

Psychoanalysis and Interpretation

A Critical Review

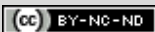
Paul Ricœur

(Copyright © 2016 Paul Ricœur)

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 7, No 1 (2016), pp. 31-41

ISSN 2155-1162 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2016.351

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



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



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

Psychoanalysis and Interpretation

A Critical Review

An Interview with Paul Ricœur

Giuseppe MARTINI – *Thank you, Paul Ricœur, for agreeing to converse with us on the theme “Hermeneutics and Psychoanalysis.” Our interview will begin around your book, published in France nearly 40 years ago and which has become a “classic”: Freud and Philosophy: Essays on Interpretation. But it will be a reflection that goes well beyond this text. Indeed, even after the publication of this book, your contributions to psychoanalysis – contributions that were, in some sense, “involuntary,” where you do not speak directly about the discipline – are extremely important (for example, think of Oneself as Another).*

Paul RICŒUR – I thank you deeply for this interview, that will also be, without a doubt, a conversation between us. It will be all the more useful that I myself am distant from the interpretation of psychoanalysis that I presented in my book on Freud. It was consistent with an era of my research now overlain by other events, and I would like to recall what was circumstantial in my work of these years (1965, I think). I had just written *Finitude and Culpability* (translated into English in two parts: *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*) which was based on an examination of the images and representations of evil. It was really the problem of evil that occupied me, a question from which I grew distant, because personally, culturally, with the trials and tribulations of life, to speak in general terms of my life orientation, I moved from a culture of culpability to a culture of compassion.

When I began the work on *Freud and Philosophy*, I thought of psychoanalysis as a challenge addressed to me with regard to the positions that I had developed morally and spiritually concerning good, evil, forgiveness, etc. So I asked myself the question: What does psychoanalysis bring to our own reflection on guilt? Not only did I digress from the subject of guilt, but I had also encountered a question that I did not pose to myself in the beginning.

What indeed has impeded me in the reading of Freud is the systematic aspect, so that I constructed the book only with systematic sections of this work: on the concept of the unconscious, the libido, the object, and then the theory of culture that was finally the field in which I wanted to invest myself. I was led to what I had not expected: the fundamental opposition between psychoanalysis and what was, for me, the philosophy of reference, reflexive philosophy as properly Husserlian, on the one hand, and the tradition of the reflexive philosophy of Jean Nabert, on the other hand. I was beginning to get interested in Gadamer’s work, therefore interested in a properly hermeneutic philosophy. If your use of the word “dialectic” has a force in my own reflection, it is at the level of conflict between the reflexive dimension of the thought, master of meaning, and the unmanageable and unrepresentable character of the contents of the unconscious. One could miss this difficulty due to vocabulary, even of Freud since he always speaks of “thoughts” of the unconscious (the unconscious has thoughts, but he never said that the

unconscious was a thinker, and I always stay attached to this idea that *I* think). However, there are unconscious thoughts and representations. Thus, it is a question that concerns the connection between the representations that I form in an argumentative style and the representations which I have neither the key to comprehension nor above all the control of the origin.

Because I discussed only Freud's theoretical chapters, I missed the point of Freudian practice. I think more and more that in the analytic situation, in the personal encounter in treatment, there is much more going on than just psychoanalytic theory. I am convinced that practice exceeds theory, in particular, related to the role of transference and counter-transference. I know now that by failing to pay attention to this experience of transference and counter-transference, I am excluded from a certain radicalism of the analytic space. This is why I hardly ever write about psychoanalysis, thinking that it is necessary to have an experience of psychoanalytic practice. Nonetheless, I do not think that my book is condemned for all that. In point of fact, if Freud published, he did not publish for his patients, nor for his colleagues, but he published for the general public; a public that certainly did not experience the talking cure or the situation that he himself called the intermediary area between the original conflict and the present situation of the patient. So, I found a partial justification of my approach in the very nature of Freud's writing which was not marked by the incommunicable side of his practice, but by the availability of his concepts to the general public.

All of that explains why I could, in good faith and with a certain peace of mind, engage his theory of culture. That is what interested me most at the time : the role of censorship, the release of libido in a public space of language. We can say that this marked the entrance of psychoanalysis into our culture as a massive cultural phenomenon. From here, we enter into the era of the discovery of the unrepresentable. This is due to the fact that first Freud brought into the public space that which was a kind of secret related to the family and suffering. It is there in the place of language where we situate the place of transition between reflexive representation and the representations of the unconscious, and beyond these representations, what we take for the unrepresentable.

