



TYPE: Article

Title: On Contagions: Leviticus and the Fascination of the Abomination

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Source: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

Published by: Whitestone Publications

Stable URL: <https://jcrt.org/archives/02.2/majer/>

DOI (newest version): [10.17613/59h9z-zew65](https://doi.org/10.17613/59h9z-zew65)

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Majer - On Contagions - JCRT 2.2
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Contagions

Contagions describe a communication. The nature of this communication varies: a contagion may communicate a disease, an idea, or a feeling. Unlike communication defined as an intentional act, contagions are distinguished by a non-volitional character; their essence is that we cannot control them, that they may secretly infiltrate or suddenly overwhelm us. (An exception would seem to be the case of a person deliberately infecting another; but only an effect at least once removed, the infection spreading to a third person, would qualify as contagion: strictly speaking, there could be no *act* of contagion.) Thus contagions may be broadly understood as registering a certain weakness or vulnerability, a confusion or susceptibility of our thoughts and feelings, a potential disturbance of the integrity of our bodies and our identities. Contagion, with its trace of the Latin *tangere*, to touch (one might hear its catch in the sounding of the second syllable), suggests something that exceeds simple communication or contact—perhaps even a mortal fascination, an intimation of what touches at the very limit of our boundaries, what marks the uncertain proximity and distancing of a spacing, a between, somewhere inside us, outside us, or maybe elsewhere, impossible to locate precisely because contagions mark a shifting of locations, an unsettling of positions. (In the symphony hall, is the fit of coughing mine, or an echo of the others who are also coughing, or a break in the signifying-system of music and listening itself?)

3. In the Western tradition, contagions have named a touching variously considered detrimental or beneficial. Most often the negative sense is uppermost, as in *For Rabirius on a Charge of Treason*, where Cicero draws a contrast to his opponent's position in terms of purity and pollution: "[it is] I, who forbid the assembly to be polluted by the contagion (*contagione*) of an executioner, who think that the forum of the Roman people ought to be purified from all such traces of nefarious wickedness, who urge that the assembly ought to be kept pure, the campus holy, the person of every Roman citizen inviolate "'¹
4. This sort of contagion is a familiar point of application for contemporary cultural theory, which often takes as a major focus structures of domination and their elaboration in terms of what Mary Douglas has called schemas of purity and danger. It is obvious here that contagions serve ideological and cultural imperatives. Cicero deploys a polarity of pure and impure, characterizing his opponent as one who would allow a contagion of violence to pollute the Roman *polis* and so representing himself as its righteous defender. The category of the pure and proper gains in affective value to the extent that it is in proximity to a dangerous contagion. The strategy has a double payoff: on one side, the opponent's position is characterized in terms of a creeping plague, an incipient horror that on the instant will infect the Roman people. On the other, Cicero's position is identified with a suddenly and dramatically precious purity, order, and holiness.
5. Such moments of contagion are historically and culturally ubiquitous, of both ancient and modern vintage, and characteristic of non-Western as well as Western peoples. Along with

¹Cicero, *Rab. Perd.* 11.

the critique of ideology, however, contagions have also been a mainstay of theory construction in the human sciences; while demystifying the ideological function of contagions, cultural theory itself in some respects depends on the concept, epistemologically speaking. The importance of contagions emerges with the development of the concept of culture and, more broadly, social-scientific theories from the nineteenth century onward. Contagions are a key element in the construction of such theories because contagion as communication or transmissibility provides a sort of discursive hinging or adhesion, an apparent stabilizing of the uneasy immanence/transcendence of the culture concept. One example of such hinging is Emile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, where the essential mechanism of culture is a contagion that explains, in each and every case (affects, representations, the apriori categories of thought itself) the necessity of all to cohere, to circulate, always to compose a whole. The force of contagions and taboos is shown to be the power of the cultural or social itself, evidence of an irresistible telos of integration and function like that Durkheim sees in the crowd effervescence of festival and sacrifice.

6. Contagions, however, appear in a different light when the culture concept is exposed as essentially a metaphysical construction driven by an epistemological insistence on the privilege of the same, and a subsuming of otherness and difference under an ultimate controlling power of the whole. As argued by Christopher Herbert, culture is a discursive ghost, a crypto-theological concept that legitimizes the modern nation-state and its programs of social and political control; Mary Poovey makes a similar point in tracing the nineteenth-century emergence of the discursive domain of the social body.² Given this demystification of the culture concept, another strain in contemporary theory has focused on contagions in terms of transgressions and subversions, of how various forms of resistance arise in relation to dominant ideologies, and how such resistances may allow a liberation of affect or desire as opposed to a reaffirmation of a dominant order or an articulation of power/knowledge. In such transgressive moments, contagions indicate something other than a proximity of the pure to the impure—that fearful instant when order and totality are reaffirmed and revalued precisely because they are under threat. Instead, disturbances and crossings of boundaries highlight a breaking loose of affect or desire in an inversion or displacement of dominant cultural categories and hierarchies. As in the moments of cultural rejuvenation described by Mary Douglas, the practices of carnival explored by Mikhail Bakhtin, the powers of liminality mapped by Victor Turner, or the limit-experiences of sacrifice theorized by Georges Bataille, such moments witness a revaluing of things conventionally designated as low or base—society's others and outcasts, the human body, the material world, the scatological and the erotic. Thinkers have disagreed on whether such moments are truly subversive or are ultimately recuperated within the dominant culture (or perhaps, unevenly, both). Be that as it may, contagions register a potential for invasion, for overwhelming, for a defeat of what is sure and proper. In such moments, a dangerous yet enticing proximity exerts its fascination, unsettling the stability and surety of cultural categories and identities.
7. Responding in another way to the limitations of conventional models of ideology and culture, some areas of contemporary theory exhibit a distinctively anti-systemic strain. One example is cognitive anthropology (and in the recent popular-scientific discourse of "memetics") where contagions are reframed in evolutionary-biological terms. Dan Sperber's thesis of an epidemiology of representations attempts an empirical account of culture by hypothesizing a

²Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

process through which representations adhere or are “catching” for the human mind. On a quite different basis, but with the same interest in complicating culture/ideology models, Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the contact zone and Homi Bhaba’s descriptions of hybridity and borders suggest an anti- or sub-systemic sort of contagion—a twisting, filtering, revision, or skewing of affects and representations that lingers over rather than works a transgression or a systematic return upon the crossings and roilings of categories and boundaries.

8. A similar move is characteristic of poststructuralist theory where contagions are a means of tracking differentials that unsettle the systematizations of ideology and culture, as well as those of Western philosophy. Jacques Derrida’s accounts of the pharmakon and the parasite establish how philosophy’s truths are a function of warding off contagious incursions of otherness or difference; *différance*, as marked by the traces of alterity which unsettle forms of systematicity, is itself a contagion, a touching-between that disperses and disseminates positions and substantives. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s work (as well as in the later Derrida), a like approach has been taken to sociality and ethics. David Hume and Adam Smith long ago attempted to conceptualize the social in terms of feeling and sentiment, postulating a contagion of sympathy in models, which presented a supplement to classical liberal ideas of the social contract. While such accounts tended to support utilitarian or nascent-cultural models of the social, Nancy returns to the possibility of understanding sociality in terms of affect and especially in terms of a redefinition of communication, contact, and contagion. Sociality is described as a being in common in which persons are singularities rather than subjects of culture; the communication which marks the encounter of singular beings is a passion of contagion which is not, however, a matter of social or cultural organicism, totality, or communion, but of a being-with, an exposure or susceptibility to the between.
9. In a famous phrase from Joseph Conrad’s story, Marlow ponders the “darkness” of the archaic world and suggests his unaccountable interest in it as evidence of a profound seductiveness: he is touched by a contagious “fascination of the abomination.” The word “abomination” recalls Leviticus, where the word of Jehovah marks those contagious pollutions, which are an abomination before the Lord. Taboos regarding diet, bodily discharges, and particularly the practices of worship and sacrifice all support the value of holiness by means of a correspondent heightening of dangerous contagions, of abominations. From the perspective of Leviticus, the fascination of the abomination registers a horrified gaze upon transgression, upon a breaching of taboo, which taints the offender with uncleanness, fault, or sin. Further, perhaps, fascination names a passivity, an arrest in spite of oneself at the sight of evil, a pausing over some momentary wavering of the boundary between proper and improper, sacred and profane. In *Heart of Darkness* Conrad complicates the meanings of abomination in light of such a fascination, one which encompasses not only a revulsion but also an attraction. The fascination of the abomination plays upon moral and psychic ambivalences, implicating Marlow himself as he explores the nature of Kurtz’s transgressions. And fascinated, Marlow does not steadily maintain Kurtz’s case at a distance but is himself infected by it. His attempts to give an accounting seem always provisional, compromised, demonstrating not a ready mastery but rather a disturbing uncertainty, an incipient dispossession of truth and meaning. This fascination of the abomination might also be called a power of seduction, in Jean Baudrillard’s sense of the term.³ Kurtz’s case becomes not a matter of determinate meaning and truth but rather a play of signs, an absorption of meaning within a multiplicity of appearances. Marlow is fascinated by the reversibility of true and false, with Kurtz viewed by turns as innocent and

³Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: Palgrave, 1990).

guilty, the truth of his case less important than its bewitching and infectious spell. In some way, it appears that what is crucial in *Heart of Darkness* is not what the final determination, the last turn of the screw, will be, but instead everything that happens in the gaps, the breaks, not the points of arrival or the secured positions of an interpretation but instead the *betweens*.

