

Introduction – Ricœur on Conflict

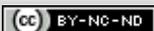
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Introduction – Ricœur on Conflict

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The concept of conflict has a long philosophical history from Heraclitus to Hegel and Marx and to contemporary social and political philosophy. Scholarship on conflict abounds and yet Paul Ricœur's philosophy is scarcely cited in this field.¹ However, conflict was always decisive in his work.² This applies both to conflict's epistemological dimension, as the expression of the hermeneutic method of Ricœurian philosophy (i.e., the conflict of interpretations)³ and to its practical dimension, as articulating the challenge that the complexity of human action poses to philosophical reflection. In these two domains, the theoretical and the practical, it is thus a matter of thinking conflicts and thinking through conflicts, even if sometimes Ricœur's explicit goal is to "arbitrate the conflict between rival interpretations"⁴ or to find "mediations that are always fragile and provisional"⁵ in the domain of human action.

This issue of *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* thus emphasizes the way in which conflict is one of the key notions in the philosophy of Paul Ricœur. Indeed, the concept of conflict already appears in the early works of the 1940s and 1950s revolving around the problems of *existence*, *finitude* and *the will*, even though here conflict is not always explicitly thematized and thus sometimes plays the role of an operative concept. The truth is that conflict in Ricœur assumes different figures, sometimes borrowed from other philosophers – take, for instance, the reflection

¹ The obvious exception to this state of affairs lies in Ricœur studies, and notably in scholarship on Ricœur's analyses of human action. This includes, for instance, attempts to spell out his political philosophy, drawing on Ricœur's analyses of power in phenomena like the political paradox or the problem of domination. See, for example, Bernard Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricœur. The Promise and Risk of Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Pierre-Olivier Monteil, *Ricœur politique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013). For an attempt to grasp Ricœur's theory of history from the standpoint of conflict, see Olivier Abel, "The Unsurpassable Dissensus," in Andrzej Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Description and Interpretation. The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2005), 93-109.

² For an earlier attempt to spell out a typology of conflict in Ricœur's work, see Gonçalo Marcelo, *The Course of Conflict. A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricœur*, PhD thesis, FCSH/Universidade Nova de Lisboa, April 2014, online: <https://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/13207>.

³ Paul Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Seuil, 1969). See also Maria Luísa Portocarrero, *A Hermenêutica do Conflito em Paul Ricœur* (Coimbra: Minerva, 1992); *Testemunho, Atestação e Conflito. Balizas da Antropologia Hermenêutica de Paul Ricœur* (Coimbra: Coimbra University Press, 2021); Fernanda Henriques, "A Esperança Escatológica e o conflito de interpretações," in Fernanda Henriques (ed.), *A Filosofia de Paul Ricœur* (Coimbra: Ariadne, 2006), 109-14.

⁴ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 14.

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice* [1990] (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 15.

on Jaspers' "loving struggle" [*Liebender Kampf*] –⁶ other times stemming from the description of specific tensions between conflicting phenomena, such as is the case of the conflict between the voluntary and the involuntary.⁷ Moreover, and besides the phenomenological and hermeneutical pinpointing of conflicts, sometimes the notion of conflict extends to the normative domain and its implications for human action, as is shown in Ricœur's later practical philosophy. Two notable examples include the analysis of the conflict of duties in the "tragic of action"⁸ as a way to go beyond the difficulties of Kantian universalism and the reflection on the struggle for recognition as a constitutive part of the intersubjective constitution of selfhood.⁹

Moreover, Ricœur paid special attention to the social and political convulsions of his time, always thinking conflicts and thinking *through* them.¹⁰ This includes his reflections on war,¹¹ revolution,¹² and the problems of class conflict¹³ or political domination¹⁴ as well as, on the other hand, possible non-violent answers to conflict, ranging from his early pacifism and political philosophy¹⁵ to later elaborations on justice,¹⁶ love and symbolic gestures.¹⁷ It thus goes without saying that Ricœur's philosophical analysis of conflicts did not remain at a purely theoretical or abstract level and instead departed from the recognition of real conflicts to which answers needed to be urgently provided. Some of these answers were provided as a result of thinking socio-political conflicts in venues such as the *revue Esprit* and other journals and collectives with which Ricœur was engaged.

At the epistemological level it must be stressed that one of the originalities of Ricœur's work among the philosophies centering on conflict is without doubt the notion of the conflict of interpretations, the title of his 1969 collection of essays. The problem that gives rise to this method was stated already in *Freud and Philosophy*: "there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon

⁶ See for instance Mikel Dufrenne and Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), 159.

⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Philosophie de la volonté*, I. *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1950).

⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études* (Paris: Stock, 2004).

¹⁰ For a reflection on social conflicts, see Paul Ricœur, "Le conflit. Signe de contradiction ou d'unité?," in *Contributions et conflits. Naissance d'une société* (Lyon: Chronique sociale de France, 1971).

¹¹ Two notable examples are his reflections on the second world war, including the discussion of German culpability (see "La culpabilité allemande," *Christianisme social*, vol. 63/3-4 (1949), 150-57) and his opposition to the Algerian war.

¹² We find a concrete example in his attention to the Chinese revolution. See for instance "Certitudes et incertitudes d'une révolution," *Esprit*, vol. 24/1 (janvier 1956), 5-28.

¹³ Ricœur was an attentive reader of Marx ever since his youth. Indeed as early as 1937-1938 we find socio-political interventions inspired by Marx. See for instance "Socialisme et christianisme," *Être*, vol. 1/4 (10 mars 1937), 3-4; "Nécessité de Karl Marx," *Être*, vol. 2/5 (mars 1938), 6-11.

¹⁴ See "Le paradoxe politique," in *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 294-321 and also the analyses of power-over (as contrasted with power in common) in *Soi-même comme un autre*.

¹⁵ See "L'homme non violent et sa présence à l'histoire," in *Histoire et vérité*, 265-77.

¹⁶ Ricœur sees in law, and in judicial intervention specifically, a way to solve conflicts without violence. The long-term goal of judicial intervention is thus social peace. See *Le juste I* (Paris: Esprit, 1995).

¹⁷ See Ricœur, *Amour et justice*, and the analysis of the states of peace in *Parcours de la reconnaissance*.

for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field [...] is internally at variance with itself".¹⁸ In the opening chapter of *The Conflict of Interpretations*, "Existence and Hermeneutics," the principles guiding Ricœur's "long route" of hermeneutics are made explicit, with self-understanding coming to be defined as a task necessarily mediated by the conflictual deciphering of signs and symbols.

It can be argued that both in this first hermeneutical phase of Ricœur's philosophy, centered in a micro-hermeneutics of the double-meaning of symbols, and in the macro-hermeneutics of the 1970s and 1980s, revolving around the hermeneutics of texts and action, what is at stake is a creative, dynamic process whereby new light is shed on the phenomena analyzed, therefore producing new and better interpretations. This can be seen as a "weak" type of dialectic, without totalizing pretensions (e.g., a "broken Hegelianism," as Johann Michel¹⁹ has put it), for instance in the dialectic between explaining and understanding ("to explain more is to understand better") but one that results in an enlarged perspective distinguishing between better or worse interpretations.

What remains to be discussed is the often-unacknowledged relevance and timeliness of Ricœur's approach of conflict today. Indeed, it can be argued that it offers an alternative both to relativism and (an often reductionist and naturalist) naïve realism and is well suited to capture the forms of rationality that are specific to the social and human sciences. Enriched with his investigations on semantic innovation (through metaphor and narrative) and his philosophy of imagination both in its individual and social dimensions, it helps us unveil the symbolic texture of reality and contextualize first-person perspectives within it.

The relevance of Ricœur's model of conflict is thus the challenge that this thematic issue tackles. The issue includes five articles exploring this topic from different angles. Taken together, these articles achieve three aims. First, contributing to the exegesis of Ricœur's concept of conflict, including (but not limited to) the conflict of interpretations. Second, making sense of what this model of conflict might mean in the context of Ricœur's philosophy and what contribution does it make to philosophy in general. Third, applying this notion to analyze contemporary social and political phenomena, thus showing its timeliness.

The first article, Ana Lucía Montoya's "La réponse ricœurienne au conflit dans *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* à partir de la sagesse cartésienne" [The Ricœurian Answer to Conflict in *Freedom and Nature* from Cartesian Wisdom] explores the influence of Cartesian wisdom on the conclusion of *Freedom and Nature* as a possible way to go beyond the conflict between the voluntary and the involuntary. The article puts forward a rigorous analysis of the first volume of the *Philosophy of the Will* as well as of Ricœur's 1939 conference paper "L'attention,"²⁰ from the angle of the three virtues to reach contentment offered by Descartes in one of his letters to Princess Elizabeth. The article aims to reinterpret these three virtues (choice, effort and consent) in light of the virtue of attention

¹⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1970), 26-7.

