

RICOEUR FROM FALLIBILITY TO FRAGILITY AND ETHICS

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*In the last decades of his life, Ricoeur was dismayed by the undiminishing amount of violence that humans inflicted on one another. He felt impelled to address this unjustified suffering. He moved from theoretical philosophical discussions to develop an ethical project directed toward a just society. I trace Ricoeur's development, starting from *Fallible Man and Freedom and Nature*, by way of *The Symbolism of Evil*, *Oneself as Another*, and *The Course of Recognition*, as he delineates his project. In this journey, Ricoeur emerges from the strict Protestant training of his youth to a more pluralist and inclusive ideal. During his elaboration of the ethical, as well as political and social conditions where human beings can flourish, Ricoeur does not appeal directly to religious terminology. Nonetheless, his work remains imbued with a deep love of humankind and wisdom, the roots of which remain entangled in his Christian background.*

Introduction

In the last twenty years of his life, Ricoeur expressed a growing dismay at the undiminishing amount of violence that human beings continued to inflict on one another. For Ricoeur, this was a manifestation of suffering in the form of unjustified harm perpetrated on innocent people. As a result, he moved from simply theoretical discussions of philosophical problematics—though he had always been concerned with matters pertaining to everyday life, *i.e.*, the “life-world,” or *Lebenswelt* of Husserl—to struggle with more pronounced ethical and practical issues. He discussed this in an interview with Charles Reagan: “I must say that in my previous work there is very little about ethics and politics.”¹ He then continued, as if justifying the change to which he would henceforth devote much attention:

¹ Paul Ricoeur in Charles Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 114.

It is this speculative problem of action and passion but also the problem of victimization—the whole story of this cruel century, the twentieth century—and all of the suffering imposed on the Third World by the rich, affluent countries, by colonialism. There is a history of victims that keeps accompanying or reduplicating the history of the victors. But the history I try to revive has a strong ethical debt to the victims. (114)

As part of this response Ricoeur would move in two directions. One was public, directed toward ethics; the other of a more personal nature. At the heart of his practical, ethical move is a quest for justice. At the personal level, there is a search for wisdom, initially inspired by Job. In the early 1970s these two commitments sometimes overlapped, but over the years Ricoeur became more reticent about disclosing his religious and private views which were undergoing revision. He had spoken about Job in his Bampton lectures at Columbia University in 1966, where he described the death of a God who needed to be defended by theodicy, and a resultant movement toward a tragic quality of faith—one that no longer seeks assurances, but one “that moves through shadows in a ‘new night of the soul.’”² For Ricoeur, it was not proofs and truths, but wisdom that was required. Toward the conclusion of the essay in a later encyclopedia entry on “Evil,” he appeals to this notion of wisdom, impressed by Job’s final state of equanimity:

Wisdom, which is no longer to develop arguments or even to accuse God but to transform, practically, emotionally, the nature of desire that is at the base of the request for explanation. To transform desire practically means to leave behind the question of origins, toward which myth carries speculative thought, and to substitute for it the question of the future and the end of evil.³

In these developments, Ricoeur was obviously struggling with issues that involved a religious dimension, but he was loath to make public pronouncements about such personal convictions. As he developed his philosophical program, he became quite clear about the distinction he made between philosophical engagement and making reli-

² Paul Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, and Faith,” in *Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, (ed.) Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 440–67, here 460.

³ Paul Ricoeur, “Evil,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 5, (ed.) Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 199–208, here 207.

gious, especially theological, pronouncements. In a 1970 article, he stated: "Now I am not a theologian, but a philosopher. It is not my task to say to what extent it is true that the main category of Christianity is promise rather than presence."⁴ This marked the beginning of what Ricoeur named his "conceptual asceticism."⁵ His more public and practical preference, to move to ethics to help alleviate evil, was no doubt informed by his personal religious orientation. But in his writings his stated reasons derived from conclusions about the inability of abstract philosophical reasoning, or even of speculative explorations, to provide conclusive answers to the problem of evil and suffering in the world. Ricoeur still conceded that the different religions could provide sustenance for suffering of humanity⁶, but he remained anguished that they could not solve the problem of either its origin or its prevention. While Ricoeur did acknowledge the necessity of mourning that inevitably accompanies any awareness of the manifestations and effects of violence that witness to humanity's ongoing inhumanity, he understood his public task as distinct. Here he attempted to propose orientations that could help to alleviate the cause of human suffering insofar as its origins lay within the behaviour of human beings themselves. In so doing, he observed that such a project initially involved a return to his early mentors. He stated in his "Philosophical Autobiography":

By taking into account the primordial suffering which appears to be inseparable from human action, I returned to the lessons from my first masters on limit-situations (Jaspers) and embodiment, as well as my former investigation on the absolute involuntary. (PPR, 49)

Ricoeur, however, would develop his thinking beyond these earlier and less-applied investigations inspired by Jaspers and Marcel on the subject of human fallibility. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that this earlier work on human fallibility contained the seeds of his later work. He describes his attempt to accommodate both dimensions:

It is at this point that the distinction to which I am most attracted—that between, on the one hand, fragility, vulnerability, falli-

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," *American Catholic Philosophical Association. Proceedings*, vol. 44 (1970): 54–69, here 57.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (tr.) K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1990]), 24. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OA.

