

Book Review

Diego Bubbio, *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition: Perspectivism, Intersubjectivity, and Recognition*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 2014, pp. 226, ISBN: 9781438452517 (hbk).

The eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant still casts enormous shadows over much contemporary religious and philosophical thought. It could hardly be otherwise; Kant is the last 'common ancestor' of both the analytical and continental philosophical traditions. He is the final figure both schools of thought consider a worthy interlocutor—although, admittedly, there is nigh insurmountable distance between the Kant of Frege and Strawson and that of the Kant of Hegel and Lyotard. Even so, few thinkers besides maybe Plato have exerted such influence—and been the cause of such anxiety of influence—as Kant has been in European intellectual life.

In this volume—part of the SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy—Diego Bubbio continues an analysis that was, in several respects, inaugurated a decade ago in his fine *Il Sacrificio. La Ragione e il suo Altro* (*Sacrifice: Reason and Its Other*, Città Nuova, 2004). In his previous work, Bubbio considered the question of sacrifice and its relation to reason through a series of hermeneutic reflections on the ways in which sacrifice might be considered to somehow transcend rationality—or at least be irreducible to those concepts which are routinely used to express or provide an account of it. In several respects, *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition* delves into cognate issues. Here, however, the philosophical field is broader (including Kant and Hegel, whom the earlier book did not consider), and the task undertaken is not simply hermeneutic and exegetical, but normative, or—in Kantian terms—'regulative'. The author, in other words, wants to provide a more adequate conception of sacrifice by considering its provenance within German idealism.

Bubbio's contentions are that, first, modern treatments of the idea of sacrifice ultimately trace themselves back to Kant and can be understood properly only in this context; secondly, that mapping the contours of this tradition allows us better to grasp the idea of sacrifice *simpliciter*. Bubbio points out that the standard or 'received' view of sacrifice is that it involves the destruction or negation of something for the sake of something else, often employed as a means of appeasement through a process of surrogation. (This conception holds both for sacrifice in the traditional, ritual, sense, as well as the post-Christian idea of 'self-sacrifice'.) He wants, however, to investigate a road rarely taken: the idea of sacrifice as a kind of withdrawal or emptying—what is sometimes referred to as 'kenotic' sacrifice, a conception that can arguably be traced back to the work of Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme and ultimately—in pre-philosophical form—to the New Testament. It is also Bubbio's position that this is, once we read him carefully, Kant's position as well.

To this end, Bubbio provides a series of interpretations that operate in two directions: first, he offers a number of investigations that suggest that the kenotic conception of sacrifice helps us to understand better the conceptual developments which take place in

post-Kantian idealism, which is—often implicitly—beholden to this idea; and secondly, that the use of the thinkers associated with this tradition allows us to gain a better grasp of sacrifice *per se*, and specifically allows us to understand it in kenotic purview.

What can we make of all of this? Undoubtedly, this is an impressive volume in a variety of respects—indeed, in too many respects to list here. There are interesting lines of argument, such as tying kenotic sacrifice to perspectivism—indeed, in showing the indispensability of one to the other, where the (kenotic) withdrawal is allied to making space for alternate viewpoints; there are also subtle considerations of what Terry Pinkard calls the ‘Kantian paradox’, especially as this manifests in the domain of religion. There is also an uncanny capacity to show commonalities between ostensibly opposed thinkers, most notably between Hegel and Nietzsche.

And yet there are, of course, things here that one might complain about, the most puzzling of these being the uncharacteristic sloppiness of SUNY’s copyediting. The missing words, awry punctuation, and syntactical mishaps which appear regularly in the text thankfully never serve to obscure the lines of argument; they are, however, distracting to the reader without being fatal to one’s appreciation of the volume. (I am now led to believe that a corrected edition is in preparation.) There are also some odd oversights. For instance, can any discussion of the place of the concept of sacrifice in idealism really afford to ignore the work of Schelling? Along a similar line, we might wonder why Bubbio’s engagement with so much contemporary thought is so cursory. Of course, it is always easy—too easy, in fact—to chide an author for missing something out, as if a text could somehow incorporate everything into its ambit. But my complaint here—if it is one—is actually more selfish and subjective: I would be very interested in Bubbio’s thoughts on contemporary thinkers like Žižek. And while I have some difficulties in accepting Bubbio’s contention that Girard offers no normative account of sacrifice—especially in light of Girard’s most recent work, including the correspondence between him and the late Raymond Schwager—his interpretation of Girard as a perspectivist is thoroughly convincing, and should (hopefully!) provoke the ire of many orthodox Girardians.

Bubbio’s particular talent is for re-excavating the history of Western philosophy and asking us to see anew things that we have read before. With the exception of a fascinating chapter on the work of K. W. F. Solger, the thinkers here are not obscure and nor are the texts examined. Bubbio does not spend needless energy on asides and footnotes, so common in a deconstructive era, but on some of the most famous passages of major thinkers—from Kant’s Preface in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to Nietzsche’s excoriation of ‘slave morality’ in the opening sections of *The Genealogy of Morals*. What he is able to do is help us to read these well-worn passages again and prompt us to think about them in terms other than what we are used to. Whether or not one ultimately sides with the theses proffered in the book—specifically that kenotic sacrifice offers us a ‘hermeneutic key’ to understanding idealism—the mere interpretative ingenuity and rigour of the philosophical mind here is to be admired.

Although Kant has been a figure of fascination for some time, in some senses, the enormous task of understanding both the nature and the ambit of the Kantian legacy in contemporary thought has only just begun. If *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition* is any indication of the quality and trajectory of the inquiry, then we are—it seems—in very good hands.

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