¹⁹ Johann Michel, *Ricœur et ses contemporains. Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Castoriadis* (Paris: Puf, 2012).

²⁰ Paul Ricœur, "L'attention. Étude phénoménologique de l'attention et de ses connexions philosophiques," in *Écrits et conférences*, 3. *Anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 51-93.

understood as a practical mediation, and it attempts to show that they are a way to the good life in the early Ricœur. As such, Montoya not only shows the centrality of conflict (between the voluntary and the involuntary) in this first stage of Ricœur's work but also one of the possible solutions for that conflict.

The second article, Maria Luísa Portocarrero's "Ricœur's Conflict of Interpretations in the Making. Symbols, Reflection and the War of Hermeneutics," is an invited contribution. The invitation sought to pay homage to a Ricœur scholar whose pioneering work on the notion of conflict – and notably the conflict of interpretations – remains a landmark in Ricœur studies. The article reconstructs the origin of the notion of the conflict of interpretations in Ricœur's philosophy: recalling the passage from the analysis of fallibility to the symbolism of evil, it emphasizes the implications of the "war of hermeneutics" – i.e., the conflict between the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of suspicion – for language and philosophical reflection. These implications include the complementarity of interpretations and the potential of every interpretation to be revised, and Portocarrero emphasizes that this notion of the conflict of interpretations can be applied to other theories and phenomena in conflict.

This significance of the conflict of interpretations brings us to the third article, "La conflictualité productive chez Ricœur" [Productive Conflictuality in Ricœur] by Jean-Paul Nicolai. This article puts forward a new reading of Ricœur's philosophy through an interpretation of the role of conflict in Ricœur that compares it to Lyotard's concept of discrepancy. The article proposes the concept of *ergodicité* to grasp what is at stake in the encounter with another that allows the subject to think the same even in discrepancy, and it reinterprets the Ricœurian anthropology in light of that concept. Nicolai also introduces the concept of "the encompassing" to describe the Ricœurian notion of conflict, and the article analyzes in detail the way in which Roman Jakobson's claims are discussed in *The Rule of Metaphor*²¹ in order to illustrate that approach. As such, Nicolai presents an original approach to highlight the way in which the notion of conflict animates Ricœurian philosophy and inspires its creativity.

The last two articles of this issue give concrete applications of Ricœur's conflict of interpretations. Gonçalo Marcelo's "The Hermeneutics of Polarized Ideologies. Conflict, (Ir)rationality and Dialogue" devises a social hermeneutical framework to make sense of the problem of polarized ideologies. Drawing from Ricœur's social philosophy, the article reinterprets the notion of pathological ideologies as totalizing systems of beliefs. It introduces the notion of "hermeneutical delusion" to describe the mechanism of ideological bias whereby subjects are caught in misleading interpretations that they refuse to forego due to identity claims and affective reasons. Describing how hermeneutics can contribute to social epistemology, the article discusses a non-reductionist account of meaning and rationality that is intrinsic to the hermeneutical project. It also shows how taking up this project – by updating and extending Ricœur's notions of conflict of interpretations and ideology – can contribute to understanding the contemporary polarization of ideologies in the public sphere, and it discusses the virtue of hermeneutical dialogue as a possible way to counter this problem.

²¹ Ricœur, *La métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

Finally, the fifth and last article of this issue, Jean-Philippe Desmarais' "Herméneutique dialectique de la réconciliation dans les Amériques. Généalogie de son origine théologique et de sa sécularisation dans l'œuvre de Las Casas" analyses the work of Bartolomé de Las Casas by adopting a pluridisciplinary theoretical framework that encompasses sociology of the civil sphere, Ricœur's hermeneutics and Foucault's genealogy. The article puts forward several goals: to study the genealogy of the concept of reconciliation at work in the Americas and specifically in Canada, by retracing its origin in the work of Las Casas; to arbitrate a conflict of interpretations concerning the colonial or decolonial nature of that work, by contrasting the interpretations of Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo; to unpack the complex sedimentation of the meaning of reconciliation in Las Casas by starting from his initial theological approach and culminating in an approach to justice in terms of natural Law; and to compare the several types of reconciliation found in the work of Las Casas with contemporary debates in Canada. The article thus makes its way through history, genealogy and hermeneutics in order to come to the contemporary social and political debates in a postcolonial context. In so doing, Desmarais unveils the conflict of interpretations within Las Casas' work and proves the usefulness of this Ricœurian notion not only to the exegesis of the work of Las Casas but also to illuminate contemporary social and political debates.

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