⁶ Lewis Edwin Hahn, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1995), 475. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PPR.

bility—in short, finitude—and, on the other, the historical effectiveness of evil already present—constitutes the primary resistance that I oppose to the temptation of mastery that thought claims to achieve, before considering any project of liberation, and this is so as early as the work of delimiting and identifying the problem of evil. (PPR, 473)

In making this statement, Ricoeur confirms his vital engagement with the notions of both fragility and fallibility as aspects of finitude. Yet, over the course of his work in investigating instances of evil and suffering, a noticeable distinction between the terms “fallibility” and “fragility” began to appear. In time, they will refer to different aspects of human existence and mirror Ricoeur’s own changed understandings. It is a subtle but significant change that I believe is indicative of his move to the public domain; “from text to action.” In his early work *Fallible Man*⁷, Ricoeur’s use of the term “fallibility” had been virtually co-extensive with “fragility,” witnessing to a weakness or intrinsic fault in humanity. In his work during the ’80s and ’90s, Ricoeur began to employ the word “frailty” or “fragility” together with “vulnerability” as indicative of the dimension of unmerited suffering in the world that so distressed him. He struggled to discern a way to protect human beings from such unmerited suffering. Rather than undertake a search to determine the factual fault or failing that can lead to bad behaviour, the question changed for Ricoeur. It became: “What shall we do with this fragile being, what shall we do for her or him? We are directed towards a future of a being in need of help to survive and to grow.”⁸ This statement encapsulates the impetus of Ricoeur’s turn to ethics.

In this article, I propose to trace Ricoeur’s development, starting from *Fallible Man* and *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*⁹ by way of *The Symbolism of Evil*¹⁰, *Oneself as Another*,

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, (tr.) C. A. Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1986 [1960]). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FM.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, “Fragility and Responsibility,” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, (ed.) R. Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), 15–22, here 16.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, (ed.) E.V. Kohak (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966 [1950]). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FN.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, (tr.) E. Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967 [1960]).

and *The Course of Recognition*¹¹, as he undertakes explorations into ways of grounding his ethical orientation. In this journey, he emerges from the strict Protestant training of his youth. I will trace his quest for an ethics that moves beyond what he terms Heidegger's "ontology without an ethics" and Levinas's "ethics without an ontology,"¹² to express a position that derives from his own unique heritages—that of philosophy and religion. Yet in this development, Ricoeur does not use religious terminology as he works toward his definition of an ontological ethical position. This will feature what he names as "an acting and suffering human being." His search is to elaborate the ethical, as well as political and social conditions in which human beings can flourish.

Ricoeur and Fallible Man

In *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur undertook an extensive phenomenological study of human fallibility—as part of his proposed but uncompleted trilogy of the human will. He appraises this term:

What is meant by calling man fallible? Essentially, this: that the possibility of moral evil is inherent in man's constitution. The reply calls for two kinds of clarification. It may be asked, indeed, in what feature of its primordial constitution this possibility of failing resides more particularly. On the other hand one may ask about the nature of the possibility itself. (FM, 133)

In this connection, Ricoeur employed the term, "fragility," as virtually a synonym of "fallibility," indicative of a similar weakness, a type of "capacity for." He provides a definition:

Fragility is not merely the "locus," the point of insertion of evil, nor even the origin, starting from which man falls; it is the capacity for evil. To say that man is fallible is to say that the limitation to a being who does not coincide with himself is the primordial weakness from which evil arises. (FM, 146)

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007 [2005]). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CR.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, "On Life Stories (2003)," in *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, (ed.) R. Kearney (London: Ashgate, 2004), 157–69, here 167.

Yet even here there was a caution, one that he adopted from Kant, whom he has described as his preferred master for the philosophy of religion. This was to the effect that evil could never triumph. “However primordial badness may be, goodness is even more primordial.” (FM, 145) Fallibility does not mean evil is inevitable. “Fallibility is only the possibility of evil: it indicates the region and structure of the reality that, through its point of least resistance, offers a locus to evil.” (FM, 143) Nonetheless, in Ricoeur’s mind, this fallibility had an intimate connection with fault as a failing, even if it was not directly responsible for defilement, sin and guilt. It is fascinating to discover, however, that even as he was trying to decipher the modalities that disposed humans to evil, there was another important aspect of humanity that engaged Ricoeur.

Birth, Life, and Freedom from Necessity

In the concluding section of his phenomenological analysis, *Freedom and Nature*, there is a chapter entitled: “The Way of Consent.” Here Ricoeur explores the division of mind and body in connection with what he terms “the virulent form of dualism of freedom and necessity.” (FN, 444) In this context, the aging body and the spectre of death are aligned with necessity. Yet Ricoeur refuses to accept such a stark contrast. Even at this early stage of his work, Ricoeur introduces the notion of birth that, as he observes, is something with which most philosophers do not concern themselves. “My birth is the beginning of my life: in it I was placed, once and for all, into the world, and placed in being before I was able to posit anything voluntarily.” (FN, 433) As a result, birth “is not available to consciousness.” (*ibid.*) In one sense, then, birth belongs in the realm of necessity, but for Ricoeur it also signalled something else. For Ricoeur, it marked the beginning of a process of coming to consciousness—a process of beginning to be free: “I have always begun to live when I say ‘I am.’” (FN, 441) Ricoeur then concludes that we need not be governed by necessity, that we can consent to life—and that to make such a choice makes all choice possible.

