

## Generous to a Fault

A Deep, Recapitulative Pattern of Thought in Ricoeur's Works

Joél Z. Schmidt

Salve Regina University

### Abstract

Paul Ricoeur clearly sought to differentiate between and keep separate his philosophical and theological intellectual endeavors. This essay brings into relief a deep, implicit, recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur's thinking that cuts across this explicit "conceptual asceticism." Specifically, it highlights this recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur's treatment of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible; his understanding of utopia and ideology; the functioning of symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil* and of sublimation in *Freud and Philosophy*. On these topics Ricoeur extended his typical generosity toward all that might appear to be outdated, primitive, and even regressive in our collective and personal humanity. The frequently recapitulative nature of Ricoeur's insights indicates the importance not just of the content of his thought but also the way in which he did his thinking, a pattern which above all was generous, even to a fault.

**Keywords:** Paul Ricoeur, Methodology, Theology, Philosophy

### Résumé

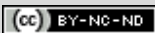
Paul Ricoeur a clairement cherché à différencier et séparer ses efforts intellectuels philosophiques et théologiques. Cet essai met en relief un profond, implicite, récapitulatif motif dans la pensée de Paul Ricoeur qui transgresse cette explicite "ascèse conceptuelle." Plus précisément, il souligne ce motif récapitulatif dans sa traitement de la prophétie dans la Bible Hébraïque; sa compréhension de l'utopie et l'idéologie, le fonctionnement des symboles dans *Le Symbolisme du Mal*, et la sublimation dans *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud*. En relation avec ces sujets Ricoeur a étendu sa générosité typique envers tout qui pourrait apparaître dépassée, primitive, et même régressive dans notre humanité collective et personnelle. Le caractère souvent récapitulatif des idées de Ricoeur indiquent l'importance non seulement du contenu de sa pensée, mais aussi la manière dont il a pensé, un modèle qui avant tout était généreux, même à une faute.

**Mots-clés :** Paul Ricoeur, Méthodologie, Théologie, Philosophie

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 3, No 2 (2012), pp. 38-51

ISSN 2155-1162 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2012.116

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

# Generous to a Fault

## A Deep, Recapitulative Pattern of Thought in Ricoeur's Works

Joél Z. Schmidt

Salve Regina University

Throughout his academic career Paul Ricoeur consistently sought to differentiate between and keep separate his philosophical and theological intellectual endeavors. One prominent example of this “conceptual asceticism” appears in Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another*; the basis for this work were the Gifford Lectures that Ricoeur delivered in Edinburgh in 1986, the purpose of which lecture series is to “promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term—in other words, the knowledge of God.”<sup>1</sup> It is thus noteworthy that in the version of the lectures published as a book Ricoeur omitted the two concluding lectures which were the most explicitly theological in nature. In the introduction to *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur provided the following rationale for this omission:

The primary reason for excluding them...has to do with my concern to pursue, to the very last line, an autonomous, philosophical discourse. The ten studies that make up this work assume the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind me to biblical faith...It will be observed that this asceticism of the argument, which marks, I believe, all my philosophical work, leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspension that could be called agnostic.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the same paragraph from which the preceding citation is drawn Ricoeur readily acknowledged that below the level of disciplinary methodology and specific topics his intellectual interests and the manner in which he pursued them could very well be influenced in an unconscious way by his personal convictions.<sup>3</sup> This essay will bring into relief just such a deep pattern in Ricoeur’s thinking that appears to underlie a number of his published works, both philosophical and theological, that is recapitulative in nature and which cuts across the strict “conceptual asceticism” he maintained on the level of his explicit argumentation. While this pattern is evident in a great number of Ricoeur’s works, in this essay the focus will be on its existence in: his treatment of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible; his understanding of utopia, ideology, and their inter-relation; the functioning of symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil*; and sublimation in *Freud and Philosophy*. In relation to these topics Ricoeur extended his typical generosity toward all that might appear to be outdated, primitive, and even regressive in our collective and personal humanity. In his vision we cannot simply cut off the most regressive parts of ourselves that appear to stand in the way of the realization of our prospective ideals, but we must rather consent to the long, slow process of their transformation since the progressive only arises out of the regressive and via its transformation. The wager guiding the present investigation is that beyond the interest this topic holds for Ricoeur specialists, the frequently recapitulative nature of Ricoeur’s insights indicate the importance not just of the content of his

thought but also the way in which he did his thinking, a pattern which above all was generous, generous even to a fault.

The first manifestation of a deep, recapitulative pattern of thinking to be treated in this investigation is Ricoeur's description in the essay "Biblical Time" of the functioning of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. According to Ricoeur, biblical prophecy consists of a three step dialectical progression.

First, biblical prophecy interrupted the experience of time provided by the genres of the law and the narratives of Israel's origins. Ricoeur takes pains to clarify that the contrast between prophecy on the one hand and the laws and narrative on the other does not take the simple form of an orientation to the future (prophecy) interrupting an orientation to the past (laws and narrative): this is a "trivial idea." No, traditional narratives were not only directed toward the past but rather offered a consolidating experience of time as a whole by projecting themselves toward the future in the modality of "an unprovable confidence in a security that cannot fail."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the prophetic announcement of the Day of the LORD as a day not of joy but of terror provided a dislocating experience of time by shaking and shattering this assurance which had been "transformed into a possession."<sup>5</sup>

Second, after putting an end to the future as previously imagined biblical prophecy demonstrated its innovative quality by projecting visions of a new, previously unanticipated future. Israel cannot reassure itself that the future will simply be an extension of the present as already known, more of "the same"; no, the future will have a quality of interruption, event, and hence otherness that frustrates our desires for security and control (appearing in this context under the guise of a desire for a predictable future).

