

Ethical Assumptions and Implications of Hermeneutic Practice as Practical Wisdom

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to justify the view that hermeneutical practice as a philosophical proposal cannot be reduced to the extraction of hidden meanings or the explication of text structures but instead contains ethical assumptions and implications. Following Ricoeur's work, I will show that literary texts are part of ethics insofar as they create different mental experiments about ideas and values. I will show that the interpretation of literary texts, woven by the free play of imagination, constitutes a practice in which readers have the possibility of reconfiguring their way of looking at the world and acting. The reading of literature is an exercise of practical wisdom by enabling readers to rehearse and enable the implementation of the good life in just institutions. To achieve the paper's goal, I initially discuss ethical assumptions present in literary texts. I then develop Ricoeur's notion of hermeneutics as used for the interpretation of literature. Finally, I propose several ethical implications resulting from the hermeneutical practice that is related to literary texts.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Imagination, Ethics, Literature, Practical Wisdom.

Résumé

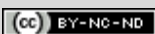
Le but de cet article est de justifier le point de vue selon lequel la pratique herméneutique en tant que proposition philosophique ne peut être réduite à l'extraction de significations cachées ou à l'explication de structures textuelles, mais contient des hypothèses et des implications éthiques. En partant de l'œuvre de Paul Ricoeur, je montrerai que les textes littéraires font partie de l'éthique dans la mesure où ils créent différentes expériences mentales sur les idées et les valeurs. Je montrerai que l'interprétation des textes littéraires, tissée par le libre jeu de l'imagination, est une pratique dans laquelle le lecteur peut reconfigurer sa façon de voir le monde et d'agir. La lecture de la littérature est un exercice de sagesse pratique qui permet d'anticiper et de faciliter la réalisation de la vie bonne dans des institutions justes. Pour atteindre cet objectif, je discute d'abord des hypothèses éthiques présentes dans les textes de fiction, puis je présente le concept d'herméneutique de Ricoeur utilisé pour l'interprétation de la littérature; et enfin, je propose plusieurs implications éthiques résultant de la pratique herméneutique liée aux textes de fiction.

Mots-clés: Herméneutique, imagination, éthique, littérature, sagesse pratique.

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Introduction

This reflection is situated in the context of the development of a research project designed to show and offer a foundation for the claim that hermeneutics is justified as an ethical proposal.¹ In addition to Hans-Georg Gadamer, I find in Paul Ricœur – although implicitly – data and arguments that enable me to justify hermeneutical practice as an ethical proposal in terms of practical wisdom.

Following Ricœur, I propose to explain some ethical implications of the hermeneutical practice related to literary texts as an exercise of practical wisdom insofar as it enables interpreters, through the use of imagination, to understand and deliberate on the choice of paths that make them freer and better. This paper expands upon reflections that I previously made² in which I claim that literature constitutes a laboratory where different possibilities of seeing, feeling and acting are created. Starting from the assumption that literary texts, as redescriptions of the real, institute a distance between the pre-comprehension of reality (Mimesis I) and its configuration (Mimesis II), there is a need to reconnect these two mimeses by a process that Ricœur called reconfiguration (Mimesis III) and that I call hermeneutics. More specifically, I will show some ethical implications of the hermeneutic practice related to literary texts. My claim is that the interpretation of texts, as an exercise of reconfiguration of the real, has ethical implications insofar as it has to do with interpreters' ways of seeing and feeling and helps to guide, illuminate, and justify their behavior. The life that is projected and woven in the texts requires and needs readers who reconfigure it, and, by doing so, have their lives reconfigured, reread by language and, so I argue, examined in ethical terms.

The paper is developed around three interconnected axes. In the first, I briefly discuss some fundamental ethical aspects of literary texts. Then, considering that each text requires interpretation, I explicate and explore some aspects of hermeneutics in Ricœur's thought. Finally, I develop some ethical implications of the hermeneutic practice related to literature as an exercise or growth in wisdom.

1. Ethical Presuppositions Present in Literary Texts

What and how has literature, as a fiction woven and guided by the thread of creative imagination, to do with ethics? In the words of Olivier Abel, when we talk about poetics, "this word evokes something diffuse, very vague, without rules, without a defined relation with reality, as if poetics were an escape. And why should one connect ethics to something imaginary, to something so uncertain?"³ How can one justify the ethical implications inherent in literary texts

that are products of the free play of imagination and are, therefore, apparently disconnected from human praxis?

First, according to Ricœur, “texts speak of possible worlds and possible ways of orientating oneself in these worlds.”⁴ Literary texts are woven by the elucidation of the thoughts and justifications of their characters’ actions. The literary plot elucidates the way the characters orient themselves in the world by the free play of imagination. One can say that by doing so, literature contains ethical assumptions.