This affirmation of life was confirmed more recently when, in an interview towards the end of his life, Ricoeur reminisced about writing this conclusion to *Freedom and Nature*: “I had not wanted to be crushed by the problem of death: I wanted in this way to give its

rightful place to the theme of birth.”¹³ In this same set of interviews, Ricoeur further expanded on these ideas, bringing them into a more contemporary context: “I, therefore, project not an after-death but a death that would be an ultimate affirmation of life. My own experience at the end of life is nourished by this deepest wish to make the act of dying an act of life.... What is important is to be living up until the moment of death.” (CC, 156) This is, of course anticipates his posthumously published book: *Living up to Death*.¹⁴

Such an affirmation of life suffuses much of Ricoeur’s *oeuvre*, although he was only too well aware of the finitude and vulnerabilities of human existence. He bore witness to this attitude in another later interview, where he also reminisced about the writing of *Freedom and Nature*:

For there is, after all, and since the beginning of my work sixty years ago, the idea of mortality which traverses everything through and through. At the time, I was welcoming this... I would not say joyously, but I had concluded my book with the idea of assenting to finitude. I was an avid reader of Rilke and I ended with the verse: “*Hier sein ist herrlich*: ‘being here is sumptuous, wonderful, magical.’ Now, in my old age with the proximity of death, I repeat again: *Hier sein ist herrlich*.”¹⁵

Hermeneutics and Freud

Nonetheless, the fact of human finitude definitely posed problems for Ricoeur’s initial observations concerning the nature of the will and its freedom in *The Voluntary and Involuntary*. In addition, other issues, such as those conveyed by the religious terminology of guilt and sin, also emerged. Ricoeur admitted he was especially predisposed towards such matters because of his “early formative training in Calvinist predestination.” (PPR, 29) He gradually came to be aware, however, that the expressions used to convey human understanding of evil were basically mediated by figurative language and that this aspect of the subject needed close attention. His subsequent

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, (ed.) F. Azouvi and M. de Launay; (tr.) K. Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 93–94. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CC.

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Living up to Death*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 [2007]).

¹⁵ Ricoeur in Sorin Antohi, “Memory, History, Forgiveness: A Dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi,” *Janus Head*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2005): 8–25, here 20.

investigations culminated in his hermeneutic study: *The Symbolism of Evil*. In this work's conclusion, Ricoeur recapitulates his understanding of hermeneutics, and its relation to human existence, as he had come to appreciate it:

The task of the philosopher guided by symbols would be to break out of the enchanted enclosure of consciousness of oneself, to end the prerogative of self-reflection.... [T]he *Cogito* has still to discover that the very act by which it abstracts itself from the whole does not cease to share in the being that challenges it in every symbol.¹⁶

As a result, there is a growing insight on Ricoeur's part of the mediations involved:

All the symbols of guilt—deviation, wandering, captivity—all the myths—chaos, blinding, mixture, fall—speak of the situation of the being of man in the being of the world. The task, then, is, starting from the symbols, to elaborate existential concepts—that is to say, not only structures of reflection but structures of existence, insofar as existence is the being of man.¹⁷

These insights marked Ricoeur's further move toward a hermeneutic phenomenology.

During these early hermeneutic studies, however, Ricoeur had also become aware of "a sort of residue, inaccessible to analysis and to the phenomenological method: infantile, archaic, pathological culpability." (CC, 29) This led him to another formative undertaking where he engaged with the work of Sigmund Freud. His intense study resulted in his volume *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*.¹⁸ Ricoeur had become aware that the opacity of symbols was not simply a phenomenon related to representations of evil alone but to the entire intentional life of the subject. Such a

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 356.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 356–57.

¹⁸ *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, (tr.) D. Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970 [1965]). Ricoeur acknowledged that his turn to Freud's approach was influenced by his high school studies with Ronald Dabiez, whom Ricoeur notes was one of the first thinkers to attempt a philosophical reading of Freud. As Ricoeur observes, in noting this impact on his future work: "His Freud was the 'biological' Freud: he stressed the realist conception of the unconscious which he used to refute the 'Cartesian illusion' of self-consciousness, and the alleged reduction of the world to my representation." (CC, 7)

conclusion also put into question “a presupposition common to Husserl and Descartes, namely the immediateness, the transparency, the apodicticity of the Cogito.” (CC, 16) Retrospectively Ricoeur credited his work on Freud with helping him to leave behind his preoccupation with Calvinist guilt: “The work did indeed help me to go beyond the somewhat obsessive and archaic side of the problem of culpability which has been replaced in my work by the question of suffering, of excessive suffering that overwhelms the world.” (CC, 29) (Henceforth Ricoeur preferred to use the word “suffering,” instead of “evil,” specifically with reference to the harm inflicted on innocent victims—though “problem of evil” still continued to haunt his philosophical reflections.)

While it is obvious that Freud had a definite impact on Ricoeur in steering him to a more complex and less deterministic version of human finitude in relation to guilt and sin, there was yet one more encounter that took place in the late 1960s that would also have a profound effect on Ricoeur’s work. This was his meeting with Hannah Arendt at the University of Chicago.

