

Ricœur's Conflict of Interpretations in the Making Symbols, Reflection and the War of Hermeneutics

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to situate the problem of the conflict of interpretations in Paul Ricœur by placing it in the context of Ricœur's anthropological reflections on the questions of fallibility and evil. The article invokes the distinction between fallibility and evil and analyses the symbolic language of evil as a reason for the hermeneutic turn of Ricœur's thought. The implications of this topic for the philosophical analyses of language and consciousness are then put in relief. The article explains the inner workings of the logic of the conflict of interpretations, showing its perspectival trait, and claims that this notion remains pertinent given that its method can today be applied to conflicts of interpretations other than those Ricœur dealt with.

Keywords: Conflict of Interpretations; Consciousness; Evil; Fallibility; Hermeneutic Turn; Symbol.

Résumé

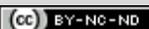
Cet article a pour but de situer le problème du conflit des interprétations dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur. L'article analyse cette notion dans le contexte des réflexions de Ricœur sur la faillibilité et le mal, en faisant la distinction entre ces deux concepts et analysant la manière dont le langage symbolique du mal pousse le tournant herméneutique de Ricœur. Les conséquences du conflit des interprétations pour les analyses philosophiques du langage et de la conscience sont aussi mises en relief. L'article explique la logique du conflit des interprétations, montrant son trait perspectiviste, et argumente que cette notion reste actuelle car sa méthode peut toujours être appliquée à d'autres conflits d'interprétations.

Mots-clés : Conflit des interprétations ; conscience ; mal ; faillibilité ; tournant herméneutique ; symbole.

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 13, No 1 (2022), pp. 32-50

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2022.590

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



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Ricœur's Conflict of Interpretations in the Making¹

Symbols, Reflection and the War of Hermeneutics

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I. Introduction

In the context of an issue dedicated to the topic of conflict in the work of French philosopher Paul Ricœur, this paper concentrates on his notion of the conflict of interpretations. Its first aim is to explain the origin of this notion in Ricœur's thought. To achieve that goal, I briefly recap the trajectory of his work in the passage from the first to the second volume of the *Philosophy of the Will*, coming from phenomenology and reflective philosophy to hermeneutics. I pay special attention to the problem of fallibility and evil, and to the inner workings of the interpretation of symbols such as they appear in Ricœur's philosophy, in order to afterwards reconstruct the specific logic of the conflict of interpretations, such as it appears in the intersection between structuralism, psychoanalysis and Ricœur's hermeneutics; or, as he puts it, in the interplay between a hermeneutics as a recollection of meaning (or a hermeneutics of trust) and the hermeneutics of suspicion. The paper mainly concentrates on a close reading of *The Symbolism of Evil, Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations* in order to make clear both the origin of the conflict of interpretations (capture it "in the making") and its implications.

The paper is divided into several small sections, each analysing a significant aspect of this problem. In the first section I trace back the origins of conflict to the evolution of the poetics of the will. The second section lays out the language of symbols, while the third focuses on their double dimension, both regressive and prospective. In the fourth section I start analysing the conflict between the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of suspicion, and in the fifth section I recall how the structural view of language, when coupled with the passage through the hermeneutics of suspicion, changes our view on human consciousness – inaugurating the Ricœurian so-called "long route" of hermeneutics – and opens up the path for the later development of Ricœur's particular view of human language as pointing to a double reference. Finally, in the sixth section, before my conclusion, I return to what Ricœur's notion of the conflict of interpretations means for philosophical reflection and for its relationship with language. The perspectival nature of the conflict of interpretations means that the interpretations in conflict are meant to be complementary; but at the same time, given that language itself cannot be depleted by any particular interpretation, that each interpretation only suspends conflict without fully

¹ This article was financed by national funds through the Foundation for Science and Technology, FCT, I.P., in the framework of the CECH-UC project: UIDB/00196/2020.

eliminating it, because every interpretation contains in itself the potential to be revised. The conclusion recalls some of the main traits seen throughout the article and elaborates on the significance of this notion today. Even though Ricœur's notion of the conflict of interpretations has perhaps not always been given the attention it deserves,² I believe it is in both method and content a very important contribution to philosophy that deserves we come back to it still today.

II. The Origins of the Hermeneutic Turn. The Interpretation of Symbols

To understand the background leading to the problem of the conflict of interpretations, which originated the book with the same title, we must trace it back to the work of Ricœur's first years, the *Philosophy of the Will*. The theoretical horizon of this *Philosophy of the Will*, comprised of 3 volumes, is the project of a phenomenology of the will enabling us to grasp bad will and the problem of evil. The first volume, *Freedom and Nature*, is a phenomenological account of these structures; the second, *Fallible Man*, presents the idea of fallibility as a human trait characterized by inner disproportion, while the third, *The Symbolism of Evil*, makes us aware of the importance of language – especially that of equivocal language – to posit the empirical real of the relational human being touched by suffering and by evil.

According to Ricœur in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, one must simultaneously reflect on the birth of the spoken being of the world and of the speaking being of the human being.³ The previous investigation has shown evil to be non-observable; it is rather something one confesses. It is the experience of past, present and future spoken in a symbolic language, always guided by retrospection (in this case, remorse) and by the principle of possible regeneration.⁴ Therefore, as Ricœur explains, there is a methodological gap between the phenomenology of fallibility undertaken in *Fallible Man* and the more hermeneutic investigation in *The Symbolism of Evil*, and this gap is the distance between fallibility and alienation. Thus, *The Symbolism of Evil* proposes “a great detour at the end of which it will be possible to resume the interrupted discourse and integrate anew the teachings of this symbolism in a truly *philosophical* anthropology.”⁵

² Even though this is not a topic with a lot of secondary bibliography, see for instance Paul B. Armstrong, “The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism,” *PMLA*, vol. 98/3 (1983), 341-52; Richard Kearney, “Religion and Ideology. Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutic Conflict,” *Irish Theological Quarterly*, vol. 52/1-2 (1986), 109-26; Maria Luísa Portocarrero, *A Hermenêutica do Conflito em Paul Ricœur* (Coimbra: Minerva, 1992); Gonçalo Marcelo, “From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again. Some Notes on Ricœur's Dialectic,” *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra*, vol. 38/10 (2010), 341-66.