Secondly, literary texts – as in the case of Greek tragedies – make up a fabric where “human actions [are imitated] in a poetic manner” which “expresses a world of human actions that is already there,” not in order to duplicate reality, but to produce, construct, and create a world of human actions and “an imitation of human actions that makes them appear better, higher, nobler than they are in reality.”⁵ In *Antigone*, we find a language that carries and contains qualities and values put into motion with which the interpreter is invited to play and to position themselves. I ratify Abel’s view according to which Ricœur, in *Oneself as Another*, when talking about the “ethical implications of narrative, suggests this ethical-narrative node of the subject. His idea is that one cannot separate the ethical from the mythical, narrative, poetic [...] Narrative and plot are very intertwined with morals.”⁶

Thirdly, according to Ricœur, “the world of fiction is a laboratory of forms in which we try out possible configurations of action in order to probe their consistency and plausibility.”⁷ As a laboratory of trials, fiction on the one hand constitutes a suspension, an *epoché*, of daily language, and precisely because of that it enables, on the other hand, the creation and ratification of other possible modes of action. Fiction, in this sense, is instituted as a set of mental experiments where the consistency, plausibility, reasonableness and meaning of new values and actions are tested. The unique contribution of fiction to ethics lies in the fact that the latter poetically tries out imaginative variations on the real, on human actions. It can perform such trials because it takes distance from the real world⁸ and therefore offers new possibilities of praxis.

Fourthly, I highlight the heuristic, persuasive, and ethical force of fiction. A central aspect in the famous argument attributed to Plato to diminish the ontological and, consequently, ethical value, importance, and dignity of fiction is the claim that it *softens and weakens the senses*, which would imply a decrease of the power of reason in the orientation of actions. In Ricœur’s words, “it is here that the worst of philosophical traditions [...] hold the image to be a weakened perception, a shadow of reality. The paradox of fiction is that setting perception aside is the condition for augmenting our vision of things.”⁹ By suspending and, in a way, abolishing the usual perception of daily life, fiction carries in itself the force of broadening the view of the latter. The assumption of a more universal view of the real implies an action of the same or of a similar proportion.

Ricœur calls a “heuristic force” the ability of fiction to use “our suspension of belief in an earlier description” in order “to open and unfold new dimensions of reality”¹⁰ in ontological, aesthetic, religious, political, and ethical terms. Thanks to the suspension of, for instance, conceptual splits between blacks and whites, rich and poor, Christians and Muslims, true and false, one can create the possibility and feasibility of a praxis that is not guided by the present conceptual schizophrenia under the assumption through the imagination that *we are free and equal* in terms of rights and duties. Plato’s *Republic* and Thomas More’s *Utopia* demonstrate this ethical possibility. It is in the text woven by the imagination that one can try out such “new ideas, new values” and,

therefore, an ethics guided by an inclusive, republican, non-individual, and non-egocentric logic. To put it in another way, using Ricœur's words:

If, on the one hand, it appears to weaken and disperse meaning in free-floating reverie, on the other hand, the image introduces a note of suspension into the entire process, an effect of neutralization, in short, a negative moment, thanks to which the entire process is placed within the dimension of the unreal. The ultimate role of the image is not only to diffuse meaning in the various sensorial fields but to suspend signification in the neutralized atmosphere, in the element of fiction. And it is this element that we shall see reemerge at the end of our study under the name of utopia. But it is already apparent that imagination is indeed just what we all mean by the word: the free play of possibilities in a state of noninvolvement with respect to the world of perception or of action. It is in this state of noninvolvement that we try out new ideas, new values, new ways of being in the world.¹¹

The free play of imagination not only weakens the force of reason, but also potentiates it by instituting new realities, by trying out *new worlds* from the ontological, aesthetical, political, and ethical point of view. Rather than being an imperfect copy of a perfect world, literature, by recreating the real through imagination, "precisely because it is fiction, far from being a simple amusement or a pleasant pastime, challenges the real as such as the exclusive criterion of truth."¹² Thus, one can not only refute a certain view of Plato's argument but also claim that literary texts contain ethical traits and carry a persuasive force that potentiates philosophical comprehension¹³ and intervenes in human behavior.

I quote Richard Kearney to summarize the argument against the disregard of fiction by philosophy and to reinforce, based on Aristotle, the ethical traits and potential of literature:

Poetics teaches us essential truths about human experience [...], and these essential truths are intimately related to the pursuit of possibilities of happiness or unhappiness – that is, the desire for the good life guided by practical wisdom (*phronesis*). The fictional narrator presents us with a variety of ethical possibilities that the reader is then free to choose from, discarding some, embracing others. The narrator proposes; the reader disposes. But the pact of trust and exchange struck by narrator and reader always carries some evaluative charge.¹⁴

The literary text, woven by the free play of imagination, presupposes and implies an ethical function by, on the one hand, suspending, abolishing, shaking, deconstructing, and neutralizing the first order reference in relation to the world. On the other hand, thanks to this critical function, literature creates and tries out new worlds; it imagines life through the free play of imagination by instituting mental experiments.