Third, after dislocating the comfortable progression from assured tradition to assured future inheritance, and projecting an essentially new and unforeseeable future, Hebrew prophecy overcame the opposition between the closed past and a new future by projecting the future as a kind of "creative repetition" of the past. The prophets of salvation in fact did not imagine the unprecedented quality of the coming Day of the LORD in terms utterly heterogeneous to all of Israel's prior encounters with God, but rather as a *new* Exodus, a *new* Zion, a *new* Davidic descendance, etc.<sup>6</sup> This gives a cumulative quality to biblical narratives, in which subsequent events augment the meaning of preceding events.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, by this practice prophecy demonstrated that the meaning of the traditional Biblical narratives is not exhausted by their original or established meanings, but that these traditional narratives contain a "storehouse of inexhaustible potentialities." In other words, the creative repetition of the three-step dialectic of biblical prophecy breaks open the "surplus of meaning that, so to speak, lies dreaming in the traditional narrative."<sup>8</sup> This is the first instantiation of a recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur's thinking inasmuch as the prophetic vision of a new future takes the shape of a recapitulation of the past.

The second instantiation of a deep, recapitulative pattern of thinking to be treated in this essay concerns aspects of Ricoeur's description of ideology, utopia, and their inter-relation. In Ricoeur's creative organization there are three different levels of ideology<sup>9</sup> mirrored by three different levels of utopia.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this investigation it is not necessary to rehearse all the details of this schematization, but rather to focus upon Ricoeur's affirmation that the utopian projection toward a new future often exists as a transformative recapitulation of the past. In his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* this theme appears in a number of ways in Ricoeur's essay on

Charles Fourier: in the specific way that in his utopia Fourier describes human passions, and God and religion; in the theoretical inferences Ricoeur draws from the former for the functioning of utopia in general and its inter-relation with ideology; and concretely in his analysis of the manner in which Greek tragedies remain an ongoing source of insight and inspiration for contemporary readers.

To begin with the first of these sub-thematic topoi, according to Ricoeur the most fundamental aim of Fourier's utopia is his vision of liberating human passions, those "emotional potentialities" which have been weakened, repressed, and reduced in number, strength, and variety through the influence of human civilization.<sup>11</sup> Consequently Fourier's ameliorative utopian vision deploys a well-known trope within the domain of ideology critique, namely that of inversion: if by its malign transformation of virtues into censured vices society has inverted the true nature of reality, then the corresponding therapy called for by this state of affairs is a re-inversion. Alternatively one can use the complementary notion of "return" to drive at much the same point: if civilization has repressed and forgotten the fundamental law of attraction in social reality, then any prospective vision leading out of this "hell" must actually take the form of a recollection of our true nature, a return to a more fundamental "Edenic" state. In sum, and to use Ricoeur's delightful expression, coupling the schemas of return and inversion we can say that in Fourier's utopian vision of liberating repressed human passions, "The return is a re-turn."<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Ricoeur observed a similar recapitulative dynamic at play in Fourier's description of God and religion. Fourier strongly rejected the punitive image of God as a "cruel tyrant" associated with the preaching of hell, which in his view functioned to divinize privation. In diametric opposition to such a perspective Fourier instead advocated "the divinization of delight," and the consequent portrayal of God in terms of pleasure.<sup>13</sup> Here again is the theme of inversion, but just as in his depiction of human passions Fourier's utopian religious imagination also includes a trajectory of return. It is interesting that Fourier did not imagine a utopian future free of all belief in God; rather, Fourier sought to *invert* surface level representations of God (from wrath to delight) in order to *return* to a more fundamental divine reality that had been forgotten or obscured. Like his vision of the need to uncover and liberate repressed human passions Fourier's utopian vision of religion was consequently also recapitulative, located between the established, decadent religion of his time and a more fundamental religion that he believed remained to be uncovered or invented.<sup>14</sup> In both of these aspects Ricoeur drew attention to a consistent feature of Fourier's projection of a utopian future: "The utopia claims to be a restoration of the primitive law. Thus, it is both progressive and regressive. The progression is in fact a regression to the divine law."<sup>15</sup>

His observation of this recapitulative dynamic at work in these two specific aspects of Fourier's utopia led Ricoeur to draw two more general theoretical inferences for the functioning of utopia and its inter-relation with ideology. On the one hand Ricoeur questioned to what extent the quality of "return" characterizes not just Fourier's particular utopian vision, but rather utopian imagination in general:

To what extent is utopia's futurism fundamentally a return? Fourier comments quite often that what he advocates is not a reform but a return, a return to the root. He has many pages on the topic of forgetfulness. This theme is also prevalent in Nietzsche and in others such as Heidegger; the idea is that we have forgotten something, and consequently our problem is not

so much to invent as to rediscover what we have forgotten. In a sense all founders of philosophies, religions, and cultures say that they are bringing forth something that already existed...The new *logos* is always an ancient *logos*.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Ricoeur argued for the necessity of healing what is negative in utopia with what is positive in ideology and vice versa.<sup>17</sup> By their excentricity utopias tend to abstract so fully from what is that they provide no indication of how to move from the “here” of the current state of affairs to the “elsewhere” of the projected perfection. To this pathology of utopia the positive integrating function of ideology can serve as a healing tonic.<sup>18</sup> Here too we have an example of a dynamic in which the progressive only attains its liberating aims, paradoxically, by drawing upon that which appears to be regressive.

