

Problems about the Canon in Teaching Philosophy in Colombia

Notes for a Dialogue with Paul Ricœur, Didactics and Curriculum Theory

Manuel Prada Londoño

University of La Salle

Fredy H. Prieto

Secretary of Education of Bogotá

Abstract

This text is focused on the question of what we should teach in high school philosophy and the relationship of this teaching to recognizing oneself as a good philosophy teacher. We hold that these points are connected to the idea of “canon” and “history of philosophy” that we gained with and despite Ricœur himself. This paper advances a critical view of contemporary practices in philosophy teaching in Colombia through Ricœur’s thought. In the first part, we follow Ricœur’s considerations about the history of philosophy and its connections to the very practice of thinking. In the second part, we concentrate on the question of the canon. At the end of each section, we will give some pedagogical stitches to interweave Ricœur’s philosophical legacy with the didactics and theory of the curriculum, thus forming a tripod that should be part of the didactics of philosophy as an independent discipline.

Keywords: Canon; History of Philosophy; Curriculum Theory; Didactics of Philosophy

Résumé

Ce texte se concentre sur la question de savoir ce qu’il faut enseigner en philosophie au lycée et sur le rapport qu’entretient cette question avec le fait de se reconnaître soi-même comme un bon professeur de philosophie. Nous pensons que ces aspects sont à mettre en relation avec l’idée de « canon » et d’« histoire de la philosophie » que nous avons acquise avec et malgré Ricœur lui-même. Cet article constitue une vision critique des pratiques contemporaines de l’enseignement de la philosophie en Colombie à travers la pensée de Ricœur. Dans une première partie, nous présentons les réflexions de Ricœur sur l’histoire de la philosophie et ses liens avec la pratique même de la pensée. Dans la deuxième partie, nous nous concentrons sur la question du canon. À la fin de chaque section, nous offrons quelques idées pédagogiques pour entrelacer l’héritage philosophique de Ricœur avec la didactique et la théorie des programmes éducatifs, formant ainsi un trépied qui devrait faire partie de la didactique de la philosophie en tant que discipline indépendante.

Mots-clés: canon ; histoire de la philosophie ; théorie des programmes éducatifs ; didactique de la philosophie

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Problems about the Canon in Teaching Philosophy in Colombia

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I. Introduction

For this article, we assume as a starting point one of the questions directly or indirectly faced by all teachers of philosophy, especially in high school: what should we teach? The answers to this question depend on many factors. For example, some are related to the teacher's preferences and training (e.g., the field of philosophical knowledge with which they are most familiar, the research interests they have at the time of teaching the course, the philosophical topic of the course itself, and so forth). Others are connected to the teaching context itself (e.g., secondary or tertiary education). In other cases, the target audience of the class is considered (for instance, the age range to which the students belong, the moment of their training in philosophy); and, on more than a few occasions, matters that can be called "institutional" must be contemplated (such as the curricular project, education policies or assessment criteria, among others).

We approach this question through Paul Ricœur's texts in *History and Truth* that deal with the history of philosophy, with the aim of creating a dialogue between general didactics and curriculum theory. In this endeavor, we draw especially from William Pinar's theory of curriculum and Eduardo Rabossi's work on the philosophical canon.¹ Based on these sources, this text defends the thesis according to which the question: "what should we teach in high school philosophy?" has to be dealt with together with the questions of "canon" and "history of philosophy," on which we will propose a view gained with and despite Ricœur himself. As for the notion of "canon," we

¹ We are guided here by how some Latin American authors understand general didactics, and we apply it to philosophy as specific teachable knowledge (Frida Díaz Barriga and Gerardo Hernández Rojas, *Estrategias Docentes Para Un Aprendizaje Significativo. Una Interpretación Constructivista* (México: McGraw Hill, 2010); Andrés K. Runge, "Didáctica: Una Introducción Panorámica y Comparada," *Itinerario Educativo*, vol. 27/62 (2013), 201-40, online: <https://doi.org/10.21500/01212753.1500>; Alicia de Camilloni, "Herencias, Deudas y Legados. Una Introducción a Las Corrientes Actuales de La Didáctica," in Alicia de Camilloni, María C. Davini, Gloria Edelstein, Edith Litwin, Marta Souto and Susana Barco (eds), *Corrientes Didácticas Contemporáneas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1996), 17-40). In the background of this text, the reader will also find the contributions of the North American theory of the curriculum which, deeply influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizes the very experience of teaching and learning as an element *sine qua non* to make decisions about what happens in the classroom (William Pinar, William Reynolds, Pastrick Slattery and Peter Taubman, *Understanding Curriculum. An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008; first edition 1995); William Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?* (New York: Routledge, 2020)).

orientate ourselves to Rabossi's idea that the canon of philosophy is "a basic perspective that stipulates and defines the domain, the theoretical and practical assumptions, the goals, objectives, and values that are proper [to philosophy as a professional practice]." ² Among those values, we find the knowledge of the history of philosophy as a condition without which it is, if not impossible, at least very difficult to be a "good" teacher of philosophy. In a more restricted sense, the canon refers to the set of texts, authors, and problems to which the members of a community, in this case a philosophical one, recognize authority, in the best-known sense proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. ³

