What Did It Cost? Sacrifice and Kenosis in *The Infinity Saga*

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Comic book films are generally appreciated for providing cathartic experiences of moral clarity through their depictions of good triumphing over evil. Often utilizing a narrative structure that Joseph Campbell called the "hero's journey," these stories typically center around a protagonist whose struggles propel them on a path of personal transformation and fulfillment. The effectiveness of such films depends largely on the audience's ability to bond with the main character in order to experience a vicarious moral victory through psychological identification with the hero's challenges and triumphs.

While these films often reach mythological proportions that frequently border on the religious, one of the criticisms of the genre by religious and non-religious viewers alike is the tendency to offer a relatively one-dimensional portrayal of evil. Villains, at times, seem to be little more than demonic archetypes serving as plot foils for the hero. In this sense, the genre has not strayed very far from the standard action genre, which Terry Christensen summed up in his exhaustive study of American cinema from *Birth of a Nation* to *Platoon*: "the bad guys act out of greed or ambition, and the good guys act to stop the bad guys" (1987, 213).

But as C.S. Lewis once quipped, "you can be good for the mere sake of goodness; you cannot be bad for the mere sake of badness.... no one ever did a cruel action simply because cruelty is wrong" (2001, 44). Hannah Arendt, the Jewish reporter who was invited to witness the trial of Holocaust organizer Adolf Eichmann, spoke of the "banality of evil" (2006), which John Milbank later expounded upon in his observation that "the horror of Auschwitz...is not the revelation of evil perpetrated for its own sake, but rather a demonstration that even the most

seemingly absolute evil tends to be carried out by people who imagine, albeit reluctantly, that they are fulfilling the goods of order, obedience, political stability, and social peace" (2003, 2).

This is perhaps why Christian theologians from Augustine to Aquinas and all the way up to the present have tended to speak of evil not as a substantive aspect of existence, but as a *privatio boni*—a privation, or perversion, of the good. Evil comes when good ends are sought in excess of what is necessary or at the expense of others. Even the figure of "Satan" is understood in orthodox theology as having "fallen" from goodness. Within this context, then, evil does not really "exist"—at least not in any necessary, eternal, or inevitable sense. Rather, "evil" is understood to emerge as a consequence of distortions in human thinking. These distortions result from our natural psychological limitations, as well as the cultural paradigms into which we are born, which cause us to develop a godlike sense of subjectivity that corrupts our moral discernment, and blinds us to the shadow side of the systems in which we participate, as well as the effects that our individual actions have on ourselves and others.

Christians refer to this basic condition of moral confusion as "original sin." Indeed, Augustine characterized sin as *concupiscentia,* or "distorted desire." The ideologies we absorb from birth impress upon our understanding of the world in ways that disguise themselves as innate. "Sin" thus most often appears to us in a guise that is different from what we typically expect – not as clear-cut moral depravity, but in cultural patterns that are cloaked as "common sense" and believed to be necessary for order, and goodness, and the relative peace of the status quo. As John McDowell explains in his discussion of original sin:

> such an inheritance assumes that its own way of seeing the world and acting in it is not only legitimate but *natural*—its contingency and arbitrariness are accordingly masked. That is why those inculcated into the various forms of racism, patriarchalism, consumerism, and imperialism...fail to see through their identity-determining beliefs and find all manner of ways to justify them. (2007, 56)

These "distortions" convert our basic human need for physical security into greed and mistrust, our natural desire for love and affection into narcissistic ambition or blind obedience, and our right to autonomy into suspicion and preemptive violence. Several Biblical commentators have identified this threefold struggle over "possessions, prestige, and power" as a theme that weaves throughout the Scriptures (Rohr 1995, 18), starting with an oft-overlooked passage in Genesis 3:6, which reveals the three underlying issues that tempt Eve to eat from "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" in the first place: she sees that it is good for food, that it is a delight to the eyes, and that it is desirable to make one wise. These same three issues lie at the heart of the challenges faced by the Israelites during their 40 years in the wilderness, and they are also the three temptations that Jesus faces and overcomes during his 40 days in the wilderness, thus revealing himself as the human being who was "without sin" (Myers 1997).

"Evil," then, at least from a theological standpoint, is not something or someone that should be thought to exist *out there*—a "bad guy" who can finally be eradicated by the "good guys." Sin, rather, is always lurking at our own doorstep (Gen. 4:7). Indeed, it is often precisely when we start to project evil onto others that we are most ready to become its unwitting preparators. Biblical scholar Walter Wink has criticized the entire comic book genre on this very point, for its propagation of what he called the "myth of redemptive violence": the belief that violence against "evil" can save us. Wink argues convincingly that this mythology is, in fact, the dominant "religion" of our day—far more prevalent than Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. This doctrine is so effective and so pervasive *precisely* because it is largely invisible: "violence simply appears to be the nature of things," writes Wink. "It seems inevitable" (1998, 42).

While *The Infinity Saga* certainly participates in the perpetuation of this myth through an overall adherence to the standard tropes of the comic book genre, the film saga when taken as a whole also offers an impressive attempt to disrupt and deconstruct this narrative arc, as an increasingly complex set of villains are met by an increasingly nuanced assortment of heroes who struggle constantly with the question of what makes them any different from their enemies. As Captain America remarks in *Age of Ultron*, "Ultron thinks we're monsters. That *we're* what's wrong with the world. This isn't just about beating him. It's about whether he's right."

