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# The Need for an Alternative Narrative to the History of Ideas or To Pay a Debt to Women

## A Feminist Approach to Ricœur's Thought

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Abstract

This paper explores the thought of Paul Ricœur from a feminist point of view. My goal is to show that it is necessary to narrate differently the history of our culture – in particular, the history of philosophy – in order for wommen to attain a self-representation that is equal to that of men. I seek to show that Ricoeur's philosophy – especially his approach to the topics of memory and history, on the one hand, and the human capacity for initiative, on the other hand– can support the idea that it is possible and legitimate to tell our history otherwise by envisioning a more accurate truth about ourselves.

*Keywords: Women's Studies, Ricœur, History, Memory, Identity*

Résumé

Dans ce texte je veux explorer la pensée de Paul Ricœur d'un point de vue féministe. Mon but c'est de démontrer qu'il faut raconter autrement l'histoire de notre culture –notamment l'histoire de la philosophie - afin que les femmes puissent atteindre une représentation de soi égalitaire à celle des hommes. Je veux démontrer que la philosophie de Ricœur - surtout les thèmes de la mémoire et de l'histoire, d'une part, et celui de la capacité humaine d'initiative, de l'autre - peut soutenir l'idée qu'il est possible et légitime de nous raconter notre histoire autrement envisageant une vérité plus juste sur nous-mêmes.

***Mots-clés:*** *Féminisme, Ricœur, Histoire, Mémoire, Identité*

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## A Feminist Approach to Ricœur's thought

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## Overview

The starting point of this article comes from both a direct and indirect experience of a sort of *invisibility* which prompts a structural absence of history within Women's Studies. On the one hand, it is as if they will not develop properly, and, on the other hand, they seem to have no repercussions at all. One can notice a constant lament, at the beginning of any text or investigation on feminism, of the fact that it still looks as if such an approach must start everything afresh – as nothing has been done before on the subject. Some scholars, like Mary Whaite – who led the enterprise of publishing a History of Philosophy from the point of view of Woman[1] – regrets some pejorative comments from her colleagues on the dubious interest and philosophical relevance of her project, along with the difficulties she and her team had to face in order to obtain reliable information about women of the past to proceed with their work.[2]

Moreover – and, perhaps, even as a consequence of the above-stated ideas – the main results of feminist research as well as a feminist perspective on philosophical topics are barely mentioned in general anthologies. What interests me here is to highlight the Histories of Philosophy. Even though at this moment one can already rely on a significant amount of published material on the contribution of women to the development of western tradition, no General History of Philosophy or – for instance – no History of 20th Century Philosophy has incorporated the outcome of those researches or, at least, incorporated such debate. This state of affairs is the result of an outright denial of an academic shelter for gender questions, along with an absence of criticism to a standard theoretical heritage or aiming at building a different memory of the past. As a result, philosophers still narrate their cultural heritage as if Women's Studies does not exist. Thus the very possibility of having a different collective memory laying to women a better (and fairer) place, which would allow for a better self-understanding of Humankind as a whole, is barred from the outset.

Relying on the background of the above-mentioned experience, I will here address the Phenomenological Hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur – especially the topics of memory, history, identity and recognition. My aim is to find out how the Ricœurian approach to such topics can legitimate and even display the necessity of searching into the western philosophical tradition for "a gender perspective." I thus aim to fill in a thematic emptiness regarding an exploration of Ricœur's thought from the point of view of feminism[3]. When people want to recall French philosophers that, admittedly, could have matched the theoretical needs of Women's Studies, the names of Foucault, Derrida or Deleuze spread to mind – but usually not the name of Paul Ricœur. [4] I would like to show that Ricœur's thought can just as well match the theoretical needs of Women's Studies.


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In the 1970's, Judy Chicago – in order to give prominence to the role of those women who strongly contributed to the development of collective life, whether by concrete deeds or symbolic means –, conducted the *Dinner Party* project. She did so while holding the idea that "our heritage is our power." My text has a similar goal: to show how urgent it is to find in our tradition alternative ways of thinking the feminine, ways that were not properly developed in canonical anthropological readings. By doing so, we will be providing women with different models to build up more rewarding images of themselves and with more positive patterns of reference for structuring their own identities. In this context, I want to show that it is not only legitimate but even necessary to recount differently the history of our culture and the history of philosophy in particular, if we are to find new texts, new authors and new interpretations which might uncover the role of women within the whole dynamics of thought and life.

The proposal developed here will articulate three dimensions of the theoretical issue we are dealing with: 1) its necessity; 2) its possibility; 3) its fruitfulness. The necessity and fruitfulness of a specific approach to feminism within the history of ideas represent two sides of the same theoretical urgency to reformulate what has been said about women and the feminine in the western tradition. The possibility of such an approach is inextricably related to its correspondent *legitimacy*. My text will thus be structured in two parts. In the first one I will be evidencing both the necessity and fruitfulness of going after new readings of the past. In the second one the hermeneutic legitimacy of such pursuit will be highlighted.

