurity coincides with the transcendental effectiveness of a violence that is holy, legal, and legitimate successfully opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal, and illegitimate.

In the same way that sacrificial victims must in principle meet the approval of the divinity before being offered as a sacrifice, the judicial system appeals to a theology as a guarantee of justice. Even when this

theology disappears, as has happened in our culture, the transcendental quality of the system remains intact. Centuries can pass before men realize that there is no real difference between their principle of justice and the concept of revenge.

Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence. This is the case no matter what the consecrating institution may be. Only by opting for a sanctified, legitimate form of violence and preventing it from becoming an object of disputes and recriminations can the system save itself from the vicious circle of revenge.

A unique generative force exists that we can only qualify as religious in a sense deeper than the theological one. It remains concealed and draws its strength from this concealment, even as its self-created shelter begins to crumble. The acknowledgment of such a force allows us to assess our modern ignorance—ignorance in regard to violence as well as religion. Religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion. If we fail to understand certain religious practices it is not because we are outside their sphere of influence but because we are still to a very real extent enclosed within them. The solemn debates on the death of God and of man are perhaps beside the point. They remain theological at bottom, and by extension sacrificial; that is, they draw a veil over the subject of vengeance, which threatens to become quite real once again, in the form not of a philosophical debate but of unlimited violence, in a world with no absolute values. As soon as the essential quality of transcendence—religious, humanistic, or whatever—is lost, there are no longer any terms by which to define the legitimate form of violence and to recognize it among the multitude of illicit forms. The definition of legitimate and illegitimate forms then becomes a matter of mere opinion, with each man free to reach his own decision. In other words, the question is thrown to the winds. Henceforth there are as many legitimate forms of violence as there are men to implement them; legitimacy as a principle no longer exists. Only the introduction of some transcendental quality that will persuade men of the fundamental difference between sacrifice and revenge, between a judicial system and vengeance, can succeed in bypassing violence.

All this explains why our penetration and demystification of the system necessarily coincides with the disintegration of that system. The act of demystification retains a sacrificial quality and remains essentially religious in character for at least as long as it fails to come to a conclusion—as long, that is, as the process purports to be nonviolent, or less violent than the system itself. In fact, demystification leads to constantly increasing violence, a violence perhaps less “hypocritical”

than the violence it seeks to expose, but more energetic, more virulent, and the harbinger of something far worse—a violence that knows no bounds.

While acknowledging the differences, both functional and mythical, between vengeance, sacrifice, and legal punishment, it is important to recognize their fundamental identity. Precisely because these three institutions are essentially the same they tend to adopt the same types of violent response in times of crisis. Seen in the abstract, such an assertion may seem hyperbolic or simply unbelievable. It can only be appreciated by means of concrete examples. Only then will the utility of the comparison become apparent; customs and institutions that have remained incomprehensible, unclassifiable, and “aberrant” heretofore make sense when seen in the light of this identity.

Robert Lowie, discussing collective reactions to an act of violence, brings out a fact well worth noting here: “The Chukchi generally make peace after the first act of retribution. . . . While the Ifugao tend to protect a kinsman under almost all circumstances, the Chukchi often avert a feud by killing a member of the family.”¹⁴

Whether it be through sacrificial killing or legal punishment, the problem is to forestall a series of reprisals. As the above quotation shows, Lowie is well aware of this aspect. In killing one of their own, the Chukchi abort the issue; by offering a victim to their potential enemies they enjoin them not to seek vengeance, not to commit an act that would constitute a fresh affront and oblige the other side to seek further retribution. This expiatory procedure brings to mind the sacrificial process; the fact that the victim is someone other than the guilty party drives the resemblance home.

The Chukchi practice cannot, however, be classified as sacrificial. A properly conducted ritual killing is never openly linked to another bloodletting of irregular character. It never allows itself to pass as a deliberate act of retribution. Because this link is consistently missing, the meaning of the sacrificial process has always eluded us, and the relationship between sacrifice and violence has remained obscure. Now the meaning is made clear, and in a manner too spectacular for the act to be mistaken for mere ritual.