"Every villain is a hero in his own story and believes that what they're doing is right," Joe Russo observed in an interview with the Motion Picture Association of America (Abrams 2018). This was the insight that led to the Russo brothers' decision to cast one of Marvel's greatest supervillains in the role of the protagonist for *Avengers: Infinity War.* One only needs to consider masterpieces of cinema like *The Godfather, A Clockwork Orange,* and *American Psycho* to appreciate the chilling effect that protagonist villains can have on audiences, who find themselves sympathizing with the main character even while maintaining a sense that their actions are wrong.

But the Russo brothers took this approach one step further, placing the protagonist villain within a kind of "hero's journey," resulting in one of the most hauntingly realistic portrayals of evil ever seen in a major comic book film. Its effect on audiences was an almost total inversion of the kind of moral clarity one typically expects from the genre, as an unusually large number of fans came away from the theatre arguing that the villain was right. Memes and YouTube videos began circulating widely in Thanos' defense. T-shirts were printed in feigned endorsement of "Thanos for president." The general speculation as to whether Thanos may have had "a point"

inspired websites like Vox and Forbes to publish lengthy articles in consultation with scientists and economists to seriously consider the question.

This was not a simple case of "misaimed fandom." Interviews with the Russos make it clear that this effect was intentional—events in the film were skewed in order to wholly reflect Thanos' point of view and make him seem more sympathetic. An earlier version of the throne room scene, for example, shows Gamora condemning Thanos for kidnapping, orphaning, and imprisoning her, but this was later replaced with the version we see in the final film, in which Thanos appears rational and benevolent, while the fiercest woman in the galaxy comes across like an angry child, incapable of understanding the difficult decisions that her father has to make. Meanwhile, the rest of the Avengers in *Infinity War* are depicted as disorganized, weak, incompetent, and arrogant, as they try to stop Thanos with brute force. Nowhere in the film does anyone bother mentioning the economic, ideological, or mathematical flaws of the mad Titan's strategy. Even Dr. Strange's reference to genocide seems to fall flat in light of Thanos' seemingly more nuanced perspective.

In this way, *Infinity War* was crafted precisely to disrupt the audience's perceptions of who is good and who is evil, challenging us to dig deeper in our moral discernment. Unfortunately, many casual modern American moviegoers are ill-equipped to engage in this level of ethical analysis, particularly when confronted with the same consequentialist logic that is built into the very fabric of our own social, economic, and political lives. Our common life is grounded in a utilitarian approach to moral thinking that determines what is good based on outcomes, favoring whatever maximizes "happiness" (however ambiguously defined) for the majority, regardless of the means by which that outcome is sought.

From this perspective, Thanos' argument actually seems to make sense. Even the aforementioned articles that set out to find flaws in his ideology did so largely from a utilitarian point of view: Thanos was "wrong" only if it could be proven that his idea wouldn't have worked anyway—either because by destroying half of all life he would inevitably be destroying many things that were themselves "resources," or because either way, within a couple hundred years, the universe would be right back to where it started, and the sacrifice would need to be repeated all over again.

But perhaps this is what Thanos means in *Avengers: Endgame* when he claims that he is "inevitable." At its core, utilitarianism accepts that a certain amount of suffering and inequality are natural, and therefore inevitable. Creative, collaborative solutions are overlooked in favor of mathematical risk assessments and the justification of losses as collateral damage on the way to a desired outcome. Several studies have linked utilitarian thinking to psychopathy and a diminished capacity for empathy (Wiech et al, 2013). On a societal level, utilitarianism functions to maintain the illusion of peace at the expense of the marginalized. Taken to its logical conclusion, this cold and calculating mindset can serve to justify processes of dehumanization that determine the value of a human life based solely on its usefulness towards some pragmatic end, just as Thanos evaluates the lives of everyone around him, even his most loyal servant Ebony Maw.

For this reason, many Christians are quick to dismiss utilitarian logic in theory, arguing that "the ends should never justify the means." Yet this perspective remains relatively ubiquitous in practice, as demonstrated by the classic "trolley dilemma"—a thought experiment in which a person is told that they control the switch to a trolley that is hurtling uncontrollably down a track towards five people, a disaster that can only be averted by flipping the switch and redirecting the

car onto another track, where it will only kill one person. Multiple studies have shown that approximately 90% of people will choose to kill the one person in order to save five—*unless* that person happens to be someone they love, in which case the percentage drops to only about a third (Cloud 2011).

Trolley dilemmas abound in comic book films. DC fans will recognize this as one of the classic dilemmas faced by both Batman and Superman. Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* places Peter Parker in a similar predicament, having to choose between saving his beloved Mary Jane or a group of children who are trapped in an actual trolley car. Likewise, the first *Avengers* film culminates in a classic trolley dilemma, as the World Security Council decides whether to destroy New York City in order to prevent the Chitauri from invading the rest of the planet. Typically, our superheroes always manage to find a "third way"—a creative solution that reveals the tragic flaw in utilitarian logic: *it demands a sacrifice*.

