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"Every creature your sacrifice and your idol". Personality, relationality and forgiveness

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This morning, I will attempt to think alongside one of my favorite companions, Johann Georg Hamann, still and perhaps perennially the most underappreciated figure of the Enlightenment. It feels slightly peculiar for an American living in Britain to come to Poland to talk about a German, but in Hamann's case the situation is even more complex, as his native Königsberg is, of course, German no longer, and Hamann himself was a habitual crosser of boundaries, whether linguistic, national, religious, or social.[2] He worked in French

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2 Knut Martin Stünkel suggestively considers this geographical aspect of Hamann by way of his interactions with the Latvian language and people. Stünkel, "'Only a single cadence of a few notes'? Johann Georg Hamann's Religious Contact with the Baltic Region," *Entangled Religions* 14.6 (2023).

and English, spent significant time in Riga, Warsaw, and London, brought his Lutheran faith into sincere dialogue with rationalist, Jewish, and Catholic partners, and befriended anyone he thought was interesting regardless of whether he could agree with them at all – notably, Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant.

Hamann was utterly individual in his style and positioning; one can find no fiercer opponent of following the crowd, not even Kierkegaard (who adored Hamann). What Hamann refers to as "Nobody, the well-known"[3] – the crowd, the public – is a non-person. It has no individuality. But it is through his friendships, particularly with Johann Herder and Friedrich Jacobi, that much of Hamann's work was preserved. Even more, it is through those friendships, through the multitude of relations in which Hamann was enmeshed, that his work is even intelligible. So, in his life we find an illustration of the basic principle that individuality, the irreducibility and uniqueness of the person, is not at all in opposition to true relationship. Rather, they are mutually supporting. The question, therefore, is how they come out of joint, and what to do about it.

It is with that question in mind that I turn to a paragraph from Hamann's 1762 treatise *Aesthetica in Nuce*, which is an attack on the consequences of emptying the Bible, the human person, and the natural world of their uniqueness:

> All the colors of this most beautiful world grow pale once you extinguish its light, the firstborn of creation. If your belly is your god, then even the hairs on your head are under its guardianship. Every creature will alternately become your sacrifice and your idol. – Subject against its will – but in hope, it groans beneath your yoke or at your vain conduct; it does its best to escape your tyranny, and longs even in the most passionate embrace for that freedom with which the beasts paid Adam homage, when GOD brought them unto man to see what he would call them; for whatsoever man would call them, that was the name thereof.[4]

3 Dedication to the *Socratic Memorabilia*: "To the Public, or Nobody, the Well-Known." Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3. For the German original, see Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke* I, ed. Josef Nadler (Verlag Herder, 1950), 57.

4 Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, in: *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 78. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke* I, 206.

Hamann gives voice to the religious underpinning and consequence of pervasively secular reason—'every creature will alternately become your sacrifice and your idol.'To be left to your own devices or to follow the crowd are to make the belly your god—a reference to Philippians 3:19, "Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. "What Hamann understands as earthly-mindedness is not at all, however, an excessive love for the world. On the contrary, it is a reduction of all creatures to instrumentality, either as sacrifices or as idols, that is, as disposable husks or objects of worship, in either case seeking to fill a bottomless pit of desire.

What Hamann observes is that godlessness, a sterile and pure secularity, is therefore never at issue. Furthest from an exclusion of the sacred from the bounds of human social existence, we instead see a return of the sacred in force, not as bestowing freedom on anyone but as subjugating each thing to a binary logic of unsurpassed violence. If I trust in this thing to save me, then it is my god, and I can sacrifice anything and everything to it to get what I need. And if it is not my god, then I can sacrifice it to whatever thing I come to trust in—to a greater good. Thus, faith is at issue in a most basic way; it seems wherever faith dwells, there we see the rise of yet one more cruel god, one more site of sacrifice, and alongside it the erasure of both real persons and life-giving relations.

