

Paul Ricœur and Metaphysics

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Abstract

In twentieth-century France, the word “metaphysics” had connotations of closed systems which claimed certainty for themselves. As a result, few dared to engage in metaphysical speculation. Ricœur, however, rejected this prevalent definition because he believed it came from Heidegger’s procrustean reading of the history of philosophy. While agreeing that certainty and closure were neither desirable nor possible, Ricœur did make metaphysical claims. Following Jaspers’s revival of pre-modern apophatic metaphysics for which transcendence cannot be comprehended, Ricœur, in his early work, argued for “critical realism” against neo-Kantian idealism, “original affirmation” against Sartrean negativity, and the “metaphysical choice” of human freedom’s consent to the unchosen features of reality.

Keywords: metaphysics; ontology; ontotheology; certainty; consent

Résumé

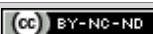
Dans la France du xx^e siècle, le mot « métaphysique » avait des connotations de système clos prétendant à la certitude. La plupart des philosophies n’osaient pas faire de la métaphysique. Ricœur, cependant, a rejeté cette définition répandue, en reprochant à Heidegger d’avoir couché la philosophie occidentale sur ce lit de Procuste. Bien qu’il admette que la certitude et la clôture ne soient ni souhaitables ni possibles, Ricœur a néanmoins fait de la métaphysique. Suivant la renaissance jaspersienne de la métaphysique apophatique prémoderne selon laquelle la transcendance n’est pas compréhensible, le jeune Ricœur a plaidé pour un « réalisme critique » contre l’idéalisme neo-kantien, une « affirmation originaire » contre la négativité sartrienne, et l’« option métaphysique » du consentement de la liberté humaine aux aspects non choisis de la réalité.

Mots-clés : métaphysique ; ontologie ; onto-théologie ; certitude ; consentement

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Introduction

Surprisingly little work has been done on Ricœur's metaphysics. Most mentions of metaphysics in Ricœur take place in the context of discussions about religion and theology due to the metaphysical nature of many religious claims. The few engagements which focus on philosophy tend to draw from Ricœur's later work, where he seeks to reconcile metaphor and speculative discourse,¹ or ontology and ethics,² or to renew reflection on the classic "great kinds" (being/nonbeing, act/potency, one/many, self/other).³

While this article will sometimes reference Ricœur's later work (especially where he distances himself from Martin Heidegger), its focus is on the pre-hermeneutical Ricœur, an area which has received very little attention.⁴ Ricœur's early writings are valuable in their own right due to the wealth of insights he has in that period. But they are also key to understanding his later

¹ Elena Būgaitè shows, in a largely expository article, how Ricœur's concept of a "living metaphor" reconciles metaphor with speculative discourse by revealing the inescapable ontological vehemence of language, allowing us "to overcome the dualism of language and reality and open the path to the interpretation of being; thus, it already introduces us into metaphysics." She concludes: "Thought does not make language more metaphysical. It only reveals that language is already metaphysical" (My translation: "... oltrepassare il dualismo del linguaggio e della realtà e di aprire il cammino all'interpretazione dell'essere; così introduce già nella metafisica. ... Il pensiero non fa diventare il linguaggio più metafisico. Rivela solo ciò che già è metafisico nel linguaggio" [Elena Būgaitè, "Metafora E Metafisica Nel Pensiero Di Paul Ricœur," *Rivista Di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, vol. 100, n° 1 (2008), 71]).

² Dominique Janicaud uses Olivier Mongin's characterisation of Ricœur's philosophy as an "ontology of action" to draw a contrast between Heidegger's failure to overcome the opposition between theory and practice and Ricœur's success at the same. Janicaud also points to Ricœur's *ressourcement* of the history of metaphysics, a theme we will turn to below. See Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger in France* (trans. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015], 280–289). On this theme, see also the doctoral dissertation by Hing-Wah Yip, "What Metaphysics of Morality in View?" (Leuven: Catholic University of Leuven, 2002).

³ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Tenth Study; *id.*, "From Metaphysics to Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 40, n° 4 (1996); Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 166–167; Paul Ricœur, "Reply to G.B. Madison", in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Lewis Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 93.

⁴ Except in my own previously published work. See Barnabas Aspray, *Ricœur at the Limits of Philosophy: God, Creation, and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

work. Although Ricœur's philosophy never ceased to grow and develop,⁵ scholars have noted that this never leads to a rupture with his past thought. His earliest influences and ideas remain present, covertly or overtly, in all his later writings.⁶

This article contends that in his early work Ricœur refashions metaphysics by excluding from its essence the need (1) to establish certainty of its claims, and (2) to form a closed system with a comprehensive grasp on being. Inspired by Karl Jaspers, Ricœur then (3) draws on the pre-modern tradition to recover an apophatic metaphysics that prevents the possibility of closed systems by asserting the ungraspability of transcendence. Finally, (4) Ricœur develops his own metaphysical insights that respond to the concerns of his time: acknowledging the gift of being as a response to idealism, uncovering the original affirmation that underlies every negation, and proposing the "metaphysical choice" of consent as the final reconciliation of human freedom with reality.