Regarding curriculum theory, we follow Pinar when he states: "I encourage individual teachers to answer the classic curriculum question –what knowledge is of most worth?– animated by the historical moment, their own intellectual passions, and the particular, irreplaceable individuals they teach." ⁴ In contrast, in many contexts, at least in Colombia (where we think from) the question about what to teach is not considered in all its aspects. It is taken for granted that whoever declares himself/herself a teacher of philosophy and holds the required degrees, publications, and teaching experience already knows how to answer that question, ⁵ and therefore the historical moment in which their practice is developed, their academic passions, or the particular, irreplaceable individuals they have in class are not taken into account. In other words, it is taken for granted that the question "what should we teach?" is answered by an increasingly correct appropriation of the constitutive rules shaping the standards of excellence conveyed by the canon of philosophy itself. ⁶ Teachers who are keen on the canon of philosophy teach, for instance, the fundamental problems of an area, current or period –taking into account or not all the discrepancies between schools of interpretation on the same author or problem. They distinguish between "primary" and "secondary" sources, privileging the former. They know and master the

² Eduardo Rabossi, *En el Comienzo Dios Creó el Canon. Ensayo sobre la Condición de la Filosofía* (Buenos Aires: Celtia-Gedisa, 2008), 73.

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁴ Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?*, 114.

⁵ We refer to all teachers who argue that philosophy in itself already contains its didactics and therefore it is not necessary to resort to other disciplines such as pedagogy, didactics, educational psychology, or another to enrich the understanding of learning philosophy. In Latin America, the text by Alejandro Cerletti that defends such a position has become the main reference: *Teaching Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem (La Enseñanza de La Filosofía Como Problema Filosófico* (Buenos Aires: Libros del Zorzal, 2008)). However, at least in France, such a position is also found, according to Michel Tozzi ("La didactique de la philosophie en France. Vingt ans de recherche (1989-2009)," *Éducation et socialisation*, vol. 26 (2009), 73-96).

⁶ We use here the notion of *standards of excellence* used by Ricœur in *Oneself as Another*: "These standards of excellence are rules of comparison applied to different accomplishments, in relation to ideals of perfection shared by a given community of practitioners and internalized by the masters and virtuosos of the practice considered." (trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 176).

typical modes of philosophical argumentation, as well as the very wide range of literary genres that enrich it.⁷

All the previous considerations apply to undergraduate philosophy teaching, but especially to high school philosophy, at least in Colombia. In our country, philosophy is a compulsory school subject (Law of education 115 of 1994). Therefore, every high school student must take and pass the courses of philosophy in order to finish secondary education. As textbooks and course syllabus clearly show, in Colombian high schools, philosophy is taught according to the canon. Furthermore, philosophy teachers want their students to look at primary sources when considering traditional problems and authors, as well as the canon of teaching.

To develop the thesis of this paper, the first part presents the idea of the history of philosophy according to Ricœurian thought. In the second, we focus on the question of the canon, from the restricted perspective mentioned above. At the end of each section, we will present some pedagogical stitches to interweave Ricœur's philosophical legacy with general didactics and theory of the curriculum, thus forming a tripod that should be part of the didactics of philosophy as an independent discipline.

II. On the History of Philosophy

Between 1952 and 1961, Ricœur published a set of texts on the history of philosophy and its connection with the work of thinking, which later appeared as part of the book *History and Truth*. Behind these texts there resonates the old tension (already noted by Kant and Hegel) of opposition and complementarity between the work of the philosopher and the work of the historian of philosophy, which Ricœur does not consider opposites but views as differing from one another in several respects. Likewise, in those texts there emerges the tension between the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, and Ricœur urges his readers to do the former without the latter. In this article, and always concerning the problem of the canon, we point out another of the great tensions highlighted by Ricœur: the tension between the plurality of philosophies and a kind of unity in the history of philosophy, a sort of common thread, a common spirit to all philosophy.

According to Ricœur, the principal way of understanding the first pole of this tension is to regard the history of philosophy as a parade of ideas that "contradict[s] and destroy each other, each of them manifesting a changing truth,"⁸ or as "a series of varying solutions to unchanging problems, those that are called the eternal problems (freedom, reason, reality, soul, God, etc.)"⁹ This way of reading the history of philosophy, continues the philosopher, encourages a skeptical look that ends up assuming the "interpretation of philosophies as being typical answers [realism,

⁷ We think here of a teacher who does not believe that the only way of doing philosophy is the paper. On the literary genres in philosophy and its possible didactic application, we suggest: Maximiliano Prada, Diana M. Acevedo and Fredy Hernán Prieto Galindo, *Filosofía Como Forma de Vida. Laboratorio de Escritura: Estrategia Pedagógica* (Bogotá: Aula de Humanidades, 2019).

⁸ Paul Ricœur, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1965), 42.

⁹ Ricœur, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth," 44.

idealism, existentialism] to anonymous and abstract problems which are passed on from hand to hand.”¹⁰ While for the skeptic there is no possible truth in philosophy, the one who assumes the typical answers is not only making use of an “innocent pedagogical method,” but taking the side of “deadly abstractions with which history is filled: instead of singular philosophies it knows only their empty shell, their socialized wrappings.”¹¹

Regarding the second pole, that of a unity of the history of philosophy, we can identify the danger of dogmatism, of assuming that all philosophy is the long presentation of the same questions, problematizations, and set of arguments.¹² With this form of dogmatism, the specific contribution of each period of philosophy, each context, or each author is lost. In the same way, errors are made in understanding the problems located in their context of origin and, therefore, we eliminate the quality of “otherness” of the past and its actors, the quality of “others” whose voices have something to tell us and cannot be subsumed to our own understandings, which are also historically situated. Another typical form of the dogmatism denounced by Ricœur consists in considering that an author or a philosophical school has the last word regarding the fundamental problems of philosophy, that this or that author represents a kind of culmination or philosophical maturity. It should be noted that often this dogmatism is due more to the students or commentators of these authors than to the philosophers themselves.