## The Necessity and Use of Different Narratives of the Past

In *The Course of Recognition* Ricœur states that feminist movements helped to make the issue of recognition popular, and still adds that those movements claim for their members a specific identity, thus allowing them both to be recognized as a group and to improve their self-esteem and social impact. Ricœur insists upon the importance of recognition in the shaping of our identity, making two claims:

- The identity of historically determined groups is a component of a temporal dimension "that embraces discrimination against these groups in a past that may date back a few centuries."[5]
- It is necessary to make a "reversed discrimination" towards those groups.

These claims have a double support: on the one hand, they fit and even come in the sequence of Ricœur's thought on the triangular connection of memory, history and identity; on the other hand, they instantiate his mode of thinking in dialogue with other trends of thought – in the present case, with several approaches to recognition. The above ideas serve as the starting point for showing a lack of theoretical recognition towards all those readings proposing new frames of analysis for the status of women and the feminine. A certain marginalization, or even an outright blindness against those readings, attests to this lack of recognition. I would mention two further aspects that confirm such attitude.

First, in the critical review of an excellent anthology published in 2000 by Françoise Collin, Evely Pisier and Elene Varikas – *Les Femmes de Platon à Derrida* –, Michèle Riot-Sarcey shows that the book stresses the fact that women could not have been subjects of History[6], because it is as if they do not belong to History. According to the author of the critical review, the texts presented in the anthology seem themselves not to be part of History, since they all report the same ideas about women and the feminine – much like a single, uniform text – and as if time

had no impact upon the anthropological conceptions depicted.[7] All the texts associate women with evil, sin, nature, with sensibility and sexuality and, simultaneously, consider these categories to be secondary and necessarily subsumed to those of culture, intellectual or rational – all these belonging to the masculine. Now, the anthropological question is absolutely crucial when it comes to think on the relation between the two sexes with equity. That is why Nancy Tuana has created the collection *Re-reading the Canon* – its primary target being to seek what she calls "gender sub-texts" present in canonical texts of the philosophical tradition, so that conceptions of the feminine and women can be brought to light and widely discussed. This collection points out two things: 1) Philosophical positions have not been pure or neutral and what we persistently call " universal " is no such thing and has not taken into account half of the humanity; 2) Philosophy (the History of Philosophy) had a great deal of responsibility in shaping social representations of women and the feminine.

Second, in a Portuguese overview of social representations in the mid-1990s,[8] Lígia Amâncio inquired upon stereotyped social representations of the two sexes. The extensive bibliographical update she performed then reveals several important criteria for this issue. On the one hand – and relying also on data from previous foreign studies on the same topic – Amâncio's overview presented the results of terminological and psychological inquiries which associate the masculine with such notions as (1) objectivity; (2) independence and (3) dominance, and the feminine with such others as (1) expressivity; (2) dependence and (3) submission. These terms allow for the conclusion that social relationships, despite being structured on the basis of symbolic patterns, convert these patterns into concrete, objective and universal differences between the sexes, thus projecting a real asymmetry between the ideas of man and woman. At the same time, research on the same topic in Portugal also had an interesting outcome to the present study. In fact, it shows: (1) a division between masculine and feminine, in accordance with the aforementioned terms – rationality and objectivity for the masculine and emotion and sensibility to the feminine; (2) how the masculine is associated with a position of superiority in contrast with the feminine, clearly marked by features of inferiority, whether explicit or implicit. The masculine is Brave, Dominant, Strong, Independent and Combative, whereas the feminine is Curious, Dependent, Fragile, Inferior, Sweet and Sentimental.

In my interpretation, this set of remarks is absolutely consonant with Ricœur's statement that there are some groups whose identity has been discriminated "in a past that may date back a few centuries" and towards and for which it is necessary to make "a reverse discrimination." In other words, theoretical approaches to women and the feminine do not provide a fair standard of reference so that they can build up a balanced and equanimous social identity. Given this scenario, it seems necessary to find different and dissonant points of view allowing us to overcome this secular past of discrimination. And for doing this Paul Ricœur will be *mon compagnon de route*.

## Memory, History and Identity: The Duty of Building a Critical Memory of Women

The core of the present exploration of Ricœur's thought is based on his *Memory, History, Forgetting*[9] – especially on two central topics of that book: (1) the relationship among history, memory and identity, and (2) the point of embedding a critical memory within the philosophical notion of *the duty of memory*. In exploring these two main ideas, I want to show that it is essential

to build a critical collective memory of some conceptions of the feminine that are still not available to women – whether in the canon or in classroom syllabi.