Ricoeur and Arendt

Ricoeur describes himself as reacting with “a certain amazement” to Arendt’s neologism, the term “natality,” when he first encountered it. He remarked: “For her too, birth signifies more than death. This is what wishing to remain living until death means.” (CC, 157) This was because it was indicative of an inherent affirmation of life in this world and its strivings, similar to his own position. He remarked on Arendt’s view as she moved away from Heidegger’s emphasis on the acceptance of “being towards death” as the mark of human authenticity. Elaborating on Arendt’s advocacy of natality, Ricoeur observes: “Must this not be understood as a discreet yet stubborn protest addressed to the Heideggerian philosophy of being-toward-death? Should we not see action as ‘an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but to begin?’”¹⁹ He thus acknowledges Arendt’s work as deeply committed to a project of constant renewal and reform of this world in the mode of natality. Such supportive references to Arendt’s ideas substantiate Ricoeur’s own hopes for humanity, despite its conditions of finitude.

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, (tr.) K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004 [2000]), 489.

He recognized in her a kindred spirit, as one who also affirmed life in this world.

Arendt herself appreciates natality not simply in relation to birth but also as an intrinsic element in all creative human activity. "The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense, initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities."²⁰ The figurative mode of natality will imply a second more conscious mode of birth. It designates the possibility of new beginnings, of constant initiatives in thought and action that result in constructive forms of productivity. As Arendt describes it: "With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our physical appearance." (HC, 157) For Arendt, narrative is the record that provides coherence for such activities.

Arendt adapted the term "natality" from the work of Augustine, on whom she wrote the equivalent of her M.A. thesis (titled *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin*, 1929).²¹ She enlarged his understanding of life, however, from its particular religious setting, to align it with her vision of human beings acting together for the common good of this world. For Arendt, "To act, in its most general sense, means to take the initiative, to begin...to set something in motion." (HC, 157) The simplicity of this statement is beguiling, but it has far-reaching implications. Natality, in concert with action, interrupts what Arendt views as the order of necessity—"the inexorable daily course of life" that follows the law of mortality. (HC, 222) This is because action, specifically communal activity, is also at the heart of Arendt's vision of politics. Human beings, in relationship with others, can act in ways that allow them to realize the fullness of human freedom.

Ricoeur affirmed his appreciation of Arendt's position when he stated: "Action, connected with speech, reveals man as an agent, *i.e.*, the one who initiates change in the world."²² He also approved of her

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1959), 10–11. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *HC*.

²¹ She subsequently revised her thesis in the late fifties and sixties in America. This revised version was published in English as *Love and Saint Augustine*, (ed.) J. Vecchiarelli Scott and J. Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²² Quoted from "Action, Story and History: On Re-Reading *The Human Condition*," *Salmagundi*, vol. 60 (1983): 60–72, here 65, an English translation of Ricoeur's "Préface" to the French edition of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, *Condition de l'homme moderne*, (tr. française) G. Fradier (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1983), 5–32.

emphasis on plurality; that ideally human beings could act together to effect changes in the world. For Arendt, however, human beings were not only actors but also sufferers: "Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other human beings, he is never merely a doer, but always at the same time a sufferer." (HC, 190) Arendt's work allowed Ricoeur to express his ideas on the human predicament with a different nuance. As a result, terms that he had used previously took on different valences. Life and creation were intrinsically good, but a tragic element appeared inevitable. In contrast to Arendt, however, Ricoeur took consolation in Kant's pronouncement that evil, though radical, was not original in human beings.²³

It would seem, then, that Arendt and Ricoeur, who was in agreement with her diagnosis, were affirmative of life in this world. They were, however, also guarded in their assessments of the human condition. They were both well aware that human beings inflicted acts that caused profound suffering, even death, on their fellow beings. Yet both would also allow that forgiveness and promising were human actions that could be reparative—a mode of natality that could rehabilitate the human situation.

In addition, Arendt had introduced a further modification that impressed Ricoeur when she discusses "the frailty/fragility of human affairs." Here she indicates that the outcome of human actions, performed in freedom, were unpredictable—that once initiated, they could not be controlled and their effects were indeterminable. This was not an entirely pessimistic prescription, for Arendt conceded that "miracles" could occur, *i.e.*, felicitous and unpredictable results, ones that were not governed by necessity. What needs to be emphasized here, however, is that the background informing Arendt's remarks was quite different from those of Ricoeur. Her ideal was the Greek *polis*, with its evocation of freedom, that is, of free action. Laws and institutions could of course mitigate this outcome of unpredictability by imposing limits; narrative could provide beneficial exemplars; and human beings could both promise and forgive—actions of constancy. Yet while democracy and plurality existed, there was always a sense of frailty. Perhaps unpredictability can be considered as a price worth paying for freedom. At the same time, Arendt's ideas need further elaboration, situated as they were, within an even wider frame. This is because the guiding impulse of all her work

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*, (tr.) Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 69f.

connected to action was intended to prevent a resurgence of totalitarian regimes, which she wrote about in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.²⁴ Regimes such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia provided lessons of another form of fragility where institutions and morals were so easily subverted and destroyed.