If I have been able to demonstrate the ethical presuppositions of literary texts, it remains up to readers to put their ethical implications into practice: "[I]t belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading."¹⁵ To put it in another way, "the work decontextualizes itself, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, and is able to recontextualize itself differently in the act of reading,"¹⁶ in the act of interpretation. The literary text, as "the refiguration of the real by poetry,

by the plot, by metaphor is not only a new representation, but opens to the receiver, the reader, the way for a refiguration of the real"¹⁷ which takes place through hermeneutical practice.

2. On Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics

2.1.

For our reflection, I adopt here Ricœur's notion of hermeneutics as "the reply to the fundamental distancing constituted by the objectification of man in works of discourse."¹⁸ In this view, hermeneutics is ultimately not a theoretical instrument to extract meanings or structures hidden in texts and cannot be reduced to a Romantic, historicizing, fundamental or dialogical hermeneutics. "This concept of interpretation expresses a decisive shift of emphasis concerning the Romantic tradition of hermeneutics. In that tradition, the emphasis was placed on the ability of the hearer or reader to transfer him- or herself into the mental life of a speaker or writer."¹⁹ Ricœur's proposal is also different from the hermeneutics of Dilthey, who, "still close in this sense to Romantic hermeneutics, based his concept of interpretation on that of 'understanding,' that is, on grasping an alien life that expresses itself through the objectifications of writing."²⁰

The overcoming of the Romantic and historicizing perspective on hermeneutics in Ricœur's thought is made "once we take distancing by writing and objectification by structure seriously,"²¹ i.e., when one shifts the emphasis from the other's "subjectivity" to the "objectivity" of the text itself. Regarding the relation between interpreter and text, Ricœur proposes a novel approach to hermeneutics in which I see ethical traits and implications that I will develop below. The novelty in Ricœur's proposal is that interpretation puts less emphasis on the other

as a mental entity than on the world that the work unfolds. To understand is to follow the dynamic of the work, its movement from what it says to that about which it speaks. Beyond my situation as reader, beyond the situation of the author, I offer myself to the possible mode of being-in-the-world that the text opens up and discloses to me.²²

As we can see, Ricœur does not disregard the importance of readers and of the author in the hermeneutical process but stresses the value of the world of the text in front of which interpreters have their lives addressed and, in a way, challenged, reread. From this perspective, the interpretation of texts with their new worlds of action opens up new perspectives for life, for action, for readers.

In Ricœur's view, interpretation cannot be reduced to a scientific function. It does not aim simply at extracting meanings hidden in texts – as if these meanings were static entities covered by words – and cannot be reduced to the elucidation of their structure. Ricœur writes, "The principal task of hermeneutics eludes the alternative of genius or structure; I shall link it to the notion of 'the world of the text.'"²³ According to Abel:

Ricœur's hermeneutics tries constantly to keep a balance between, on the one hand, a hermeneutics that emphasizes the belonging of the interpreting subject to the interpreted world, in accordance with the line of Heidegger and Gadamer that insists on this ontological

dimension, and, on the other hand, a more classical, more critical hermeneutics in the sense of an awareness of the historical, linguistic, and archeological distance from its contexts.²⁴

Thus, in Ricœur's view, "what must be interpreted in a text is a proposed world that I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. That is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to this unique text."²⁵

2.2.

The implementation of this interpretive perspective occurs in a circular manner between interpreter and text. With the shift of emphasis from the understanding of others to the understanding of the world of their work, Ricœur introduces a novel approach to the methodology of hermeneutics, i.e., of the hermeneutical circle. He agrees with the thinkers of Romanticism that the "understanding of a text could not be an objective procedure" along the lines of modern scientific procedure, "but that it necessarily implies a pre-understanding, expressing the way in which the reader already understands himself and his work. Hence a sort of circularity is produced between understanding the text and self-understanding."²⁶ Here I detect an ethical indication – that I will pursue below – in the sense that the understanding of a text implies a self-understanding of the interpreter and that this takes place in a circular manner. Through interpretation it is possible not only to enlarge knowledge and information about a particular object but also to broaden the spectrum of possibilities for action through which we become more ourselves, freer, better.