Now, Hamann's phrase 'every creature' is expansive and includes the human as well as the nonhuman. I will return to that question. But as Hamann recognizes, the conviction of the biblical tradition is that the human person in their uniqueness cannot be sacrificed. Their life is not fungible, not a token which can be traded for something else. There is no greater good than the good of persons. In Matthew 16, Jesus says, "For what will it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his life? Or what will he give in return for his life?" (Mt 16:26). Life has no exchange value—it is priceless because it is unique.

That uniqueness arises out of the specific and individual character of the God to whom it belongs, whose nature it is to give the world, and himself with it, rather than demand its sacrifice. We are quite right to find in the Trinity the root of individuality and person. However, we should be careful not to locate the *historical* discovery of this individuality in the debates over the Trinity, when in fact it appears much earlier. It is expressed already in the ancient confession of Deuteronomy 6, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord

is one."[5] That one, the Hebrew *echad*, is not simply a numerical designation; especially as it is expressed alongside the divine name, it indicates God's utter and unsurpassable uniqueness. He is himself.

Likewise, we find the same individuality expressed in the election of Abraham, which is not the elevation and priority of the universal man, but of one man among many, a particular through whom all the families of the earth, in their plurality, would be blessed.[6] God calls Abraham by name, introduces himself by name, and is in turn called upon by name. Similarly, Hamann refers to every creature as longing for the freedom which characterized even Adam calling the beasts by name. In this giving and receiving of names, calling and being called upon, it is unthinkable that relationship and person could be opposed, or that something like an isolated individual could even exist.

Following from this, the problem in our social relations cannot be too strong a sense of the self. Personality and selfhood are not threatened by relation but dwell and emerge within it. We have a self that is already a relation, and so we need not entertain the suppression of individuality as of any value for a truly relational, common life. Nor can we entertain a greater good than the good of persons.

On this point, I have been helpfully provoked by a recent work on political theology by the Jewish scholar Daniel Weiss.[7] Weiss levels apolite but serious accusation that Christian political theologies have far too often been comfortable with the notion of sacrificing some measure of individuality—or more precisely, some individuals—to a supposedly greater good. It seems to me that Christian theology has resources to answer that challenge—if the binding of Isaac cuts off the possibility of the sacrifice of human persons,[8] how much more should we be able to say that the death of Jesus precludes politically instrumentalizing the death of a person? But if this is so, then the fact of governments of supposedly Christian nations continuing to sacrifice individuals to the collective demonstrates the depth of the idolatry in which we are enmeshed.

5 Deuteronomy 6:4.

6 Genesis 12:3.

7 Daniel H. Weiss, *Modern Jewish Philosophy and the Politics of Divine Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

8 Genesis 22:1–14.

The situation of holding every creature as alternately sacrifice and idol extends to our selves and our communities, and it is precisely this oscillation which accounts for the self-centred tribalism of modern political life. Tribalism or identity politics, whether of the left or of the right, is a paradox, a self-centredness without a real self. It is an attempt to wring a person, a 'me' out of a category, as if belonging to such and such a nation or party could on its own supply me with a self. The 'me' that God has spoken is sacrificed to the idol of the tribe. Even here, relationships may be viewed as constitutive of the self – I am a member of my tribe, and so an enemy of others; or worse, an enemy of others first, and so a member of my tribe. Hatred and bigotry become the relations that constitute persons. But when the only alternative seems to be drifting in loneliness and disaffection – the idolization of myself and sacrifice of all else – tribal identity may appear the lesser evil.

What would deliverance from this dilemma look like? Or to say it differently, where does divine harmony express itself in the created order, and how may that be drawn upon when the world appears anything but harmonious? It is remarkable, more so the more one is familiar with stories of origin, that in the unique account of Genesis 1the world comes to be in true harmony without any note of divine violence, any conquest over a resistant foe, any overcoming of an ontological or mythological boundary, gap, or chasm. God speaks – this is divine breath and word, Trinitarian action – and what is spoken simply is. "Let there be light," and there was light.