Aiming at avoiding the risks of skepticism or dogmatism, Ricœur proposes another way of understanding the tension between the multiplicity of philosophies and the unity of philosophy. On the side of multiplicity, Ricœur highlights the need to safeguard human plurality, which is why he urges us not to sacrifice “the profound originality, the incomparable intention, and the unique vision of the real that a philosophy proposes to us,”¹³ and to avoid “a kind of imperialism which is the contrary of the historian’s attitude. The latter [the historian], it would seem, agrees at the outset to ‘uproot’ himself, to put himself under the law of another, and to conduct his investigation as an exercise in communication and, I might add, in charity.”¹⁴ Likewise, the multiplicity of philosophies (which is in turn a multiplicity of authors, world experiences, and incommensurable contexts) reminds us that the work of thinking concerns everyone in the first person, as it concerned those whose uniqueness we highlight. Thus, we can say with Ricœur that the work of philosophy invites each one of us as a philosopher, a teacher, or a student, to show that each one has

[...] something to discover personally, something that no other except myself has the task of discovering. If my existence has a meaning, if it is not empty, I have a place within being which invites me to raise a question that no one else can raise in my place. The narrowness of my condition, my information, my encounters, my reading, already outline the finished perspectives of my calling to truth.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 44.

¹¹ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 47.

¹² Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 42.

¹³ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 43.

¹⁴ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 44.

¹⁵ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 50.

Now, we usually hope that what we discover, what we come to think, is recognized as an idea going beyond our particular whims and has some universal validity, or better, some validity that has a more generic character, more applicable to wide and diverse contexts of enunciation. Thus, on the side of unity, Ricœur defends an aspiration of humanity that, in philosophy, *hopes to be in the truth* of being. That hope can be fulfilled “when I momentarily perceive the harmony of the diverse philosophical systems which are nevertheless irreducible to one single, coherent discourse” and which is signed by “the conviction of the ultimate unity of truth [which] is the very Spirit of Reason.”¹⁶ This truth to which we aspire is not absolute, but it aims to gradually reveal what the things themselves are like, the questions we pose, and the meaning they have for us. Of course, the truth is not an exclusive possession of those who dedicate themselves to philosophy, nor something that governs a doctrine, a school of thought, or a particular book. However, “[t]his possessive relationship to truth is perhaps the reason for the pretension and the aggressiveness characteristic of all rebellious thought that is hidden in all eclecticism and in all systematic philosophy of history.”¹⁷ Nor is it the resolution of “the dream of some happy ending which lies on the imaginary horizon of our battles.”¹⁸ As Ricœur states, truth,

as milieu or light, leads us to a theme which we earlier encountered: that of being as “openness.” [...] But what does this idea of “openness” signify? It signifies that the many philosophical singularities [...] are *a priori accessible* to each other, that all dialogue is possible *a priori*, because being is *that act* which, preceding and founding all possibility of questioning, grounds the mutuality of the most singular philosophical intentions. It is this openness, this clearing, this *lumen naturale*, that the naive imagination projects in the Elysian Fields where dialogues among the dead are possible. In the Elysian Fields, all philosophers are contemporaneous and all communications reversible [...] The being of every question originally opens everyone to everyone else and grounds the historic and polemic truth of communication.¹⁹

It is precisely this notion of *openness* that is sometimes overlooked due to the *de facto* adoption of only one history, the one dating the birth of philosophy in Ancient Greece with the pre-Socratics, and one canon, one list of a limited and unchangeable count of authors or texts to be read. Under such views of the history of philosophy and the canon, the *lumen* of being which makes possible dialogue *a priori* between many philosophical singularities does not work, nor make available possibilities of questioning or the mutuality of the most singular philosophical intentions to people who try to teach or learn philosophy. What are the pedagogic consequences of such an understanding of philosophy? How could we link this tension between universality and multiplicity that is constitutive of the history of philosophy and the problem of the canon, to the question: “what should we teach?” Here are some ideas:

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, “Preface to the First Edition (1955),” in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1965), 6-7.

¹⁷ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 55.

¹⁸ Ricœur, “Preface to the First Edition (1955),” 12.

¹⁹ Ricœur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” 54.

– For the Colombian case, which is the one we know best, we invite Colombian philosophy high school teachers to question and even unlearn their own idea of the history of philosophy, an idea probably acquired when studying for their Bachelor of Philosophy degree. What we find when reflecting on our experience, is that we have learned a version of the history of philosophy that reduces it to a set of sclerotic responses²⁰ that follows a fragmentary chronological order. It has a “heroic” and “museographic” spirit –as we have learned from Nietzsche²¹– in which the culmination of any period is identifiable with an author or a school of thought.