In choosing this line of thought I distance myself from to the polemics raised by *Memory, History, Forgetting* within part of the French intellectual elites which attacked the book for its supposed aim in fading the idea of *the duty of memory*.[10] Quite the contrary, I believe that the duty of memory is precisely the ethical imperative standing behind Ricœur's work, and this being the case, it legitimates the need to *narrate differently* the content of our memories and, through them, the content of our history. Of course, the critical target of Ricœur's approach was not the question of women or the feminine – his main concern was the *Shoa* –, but the way he critically approached this issue allows for adaptations to other subjects, such as our present topic.

*Memory, History, Forgetting*, is dedicated – as Ricœur says – to understanding the nature of our representations of the past, and to the multiple ways in which they determine us, since by being historical the human condition implies an approach to reality which necessarily involves any individual. At the beginning of the third part of *Memory, History, Forgetting* – on the notion of the historical condition – Ricœur makes the following question: "What is it to understand in the historical mode?"[11] This is an essential question as it refers to the fact that, once excluded from a totalizing mode of reflection, the human being is pushed towards a way of knowing himself and the world inevitably framed by his historical condition, i.e., to "a situation in which each person is in each case implicated."[12] And this is the perspective which leads us directly to the unavoidable role played by memory, in a double sense: (1) because "[…] the phenomena of memory, so closely connected to what we are, oppose the most obstinate of resistances to the *hubris* of total reflection"[13] and, (2) because "collective memory […] constitutes the soil in which historiography is rooted."[14]

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Paul Ricœur writes that his book "is a plea on behalf of memory as the womb of history, inasmuch as memory remains the guardian of the entire problem of the representative relation of the present to the past."[15] What exactly does this statement mean within the whole articulation of the book? It is certainly not the case that memory and history are indistinguishable or can cohabit promiscuously with each other – even because their referential fields are completely different: Whereas the first one concerns accuracy, the second concerns truth. And as Ricœur himself stresses, History proceeds to a scientific severance of any kind of relation with a living experience of remembrance. Their connections consist instead in what one might call a "*mutual potentiation* ": nemory serves history, and history, in turn, consolidates and perpetuates a certain memory or, better said, it legitimates a certain memory.

To reach a broad understanding of what is at stake in this idea, we must reflect further on the long hermeneutic route made by Paul Ricœur in his major work from the 1980's: *Time and Narrative*. Some essential clues from that work are recovered by *Memory, History, Forgetting*, namely, the category of "representation" or "lieutenancy" that is used to describe the kind of relationship History holds with its object of study – its main feature is not to be "observable but memorable."[16] With this statement, Ricœur aims at uncovering the idea that the study of historical objects is fragile and that they only become object of study through a process of reading and interpretation. Be it the document where the happened is reported or the trace that recalls it, the past that becomes an object to historiography is always intrinsically interpretative. And this is precisely the form of relation with the past that Ricœur labels " representation " or "lieutenancy," words that refer to the notion of *being-in-place-of* – which properly accounts for the specificity of the happened. The notion of what "happened" simultaneously refers to that which has already


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passed but still remains present, through traces or testimonies. And the idea of "representation " or "lieutenancy" is itself framed by the notion of reconstruction, the ontological mode of the past being marked by the double feature of loss and recovery. This way of facing the object of history reduces its epistemological force[17] and may help us account for the Ricœurian statement that memory is the matrix of history.

What *Time and Narrative* left unexplored and *Memory, History, Forgetting* exposes is the influence history can have over memory – especially over collective memory, thus allowing for an indestructible hermeneutic circle to be set between both. Ricœur calls this influence of history over collective memory an *institutionalization of a certain collective memory*, whereby the latter gets the seal of the "true memory," since it is held by the epistemological force of historiography. Ricœur presents this idea as follows: "[…] imposed memory is armed with a history that is itself "authorized," the official history, the history publicly learned and celebrated. A trained memory is, in fact, on the institutional plane an instructed memory."[18]

Understanding that idea means to take into account the fact that Paul Ricœur chose for the title of his work still another element – forgetting – which has a crucial role to play in an overall understanding of the text as a whole – whether for the articulation between memory and history or for the issue of forgiveness Ricœur addresses in the end of the book.

From all the Ricœurian analysis of memory I would like to stress the importance of *exercised memory*, since this is the kind of memory that directly matches the notion of forgetting – namely, within the scope of the implications of uses and abuses of both. Ricœur says the abuse of memory and the abuse of forgetting are two undesirable extremes, thus highlighting the ethic-political dimension of a duty towards a fair memory. In this respect, Ricœur will say that *too much as well as too little* memory reveal a deficit of criticism. To support his views on this respect, our philosopher will convoke the work of two major thinkers: Halbwachs e Freud.

Taking into account Halbwachs' work from the 1950's – *La Mémoire Collective* –, Ricœur will then write about the primacy (thus non-derivativeness) of collective memory, by exploring three fundamental ideas: (1) we don't remember things alone, but always with others; (2) a great deal of our memory is built upon other human beings' narratives; and (3) our memories are framed by collective narratives and strengthened by public acts within a public sphere.