³ Paul Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 257.

⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté II. Finitude et culpabilité I, L'homme faillible* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 160-1.

⁵ Ricœur, *L'homme faillible*, 159. A note on translations: even though in the main body text I am referring to the titles of the English translations of Ricœur's works, I consulted the French originals for this article, and the translations are of my responsibility, unless otherwise stated. For this reason, the page numbers for the quotes and the references in the bibliography are to the original Ricœur books as published in French.

The phenomenology of fallibility, which was the basis for the new anthropology of *Fallible Man*, had given way to new linguistic paths, to new approximations of this nature which is transformed in subjectivity by way of its inscription in the symbolic universe of the learning of signs. The new constitution of subjectivity, which is symbolic, mythical-poetic, leads Ricœur to resort to a new method to surprise the inexplicable transition from human fallibility to fault. And what is this method, might we ask? It is one which enables the analysis of the empirics of the will – that is, the human experience of concrete action. And this method is performed through the analysis of the language of confession, just as it was expressed in the traditions of religious and mythical thought, and, finally, through the analysis of psychoanalytical speech.

The Symbolism of Evil thus brings about a major shift in philosophical thinking: the analysis of the neutral structures of human reality, which was the reason for the phenomenology of the will, gives way to a hermeneutic phenomenology that delves into human expressions of original affirmation, an affirmation that exists in spite of alienation. After *The Symbolism of Evil* this original affirmation will be understood in the context of the hermeneutic turn – that is, sought in the signs and works resulting from our effort and desire to be. The thesis of original affirmation, whose origin is to be found in Jean Nabert, expresses an alterity which can only be reflected by means of an interpretation. Due to our finitude, we cannot appropriate original affirmation in a total reflection that would be intuitive in nature. To the contrary, we can only interpret the contingent signs we bear witness to throughout our history. Thus, we can reflect on our dimension of original affirmation only in a hermeneutic way. Ricœur himself will later address the hermeneutic structure of the testimonies of this affirmation, stating that what is truly important is that “this interpretation is not external to the testimony, but implied in its initial dialectic structure.”⁶

III. From Fallibility to Evil. The Language of Symbols

If Ricœur is right in positing a difference between fallibility and evil, how are we to grasp the transition from fallibility to the reality of evil?⁷ This is the question that opens *The Symbolism of Evil*. Ricœur's answer consists in understanding it by “re-enacting” the confession that religious consciousness makes.

The Ricœurian ontology of human action aims to be a discourse on the power of the capable man,⁸ despite recognising that he is marred by non-coincidence with himself and by the servitude of evil. As such, this ontology starts with the testimonies of human acts, its symbols

⁶ Paul Ricœur, “L’herméneutique du témoignage,” in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 132.

⁷ On how to grasp the problem of evil and provide answers to it, see Jérôme Porée and Gilbert Vincent (dir.), *Répliquer au mal. Symbole et justice dans l’œuvre de Paul Ricœur* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

⁸ See regarding this matter, Adrien Lentiampa Shenge, *Paul Ricœur, la justice selon l’espérance* (Bruxelles: Lessius, 2008), 112.

and myths, and inquires their ontological consistency. Therefore, after *The Symbolism of Evil*, it is the dialectics of action (which passes) and of its meaning (which endures), as well as the problem of the veracity of the symbolic discourse, that will be analysed in its significance. It is indeed by way of the symbolic representations of their actions that human beings bear effective witness to the dimension of their original affirmation, their presence in the world and their perseverance in being. Such is the meaning of a remembrance of the confession: only he who holds an original affirmation confesses, acknowledging he could have acted differently – i.e., he who knows his actions are part of an array of (free) possibilities which, when actualized, become narrower due to their temporal dimension. When I confess, I confirm that I could have acted differently, because I am not bound by the laws of physical causality; rather, I know I am a temporal being: I acted wrongly in the past, and I confess in the present, understanding I can act differently with others in the future.⁹

The hermeneutics of testimonies and bifurcations of action then makes its way through symbolic language, recognising that it is this tripartite temporal dimension of existence that is stated by the language of confession – be it of religion or of Freud's analytical experience (which expresses yet another language of evil). And in this symbolic expression an experience of contrast is revealed. In fact, the will that is occupied by evil, that is alienated, is attested and expressed. But at the same time, it provides an absolute testimony of another dimension of itself, by means of a language which escapes the traditional archetype of the strict description of modern reflexive philosophy. This language turns out to be a discourse touched by emotion, in which a vivid contrast is stated. It is a language which is simultaneously traversed by a multiple meaning or by stratified layers of meaning that require deciphering. The symbolic language of original affirmation lifts feeling from its mute opacity¹⁰ and shows us that the experience of alienation in human beings is never so radical as to condemn him to muteness; to the contrary, it signals the need for expression and requires its own language, which is neither descriptive nor prescriptive. Rather, this language is made from symbols, myths and metaphors which claim an interpretation and necessitate research into the iconic and intersubjective power of human language. This endeavour is meant to trace the structures of life in which signification takes place, and to spell out what this means.