I would like to say something about what I did at a later stage concerning language, which appears to establish in phenomenology a possible space of confrontation with psychoanalysis, namely the pre-predicative in language, before the propositional formulation. I became aware of this aspect mostly during my twenty-five years of teaching in the United States where I was constantly confronted with analytic philosophy. In analytic philosophy, we are always seeking propositional clarity. The proposal becomes the unit of account, in a sense, of philosophical discussion. A proposition, "which can be written on the wall," to use Frege's expression, is a propositional phrase. Analytic philosophy also reserved the possibility of confrontation when the tyranny of the propositional gradually comes into conflict with the distinction between the "locutionary," the "illocutionary," and the "perlocutionary." In other words, the implications of the subject are altered by the truth-value of the propositions.

It is the case with all forms of the illocutionary where what I say produces new situations, as in the imperative, in the wish, and in prohibition. The promise is perhaps the most remarkable example of the illocutionary. By the mere fact that I say "I promise," I am committed, and I am under an obligation. This area of the illocutionary thus first of all enables the redeployment of the levels of mastery and non-mastery. In its engagement with the illocutionary the subject, even if he

thinks of it, is not the master of meaning. The illocutionary claim of these propositions does not belong to him. Thus, it is toward the non-mastery that my later research was deployed.

You have touched on a very important point: the fact that psychoanalysis as practice goes beyond psychoanalysis as theory. You said that you needed to suspend your reflections on psychoanalysis precisely because of this. But you also rightly said that psychoanalysis has an important theoretical element that should not be underestimated. I say this because many contemporary psychoanalysts, and many among them in the United States who define themselves as hermeneuts, emphasized the need to face psychoanalysis as practice, although while neglecting metapsychology. They even made reference to hermeneutics by interpreting it precisely as a way of going beyond metapsychology.

But the opposition between metapsychology and practice cannot be total, simply because in practice, in the relational situation, the difficulty, which appears to me to be central to metapsychology resurfaces. Namely, this difficulty is the competition between two levels of theoretical language: the language of meaning (even in the title of *The Interpretation of Dreams*) and the level of psychic energies and forces. One of the cruxes not only within discourse but also within psychoanalytic practice is repression and the resilience of the complexes permanently inscribed in the unconscious. It is precisely in the deep structure of the complexes where we later rediscover the unrepresentable. But let us not forget that practice is the manipulation of forces. With the idea of resistance, Freud introduced the energetic dimension. In the course of treatment, it concerns the evocation of what it means to fight against resistances. The act of raising resistance is certainly itself a libidinal occurrence, but at the same time it also constitutes a linguistic emergence. This is the linguistic emergence in representational language as in dreams, poems, and utopian ideas, in short, all that Freud placed under the title of *fantasy – phantasieren* – which will serve as mediation between the level that I called at this time “economic” (I would perhaps put it more simply today as powerful affectivity) and the level of shaping meaning. This course of transfer of the conflicts of forces into the conflicts of meaning constitutes the same event in psychoanalytic treatment. And if there is a history of treatment, it is in the progressive displacement of the connections between the forces which the subject suffers without being the speaker, towards a region where suffering is recognized; recognized in its meaning and not simply in pure, naked suffering.

You just pointed out very clearly why psychoanalysis can be called hermeneutics: because it always has something to do with the construction of meaning. This does not necessarily mean that it is language that heals, but that the instrument through which care passes is a linguistic instrument. You have also emphasized the transition from a figurative representation to a linguistic representation. But, in psychoanalysis, through language, we can also try to return to a pre-representational level which precedes representation.

Permit me to say that the level which we speak of now is pre-pre-representational, it is not pre-linguistic. In my opinion, the discovery of psychoanalysis, which has perhaps been masked by the economic vocabulary of Freud’s writing in 1895,¹ is that representations fall under the economic model – as I said at that time – and are already the root of language. Why? Because human desire, even in its infantile, archaic, pre-representational structures, is potentially language. Indeed, human desire differs fundamentally from vital need in that it is a demand. It was observed before Freud by Hegel in the Jena period (*Realphilosophie*, the essay on *Sittlichkeit*) when he said that human desire is the desire of desire. This structure of desire of desire, even

when desire has not reached the level of representation, is already language. There is in the need of desire of desire a call that is not a descriptive or theoretical representation but which is a part of the realm of speech acts in their pre-representational form. Besides, we are never in what comes before language.