Just as Ricœur criticized the Romantic and historicizing hermeneutics, he also challenged and reframed the habitual notion of the hermeneutical circle by introducing into it an ethical component. "[T]he hermeneutical circle is not correctly understood when it is presented, first, as a circle between two subjectivities, that of the reader and that of the author; and second, as the projection of the subjectivity of the reader into the reading itself."²⁷ The first correction, then, to be made in the notion of hermeneutical circle is that "what we make our own, what we appropriate for ourselves, is not an alien experience or a distant intention, but the horizon of a world toward which a work directs itself."²⁸ The second correction Ricœur proposes is that "the reader understands himself in front of the text, in front of the world of the work. To understand oneself in front of a text is quite the contrary of projecting oneself and one's own beliefs and prejudices; it is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding I have of myself."²⁹

According to Ricœur, the proposal of the hermeneutical circle is the appropriate methodology for interpretation insofar as it institutes a virtuous circularity between the world of the text and the world of the reader. Ricœur writes: "From an epistemological point of view, this implication of the interpreter in the thing interpreted must appear as a weakness, a subjectivist flaw, when compared to the objectivity that the scientific ideal requires."³⁰ By understanding the world of the text, interpreters are actually understanding themselves. Although Ricœur does not call this process an ethical one, I think it is possible to do so because it has to do with the interpreter's way of being and, thus, of acting. To conclude this part of our reflection, I quote Ricœur again:

Hermeneutics, therefore, does not submit *interpretation* to the finite capacities of understanding of a given reader; it does not put the *meaning* of the text under the power of the subject who interprets. Far from saying that a subject already masters their own way of

being in the world and projects it as the a priori of their reading, I would say that *interpretation* is the *process* by which the *disclosure* of *new modes* of *being* – or, if you prefer Wittgenstein to Heidegger, of *new “forms of life”* – gives to the subject a *new* capacity for knowing themselves.³¹

I entirely agree with this conception of hermeneutics and add that its application provides interpreters not only with new modes of being, new forms of life, new knowledge, but at the same time offers reflection on and orientation of their action. In other words, in addition to the aesthetic, ontological, and political dimensions of interpretation, the exercise of the virtuous interpretive circularity constitutes an ethical practice. This claim can be read between the lines of Ricœur’s work, but it has not been made explicit and systematized in the way I am proposing to do so here. What matters in the encounter with the text is finally not the detection or deciphering of its alleged hidden meaning, nor the unveiling of the author’s intention or the disclosure of the text’s structure. What ultimately matters is that interpreters allow themselves to encounter the world of possibilities present in the text woven by the thread of imagination.

Considering that, for Ricœur, “imagination invites us to ‘think from the standpoint of everyone else,’” close or distant,³² the reading of literary texts implies an involvement of the feelings and ethos where readers find themselves so that, in theoretical and practical terms, it will not leave them. Thus, reading is not a technical but a practical act (according to Aristotelian language) that enables readers to enlarge their view of reality, to reflect on their actions, and to redirect them toward the good life, elements particular to practical wisdom. In other words, when I take a text into my hands, when I enter a conversation or engage the idioms of life and others in whatever way I do, the stakes are high, and in the end, what is most at stake is who I am and will become, how I will be with others.³³

In this case, the reading of literary texts will not let the reader remain untouched. Thus, the connection between the literary text and the interpretive activity is an ethical one insofar as, to return to Kearney’s words in a now deeper context, “the fictional narrator presents us with a variety of ethical possibilities that the reader is then free to choose from, discarding some, embracing others. The narrator proposes; the reader disposes. But the pact of trust and exchange struck by narrator and reader always carries some evaluative charge.”³⁴

3. Ethical Implications of Hermeneutic Practice as Practical Wisdom

Before developing the ethical implications resulting from hermeneutical practice, I set the stage by presenting views on ethics and practical wisdom. The ethics I am referring to here is, first, a *primordial ethics* in Ricœur’s sense, i.e., prior to the notion of ethics as a set of laws, rules, or imperatives. As we know, Ricœur “resists the idea that morals can be reduced to rules, to questions of rights and duties.”³⁵ According to Abel, in Ricœur’s thought “before morals [...] there is a primordial ethical orientation, an originary assertion; it is a kind of ethical foundation for evaluation, volition, desire [...] for pre-figuration, pre-understanding” that must be interpreted to apprehend “what is implicitly understood as good, happy and desirable.”³⁶

3.1.

Secondly, in its relation to poetic texts, the ethics I am referring to here is, in Ricœur's thought, "not a moralism of abstract rules but an ethics of experience (concerned with cultural paradigms of suffering and action, happiness, and dignity)."³⁷ Furthermore, "while ethics often speaks generally of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness, fiction fleshes it out with experiential images and examples – that is, with particular stories. [...] [T]o understand what wisdom means, we tell the story of Socrates."³⁸ In other words, according to Ricœur,

it is the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic form to propose to the imagination and to its mediation various figures that constitute so many *thought experiments* by which we learn to link together the ethical aspects of human conduct and happiness and misfortune.³⁹