Ricœur reflects on the contours of the human experience. This experience is marked by a possible alienation, enigma and the possibility of being crushed by suffering and evil. In this juncture, original affirmation eludes the scope of description and vision because it is always an experience of contrast, which transforms existence into an act. This fundamental ontological vehemence is, in turn, expressed in the fundamental hermeneutic dialectics between original affirmation and testimony. The level of confession analysed in *The Symbolism of Evil* thus reveals the symbolic and metaphorical language of *muthos*, displaying an original human reality which, in spite of all resistance, is marked by the effort and desire to be as well as by an original trust. Confession appears as the first form of self-attestation, whose meaning is a trust which is

⁹ See, regarding this issue, Ricœur, *L'homme faillible*, 15-6.

¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 28.

translated into a strong existential affirmation and is manifested in linguistic testimonies which, in turn, open to the logic of recognition through interpretation and application. As such, an entirely new linguistic and hermeneutic analysis is laid out.

Henceforth, since there is no direct non-symbolic language of evil, the *ego* of *ego cogito* can only be understood in the mirror of its objects, its works and, finally, its acts. This means that the advent of the subject emerges in an indirect way, in the experience of confession, a process in which an act of existing designates itself, before another, as author (and victim) by resorting to the institution of common language. The subject narrates his actions (and ailments) and interrupts the use of normal communication, therefore setting a different tone, one touched by blindness, by misunderstanding and by scandal. Thus emerges the symbol halfway between a silent experience and a discourse too keen on submitting the real disorder of things to the order of concepts. The symbol shows that there is a whole symbolic semantics of action that must be respected and addressed in the analysis of the subjective and ethical life of the human being. In this sense, Ricœur radicalizes the Husserlian thesis of paragraph 59 of *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, according to which the world "is already and always the empirical world, capable of being explained, and, at the same time, the linguistically explainable world."¹¹ Thus, Ricœur states, "surely I will better understand the bond between the being of man and the being of all entities, if I follow the *indication* of symbolic thought."¹²

The symbol can play a role as a guide in the subject's process of becoming oneself. It expresses the contingency of cultures in which our existence takes place, cultures which cannot all be encompassed given their diversity, and it mainly reveals that we always set off from a perspective guided and limited by our geographic, historic and cultural situation.¹³ The standpoint of naturalist rationalism of psychic or mental facts is thus radically contested twice. First, by the nature of a meditation in which the experience of the unjustifiable involves an original affirmation, which is indistinguishable from the issue of signification. This introduces interpretation in the nature of the "psychic fact" and of the testimonies of affirmation or alienation, as a necessary path to understanding the human and his action. Second, because the symbolism of evil, related to ancient cultural and religious imagination, necessitates the recognition of a cultural memory at the very root of the philosophical thought on evil. Indeed, there is no blind action, whether completely absurd or pre-symbolic. On the contrary, our praxis is already always articulated by means of representations, norms and symbols,¹⁴ which the movement of transgression, typical of attestation, incorporates.

The very dialogue with Freud (who presents another interpretation of the symbols of evil) allows Ricœur to highlight how reflection is ingrained in life by way of the contrasting

¹¹ Edmund Husserl, *A Crise das ciências europeias e a fenomenologia transcendental. Uma introdução à filosofia fenomenológica*, trad. Diogo Ferrer (Lisboa: CFUL, 2008), 223.

¹² Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté II. Finitude et culpabilité II. La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960).

¹³ Ricœur, *La symbolique du mal*, 182.

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Lectures 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 268.

combination of archaeology and teleology that intertwines the symbolic universe. Henceforth, the symbol is asserted as a fundamental category of alienation, which is itself an experience of contrast, and is used by Ricœur as a detector of the unfinished meaning of human reality. Given its connected character and its dual intentionality, the symbol is the new transcendental that can state portions of human reality which would otherwise not be expressed since neither the phenomenological method nor a direct analysis of the *Dasein* would be able to express them.

This said, for Ricœur, it is obvious that thinking from symbols does not mean abandoning the requirement of autonomy and coherence of philosophical reason. The novelty in *The Symbolism of Evil* lies in the relationship that may exist between the primacy of the donation of meaning of the symbol and the critical position of philosophical thinking.¹⁵ Ricœur refuses the naivety of belief in symbols and proposes his own critical interpretation that aims to address the symbol as a detector and decoder of humanity. For Ricœur, the incorporation of myths and symbols in philosophical reflection is not intended to simply augment consciousness, but rather to qualitatively transform our reflexive consciousness to include what modernity has excluded from it: an ethical and ontological dimension.¹⁶

The symbol reveals and hides, it appeals to imagination, what it says is never done being said, it is always iconoclastic towards other symbols. Therefore, symbols, which are language but never mere signs, call for a praxis which can be neither designated nor reconstructed behind them, demonstrating that, on the contrary, one must think from them. That is, one must promote and construct their meaning in a responsible¹⁷ and guiding way for a new praxis. Let us then see how Ricœur characterizes the typical structure of the symbol: “[it is] a signification structure in which a direct, primary, literal meaning also designates another indirect, secondary, figurative meaning, which can only be apprehended through the first.”¹⁸

In this sense, Ricœur clearly differs from Ernst Cassirer who, in his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, deems the symbolic function “the general function of mediation through which spirit and consciousness construct all their universes of perception and discourse.”¹⁹ If for Cassirer the problem of the symbol essentially answers the question “how does man give meaning by filling a symbol with meaning?,”²⁰ then Ricœur maintains the symbol already holds in itself the hermeneutic problem of recognition. For Ricœur the symbol makes us think because it requires a deciphering effort from the other. In other words, it concerns “the expressions of dual or multiple meaning whose semantic texture is correlated to the interpretation work which explains in them the second or the multiple meanings.”²¹ There is no symbol without the

¹⁵ Ricœur, *La symbolique du mal*, 481.