The typical sclerosis of this canon seems to have clear effects on those who learn and teach philosophy. Thus, we continue spreading the story about the origin of Philosophy in the 7th century BC, without even talking about the African, Asian, or Latin American reflection. We say, without flinching, that in such places there was no philosophy, we affirm that the only form of philosophy is the Greek one, as if it were true.²² Thus, we accustom our students to receiving a single version of philosophy (in general as a discipline) and of every philosophical theory. We teach them in silence that there is only one tradition of truth, one type of valid and valuable knowledge. We show them, without any map, that only Europe has something to teach us.²³ We continually reaffirm in their minds and hearts that we are “underdeveloped,” as if there were a universal yardstick by which to compare all cultures regardless of their diverse histories and circumstances. In addition, with all this, we leave them the greatest lesson of their life: only what comes from the “first world” or the “developed countries” is worthy. By this kind of saying and by these practices, we promote a hidden curriculum having more power in their thinking and acting than the official curriculum that we talk about explicitly and repeatedly all the time in our lessons.²⁴ According to Pinar, a possible source of such a state is that

Traditional teaching [...] tends to focus primarily, sometimes exclusively, upon the curriculum as object, curriculum as textbooks [...] Traditional teaching assumes that the

²⁰ That is why it is common to continue affirming, for example, that Plato is an “idealist” or that Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz are “rationalists,” without being able to identify the differences, nuances, and contradictions of their respective works.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sobre la Utilidad y el Perjuicio de la Historia para la Vida*, ed. and trans. Germán Cano (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1999).

²² Peter Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy. Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon 1780-1830* (New York: SUNY, 2013).

²³ From the critical decolonial version, José Santos-Herceg, rhetorically affirms that “Americans receive and copy both the problems and the solutions from Europe. Their questions and their answers would be imported from the Old World. Not only that, but in line with it, and perhaps as a cause, it would bring the entire system, the paraphernalia, the entire material, and methodical substratum: languages, professorships, bibliography, scholarly apparatus, world view, etc. Along with this, the validation criteria also slip in, the parameters that determine that philosophy is considered a normal practice, the teaching methods and, of course, the way in which the history of philosophical ideas itself is read.” (*Conflicto de Representaciones. América Latina como Lugar para la Filosofía* (Santiago de Chile: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010), 101).

²⁴ Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools. An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (New York/London: Routledge, 2015).

student's understanding is misguided and inadequate; rarely is the student's reading the subject of classroom discourse. Indeed, it is the lived experience of students – linked as it is to the text, mediated and expressed through language – that is missing from the traditional classroom.²⁵

Indeed, what has been more present in Colombian philosophical teaching is that focus upon philosophy as an object, an already defined, solid, immutable set of theories and problems. This is the “universal” image of philosophy that youth seem to learn when their own lived experiences as students, children, adolescents, or adults are omitted. In other words, applying Pinar's thought, learning philosophy cannot just be the study of texts, abstract problems, and methods of philosophy that disregard students' concrete and embodied reality instead of taking their experiences as a part of reflection and philosophy, part of what they can analyze with their philosophical skills or drawing upon the philosophical theories. One quick example could be the decision about getting a tattoo, or the experience of friendship, living abroad, or leaving home. Can these topics or experiences be part of a course in philosophy? Can we philosophize or develop philosophical skills with those and similar topics? Hence, by overlooking these concrete experiences and sticking to the canon, high school teachers of philosophy can only invite their students to enter the “museum of philosophy,” observe it, and learn its features by heart. Furthermore, what we might teach is more than information: we can help our students acquire a way of being as persons and philosophy apprentices. Let us see.

– Sclerosis and the museographic spirit not only characterize our way of understanding the history of philosophy, but also the attitude that we have formed in ourselves as teachers, and our convictions regarding what philosophy is (on which we base our practice and our beliefs, more or less consciously). In other words, if we bear in mind that the curriculum can also be understood as the set of experiences of those who teach and those who learn, we can see more clearly what experiences and understandings we acquire as students or offer as teachers. Do we promote the idea that the difficult part of my personal life should not affect my academic performance? Do we show that what is valuable in education, whatever its level, is reaching the objective proposed in the syllabus and not what each person can achieve? Do we believe that if I can convincingly repeat what Descartes wrote in a book, then I have understood what he has written? Do we teach that what matters in an essay is the sound and pertinent construction of arguments, even when there is no conviction about its premises and conclusions? Do we think that what matters is what the teacher knows, teaches, and wants to hear from their students? Ultimately, it would seem that the fundamental experience of students is that of lying or pretending while leaving themselves aside. In José Santos-Herceg's words:

²⁵ Pinar *et al.*, *Understanding Curriculum*, 378-9.

Studying philosophy thus becomes a series of guided tours through the museum of European philosophy which, for the same reason, tends to be absolutely disconnected from the world, from life, and from the experience of both the students and teachers.²⁶

The sclerosis mentioned here silently leads to an eventual death. What can die here is the student's motivation to study philosophy, to think, but also all the possibilities of philosophy in terms of granting its gifts. That generous goddess whose name is Philosophy can grant the gift of deep understanding, knowledge of the essence of things, fair and adequate argument, eloquence, and clarity. However, if the motivation, the desire to learn, has died, how can the simple mortal receive such gifts? As scholars of didactics Frida Díaz Barriga and Gerardo Hernández Rojas state, "the achievement of meaningful learning... requires as a basic and necessary condition a disposition, the desire or will to learn."²⁷ Without such motivation, what a person would manage to take from philosophy is boredom with thinking, laziness, and even hatred of philosophy itself, experiences that high school students sometimes admit to having.