10. In this essay I will argue that the fascination of the abomination may be seen as not just a horror of what threatens order and self-identity or of what calls forth ambivalence. Contagions intimate a *between* touching the limit points of boundaries, interrupting the work of orders, systems, and representations. As such, contagions mark an alterity that is not resumed to system or metaphysics or even to transgression but that differentially knots and interweaves, as in a patchwork, the same and the other, singular persons and plural beings in common. I will consider this sense of contagions as it emerges in the work of Mary Douglas, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Luc Nancy. In her accounts of sacrifice, Douglas insists on the systemic and integrative function of contagions. Yet in pushing her thinking to the limits of system itself, she admits a sense of finitude and exposure not comprehended within the intellectual-cognitive framework of the culture-system. Ricoeur's analysis of contagions in the construction of religious-ethical subjectivity goes further in seeing not only a first philosophy outlined in the categories of pure and impure, but also the registering of an infinite distance between the human and the divine that encompasses a susceptibility to alterity, the spacing of an infinite between. Nancy revisits the problematics of sacrifice and finitude, delineating contagions in terms of a difference, which radically displaces conventional understandings of subjectivity and sociality. For Nancy, contagion, or contact, is a between which delays and disperses, a between which makes the singularity of subjects and the plurality of sociality an always different event; the between is the syncope of an advent, the disposition of a surprise. The impossibility of sociality, its resistance to descriptions in terms of integration, function, or communion, is defined by the sharing-out and partitioning characteristic of the between, its contagious scattering that is at the same time a gathering.

Mary Douglas and Leviticus

11. Mary Douglas's analysis of Leviticus in *Purity and Danger* develops a rather different emphasis than the one I have sketched in light of Conrad's novel. The fascination of the abomination is understood in terms of the truth of the culture-system, and especially in terms of social-integrative imperatives of coherence and function. That which is taboo, impure or contagious constitutes an abomination before the Lord. In keeping with a cultural imperative, abominations keep clear and distinct the categories of social being. Seemingly arbitrary dietary prohibitions, for example, are explained in light of particular animals (the swine, the camel) representing an anomaly of social classification, and thus an abomination; that is, a potential unsettling of the culture-system's rationality, a raising of the disturbing specter of chaos and indifferentiation—precisely what the culture-system works to exclude.⁴
12. In Douglas's account even those taboos which don't make sense still do, insofar as they mark the power of social boundaries and classifications. At the same time, her analysis indicates a simple resolution of the old conundrum of the tabooed and contagious nature of both sacred and unclean by suggesting the two opposed realms are coterminous. The unclean edges the sacred, the sacred the unclean, because fundamentally it is their difference that drives

⁴Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Verso, 1972).

the engine of collective structures and representations. Coursing with an imperative of the culture-system for securing itself as self-identical, unified, the Same, contagious abominations act like an electrically charged barbed wire that articulates and maintains the stability of social space.

13. Douglas's approach has been questioned in light of its logicalistic tendency, that is, its emphasis upon social construction and classification in terms of a cognitive-intellectual schema. In this regard, it is significant that matters of anomaly and classification dominate Douglas's discussion of Leviticus, while an equally if not more important topic for cultural anthropology and questions of purity and danger—namely, the matter of sacrifice—is not addressed. Sacrifice is important to a consideration of purity and danger because sacrifice is often a key moment when taboos are deliberately transgressed, exposing the dynamics as well as the statics of the culture-system. Douglas does take account of sacrifice and transgression elsewhere. In the conclusion of her argument, transgression and sacrifice are central to the description of a different phase than the constructive-conservative one she sees in Leviticus. In this latter phase, the culture-system suffers a transgression of its laws of pollution in accordance with what she calls a mechanism of the system renewing itself. The sacrifice and consumption of a tabooed, anomalous animal in one respect would seem to contradict the anxiety for order and integration Douglas posits as characteristic of the culture-system. Yet, following a line of analysis that goes back to Robertson Smith and Durkheim, Douglas sees in such sacrificial transgression a necessary cultural dynamic. Being excluded, the anomaly, the dirt of the system, ultimately becomes formless because it is outside the system of representations and categories. As such, it accrues a kind of reserve, a disposable power, a *mana*. In sacrificial transgression, this generalized power of the collective is localized or framed, and thus made available for reinvestment in the economy of the whole. Sacrificial transgression serves a renewal or a composting function.
14. All of this confirms that for Douglas sacrificial transgression is ultimately a matter of integration and function, of the culture-system's imperative for maintaining itself. Considering further the meaning of sacrifice and transgression, however, Douglas notes that in sacrifice the urge to overcome the oppositions of pure and impure leads to specifically *religious* themes (italics in original).⁵ In the case of Lele ritual sacrifice, for example, the seemingly unaccountable breaking of the taboo that wards off anomaly is in one respect social-integrative, functioning to renew or recharge the culture-system, and perhaps at the same time functioning to afford a timely release of systemic strain. Yet such functions are not all: for Douglas, a distinctly religious aspect of sacrifice emerges in a moment of reflexivity—a point at which the humanly constructed nature of social classifications and laws is exposed and at which the givens of the culture-system are thought at another level.⁶ This perspective may be viewed as one of fascination inasmuch as it highlights the system itself as a play of signs, as a reversible pattern rather than a stable structure, as seduction rather than truth.
15. The Lele initiates, on one hand, recall Leviticus in terms of the sacrifice's social-integrative function, in the ritual rehearsing basic cultural categories just as the ancient Israelites did.⁷ The religious meaning of the ritual emerges in particular with the sacrificial victim (the pagolin), reminiscent of Abraham's ram and the Christ; as the pure and the impure are framed in terms of a single figure, the ritual unifies opposites and in so doing precipitates a power which

⁵Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 169.

⁶Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 170.