Finally, near the end of his essay on Fourier Ricoeur analyzes how Greek tragedies remain an ongoing source of insight and inspiration for contemporary readers in a manner that seems to represent a concrete instantiation of the recapitulative dynamic he described in this essay. In Ricoeur’s view, when we return again and again to the ancient Greek tragedies we do not seek in them simply an expression of the ancient Greece. Rather, we are drawn to their “projective ideas,” that which they continue to open and disclose for us today, which testifies to their capacity to be decontextualized from their original setting and recontextualized in our own. For this reason we cannot say that the Greek tragedies merely reflect the context of their production: they are not merely echoes or “reflections in the sense of mirroring,” but rather have a generative capacity which enables them to “open outward to new times,” a power to speak for many time periods.<sup>19</sup> Here Ricoeur’s description of the continuing capacity of Greek myths to be meaningful to people today, of how contemporary people can turn back to the ancient Greek myths in order to discover new meanings for today, vividly recalls his description of the three-step dialectic of biblical prophecy as a creative repetition. It also clearly reflects this dynamic as Ricoeur described it in his analysis of Fourier’s utopia and the general theoretical inferences he drew from it as a result; while Ricoeur does not explicitly label his analysis of the ongoing meaningfulness of ancient Greek tragedies as a concrete instantiation of the dynamic he identified in Fourier’s utopia, it seems to function as such. Thus, the capacity of tragedies from ancient Greece to speak to us today illustrates the same schema of creative return, repetition with a surplus, that Ricoeur identified in: his analysis of Fourier’s utopian description of the human passions, and God and religion; and in the theoretical inferences Ricoeur drew from the former for the functioning of utopia in general and its inter-relation with ideology. All of the foregoing are ways in which a recapitulative dynamic is manifest in Ricoeur’s description of and reflections upon Fourier’s utopia.

A third manifestation of a recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur’s thinking is his understanding of the multi-level organization of symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil*.<sup>20</sup> As is well known, Ricoeur divided symbols into primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, each of which fulfills a different function. At the primary level symbols function to bring mute experience to speech, for instance, the various symbols of defilement, sin, and guilt give expression to the experience of evil; on its own experience is “blind...still embedded in the matrix of emotion, fear, anguish,” but once expressed in symbols this experience is brought into language which is the light of the emotions.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, secondary symbols are myths which present a “first-order hermeneutics” of the primary symbols, e.g., the creation myths in Genesis. Tertiary or speculative

symbols in turn present a “second-order hermeneutics” of both the primary and secondary symbols, for instance, the theological doctrine of original sin.<sup>22</sup>

The important point for the current investigation in relation to this tripartite organization of symbols is the way in which according to Ricoeur a recapitulative dynamic is operative in the transition from primary to secondary to tertiary symbols. In this ascending movement Ricoeur described a complex interplay between enigmatic semantic density and univocal lucidity, related to his agenda in this book to explore the relationship between philosophical reflection and symbolic expressions, such that he posited an inverse relationship between conceptual clarity and richness of meaning.<sup>23</sup> That is, he argued that in the ascent from primary symbols (such as “defilement”) to secondary symbols (such as the Genesis creation myths) to tertiary symbols (such as the theological doctrine of original sin) the increasingly lucid articulation of symbolic meaning is inversely correlated with a corresponding “impoverishment of symbolic richness.”<sup>24</sup> Between the two extremes of complete opacity and univocal allegorizing exegesis Ricoeur wanted to forge a path of creative interpretation of meaning, “faithful to the impulsion, to the gift of meaning from the symbol, and faithful also to the philosopher’s oath to seek understanding.”<sup>25</sup> This is what Ricoeur found suggested in the Kantian expression “The symbol gives rise to thought.”<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that each step from symbol to myth to speculative thought “maintains itself only by taking up the symbolic charge of the preceding [step],”<sup>27</sup> such that both first- and second-order hermeneutics only interpret a richness of symbolic meaning that precedes their successively more pure rational elaboration.<sup>28</sup> Higher symbolic levels draw upon and transform the relatively richer but also more ambiguous meanings of lower symbolic levels to generate their relatively more clear conceptual articulations, they recapitulate powerful and primitive expressions in their own more advanced intellectual productions.