Philosophy dies for students who are forced to write without being able to include in their texts accounts of their own experiences and their opinions about reality, philosophical theories, or problems. Why should we ask them anything if they cannot answer what they themselves really think? Along this path, we firmly believe that those "possessive relationships with truth,"²⁸ mentioned by Ricœur, are maintained and lead to defending it "whatever the cost" with the main result being the question about the possible benefits of studying philosophy at school. Certainly, the main consequence of sticking to the canon, to the same authors, texts, problems, the same teaching convictions, and methods that only cause students to increase their boredom, is not just that students do not understand, value, or learn philosophy, but that legislators, other teachers, and parents question the pertinence of philosophy and its contribution to child and youth development. In other words, if philosophy is not worthy of study, why should it be part of high school curricula?

– It would certainly be convenient to learn to move in the interstice proposed by Ricœur: between the singularity of my own experience and an aspiration to a certain universality. This interstice has at least two forms of appearance in our practices as philosophy teachers: on the one hand, we certainly have a philosophical experience in a school of thought, in a particular tradition, or even with an author. We have arguments to defend that school's or author's proposals, and we are expected to have read and researched enough to give solid reasons as to why we prefer to approach problems from one perspective rather than another. However, we cannot overlook the fact that one can reconstruct dialogues among philosophies and that large-scale problems require approaches not limited to one author

²⁶ Santos-Herceg, *Conflicto de Representaciones*, 122.

²⁷ Díaz Barriga and Hernández Rojas, *Estrategias Docentes Para Un Aprendizaje Significativo*, 52.

²⁸ It is worth noting that this "possessive" relationship with truth does not have to do with assuming oneself as the owner and master of truth. Ricœur points, rather, to the fact that the relationship with truth, as an insatiable and dialogical quest, concerns each of us in the first person. In other words, it is oneself who opens oneself to truth, who embraces it, and who is willing to let truth even transform one's own life.

or one current of thought. We cannot forget that other currents, other authors from different latitudes (not just Western-Anglo-Saxon) can help us think more and better about our questions and that, without falling into reductionisms, to be a philosopher is to be willing to dialogue precisely in the hope of achieving a better understanding and, as Ricœur affirms, *to be in the truth* of being.

On the other hand, there is the vital singularity of our experience, our biography, and the ethical, political, and pedagogical convictions that we mobilize in our practice and that shape us as teachers. It is precisely from our biography that we can (perhaps we should) present to the students a proposal for a world that they probably do not see as we do: authors, texts, problems, and perspectives that we, as teachers, have loved, in and with which we have configured our identity and our theoretical and practical positions. Without a doubt, who we are comes into play in our teaching, but it is not something we should impose in an authoritarian way. Rather, it should make itself evident in the classroom and be accompanied by the profound recognition of our plural human condition along with its plurality of aspirations, anxieties, and purposes in order to interpret, question, and reinterpret them in dialogue in the class. In such a dialogue with our students, we can encourage them to engage with certain readings or authors that we think are more worth reading than others, and in turn, we teachers can be challenged as much as possible to widen the idea of “the classic.”

At this point, the reflections derived from Ricœur’s thought coincide with the curriculum theory proposed by Pinar and other scholars, since they conceive curriculum as “a form of autobiographically and academically informed truth telling that articulates the educational experience of teachers and students as lived.”²⁹ Of course, in our work as teachers, we have the responsibility not only of transmitting philosophical knowledge, but of educating, and in taking up this responsibility we participate with our entire being, which is why we articulate our autobiography with the philosophical knowledge that we once learned and now teach. Between philosophy as a field of knowledge or practices (depending on the position adopted)³⁰ and people who teach and learn is the interstice of each person’s lived experience. On the part of the teaching staff, the experience comes from our initial experience as students: how were we taught philosophy or how did we learn it? It would be worth asking ourselves what we conserve and reproduce from the teaching practices that our teachers engaged in: what was our experience in high school with such practices and to what extent did they help us to learn philosophy or even to grow as persons? It is in the mirror of our own experience as students that we can see the reflection of our students’ experience enabling us to value our pedagogical actions and make decisions that go beyond the mere thematic issue of philosophy to reach the field of education.

²⁹ Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?*, 17.

³⁰ We keep in mind here the idea defended by Pierre Hadot that philosophy can be understood as a “practice,” as a “way of life” and that we have assumed in some of our research (*Ejercicios Espirituales y Filosofía Antigua*, trans. Javier Palacio (Madrid: Siruela, 2006); *¿Qué Es la Filosofía Antigua?*, trans. Eliane Cazevane (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998)). See also Prada, Acevedo and Prieto Galindo, *Filosofía como Forma de Vida*; Fredy Hernán Prieto Galindo, “Hacia una Didáctica de la Filosofía Como Forma de Vida. Otra Opción para el Bachillerato Colombiano,” *Ponencia Presented at the VIII Congreso Colombiano de Filosofía, Pasto* (November 2022).