⁷Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 170.

reinvigorates the order and integration of the culture-system. On the other hand, however, the religious element highlights the passivity of the sacrificial animal, which voluntarily suffers its death.⁸ In this regard, the social-integrative function is perhaps not so clear. The deliberate abomination of the sacrificial ritual opens the possibility of a fascination in which the system's limits are exposed and the sacrificial ritual is revealed as a play of appearances, a pure movement of metamorphosis of the kind Sartre shuddered over when contemplating the experience of the in-itself as opposed to the for-itself: "I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me."⁹

16. Designating a specifically religious factor, Douglas is marking a limit to the social-integrative function of ritual and hinting at a way of knowing that is not primarily a matter of intellectual-cognitive social classifications. The sacrificial victim is not only an element of cultural logic but also a figure of pity and terror. In its suffering, it is a phenomenon of finitude'in one instant, at least, there is a touching upon a limit, upon what the culture-system does not completely encompass: sacrifice reflexively registers the potential failure of human order and systematicity at the very height of their ostensible powers of making whole. In the fascination of the abomination, sacrificial transgression opens to the affective, the non-representational, the non-systemic'perhaps something like the in-itself, to recall Sartre's formulation, which is not comprehended by the project of mastery of the for-itself. Like the dispossession of the sacrificial victim, this is a knowledge that is dispossessed.
17. Douglas notes that the Lele speak of the ritual as an entering into "the house of the afflicted," and she hears in the phrase a Biblical resonance, one of tragedy and suffering and exile. In sacrifice, the clear and distinct lineaments of the culture-system become muddled, become a mystery passing comprehension. Even as sacrificial transgression functions to support the social-integrative imperative of the culture-system, it registers a certain limit of the totality. The fascination of the abomination, then, may lead beyond the representational logics of social being, may forego the imperative of the same and move toward a different sort of fascination'that of the Other, or alterity. Sacrifice attests to a demand other than that of a cultural systematics.

Paul Ricoeur and the Infinite Demand

18. The term "abomination" denotes an impurity, a contagion. Yet its etymology indicates something more'ab, from, *ominari*, an omen or foreshadowing. It is not simply an omen, but an omen that comes from another place, from some distance; it is not immediately present. Abomination intimates an Other whose word demands the system of ritual, but who is also elsewhere, transcendent. Ricoeur follows this meaning insofar as in his tracing of the ethical meanings of contagion and defilement he describes both a drawing-near and a separation from this Other.
19. In Paul Ricoeur's reading of the Old Testament, the fascination of the abomination first represents a primordial experience of defilement, of contamination or stain, and a concomitant expectation of retribution. Thus the fascination of the abomination evidences a primordial reverence for order. The abomination of contagious defilement encompasses a fear of punishment

⁸Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 169.

⁹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1956), 609.

which is “the negative envelope” of a yet more basic admiration for order.¹⁰

20. Such a veneration of order is congruent with Mary Douglas’s social-integrative account of purity and danger: the fascination of the abomination ultimately testifies to an anxiety and demand for structure, stability, the reassurance of the same. In this view, the abominations of Leviticus would be, as for Douglas, a system of retributive legalism whose primary function is to establish and support the social whole in terms of its purity and its holiness: “You shall not defile yourselves.’ For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (11:44-5); “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die ” (15:31).
21. Yet there is another factor in the experience of the abomination. The negative envelope of defilement, contagion, and dread outlines an ethical relation, an intimation of what exceeds the system of laws and prohibitions regarding the pure and the impure while yet remaining in relation to it. Falling ill and doing ill come to be linked; contagious defilement forms the basis for ethics insofar as ethics responds to the demand of an Other before whom one stands accused. Thus, Ricoeur argues, the sense of evil becomes “the revelation in an infinite measure of the demand that God addresses to man. It is this infinite demand that creates an unfathomable distance and distress between God and man.”¹¹
22. Ricoeur sees the Old Testament Covenant in relation to the negative envelope of contagious defilement that borders the holy, but not only in terms of an order which affirms itself by negation.¹² When the punishment of defilement becomes no longer a matter of taboo and vengeance but a matter of ethics and sin, it is possible for the idea of retribution to exceed itself, as it becomes a demand or imperative beyond any economic or retributive explanation.¹³ Yet this ethical demand is heard in the Covenant not by a superseding of the ritualism of contagious defilement but by virtue of that same experience of defilement and retribution.
23. The Covenant is defined by an infinite demand. This demand emerges in prophetism, where the destruction visited upon a sinful Israel is not a simple vengeance, but God’s word spoken in indignation and accusation. This word defines God and Israel in terms of a dialogical relation, a personal bond, a speaking. Prophetism, however, does not simply present a situation of the ethical superseding the ritual law: the infinite demand works through the ancient codes; hence there is a tension between the infinite demand and God’s commandments, and a concomitant “dialectic of unlimited indignation and detailed prescription.”¹⁴
24. This tension between the infinite demand and the finite law defines the consciousness of sin. One is not just guilty in general before God; one is specifically and personally guilty of breaking God’s law. Injustice isn’t only a matter of a generalized problem, but something for which one is personally responsible. This dialectic of infinite demand and finite law is also necessary because a God of the infinite demand alone would withdraw from the dialogical relation and become Wholly Other; similarly, the finite law without the infinite demand would become purely a matter of individual moral conscience, of autonomy.¹⁵ Ricoeur also links this dialectic to a heteronomy of Jewish ethics in which a recognition of the infinite demand

¹⁰Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 43.