From this point of view, it would be questionable, perhaps even erroneous to speak of a pre-linguistic stage of human development, as do certain psychoanalysts like Stern and many others with him...

But then it is absolutely incomprehensible that Freud, in the first pages of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, speaks of "thoughts." He sees the unconscious as populated by thoughts. These are not thoughts in the representative sense, but they are, we can say, operations of desire. Today, in place of the word "thought," I would use the words "linguistic," "linguistic structure," or even "representation," (*Vorstellung*). I think that the most archaic structure of language, precisely because of its character of addressing another, is a mission of linguistics. It is not by chance that Freud first focused on the Oedipus complex, which is the staging of the inter-human. But all subsequent developments of psychoanalysis related to the pre-oedipal phases highlight (Winnicott, Bion) the distressed character of the newborn, his need for protection, which is a structure of address. By the sole fact that the face of the mother (and close relatives) is distinguished from all others very early, we are never confronted with a solipsism of desire. Before being a dialogical structure, desire is a structure of address, of appeal, of a cry for help. Distress itself has a pre-linguistic structure.

*While you were speaking of this dimension that we would define better, if I understand, by describing the potentially linguistic rather than pre-linguistic, I was thinking about the centrality language also possesses in contemporary philosophical reflection, especially after Heidegger. I thought further about how we could correlate this reflection on language and psychoanalysis with a more philosophical reflection on the relationship between language and the absolute. I think that what is still very vivid in your text *On Interpretation*, is precisely the idea of the inherently dialectical character of interpretation and even of psychoanalysis. In your book, you speak of a dialectical articulation between the archeological aspect, which you attribute to psychoanalysis, and the teleological aspect, which you attribute to philosophy, and possibly to theology. Later, in the course of your work, you explore different and fertile horizons of dialectical thought, not only related to psychoanalysis, but also operating in multiple fields. I want to ask you a question: do you think that the dialectic still has a function in psychoanalysis and especially in philosophy?*

I think today that the opposition between the archeological and the teleological is the weakest part of my book on Freud. This is, in fact, a compromise solution, since I started from the irreducibility of the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious to reflexive philosophies, which were all philosophies of consciousness. Thus, there was a confrontation between the conscious and the unconscious, without mediation. The mediation towards which we are currently orienting ourselves is about finding in the processes of language the intersection of a series of planes, levels, etc. I thought I could take a shortcut at the time, since I center my whole analysis of Freud on the conflict between the economic, energetic model in terms of power relations, on the one hand, and meaning as capable of being said, understood, and communicated, on the other hand. I agreed with the archeological nature of psychoanalysis, as if psychoanalysis only had to do with the regressive part of our existence, while philosophy of the Hegelian type would in a certain way have the privilege if not the exclusivity, of meaning in its progression in the order of

understanding. Today, I am very distant from this progress by philosophy towards the absolute, and secondly, I am much more sensitive to the linguistic and pre-linguistic, pre-representational dimension of the unconscious. I no longer profess the confinement of psychoanalysis to the archeological for the glory of teleology, which would be the place of philosophical meaning. The dialectic between the archeological and the teleological is not there, and it is that that I measure as the principal defect of the book, namely, its lack of reference to the analytic experience. Of the analytic experience itself, we can say that it moves in archeology, certainly, but by bringing a recognition of the meaning of the original trauma teleologically. There is therefore a teleology of treatment, which is, if not a cure, at least an acceptance of the meaning of the originary trauma.

It seems to me that this dialectic that you raised between psychoanalysis and philosophy is also internal to psychoanalysis itself. It can be expressed not only as a dialectic between the archeological and teleological poles, but also as a dialectic between the reconstruction and construction of meaning. The first aims to discover an already constructed thought, already defined in the unconscious but blocked by repression, while the second aims to extract from pre-conscious thought, pre-linguistics (or better said: that which is a linguistic mission) and from the pre-representational, a representation which has not already taken shape.