¹⁶ Ricœur, *La symbolique du mal*, 487.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 296.

¹⁸ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 25.

¹⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 19.

²⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 21.

²¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 22.

beginning of interpretation, which organically belongs to the symbol and its dual meaning, referring to a second-degree intentional structure in which "a first meaning is formed when something is intended first, but this thing refers to something else which is intended only through the first thing."²²

IV. The Regressive and Prospective Dimension of Symbols

For the analysis put forward in *Freud and Philosophy* all symbols entail two fundamental vectors, one prospective and one regressive, and thus there are two hermeneutic possibilities that must be respected and which only the work of interpretation can unpack, originating two different readings. What is then the criterion guiding these readings? One of the problems raised is the following. The very notion of interpretation entails destroying a naïve view on "psychic facts," but does it also entail falling into relativism? In my view, it does not. Like Aristotle before him, Ricoeur lays open a path for unpacking the multiplicity of meaning. Indeed, according to Ricoeur, Aristotle's definition of interpretation as "to say something of something" leads us to "a semantics different from logic and its discussion on the multiple significations of being opens a breach in the logical and ontological theory of univocity. In fact, all is yet to be done to found a theory of interpretation conceived as the understanding of the significations of multiple meaning."²³

Ricoeur will devote himself to this task with his long route of hermeneutics, taking into account that the hermeneutic tradition, connected to exegesis, worked with a notion of text²⁴ which can be used as an analogy. Indeed, Ricoeur stresses that even in the Middle Ages there was an interpretation of nature favouring the metaphor of the book of nature. What is at stake here is how the notion of text can, in fact, go beyond the simple idea of writing. Therefore, Ricoeur highlights that from the Renaissance onwards this interpretation of nature was freed in such a way from its scriptural references that Spinoza resorted to it to create a new concept of biblical exegesis: "This procedure by Spinoza, which does not interest us here from a strictly biblical standpoint, denotes a curious rebound effect of *interpretatio naturae*, now turned into a model, over the old scriptural paradigm which is now called into question."²⁵

A notion of text detached from that of writing will then be sought after by Ricoeur in his analysis of the two threads of interpretation that the symbol holds. The new path open to interpretation since Nietzsche, who retrieved it from philology to introduce it within philosophy, "is connected to a new problem of representation."²⁶ The hermeneutic problem then refers to the

²² Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 21.

²³ Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 33.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 33.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 34.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, 34.

thematic of illusion and disguise,²⁷ and interpretation is thus understood as the struggle against masks instead of a simple exegesis. The case of Freud is also enlightening, since for him interpretation is offered not only for scripture but also a dream, a neurotic symptom, a myth, a rite, a work of art or a belief.²⁸ The notion of symbol, understood as a structure of double meaning, is then the real connecting thread of a broad notion of exegesis. According to Ricœur this broad definition of hermeneutics draws its authority from its double origin, which is simultaneously exegetic and Nietzschean. In this sense, Ricœur states that “there is no general hermeneutics, there is no universal canon for exegesis, but rather separate and opposed theories regarding the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field of which we drew the outer contours is itself broken.”²⁹

Hermeneutics, now freed from the work of merely deciphering obscure passages of certain texts, is guided, according to Ricœur, by a fundamental opposition: a) on the one hand, it is conceived as the restoration and recovery of a meaning addressed to us as message; b) on the other hand, it is considered a demystifying and illusion-debasing process.³⁰ It is in the scope of the latter that Freud is integrated, while the former is practiced by the phenomenology of religion. Will of listening, will of suspicion, this is the dual motivation of hermeneutics which Ricœur will explore in his analysis of the conflict of interpretations originated by the symbol.

V. The War of Hermeneutics and the Long Route of Understanding

By striving for a concrete reflexive philosophy which integrates the poetic and aporetic language of symbolism, Ricœur’s goal is to discover in the very nature of reflexive thought a fundamental dialectical experience. In other words, an experience inhabited by an effort and a desire which is attested in works, “whose signification remains dubious and revocable.”³¹ The grafting of hermeneutics onto phenomenology reminds us precisely that reflection is a critique, not in the Kantian sense of a justification of science and of duty, but rather as “an appropriation of our effort to exist and desire to be, through the works which bear witness to that effort and that desire.”³²

Furthermore, the rooting of reflection in existence through hermeneutics demonstrates that we do not have just one hermeneutic theory, but rather different notions of interpretation, opposing and competing, and Ricœur chooses to concentrate on two of them. They dominate the reading of the testimonies of existence and cannot be forgotten: on the one hand, interpretation conceived as welcoming meaning (which I would like to call a hermeneutics of trust, and to

²⁷ Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 34.

²⁸ Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 35.

²⁹ Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 35.

³⁰ Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 35-6.

³¹ Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 34.

³² Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 21.

which Ricoeur usually refers to as the hermeneutics of the recollection of meaning); and on the other hand, interpretation understood as a genealogy of illusions or the exercise of suspicion.