A second way in which a recapitulative dynamic structures *The Symbolism of Evil* concerns Ricoeur’s description of the functioning of symbols within rather than across symbolic levels, which can be illustrated by examining Ricoeur’s analysis of the primary symbols of defilement, sin, and guilt. Within the primary level each of these symbols has a unique semantic field, which Ricoeur hierarchized in terms of their relative degree of sophistication: for example, he characterized “defilement” as the most primitive symbol of evil, drawing as it does upon experiences of physical contamination and contagion; in contrast “sin” construed as missing the mark (*hamartano*) has an interpersonal frame of reference, emphasizing the rupture of a relation; and finally the most refined symbol of “guilt” incorporates the internal, subjective experience of the conscience unhappily aware of an evil use of liberty which has diminished the self.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, in a manner akin to the relationship he articulated between primary, secondary, and tertiary symbolic levels, according to Ricoeur *within* the level of primary symbols each of the successive “advances” in symbolic representation from the schema of defilement evince continuity with and indeed draw upon the schema of defilement for their power. Thus, while the symbol of “sin” shifts the focus from contagion to the rupture of a relation, it nevertheless conserves an objective, ontological aspect to the experience of evil (akin to the externality of defilement) in a variety of ways: for example as a condition “in which” a person is situated whether or not they realize it, and by describing evil as a power which “takes hold” of a person.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the culminating primary symbol of guilt recapitulates the externality of evil in terms of the schema of seduction, the “evil [which] comes to a [person] as the ‘outside’ of freedom, as the other than itself in which freedom is taken captive.”<sup>31</sup> For this reason Ricoeur wrote that “the more historical and less cosmic symbolism of sin and guilt makes up for the poverty and



abstractness of its imagery only by a series of revivals and transpositions of the more archaic, but more highly surcharged, symbolism of defilement.”<sup>32</sup> In this way, therefore, we witness another example of the deeply recapitulative dynamic in Ricoeur’s pattern of thinking which obtains across a wide range of diverse thematic topics, and one that since it lacks the temporal qualification that attends both prophecy and utopia increases our appreciation of the formal character of this pattern.

With this notion of the intermingling of opposed symbolisms we are led to the fourth and final example of the recapitulative dynamic to be highlighted in this essay, namely, Ricoeur’s depiction in *Freud and Philosophy* of the process of symbolization in terms of sublimation. As the primary title of this work in the original French (*De l’interprétation*) and the English subtitle (*An Essay on Interpretation*) suggest, Ricoeur’s aim in this book is not simply to provide a focused examination of developments in Freud’s thought for their own sake, but rather in order to explore an hermeneutical issue related to the interpretation of symbols. Specifically, what to make of the fact that symbols can either be interpreted phenomenologically in the mode of a recollection of meaning whereby they are believed to have a revelatory capacity to disclose the sacred, or psychoanalytically in the mode of unmasking whereby they are believed to distort primary wishes and desires in their dissimulated derivatives? This is a very different question than that which animated Ricoeur’s *The Symbolism of Evil*, which methodologically can be subsumed under the rubric of a phenomenological recovery of meaning, and which was concerned with the relationship of symbols to philosophical reflection. In contrast, in *Freud and Philosophy* Ricoeur is concerned with whether recollection and unmasking as two ostensibly opposed hermeneutical strategies can be integrated within a single hermeneutical approach, and if so in what manner.

The first step in exploring these questions is to recognize Ricoeur’s acknowledgement of the value of Freud’s work in unmasking the role of desire in distorting the elementary meanings of consciousness: a certain work of demystification is required if one is to recognize the instinctual realities underlying the “illusions and lies of consciousness.”<sup>33</sup> For Freud this held true across a wide range of psychological and cultural phenomena, the most basic of the former being the operation of the primary process: in response to a present need the memories of a past satisfaction are re-activated so as to provide an immediate, direct fulfillment. Of course, the downside of this shortest path to fulfillment is that the satisfaction is hallucinated and not real.<sup>34</sup> In a similar manner dreams too are fulfillments of desire, indeed usually desires which have been prevented from entering consciousness as such through the mechanism of repression; as a result, these desires must enter consciousness in the mode of disguise via the dissimulating labor of “dream-work.” Through displacement, condensation, pictorial representation, and secondary revision the psychical apparatus traverses in its representations a threefold regression at the root of which lie our archaic desires, and preeminently our sexual desires.<sup>35</sup> Even our waking consciousness exists as a form of perception and thus calls for a psychoanalytic critique.<sup>36</sup> Moving to the cultural sphere, Freud extended his deciphering psychoanalytic interpretation to cultural phenomena by construing art as a psychical derivative of instinctual representatives,<sup>37</sup> and religion as a wish-fulfillment of one of humanity’s oldest and deepest desires: “the longing for the father.”<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur consequently considered the fundamental insight of Freudian psychoanalysis to be “a revelation of the archaic, a manifestation of the ever prior.”<sup>39</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis unremittingly applies an approach of unmasking in its interpretation of instinctual representatives and symbols, which functions to decipher the monotonous presence of

desire under all of its highly varied appearances thereby “reduc[ing] apparent novelty by showing that it is actually a revival of the old.”<sup>40</sup>

It is, however, precisely in relation to this point that Ricoeur posed his own question: are the productions of our psychic mechanism and culture only backward-looking, only dissimulations of archaic desire, or can they not also be prospective, revelatory, and open new possibilities? As a first step in demonstrating how this is in fact the case Ricoeur drew out certain subterranean themes in Freud’s analyses of art. In this connection a key phrase for Ricoeur is Freud’s statement, when describing the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci, that “It is possible that in these figures Leonardo denied the unhappiness of his erotic life and has triumphed over it in his art....”<sup>41</sup> What, Ricoeur asked, is the meaning in this context of the words “denied” and “triumphed over”? Might they indicate that art can be more than merely a dissimulating cultural analogue of the reproductive wish-fulfillments of dreams? Ricoeur argued that this is precisely the case, that the artist can create works that “are not simply projections of the artist’s conflicts, but the sketch of their solution.”<sup>42</sup>