I completely agree with this idea that we cannot maintain the status of teleology. There is nevertheless a sort of movement and orientation that says that a treatment “advances.” Freud had encountered precisely the idea of resistance with the stagnation of treatment, when no progress transpires. What I had myself inadvertently called *the archeological* is “resistance,” the “compulsion to repeat.” I returned to this in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*² by bringing together two wonderful short articles of Freud’s, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,”³ and “Mourning and Melancholy.”⁴ The first can be summarized in three words: this is the dialectic of treatment itself, in the face-to-face psychoanalytic encounter. And the idea of repetition seems to me fundamental. I find it today in the way in which the great losses of the twentieth century are so poorly integrated into our present culture. Psychoanalysis has much to say about the difficulty of mourning, and I would emphasize the importance of bringing together this first piece and the one on “Mourning and Melancholy,” including the dialectic between resistance, the compulsion to repeat, and working through (*Erinnerung*). If there is a teleological concept in practice, it is the “working through.” The term “mourning” is particularly well suited to this concept. And it is in the second essay that I find a more developed expression on mourning which Freud contrasts with melancholy. Mourning, he said, consists of detaching from all objects in which we have invested our love, eventually from our hatred, to make us free for new libidinal investments. We find another angle of the teleology of practice rather than speculative psychoanalysis.

But I would like to introduce a word that does not appear at all in our conversation: the word “suffering.” If a patient knocks at a psychoanalyst’s door, this is because he suffers and does not understand why, so we must never separate suffering and speech. Mourning is the “working through,” and in my opinion, we have not done enough on the work of memory in the work of mourning. Both remain as two concepts belonging to two different regions of psychoanalysis. And I would like to say that the work of mourning is a work of memory against repetition compulsion because suffering is in itself generative of repetition compulsion. Suffering “insists,” and it is this insistence that draws it towards melancholy. I would like to make a comparison between the shift of mourning towards melancholy and the shift of the work of

memory towards repetition. I said at the beginning, in my own life and on the occasions of mourning that I have gone through, I moved away from a personal culture of guilt and drew closer to a culture of compassion.

I am not sure, permit me to say, that Freud had a profound sense of compassion. Of course, the trap of compassion exists, and I know it: this is emotional fusion. But this kind of distanced compassion, what psychoanalysis does to the concept of mourning, is not integrated in his heart. I noticed it when I considered the cultural aspect of psychoanalysis. It is the aggressive character of the Superego that dominates this aspect, which ultimately remains in the orbit of guilt. Freud's deep pessimism is related, I believe, to the fact that the lived aggressions coming from the Id and the lively forces of the Unconscious are symmetrical to a fundamental aggression that is the Superego. In his correspondence with Einstein⁵ about the war, this aggression is quite at the center. He sees a humanity that is not friendly, a humanity doubly violent, because sexuality as demanding the desire of the other is ravaged by the predatory side of the libido, by its sadistic side. And the sadism of the most primitive vital forces must ultimately rebel against the sadism of the Superego. In short, I venture to say that these insights on the work of memory and the work of mourning are what matters to me most in Freud's work.

You rightly stressed the importance of suffering and of putting suffering into words. This poses a double problem. From the point of view of psychoanalysis, certain psychoanalysts neglect or minimize the therapeutic scope of their discipline, considering it almost inappropriate to talk about it as treatment. At the level of psychiatry, where we witness today the triumph of neurobiological psychiatry, another problem arises. The therapeutic potential of speaking is completely neglected, and not only are the contributions of psychoanalysis minimized but so too are those of phenomenological psychiatry and psychopathology from Jaspers to today. You are also interested, though in an indirect way, in these problems. Not long ago, there was your book with Changeux, in which you discuss precisely the relationship between philosophy and neurobiology.⁶ Could you comment, from your point of view, on this situation of contemporary psychiatry and the difficulty psychoanalysis has in recognizing itself as therapy?

If you introduce the neurosciences, you completely change the referent. When I say "referent," I mean the guiding concept of a discourse. In the neurosciences, there is a reference object: the brain, its structure, its organization, its functions. We are before a discourse that has end-to-end consistency. In this discourse, I will never come across the word "representation," except by violating its parameters because the brain does not represent the world, except in a way that is quite thoughtless and unconscious of the word "representation." We would make a kind of mirror exactly like some old theories, according to which the world would send little images and these images would be collected in the soul. This conception of an image of the world to be incorporated into neurological structures proceeds, in my thinking, to a confusion of two systems of reference. We cannot, I believe, exceed a certain dualism from the point of view of semantics: a semantics of representation, in the sense of the language of desire, and a semantics of neuronal architectures. If we are not Spinozists, we have no third speech; we don't have a third language that is the absolute language of Spinoza's *Ethics*. This language is prefigured in the myth of creation or radical origin of the world and in symbolic representations in general. And so, it is in the symbolic that the broken language of the neurosciences and psychology in the broadest sense, including that of the unconscious, as well as that of consciousness and representations, comes together.