Arendt's sense of frailty/fragility was indeed different from Ricoeur's early understanding of fragility—where he had employed it as a mode of human weakness, comparable to fallibility. Nevertheless, Arendt's notions of fragility and of human beings featuring as both actors and sufferers, left their mark on Ricoeur. The idea of human frailty as depicting vulnerability and the destruction of human beings' edifices of stability and democracy, were among a number of elements of Arendt's work that Ricoeur would adapt. What I would venture to suggest at this stage is that Arendt, in addition to Freud, were both powerful influences on Ricoeur's work. This became especially evident as he moved toward an articulation of ethics that would incorporate human action and suffering as a fundamental mode of being. This witnessed to their fragility in the face of both necessity as uncontrolled consequences, and hostile forces of destruction—both of which were in need of countervailing action, which for Ricoeur, implied ethics and justice.

What is fascinating to observe at this stage of Ricoeur's journey is that there is no explicit mention of religion issuing from an apologetic stance. His work in this connection is very much under the influence of Kant, especially *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. What is patently evident is his profound love of life in this world and his anguish at the extreme suffering of many of its creatures. This love and concern undoubtedly have their source in his Christian disposition, but he is reticent about imposing it on his attempts to decipher a mode of ethics that will speak to humanity at large. Nonetheless, it would appear that it is a Kantian hope that also sustains him.

Fragility

The change that became notable in Ricoeur's move to ethics was an avoidance of simply theoretical discussions to a more committed engagement with contemporary issues. The unceasing violence and suffering inflicted by humans on each other was a manifestation of

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On the Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951).

evil that Ricoeur regarded as a violation of human dignity and flourishing.

As he begins to formulate an ethical program in *OA*, in order to introduce his aim of human beings “living with and for each other in just institutions,” Ricoeur undertakes a number of specific tasks. One is to establish what are the most important actions that delineate what he terms a “capable human being” (*homo capax*). He introduces it in this way:

I would like...to underscore my emphasis, since *Oneself as Another*, on the importance of the idea of *homo capax* as integrating a wide conceptual field. With this theme I have tried to bring together those diverse capacities and incapacities that make human beings acting and suffering human beings. If the notions of *poiesis* and *praxis* were given ample development in my earlier work, those of being acted upon and suffering were less so.²⁵

He presents a phenomenological description of *homo capax*, of the four capabilities that he considers as indispensable to the constitution of human well-being. These are: “the power to designate oneself as the speaker of one’s own words; the power to designate oneself as the agent of one’s own activities, the power to designate oneself as the protagonist in one’s own life-story.” (PPR, 367) To this list Ricoeur also added the capacity for imputation. This is a term Ricoeur amends from Kant’s usage to indicate responsibility.²⁶ Such tasks also functioned as a way of clarifying the requisite capacities for participating what he considered the good life. It is in the interference or abolition of such capacities to act—when people are denied the exercise of these capacities/capabilities—that fragility becomes evident. This notion of fragility differs from Ricoeur’s earlier usage. In this later context, Ricoeur introduces the postulate of a fragile and suffering human being.²⁷ In order to make the contrast clear, I will

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “A Response by Paul Ricoeur,” in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, (ed.) M. Joy (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), xxiv.

²⁶ Ricoeur explains his understanding of “imputation”: “Imputation and responsibility are synonyms, the only difference being that it is actions which are imputed to someone and it is persons that are held responsible for actions and their consequences.” (“The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy,” in *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur*, [ed.] P. Kemp and D. Rasmussen [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989], 101n3.)

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 73.

present two different quotations; the first is from the early work of Ricoeur and one from this later ethical stage:

If the capacity to fail consists in the fragility of the mediation that man effects in the object, in his idea of humanity, and in his own heart, the question arises concerning the sense in which this fragility is a capacity to fail. What capacity is this? Weakness makes evil possible in several senses that may be classified in an increasing order of complexity from the occasion to the origin, and from the origin to this capacity. (FM, 141)

The above capacity can be described in several ways—but it definitely aligns fragility as associated with fault, fear, and finitude. It is not only a capacity to fail but also the locus of weakness that has a tendency towards a form of failure that could permit evil to occur. In contrast, the second account has a radically different description:

The vulnerability that stands in counterpoint to responsibility can be summed up in the difficulty that everyone has in inscribing his or her action and behavior into a symbolic order, and in the impossibility a number of our contemporaries have in comprehending the meaning and necessity of this inscription, principally those whom our sociopolitical order excludes. If we have been able to see in this capacity something that we presume every human being is capable of as human, now it is in terms of incapacity that we have to speak of the corresponding fragility.²⁸

In this later instance, fragility is connected with an incapacity to act, as is evident often in those people in contemporary society that are excluded or prevented by institutional conditions or socio-cultural forces from exercising their appropriate capacities. Such an incapacity to act is not a weakness arising in the self, but fragility as a form of human vulnerability where external agents inflict harm. As a result, has been a distinct movement in meaning of fragility away from personal failing to unjust impositions or actions of a destructive nature. These people are not acting but suffering. It is specifically such situations that prompted Ricoeur to utter his distressed plea, quoted earlier: “What shall we do with this fragile being; what shall we do for her or him?”²⁹

Ricoeur’s own response becomes palpable in *OA* where he introduces the notion of recognition. In addition, he will develop what he

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Fragility and Responsibility,” 16.

terms his “little ethics” in the mode of an ethical ontology. I can only present a brief outline of these crucial moves, focussing on the main aspects that have relevance for human action. It is in one of his final works published in English, *The Course of Recognition*, that Ricoeur gives perhaps the most succinct version of recognition and develops the ideas first presented in *Oneself as Another*.