Anthropologist René Girard has helpfully unveiled some of the complex psychological mechanisms underlying the human fixation with sacrifice. All human societies, Girard argues, seek to quell the escalation of violence through deeply internalized and unconscious patterns of transference, which allow for ritualized forms of "sacred" violence to be carried out—"sacrifices" that are perceived as necessary for the "greater good." Ultimately, the responsibility for these sacrifices is often either projected onto "the gods," or placed on the victims themselves. But the true purpose of the surrogate victim is pragmatic: it prevents the escalation of violence by satisfying a collective desire for vengeance against some "evil" that can be externalized and eradicated. Sacrificial victims, Girard argues, are usually selected from among the marginalized because those who have no one to avenge their deaths can bear this suffering without any societal threat of further escalation or retaliation (Girard 1977, 11-15).

Drawing on Girard, Wink's notion of the *myth of redemptive violence* points to how these same processes have become inscribed into religious cultures, through mythological stories that perpetuate the notion that such sacrifices are not only necessary, but natural and inevitable. "Civilization" thus gets framed as a kind of trolley dilemma writ large, and played out *ad nauseam.* Peace must always come at a cost. From within this perspective, the "hero" is someone who sacrifices themselves willingly, so that others will not have to be sacrificed unwillingly. The "*super*-hero" is a hero whose special powers or prowess enable them to avoid dying so that they can repeat the necessary sacrifice, over and over again.

Yet these repeated sacrifices only serve to reinforce the underlying belief that the *need* for sacrifice will always continue, with no conceivable end in sight. This highlights one of the main problems associated with the sacrificial mindset: it requires endless repetition in order for it to "work." Sacrifice is a preventative, not a curative method, which is why the ritual needs to be repeated over and over (Girard 1977, 102). It never truly offers a solution to the problem that it seeks to resolve. As long as people continue to believe that violence can bring an end to violence, it remains self-propagating, as Girard has shown: "everyone wants to strike the last blow... reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached" (1977, 26).

In *Marvel's Avengers,* Steve Rogers speaks from a prototypical "hero's" perspective when he slights Tony for not being one to make the "sacrifice play," for not being willing to "lay himself down on a wire" and let someone crawl over him if necessary. Tony answers with a typical superhero's response: "I would just cut the wire," which is exactly what Tony does at the end of *Avengers* when he redirects the bomb that was intended for New York City towards the

Chitauri spacecraft. The first phase of the *Infinity Saga* thus ends with a fairly standard narrative arc that is in keeping with the overall genre.

Beginning in phase two, we begin to see some of the costs associated with this model of heroism, as more and more of the blind spots of the sacrificial method are revealed. Ultimately, over the course of the entire 22-film saga, we follow Tony and Cap on a kind of double hero's journey, as they grapple in parallel but opposing ways with the limitations of redemptive violence, and the realization that in the real world of triage, sometimes even our best efforts to help still result in unintended consequences. Sometimes, not everyone gets saved. Sometimes, more enemies are created in the process. In light of these complexities, how do we know when we are on the side of "good"? And what does it mean to do the "right" thing?

"A Soul for A Soul": Sacrificial Violence vs. Christian *Kenosis*

Underneath all those action-packed fighting scenes between "good guys" and "bad guys," the films of *The Infinity Saga* are engaged in a deeper investigation of the moral limits of utilitarian violence and the true nature of "heroism" in relation to sacrifice. *Avengers: Infinity War* brings this exploration to fever pitch as multiple characters struggle with the question of whether and when a preemptive sacrifice might be necessary for the sake of a greater good. Peter Quill faces his own trolley dilemma when he has to decide whether to kill Gamora in order to prevent Thanos from getting the Soul Stone. Wanda faces the same problem in deciding whether or not to destroy Vision in order to prevent Thanos from getting the Mind Stone. Both Quill and Wanda ultimately choose to go through with the deed, only to have the good outcomes of their sacrifices annulled by Thanos, who nevertheless praises them for their actions. "I like him," the deranged father says of his daughter's boyfriend after he demonstrates his willingness to kill her. In this, Thanos sees a bit of himself in Peter.

These two "sacrifices" bookend and parallel Thanos' own sacrifice of that which he "loves," in one of the most controversial and heart-wrenching scenes of the entire saga. Gamora, unwilling to sacrifice the life of her sister Nebula in order to protect the Soul Stone's whereabouts, accompanies Thanos to Vormir, only to be sacrificed herself at the altar of his benevolent delusions. With tears streaming down his cheeks, the mad Titan hurls the one and only creature he has ever allowed himself to care about to her death. The Soul Stone, apparently indifferent to Thanos' motivations, accepts this murder of Gamora as a legitimate sacrificial exchange—"a soul for a soul."

What kind of "wisdom" is this? "This isn't love," Gamora rightfully protests just before being tossed over the edge. And of course, it *isn't* love—at least not in any theologically meaningful sense of the word. For regardless of whatever feelings of admiration or attachment Thanos may have felt towards the young woman he abducted from Zen-Whoberis, his actions on Vormir demonstrate that he ultimately sees her just like he sees everyone else—as a means to an end. Thus, in the very act of "sacrificing" Gamora to get what he wants, Thanos discredits any claim on "love," since love is that which compels us to sacrifice our own needs and desires for the sake of another.