Hermeneutics and Psychoanalysis

We will now proceed, if you please, to the second part of the interview, which concerns more specifically the thematic “hermeneutics and psychoanalysis,” even if we have already addressed several points. Reflection on this theme can only begin from the central role of language in psychoanalysis, about which you speak. At the same time, as we have said, a growing interest in the pre-linguistic and the pre-representational manifests itself; the different psychoanalytic schools have specified different concepts: proto-mental, fusion, empathy, beta element, and pictogram. I would like to recall of one of your expressions, which gives a very good account of this tension between the linguistic and the pre-linguistic. I refer to the passage in which you observe (it is, if I remember correctly, in an interview that you gave 15 years ago) that the “narrative function can sometimes include a deepening and increase of opacity, that is to say to return to mystery, but once again through language.” It seems to me that this “return to mystery, but once again through language” happens also to be a special feature of psychoanalysis. I think that in the field of hermeneutic philosophy, the issue of language presents similar difficulties to those which occur in psychoanalysis, in the sense that – correct me if I am wrong – in hermeneutic philosophy the centrality of language and its decentering also form a single thing. I am asking you: this connection between language and the decentering of language, which can lead towards the pre-linguistic, but also toward the negation of the importance of language, is it, in a way, a sterile paradox? Would it be possible rather to understand the tension between the linguistic and the pre-linguistic as an essential dialectical moment in the development of human thought?

My answer will comprise two moments: one related to the place of narrative in the constitution of possible meaning, and a moment parallel with problems in translation. We shall see that the two problems of narrative mediation and translation put us before the same paradox. There are two kinds of opacity: the primordial opacity of suffering that leads the patient to find linguistic, dialogical assistance, and the opacity that he discovers by means of interpretation. The function of interpretation is not to abolish opacity: it is to render it acceptable, tolerable. I would like to come back to my question of suffering, unbearable suffering and bearable suffering. I think of the very beautiful saying by Isak Dinesen: “All sorrows can be born if you put them in a story or tell a story about them.”⁷ The arrangement of the story transforms sorrows, sorrows that slip from mourning to melancholy.

Once again, I will contrast these two opacities. The first opacity is suffering itself, impenetrable to speech, suffering suffered. But the conduct of mourning and the work of memory practiced through treatment does not abolish opacity. They reveal a much deeper opacity, much less emotional – more existential – the relationship of the self to others, with the world, and with oneself. So, I speak of a fundamental opacity, but one which is made bearable. I concentrate on this word a great deal, bearable for oneself and with others. What makes a mental illness does not prevent relationships with others, social relationships, and even the dialogue with oneself.

Here I will emphasize the book by George Steiner on language, *After Babel*.⁸ The only and maybe even primordial destination of language, he says, is not communication, but consists in revealing its enigmatic character, its profoundly private character and in the end, its place at the

limits of the obscure. The paradox to which the work of language leads is the other side of communication: towards the secret.

Let us now connect this observation to the following question on the truth. If we take as a model of truth the physical truth then we have a problem of reference: the discourse that I maintain, is it adequate to the referent? Generally, with human affairs, including problems of the soul, the truth does not have this sense. We talk about “manifestation” (the Heideggerian term, but not necessarily linked to his philosophy) which consists in the passage from the latent to the open. It is a matter of transforming closed opacity into open opacity. I can talk about truth, when I can recognize myself as being this one who has this suffering, who has this story. The story that I can tell about myself, it is myself.

This revelation of interiority in its bearable structure is something other than the equivalence to an exteriority. I add another qualification: the narrative should also be free from the prejudice that there is only one true story. In my subsequent work on *Time and Narrative*,⁹ I developed the idea that we can tell several stories about the same event. Consequently, that which I had called previously the “conflict of interpretations” does not lie simply between an archeological interpretation and a teleological one, but it is located within the narrative itself between several narrative possibilities. The truth here is not univocal. Saying otherwise is a fundamental possibility of the narrative. To come back to my question about bearable suffering, the narrative that I would call “true,” this is the narrative through which I become bearable for myself and for others.