Should one then classify this custom among legal punishments? Can one properly refer to it as an “execution of justice?” Probably not; after all, the victim of the second murder was in no way responsible for the first. To be sure, Lowie invokes the concept of “collective responsibility,” but this is not a satisfactory explanation. Collective responsibility never specifically excludes the true culprit, and that is

¹⁴ Lowie, *Primitive Society*, p. 400.

precisely what is being done here. Even if this exclusion is not clearly spelled out, there is sufficient evidence for us to assume that in many instances the true culprit is systematically spared. As a cultural attitude, this certainly demands attention.

To refer in this context to the so-called primitive mentality, to some "possible confusion between the individual and the group," is to hedge the issue. If the Chukchi choose to spare the culprit it is not because they cannot distinguish where the guilt lies. On the contrary, they perceive it with the utmost clarity. It is precisely because they see that the guilty party is guilty that they choose to spare him. The Chukchi believe that they have good reasons to act as they do, and it is these reasons we must now examine.

To make a victim out of the guilty party is to play vengeance's role, to submit to the demands of violence. By killing, not the murderer himself, but someone close to him, an act of perfect reciprocity is avoided and the necessity for revenge by-passed. If the counterviolence were inflicted on the aggressor himself, it would by this very act participate in, and become indistinguishable from, the original act of violence. In short, it would become an act of pure vengeance, requiring yet another act of vengeance and transforming itself into the very thing it was designed to prevent.

Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached.

In excluding the actual guilty party from reprisals the Chukchi hope to avoid the vicious cycle of revenge. They try to cover their tracks—but not entirely, for they do not want to deprive their act of its primordial meaning as a response to an initial killing, as the payment of a debt contracted by one of their number. To quell the passions aroused by this crime an act is required that bears some resemblance to the vengeance sought by the plaintiffs but that does not quite qualify as an act of revenge. The act resembles both a legal punishment and a sacrifice, and yet it cannot be assimilated to either. The act described here resembles a legal punishment in that it constitutes an act of reparation, a violent retribution; and the Chukchi show no hesitation in imposing on themselves the same loss they have inflicted on others. Their action resembles a sacrifice in that the victim of the second murder is not responsible for the first.

So flagrant a disregard of the principle of guilt strikes us as absurd. We hold that principle in such high esteem that any deviation from it appears to us an aberration of the intellect or malfunction of the senses.

Yet our line of reasoning is rejected by the "primitives" because it

involves too strict an application of the doctrine of vengeance and is thus fraught with peril.


When we require a direct link between guilt and punishment we believe that we adhere to a fundamental truth that has somehow eluded the primitive mind. In fact, we are ignoring a problem that poses a very real threat to all primitive societies: escalating revenge, unleashed violence—a problem the seeming extravagances of their customs and the violence of their religious practices are specifically designed to meet.

In Greek culture in particular, physical contact with the anathema is avoided. Behind this peculiar prohibition lurks a fear perhaps analogous to the one that inspires the Chukchi custom. To do violence to a violent person is to be contaminated by his violence. It is best, therefore, to arrange matters so that nobody, except perhaps the culprit himself, is directly responsible for his death, so that nobody is obliged to raise a finger against him. He may be abandoned without provisions in mid-ocean, or stranded on top of a mountain, or forced to hurl himself from a cliff. The custom of exposure, as a means of getting rid of malformed children, seems to find its origin in this same fear.

All such customs may appear to us unreasonable and absurd. In fact they adhere to a coherent logic. All of them concern themselves with formulating and practicing a form of violence incapable of serving as a connecting link between the violent act that preceded and the one that must follow. The aim is to achieve a radically new type of violence, truly decisive and self-contained, a form of violence that will put an end once and for all to violence itself.

Primitive peoples try to break the symmetry of reprisal by addressing themselves directly to the question of form. Unlike us, they perceive recurrent patterns, and they attempt to halt this recurrence by introducing something different into the picture. Modern man has long since lost his fear of reciprocal violence, which, after all, provides our judicial system with its structure. Because the overwhelming authority of the judiciary prevents its sentence from becoming the first step in an endless series of reprisals, we can no longer appreciate primitive man's deep-seated fear of pure, unadulterated vengeance. The Chukchi's behavior or the Greeks' cautious treatment of the anathema strike us as puzzling.

Of course, the Chukchi solution is not to be confused with retaliatory vengeance, ritual sacrifice, or legal punishment. And yet it is reminiscent of all these institutions. Their solution seems to occur at the point where all three intersect. Unless the modern mind can cope with the fact that the three are indeed capable of intersecting, it is not likely to shed much light on the questions that concern us here.