But perhaps this is to impose a Christian concept of "love" onto a film in which no such framework exists. After all, *The Infinity Saga* does not appear to be interested in the nature of love, but only in the nature of sacrifice. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Thanos does not toss Gamora over the edge in order to obtain the stone merely out of a self-motivated agenda (as the Thanos of the comic books might). Rather, it could be argued, he does so precisely in order to fulfill what he believes to be a higher calling, one that is ostensibly for the sake of others. Significantly, Thanos counts himself among the small percentage of trolley car experiment

subjects who are willing to kill someone they love for the sake of a "greater good." It is for this reason that Thanos "mourns," believing himself to have made the greatest sacrifice of all.

If the prospect of having to kill someone you love—particularly your own child—in order to remain obedient to a higher calling is a story that sounds at all familiar, it is probably because this is exactly how later theological tradition would come to interpret not only the Hebrew story of Abraham and Isaac, but the entire Christian conception of God in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement: God *had* to sacrifice his only Son in order to save humanity from an even worse fate. In *Endgame*, when Thanos threatens to reduce everything down to its last atom if that's what it takes to create a grateful universe, Cap castigates him, saying that it would only be a universe "born out of blood." But one might reasonably ask how this is very different from the God of Genesis, who destroyed the earth with flood in order to create it anew? Indeed, is not our entire Christian narrative that of a world "bought by blood"? Regardless of whether the parallels between one of the greatest supervillains of all time and the Western Christian conception of God were intentional, this should certainly give us pause for thought, and invite us to reconsider the theology that makes such a comparison possible.

A more careful reading of the MCU's depiction of the Soul Stone in light of ancient Western history, in fact, reveals striking parallels between the film's mythological assumptions and those of many pre-Christian Mediterranean cultures. The specific imagery of tossing the sacrificial victim off a cliff, for example, seems to be a direct reference to stories of human sacrifice found throughout ancient Greek literature. Wink contends that the primary theme underlying all such stories is, again, "the victory of order over chaos by means of violence," "the ideology of conquest," and "the original religion of the status quo" (Wink 1998, 48).

This ideology is expressed in one of humanity's oldest known creation myths, the Babylonian story of *Enuma Elish*. The narrative serves as a prototypical example of how ancient cultures inscribed sacrificial violence into their understanding of the universe. Recited every year in the Spring, *Enuma Elish* describes a cosmology created out of a bloody contest between the Divine Feminine (represented by the dragon Tiamat) and her son Marduk (a prince who sought sovereignty over the world). On the battlefield, Marduk slays his mother by slicing her body in two. From these two halves, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth (Dalley 1989). This is quite literally a world "born out of blood," in which human beings were created from the blood of Tiamat's fallen army commander for the purpose of serving as slaves to the gods. Sacrificial violence in exchange for the gods' favor thus becomes a cosmological necessity that is written into the very foundations of the universe.

This understanding of the cosmos was radically contrasted by the Biblical creation story, which we find in Genesis 1. Recorded during the Babylonian exile, the Israelites borrowed a great deal of language for their own myth directly from *Enuma Elish,* in order to present a powerful counternarrative that turned their captors' understanding of the universe on its head (Carr 1996). A remarkably earthy text by comparison, the Hebrew creation story is rooted in phenomenological observations of the universe as an interconnected whole, manifesting in dialectical tensions—darkness and light, day and night, earth and sky, air and water, plants and animals, work and rest—*all* of which was declared to be good. The affirmation that "it was good" is repeated eight times, as if to insist that despite the seeming ubiquity of war, death, and human clamoring for possessions, prestige, and power, the universe is *not* born out of sacrifice and bloodshed, but out of water, breath, spirit, and the creative will of a primordial Imagination.

Furthermore, human beings were *not* created to be slaves unto the gods, but were made in the image of their Creator, imbued themselves with the seeds of creativity, imagination, and an inherent longing for relationship. The instruction to "be fruitful and multiply" re-frames the entire focus of existence away from debt and death, and towards life and abundance. William Gilders therefore argues that the blood sacrifice rituals of the Hebrew tradition actually represented a deconstruction of the sacrificial rites practiced by surrounding cultures. Rather than seeking to placate or appease gods by raising up the smoke of burnt offerings, the Israelites understood themselves to be sharing a meal with their Creator (Gilders 2004, 12-32).

Naturally, these meals occurred at God's dwelling place, the Temple at Jerusalem. But the Temple was not the only site where relational transformation was expected to take place. Hebrew sacrifice rituals were seen as valid only insofar as they were accompanied by an inner transformation of the people, made manifest in practices that gave special consideration to the socially marginalized. Acts of love and mercy, thus, took pride of place over ritual executions (Hosea 6:6), and whenever the Israelites lost their way in this regard—either by forgetting their responsibility to the poor or by falling into the "idolatrous" habit of making sacrifices to other gods in the hopes of getting their desires met—prophets rose up to remind the Hebrew people that they had been chosen by God to follow a different path: "I have had enough of burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats...Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed" (Is. 1:11, 15-17).

This Hebrew re-framing of sacrifice is expressed not only in the prophetic tradition, but even in Hebrew stories that may seem, from a modern perspective, to reinforce ritual sacrifice. The story of Abraham and Isaac, for example, was unique in historical literature not because a

god asks a man to sacrifice his child, but because the God of the Israelites tells Abraham *not* to, and provides him with a ram instead. Similarly, what is unique about the story of Noah in its historical context is not that a god is depicted as destroying the earth with a great flood, since many Mesopotamian cultures had a great flood story. But in the Hebrew version of this myth, God offers a unique promise that this will never happen again (Brueggemann 2010, 73-88).