Finally, we must insist that in such an interstice we could connect to the history preceding us, and the story that we ourselves live as citizens, teachers, and students. The former could be universal, in the sense that everyone can consult and examine it. The latter is the personal story that only I can access from my memory, linked to the history of my own society. In such an interstice, curriculum not only coincides with hermeneutics but perhaps leads the reflection. Indeed, for Pinar, “while schools by themselves cannot redress injustice, they can become indispensable in educating the public to understand their history and present circumstances, enabling them to act accordingly.”³¹ In history, we could find a certain universality about what has already happened, that can be reviewed by anyone, and from there we can obtain some lessons to live in the present. The school is one of the privileged spaces where history is not only studied but maintained or changed since it is there that the minds and hearts of present and future generations are guided to grow in certain ways. Thus, the school itself is in the interstice between the universal image of a place to educate, the particularities of each teacher who strives to achieve, to a certain extent, the educational ideal outlined by their own culture and by themselves, and the students’ capacities to think from their own particular settings.

III. On the Idea of *Canon*

In the first paragraphs of this paper, we presented a generic idea of “canon” taken from Rabossi. In this section, we would like to consider some of Ricœur’s reflections on the idea of “canon” as outlined in some of the papers he devoted to biblical exegesis, reflections that we will apply to our problem concerning teaching philosophy. We are aware that the problem of the biblical canon itself exceeds the limits we have set for ourselves in this contribution. Nevertheless, we outline these ideas in order to point out some pedagogical considerations related to the very issue we are developing.

The first text by Ricœur on which we now focus is entitled “The Canon between the Text and the Community.” We acknowledge the significant differences between biblical exegesis, coordinated as it is with a confession of faith, and the philosophical canon that interests us here. Likewise, there is a distance between the problem considered in relation to the way in which in the first centuries of the Christian era, the set of books that make up the New Testament, accepted precisely as “canonical,” was consolidated, and the canon of authors, problems, and texts of the history(ies) of philosophy. Nevertheless, the theses presented in Ricœur’s text give us something to think about in relation to our subject. Before arriving at the notion of the “authority of the biblical text” or, better, the “authoritative text,” Ricœur reconstructs his general theory of the text, already widely explained in works such as *Du texte à l’action*.³² Thus, Ricœur remembers how the text has a triple autonomy in relation to speech, with the fleeting nature of the event, the intentions of the enunciator, and the ostensible world to which it refers. After this, he points out that a text potentially redescribes our own world, or proposes new worlds to inhabit, in front of which one, as a reader, confronts, retells, and renarrates oneself.

³¹ Pinar, *What Is Curriculum Theory?*, 68.

³² Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l’action. Essais d’herméneutique II* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986).

According to Ricoeur, interpretation is the name given to the entire journey proposed to distinguish between “the written word/the spoken word, event/structure, uniqueness/genre, distancing/appropriation, world of the text/understanding of the self [that is] confronted with the text.”³³ In addition, “the idea of interpretation introduces a new dimension to this recapitulation: the idea of plurality, of diversity, of the otherness of interpretation. In a word: the idea of being able to say something differently,”³⁴ a capacity inherent to the hermeneutical experience and that, precisely, gives rise to conflicts of interpretations. Now, Ricoeur asks: “how to engage in such conflicts without being destroyed by them, without controlling them or suppressing them.”³⁵ In the case of the biblical canon, the answer is found in textual authority. Ricoeur affirms that the first criterion to establish such authority is that of a kind of “economic” principle, according to which some books must be chosen and not others, in the same way that libraries select the volumes that make up their precious collections. A second criterion will be the establishment of traditions of reading and interpretation, also supported by oral teaching, then recorded in texts, thanks to which the traditions survive. The third criterion concerns each historical community taking charge of creating and caring for “a memory, a plan, and an active arbitration in conflicts of all kinds, including conflicts of interpretation at points where various traditions of reading or interpretation meet.”³⁶ The way in which these memories and forms of arbitration are established within the scope of the New Testament canon involves conflicts of dominance, of symbolic, legal, hierarchical force of one set of interpretations over another. At this point, it is worth thinking that the history of the biblical canon can be read through the prism of the *political paradox*³⁷: on the one hand, force and imposition; on the other, the growing and well-founded recognition of interpretations; on the one hand, the shape given by the institution associated with Roman power, and recorded in the councils; on the other, a living community interpreting the Gospel message. How, is it possible that the philosophical canon has these characteristics? Or at least, can we interpret it in those ways? Before answering these questions, let us present one more point.

In the third part of the essay that we are following in this section, Ricoeur discusses what he himself calls the “inflation” of the adjective “canonical” as a synonym for dogmatic.³⁸ This inflation usually means that the relationship between the ecclesial community and biblical text is that of a vicious circularity: the ecclesial community establishes the legitimacy of the canon, and then says, hiding this foundation, that canon is inspired and is actually the one that undergirds magisterial authority.³⁹ In contrast, it is for Ricoeur a hermeneutical circle since the ecclesial community, as a historical community, interprets itself by interpreting the texts, and configures its

³³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Petr Pokorny and Jan Roskovec (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 13.

³⁴ Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 13.

³⁵ Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 14.

³⁶ Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 15.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “The Political Paradox,” in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1965), 247-70.

³⁸ Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 21.