In the hermeneutics of trust, one assumes there is a truth of language which must be clarified, since the function of the symbol is always that of presenting meaning and never dissimulation. For Ricoeur, the typical model of this hermeneutics of trust or interpretation through words is that of the phenomenological analysis of the sacred, for which there is an undeniable truth of symbols which only the work of interpretation can reveal. In this context of complete trust in language, interpretation is fundamentally connected to something which transcends it and, nevertheless, is only said by means of the double symbolic meaning. The backdrop of this type of hermeneutics is the following: the human being is a being capable of being touched by the word that is meaningful. He needs to believe in order to understand and to understand in order to believe. Thus, understanding is, first, accepting the challenge of the text in order to, in a second moment, clarify its meaning. The basic trust of the human being in language and in its revealing power is the true starting point of this form of hermeneutics, which therefore adopts a participatory and non-reductionist understanding attitude. The emphasis is on the future, on a poetics of the possible,³³ which finds its core in the very formation of the human being by the poetic and dialogic power of the word.

For the second interpretation model (hermeneutics of suspicion), characterized by the attitude of mistrust of philosophers such as Nietzsche, Freud and Marx towards the primacy of consciousness, the exercise of interpretation is always connected to a critical stance towards the language spoken by men and spoken to men. Interpretation is essentially a deconstruction; it refers to a new problem which has nothing to do with the traditional problem of misunderstanding or even with error conceived in epistemological sense. Neither does it have anything to do with the problem of lying in the moral sense; on the contrary, it has to do with the thematic of illusion, of deviation and of the mask, as a possible way of being of human existence.

The concept of interpretation is thus extended. Its new core is the relationship between consciousness and illusion. Therefore, the object of interpretation is no longer just a writing or text offered to understanding, but the entire set of signs capable of being considered as text to decipher, given its double meaning. Such signs may be constituted by a dream, a neurotic system, a rite, a myth, a work of art or by belief itself. This means that the idea of text is now disconnected from the philological idea of writing. Freud, namely, speaks of the narrative of dreams as an unintelligible text, which interpretation replaces with a more intelligible one. For Nietzsche, interpretation is also not related to the intentionality of language, but rather to the task of destroying all the idols of false consciousness.

After Freud, Nietzsche and Marx, the traditional idea according to which meaning and the consciousness of meaning may coincide is radically suspicious. Seeking meaning is no longer spelling out the consciousness of meaning; on the contrary, it implies undoing the ciphers with

³³ On this topic see Richard Kearney, *Poétique du possible. Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984).

which consciousness – now an epidermic and derivative site – has enveloped reality. For these three philosophers, consciousness itself is not what it believes to be. At its base there is something latent – the unconscious psyche, the will to power, the social being – which must be deciphered and revealed behind all the cunning of the conscious meaning. A new relationship between what is patent and latent now structures consciousness and the whole of its symbolic manifestations. The manifested dimension of meaning always simulates something deeper which must be interpreted precisely from its traits or expressions. Here all interpretation is profoundly archaeological. As Ricœur states “essentially, the *Genealogy of Morals* of Nietzsche, the theory of ideologies of Marx, the theory of ideals and illusions of Freud represent three converging procedures of demystification.”³⁴

The three masters of suspicion inaugurate a new form of interpretation; and given their convergence, they offer an absolute contrary to the phenomenology of the sacred and all hermeneutics conceived as a recollection of meaning. The mistrust towards the illusions of consciousness is now the true engine of all interpretation which faces illusion – the fable-telling function of consciousness – and rips the masks and demands the rude discipline of necessity. Expectation or trust is radically contested in the poetic core of language, a trait of hermeneutics which believes in the intentional dimension of symbols. Interpretation now must destroy masks and disguises to reach a non-linguistic, non-poietic original, which nevertheless strives to be spoken and is nothing without language, despite its disguises. Desire is nothing without the expressions in which it is said, cloaked, and in which it can be read. Such is the principle of the psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams.

This conflict of interpretations must, according to Ricœur, be taken seriously; it requires the articulation of two hermeneutics, since it originates in the ambiguity of the symbol, which is always regressive and progressive. If there are more regressive symbols, such as dreams, and more progressive ones, such as works of art, we can say the dream may be less archaizing to the extent it is less neurotic, and the work of art always expresses the past of the artist, writer or poet. True symbols, according to Ricœur, exist in the intersection of these two functions which we first presented as opposed and then merged together:³⁵

The two hermeneutics, one devoted to the resurgence of archaic significations, belonging to the infancy of humanity and the individual, and another devoted to the emergence of the anticipatory figures of our spiritual adventure, develop only, in opposite directions, the beginnings of meaning contained in the rich language filled with enigmas which men invented and received at the same time to convey their anguish and their hope.³⁶

³⁴ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 42-3.

³⁵ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 479.

³⁶ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 478.

But can how these two hermeneutics be articulated? And if they are opposed, how can they be practiced at the same time?³⁷ Ricœur starts by seeing in the war of hermeneutics and in the problem of language the symptom of a crisis of reflection, at least the one that posits the *cogito* as its foundation. He then undertakes as a fundamental task the integration of the thematic of symbols in philosophical reflection and states that both hermeneutics are legitimate, each one at its own level.³⁸ Indeed, we learned after *The Symbolism of Evil* that "consciousness is not the first reality we may know, but the last."³⁹ We should in fact, on the one hand, start by listening to the wealth of the language of symbols and myths, which fuel and precede reflection and, on the other hand, continue, by way of the philosophical exegesis of symbols and myths, the tradition of hermeneutical rationality. "The symbol makes us think [...] It gives, it is the gift of language, but this gift creates in me the duty to think, to inaugurate philosophical discourse, from the very thing preceding and founding it."⁴⁰