 THE CHUKCHI SOLUTION is fraught with psychological implications, all of rather limited interest. For example, it can be said that in choosing to kill someone close to the culprit rather than the culprit himself the Chukchi are trying to be conciliatory without risking a loss of face. That is indeed possible, but there are many other possibilities as well. It is easy to lose one's way in a maze of psychological speculation. The religious structure clearly transcends all "psychological" interpretations; it neither requires nor contradicts them.

The essential religious concern here is ritual impurity. And the cause of ritual impurity is violence. In many cases, this fact seems self-evident.

Two men come to blows; blood is spilt; both men are thus rendered impure. Their impurity is contagious, and anyone who remains in their presence risks becoming a party to their quarrel. The only sure way to avoid contagion is to flee the scene of violence. There is no question here of duty or morality. Contamination is a terrible thing, and only those who are already contaminated would wilfully expose themselves to it.

If even an accidental contact with a "contaminated" being can spread the impurity, it goes without saying that a violent and hostile encounter will guarantee infection. Therefore, the Chukchi reason, whenever violence is inevitable, it is best that the victim be *pure*, untainted by any involvement in the dispute. As we can see, these notions of impurity and contagion play an active role in social relations and are firmly rooted in reality. It is precisely this basis in reality that scholars have long denied. Modern observers—particularly (Frazer's contemporaries and disciples—were totally blind to the reality that lay behind these ideas, because it was not *their* reality and because primitive religion succeeded in camouflaging its social function.) Concepts such as impurity and contagion, because they translate human relations into material terms, provide a sort of camouflage. The peril that overshadows all human relations and that stems from these relations is presented either in a purely material or in a wholly otherworldly guise. The notion of ritual impurity can degenerate until it is nothing more than a terror-stricken belief in the malevolent results of physical contact. Violence has been transformed into a sort of seminal fluid that impregnates objects on contact and whose diffusion, like electricity or Balzacian "magnetism," is determined by physical laws. Far from dissipating the ignorance that surrounds these concepts, modern thinking only reinforces the confusion. By denying religion any basis in reality, by viewing it as a sort of bedtime story for children, we collaborate with violence in its game of deception.

In many religious communities—among the ancient Greeks, for instance—when a man has hanged himself, his body becomes impure. So too does the rope from which he dangles, the tree to which the rope is attached, and the field where the tree stands. The taint of impurity diminishes, however, as one draws away from the body. It is as if the scene of a violent act, and the objects with which the violence has been committed, send out emanations that penetrate everything in the immediate area, growing gradually weaker through time and space.

When a town has undergone a terrible bloodletting, and emissaries from that town are sent to another community, they are considered impure. Every effort is made to avoid touching them, talking to them, remaining in their presence any longer than necessary. After their departure rites of purification are undertaken: sacrifices offered, lustral water sprinkled about.

While Frazer and his disciples tend to view this fear of infection by the "impure" as a prime example of the "irrational" and "superstitious" element of religious thought, other observers regard it as an anticipation of sound scientific principles. They point out the striking resemblance between the precautions that modern medicine takes against bacterial infection and the ritualistic avoidance of pollution.

In some societies contagious diseases—smallpox, for instance—have their own particular gods. During his illness the patient is dedicated to the god; that is, he is isolated from the community and put under the supervision of an "initiate," or priest of the god, someone who has contracted the illness and survived it. This man now partakes of the god's power; he is immune to the effects of the divine violence.

It is easy to see why some observers have concluded that these impurity rituals reveal some sort of vague intuitive knowledge of microbiology; that the rituals, in short, are grounded in fact. Against this view it is argued that the procedures that are supposed to protect the believers from ritual impurity often disregard, or even flout, the principles of modern hygiene. This argument is not wholly satisfactory, however, for it fails to take into account the possible parallels between ritualistic precautions and the first tentative measures taken in the early days of public hygiene—in the nineteenth century, for example.

The theory that regards religious terrors or taboos as a sort of proto-science has hit on something of real interest, but too indefinite and limited to be of much use in our investigation. Such a theory can only arise in a culture that regards *sickness* as the sole fatal influence, the sole enemy man has to conquer. Clearly, medical considerations are not excluded from the primitive concept of contagion, and the prevention of epidemics plays a definite role in impurity rites. But these factors

play only a minor role in primitive culture. They arouse our interest precisely because they offer the sole instance in which the modern scientific notion of contagion, which is exclusively pathological, coincides with the primitive concept, which is far broader in scope.