¹¹Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 55.

¹²Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 43.

¹³Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 42.

¹⁴Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 56.

¹⁵Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 62.

occurs precisely through an emphasis on the finite law, which emphasizes that the subject is not the source of the law, nor is the law transparent to a moral consciousness, but that obeying the law makes manifest the will of God.¹⁶

25. While the fascination of the abomination would seem to indicate a demand for order and purity, fascination then might also be understood in terms of a radical exposure, characteristic of what Ricoeur calls "the initial situation of man as God's prey."¹⁷ In this perspective, the fascination of the abomination would not be a hypnotized or mystical experience of paralyzed fear or mythic participation, but rather an aspect of a dialogical relation, an opening of a discourse between God and man. The dreadful contagion of the abomination which clings to one's body, one's hands, one's heart, also is a fascination with that Other who stands away but at the same time stands in proximity to one in terms of discourse, the word, the finite law. "Thus [the] initial situation, which plunges into the darkness of the power and violence of the Spirit, also emerges in the light of the Word."¹⁸ The archaic structures of contagion and defilement engage a "hypersubjective reference"¹⁹ in which sin marks the violation of a personal bond, a tainting or staining within the dialogical relation to God. The fundamental experience of contagious defilement attends an ethical distancing of humanity and God, a distancing that ultimately maintains not a surety for cultural integration, for the dominance of the Same, but a relation to God as Other.
26. This distancing involves dialogical and affective rather than logical and representational structures. It does not manage integration, but rather a wandering and an anguish before the infinite demand. Speaking God's indignation regarding Israel's sins, the prophets locate the dirt, the defilement, the contagious abomination, in the heart of man, but at the same time turn away from self-salvation to a more demanding call to the "neighbor, with whom [one] is never finished, contrary to the demand of the ritual codes."²⁰ Thus, Ricoeur says, "the demand is unlimited with respect to its transcendent origin, with respect to its existential root, with respect to others, with respect to those lowly ones in whom the appeal for 'righteousness and justice' is incarnated. Such is the ethical distance that indignation creates in the very heart of the covenant."²¹
27. The fascination of the abomination secures the culture-system's order and hegemony in terms of pure and impure, sacred and profane. Yet this fascination also turns away from such security and self-grounding, and toward what refuses or exceeds integration and totality. The meaning of the wrath and indignation of God is an element neglected by a reading of Leviticus that views it primarily in terms of a ritual system of purity that establishes the wholeness and holiness of the culture-system. We can read the wrath of God as it is expressed in relation to the "unholy fire" offered in sacrifice by Aaron's sons in a different light than that of the culture-system's policing of the boundaries of pure and impure.

Now Nadab and Abi'hu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before

¹⁶Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 135.

¹⁷Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 51.

¹⁸Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 52.

¹⁹Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 83.

²⁰Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 56.

²¹Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 56.

the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said, 'I will show myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.' " And Aaron held his peace. (10:1-3)

28. It might be said that this passage evidences a classic situation of taboo and punishment, of defilement being instantly punished by a near-automatic action. In terms familiar from Douglas (or Durkheim), it would appear that the punishing Lord is he who maintains a strict watch over the boundaries of the holy and the unclean. This Lord is in essence the social whole itself, his power the force of the collective, his action a reflex of the culture-system's imperative for order and totality. Yet we might instead see in God's wrath and indignation against Aaron's sons the ethical distance of separation. Those whom a god of the tribe would perhaps favor and forgive are precisely those who here are most severely punished; in the midst of the chosen people, God's wrath is unleashed, marking a separation in proximity. The words Moses speaks from God emphasize this separation: God will show himself holy among those who are *near*, but this proximity is not one liable to a contact or a participation but instead is a proximity in which God is always elsewhere. The finite law of taboo and abomination is not just a matter of ritual impurity and punishment but of the infinite demand of God as Other.
29. Ricoeur describes the wrath of God as indicating a religious traumatism, an experience of "aggression against the security of man."²² The wrath of God does not, however, merely testify to archaic powers and structures of purity and danger such as those that inform the book of Leviticus. The traumatism of dread and terror before God defines further the meaning of the Covenant. The wrath of God distances God from the history of Israel even as God remains in proximity;²³ ultimately this relation is what keeps the Jewish law from ever becoming merely a ritual system or a purely cultural logic of sin and punishment.
30. The fascination of the abomination exposes a between of man and God. Contagious defilement, in marking the finite laws of purity and danger, invokes at the same time a dialogical relation, and thus breaks the social totality of myth and participation. Defilement and contagion do not just mark the internal boundaries of a homeostatic social structure, allowing the culture-system to function and cohere as one and the Same. Nor does contagion, as a force of communication, only evidence the power of the collective over its system of ideas, categories, and classifications. Contagion edges, rather, the weight or the height of the Other. Contagion intimates the *between* of the one and the other. This between does not entail a contact or a communication but rather holds these in suspense, maintaining a separation, a distance, which baffles communion or totality. The fascination of the abomination is the seduction, the dispossession of man by God.
31. Sacrifice is abomination because it breaks the ritual law, makes an exception, allows the use of what is otherwise tabooed. In Leviticus blood is first of all an abomination as a form of unclean, contagious discharge, as in the strictures on menstrual blood. Yet the blood of sacrificial animals, too, is tabooed because it is sacred, reserved to the Lord:

If any man of the house of Israel ' eats any blood, I will set my face against that person ' and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life (17:10-11).