Ricoeur’s position on this point stands in some tension with that of Freud. Freud considered symbols to be a kind of stereotyped code of sedimented meanings which the psyche uses to represent desires in disguised form; the psyche does not generate these symbols in the primary process or dreamwork, but merely makes use of those symbols that have previously been generated elsewhere and are ready at hand. Ricoeur acknowledged that this is one aspect of symbols but not their only aspect, and in a familiar maneuver he rather argued for a tripartite organization of symbols. While this tripartite organization structurally echoes the analysis of symbols in *The Symbolism of Evil*, the content with which Ricoeur filled this structure in *Freud and Philosophy* is novel. At the lowest level are worn-out symbols, part of the stereotyped cultural code Freud identified, where the work of symbolization is in fact no longer operative; at the second level are those symbols that contribute to the symbolic structure of action in any given society and serve “as a token for the nexus of social pacts”; and at the highest level are “prospective symbols” which communicate new meanings, and represent “the living substrate of symbolism.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, in Ricoeur’s view Freud correctly identified one of the functions of symbols, but not the only or the most fundamental function. For while symbols certainly can function reproductively to represent monotonous regressive desires, the most important task is to consider symbols in their productive aspect, according to their capacity to generate new meanings.

Having argued that this is the case Ricoeur subsequently had to confront the challenge of how within a psychoanalytic context to articulate the manner in which a prospective function of symbols could obtain, to which end he explored Freud’s understanding of sublimation.<sup>44</sup> Initially the relationship between progression and regression presents itself as an opposition, but Ricoeur wondered whether this ostensible opposition was not merely provisional, and preparatory for a further sublation. The Freudian concept of sublimation presents an alternative to a purely oppositional relationship between progression and regression, and this notwithstanding the fact that in Freud’s own treatment the mode of operation of sublimation remains a “riddle,” “as much a problem as a solution” since the more Freud distinguishes sublimation from the other psychic mechanisms “the more its own mechanism remains unexplained.”<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur considered the solution to this enigma to lie in Freud’s notion that sublimation involves the diversion of desires from their original aims to new aims. It is of course a crucial psychoanalytic insight that while the objects of desire are highly variable the desires



themselves remain unchanging. However, the unique quality of sublimation is that not only can desire's objects be varied, but that even its aim can be diverted.

An important conclusion arising from this analysis is that although it is vitally important to recognize the genuine difference between reproductive psychic representations and innovative cultural productions, they are not utterly heterogeneous. Both share the same "hyletic," the "matter" of desire, but differ crucially with respect to their "transformation" or "diversion" of aim.<sup>46</sup> Hence Ricoeur asked, "Could it be that the true meaning of sublimation is to promote new meanings by mobilizing old energies initially invested in archaic figures?"<sup>47</sup> If this is the case, then:

Advancement of meaning occurs only in the sphere of the projections of desire, of the derivatives of the unconscious, of the revivals of archaism. We nourish our least carnal symbols with desires that have been checked, deviated, transformed...[Indeed,] insofar as revealing and disguising coincide in it, we might say that sublimation is the symbolic function itself.<sup>48</sup>

This final example highlights with particular force Ricoeur's conservative, generous or recapitulative impulse toward what is basic and even base in the human constitution, and which recapitulative dynamic the four examples outlined in this essay have illustrated. There are of course other, perhaps more complicated thematic foci one could list as illustrative examples of this dynamic: for example, how in his philosophy of the self Ricoeur recapitulated the apparently regressive notions of the "self" and "self-love" in his own understandings of attestation, self-esteem, and self-respect;<sup>49</sup> or how in tracing the course of recognition Ricoeur recapitulated the logical sense of identification in being-recognized.<sup>50</sup> By focusing on the particular examples here selected, in this essay I have sought to provide a kind of heuristic that can operate to help one discover a similar recapitulative dynamic in a variety of other places in Ricoeur's corpus.

For Ricoeur scholars this recapitulative pattern of thinking is interesting because it cuts across Ricoeur's philosophical and theological writings. As a number of commentators have emphasized,<sup>51</sup> throughout his career Ricoeur certainly sought to maintain a clear distinction between these two categories by means of a kind of "conceptual asceticism." However, in, through, and beneath it the recapitulative pattern of thinking here described connects with Ricoeur's recognition that he was not unaffected by his operative interests and commitments. As he acknowledged in the Introduction to *Oneself as Another*, "I do not claim that at the deep level of motivations these [theological] convictions remain without any effect on the interest I take in this or that problem, even in the overall problematic of the self."<sup>52</sup>

If we acknowledge this to be true, then it is appropriate to follow up by inquiring about the origins of the pattern of thinking here identified: whence recapitulation? Is this pattern essentially theological and Christian at its base, inasmuch as it reflects a transposition of the fundamental theme of salvation for sinners, or love of enemies? Perhaps.<sup>53</sup> Or is it simply an iteration of Ricoeur's famous self-description of his methodology as a post-Hegelian Kantianism? Again, perhaps.<sup>54</sup>

While the task of identifying the source of this recurring pattern of thought in Ricoeur's corpus remains a question for another investigation, it does lead to a final and important observation that itself recapitulates a theme introduced at the beginning of this essay.