The aspects of religion in which contagion seems to have some reality for us are hard to distinguish from those in which it ceases to have any reality. That is not to say that primitive religion is afflicted with the sort of "confusion" that Frazer or Lévy-Bruhl attributed to it. The assimilation of contagious diseases and all forms of violence—the latter also regarded as contagious in nature—is based on a number of complementary inferences that combine to form a strikingly coherent picture.

A primitive society, a society that lacks a legal system, is exposed to the sudden escalation of violence. Such a society is compelled to adopt attitudes we may well find incomprehensible. Our incomprehension seems to stem from two main factors. In the first place, we know absolutely nothing about the contagion of violence, not even whether it actually exists. In the second place, the primitive people themselves recognize this violence only in an almost entirely dehumanized form; that is, under the deceptive guise of the *sacred*.

Considered all together, the ritual precautions against violence are firmly rooted in reality, absurd though some of them may appear to our own eyes. If the sacrificial catharsis actually succeeds in preventing the unlimited propagation of violence, a sort of *infection* is in fact being checked.

From the outset of this study, after all, I have regarded violence as something eminently communicable. The tendency of violence to hurl itself on a surrogate if deprived of its original object can surely be described as a contaminating process. Violence too long held in check will overflow its bounds—and woe to those who happen to be nearby. Ritual precautions are intended both to prevent this flooding and to offer protection, insofar as it is possible, to those who find themselves in the path of ritual impurity—that is, caught in the floodtide of violence.

The slightest outbreak of violence can bring about a catastrophic escalation. Though we may tend to lose sight of this fact in our own daily lives, we are intellectually aware of its validity, and are often reminded that there is something infectious about the spectacle of violence. Indeed, at times it is impossible to stay immune from the infection. Where violence is concerned, intolerance can prove as fatal an attitude as tolerance, for when it breaks out it can happen that those who oppose its progress do more to assure its triumph than those who endorse it. There is no universal rule for quelling violence, no principle

of guaranteed effectiveness. At times all the remedies, harsh as well as gentle, seem efficacious; at other times, every measure seems to heighten the fever it is striving to abate.

Inevitably the moment comes when violence can only be countered by more violence. Whether we fail or succeed in our effort to subdue it, the real victor is always violence itself. The *mimetic* attributes of violence are extraordinary—sometimes direct and positive, at other times indirect and negative. The more men strive to curb their violent impulses, the more these impulses seem to prosper. The very weapons used to combat violence are turned against their users. Violence is like a raging fire that feeds on the very objects intended to smother its flames.

The metaphor of fire could well give way to metaphors of tempest, flood, earthquake. Like the plague, the resemblance violence bears to these natural cataclysms is not limited to the realm of poetic imagery. In acknowledging that fact, however, we do not mean to endorse the theory that sees in the sacred a simple transfiguration of natural phenomena.

The sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over man increases or seems to increase in proportion to man's effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these, however, though in a far less obvious manner, stands human violence—violence seen as something exterior to man and henceforth as a part of all the other outside forces that threaten mankind. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred.

We have yet to learn how man succeeds in positing his own violence as an independent being. Once he has accomplished this feat, however, the sacred presence invades his universe, mysteriously infects, without participating in it, and buffets him about rather in the manner of a plague or other natural disaster. Once all this has occurred, man is confronted with a group of phenomena that, despite their heterogeneous appearance, exhibit remarkable similarities.

As a general practice, it is wise to avoid contact with the sick if one wishes to stay healthy. Similarly, it is wise to steer clear of homicides if one is eager not to be killed.

As we see it, these are two distinct types of "contagion." Modern science concerns itself exclusively with one type, and has established its reality beyond all dispute. However, the other type could well be of greater importance to the members of a society that we have defined as primitive—that is, a society lacking legal sanctions.

Religious thought encompasses a large body of phenomena under the heading of ritual impurity—phenomena that seem disparate and absurd

from the viewpoint of modern science but whose relationship and reality become perfectly clear when tested for the presence of basic violence, the prime ingredient and ultimate resource of the whole system.