VI. From Hermeneutic Conflict to the Nature of Consciousness

Given that consciousness is the space where the two interpretations of the symbol intersect, there should be a double approach to this notion, which at the same time opens a path to access the polarity of symbols.⁴¹ Ricœur starts by integrating the appeal of the symbol to reflection and imagination, demonstrating that the purely semantic dimension of the symbol is precisely its most superficial aspect. In this case, interpretation does not consist of explanation of or commentary on the secondary intention, simultaneously given and masked in the literal meaning; on the contrary, it develops as imagination of the possible which seeks to think about the universality and temporality implied in the myth.⁴² Besides, in the case of the symbols of evil, they express, by means of an inner contrast, the experience of salvation. Ricœur argues that philosophy has nothing to say regarding the religious message of salvation, but he acknowledges that "it can and should reflect on these symbols as representations of the end of evil."⁴³

This means that the interpretation which discovers the philosophical meaning of symbols is not an abuse, since it is demanded by their own semantic structure.⁴⁴ Those who view philosophy as a strict science, whose language must be unequivocal, are surprised by this thesis; for this conception, resorting to the symbol is taken to lessen philosophy, since symbols stem from a diversity of cultures and are in themselves opaque, always requiring interpretation.⁴⁵

³⁷ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 318.

³⁸ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 318.

³⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 318.

⁴⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 46.

⁴¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 318.

⁴² Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 47.

⁴³ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 47.

⁴⁴ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 48.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 49.

Indeed, reconciling symbols and reflection means introducing equivocal language and the war of hermeneutics into philosophy.⁴⁶ Now, this is precisely the radical novelty that Ricœur's philosophy presents, right from the 1960s, a time when multiculturalism was not yet spoken of:

The task consists not only of demonstrating that reflection requires in its own core something such as an interpretation; it is from this requirement that, also in its principle, the deviation through the contingency of cultures can be justified by an incurably equivocal language and by the conflict of interpretations.⁴⁷

Ricœur claims that a reflexive philosophy is the opposite of a philosophy of immediacy, since consciousness is conceived of as a task, one in which the self is grasped in the mirror constituted by its acts, works and objects. Thus, we glimpse the role of interpretation in self-knowledge: the reason why reflection is transmuted into hermeneutics lies "in this primitive connection between the act of existing and the signs we develop in our works."⁴⁸ Ricœur also alerts us to the fact that philosophical reflection should not be limited to a simple critique of knowledge – that is, with separating, in the Kantian vein, what is *a priori* and what "is simply empirical in knowledge."⁴⁹ It is against this limitation of the scope of reflection that Ricœur claims, in line with Fichte and Nabert, that "reflection is not so much a justification of science and duty, but rather more of an appropriation of our effort to exist. Epistemology is only a part of this task."⁵⁰ Reflection is appropriation, since its starting point is forgetting, a situation of dissemination and distancing from the centre of its existence. Reflection must conquer its imaginative power, which today is completely compromised by a stance of planning. Indeed, since Heidegger, we know we start off already thrown into the world, enveloped by worry, which means that from the start we do not possess what we in fact are and therefore that we must conquer it: "Such is the last formulation of our original proposal: reflection is not intuition; we say it now: the position of self is not given, it is a task."⁵¹

With this thesis, Ricœur highlights the practical and ethical aspect of reflection, a topic which he will continue to develop until his last texts. And as to the objection that might be raised and according to which this ethical inclination might be a limitation to philosophy, he replies that he construes this ethical dimension in a broad sense, like Spinoza who calls "the complete process of philosophy ethical."⁵² Here ethics is not merely morality, nor should it be confused with it. Its objective is to understand the ego in its effort to exist and its desire to be. In this sense, reflection is a path, an appropriation of the desire and effort to be of existence, through the works that

⁴⁶ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 50.

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 50.

⁴⁸ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 325.

⁴⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 52.

⁵⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 52.

⁵¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 53.

⁵² Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 53.

witness that effort and desire; for Ricœur, reflection is much more than a critique of knowledge or of moral judgment.⁵³ Reflection thus becomes hermeneutic, given that the meaning of these works is always dubious and revocable.⁵⁴ As Ricœur claims, "reflection must become interpretation because I cannot understand this act of existing if not through the signs spread across the world [...] Such is the hermeneutic problem in its principle and in its greater generality."⁵⁵

We can therefore see that Ricœur broadens the meaning of hermeneutics and the scope of philosophy itself. Indeed, ever since Modernity, there has been a growing tendency to confine philosophy within the epistemology of positive science. Ricœur rejects this tendency. It goes without saying that the new hermeneutic nature of concrete reflection does not fall back into relativism. To avoid relativism, it needs to face the conflict of the rival interpretations and arbitrate their controversy. It does so by acknowledging that each interpretation, because it is finite, starts from its own symbolic imagination and from fundamental operating concepts which always leave out meaningful aspects – as such, we might add, they always ask to be complemented by other interpretations. Thus, the potential for conflict is constitutively inscribed within each interpretation.⁵⁶ In other words, the tension of the symbol is transmitted to interpretation. Despite an interpretation's basis in a concrete reading choice, that is, its perspective, this perspective never annuls the conflict it starts from.⁵⁷ It only dissimulates it as a condition of its coherence.⁵⁸ As such, we can reach the following conclusion: the true logic of hermeneutics is marked by paradox and conflict. And this is why there is no general hermeneutics, but only different, separate and even contradictory theories.⁵⁹ However, what is important for Ricœur is that each interpretation, in its own way, humbles consciousness and decentralizes the origin of signification. Now, it is precisely this decentralization that reflection must seek.⁶⁰

Hence, hermeneutics is always moved by a double movement: the will of doubt and the will of listening; the vote of rigor and the vote of obedience.⁶¹ And by choosing one of these paths, we do not cancel the other out or make it impossible, we rather only halt it. This means reflection itself requires decentralising the subject, exposing him to the conflict of interpretations

⁵³ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 53.