Namely, in a surprising and apparent reversal toward the end of his life, Ricoeur himself called into question the “asceticism of argument” to which he sought to adhere throughout his intellectual career. In the dialogue entitled “On Life Stories” recorded between 2001-2003, Ricoeur offered the following striking comments:

I might even concede here a point made recently by my young colleagues, Dominico Jervolino and Fabrizio Turoldo, that my thought is not so removed from certain religious and biblical issues as my standard policy of “conceptual asceticism” might have been prepared to admit in the past. I am not sure about the absolute irreconcilability between the God of the Bible and the God of Being. The tendency of modern French thought to eclipse the Middle Ages has prevented us from acknowledging certain very rich attempts to think God and being in terms of each other. *I no longer consider such conceptual asceticism tenable.*<sup>55</sup>

In the context of Ricoeur’s long held and strictly maintained distinction between philosophy and theology, these comments are very startling. Moreover, Ricoeur’s reference to “certain very rich” medieval attempts to think God and being in terms of each other presents a stark contrast with the methodological approach Ricoeur described in his introduction to *Oneself as Another*. There Ricoeur was very careful to identify that even the ontological study which concludes *Oneself as Another* is “conducted within the dimension of a philosophical hermeneutics [which] consists in an ontological investigation that involves no ontotheological amalgamations.”<sup>56</sup>

Growing out of this observation, the following question arises in relation to the theme of this essay: beyond existing as a subterranean intellectual pattern underlying both Ricoeur’s philosophical and theological works, does this methodological reassessment represent the emergence of Ricoeur’s recapitulative pattern of thinking from an implicit to an explicitly thematic level? Does this move away from a concern that theology might contaminate the purity of philosophical reflection exist as the ultimate example of Ricoeur’s recapitulative generosity, of his being generous to a fault? Up to this point the phrase “generous to a fault” has functioned in this essay primarily to describe a pattern of thinking that is generous to everything in us that is regressive and archaic, in short a pattern of generosity to our faults. In addition it has also functioned to express an implicit, appreciative evaluation of this recapitulative pattern. However, at this point the possibility of a new semantic valence emerges in line with the negative connotation of this expression in everyday language. Has Ricoeur here gone too far? In re-opening the possibility of ontotheological amalgamations must we in fact hold Ricoeur accountable for the potentially damaging effects of his reckless generosity? In relation to this theme Ricoeur’s generous impulses will appear to many as excessively prodigal, flirting with the edge, as courting intellectual disaster.

Whatever our evaluation of this particular point, it is necessary to consider whether it is not the very prodigality of Ricoeur’s generosity that infuses his recapitulative pattern of thinking with its power. Here we are perhaps in the realm of the impassioning impossible, or the excessive gift, and it seems likely that the recapitulative pattern of Ricoeur’s thinking offers significant resources for reflecting upon the pressing needs of our day in a variety of domains precisely in proportion to its prodigality. In this respect the recurring recapitulative pattern in Ricoeur’s thinking seem to reflect something of the paradoxes he explored at the end of *Memory, History, Forgetting* in relation to the vertical asymmetry that spans “the great height of the spirit of

forgiveness and the abyss of guilt.”<sup>57</sup> It is relatively easy to laud Ricoeur’s generous approach when it recapitulates an archaism that has already been tamed, a domesticated regression; it is much harder to appreciate such an approach when it concerns an archaism by which we still feel threatened. However, it is precisely at this point that the power of Ricoeur’s approach is most forcefully manifest, for it suggests that our prophetic visions, far from being able to cut off our most regressive tendencies, arise out of the substrate of our individual and collective archaisms. What resources might this insight offer to us in our own contemporary context, for example in relation to the ongoing financial crisis which to a significant extent seems to have arisen out of the occlusion of an enlightened self-interest by distorted perceptions of immediate self-interest? If Ricoeur is correct that the way to a better future does not lie in attempting to cut off the most regressive parts of ourselves, we can expect that prospective visions suggesting the simple eradication of “greed” will in fact be ineffective and unrealistic. How, rather, to incorporate the dynamics of self-interest in our efforts to establish a more just society? How to recapitulate this regressive passion into efforts directed toward “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions”? In such concrete examples which affect the material reality of people’s lives we see that what is at stake in Ricoeur’s recapitulative pattern of thinking is not merely an intellectual abstraction. The frequently recapitulative nature of Ricoeur’s insights indicates the importance, stakes, and risks associated not just with the content of Ricoeur’s thought but also with the way in which he did his thinking, a pattern which above all was generous, generous even to a fault.