From Freud – namely from his *Recollection, Repetition, Working Through* (1914) and *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) – Ricoeur would borrow some key-concepts in order to approach 'exercised memory' and the corresponding relationship with forgetting. The philosopher then explored the Freudian perspective on the repression of traumatic memories which are replaced by a repetition pattern of behavior – the essence of the latter being a refusal to look upon the wound and the trauma, at the same time that a repetitive behavior is put into action so that we can forget what happened before that harmed us. Along the same line of reasoning, Ricœur insists on another Freudian view – the impossibility of forgetting a lost object, which determines a psychological fixation preventing the individual from setting herself free and doing a proper mourning (thus separating her ego from the lost object). This fixation does not allow the individual to establish new affective involvements. In both cases, we face a pattern of inflexible behavior, which is neither creative nor self-fulfilling.

Based on the interlacing of both perspectives, Ricœur will then set up the hypothesis that historiography should both reflect on and mourn its own tradition, in order to overcome rigid and repetitive readings of the past which conceived it as a dead reservoir, and examine certain social phenomena – namely, celebrations and commemorations which praise certain happenings

while forgetting others – in order to account for repressed or manipulated memory by analogy. In each case there is a wound unhealed or a debt of memory that is left unpaid.

I say it again: Ricœur's analyses were focused on very precise historical issues, like Apartheid or the *Shoa*, representing circumscribed and dated events, which perfectly matched such notions as "trauma" or "social wounding." And this is certainly not what happened with the (social) issue I am hereby addressing – where, to borrow some words by Ricœur himself, what is at stake is an exercised memory that grounded discrimination against women in a past that may date back a few centuries. Nevertheless, I think it is possible to restore Ricœur's idea and put it into work at a conceptual platform on legitimate and taught memory in all that concerns women and the feminine – a platform that built our culture and formed just as much a repetitive, rigid and uncreative heritage.

In a text full of references to Ricœur's thought,[19] Johann Michel explores the idea I am here outlining, calling our attention, on the one hand, to the dialectics that could be established between Ricœur's approach to forgetting and the configuration of a public memory and, on the other hand, to how that public memory could be no more than a trap in the process of building a canonical narrative to be repeated over and over again. Now, this is precisely where the fundamental topic of this article lies: the perpetuation of a single point of view about the past ends up dismissing other possible perspectives (memories) of it, turning that past into a closed, impenetrable thing – thus converting the past into a dead tradition.

As regards the question of gender, this perspective crystallized into a "taught memory" which silenced or at least minimized the contribution of women to the development of culture and history and destroyed some possibilities for Women's Studies to raise fundamental questions for its development. That was indeed what happened in anthropological debates, for instance, where the very existence of the two sexes was ignored and women were discriminated against. This apparent contradiction was actually made possible for two main reasons. To begin with, the texts that make up our collective memory only discuss human nature in general, with no place whatsoever for particularities, even though they conceive such "human nature" from a masculine point of view or from the point of view of the neutral universal. Furthermore, there is a "background noise" also incorporated in collective and taught memory to the effect that feminine should be defined as a derivation of the masculine and always by contrast with it. This is the main reason why women are anthropologically defined as beings lacking something – whether in the Aristotelian or in the Freudian framework, just to mention two paradigms – and also why the construct became a norm, thus naturalizing one perspective.

If, however, we follow Ricœur in believing that "A school class is, in this respect, a privileged place for this shift in viewpoint in memory,"[20] we will have to acknowledge how important it is to assume the ethic-political responsibility of building a fair memory of women and the feminine, that could support new legitimate and taught points of view. And there is yet another consequence – no less negative than the anthropological one mentioned above – of a certain inheritance of memory that is related to the extremes of *too much* and *too little* memory: the problem of *identity* which, as it is well-known, in Paul Ricœur is indelibly associated with *time*, since it is conceptualized as "narrative identity."

## Identity, Recognition and Time: Indissolubility and Vulnerability

It is widely accepted – by different and sometimes even irreconcilable theoretical approaches – that identity and recognition are intrinsically related. In *The Course of Recognition*

Paul Ricœur engages in dialogue with some authors involved in that issue – namely, Taylor and Honneth. The main reason for Ricœur's disagreement with both thinkers lies in his saying that it is the category of narrative identity which assures the first necessary recognition, built up in the articulation of identity and self-recognition. And that is the reason why identity, recognition and time form an interconnected hermeneutic trilogy, marked by precariousness and vulnerability.