This more *primordial* understanding of ethics has a parallel in the proposal of an *originary* ethics made by Heidegger⁴⁰ and developed by Gadamer. In Gadamer's philosophy we also detect an intimate link between hermeneutics and ethics, which must not be reduced to a theoretical system disconnected from practice nor understood as a "theory among other possible theories [...] but that [...] needs to be understood both as, and out of, a practice that cultivates an ethical sensibility," so that we have to understand ethics as "more 'original' that is, closer, to its own sources."⁴¹ In his dialogue with Gadamer's hermeneutics, Dennis Schmidt claims that the exercise of comprehension constitutes a care and cultivation of our soul. It is in this sense that we must understand ethics as "an ethics that is original," which, in turn, "forms a character, and nourishes that out of which anything like conduct, decision, action, right or wrong is to be thought and understood."⁴² As evident, then, the perspective of a *primordial ethics* in Ricœur's sense finds support in the *originary ethics* pointed out by Gadamer, who

recognizes that such an ethics does not find its center in any rules of conduct, any discussion of the will or imperatives, nor is it articulated by the juridical language of right and wrong [...] Gadamer will understand the questions of ethical life to be centered much more upon the issue of comportment and of the formation of character.⁴³

Thirdly, we can call the interpretation of literary texts an ethical exercise in terms of the concept of practical wisdom. I claim that in Ricœur's – as well as in Gadamer's – thought the hermeneutics of texts consists in a *phronesis*, what Abel describes as a "practical wisdom, understood as the ability to refigure, to adjust in an unprecedented context, to reinterpret in the unique world and situation in which we are."⁴⁴ The topic of practical wisdom permeates and interweaves Ricœur's reflections and texts. In the article *À la gloire de la phronèsis*, he speaks about the rebirth of the concept of wisdom and its modern philosophical potential based on commentators of Aristotle and interpretations such as those of Gadamer and MacIntyre.⁴⁵ In *Oneself as Another*, he proposes practical wisdom as the concept that dialectically articulates Aristotelian *phronesis*, Kantian deontology, and Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*.⁴⁶

Here, however, my primary interest consists in spelling out, exploring, and founding the ethical role of productive imagination – both in the construction of texts and in their interpretation – as an exercise of practical wisdom. Jeffrey Barash's article, "Pour une politique de la mémoire à

partir d'une interpretation de la sagesse pratique chez Paul Ricœur"⁴⁷ includes aspects that corroborate the thesis I propose, namely, the hermeneutics of literary texts as an exercise of practical wisdom. In this text Barash explores the role of *phronesis*, of *practical wisdom*, which Ricœur also refers to as "the circumstantiated moral judgment."⁴⁸ What I am then claiming is that the reading of literary texts is at the same time a circumstantiated moral judgment of the text and of the personal and social context offered by readers. In this judicative practice readers reassess not only their theoretical views, but also review and potentially redirect their actions. Thus, the interpretation of literary texts enables readers to (re)adjust to the concrete situation under the aegis of the implementation of justice, freedom and a good life in contrast with dogmatic, racist, sexist, and totalitarian practices.

In contrast to theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), which aims at the immutable, "the object of practical wisdom is the contingent and variable," which is particular to "the domain of human action."⁴⁹

[P]ractical wisdom is rooted in an *ethos*, a set of dispositions based on which choice can orient itself. And against mere calculation, the implementation of practical wisdom depends on good deliberation (*eubolia*), through which it aims at the means to realize the good life, which always and first of all implies the good life in common.⁵⁰

The interpretation of literary texts is an exercise or experiment designed to find reasons, motives, and means to realize the good life in the time and space in which interpreters find themselves. Since there is no formula or rule given beforehand to determine what a good life means for different people or cultures, the interpretation of literary texts constitutes an exercise of practical wisdom insofar as it rehearses new possibilities of being and acting mediated by imagination. Literary texts, besides rehearsing new worlds and possibilities of action, collect and keep customs, habits that are reexperienced through reading. Antigone is a beautiful example of this as it conserves through her speech the "unwritten law." Literary texts remind and warn us about ways of acting that lead or do not lead to the actualization of a good life in the context where we find ourselves. They enable us to rehearse ways of dealing with conflicts that are inherent in human life.⁵¹ Ultimately, the hermeneutical practice of literary texts as an exercise of practical wisdom through the use of imagination consists in "inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude, by betraying the rule to the smallest extent possible."⁵²

3.2.

As I have emphasized, the claim of the ethical implications of hermeneutical practice is anchored in a *primordial ethics* in Ricœur's sense or *originary ethics* in Gadamer's terms, and both can be taken as practical wisdom. On this basis I now turn to develop how Ricœur's hermeneutic practice constitutes, in interpretation of literary texts, an ethical exercise and practice. First, Ricœur's theory of interpretation put an emphasis precisely on the *opening up of a world* offered by the text. Literary texts institute through the play of imagination new perspectives for living and acting; reading these texts enables "the advance of self-understanding in the presence of these new worlds."⁵³ The exposure to and the encounter with new worlds, new possibilities of being and acting, through the interpretive activity, enables interpreters to have an understanding of the world and a self-understanding that directs their way of acting. What is crucial, then, in the exercise of

interpretation is not to apprehend what the author intended to say nor to extract the meaning codified in the text, but to reconfigure one's self-understanding and, as a consequence, one's action as a reader.

3.2.1.