³⁹ Ricoeur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 7.

identity (which we could well name *narrative*) through reference to textual marks on the Gospels, the letters, and the other texts making up the New Testament.⁴⁰

The second aspect of the inflation of the term “canonical” refers to the lack of knowledge (forgetfulness or omission) that the New Testament is made up of different literary genres, dissimilar messages, and even contradictory Christologies, tending to become increasingly incompatible the more time passes and the more interpreters move away from the very context in which the texts were produced. To forget this and to think of the New Testament canon in a monolithic way is to confuse two different areas of analysis: that of biblical exegesis done also in an argumentative key and that of the concrete dogmatics of faith confession. In other words, Ricœur warns that the canon is not being considered here in light of the systematic theological constructions of the various confessions (Catholic or Protestant). It is not seen as the basis of a fixed doctrinal body, free (or protected) from conflicts, but as the human reality of the believer who identifies with a set of historically situated texts opening up possible worlds in which the experience of a hermeneutical faith occurs. The ecclesial community, and each believer within it, has to deal with these difficulties by housing within itself the plurality of meanings and choosing the best ways for exegetical and theological traditions to dialogue, to preserve its own identity in the long term, also plural, as a Christian community.

Now, at the end of this section, we pose a single question to which we present multiple answers: What are the pedagogical or didactic implications for the teaching of philosophy of these hermeneutical reflections of Ricœur on the New Testament canon? In the following paragraphs, we present some key ideas or criteria that might answer that question.

– Although the “economic” criterion is not the most relevant, thinking about a possible canon of philosophy requires remembering a truism, this time in Bloom’s words: “Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read.”⁴¹ This criterion undoubtedly involves an eminently “practical” problem, that of the limitation of time in a course, for example, but also that of personal preferences, or that of the specific emphases or institutional stakes of the school where we teach. The main challenge with this economic criterion always lies in reflecting on and accounting for the reasons why some texts are chosen and others are not, and identifying the convictions underlying those decisions, as well as the unthematized or poorly founded criteria for one choice or another, both at the personal and at the institutional level. In the next paragraphs, we point to some possibilities with regard to those reasons, convictions, or criteria. It is worth asking: How do philosophy teachers usually select the texts for teaching and learning philosophy and for teaching and learning how to philosophize? How could they do it so philosophy is more relevant for students?

– Regarding an interpretive tradition, usually our criteria obey the established custom. In Latin America, it usually respects a historical order, which means the “so common distinction between ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary philosophy that

⁴⁰ Ricœur, “The Canon between the Text and the Community,” 22.

⁴¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994), 15.

aims to account for the complete linearity of the evolution of philosophical thought."⁴² In other places, the criterion is not strictly "historical," but rather a selected corpus of authors and books such as those of the analytical tradition in the English-speaking world.⁴³ In other cases, the teaching of certain authors or problems follows other kinds of traditions, so that even publishers end up favoring a set of texts and authors,⁴⁴ and focusing on circumstances that have shaped the canon.

A rigid, monolithic philosophical canon eliminates the wide range of possibilities that different philosophies can offer. The course might be limited to a set of topics and texts already selected by tradition, by the name of their authors, or even by a publisher, which has little or nothing to do with the students themselves or with educational intentions (as we will see shortly). How to make room in the syllabus for a text by a Colombian or Senegalese author if that would mean sacrificing the reading of Plato or Saint Thomas? Why exclude from the course a text by Habermas on the interests of science to introduce one that reflects on cybernetics or Facebook? Of those selection possibilities, which would give young people today more opportunities to think and reflect about themselves: faithfully follow the canon or mix it with other kinds of sources?

– We can consider the idea of a canon of philosophy, not as a monolithic doctrinal body or a dogmatic set of closed doctrines, but inspired by the hermeneutical theory of the text. It means that a canon could be a set of discourses opening worlds to us and raising decisive questions about the meaning of life, history, reality, truth or justice, etc. Likewise, new or recent texts tell us about the new worlds or new realities that have taken center stage in the lives of most people. Consider, for example, the use of new technologies and the possibilities, perhaps opportunities, that they have begun to generate and that are in no way limited to the area of access to information, but rather encompass areas such as work or deep emotional relationships (finding a partner, friends, contacts, etc.).⁴⁵ In short, opening and expanding the canon would require high school teachers to create very different course outlines for their classes instead of following almost an identical syllabus. What are the worlds of each type of student and what worlds could philosophy help to open or create? When searching for answers to such a question, the plurality of meanings and interpretations inevitably appears.

⁴² Santos-Herceg, *Conflicto de Representaciones*, 119.

⁴³ Steven Cahn might offer a clear example in his book: *Teaching Philosophy. A Guide* (New York/London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁴ This seems to be the case of France as explained by Sébastien Charbonnier, "Le choix de l'œuvre en lecture suivie. Quelques enjeux de la canonisation en philosophie," *Côté philo*, vol. 15 (2011).

⁴⁵ José M. Lara and Elquis Rodríguez have shown that by bringing students some texts that are closer to their daily reality, they become more motivated and, in this way, learn to think more philosophically ("Fomento del Desarrollo del Pensamiento Crítico en Estudiantes de Grado Décimo desde Situaciones Cotidianas en la Asignatura de Filosofía," *Educación y Humanismo*, vol. 18/31 (2016), 343-57, online: <https://doi.org/10.17081/eduhum.18.31.1383>). We could even think that after these texts we can bring other texts from the "old continent" to see what fruits they can bear to young people (see also Fredy Hernán Prieto Galindo, "Rethinking Critical Thinking in Colombian High School Philosophy through Paul Ricœur's Phronesis. A Hermeneutic Inquiry," Ph.D. Dissertation in Secondary Education, Edmonton, University of Alberta, 2023).