This Biblical deconstruction of sacrifice reached a climax in 70AD, when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman Empire. A few decades earlier, a homeless rabbi of questionable parentage from a disreputable part of Galilee was put to death in the most shameful manner possible: crucifixion. This unspeakably gruesome form of state-sanctioned murder was reserved especially for those who threatened the order and sovereignty of Rome—an empire whose rulers called themselves "sons of god" (Peppard 2011, 46-49). The Gospel tradition thus tells the story of how a poor Nazarene was killed by the Roman government after being accused of sedition by a belligerent mob that was desperate to prove its loyalty and allegiance to the emperor (see John 19: 6-16).

Shortly after this tragic event, a rogue band of Israelites began traveling around making the bold claim that this very man had been *the* "Son of God," and that his death on a Roman cross constituted a final sacrifice *for the entire world*. Furthermore, these disciples claimed that the man in question had actually been raised from the dead, a miracle signaling the final and total annulment of death's power. The Resurrection effectively disempowered *all* rulers who sought to wield the fear of death in the service of power, at the expense of the poor. Jesus' death exposed the violent underbelly of "pax Romana," laying bare the tragic consequences of collusion between religious authorities and any political power. Christ being raised from the dead rendered all such powers null. Terry Eagleton writes:

> It is Jesus' dedication to justice and fellowship that delivers him to the cross. His solidarity with those who dwell in the borderlands of orthodox society, men and women whose existence signifies a kind of non-being, prefigures the non-being to which he himself is brought... So it is that an act of state brutality also signifies a symbolic undoing of political violence... Authentic power is at war with the status quo, given that its source lies in solidarity with weakness (2019, 26-27).

Jesus' crucifixion therefore radically transformed the concept of "sacrifice" from a necessary loss pursued for the sake of social order to the more radical and subversive sense of *self*-sacrifice, not pursued as an obligatory form of self-denial but as a generative path of liberation—a position from which we are able to stand in solidarity with the suffering and the marginalized even unto death. Paul's word for this understanding of sacrifice was *kenosis,* a Greek word meaning to "empty oneself" (Phil 2:7). For Paul and the early Christians, *kenosis* was not merely a description of something God did, but of *who God is* (Moltmann 1991, 205). The God of Moses, who called himself "I AM" was revealed to be a God whose very nature is made manifest in the active emptying of Self unto Other. This notion of the divine was later inscribed into Christian tradition as the doctrine of *perichoresis*—a singular God whose nature was characterized as an interpersonal dance of "Three in One."

This radical, paradoxical, and unprecedented understanding of God compelled Christians to find their true life and identity precisely in practices of losing it (Luke 17:33). For many early Christians, this meant having to make an empowered leap into their own literal deaths, when the cruelty of state-sanctioned murder was inescapable. For most Christians throughout history, however, the process has entailed a much slower transformation over time, through everyday kinds of relational practices. As Karen Armstrong writes, "the habitual practice of compassion and the Golden Rule 'all day and every day' demands perpetual *kenosis*, the constant stepping outside our own preferences, convictions, and prejudices" (2009, 328).

This practice of "self-emptying" cuts through the moral distortions of our "original sin" by inviting us to de-center our own perspective, and open ourselves up more fully to the perspectives and experiences of others. Such a process may well include some grief and even conflict, as the satisfying delusions that maintain the "negative peace" of our personal status quo must be brought forth to die at the altar of reciprocal truth. This is precisely what is at stake in the recognition of privilege, which requires us to acknowledge and relinquish the various forms of social and interpersonal power that we may wield over others in any given situation or context. It is only through an acknowledgment of our fundamental interdependence that can we move into a more communal and contextual kind of truth, one that is neither blinded by illusions of objectivity nor trapped in the nihilistic relativism of subjectivity. A third way emerges—one in which we can discover a much deeper sense of identity extending beyond the individual self—a phenomenon that Paul referred to as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

It is important to distinguish this early Christian understanding of *kenosis* from the more submissive and obligatory form of self-sacrifice that later came to dominate Western religious culture. Jesus taught that the poor, the oppressed, and those who suffer for justice are "blessed" (Matthew 5:3-12) not because poverty, oppression, or suffering are themselves good or necessary, but because marginalized people already knew what it meant to have to de-center their own experience. The challenge for those who suffer, then, is in fact precisely to *avoid* rationalizing and internalizing their experiences as "necessary" or for some greater good, which only works to justify and conceal violence, and ultimately leads to its recapitulation. Those who have suffered trauma need to resist identifying with either their victimhood or their oppressors, both of which make them vulnerable to repeated experiences of violence and subjugation. The path of Jesus asks us to halt this cycle by inviting us to unmask the truth about lives and our pain,

and finally to grieve it. Only then can we transform our suffering into a wisdom that can be placed in the service of empathy and solidarity.