²²Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 66.

²³Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 67.

32. In a cultural logic of purity and danger, the unclean and sacred character of blood indicates it as a theme in the elaboration of the social structure. As unclean, blood supports the drawing of specific social boundaries and classifications; as sacred, blood supports a ritual by means of which the culture-system renews itself, transposing what is normally unclean into the framework of the sacred and managing a reinvestment or renewal of the social totality. Hence the blood that is tabooed is the vital substance of sacrificial ritual. The blood of the sacrificial animals is holy, and Aaron now is instructed to sprinkle it upon the mercy seat and upon the horns of the altar.

Then he shall go out to the altar which is before the Lord and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood ' and put it on the horns of the altar round about. And he shall sprinkle some of the blood upon it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and hallow it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel. (16:18-9).

33. Ricoeur, however, reads the blood-offering from another perspective, one which perhaps joins Douglas's sense of the sorrowful mysteries of sacrifice, of an entering into affliction, which further intimates an experience of exposure and finitude. In the symbolism of blood it is possible to see not just an expiation, that is, a sacrificial return directed to the power of God, but a gift. This gift is in keeping with the dialogical relation of God and man. Hence the blood is not a substitution which represents, in the sacrifice, the soul of the transgressor, Israel. Nor does the blood, as in the cultural logics described by Robertson Smith or Durkheim, represent the shared life of the community or the collective. Instead, the gift is something God has given to man, insofar as in the dialogical relation, God has given instruction. The gift is a form of the word, of speaking, between God and man. Again, the finite law of sacrifice marks an infinite demand that overflows it because the sacrifice is not only ritual function but also discourse, language.
34. The scapegoat ritual that follows emphasizes this ethical and dialogical meaning of the sacrifice. The animal is not merely a scapegoat who restores the purity of the social whole by having Israel's transgressions laid upon its head, thus serving a cultural symbolism and making for rejuvenation of the culture-system. The scapegoat is the focus and the occasion of a confession to God of Israel's transgressions, a dialogical figure of sorrow and atonement. Like the blood-gift, the scapegoat is a way of speaking, between God and man. The fascination of the abomination would then be one way of describing a relation that, in Emmanuel Levinas's terms, "suspends participation and object-cognition." Such a relation is one in which one does not draw one's existence from the Other but hears the word of the Other and is "in relation with a substance overflowing its own idea in me."²⁴ Like Ricoeur's infinite demand, this overflowing which Levinas names "Infinity" marks a distance, separation, and suspense in which the relation to the Other will not be integrated, will not serve self-possession, identity, or the security of the Same. In the finite law of the ritual, the fascination of the abomination evidences the trace of the Other in terms of a *between* and not a communion or a conjuncture; it registers the trauma and the welcome, the contagious fascination of him who faces.

Jean-Luc Nancy and the Fascination of Sacrifice

²⁴Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 77.

35. What is blood but an abomination, insofar as blood outside of the body-envelope is matter out of place, a discharge across the body's boundaries that marks a rupture of the body's integrity and self-identity? The horror of blood, according to one strain of contemporary psychology, is a disgust-response, typically excited by phenomena that exhibit a loss of bodily integrity and that lead in turn to the magical thinking of contagion which imagines the dangers of a substance which potentially will spread and infect and injure.²⁵ In view of this power of contagious communication, it is said, one wants to clean up and cover over, to regulate and impose order.

36. Social-integrative theories of sacrifice see blood as a substance of functional transgression, a substance whose flow through the integral system of the human body is seconded by the flow of the blood of sacrifice, which is ultimately a flow of collective force through a ritual which reaffirms the integrity of the cultural order, the social body. But perhaps, as in Ricoeur, the sacrificial blood, abominable and contagious, also marks a vulnerability and exposure to what is Other. Georges Bataille similarly holds that in sacrificial transgression the human reaches a point where mastery ceases. This cessation of mastery is not a moment of contact with the transcendence of a deity, nor of participation in a society's projection of its own power and unity, nor is it only some existential abjection of the self. It is instead an exposure to a limit of the subject of being and of the being of the social; where mastery ceases, one is exposed to the Other, to alterity. Thus sacrifice may be understood in terms of what is intimated in the fascination of the abomination—as in Ricoeur, an overflowing of the finite ritual which attests to an infinite demand beyond any functional explanation; or, as in Bataille, an absolute negativity where mastery ceases.

37. Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested, however, that the fascination of the abomination, which exercised Bataille's thought, gives rise to some difficulties with the concept of sacrifice. In the Western tradition, Nancy argues, sacrifice has been constructed as a mimetic rupture, that is, as a break with archaic practices and as a spiritualization of their form, and as such has tended to occlude the meanings of existence and finitude in favor of a dialectical-idealization. Sacrifice has become a model of dialectical sublation, of an infinite movement that takes up the finite moment of archaic sacrifice in trans-appropriation—Nancy's term encompasses the transitive, the transgressive, and the economic-dialectical character of this construction. While the mimetic rupture would seem to leave behind archaic sacrifice, at the same time a fascination with the violence of sacrificial cruelty persists.²⁶ This fascination of the abomination is the secret at the heart of the dialectic: the intellectual-cognitive structure is traversed by a cruel passion—or is itself founded on such passion, betraying the Western-cultural project of truth and mastery as it is correlated with violence and cruelty.²⁷

38. Thus for Nancy, it is questionable whether the model of mimetic rupture provides an accurate account of sacrifice. The fascination of the abomination, of blood and cruelty, seems to persist even as sacrifice becomes a theological and philosophical structure purified of archaic affect. And the term *mimesis* is yet more problematic, variously encompassing identification and participation and contagion, all of which seem resistant to adequate explanation. Nancy asks, then, whether the notion of mimetic rupture does not leave us with a mystified view of

²⁵See, e.g., Paul Rozin, Michele Ashmore, Carol Nemeroff, "Magical Contagion Beliefs and Fear of AIDS," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 22, 14, (1992), 1081-92.

²⁶Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," trans. Richard Livingston, *Yale French Studies* 79(1991):25.

²⁷Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 25.

sacrifice, whether the dialectic liberates us from cruelty or only carries it forward in another form.²⁸

39. Bataille points to one answer to this question in his explorations of sacrifice and dialectic, demonstrating, in Nancy's view, that the dialectic cannot comprehend what is at stake in mimesis and sacrifice.²⁹ Yet the problem for Bataille is how to think this truth without becoming fascinated once again by the dialectic and the movement of transappropriation. Thinking beyond sacrifice would mean leaving behind the model of a subjectivity that masters negativity, endures even its own death, and so returns to itself its sovereignty.³⁰ Sacrifice intimates the obscure realm from which repetition and mimesis emerge and hence fascinates, is uncanny; in the fascination of the abomination, sacrifice seems to offer us access to the other. Yet this other is enmeshed yet again in mastery, in appropriation, as the finite is infinitely transcended and appropriated once more. The trouble is ultimately in our understanding of finitude, which is indeed based upon grasping and comprehending, upon substantialization and propriation, upon a cruelty that would take by force. Finitude is not comprehended by models of process or economy; nor does finitude gather its meaning again through an explosion or shattering of itself. This is to say that finitude is not a possession or a substance, is not a "blood" which can be hoarded for its function, or poured out for the exercise of a power, or even made to burst the integral in the glory of an expenditure without reserve. In Nancy's view, finitude is not a function of the sacrificial; instead, it is simply the exposure or abandon of existence, its offering not to the economic and substantivizing logics of sacrifice and the dialectic but to the world'indeed, itself *as* world.³¹
40. A finitude offered to the world'in one respect, Nancy insists on the opening, or distance, Ricoeur formulates in terms of an absolute but formless demand spoken between God and man in the finite ritual. But for Nancy there is no outside of finitude; man is not fundamentally God's prey, called to a dialogical relation characterized by an unfathomable distance and distress. For Nancy, in the offering of finitude (the Christological image is tempting here but would only represent one more dialectical idealization performed by the notion of the mimetic rupture), there is nothing but a clarity, a clarity without a God. This clarity is one which experiences differently the fascination of the abomination: fascination gives way to an opening and an exposure; an opening, however, precisely upon *nothing*. This is not the nothing of the abyss, but a nothing which only exposes, returns existence to itself'not by way of an intransitivity of the dialectic, the sacrificial, or Being, but as a differential transitivity: each time, a different time; every one, another one. This nothing is a desubjectification, which obviates the drive toward trans-appropriation. Existence does not have reference to the violence of a movement that would always extract something more from it, the blood of sacrifice, the sublation of the dialectic. Existence is unsacrificeable.³²
41. This nothing of finitude is a refusal of totality, of integration, of the systemic and the Same. For Nancy, it also involves a suspicion of "the Other" insofar as alterity seems to provoke reappropriation, to become yet another property or substance for mastery. Refusing transappropriation, Nancy in one respect joins Ricoeur's account of the infinite distance of the Other as indeed speaking an absolute yet formless demand, as overflowing in terms of an infinite

²⁸Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 27.

²⁹Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 27.

³⁰Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 35.

³¹Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 36.