Ricœur establishes this interconnection between identity and time at the very beginning of his philosophical approach to identity, through the notion of "narrative identity" – in its double dimension of "personal identity" and "collective identity" – in the conclusions of *Time and Narrative*. There, this notion was put side by side with the first aporia of temporality: the impossibility of binding phenomenological and cosmological time, and it was the *rejeton* of hermeneutic circularity that framed such connection. The emergence of the issue of identity in Ricœur's thought thus lies in the aporetical rooting of the problem of identity and is marked by the same kind of vulnerability mentioned above.[21]

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the fragility of identity is resumed again in the theoretical framing of memory and history, and there Ricœur saysthat "as the primary cause of the fragility of identity we must cite its difficult relation to time," besides stressing the fundamental role of memory in shaping identity. For that reason the philosopher goes on stating that "the heart of the problem is the mobilization of memory in the service of the quest, the appeal, the demand for identity."[22]

We have now reached another determinant platform of reasoning in this reflection, which can be materialized in the following question: could the narratives of the history of philosophy and of culture broadly construed help women building their identity – whether individually or collectively – in terms of human balance and positivity? In other words: are there any manifestations of positive recognition of women and the feminine in texts, theories or well-known explanations presented by the western tradition up to the present day? And is there really a problem here?

In the seventeenth century, Poulain de la Barre presented himself as an apologist of the cause of women, by stressing the necessity of approaching the issue of gender equality in a rational way, so that old and repeated prejudices set against women and spread over the centuries could be dispelled. For him there was no doubt about the negative impact those prejudices have had upon women and their tainted representations of themselves – which, in his view, constituted an inviolable prison as well as an irremovable impediment for a whole development.[23] The introjection of misconceived widely accepted images about the inferiority of the feminine prevented women from overcoming a centenary situation of subalternity, Poulain de la Barre argued.

And today as in the seventeenth century, if one sticks to certain social phenomena and to some statements about the role played by recognition in the process of constructing identity, one should still answer the above question affirmatively. Charles Taylor – just to single out an author with whom Paul Ricœur set up a dialogue on this issue – has argued for the importance of singling out the role of recognition in the whole process of identity construction. The leading issue, for Taylor, is related to the recognition and the identity of specific cultures.[24] What mediates this relation is the notion of "authenticity." Identity has to do with knowing what one is for others. Now, Taylor points out that it is recognition that determines identity construction in a significant way. Identities are constructed in the context of interations. Others, their looking upon me, determine the way I look upon myself. If there is no recognition – in the sense of a positive valuation – the resulting appreciation is not internalized and becomes oppressing, leading to

inauthenticity. Taylor defends accordingly the urgency to establish social conditions allowing for recognition among cultural differences, so that both cultures and individuals within them could be faithful to themselves and to their models of authenticity.

Even if Ricœur did not build up a systematic theory of recognition – in that his work is no more than a course –, his itinerary threw some light on a defining feature of such a project. That feature is the constitutive asymmetry of different processes of recognition and it grounds all the positions defending an interaction between recognition and identity construction. By subscribing to this notion of asymmetry as a defining feature of recognition and applying it to some theoretical models on women and the feminine that have defined our culture – from Aristotle's notion of the "unfinished male" to the Freudian proposal of "penis-envy" – I have been insisting upon the fact that women were always conceived either as the "reciprocal other" or, from an external point of view, as a dissonant alterity. This being the case and aiming at doing justice to Simone Beauvoir's idea of the feminine as "the second sex," I have reached the conclusion that, as far as women are concerned, the constitutive asymmetry of recognition turned into a kind of "exteriority" of the essential core of what it is to be human.

If we now take into account all that was said above on collective memory, individual memory and taught memory – in other words, on memory legitimized by history – I think we are bound to conclude that women have at their disposal no more than a poor and unattractive scope of elements upon which they can build their identity, both as individuals and as a group. It is thus mandatory to explore new ways of turning memory into a vehicle for other sorts of narratives to emerge, which may provide women with representations of themselves equivalent in terms of dignity to those available to men.

If, as Paul Ricœur says, memory is crucial to any kind of vindication of identity, then it is also indispensable to reconfigure a philosophical memory of any kind of issue related to gender questions – so that the present philosophical state of affairs concerning those topics could be modified, and canonical asymmetries, both in texts and in themes, may be discarded in the future. And if we recall Ricœur's statement that a school class is a privileged place for a shifting in viewpoint in memory, we should also be allowed to dream about a History of Philosophy still to be accomplished, where a whole set of existential questions unsettling humanity in its double composition of Men and Women could be made apparent and which would take upon itself the responsibility to build a fair ethic-political memory.