- <sup>1</sup> Cited from the website of the Gifford Lectures, accessed January 11, 2011 from: <http://www.giffordlectures.org/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, in the Introduction to *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur wrote that "I do not claim that at the deep level of motivations these [theological] convictions remain without any effect on the interest I take in this or that problem, even in the overall problematic of the self." Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Time," in *Figuring the Sacred*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 174.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 92.
- <sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, "Biblical Time," 175.
- <sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, "Biblical Time," 173.
- <sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, "Biblical Time," 176.
- <sup>9</sup> The most salient manifestations of ideology, Ricoeur argued, are the most negative, necessitating a procedure of questioning back (*rückfragen*) to identify ideology's positive contributions. So in the order of presentation the most readily perceivable ideological function is that of the distortion of reality. Marx analyzed ideology in terms of the metaphor of the *camera obscura* which provides an inverted picture of reality. The location of the real economic basis is camouflaged and the true vector of the dependence of capital upon labor is not only obscured, but inverted. By means of this dissimulation capital obtains an illusory aura of independent productivity, of "surplus value." At the second level ideology operates to *legitimate* authority by covering over the gap between the authority granted by the body of the ruled and the claim to power on the part of those ruling. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 200–202, 212. At the third level, and relying upon the work of Clifford Geertz, Ricoeur argued for a positive, integrating ideological function related to the symbolic structure of every society: this relates to the notion that our actions in the socio-cultural sphere are symbolically mediated. On this issue see Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 153–154, 223, 254–66; and Paul Ricoeur, "Ideology and Utopia," in *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 317. That is, whereas certain Marxist perspectives have argued for a fundamental distinction between the "real" and "representation," Ricoeur claimed that the symbolic structure of any society is basic. In his opinion, it is only by positing some element of symbolic mediation at the level of the "real basis" that one is able to understand the process by which our self-representations might become ideological.
- <sup>10</sup> In Ricoeur's creative organization each of the three levels of ideology is mirrored by three corresponding levels of utopia. Thus, at the first, most negative level utopia generates visions of a future perfect society, but frequently does not include adequate reflection upon the steps required to advance from the unsatisfactory "here and now" to utopia's idyllic "elsewhere." For this reason, at this level utopia can present itself as an escape from reality and a flight from responsibility. At the second level utopia has the function of uncovering the "surplus value" contained in any ideological claim to power, since it draws attention to the gap between authority claimed and authority granted. (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 310). Finally, at the third and deepest level utopia functions to subvert what *is* in favor of the exploration of the *possible*. In contrast to ideology which, whether in negative or in positive terms, always appears to have a conserving or preserving function, utopias are fundamentally subversive, a disruption of what is in favor of what could be, or in Ricoeur's words "an imaging of something else, the elsewhere." Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 265–66. Nevertheless, it is not accurate to say that utopia is not implicated in the formation and maintenance

of identity. There is a *prospective* component to identity -- e.g., dreams, hopes, goals, expectations, anticipated projects, etc. -- and for this reason one can say that the subversive role of utopia vis-à-vis present reality is nevertheless also a component of identity. (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 311).

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 304.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 308.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 306. Fourier's efforts in this area were in the service of discovering a "reasoned faith," and Ricoeur likens this aspect of Fourier's thought with his own attempts to explore "the necessary juxtaposition of suspicion and recollection."

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 305-306.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 304.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 307-308.

<sup>17</sup> As Ricoeur wrote, "It is as though we have to call upon the 'healthy' function of ideology to cure the madness of utopia and as though the critique of ideologies can only be carried out by a conscience capable of regarding itself from the point of view of 'nowhere'" (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 324).

<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the conserving and preserving function of ideology can become overly narrow, blind to the possibility of other and better ways of doing things than currently obtains. It is this pathology of ideology that the abstraction to the "nowhere" of utopia remediates.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 313.

<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps important to identify Ricoeur's indebtedness to Karl Jaspers for this tripartite schematization. While Ricoeur did not acknowledge this indebtedness to Jaspers' work in *The Symbolism of Evil*, he did so in an article published the year prior to that volume: Paul Ricoeur, "The Symbol...Food for Thought," *Philosophy Today* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1960): 201. An important terminological difference is that Ricoeur called "symbol" (*symbole*) that which Jaspers called "figure" or "code" (*chiffre*).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 237.

<sup>23</sup> In describing how symbols convey meaning at each of these three levels, Ricoeur clearly wanted to distinguish the way that symbols "suggest" meaning with how allegories merely "clothe" it. At all three symbolic levels Ricoeur wished to preserve the distinctive quality by which symbols present their meaning "in the opaque transparency of an enigma and not by translation." Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 16. Nevertheless, Ricoeur recognized the necessary role of "allegorizing exegesis" in interpretation, which in his view consists of a univocal rationalizing interpretation. Ricoeur, "The Symbol...Food for Thought," 200. For if symbols were to remain *completely* opaque to any allegorizing activity, they would simply offer nothing to thought. Ricoeur, "The Symbol...Food for Thought," 202. Throughout the analysis as he structured it, Ricoeur treated allegory not as a means of *creating* symbols but rather as a mode of univocal rationalizing interpretation, which univocal tendency is necessarily correlated with a narrowing of the full field of symbolic meaning. That is, in allegorizing interpretation the relationship of symbol to meaning is akin to that between a dispensable ornamentation and an essential (univocal) meaning; once the latter has been discerned through a process of "trans-lation," the former may be discarded as superfluous. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 16, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I," trans. Denis Savage, in *Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 291. One can also see a similar assertion of the relative poverty of tertiary symbols in passages where Ricoeur spoke of the "exhausted time" of tertiary symbols in comparison to the "hidden time" of primary symbols. In Ricoeur's opinion a tradition must always return to this "hidden time" of primary



symbols by a work of interpretation in order to continually renew itself. Paul Ricoeur, "Structure and Hermeneutics," trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>25</sup>Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 348.