⁵³ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 54.

⁵⁴ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 54.

⁵⁵ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 54.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 477.

⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 72.

⁵⁸ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 72.

⁵⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 35-6.

⁶⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 326.

⁶¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 36.

and to the logic of double meaning as the logic of thinking.⁶² Thus, it does not suffice to reveal its linguistic and hermeneutic condition: "It is also necessary to protect against all crystallization or desire of rushed aggregation."⁶³ And this is only achieved when taking seriously the metaphorical and narrative condition of human language and, through it, by also taking seriously the conflict of interpretations. This is done, first, by highlighting the differences between the interpretations in conflict, in order to, in a second moment, grasp the outward movement through which each interpretation refers, through its operating concepts, to its rival interpretation.⁶⁴

The connection between these interpretations that is thus achieved does not annul the difference in their perspectives but may enlighten them as to the ignorance they both share. Acknowledging their own limits, each one demands recognition in the opinion of the other and may then lean on the other perspective to proceed.⁶⁵ This means, concretely, to finally give up the idea of realising meaning by itself. The other – both the other interpretation and the other subject – is finally acknowledged as gift, word or relationship,⁶⁶ because it brings us something significant and thus pure difference is no longer its defining trait. In this sense, according to Ricœur, the structuralist movement also allows hermeneutics to integrate a whole relational notion of difference which, as the true condition of meaning or signification, is in no way purely unyielding, psychological or subjective. It is rather located in a form of collective unconscious (comprised of differences and inner relationships) which Saussure called *langue*, that is, language.⁶⁷

Language, in the context of Husserl's phenomenology, was taken to be the quintessential signifying means of all consciousness. But for Saussure and for structuralism in his wake, language (understood as *langue*) suspends the immediate reference to the natural world before being individualized as speech (*parole*) or even text.⁶⁸ For Saussure, this reference – as well as the subject itself – are suspended. In this view, it is the internal relations between signs (the basic elements of language) that command the very possibility of enunciation of the self, revealing – e.g., through the use of the personal pronoun – that it is always in a situation or instance of discourse that he says *I*, in contrast with the other he calls *you* while referring to the same objective situation.⁶⁹ Besides, according to Ricœur, it is in the specific objectivity of significations, of cultural objects or works that the real assessment of the subject's possibilities takes place.⁷⁰

⁶² Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 54-63.

⁶³ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 414.

⁶⁴ Paul Ricœur, "Du conflit à la convergence des méthodes en exégèse biblique," in Xavier Léon-Dufour (ed.), *Exégèse et herméneutique. Parole de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 35.

⁶⁵ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 250.

⁶⁶ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 505.

⁶⁷ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 247-50.

⁶⁸ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 81-4 and 246-7.

⁶⁹ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 251-2.

⁷⁰ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 502.

Painted, sculpted and written works “give the density of the thing, the harshness of the real to these images of man [...] It is through these works, by means of these monuments, that the ‘dignity’ of man is constituted, which is still the instrument and trait of an unfolded consciousness process, of recognition of the self in the other.”⁷¹

Now, these cultural objects resist a simple antithetic of interpretations; they reflect not only the specific time and place of their origin, insofar as they also project the subject's possibilities. As such, they are *objects* which manifest, by way of their concrete universality, the abstract universality of the idea of humanity.⁷² It is then up to the hermeneutics of trust and its exegesis of meaning, elicited by the cultural interpretation of symbols, to decenter itself by means of the structural critique. This critique is helpful for shedding the traditional idea according to which language's function is to copy and mirror. The combination of these two perspectives, in which the hermeneutics of trust is transformed by the structural critique, uncovers the non-purely subjective, but relational, conditions of the reference to the real.⁷³ And here a misunderstanding must be dissolved. At first glance the structuralism appropriated by Ricœur to contest the traditional and naive vision of language seems a narrow interpretation because it sees in language mainly a differentiating principle. But for Ricœur, the structural movement presupposes operating concepts, and Ricœur appropriates them to think difference as the interplay of relations. Thematising these concepts and relations reveals a new possibility of reference to the real, that of semantic innovation, which Ricœur will explore in his subsequent works. Therefore, from the conflict between hermeneutics and structuralism may indeed emerge the idea that semiological reduction of the real constitutes the new condition of the possibility of a poetic or unfolded reference which should be investigated and theorized precisely by hermeneutics.⁷⁴

VII. The Complementarity of Interpretations

Ricœur believes in the complementary function of the rival hermeneutics, since he knows that all interpretation always starts as a wager on meaning. Indeed, the symbol itself is always a virtual space, while it is not instantiated in a finite and partial interpretation. This means all interpretation, by definition, reduces the multiple determination of the symbol. As such, every interpretation only develops, along a certain line, the vectors of meaning implied in a language that is rich and filled with enigmas, and in which they convey their anguish and their hope. There, what is needed is to reveal the complementarity of the rival hermeneutics, unveiling their perspectival character. This double movement of interpretation will enable the constitution of an archaeology and a teleology of the subject.

⁷¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 502-3.

⁷² Ricœur, *L'homme faillible*, 139.

⁷³ Ricœur, *L'homme faillible*, 252-7.

⁷⁴ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 257-62.