## It is Possible and Legitimate to Test Other Narratives of the Past

"Why, in the transmission from future to past, should the present not be the *time of initiative* – that is, the time when the weight of history that has already been made is deposited, suspended, and interrupted, and when the dream of history yet to be made is transposed into a responsible decision? Therefore it is within the dimension of acting (and suffering, which is its corollary) that thought about history will bring together its perspectives, within the horizon of the idea of an imperfect mediation."[25]

The above quotation is a good synthesis of what has been this study's essential theoretical goal, at the same time that it makes room for the next topic of my analysis, based on a systematic exploration of that quote. In the previous section, I tried to demonstrate that Ricœur's thought allows for grounding the necessity and fruitfulness of construing a critical collective memory of notions of women and the feminine, in order to mobilize an "inverted discrimination"

towards them. In what follows, I will explore the Ricœurian proposal that such construction is not only necessary but legitimate.

The notion of "imperfect mediations" is the fundamental theoretical background for the text quoted above, a notion that uncovers a whole understanding horizon of Ricœur's work – articulating, more specifically, the concepts of memory and history. In the chapter titled "Should we renounce Hegel?" in the third volume of *Time and Narrative,* Ricœur clearly stated such an articulation. To put it concisely, his thesis runs as follows: Hegel constitutes the eternal temptation for those seeking to understand the real and, at the same time, the irredeemable impossibility imposed by the strict requirements of critical thought.[26] That is why he would say, over and over again, that "we must choose between Hermeneutics and Absolute Knowledge" – this choice is the defining feature of any question, placing it always short of a totally unifying conceptual synthesis.

This is also the conceptual framework for two other slogans Ricœur will repeat throughout his work: first, "one should explain more if one wants to understand better"; second, "it is always possible to understand differently." That is to say, the whole process of approaching a certain theoretical issue is constitutively developed within a hermeneutic circle where progresses only take place if a dialogue is set with other approaches to the same issue, whether from the same theoretical standpoint or from a different one. It is never the case that we can rely on a straight, linear progression leading to a conceptual unified outcome.[27]

Another aspect belonging to the notion of "imperfect mediation" I would like to stress concerns a way of conceiving the present "as initiative." Time and evil are central philosophical issues in Ricœur's work. The philosopher argues that evil is an embarrassment to be faced and time is the enabling structure of being and acting. In *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* – the book shaping the whole of his philosophical project – Ricœur sets an analysis of the voluntary act, presenting time, on its dual aspect of subjectively lived and vitally consented time, as a constitutive feature of acting. These two main features of temporality will be taken up again in *Time and Narrative* –and then be restated in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

When talking about the present as initiative, Ricœur will part from St. Augustine's position to the effect that the present is "fleeting attention," since he wants to move away from "the prestige of presence, in the quasi-optical sense of the term."[28] What interests him – Ricœur goes on to say – is to dethrone the present as a visual category and include it under the categories of acting and suffering (or enduring – in the sense of passivity and not merely as physical suffering).

And what is at stake here is already the main point Ricœur will make in *Oneself as Another*: the fact that to be human is *to be capable of*, that is to say, to be able to say " I can." Relying on a similar purpose, he had already stressed in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* that a will rooted in an embodied existence may be defined as a "motivated will." In Ricœur's own words "wanting is not creating, but it is not suffering either." Human freedom and initiative only turn real if they fully assume the consequences of their existential rooting. Having a body is simultaneously to hold power and to be deprived of it – the consent to be deprived of power being the very ontological platform for the fulfillment of human capacity.

*Oneself as Another* is perhaps the most important work by Ricœur if one wants to understand the notion of "the power to act," the human initiative capacity. It is in the fourth study of the book – which deals with the articulation between agent and action – that such notion is particularly stressed. Ricœur sets his reflection in the framework of the third Kantian antinomy, underlining the difference between a beginning *of* the world and a beginning *in* the

world, thus coining the notion of "practical beginning" by arguing for the effectiveness of human action or, as he himself put it, "the power to do things, that is to produce changes in the world."[29] Thus, human initiative is the ability to start something new, even if such start is bound to be no more than " give a new course to things, starting from an initiative that announces a continuation and hence opens something ongoing. To begin is to begin to continue."[30]

Finally, it is important to understand the connection between the future and the past that the text quoted above presupposes. Ricœur responds to that connection with the idea of the *present as initiative.* Ricœur's great source of inspiration for the analysis of this topic was the work by Reinhart Koselleck, and his analytical categories of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" – used to define the human relationship with historical time. And the whole of the Ricoeurian understanding of humankind's historical condition is marked by the way he conceptually operates with those two meta-categories and how they are subsumed under the idea of the present as initiative.