The canon of philosophy is also woven with the diversity of interpretations of problems, texts, or authors coexisting within our current or potential communities of study (such as associations of specialists, or university communities, among others). Now, such hermeneutic plurality can consider didactically that the fundamental pedagogical objective that guides a course or a single lesson is flexible enough so that each student can recreate it with the help of the teacher. In this sense, there would not be a single interpretation, the most widespread or accepted one or the one taught by the teacher (as it happens in Colombian contexts, where sometimes to have a different opinion seems a sin against the teacher of philosophy), but several, including those that each person in the classroom manages to create in dialogue with their classmates. Of course, we do not defend the claim that any interpretation is valid since we hold that an interpretation must correspond with the texts themselves. Precisely by confronting multiple interpretations with the source itself, any student learns that the valid interpretation has as guidance and limitation what is said in the text. What we want to emphasize is that student interpretations could also take place in the classroom even if they differ from the one the teacher presented; and, like any interpretation, the students' interpretations must adhere to the rigor of the exam when confronted with the source and the teacher is obliged to accept it when the text seems to approve it.

In this sense, it is worth reiterating that any high school teacher has the possibility and perhaps the duty to present at least two interpretations of each philosophical theory to their class. Thus, they avoid the image of an absolutely coherent, unanimous, and invulnerable philosophy, of an immutable canon. They present a discipline growing in the midst of conflict, debate, and even contradictions, and they demonstrate how the validity of each position depends on its relationship of closeness/distance with the phenomenon itself, in the same way that a textual interpretation must always be validated against the interpreted text.

IV. Final Reflections

Among the challenges emerging from these reflections and ideas for the teaching of philosophy, we want to point out the following:

- To assume that our professional life as educators (including academic life) is an always open process of education, of learning about our own work as teachers and readers. Such openness enables us to distinguish plausible interpretations (from those that are not) and to identify what each of them can contribute to improve our understanding of ourselves as persons and as teachers. Ultimately, openness to our own personal and professional education can lead us to a resignification of our work and the contribution that we can make to the education of the students in our class, which is the *telos* of our effort.
- To maintain phronetically, that is, from the practical wisdom that Ricœur proposes, the tension between those elements that we recognize as part of the historical and acceptable sedimentation of the minimum that someone who recognizes himself/herself as a philosophy teacher should know; and the openness that fosters new learning, new dialogues with other bodies of knowledge, new understandings of the world, new perspectives from which to see and examine our work as philosophy professionals and as philosophy teachers.

– We need to embark on questioning some topics that we repeat in the classrooms (e.g.: “the passage from myth to *logos* is the beginning of Philosophy”), especially where such questioning has been part of philosophical inquiry for a very long time. Likewise, we need to challenge the prejudices that mark our discourses and practices of teaching philosophy (for example: “in Latin America is only repeated what is thought in Europe,” “ancestral or native communities do not have philosophy,” or “there is a unique reason and it operates from a single form in all those who consider themselves human beings”), which are assumed by some Colombian teachers as part of the “canon” of the discipline. Moreover, as Professor Ernst Wolff has pointed out (personal communication), the “canon” witnesses to a growing attentiveness to this problem of the “binary” ways of conceiving the world (whether in the canon itself or elsewhere), such as those related to the rational/irrational, the developed/underdeveloped, the true/false, the academic/the lifeworld, etc. Each of these binaries require a discussion that we cannot offer here; likewise, in the contemporary literature on these topics, the binaries seem to have been overcome, but this overcoming is not always the protagonist of the discourse on the teaching of philosophy in secondary education, at least in Colombia.

The problem of the canon can be read also from a Ricœurian perspective, in the key of a political paradox,⁴⁶ so as to articulate the roles of education as an institutionalized practice and that of learning as it takes place in the classroom. As institutionalized, education provides the educational infrastructure (e.g. schools, libraries, but also the syllabus with its ideas of a canon); but the classroom activity allows for creative appropriation and critical engagement with the canon. Perhaps a new canon would be a middle point between excesses and deficiencies: the excesses of the imposed ideas of philosophy, its concept, its methods, its contributions at each educational level; and the deficiencies of relevance according to the context and needs of the students, their neighborhood, city, country; deficiencies of affectivity and imagination before a reason that is said to be “universal, objective, and neutral.”

In other words, education would include a process of examination of the canon, an invitation to question, from the teaching itself, the history of the philosophy that we have learned, as well as the beliefs rooted in our thinking and acting around philosophy. This would stimulate thinking through other lenses with which we may well call into question everything we have learned, as an ethical-political commitment to discriminated against groups such as women, colonized, racialized, and disabled people... In teaching, this could mean not only including themes and authors of decolonization, racism, feminism, and others but to openly questioning philosophy itself, its understanding, its history, its problems, areas, in short, its tradition.

Applying some changes to the canon, such as those just mentioned, could begin the process of distancing ourselves from the idea or intention that the student body in general learn the same thing and in the same way as we did, further evidenced by the same standardized tests at the end of high school. In other words, we would begin to abandon the silent, hegemonic ambition of uniformization of those in our care, as if our mission was to make everyone conform to the same model; in a word, we would stop trying to eliminate difference from schools and society. Is not the

⁴⁶ Ricœur, “The Political Paradox.”

very mission of education for everyone to find themselves? Education clearly revolves around the issue of personal identity that we build and reconstruct throughout our lives and on which school education undeniably has a great influence, through the texts that are read and discussed in class and, with the topics and perspectives that are addressed. At this point, the responsibilities are almost entirely ours, those of us who teach.

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