Thus, "[i]n contrast to the tradition of the cogito and to the pretension of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition, it must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works."⁵⁴ The interpretive exercise is an ethical one because, by enabling an enlargement of the understanding of reality, it affects the interpreter's way of perceiving and also acting. While a more confined understanding of reality leads to a narrower and less free action, the more universal perspective offered by reading enables a freer and more responsible decision.

By reading a literary text, readers are led to deal with and play their mental ethical experiments related to the validity, meaning, and applicability of certain values. By encountering new worlds woven by creative imagination, readers revise and refigure their world⁵⁵ in theoretical and practical terms. It is in this sense that, in Ricœur's view, "the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves."⁵⁶

According to Ricœur, the appropriation of the world of the work through refiguration is the appropriation of a "proposal of a world" – not as something that is behind the text nor as a hidden intention. He then draws the following conclusion, which exemplarily describes the ethical task of his view on hermeneutics:⁵⁷

[T]o understand is to understand oneself in front of the text. It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. So understanding is quite different from a constitution of which the subject would possess the key. In this respect, it would be more correct to say that the self is constituted by the "matter" of the text.⁵⁸

3.2.2.

In connection with the ethical implication resulting from hermeneutics as an exercise of understanding and self-understanding, I find interpretation an exercise of explication, of justification of a way of being and acting in the world that the interpreter performs when reading a text. In Ricœur's words:

If we can no longer define hermeneutics in terms of the search for the psychological intentions of another person which are concealed behind the text, and if we do not want to reduce interpretation to the dismantling of structures, then what remains to be interpreted? I shall say: to interpret is to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text.⁵⁹

In the reading of literary texts, in the encounter with the world of the work that they present, interpreters are led to analyze, compare, and judge their way of being and acting. When interpreting a text, readers engage in a kind of comparative and therefore judicative exercise related

to their own actions and those of others, comparing the world that they encounter in the text with their own world. In this sense, interpreting is a judicative, ethical exercise in that it makes a comparison between possible modes of action – the created ideal and what is feasible. Thus, reading a text is a phronetic exercise in that it enables readers to enlarge their theoretical horizon, which reverberates in their way of acting towards a freer and better life. This practice renders readers wiser as they are able to grasp and practice through the reading of literary texts the good in each situation that the text addresses.

Additionally, the written text always contains a persuasive component, that is, its author tries to offer readers a new world, created by imagination, that intrudes on readers' praxis. Literature presents

a vision of the world that is never ethically neutral, but that rather implicitly or explicitly induces a new evaluation of the world and of the reader as well. In this sense, narrative already belongs to the ethical field in virtue of its claim – inseparable from its narration – to ethical justice. Still it belongs to the reader, now an agent, an initiator of action, to choose among the multiple proposals of ethical justice brought forth by the reading.⁶⁰

When interpreting the text, readers do not find themselves in front of a neutral or indifferent reality but must judge, weigh, and choose to position themselves in front of the text's proposed world. Hermeneutical praxis involves this valuational face of the world in front of which the interpreter takes a position not only in cognitive but also in ethical terms.

3.2.3.

Another ethical implication of hermeneutical practice results from the enlargement of the world on the part of interpreters. The universalization of their horizon is not only a result of the addition or fusion of data and arguments offered by the texts; the enlargement of the life world takes place through the shock, the difference, the resistance, and the provocation that the texts produce with their unusual mental experiments. In the encounter with the text, prejudices and values may be not merely ratified but challenged and, if so, rectified and remade thanks to the difference between the world of an interpreter and the world of the work. Ethical practice is improved not only by good examples but also by the bad ones, by enemies, by the different, by the criticism embodied in the mental experiments of literary texts. "[T]he creations of language would be devoid of meaning if they did not serve the general project of letting new worlds emerge by means of poetry."⁶¹ The emergence or creation of new possibilities of being and acting takes place not only by the addition of arguments but also by the encounter with possible worlds and different fruits of the free play of imagination.

3.2.4.

In the exercise of interpretation there occurs, in a more or less explicit way, the passage *from text to action* – as in the title of the work by Ricœur that is the main object of analysis here – which shows the intimate connection between the apprehension of knowledge and its application, between the acquisition of information and its implementation in action. By interpreting the world of the work, readers end up stimulating and sharpening their perception and understanding of the world and, therefore, deepening their posture towards people. In Abel's words, "poetics

becomes ethics by making us imagine and feel things that we do not feel and become capable of expressing them.”⁶² Thus, the hermeneutics of literary texts is an ethical task insofar as it “increases the abilities to feel and act, increases the reader’s sensitivity, receptivity, but also increases the reader’s ability, dexterity, and readiness for action. This is the ethical moment proper of refiguration.”⁶³ The act of reading involves a judicative exercise by readers, about the world of the text, about their world, and about their conduct in the world. This is another ethical component that is inherent in literary interpretation, as it stimulates and increases our “sensitivity” and our “ability” to act in a particular way.