Indeed, if every interpretation can only realize a part of the potential meaning of symbols, that does not mean it will annul the original wealth and plurality of meanings of symbolism. On the contrary, if interpretation is a limited and coherent reading within the context of its perspective,⁷⁵ then it presupposes operating concepts which, when spelled out, insert in this first interpretation the meaning acquired through contact with another interpretation. This means that if the coherence of a given interpretation does require a certain suspension of conflict, on the other hand this does not mean the conflict has ceased. It has merely been envisioned according to a certain context.⁷⁶ Thus, each of the conflicting interpretations is inscribed, as a possibility, in the thematic concepts of the other.⁷⁷ This is the meaning of the dialectics of interpretations according to Ricœur: the original conflict is not the one existing between myself and the other; rather the conflict is rooted within myself.⁷⁸

Therefore, my starting point, as well as the starting point of the other, is that of the rootedness in a situation of original participation which I do not control, because everything the symbol reveals, it hides in the exact same measure.⁷⁹ I must then count on the other to avoid crystallization and thus to broaden my perspective. Only solidarity in conflict leads the way to truth as dispossession of the self. Leaning on the opponent in order to proceed⁸⁰ is the condition of every interpretation, which acknowledges the need for openness to compensate for its perspectival dimension. The mission of hermeneutics is thus to reveal how each interpretation contains, according to its own coherence, an entire set of implicit references that can only be clarified in the encounter with other interpretation. The weaknesses of one are precisely the strengths of the other. Thus, arbitrating conflict clearly requires attention to the limits of each interpretation in order to find possible points of intersection. Indeed, without a dialectic dialogue with the opposing perspective, a single interpretation is always condemned to reification.

Take, as an example, the regressive model of interpretation proposed by Freud, which discovers the previous position of the *sum* at the heart of the *cogito* and is the basis of an archaeology of consciousness. For Ricœur, this model is abstract if a relationship with the teleology of the subject is absent. Indeed, if Freudianism is a narrow interpretation for which “religion is the universal obsessive neurosis of humanity,” it must be taken up, according to Ricœur, in a more understanding hermeneutics.⁸¹ Ricœur claims that the concept of archaeology of the subject is very abstract as long as the dialectic relationship with the complementary element, teleology, is absent.⁸²

⁷⁵ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 18 and 318.

⁷⁶ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 72.

⁷⁷ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 475 ss.

⁷⁸ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 477.

⁷⁹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 519.

⁸⁰ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 250.

⁸¹ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 433.

⁸² Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 444.

Hence, Ricœur shows that if Freudianism is an explicit and theorized archaeology, it must refer to an implicit and non-theorized teleology,⁸³ the one exemplified by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Only that which has an end has an origin, which means that if archaeology enables the discovery of the rooting of *cogito* in desire, it is necessary for philosophy "to move towards *I speak* from the positing of *I am*."⁸⁴ This means that decentering the subject is only radical if all archaeology implies a movement of progressive awareness that the subject is inhabited by an entire process of meaning, of which he is not sovereign; instead, the subject belongs to the meaning developing within oneself.

A teleology of the subject implies in itself a decentralization similar to the archaeological one, but in the opposite direction.⁸⁵ For Ricœur, the role of desire in the configuration of self-awareness enables the reunion of Freud and Hegel. In each we find the reversed image of the other. Thus, arbitrating rival interpretations means bringing to light the implicit teleology of Freudianism, as well as discovering the archaeology implied in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The archaeology of the subject or the critique of the ideologies of consciousness, whether in psychoanalysis and suspicion or in structural linguistics, is a necessary condition for the restoration of a new scope of meaning. At this stage Ricœur claims that the future of philosophy can take in the suggestions and be instructed by psychoanalysis and semiology. Indeed, the space of meaning opened in virtue of the teleological movement of desire abandons the narcissistic project of totalizing the subject. Instead, it posits the whole as a promise promoting openness as a finite practice of interpretation. For Ricœur, "only the overdetermination of symbols enables the presentation of a true dialectics which would simultaneously do justice to an economy of culture and to a phenomenology of the spirit."⁸⁶

VIII. Conclusion

This article has shown both the origins of the conflict of interpretations, coming from the reflection on fallibility and evil, and its inner workings and implications. I have tried to reconstruct, at each step of the way, how Ricœur's discovery of the different hermeneutics in conflict impacted his philosophy as well as our grasp of human reflection and language. In a way, they were a radical novelty in their context. This novelty was both in the passage from phenomenology to hermeneutics and in the enrichment of the meaning unfolded by hermeneutics through its encounter with psychoanalysis and structuralism. As was shown, this allowed for a non-reductionist view of language that is ultimately rooted in the perspectival character of the conflict of interpretations, one that bears not only on language but also on the subject. As Ricœur's readers know, his further developments on semantic innovation both in *The Rule of Metaphor* and in *Time and Narrative* and on selfhood in *Oneself as Another*, would carry

⁸³ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 444.

⁸⁴ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 261.

⁸⁵ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 447-9.

⁸⁶ Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 503.

further the analysis of these phenomena, unveiling an ontology strongly rooted in a hermeneutics and its open-ended process of (the conflict of) interpretations.

I chose to focus on the period from *The Symbolism of Evil* to *The Conflict of Interpretations*, a period unfolding in the 1960s. It might be objected that this philosophy is somehow “dated” insofar as Ricœur’s work took different directions until his later works, and that many other important analyses of human language and the subject were developed by others in the following decades. Thus, it could be said, psychoanalysis and structuralism had their time and perhaps what was revealed then was somehow contingent. But what I would like to argue is that the specificity of the conflict of interpretations goes beyond these epochal considerations, in that it reveals the complementarity of interpretations, and could well be applied to other theories able to illuminate human experience. This was not the focus of this article, as its main goal was to explain the main theses of the conflict of interpretations as they were laid out by Ricœur at that specific point in time, and these analyses can very well, in different contexts, still bear fruit for the future.

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