I return here to the second line of thought, translation. You had in hand a little text that I had written on the untranslatable.¹⁰ I wrote there that there is an untranslatable starting point when I am faced with a text that is closed to me or foreign. Then the translation struggles to produce a text, which, I say, without being identical to the original text, is symmetrically equivalent, but it is an equivalence without identity. Then by the impact of the translation, all is revealed as untranslatable. There is an untranslatable in advance of the translation, and an untranslatable is produced and revealed by the translation. Psychoanalysis leads us to recognize, in initial suffering, that resources of meaning are going to bring out another depth and maybe even additional meaning that was initially foreign. At the end, we neither suffer the same thing nor in the same way. We suffer from something else and differently, but in a comprehensible way, which has the unity of a certain narrative coherence and which allows us to keep living, living with others and with oneself, as I just said.

So there is a kind of untranslatable produced even by psychoanalysis, or we might say, making reference to Jaspers, psychoanalysis produces something incomprehensible at the same moment as it is oriented towards comprehension.

In this respect, Karl Jaspers’ philosophy peaked in a concept of failure (*Schiffbruch*, shipwreck). Failure is not at all the same thing as being devoid of any kind of response to the environment. It is instead to encounter the limits even of a project of comprehension.

These reflections seem to me a response to psychoanalysts (I think of Laplanche), who defined the field as anti-hermeneutic basing it, in my opinion, on an ambiguity. Indeed, they have rightly objected to North American “hermeneut” psychoanalysts for whom the narrative is, in some way, associated with repression. Authors across the Atlantic refer to a narrative that aims at the comprehensiveness, coherence,

and systematicity of meaning. Nevertheless, if we stress that psychoanalysis is a search for meaning, and therefore a hermeneutics, we also stress, as you do, that this search for meaning sometimes brings about an increase in opacity and non-meaning. Then the definition of psychoanalysis as an anti-hermeneutic inevitably follows. We could even say that psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic precisely insofar as it is in search for unfinished and untranslatable meaning.

On that point, what is of Laplanche is, I would say, temporary. It is based on quite a primitive idea of hermeneutics, as if hermeneutics were conclusive and unequivocal. But opening up ambiguity is to also open up a space of freedom for placing oneself in relation to oneself and others.

Unfortunately, we must acknowledge that this “primitive” idea of hermeneutics is also that of North American psychoanalysts with whom Laplanche is involved in controversy.

What lies behind it, I repeat, is a variant of the correspondence theory of truth, when it concerns the truth as a manifestation of a position within, a way of being, and a fundamental situation.

The question of truth could be integrated with questions that concern the symbol. Related to this connection, do you think that the symbol can have a function of mediation, in the sense that it can reconcile the idea that interpretation is infinite, that other interpretations are always possible, while still recognizing that erroneous interpretations exist?

This situation is found elsewhere in psychoanalysis. A saying of medieval thinkers comes to mind: “The written text grows with its readers.”¹¹ There is what the text proposes, and there is also what reading expands with this proposal. I offer here the word “reconstruction” that I share with my colleague from Brussels, Jean-Marc Ferry. Beyond narrative coherence, there is the reconstruction of the self’s relationship with others and with oneself. This idea of reconstruction is more important than that of coherence. We have to go through a narrative that I understand to go beyond the fractures that this narrative has created at the same time that it has solved others.

The Question of the Subject

These reflections lead us to the heart of the last part of this interview, the question of the subject which you have already addressed today in our dialogue through the problem of suffering, and which seems to me to be very much present in your philosophical reflection.

Thus, we touch on the question of the self. I am very careful never to confuse *ego* and *self*. In the word “ego,” there is a claim to immediacy, while the word “self” retains its reflexive strength because it traverses mediations. The self is back to itself, but through a detour into the external, into the other, and into the incomprehensible. Thus, the self is not the identity of a thing that remains unchanged; it is the identity of a story which is constructed, destroyed, and reconstructed. This is why, ten years ago, I contrasted the two meanings of the word “self,” *l’idem* and *l’ipse*. I call to mind Heidegger. Now Heidegger basically accepts this idea of selfhood as *ipse* identity.