In *Captain America: Civil War,* Vision observes a rise in the number of conflicts since Tony first donned his Iron Man suit, proposing a possible "causality." But the true correlation is the opposite of what he suggests: it is not that strength incites conflict by inviting a challenge, but that solidarity with the oppressed *exposes* conflicts that would have otherwise remained hidden beneath the surface of our peaceful everyday lives. Tony's journey of *kenosis* begins under just such conditions, working as a weapons manufacturer for the U.S. military. He is totally inured to the costs of war until he becomes his own collateral damage. Out of this experience of suffering, he forges a new identity that allows him to stand in solidarity with others who suffer—an identity that he cannot seem to give up, no matter how many times he tries. Even Pepper finally realizes that for Tony, Iron Man was never just a "job." Tony *is* Iron Man, which is what makes his snap meaningful in the end—not because it represents a dutiful sacrifice carried out for the sake of "a greater good," but because it was the final, authentic manifestation of a life lived according to an unshakeable commitment to stand with those who suffer, no matter the cost.

Natasha's final leap into death on Vormir could be interpreted similarly, although the absence of a fully fleshed-out backstory for Black Widow within the context of *The Infinity Saga* only mirrors the dehumanization and erasure of identity that her character experiences within the film universe, making her demise as sacrificial victim doubly tragic. Having built the necessity of sacrificial death into the film universe, the Russo brothers wrote themselves into a utilitarian corner: someone *had* to die in order for them to get the stone. Joe Russo later explained in an interview that Natasha seemed the most "obvious" choice because, in his estimation, her death

on Vormir offered a "redemptive" conclusion for the former assassin (Breznican 2019). Girard's work, however, suggests that it is precisely Natasha's marginalized status—both diegetically and within the context of the MCU—that makes her the most likely sacrificial candidate.

Looking at this situation through the lens of the early Christian martyrs, then, allows for an even more radical interpretation to emerge: when faced with the cruel but inescapable demand for sacrificial death—a situation constructed by those in power but presented as though it were natural, necessary for the sake of some higher order, or demanded by "the gods"—the martyr transforms that which was a compulsory task into a free decision, thereby exposing the cruelty of the status quo for what it is. As Terry Eagleton writes:

> the evolution of sacrifice arrives when the victim themselves becomes conscious of their condition, and in doing so assumes agency of the event... What was a process to be endured becomes a project to be executed. Those who are cast out can now be signs of the criminal nature of the status quo, and by making this destiny their own, can become the cornerstone of the new dispensation. (2019, 50-51)

"Why Does Someone Always Have to Die in This Scenario?"

For the early Christian communities, Christ's incarnation and resurrection established a posture towards existence that was radically life-affirming to its core. Just as the Hebrew creation narrative shifted the focus of the ancient Israelites from death to life in the midst of the Babylonian exile, this new understanding of a God who was able to work even through death itself to make all things new, established a radical paradigm shift that eradicated death's sovereignty over the consciousness of the poor and marginalized. Local variants of this humbling and empowering faith spread across the Mediterranean and into the regions of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Political powers came and went—some of whom supported the Christians, and some of whom persecuted them. But it was not until the turn of the millennium that the Christian faith itself was fully infiltrated by the doctrines of imperial religion.

Brock and Parker trace this shift to Charlemagne's establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in the tenth century, and to Pope Urban II's subsequent reversal of a thousand years of church tradition by lifting the Christian prohibition on the spilling of human blood. Rather than having to repent of the sins of war prior to being baptized, soldiers could now kill as a *means* of being cleansed from sin. Brock and Parker write, "At the dawn of the Holy Roman Empire, Christianity began to lose its grip on the sinfulness of killing. A new age began—one in which the execution of Jesus would become a sacrifice to be repeated, first on the Eucharistic altar, and then in the ravages of a full-blown holy war" (2008, 252).

The crusades gave birth to a particularly twisted new iteration of the myth of redemptive violence, one that cleverly flipped the script on who was "victim" and who was "villain." Christians who invaded other people's lands and killed them could now be considered "martyrs" and "defenders" of Christian faith. This shift in Christian practice was buttressed by a new theology of Jesus' death posited by Anselm of Canterbury in 1098. Anselm tried to use the new feudal economic system as a metaphor for God's grace, drawing on the experience of crushing debt that most people faced at the time. He described how God, in his mercy, sent his only begotten Son to earth to die on a cross, thereby saving humanity from the crushing weight of our sins, a debt we owed to God that we could never pay (Anselm 1969). The doctrine was theologically flawed at the outset, part of a misguided attempt to respond pastorally to an already deeply-flawed question: why did Jesus *have* to die? The question presupposes that the violence must have been *necessary*—that God must have demanded a sacrifice. Accordingly, Anselm's "satisfaction theory" led to a foregrounding of Jesus' gruesome death that obscured a more holistic understanding of his incarnation, teachings, miracles, resurrection, and ascension.

With Anselm, Christian faith in the West finally yielded to the sacrificial logic of ancient Roman religion. Not everyone agreed with Anselm's theory, of course. It was never adopted in the Eastern Church, and even one of Anselm's own contemporaries, a French theologian named Abelard, objected: "how cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything...still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world (Abelard 1980). Nevertheless, Anselm's ideas took hold in the Western imagination, particularly during the plagues that ravaged Western Europe. Suffering and sacrifice were glorified to the point of near-obsession, as images of Jesus' crucifixion came to dominate Christian imagery and art.