There are undeniable similarities, for instance, between a bout of serious illness and an act of violence wilfully perpetrated by an enemy. The sufferings of the invalid are analogous to those of the wounded victim; and if the invalid runs the risk of dying, so too do all those who are involved in one fashion or another, either actively or passively, in a violent action. Death is nothing more than the worst form of violence that can befall a man. It is no less reasonable, therefore, to lump together all the possible causes of death, pathological and otherwise, than it is to create a separate category for only one of them: sickness.

To understand religious thought requires an empirical approach. The goal of religious thinking is exactly the same as that of technological research—namely, practical action. Whenever man is truly concerned with obtaining concrete results, whenever he is hard pressed by reality, he abandons abstract speculation and reverts to a mode of response that becomes increasingly cautious and conservative as the forces he hopes to subdue, or at least to outrun, draw ever nearer.

In its simplest, perhaps most elementary form, religion manifests little curiosity about the origins of those terrible forces that visit their fury on mankind but seems to concentrate its attention on determining a regular sequential pattern that will enable man to anticipate these onslaughts and take measures against them.

Religious empiricism invariably leads to one conclusion: it is essential to keep as far away as possible from sacred things, always to avoid direct contact with them. Naturally, such thinking occasionally coincides with medical empiricism or with scientific empiricism in general. This is why some observers insist on regarding religious empiricism as a preliminary stage of science.

This same empiricism, however, can sometimes reach conclusions so utterly foreign to our own way of thinking and can show itself so narrow, inflexible and myopic in its attitudes that we are tempted to attribute its functioning to some sort of psychological malaise. Such a reaction leads us to regard primitive society as an "ailing" society, beside which our "civilized" society presents a picture of radiant health.

The adherents of this theory show no hesitation in standing these categories on their heads, however, whenever the need arises. Thus, on occasion, it is "civilization" that is sick; and because civilized society is the antithesis of primitive society, it now appears that the primitive


sphere must be the healthy one. Manipulate them as one will, it looks as if the concepts of sickness and health are not very useful in clarifying the relationship between primitive societies and our own.

Ritual precautions that appear lunatic or at least highly exaggerated in a modern context are in fact quite reasonable when viewed in their proper context—that is, in the context of religion's complete unawareness of the violence it makes sacred. When men believe that they can actually feel the breath of a Homeric Cyclops at their backs, they are apt to resort to all means at their disposal, to embrace all possible precautions. It seems safer to overreact than to underreact.

This religious attitude is not dissimilar to that of medicine when suddenly confronted with an unknown disease. An epidemic breaks out; the doctors and scientists are unable to isolate the pathogenic agent. Under the circumstances, what should they do? Clearly they must adopt, not *some* of the precautionary measures employed against familiar diseases, but *all* of them, without exception. Ideally, they would invent entirely new measures, since the enemy they are fighting is itself employing new weapons.

Once the microbe has been identified, it is seen that some of the measures employed were completely useless and should be abandoned in any future dealings with the disease. Yet it must be admitted that as long as the cause of the illness was unknown, their use was fully justified.

We must be careful not to push our metaphor too far. Neither primitive nor modern man has yet succeeded in identifying the microbe responsible for the dread disease of violence. Western civilization is hindered in its efforts to isolate and analyze the causes and to examine them in any but the most superficial manner because it has enjoyed until this day a mysterious immunity from the most virulent forms of violence—an immunity not, it seems, of our society's making, but one that has perhaps resulted in the making of our society.

 AMONG PRIMITIVE TABOOS the one that has perhaps been most analyzed is the taboo surrounding menstrual blood. Menstrual blood is regarded as impure; menstruating women are segregated from the community. They are forbidden to touch any objects of communal usage, sometimes even their own food, for risk of contamination.

If we wish to understand why menstruation is considered "impure," we must consider it within the general category of bloodletting. Most primitive peoples take the utmost care to avoid contact with blood. Spilt blood of any origin, unless it has been associated with a sacrificial

act, is considered impure. This universal attribution of impurity to spilt blood springs directly from the definition we have just proposed: wherever violence threatens, ritual impurity is present. When men are enjoying peace and security, blood is a rare sight. When violence is unloosed, however, blood appears everywhere—on the ground, underfoot, forming great pools. Its very fluidity gives form to the contagious nature of violence. Its presence proclaims murder and announces new upheavals to come. Blood stains everything it touches the color of violence and death. Its very appearance seems, as the saying goes, to “cry out for vengeance.”