³²Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 37.

absence, a “nothing.”³³ And for Nancy transcendence remains a possibility, despite an immanence that offers only its own closure, its movement, its dispersal and difference. Sacrifice in these terms would mark only a horizon and not a substance, not a coagulation. This horizon is that of the *between*: the between distances and disperses existence from itself; the between is the spacing of birth and death, of the one and the other. The subject does not move into the between the spacing of mimesis, methexis, or contagions’ not because the between is a realm of obscurity or mystery or the abyss, but because the between is simply the limit of each finite existence. Existence is alone, not systematized, not dialecticized, because it always already breaks away from itself.³⁴

42. Such a between might be compared to Ricoeur’s unfathomable distancing between man and God. But in the between existence itself is distanced, infinitely distanced, from itself. For Nancy the unsacrificeable ultimately is not an unfathomable distance but the always-already distancing and spacing of finitude. Existence cannot be sacrificed because it is nothing, it is the distancing and separation of the *between*, of alterity.³⁵ What sublation could never know in sacrifice, what gives a meaning to the infinite absence of appropriation that is finitude and existence: *between*.
43. The *between* returns us to the fascination of the abomination, inasmuch as the *between* is the relation or non-relation of contagion. Contagion fascinates with its promise of communication and communion, of touching and contact. Contagion ab-ominates what is distanced, held back, separate from, that same communication and communion, what is other. While social-integrative theories would resume the other to the systematicity of function and while Ricoeur would maintain its infinite distance as vital to the dialogical relation of man and God, Nancy intimates the other as that nothing, as the *between* of contagion which does not coagulate into a substance or totality.
44. As promised in a note early on in his essay, Nancy includes a further discussion of the meaning of contagion. Here the issue of contagion appears in the context of defining mimesis. Mimesis is problematic in meaning, denoting imitation but notoriously unclear when it comes to how imitation works. Freud proposes a process of identification; Levy-Bruhl proposes an experience of participation; in Nancy’s view, neither develops a satisfying account. A reconsideration of archaic sacrifice, however, offers some clue. In the classic descriptions of Robertson Smith and Durkheim, sacrifice works according to a social-integrative model of communion. In this communion, contagion is the key dynamic because contagion makes possible a general communication of affect, which in turn secures the social totality. Contagion here marks a between which is ultimately intransitive, resumptive. Frenzy, effervescence, the fascination of the abomination in the ritual all represent a between of contagion that serves a linking of the all in a one greater than the sum of its parts.
45. Nancy proposes another kind of contagion, one in which the between is transitive and is not resumed; this he names a “non-communal communication” characteristic not of communion but of being in common. Through a long history of the fascination of the abomination, Western religion has feared this contagion, shunning it not only because of its impurity in cultural-systemic terms but because such contagion adumbrates an “incommunion” which is impossible to appropriate to the economies and systems of ontotheology.

³³Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable,” 37.

³⁴Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable,” 37.

³⁵Nancy, “The Unsacrificeable,” 38.

46. The incommunion of contagions characterizes the between. It traces an exposure and an offering of each singularity to the other and to the plurality of other singularities. This incommunion characterizes a being that is not a totality of the social body or the culture-system but rather a differential threading of the singular and plural, of an uncommon being in common (or, in Alphonso Lingis's phrase, a community of those who have *nothing* in common [*italics mine*]). Contagions, then, measure the distance and separation of the other, of alterity, not in terms of an outside, but in terms of a step not taken, a step not beyond, an "enigmatic contact," in Blanchot's phrase, which is a (not) touching upon an Unknown. Finitude and its exposure and offering are not taken up by a totality; their transcendence is in the horizon of a between that separates and distances.

47. In Nancy's model, fascination gives way to a clarity that is not one of a social-integrative function or even a negative theology but rather a clarity of the differential, of difference. The abomination need not irresistibly fascinate with the prospect of an infinite appropriation. As in the hypersubjective reference of Ricoeur, but with a difference, the between of contagion marks the touch, the call of the neighbor with whom one is never finished. The abomination is only a sign of the other, the others.

48. The perspective on contagions and the between developed by Nancy might be compared to Deleuze and Guattari, who declare, following a parallel line of thought: "To filiation we oppose contagion."³⁶ The molecular operates through a transverse communicativity, moving through what Deleuze and Guattari name the "in-between." The in-between opens lines of flight, deterritorializations that unravel the hierarchical orders and regulatory schemas of molar systems and economies. The in-between affords a possibility of imagining sociality in a different way than proposed by social-contract theory and by functional-structuralist models such as Douglas's. The contagious communication that occurs with the in-between shows the human as fundamentally exposed to world, as indeed exposing world *as* world. One is in a certain sense always at the beginning of the world; one is like the grass because one has given over all that stops us from "slipping between things and growing in the midst of things."³⁷ Giving over the dreams of filiation, of synchrony and the intransitive, one is transfixed, among, exposed to, the contagions of the others. Sociality means that one grows as a singularity traced by the alterity of that plural in-between, scattered and gathered, each time, another time, not a stop.

49. Contagions indicate more than an ideological resource for segregating the pure and impure in their various guises, significant as this function is to understanding power and the forms of cultural hegemony. Contagions, the between'from a cultural-systemic view, a matter of function and integration and the control of difference; contagions, the between'in view of an analysis of finitude and infinitude, an unworking and a disintegration. One that, however, may at the same time be said to create the world, inasmuch as world may be defined, to recall Nancy, by coappearing, coexisting: the contact or contagion of the one and the other, their anachronic proximity and dispersion, their touching not a touching together but a glide and a drift, sociality a common incommunion.

³⁶Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 293.

³⁷Deleuze and Guattari, 280.

Notes

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Updated 07/28/21.
jcrt.org/archives/02.2/majer