Let us now go back to Ricœur's statement: "Why, in the transmission from future to past, should the present not be the time of initiative – that is, the time when the weight of history that has already been made is deposited, suspended, and interrupted, and when the dream of history yet to be made is transposed into a responsible decision?" Let me underline five keywords here: transmission, deposited, suspended, interrupted, dream. These terms express how Ricœur approaches the relationship between the past and the future when it comes to the formation of the human mode of being and the making of history. There is a specific bridge between past and future, since each future has a singular past. However, that bridge is not a sort of determination – on the contrary; it expresses an enabling and mutually conditioning relation. There is no straight symmetry between past and future. That is the reason why, according to Ricoeur, one must surpass the idea that the past is a fixed, changeless thing. Quite on the contrary – "We have to reopen the past, to revivify its unaccomplished, cut-off – even slaughtered – possibilities."[31] We are beings affected by the past and such affection will mark our future – but it is neither an indelible mark nor a destiny. One must deal with the past as the "space of experience" allowing us to make it into a living tradition that itself turns the present into initiative – among other things to uncover in the past other possibilities.

It is once again necessary to recall that what is here at stake is the ontological character of the past. Ricœur wants to separate his own approach to the past from what he calls the "retrospective illusion of fate" – which is certainly connected with a conception of historiography that is purely retrospective and abstracts the past from other temporal extases: the present and the future. Ricœur opposes that kind of approach to a Heideggerian one, marked by a constitutive binding of past, present and future and within which it is possible to conceive a living tradition, set upon a dialectics of tradition-innovation. This is the approach justifying "the dream of a History still to be made" – available and even imposed upon us. The future may well be the so-called "horizon of expectation," the "not yet," but there is a "transmission from future to past." Concurrently, horizons of expectation should not be merely utopic, with no rooting or resonance in the past.

As I understand it, the present as initiative opens up the possibility for us to inquiry the past in a way that could fulfill all its unaccomplished and even blocked potentialities – and from them shape new horizons of expectation. Or, as Ricœur says, one must bear in mind all the while that "reality is not to be totalized"[32] – and that send us back again to the notion of "imperfect mediation" as a conceptual tool to understand it.

## The Search for the Historical Roots of Gender Issues

Let us recall Ricœur's statement that "reality is not to be totalized," as it supports two key points to be made in these final remarks: 1) about our capacity for initiative and 2) about its implications for the non-totalizable character of reality. Both insights give rise to a legitimate look to the past for a platform where gender questions can be uncovered and brought into the present. This makes room for gender issues in academic syllabi – in the general canon of studies and, more specifically, in philosophical studies. To achieve that, a new direction is needed –one that carries on a certain tradition, but changes its beginnings. These unexpected and unrealized beginnings should give voice to all those people that always questioned themselves about the nature of the feminine, using sometimes polemical or contradictory arguments.

In this context, it seems possible and legitimate to provide women and men with a fresh overview of the past – one that may count as a new theoretical space of experience able to encompass other "horizons of expectation." These expectations are not merely utopian but also can be grounded in past events that a certain canon has blocked or precluded. As Ricœur said, the past has an unaccomplished potential and is by no means unchangeable; in a certain way, it has not completely passed. That is the reason why it is possible and legitimate to reopen it, bringing new characters and texts onto the stage of history – thereby creating a space in which Women's Studies is neither excluded nor ghettoized.


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[1] Mary Ellen Waithe, ed., *A History of Women Philosophers* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987).

[2] The author insists upon the fact that in studies about women at Classical Antiquity all data were collected indirectly. She stresses, for instance, that studies on Hypatia of Alexandria gathered historical data about her father and her students and not directly about her.

[3] There are few texts by Ricœur dealing with feminist issues. In the secondary literature, there is a text written in French on this topic (Annlaug Bjorsnos, "Beauvoir et Ricœur – l'identité narrative," 2008) and in a conference held in Lisbon in 2010 a talk on that topic was given by Damien Tissot. And as regards work in English, I must mention the work done by Pamela Sue Anderson, who has for several years now been exploring Ricœur's thought from the point of view of a feminist approach to religion. Scott Davidson edited *Paul Ricœur across the Disciplines* (London: Continuum Press, 2010), and in that volume there were two papers on the subject: Scott Davidson and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, "Ricœur and African American Studies: Convergences with Black Feminist Thought"; Pamela Sue Anderson, "Ricœur and Women's Studies: On the Affirmation of live and a Confidence in the Power to Act." Morny Joy and Annemie Halsema have also written about the topic.

[4] Such a lack of recognition can be noticed in the *Re-reading the Canon* series, edited by Nancy Tuana, and made up of collections of essays offering feminist re-interpretations of the writings of major figures in the western philosophical tradition. In it, the works of Derrida, Foucault, Levinas and Gadamer show up in a volume containing essays covering the full range of philosophers' thought and representing the diversity of approaches now being used by feminist critics. And the work of Paul Ricœur isn't even mentioned.

[5] Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Harvard University Press, Cambridge: Massachussets, 2005), 213.

[6] Françoise Collin, Evely Pisier et Elene Varikas, eds., *Les Femmes de Platon à Derrida* (Paris: Plon, 2000). Michèle Riot-Sarcey, "Les Femmes de Platon à Derrida ou l'impossible sujet d'histoire," *Les Temps Modernes* 619 (2002): 95-114.