Rather than inviting Christians into a process of reciprocal selfhood in the context of life-affirming community and global transformation, Anselm's satisfaction theory left Western Christians isolated in their self-consciousness and personal sense of guilt. Sin and repentance went from being an interpersonal and communal affair to an individualistic undertaking characterized by private introspection and ritual purgation. Genuine *kenotic* de-centering and accountability in the context of communal relationships gave way to an ego-driven form of self-denial that was deeply invested in its own self-righteousness. This toxic ideology of sacrifice served to theologically rationalize nine crusades, medieval torture, the Inquisition, colonialism, native genocide, and chattel slavery.

At one of the first African slave markets in Europe, the medieval writer Zurara was *inspired* by the suffering of the newly enslaved, who had been captured under the 1455 bull of Pope Nicholas V, granting the King of Portugal the divine right to imprison any non-Christians found in foreign lands and reduce them to perpetual slavery while appropriating their lands and their property for himself. Thinking of the salvation that Zurara believed would be theirs on

account of their sacrifice, he prayed that God would "place before the eyes of these miserable people some awareness of the wonderful things that await them" (Zurara 2010). It is a sentiment hauntingly similar to the words that Ebody Maw speaks to the dying Asgardians in the opening scene of *Avengers: Infinity War*: "You may think that this is suffering; no, it is salvation."

This is why Thanos' sacrificial logic of "salvation" is as chilling as the American public's inability to detect its moral error: we cannot name the sins of Thanos without exposing our own. His ideology parallels precisely that of the European colonizers, who valued the concept of resources and profit over human lives. Indeed, this is a mindset in which a human life can be sacrificially converted into a "resource" for the benefit of others. Seeking paradise and promising salvation, the colonizers brought genocide instead, sacrificing nearly the entire existing population of the Americas in order to create a new world for themselves—a false paradise "born out of blood."

The Protestant Reformation sought to correct what it saw as theological errors in the Western church's understanding of ritual sacrifice, but it only really succeeded in rearranging the liturgical furniture. The burden of Anselm's debt was simply internalized, and imperial arrogance gave way to a delusional sense of personal responsibility, resulting in a highly individualistic culture marked by patterns of psychological splitting and shallow facades of moral superiority. Later, the thinkers of the so-called "Enlightenment" attempted to further correct course, by limiting the influence of "religion" altogether, sequestering all conversations about beauty, and goodness, and truth into the newly secularized realms of "art," "politics," and "science." But these cultural shifts only further disguised the pervasive influence of the old imperial religion, and the ancient sacrificial mindset found new forms of expression within a secular milieu.

Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist and Jesuit priest from the early 20th century, interpreted the findings of Charles Darwin on the evolution of species as being fully compatible with the Biblical creation story found in the Book of Genesis. Teilhard saw the universe as "passionately alive, throbbing, and pulsating with energy and growth," an interconnected and relational web of abundant life that was constantly engaged in a process of 'being fruitful and multiplying' (Delio 2015, 37). Yet most of Darwin's contemporaries interpreted his observations through the lens of a more familiar framework: survival, scarcity, and sacrifice. Thus, a "scientific" variation on the myth of redemptive violence was born, one in which the sacrifices of the weak are necessitated by the "gods" of biology through the process of natural selection.

This same ideology was also imbedded within the new economic system of market-based capitalism: the "fittest" would survive only through self-interest, competition, and the sacrifices of the working class. Rather than creating economic conditions that resonated with the Biblical mandates to care for the poor, or the Christian belief in the inherent dignity of every living being, modern capitalism constructed a new class system that reinforced the age-old logic that the sacrifices of the poor were natural and inevitable. Dickens' character Ebenezer Scrooge famously embodies this attitude in *A Christmas Carol* when he gripes: "If [the poor] would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (Dickens 1911, 18).

Concerns about "overpopulation," of course, are nothing new. But during the 19th and 20th centuries they became increasingly associated with rational, scientific reasoning. Most people nowadays assume that it was Darwin who first suggested that we must limit the human population or else "nature" will limit it for us—through plagues, famines, or other natural disasters. But Darwin was influenced by an 18th-century thinker named Thomas Malthus, who like Thanos used "a simple calculus" to demonstrate that human population grows exponentially,

while resources grow linearly. It was Malthus who first suggested that human catastrophe would be inevitable unless certain controls, or "corrections," were put into place. Hoping to warn his fellow Englishmen about the inevitability of another plague, like the one that had eliminated half of all human life in Europe, Malthus wrote:

> The power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation...and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands (Malthus 1798, 44).

Interestingly, Malthus was neither a mathematician, nor a biologist, nor a scientist. He was an Anglican priest, who had interpreted the Christian concept of *kenosis* through a utilitarian lens. Malthus believed that scarcity had been ordained by God in order to teach human beings virtuous, self-sacrificing behavior.

Malthus was critiqued by many of his own contemporaries, and his "calculus" has now been debunked by population data collected over the last century showing that the rate of global population growth has actually been on the decline since the 1960s, dropping off to sustainable levels particularly in areas with more equitable resource distribution (Roser et al, 2019). But widespread belief in the necessity of sacrificial purgation remains strong, and these ideas continue to hold sway in American culture, particularly among those who would unwittingly accept Malthus' influence on evolutionary ethics and class-based economics. We hear Malthus on the Left whenever environmentalists call for "population control" as a strategy for fighting climate change. We hear Malthus on the Right whenever conservatives suggest that we could end poverty if poor people would only stop having children.