The dynamic I could call a “course” of recognition becomes apparent—I mean the passage from recognition-identification, where the thinking subject claims to master meaning, to mutual recognition, where the subject places him- or herself under the tutelage of a relationship of reciprocity, in passing through self-recognition in a variety of capacities that modulate one’s ability to act, one’s agency. (CR, 248)

This book on recognition marks the culmination of Ricoeur’s own lifework—and I do not mean this in the sense that it is one of his final works published, so close to his death. I say this because, in this work, Ricoeur demonstrates clearly that his earlier preoccupations with identity and self have not been undertaken without an acute awareness of a person’s ineluctable involvement with other human beings. His appreciation of recognition brings with it a unique perspective that surpasses Hegel’s formula—so often interpreted as either a synthesis or an incorporation of the other. This is clarified in his explication of the title of the book *Oneself as Another*. “To ‘as’ I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of a comparison (oneself is similar to another) but indeed that of an implication (oneself inasmuch as being other).” (OA, 3)

In Ricoeur’s view, recognition is no simple comparative exercise. It is an extremely radical claim. For what Ricoeur is proposing is not simply that I am similar to others, and thus accord them similar privileges to those I attribute to myself, but that one cannot become aware of one’s identity unless this complex interrelationship of mutual recognition takes place. This implies that one is ultimately oneself only in as much as one is at the same time other; hence the title of his book. One attains self-worth only in so far as the comparable worth of others is necessarily intrinsic to my worldview. Such a claim goes beyond Hegel in that what Ricoeur proposes is not simply that recognition of others is necessary for one’s own growth in knowledge and self-awareness, but that recognition involves a sense of identification with others in the uniqueness of their worth, *i.e.*, their “irreplaceability.” (OA, 193) This means that their difference or otherness as a human being exists not to be incorporated, let alone eradicated.

In this exercise, one encounters this other person both as irreducible in him- or herself, and as an irreducible dimension of the “dialogical constitution of the self.”³⁰ This is an extraordinary proposition of relational symmetry as reciprocity. Ricoeur describes the philosophical contention that is at the heart of his position of mutual interaction: “I want to bring to light the novelty of the existential category of reciprocity through an argument drawn from the difficulty phenomenology encounters in deriving reciprocity from a presumably originary dissymmetry in the relation of the ego to others.” (CR, 153) Yet it remains for Ricoeur to develop how recognition and reciprocity, as well as other components, are to be reconciled within a complete ethical program.

Towards an Ethical Ontology

The other principal components of Ricoeur’s ethical project, as well as essential elements of the movement of recognition that I can only highlight, are solicitude, self-esteem and imputation/ responsibility. Ricoeur undertakes his initial attempt at delineating these terms in the “Seventh Study,” of *OA*, titled “The Self and the Ethical Aim” (169–202). There he develops in detail the concepts of solicitude, self-esteem, and imputability/responsibility, which would later become significant components in his delineation of recognition.³¹ It is at the beginning of this “Seventh Study,” that Ricoeur also forecasts a definite teleological direction toward justice that will be at the heart of his ethics. This becomes apparent in his adaptation of Aristotle’s fundamental ethical intention of “living well” when he describes his own ethical position as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.” (*OA*, 172) As a necessary element in this process, Ricoeur’s understanding of solicitude has an important role. Ricoeur proposes that solicitude, which he appreciates as a “benevolent spontaneity,” involves an openness to another that can challenge, even change a person. This is a major refinement of Heidegger’s definitions of both care (*Sorge*) and solicitude (*Fürsorge*) so that they

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, (tr.) D. Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1995]), xiii. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *TJ*.

³¹ Ricoeur states: “Recognition is a structure of the self reflecting on the movement that carries self-esteem toward solicitude and solicitude toward justice. Recognition introduces the dyad and plurality into the very constitution of the self. Reciprocity in friendship and proportional equality in justice, when they are reflected in self-consciousness, make self-esteem a figure of recognition.” (*OA*, 296)

no longer operate solely from what Ricoeur regards as a self-referential position. (OA, 310) He expands and refines this model, indicating that he acknowledges solicitude as an intrinsic feature of a human being's make-up. He observes:

Solicitude assumes that, counter to all cultural pessimism, I pay credit to the sources of goodwill—what the Anglo-Saxon philosophers of the eighteenth century always tried to affirm in opposition to Hobbes, i.e., that man is not simply a wolf to man, and that pity exists. It is true that these are very fragile feelings and that it is one function of religion to take charge them and recodify them in a way. (CC, 159)

These observations would seem to provide Ricoeur with an opportunity to explore the role of religion's contribution as a dynamic feature of solicitude's influence in orienting humanity towards care for others. Yet, again at this stage, he maintains his distance, maintaining a philosophical approach, unwilling to defer to religion for elucidation. He does acknowledge, however, that religion strongly influences deliberations on the subject of solicitude towards others. It would seem that Ricoeur's intention in this regard is to shape philosophy to be equally responsive.