Any bloodletting is frightening. It is only natural, therefore, that menstrual bleeding should awaken fear. However, there is another, complicating element at work here. Although menstrual bleeding can be readily distinguished from blood spilt in a murder or an accident and can thus be dissociated from those virulent forms of violence, it is in many societies regarded as the most impure of impurities. We can only assume that this extreme reaction has to do with the sexual aspect of menstruation.

Sexuality is one of those primary forces whose sovereignty over man is assured by man's firm belief in his sovereignty over it. The most extreme forms of violence can never be directly sexual because they are collective in nature. The group is quite capable of perpetrating a single, coherent act of violence, whose force is increased with the addition of each individual quotient of violence; but sexuality is never truly collective. That fact alone explains why sexual interpretations of the sacred invariably ignore or play down the role of violence, whereas an interpretation based on violence readily grants sexuality the prominent place it occupies in all primitive religions. We are tempted to conclude that violence is impure because of its relation to sexuality. Yet only the reverse proposition can withstand close scrutiny. Sexuality is impure because it has to do with violence.

Such an idea seems to run counter to the spirit of contemporary humanism, which has settled into a friendly accord with the pan-sexualism of the psychoanalysts and remains unruffled even by the death-wish theory. Nonetheless, the signs are too numerous and too clear to be ignored. We have conceded that menstrual blood has a direct relationship to sexuality; we also contend that its relationship to unleashed violence is even closer. The blood of a murdered man is impure. This impurity cannot be derived from the impurity attributed to menstrual blood. On the other hand, to understand the impurity of menstrual blood we must trace its relationship to blood spilt by violence, as well as to sexuality. The fact that the sexual organs of women periodically

emit a flow of blood has always made a great impression on men; it seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed.


To understand the nature and extent of this affinity we must return to that solid core of "common sense" that plays a far greater role in religious thinking than fashionable theorists are willing to acknowledge. In fact, the notion that the beliefs of all mankind are a grand mystification that we alone have succeeded in penetrating is a hardy perennial—as well as being, to say the least, somewhat arrogant. The problem at hand is not the arrogance of Western science nor its blatant "imperialism," but rather its sheer inadequacy. It is precisely when the need to understand becomes most urgent that the explanations proposed in the domain of religion become most unsatisfactory.

The connection between sexuality and religion is a heritage common to all religions and is supported by an impressive array of convergent facts. Sex and violence frequently come to grips in such direct forms as abduction, rape, defloration, and various sadistic practices, as well as in indirect actions of indefinite consequences. Sex is at the origin of various illnesses, real or imaginary; it culminates in the bloody labors of childbirth, which may entail the death of mother, child, or both together. Even within the ritualistic framework of marriage, when all the matrimonial vows and other interdictions have been conscientiously observed, sexuality is accompanied by violence; and as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of matrimony to engage in illicit relationships—incest, adultery, and the like—the violence, and the impurity resulting from this violence, grows more potent and extreme. Sexuality leads to quarrels, jealous rages, mortal combats. It is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious of communities.

In refusing to admit an association between sexuality and violence—an association readily acknowledged by men over the course of several millennia—modern thinkers are attempting to prove their broadmindedness and liberality. Their stance has led to numerous misconceptions. Like violence, sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible; it willingly accepts substitutes. And again like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates energy that sooner or later bursts forth, causing tremendous havoc. It is also worth noting that the shift from violence to sexuality and from sexuality to violence is easily effected, even by the most "normal" of individuals, totally lacking in perversion. Thwarted sexuality leads naturally to violence, just as lovers' quarrels often end in an amorous embrace. Recent scientific findings seem to justify the primitive perspective on many points. Sexual excitement

and violent impulses manifest themselves in the same manner. In both instances, the majority of discernible bodily reactions are identical.¹⁵

Before we attempt to explain away the taboo on menstrual blood by means of some all-inclusive, generalized interpretation—before, for example, we invoke those “phantasms” that play the same role in our consciousness as do the enchanters’ tricks” in Don Quixote’s—we should make quite sure that we have first exhausted all direct avenues to comprehension. In fact, there is nothing incomprehensible about the viewpoint that sees menstrual blood as a physical representation of sexual violence. We ought, however, to go further: to inquire whether this process of symbolization does not respond to some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women. By means of this taboo a transfer of violence has been effected and a monopoly established that is clearly detrimental to the female sex.