In his 1772 *The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, Hamann takes up this tradition of creation as divine speech, which for him is key to the true essence of language: "Every phenomenon of nature was a word, – the sign, symbol, and pledge of a new, secret, inexpressible but all the more fervent union, fellowship, and communion of divine energies and ideas. All that man heard at the beginning, saw with his eyes, looked upon, and his hands handled was a living word; for God was the word."[9] Or more succinctly: creation is a speech "to creatures, through creatures."[10] It is in this creative speech – not as idea, an original plan or pattern, but as sensual, vocalized life that creation comes to be in its irreducible particularity. Every phenomenon

9 Hamann, *The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, in: *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 107. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke* III, 32.

10 Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*, in: *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 65. Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke* I, 198.

of nature was a word; therefore every creature a word, both unique in its position and related to every other word.

Yet the harmony evident in Genesis 1 is not the world as we experience it. Our lives, as ourselves, are full of conflict, which is why we would seek signs of harmony at all. Here, however, we must specify what is meant by 'signs.' The words of God in Genesis 1 may be called signs only in a curious sense, because they do not defer or point elsewhere; they are already the things themselves. This too is not our experience. Our common experience of language is its failure, the deception and emptiness inherent in calling out a word which cannot deliver what it says. I can speak, but my words cannot make themselves true.

In contrast with that experience, the church has been entrusted with true words which bring harmony and stand as unique and effective signs on account of the one who speaks all things into being. These are social words which constitute living community and upon which such community stands. They do this because they name and address persons; because they concern unique selves in their complex bodily relationships to one another; because they concern the ways in which human existence, social and ecological, is determined either as idolatrous and destructive, or as harmonious. What are these words? Two examples: 'This is my body', and 'your sins are forgiven.'

It is forgiveness that seems to me of critical importance because it is in desperately short supply. Both individualism and tribalism function by placing blame. The individual is blameless because they can accuse the whole world from their isolated standpoint: "It's not my fault. It's all of you." The tribe is similarly blameless because the other side, the enemy, is the faulty one. The tribe is the assembly of the pure, and as such it is sectarian and so heretical in a root sense, constituting a *haeresis*, a sect. The sect is always too pure for the church,[11] which remains on earth until the end as a mixed body of sinners taken up into God's holiness. To admit this is not to weaken the church's witness, but to clarify it – we live as those forgiven by God, who bear with one another because of the mercy shown to us.

11 John Behr's judgment regarding the context Irenaeus of Lyon's interventions into Roman church life in the 2nd century remain pertinent to modern sectarianism. It is the sect that is intolerant. The church, whatever its failings, must contain diversity, but the sect cannot. "Marcion, as we have seen, chose (the verb for which, αἱρέω, is the root of the noun *hairesis*), on his own initiative and by his own actions, to separate himself off from the broader body of Christians in Rome, so forming his own 'church', or 'faction' – that is, his own hairesis." Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 40.

Persons are preserved because they are forgiven, and only in the light of that forgiveness is the harmony, the goodness of their created uniqueness, made evident. There is no harmony in a world of enemies, and we become other than enemies only in the light of forgiveness. Forgiveness values and preserves the person. It is in no way limited to addressing an internal consciousness of guilt, or to one's private standing before God. It is the healing of a person who is therefore capable of action in the world, precisely in relation to other persons.

What I want to suggest alongside Hamann is that if the forgiveness of sins is the basis of restored individuality, and so of healthy community, it is also the wellspring of a proper ecological attention. This cannot be understood in a scientific sense, obviously. Nor certainly in the sense that creation as such would need forgiveness. The nonhuman world neither asks nor receives that from us. Nevertheless, it is only by that forgiveness which we receive and so give that other creatures are restored from their bondage as either our sacrifices or our idols and given freedom once more. Furthermore, we should interpret creatures expansively, to include not only living flora and fauna, but the larger systems in which they are embedded; and further still, to include the products of human technology, culture, and political wisdom. These too are vulnerable to misuse, both by their sheer instrumentalization and by their idolization. These too are also in need of restoration to good function. The danger of the algorithmic reduction of humanity is not a pure result of the technological; ChatGPT and machine learning systems in general remain simply tools, inherently no more or less dangerous than whatever instrument by which Cain slew Abel. It is in our hands that they become deadly. To use these things well, we ourselves must be healed.