Self-esteem is another central term. Given that this word could easily be associated with solipsistic preoccupations, perhaps a necessary first step is to clarify the meaning that Ricoeur attributes to it. Ricoeur states in *OA*: "It is not by chance that we have continually been speaking of esteem of the self and not esteem of myself. *To say self is not to say myself.*" (OA, 180) Self-esteem has associations with self-estimation, with self-assessment. As Ricoeur states elsewhere: "The self—i.e., the '**who** of action'—does not merely consist in the self-designation of humans as the owners and authors of their deeds; it implies also the self-interpretation in terms of the achievements and failures of what we called practices and plans of life. I suggest that we call self-esteem the interpretation of ourselves mediated by the ethical evaluation of our actions."³² In addition, self-esteem also implies self-interpretation not just in the sense that I need to give an account of myself to myself, but also that I am ethically accountable to others. Ricoeur's further qualification helps to place this dynamic in perspective as a means of connecting identity with ethics and justice, i.e., of explicitly joining self-reflexivity with the good. Ricoeur

³² Paul Ricoeur, "The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1988):203-215, here 213.

introduces this strategic move. "I cannot have self-esteem unless I esteem others *as myself*. 'As myself' means that you too are capable of starting something in the world, of acting for a reason, of hierarchizing your priorities, of evaluating the ends of your actions, and having done this, of holding yourself in esteem as I hold myself in esteem." (OA, 193) Ricoeur thus understands self-esteem, as a self-reflexive exercise, can induce not only self-evaluation of one's motive and desires, but it can also help to inculcate solicitude for, as well as respect of the other. This can be considered as a contemporary reformulation of the Golden Rule. Ricoeur also intends, in the cause of justice, to undertake an even more demanding task of including an explicit connection to the good in all such exercises self-reflexivity. Self-esteem will provide the basic, if not foundational step, in this direction. This in turn paves the way to include recognition and ultimately justice within his overarching teleological framework. An essential part of this ethical orientation is Ricoeur's hope that such an itinerary can redress the asymmetry that exists between human beings and that the good life in a just society can be achieved.

The final crucial addition to the components will be the idea of "imputation," that Ricoeur adopts from Kant, which indicates that one assumes responsibility for one's actions. Ricoeur understood this capacity as involving two aspects: "Imputation and responsibility are synonymous, the only difference being that it is actions that are *imputed* to someone and it is persons that are held *responsible* for actions and their consequences."³³ Ricoeur will utilize this term to bring the dimension of morality into his ethical framework. He remarks:

Moral experience requires nothing more than a subject capable of imputation, if we understand by "imputation" the capacity of a subject to designate itself, himself, or herself as the actual author of its, his, or her own acts. In a language less dependent on the letter of Kantian moral philosophy, I will say that a norm—whatever utility it may or may not have—calls for a being capable of entering into a practical symbolic order as that norm's counterpart, that is, one capable of recognizing in norms a legitimate claim to govern behavior.³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, 47. Such a statement can only be made on the basis of Ricoeur's extended examination and reclamation of the notion of "imputability" and its Kantian origin that he undertakes in *TJ*, 13–19.

Such a statement again raises fears about the spectre of a categorical imperative, but Ricoeur is not seeking to integrate such a drastic measure. He is quite reassuring about his purpose in raising this issue. His request is motivated by the same stimulus that initiated his ethical project. Ricoeur reflects:

Over against such a reductive move [*i.e.*, a simplistic opposition between teleological and deontological positions], I would reply that the two studies in *Oneself as Another* devoted to the two levels of moral judgment governed by the predicates of the good and the obligatory (Studies 7 and 8) are merely preparatory exercises for the confrontation that gives me the most difficulty, the confrontation with those situations I place globally under the heading of the *tragic dimension of action*. (TJ, xxi)

There is no explicit religious directive or categorical imperative involved. In Ricoeur's view, it is the incursion of violence into an ordered existence intent on the good life that demands that the teleological must engage with the deontological. (TJ, xvii) A pivotal link nominated by Ricoeur as a type of catalyst that will allow such a transition to occur is the idea of imputability or responsibility—nominated earlier by Ricoeur as one of the core capabilities of *homo capax*. Ricoeur had first observed in *The Just*: “[The] two ideas of capacity and imputability...take on a new aspect when they are brought together...under the aegis of a teleological approach to the idea of the just.” (TJ, xvi)

At the same time, however, by inserting these notions of reciprocity and intersubjectivity within a teleological orientation, Ricoeur also intimates that this same ideal of reciprocity will have to be also encountered on the plane of morality in connection with the Golden Rule. (OA, 183) To this end, Ricoeur will also introduce a revised understanding of a Kantian idea of norm, which he describes as needing “to establish reciprocity wherever there is a lack of reciprocity.” (OA, 225) This encounter between aim and norm, the good and the obligatory, ethics and morality, is not proposed by Ricoeur in order to establish the superiority of one over the other. It is introduced in his customary mediatory manner, to help demarcate his own ethical position where both are intrinsic and mutually enriching components.³⁵ He will nonetheless conclude by stating that although