According to Abel, “imagination incites action, initiative, and intervention because it shows that the world is not finite, that it is not closed upon its presence.”⁶⁴ Imagination enables the interpreter “to feel what does not exist” and “to feel the absence,” which leads to the conclusion that one can speak

of a poetic of feeling and of a poetic of acting. As regards feeling, imagination will especially enable me to put myself into the place of another, to imagine the world seen from another point of view. Imagination works on this sensitivity that I lack due to the mere fact that I am bound to the narrowness of my perception of the world. As regards acting, imagination enables me to anticipate what I will do, and it prepares in me paths of my ability to do, of my capacity to act.⁶⁵

According to Kearney, following Ricœur, poetic narratives have an ethical component insofar as they

not only excite emotions of pity and fear, they also teach us something about happiness and unhappiness – that is, the good life. What we learn in the narrative ‘imitation of actions’ we may incorporate in our return journey from text to action. This combination of emotion and learning in fiction is what prompts Ricœur to identify narrative understanding with phronetic understanding.⁶⁶

In Ricœur’s words, interpreters or readers can only find themselves if they let themselves be affected by the literary text or be open to the imaginative variations proposed by it. The metamorphosis of the world proposed by literary texts enables readers to make mental experiments or playful metamorphoses of their ego⁶⁷ and, therefore, of their actions.

3.2.5.

If there is a movement from text to action that goes through imagination, which happens in the experience of reading, this movement also summons a *change of life*. In Kearney’s words, “most narratives, as Ricœur reminds us, convey something of the Rilkean summons: *Change your life!* [...] Narrative persuasion almost always involves some element of ethical solicitation, however tacit or tangential.”⁶⁸ Literary texts contain ethical mental experiments that require from interpreters a judicative exercise regarding their mode of acting which, in turn, intervenes in and also guides their praxis. Is it possible not to be affected by the reading of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*? From this perspective, the reading of literary texts renders us wiser insofar as we see ourselves mirrored in them, and they show us who we are and how we act and create paths that we should tread through imaginative exercise.

Conclusion

It is not sufficient for us to create good laws or codes of ethics in order to live better. Ethical education as guidance for *a better life in just institutions* also takes place through the interpretation of literary texts. If we can say that we are what we read, we can also say that human praxis will be all the better the more it is nourished by the reading of literature.

If I might offer a gloss on Ricœur's statement, when we interpret we not only *explicate our way of being in the world unfolded in front of the text*, but we understand ourselves more and better, i.e., we perform an exercise in the orientation of our praxis. Interpreting is actually playing with the possible world created by literature, and in this exercise it is important to let oneself be affected, in both theoretical and practical terms.

From this perspective, the reading of literary works is a practice – which cannot be reduced to a technique – that renders us more open, human, free and, therefore, wise. The practice of interpretation enables us “to grow in terms of being” (*Zuwachs an Sein*),⁶⁹ in terms of acting and, in Ricœur's terms, to grow to rehearse and practice a good life in just institutions. The hermeneutical practice of literary texts as an exercise of practical wisdom enables a mirroring of our behaviors and a concomitant rehearsal of the implementation of the good life through the use of a productive imagination capable of breaking with dogmatic, racist, totalitarian, and anti-ecological postures.

It is now possible to answer with even more conviction Abel's question asking “why should one connect ethics to something imaginary, to something so uncertain?”⁷⁰ Thanks to literary creations, through the proposal of mental experiments via fiction, one can also justify the value of a world ruled by principles such as freedom, human rights, and cooperative coexistence with nature. Literature constitutes the privileged space to try out – and in this way also to justify – possible values and worlds, values and worlds that are better, are alternatives to the market-based and life-destructive logic that is hegemonic. The better world proposed by creative imagination must be desired to be implemented, and this takes place through its interpretation, since, as Augustine put it, *one cannot love what one does not know*.⁷¹ Literary interpretation is an ethical practice insofar as it shows and persuades us that crime does not pay, that the value of life, justice, and freedom is what makes us more human, free and happy.

- ¹ This text was supported by CAPES, Edital PQG 2017, Edital Universal 2018.
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- ³ Olivier Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," in *Teoria Literária e Hermenêutica Ricœuriana*, ed. Adna Candido de Paula e Suzi Frankl Sperber (Dourados, UFGD, 2011), 215.
- ⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013), 60.
- ⁵ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 63.
- ⁶ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 217.
- ⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 159.
- ⁸ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 169.
- ⁹ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 169.
- ¹⁰ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 170.
- ¹¹ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 169.
- ¹² Jean Marie Gagnebin, "Da dignidade ontológica da literatura," in *Paul Ricœur: ética, identidade e reconhecimento*, ed. Walter Salles and Fernando Nascimento (Rio de Janeiro, PUC-Rio; São Paulo, Loyola, 2013), 50.
- ¹³ See Fernanda Henriques, "A relação entre Filosofia e Literatura. Paul Ricœur e Martha Nussbaum dois exemplos na filosofia do século XX," in ed. Maria Celeste Natário e Renato Epifânio, *Entre Filosofia e Literatura* (Lisboa, Zéfiro, 2014), 11-24.
- ¹⁴ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2004), 112-3.
- ¹⁵ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 113 (quoting Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 3, 249).
- ¹⁶ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 290.
- ¹⁷ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 232.
- ¹⁸ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 80.
- ¹⁹ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 60.
- ²⁰ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 81.
- ²¹ Paul Ricœur, *Do texto à ação* (Porto, Rés Editora, 1989), 120.
- ²² Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 60.