[7] In the sense of "the repetition of the same," cf., Benoîte Groult, *Cette mâle assurance* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993).

[8] Lígia Amâncio, *Masculino e Feminino: A construção social da diferença* (Porto: Afrontamento, 1994).

[9] Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. David Pellauer and Kathleen Blamey, (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004). From now on all references to this book will follow the English translation. Ricœur says this work is dedicated to a full understanding of our representations of the past. On this purpose, it is perhaps worth noting that it was written at a time when national celebrations in honor of memorable happenings of the past were common throughout western countries. Ricœur mentions that kind of rituals to part from them, stressing that his work does not proceed from any sort of commemorative dynamics and even aims at overpassing criteria rooted in an epoch. However, that very subject will be present throughout the book, drawing the reader's attention to fundamental features of its main target.

[10] Cf., François Dosse, "Lieux, travail, devoir de mémoire chez Paul Ricœur," in *L'Herne-Ricœur,* eds. Myriam Revault d'Allones et François Azouvi (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2004), 256-270.

[11] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 283.

[12] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 284.

[13] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* 24.

[14] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* 69.

[15] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* 87.

[16] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 157.

[17] This position held by Ricœur comes from his notion of a philosophy of history – a notion that he resumes from time to time, and that is particularly insisted upon in the last chapter of *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1 (on "Historical Intentionality") and in the Section 2 of *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 3. This philosophical project, however, had already been sketched in *History and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), through the very concept of *equivocality* – which was said to form the adequate platform of access to the mode of historical knowledge and what was then called "incomplete objectivity." It was that very perspective that made Ricœur defend – in both works – the impossibility of achieving the project of a Universal History, this being no more than a *limiting idea*. The grounding of such position was, for Ricœur, what he called "the second aporetic of temporality" – the fact that time constitutes a totality but at the same time manifests itself in the forms of past, present and future. That is to say, time is both a totality and a process of totalization. And it is only when the impossibility to accomplish a whole historical unity is fully acknowledged that human rationality can understand the so-called "second aporetic of temporality."

[18] Ricœur*, Memory, History, Forgetting,* 85.

[19] Cf., Johann Michel, "Podemos falar de uma política do esquecimento?," *Memória em Rede*, *Pelotas* 2, n.3 (Ago.-Nov. 2010) www.ufpel.edu.br/ich/memoriaemrede; and also Johann Michel, "Du centralisme à la gouvernance des mémoires publiques," *Sens [Public]* (2010). International Web Journal. www.sens-public.org.

[20] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* 121.

[21] This statement should be further articulated with other views defended by Ricœur, namely, the idea that the self-knowledge of an embodied subjectivity – the wounded *Cogito* – can only be accomplished through a hermeneutic mediation and never by insight or direct knowledge. At the present issue, the stress is put upon the idea that historical and fictional narratives are what give access to the identity of individuals and communities.

[22] Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* 81. In what follows, Ricœur will still give two further reasons for the fragility of personal identity: the confrontation with the other and the constitutive violence that grounds cultural identity.

[23] Between 1673 and 1676 this author published three books on the issue of the equality between the sexes, namely: *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les*

*moeurs. Entretiens*, *De l'excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes*, *De l'égalité des deux sexes. Discours physique et moral ou l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés*. All can be found on-line, in facsimile, at the National Library of France.

[24] Cf., mainly, Charles Taylor in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[25] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3, 208.

[26] The last sentences of the chapter quoted above ("Should we renounce Hegel?") confirm this view: "For what readers of Hegel, once they have been seduced by the power of Hegel's thought as I have, do not feel the abandoning of this philosophy as a wound, a wound that, unlike those that affect the Absolute Spirit, will not be healed? For such readers, if they are not to give into the weaknesses of nostalgia, we must wish the courage of the work of mourning." (Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative 3*, 206).

[27] In his work from 1955*, History and Truth* – which precedes the structuring of his hermeneutic thought –Ricœur already expressed the idea of a limited rationality through the expression "dialectique à syntèse ajournée." He thereby intended to highlight the operating mode of a finite rationality.

[28] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3, 230.

[29] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 110.

[30] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3, 230. At this theoretical framework, Ricœur will obviously invoke Kant: "This assertion is of the greatest importance, for the quarrel about determinism, and it allows us to reformulate the Kantian antinomy of the free act, considered as the beginning of a causal chain. Indeed, it is not from the same attitude that we observe something that happens or that we make something happen. We cannot be observers and agents at the same time. One result is that we can only think about closed systems, partial determinisms, without being able to move on to extrapolations extending to the whole universe, except at the price of excluding ourselves as agents capable of producing events. In other words, if the world is the totality of what is the case, doing cannot be included in this totality. Better, doing means [*fait*] that reality is not totalisable" (Idem, 231).

[31] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3, 216.

[32] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3, 205.


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