³⁵ Ricoeur acknowledges: “We have too much emphasized the distinction and even the opposition between the deontological and the teleological. I think that this opposition is not implied by the basic texts themselves. It is more or less a

the two positions are not mutually exclusive, ethics does take primacy over morality.³⁶ Yet this exploration should not be taken as simply a rearticulation by Ricoeur of the basic positions of Kant and Aristotle, and the interminable debate as to their respective merits. His purpose is to raise anew the question of the definition of norms and the role they should play in the indispensable dialogue that takes place *en route* to formulating contemporary proposals of defining justice where ethics and morality constructively interact.³⁷

This less severe understanding of a moral norm, *i.e.*, in comparison to Kant's categorical imperative, as it pertains to imputability, allows this revised notion of imputability to replace any previous dogmatic or categorical impositions of the moral law as the requisite activity of an autonomous self. As such, when the teleological impulse encounters the obstacles, if not the destruction, wrought by violence as a severe interruption in its proceedings towards the "good life"—whether on a personal, intersubjective or a global basis, Ricoeur does not think that recourse to a universal system of rigid norms is required. Nonetheless, serious self-reflection is needed in the mode of imputability/responsibility to assess one's own culpability and lack of responsibility. It is in this context that Ricoeur will concede that in any such deliberations, the final arbiter of any decisions will depend on practical wisdom or *phronesis*.³⁸

construction of the tradition. And, in this sense, I would say that if there is something to deconstruct in 'moral philosophy,' it is precisely that this quickly stated opposition between the deontological and the teleological." ("Ethics and Human Capability," in *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Theory*, [ed.] J. Wall and W. D. Schweiker [New York: Routledge, 2002], 287).

³⁶ Ricoeur would go so far as to propose that: "A teleological concept governs the whole attempt of a so-called deontological ethics." (OA, 287) He bases this on the fact that the "first proposition in *The Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* is based on the fact that nothing can be conceived as higher under the sky and in reality at large than a good will." ("Ethics and Human Capability," 287)

³⁷ It needs to be appreciated that Ricoeur's position is ultimately taken in the light of an importation of *phronesis* or practical wisdom as the arbiter in applying universal norms to specific situations. Ricoeur will still insert a caution to such an outcome. "The thesis outlined above that the deontological point of view cannot eclipse the teleological point of view on the level of the general theory of justice finds a complement in the thesis that the just in the final analysis qualifies a unique decision made within a climate of conflict and incertitude." (TJ, xxi)

³⁸ Ricoeur notes: "The cultural and historical mark that conflicts inherent to concrete situations of transaction exhibit requires taking into account the contextual character of realization of the ethics of discussion. These conditions of actualization have to affect the very rule of justice" (*Reflections on the Just*, 8).

In his final major publication, *The Course of Recognition*, Ricoeur returns to the subject of imputability/responsibility, as if to give it one final tweak. It is, in one sense, a type of commentary on his own work and its revisions, and also a nod toward what tasks still remain. He remarks: "It is left to phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy to take up the question left hanging...about the self-designation attaching to the idea of imputability as an aptitude for imputation. The passage from the classical idea of imputability to the more recent one of responsibility opens new horizons." (CR, 107) One of the changes he understands as having occurred as a result is a change in emphasis—maybe influenced by his own move—on the fragile or vulnerable other, rather than on the damage inflicted. There is a problem, however, that results from this expansion: "This extension to the vulnerable other involves, it is true, its own difficulties, having to do with the scope of responsibility as it applies to the future vulnerability of human beings and their environment." (CR, 109) Ricoeur thus leaves us with a formidable assignment, if we are to take up the challenge he has provided in his texts to work toward a just society. In reworking the notions of responsibility and recognition within a revised ontological ethics that emphasizes both human fragility as well as the free exercise of human capabilities, Ricoeur has provided a model that stresses the need for ongoing and constant refinement. (TJ, 47)

Conclusion

Ricoeur has been faithful to his own independent vision as he has painstakingly carved out a phenomenological hermeneutical approach that nonetheless owes much to his formative predecessors, Husserl and Heidegger. At the same time, he has expanded his range of interests to other contemporary challenges that have been brought to bear on the nature of the modern self and subjectivity. In Ricoeur's view, it is the undiminishing occurrence of violence disturbing human existence intent on the good life that has deeply troubled him, and provoked him to seek ways of countering it. As a result, he has striven to develop an ethical orientation that is mindful of others, in their dispossessed and suffering states, without a complete abnegation of one's own identity or responsibilities. In these explorations, the dream of total mediation, as well as the notion of a transparent self has been replaced by a more fragile and chastened notion of human identity. What is at the heart of his project is the attempt to reconfigure the conception of a capable self or human being who can respond to the injustices of the present era. This

involves continuously posing the question as to what can be accepted today as binding in the efforts to establish justice in a world so fraught with violence. His approach encourages forms of human action that promote a teleologically ordered, yet morally qualified, ideal of justice, toward which capable human beings direct their actions for the betterment of life in this world. Ricoeur may have been reticent to allow religion to enter his public world, but his work resonates with a deep love of humankind and wisdom, the roots of which are entangled in his Christian background.

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