<sup>26</sup>As Ricoeur commented on this phrase, "That sentence, which enchants me, says two things: the symbol gives; but what it gives is occasion for thought, something to think about." Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 348.

<sup>27</sup>Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics of Symbols: I," 291.

<sup>28</sup>Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics of Symbols: I," 296.

<sup>29</sup>Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 81, 102.

<sup>30</sup>For example, as a condition "in which" a person is situated whether or not they realize it, and by describing evil as a power which "takes hold" of a person. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 70

<sup>31</sup>Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 155.

<sup>32</sup>Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 12. Similarly, in speaking of symbols representing the servile will Ricoeur stated that "The final symbol indicates its limiting concept only by taking up into itself all the wealth of the prior symbols. Thus there is a circular relation among all the symbols: the last bring out the meaning of the preceding ones, but the first lend to the last all their power of symbolization." Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 152. Further to this same point, for this reason Ricoeur argued that the symbol of guilt can only be understood through a "double movement, starting from the two other stages of fault: a movement of rupture and a movement of resumption." Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 100. Or again, that in the trajectory he has traced from defilement to sin to guilt "the most archaic are retained and reaffirmed by the most advanced of these symbols." Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 151.

<sup>33</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32. This psychoanalytic category of illusion is itself significant, and cannot be reduced to that of error in epistemology or lying in morality. Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 26

<sup>34</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 78-79, 108.

<sup>35</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 159-160.

<sup>36</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 120.

<sup>37</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 174.

<sup>38</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 252. See also Ricoeur's statements that Freud "knows cultural phenomena only as analogues of the wish-fulfillment illustrated by dreams" (155), and that dreams function as the model for the interpretation of cultural productions, revealing the oneiric dimensions of art, morality and religion (162).

<sup>39</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 440.

<sup>40</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 446.

<sup>41</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 173.

<sup>42</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 175.

<sup>43</sup>Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 102, 503-506.

<sup>44</sup>Ricoeur's analysis of sublimation in Freud's works contains at least the following themes, only some of which are dealt with in detail in the analysis that follows: i) works of art present new meanings; ii) both "representation" and "sublimation"/"symbolization" are grounded in the same hyletic matter of desire; iii) in contrast to representation, in sublimation "denial" (of the primary process) plays a crucial role as a substitutive representative of the death instincts; iv) it is significant that symbolization seeks to overcome absence through unreal creations with no prior referent in reality (unlike reproductive representations of the desired but unattainable object); v) unlike the productions of the primary process or dreamwork, artistic creations obtain the enduring permanency of a work; and vi) ultimately the functions of reproductive dissimulation and productive creation exist as two

poles on the extremes of a shared continuum, i.e., there is no absolute separation between reproductive and productive imaginative functions, they can be combined in different proportions.

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 172, 175 and 487 respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 521.

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 175

<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 497. See also Ricoeur's powerfully concise statement that the symbol is "the concrete 'mixed texture' in which we see both archeology and teleology" (Ibid., 494).

<sup>49</sup> For example, we can think of the way in which in his philosophy of the self Ricoeur did not completely banish all notion of the *cogito*, but rather allowed a limited place for a meta-level of self-awareness by which a person grasps "the unifying principle of the operations among which it is dispersed and forgets itself as subject." Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," in *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 12. Indeed, he recapitulated the (in his context) regressive notion of "reflection" associated the self-constituting *cogito* in his own more complex and mediated understanding of "concrete reflection." Or we could explore how at the heart of his ethical vision -- of "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" -- he recapitulated the apparently regressive notions of the "self" and "self-love" in his own understandings of self-esteem and self-respect.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 250. As an interesting aside, this is the only context I am aware of in which Ricoeur used the term "recapitulation" to label the dynamic I have described throughout this essay.

<sup>51</sup> For a recent example see: Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 24

<sup>53</sup> At first blush it certainly would not appear to be very difficult to draw connections between the dynamic I have described here and the poetic biblical representations of salvation *for sinners*, and even the term I have used throughout this paper, "recapitulation," has an important Irenaean heritage in Christian usage. Another point in favor of this line of thinking would be the observation of how some of Ricoeur's philosophical expressions echo the relatively refined theological soteriological formulation of Thomas Aquinas that "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it" (*Summa Theologiae*, Pt.1, Q.1, A.8, Reply 2). See for example Ricoeur's statement that the rootedness of sublimation in our experience, including especially our primitive and primordial instincts, "keeps man's cultural existence from being simply a huge artifice, a futile 'artifact,' a Leviathan without a nature and against nature." Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy*, 524. See similar comments to this effect in Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," trans. Robert Sweeney, in *Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 412, and the related observation that "The passion for the possible must graft itself onto real tendencies."

<sup>54</sup> However, one benefit of the language of "recapitulation" used in this essay is that it brings out other dimensions than the dialectic of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Furthermore, it would perhaps be necessary to complicate the categorization further by interrogating to what extent Hegel himself was a Christian thinker, albeit a creatively heterodox one. See Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Italics added. Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 169.

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 483. For more on this theme see the entire epilogue to this volume entitled "Difficult Forgiveness," 457-506.