By way of a conclusive reflection, I would like to connect the question of the subject to a new comparison between the domain of philosophy and that of contemporary psychoanalysis. In your thought,

the idea of the subject is definitely central. On the contrary, certain philosophers, who claim postmodernism, decree, in a sense, the death of the subject. In the same manner, there are psychoanalysts who include psychoanalysis as an intersubjective activity, while for others it is a place where the subject is absent. At best, there is an unconscious that enters into a relationship with another unconscious. It seems to me that these psychoanalysts were themselves influenced by postmodern philosophy. Thus, the death of the subject or, as in your works, subjectivity seen in its dialectical articulation and so in its development through narrative, does it emerge in psychoanalysis as it does in philosophy?

The word “postmodern” is quite alien to me simply because I do not know what is modern. Assuming that we know at what time we live constitutes an historic prejudgment. Me, I do not know at all. This way of placing history as the history after, I do not understand what it means. But it seems we have forgotten what of the subject is absolutely irreducible. You can deconstruct representations as much as you want, but suffering and enjoyment are equally *mine*; they belong irreducibly to someone. Someone is suffering and compassion goes from someone to someone. This is the unassailable retreat of subjectivity. But suffering seeks meaning; it involves the why. This connection between suffering and the why of suffering is the ultimate retreat of the subject. This is what cannot be deconstructed. We started from the oblivion of suffering as being constitutive of a demand, the link between suffering and demand. It is the address of one desire in another desire. There lies the heart of subjectivity.

And it seems to me the ultimate reason why, in psychoanalysis, we cannot do without speaking about the subject. The subject inevitably comes into play in psychoanalytic practice.

Because it is the same situation of the essential demand of treatment. Someone addresses another someone to help him find his bearings in the demand for meaning and as a consequence to cast some light on his suffering. I see a very large abstraction in this idea of deconstruction applied to discourses which are already in the order of representation. But the problem of psychoanalysis is the problem of reconstruction, composed of suffering and the demand for meaning addressed by a desire in another desire.

And it is precisely for this reason that, in psychoanalysis, we do not have to deal only with the unconscious but also with the subject. To come back to the dialectic dimension, I am reminded of a contemporary analyst: Ogden. Speaking of the subject in analysis, from a different perspective than that of other North Americans, he reminds us that psychoanalysis does not have to do with the unconscious but rather with the dialectic between the conscious and the unconscious. It is because the subject or better the subjects always come into play.

The analytic situation is this relation between the conscious and the unconscious, which expresses itself in the intention to “tell all.” This is the only imperative of psychoanalysis. Certainly, treatment has its obligations: to accept the timetable of treatment, to pay, to respect the schedule, etc., but the analytic session itself has a structure that is essentially the debate between the conscious and the unconscious.

Interview by Giuseppe Martini. English translation by Stephanie Arel
[Original edition and translation by Weiny Freitas and Alberto Romele]
(Copyright © 2016 Paul Ricœur)

- ¹ Sigmund Freud, *Esquisse d'une psychologie scientifique*, posthumous text of Freud published for the first time in London (Imago Publishing) in 1950; French translation: *La naissance de la psychanalyse*, (Paris: PUF, 1956).
- ² Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000).
- ³ Sigmund Freud, "Répétition, remémoration, et perlaboration," [1914], dans *Œuvres complètes XII*, (Paris: PUF, 2005).
- ⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Deuil et Mélancolie," [1917], dans *Œuvres complètes XII*, (Paris: PUF, 2005).
- ⁵ Correspondence between Freud and Einstein published in 1932 under the title: "Pourquoi la guerre?" See S. Freud, *Actuelles sur la guerre et la mort et autre textes*, (Paris: PUF, 2012).
- ⁶ Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricœur, *La Nature et la Règle: Ce qui nous fait penser*, (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998).
- ⁷ Isak Diesen, cited by Hannah Arendt at the head of her chapter on the concept of action in *Condition de l'homme moderne* (1958), published with a preface by Ricœur, (Paris: Pocket Agora, 2002).
- ⁸ George Steiner, *Après Babel: Une poétique du dire et de la traduction*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978 [1975]).
- ⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, volume I: *L'intrigue et le récit historique*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983), volume II, *La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 1983), volume III: *Le temps raconté*, (Paris: Le Seuil, 1985).
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Sur la traduction*, (Paris: Bayard, 2004).
- ¹¹ Ricœur mentions this saying of Gregory the Great (540-604) in many of his works on hermeneutics.