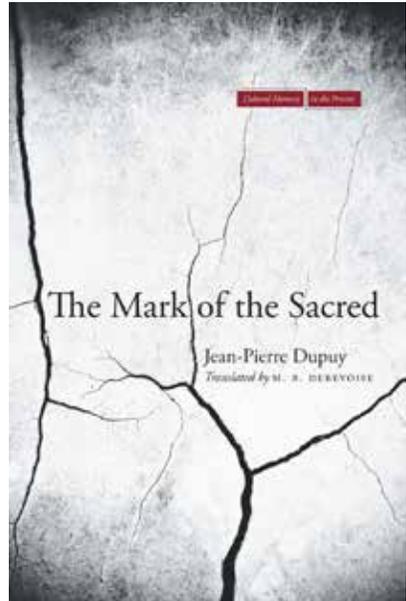

BOOK REVIEW

The Mark of the Sacred by Jean-Pierre Dupuy

By Anders Kølle

In *The Mark of the Sacred* (2013) the French economist and philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy sets out on a journey across the vast terrain of human rites, rituals, sacrifices and violence that constitute an essential and unneglectable part of human history. For Dupuy this history is first and foremost a history of limits, borders, and transcendence. The sacred is the very means by which man searches out boundaries and marks out lines of demarcation – between what is permissible, sayable, and praiseworthy



on one hand, and what is impermissible, taboo and profane on the other. From the perspective of Dupuy there is therefore always something of a territorial animal walking its rounds at the very heart of religious thinking. As a lion or a wolf meticulously and persistently secures and defends its territory from trespassers and intruders, so a religious community fiercely protects its domain. The rituals and the rites are in a way nothing but the routine repetition of a difference: Between what is inside and what is outside, between what properly *belongs* and what is foreign and external. Separation and discrimination is therefore as much the objective of religious rituals as it is the aim of the territorial animal-however with one crucial

difference: *Unlike* the wolf or the lion, religious man does not solely mark out limits and borders in order to keep others out – he does it in order to delimit and restrict *himself*. What the production of difference guards is, in other words, not exclusively the trespassing of others but also – and even more importantly – the trespassing and straying off of religious man himself. Only through the creation of otherness does something like selfhood and a notion of self emerge. And only through the production of exteriority does man find something beyond himself which helps define and settle his own role and place. Far from repeating or miming traditional Hegelian dialectics, Dupuy thus makes contradiction and not synthesis the main purpose of religious thought: It is only to the extent that man recognizes an otherness which forever remains outside his control and grasp that man finds the necessary means to control and delimit himself. The sacred is, for Dupuy, precisely this gift to humanity: The gift of self-restriction and self-governance.

Now, it is this very gift that modernity with its tendencies toward disenchantment, demystification and desacralization threaten to take away. Following in the footsteps of the sociologists Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, Dupuy identifies the unlimited rule of rationality as the source of modern distress and destruction. Where nothing outside human ambitions and wants is appraised and worshipped, where no exteriority and otherness is there to delimit the actions of man, the purified reason turns into a madness of immanence: The moment everything is brought within reach and control is also the moment man loses control of himself. The gift of modern technology and of modern sciences is, according to Dupuy, also a poison; modern man's omnipotence is at the same time his impotence. In his self-aggrandizing pursuit of progress, man loses not only the respect and value of nature but also the respect and value of human life itself:

Modernity was born amidst the rubble of traditional symbolic systems, in which it could sense the presence only of the irrational and the arbitrary. But in its urge to do away with these systems once and for all, to utterly demystify the world, modernity failed to see that traditional systems, by setting limits to the human condition, endowed it with meaning; in replacing the sacred by reason and science, it lost sight of the fact that the very finiteness of life is what makes it worth living.¹

This blindness that inhabits and cripples the clear sight of reason and science is also what Dupuy, following the German philosopher Günther Anders, calls the “Promethean discrepancy”: In modernity “our power of making and doing infinitely exceeds our capacity for feeling and imagining.”² Just as this discrepancy led to the unforgettable horrors of Holocaust and Hiroshima, it is now leading all of mankind towards the brink of doom: Nuclear weapons, global warming, nanotechnology, and biotechnology are all the offspring of man’s ability to create his own menace as the rotten fruit of his unwise wisdom. What has already begun to limit the possibilities of man in the form of ecological catastrophes is thus a limitation born of man’s own limitless behavior. For Dupuy, the loss of the sacred and the desacralization of the world is therefore not, as commonly believed and argued by Enlightenment thinkers, what will emancipate and free man, but rather what will enslave him and chain him to his own unlimited immanence and turn him into a victim of his own conquests. The “iron cage” of rationality only entraps man the moment he believes to have been set free. Dupuy therefore fundamentally agrees with Martin Heidegger when the German philosopher once stated that “the sciences do not think”. But he disagrees concerning the cure: To bring the sciences in touch with philosophy and with the insights and wisdom of philosophical thinking is not enough, cannot save us from the imminent danger that modernity has placed us in. Nor can philosophers take it upon themselves to think on the scientists’ behalf. Rather thinking must in fact turn towards its limitations, embrace its own finitude and

insufficiencies, treasure its own shortcomings. In a strange and paradoxical way this means to think what must always remain outside thought – as an exteriority that can never, should never, be internalized and as an otherness that must remain forever foreign. Perhaps for this reason one inevitably has the feeling when reading Dupuy that he constantly defers or postpones the essential – that the sacred remains outside and untouched by his words. But in this case how could language do otherwise than constantly push what it wants to name in front of itself? Pursue it only in the hope of never reaching it? To rethink an exterior – an exterior that remains forever outside language and thought is the paradoxical objective of Dupuy's own thinking. For to circumvent it is to kill it, to describe it is to annul it. But to forget it, as modernity has sought to do, is to be on the path to self-destruction. Hence everything depends on the right distance – and everything in Dupuy's text becomes an art of keeping this distance: Advancing without coming too close, retreating without ever losing sight of what is essential. An awkward position indeed, which cannot hide its own awkwardness: The madness of immanence and the smothering of the sacred await the text on both sides of its course and of its movement. Hence writing must in a sense become ritualistic and performative itself: an endless return to that which always escapes – and the escape of that which always returns. The linear progression of thinking and writing is no longer an ideal or an intellectual virtue. Perhaps it is therefore no coincidence that the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and the films *La Jetée* by Chris Marker and *Vertigo* by Alfred Hitchcock find their way into Dupuy's book on the sacred. This is not solely because great works of art, like the sacred itself, seems to place us in the immediate proximity of an infinite distance: the irreducible distance that smiles back at us from the lips of Mona Lisa or from the waterlilies by Monet. Much closer to Dupuy's own writing is the abysmal dread and fascination that Borges and Hitchcock expressed so well: The vertigo that accompanies the sacred whether this appears to us as the irreproachable beauty of Kim Novak or as the spirits of animistic beliefs.

END NOTES

¹ Dupuy, 2013, p.79

² Dupuy, 2013, p.185