 THE TAINT OF impurity cannot always be avoided; even the most careful precautions are no security against it. And the least contact with the infection can contaminate the entire community.

How can one cleanse the infected members of all trace of pollution? Does there exist some miraculous substance potent enough not only to resist infection but also to purify, if need be, the contaminated blood? Only blood itself, blood whose purity has been guaranteed by the performance of appropriate rites—the blood, in short, of sacrificial victims—can accomplish this feat.

Behind this astonishing paradox, the menace of violent action can be discerned. All concepts of impurity stem ultimately from the community’s fear of a perpetual cycle of violence arising in its midst. The menace is always the same and provokes the same set of responses, the same sacrificial gestures designed to redirect the violence onto inconsequential victims. The idea of ritual purification is far more than mere shadow play or illusion.

The function of ritual is to “purify” violence; that is, to “trick” violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals. Because the secret of this mechanism is unknown to the participants in the rites, religion tries to account for its own operation metaphorically, using for that purpose the objects and materials involved in that operation. The properties of blood, for example, vividly illustrate the entire operation of violence. We have already spoken of blood spilt by mischance or malice. Blood that dries on the victim soon loses its viscous quality and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab. Blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure

¹⁵ Storr, *Human Aggression*, pp. 18–19.

product of violence, illness, or death. In contrast to this contaminated substance is the fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims, crimson and free flowing. This blood is never allowed to congeal, but is removed without trace as soon as the rites have been concluded.

The physical metamorphosis of spilt blood can stand for the double nature of violence. Some religious practices make elaborate use of this duality. Blood serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse, contaminate or purify, drive men to fury and murder or appease their anger and restore them to life.

We are not dealing here with one of Gaston Bachelard's "material metaphors," a poetic recreation of little real consequence. Nor does Laura Makarius's suggestion that the ambiguous character of blood is in fact the ultimate reality behind the constant reversals of primitive religion seem wholly apposite here.¹⁶ Both authors lose sight of a crucial point: the paradoxical nature of violence. Although religion grasps this paradox—and that only tentatively—mostly by means of such symbolic representations as that of blood, it differs radically from modern theory, which speaks of "phantasms" and "poetry" and does not even realize how real the sacrificial process can be and how appropriate the major metaphors and symbols through which it is expressed.

Even the wildest aberrations of religious thought still manage to bear witness to the fact that evil and the violent measures taken to combat evil are essentially the same. At times violence appears to man in its most terrifying aspect, wantonly sowing chaos and destruction; at other times it appears in the guise of peacemaker, graciously distributing the fruits of sacrifice.

The secret of the dual nature of violence still eludes men. Beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the former continually promoted at the expense of the latter. Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of "good" violence. As we have remarked, if sacrificial violence is to be effective it must resemble the nonsacrificial variety as closely as possible. That is why some rites may seem to us nothing more than senseless inversions of prohibited acts. For instance, in some societies menstrual blood is regarded as a beneficial substance when employed in certain rites but retains its baleful character in other contexts.

The two-in-one nature of blood—that is, of violence—is strikingly illustrated in Euripides' *Ion*. The Athenian queen, Creusa, plots to do away with the hero by means of an exotic talisman: two drops of blood from the deadly Gorgon. One drop is a deadly poison, the other

¹⁶ Cf. Laura Makarius, "Les Tabous du forgeron," *Diogenè* 62 (April-June 1968).

a miraculous healing agent. The queen's old slave asks her the origin of this substance:

Creusa: When the fatal blow was struck a drop spurted
from the hollow vein. . . .

Slave: How is it used? What are its properties?

Creusa: It wards off all sickness and nourishes life.

Slave: And the other drop?

Creusa: It kills. It is made from the Gorgon's venomous
serpents.

Slave: Do you carry them mixed together or separate?

Creusa: Are good and evil to be mixed together?

Separate, of course.

Nothing could seem more alike than two drops of blood, yet in this case nothing could be more different. It is only too easy to blend them together and produce a substance that would efface all distinction between the pure and the impure. Then the difference between "good" and "bad" violence would be eliminated as well. As long as purity and impurity remain distinct, even the worst pollution can be washed away; but once they are allowed to mingle, purification is no longer possible.