Aside from the scientific and socioeconomic flaws of Malthus' strategy, his biggest error was, ironically, a theological one. By failing to consider humanity's innate capacity for innovation and cooperation—qualities that Christians insist are imprinted onto human beings by God who is the source of all creativity and relationality—Malthus overlooked the possibility that humanity might be capable of finding ways to live in equitable relationship with one another, distributing resources according to need as the prophets instructed and as the early Christians did (Acts 4:35). The insistence that greed and inequality are "natural" and "inevitable" only serves to justify and perpetuate endless cycles of inequality and violence. As Stanley Hauerwas observes, "as long as it is assumed that war is always an available option, we will not be forced to imagine any alternative to war" (2012, 273).

But if it is not "inevitable," why, then, does the myth of redemptive violence remain so pervasive? Even Girard himself, who devoted his life's work to naming and subverting these mechanisms, and who ultimately converted to Christianity as a result, often fell into the bad habit of describing the anthropology of human origins in ways that make this pattern seem wholly unavoidable. The myth of redemptive violence is so persuasive precisely because it is rooted in our existential anxieties about survival, which clouds our judgment and leaves us vulnerable to fear-based systems of thought that seek to establish a sense of order and cognitive equilibrium, at any cost. The answer to this question, then, ultimately lies in trauma, and the question of how we deal with grief. Thanos was willing to sacrifice "everything," even the whole universe, if that's what it would take to cleanse it of the forces that he believed led to his own planet's demise. And yet in the process, he could not see how this strategy only replicated those same forces, rather than eradicating them.

Returning to our discussion of original sin, then, we can see how fears about survival lie at the heart of our struggles with "possessions, prestige, and power," since these are all the methods by which we seek to cheat death. We store up riches, defend our reputations, and try to gain control over our lives and the lives of others. But on that day when we eat from the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," we "die," as *thanatos* becomes our new master. Christians interpret the "tree of Life" as Christ, the one who invites us into life abundant precisely by destroying our fear of death, and thereby destroying all temptations to eat from the tree of knowledge, which causes us to divide the world into "good" and "bad" and see ourselves as justified, while casting blame on the other as Adam and Eve do (Genesis 3).

These are the unconscious patterns that end up replicating our trauma, rather than healing us from it. They turn our most altruistic and well-meaning efforts to heal into paternalism, masochism, and abuse. That is why it is insufficient for us to frame *kenosis* merely in terms of individualistic "self-sacrifice," or even a simple focus on "the needs of others." Thanos, Steve Rogers, and Tony *all* begin their journeys motivated by altruism at some level, drawing from the well of their own suffering to try and heal their trauma by "helping" others. In *Age of Ultron,* Tony's trauma-inspired protectiveness leads him to create Ultron—a character that both mirrors Tony and foreshadows Thanos in the sense that he alone believes that he knows what is best for the world. Steve's hubris runs counter to this throughout *The Infinity Saga*, but is likewise rooted in a basic orientation that leaves him blind to the consequences of his actions. His dutiful commitment to a life of "self-sacrifice" through his military service is what leads to his discovery in *Winter Soldier* that by following orders, he has been working for the enemy all along.

In *Civil War,* Tony and Steve find themselves on the opposite sides of their initial positions. Tony learns to appreciate oversight and the need for a more communally-constructed sense of responsibility and accountability, while Steve learns to trust his own instincts and follow his own inner conscience. In the end, Tony's path of *kenosis* leads him to embrace a larger sense of identity that extends even beyond his own personal survival, while Steve's *kenotic* journey ultimately means sacrificing the role of the sacrificial "hero" altogether, choosing to live out a normal life and die a normal death as an old man. Both of them, on some level, are finally forced to relinquish their sense of control. Thanos, meanwhile, exhibits no change. When confronted with failure, he simply doubles down on his original plan, blaming others for their ingratitude rather than recognizing his own error. Thus, despite the efforts of the Russo brothers, Thanos' narrative cannot really be considered a true "hero's journey," since Thanos has no real arc. At best, his journey represents a kind of anti-growth, characterized by ever-deepening isolation and self-deception in his efforts to gain control over the forces of life and death.

A hero, then, is more than simply a "good guy" who is willing to put up a fight against the "bad guys." A hero is also more than someone who is willing to sacrifice their own life for the sake of the greater good, and more than someone who considers the needs of others over their own, or uses their power to protect the weak. The true "hero" is the one who is willing to grieve, to grapple, to grow, to yield, and ultimately to *learn*—to be shaped by the messy, painful, and unpredictable processes of relationship. *The Infinity Saga* reminds us that we are *all* both hero and villain, both wise and foolish, both selfish and compassionate, both vulnerable and strong, and that the only thing really stopping any of us from becoming Thanos are those *kenotic* moments that invite us to soften our view on the world, lean into our pain, and loosen the clenched fist we have around the certainty of our own self-righteousness, in order to let go of our

dogmatic perceptions of who we think we are supposed to be. This is not an individualistic path of heroic obligation, but a communal path of mutual transformation.

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