- ²³ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 81.
- ²⁴ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 223.
- ²⁵ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 83.
- ²⁶ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 60.
- ²⁷ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 61.
- ²⁸ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 61.
- ²⁹ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 61.
- ³⁰ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 70.
- ³¹ Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essay on Language, Action and Interpretation*, edited, translated and introduced by J.-B. Thompson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), 192.
- ³² Paul Ricœur, *The Just*, translated by David Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000), 105.
- ³³ Dennis J. Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012), 46.
- ³⁴ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington, Ashgate, 2004), 113.
- ³⁵ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 235.
- ³⁶ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 218.
- ³⁷ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 112.
- ³⁸ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 114.
- ³⁹ Paul Ricœur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 22-3, quoted by Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 114. Kearney concludes his reflection by arguing: "These 'lessons' of narrative imagination constitute the 'universals' of which Aristotle spoke. But they are universals of a more approximate (and context-sensitive) kind than those of theoretical thought. Ricœur speaks of narrative understanding, then, in the sense Aristotle gave to *phronesis*, by contrast with the abstract logic of pure *theoria*. And it is on this basis that he makes his ultimate wager that the good life is a life recounted." *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 114.
- ⁴⁰ Dennis J. Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," *Research in Phenomenology* 42 (2012), 37.
- ⁴¹ Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," 36.
- ⁴² Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," 38.
- ⁴³ Schmidt, "On the Sources of Ethical Life," 38.

- ⁴⁴ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 233.
- ⁴⁵ Paul Ricœur, "À la gloire de la *phronesis* (*Éthique à Nicomaque*, livre VI)," in *La vérité pratique. Aristote, Éthique à Nicomaque*, livre VI, ed. J.-Y. Château (Paris, Vrin, 1997), 13-22.
- ⁴⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 169-296.
- ⁴⁷ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "Pour une politique de la mémoire à partir d'une interprétation de la sagesse pratique chez Paul Ricœur," in Jeffrey Andrew Barash and Mireille Delbraccio, *La sagesse pratique; autour de l'œuvre de Paul Ricœur* (Amiens, CRDP de l'académie d'Amiens, 1997).
- ⁴⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Le concept de responsabilité," in *Le Juste* (Paris, Édition Esprit, 1995), 69, quoted by Barash, "Pour une politique de la mémoire à partir d'une interprétation de la sagesse pratique chez Paul Ricœur," 181.
- ⁴⁹ Barash, "Pour une politique de la mémoire à partir d'une interprétation de la sagesse pratique chez Paul Ricœur," 182.
- ⁵⁰ Barash, "Pour une politique de la mémoire à partir d'une interprétation de la sagesse pratique chez Paul Ricœur," 182.
- ⁵¹ See David Pellauer, "À la limite de la sagesse pratique, la cécité morale," in Jeffrey Andrew Barash and Mireille Delbraccio, *La sagesse pratique; autour de l'œuvre de Paul Ricœur*, 89.
- ⁵² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 269.
- ⁵³ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 54.
- ⁵⁴ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 85. And Ricœur continues his reflection by asking: "What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings, and, in general, of all that we call the self if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature?"
- ⁵⁵ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 232.
- ⁵⁶ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 85.
- ⁵⁷ "Recall that, in *Being and Time*, the theory of 'understanding' is no longer tied to the understanding of others, but becomes a structure of being-in-the world. More precisely, it is a structure which is explored after the examination of *Befindlichkeit* [state-of- mind]. The moment of 'understanding' corresponds dialectically to being in a situation: it is the projection of our own most possibilities at the very heart of the situations in which we find ourselves." Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 86.
- ⁵⁸ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 85.
- ⁵⁹ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, 83.
- ⁶⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative, vol. 3*, translated by David Pellauer & Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), 249.

- ⁶¹ Ricœur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*, 64.
- ⁶² Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 231.
- ⁶³ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 233.
- ⁶⁴ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 231.
- ⁶⁵ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 231-2.
- ⁶⁶ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 113.
- ⁶⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Do Texto à ação* (Porto, Rés Editora, 1989), 124.
- ⁶⁸ Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, 112.
- ⁶⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1999), GW 1, 145.
- ⁷⁰ Abel, "Du retournement poétique au paradoxe éthique," 215.
- ⁷¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X, Chapter XXII.