This article does not sharply distinguish between ontology and metaphysics. Ricœur himself admitted that he preferred to speak of ontology, but he also admitted that there was no "systematic difference" between the two, noting at the same time that the word "ontology" was invented by Emmanuel Kant.⁷ Heidegger made ontology his own and banished metaphysics, but as will be seen below, Ricœur challenged Heidegger's definitions of both words. For our purposes, what unites the two terms is that they refer to reality as such, as distinct from our knowledge about it (epistemology) experience of it (phenomenology), language about it, moral precepts derived from it (ethics), or any particular aspect of reality such as beauty, truth, or goodness. Metaphysics and ontology concern what is real. This, according to Ricœur, is the most universal definition of philosophical inquiry. As he says near the beginning of his career, "the intention of philosophy is Being."⁸ The whole history of philosophy is unified, he says again later, not by a perennial answer but by a perennial question: "philosophy brings us to a more primitive question, which is primordial. This is the question, for example, of Aristotle: 'What is?'"⁹

⁵ He says in one place that "developing is... characteristic of my work. I would compare this to the optics of a camera, which gradually brings out details more and more clearly from an initially larger, obscure picture" (quoted in Tamás Tóth, "The Graft, The Residue, And Memory: Two Conversations with Paul Ricœur," in *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricœur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński [Toronto: Hermeneutic Press, 2003], 646).

⁶ See *inter alia*: Alan Olson, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics: An Interpretation of the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 156; Jean-Luc Amalric, "Affirmation originaire, attestation et reconnaissance. Le cheminement de l'anthropologie philosophique ricœurienne," *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 2, n° 1 (2011), 12–34; *id.*, "Finitude, Culpability, and Suffering: The Question of Evil in Ricœur," in *A Companion to Ricœur's Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 179–200; *id.*, "Act, Sign and Objectivity: Jean Nabert's Influence on the Ricœurian Phenomenology of the Will," in *A Companion to Ricœur's Freedom and Nature*, 17–36.

⁷ Interview with Paul Ricœur (conducted by YIP HING-WAH on relation between metaphysics and morality [Chatenay-Malabry, 25 June 1999]), in Yip, "What Metaphysics of Morality in View?," 228.

⁸ "L'intention de la philosophie est donc l'être" (Paul Ricœur, *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers : philosophie du mystère et philosophie du paradoxe* [Paris: Éditions du Temps présent, 1948], 34).

⁹ "La philosophie nous ramène à la question beaucoup plus primitive, à la question primordial, [par exemple] de l'Aristote, 'Qu'est-ce qu'il est ?'" (*Philosophie et Vérité*, Documentary, 1965, 9:24–9:30).

I. The Difficulty of Doing Metaphysics in the Twentieth Century

Doing metaphysics in the twentieth century was not for the faint of heart. Both sides of the analytic-continental divide that began in the 1930s rejected metaphysical speculation, albeit for different reasons. Analytic philosophy saw in metaphysics a misuse of language that turned it into meaningless sounds which cannot be brought to conceptual clarity due to the inability to point to a referent. Continental philosophy, following Heidegger, accused the entire history of Western thought of striving for representational thinking, absolute certainty, and conceptual closure that forgets the *Inständigkeit* (situatedness within being) of the thinking subject. Behind both schools lies the titanic figure of Kant, not as hostile to metaphysics as his reception in France was led by Heidegger to believe,¹⁰ but who did place firm limits on what philosophy can say about being or ultimate reality with any rational validity by erecting an impenetrable barrier between the real (noumena) and appearances (phenomena). Metaphysics was viewed with suspicion not only in philosophy. It was equally taboo in theology, at least among Reformed Protestants and especially those influenced by Karl Barth.¹¹ This means that from both sides of Ricœur's "double allegiance" — to philosophy and to his Protestant faith — Ricœur was under pressure to avoid metaphysics.

If philosophy cannot concern itself with ultimate reality, as it used to do, what, then, can it concern itself with? In a 1955 review of a book by the French Hegelian, Jean Hyppolite, Ricœur describes it this way:

"It is often said that the domain of philosophy is humanity [*l'homme*]. In the absence of a common metaphysics or theology, is not the only service philosophy can render to its contemporaries that of making humanity — humanity that provides all answers because it raises all questions — the very theme of philosophy? At bottom, if phenomenology, Marxism, cultural anthropology, and existentialism share a common purpose, it is indeed this 'humanist' aim."¹²

Ricœur then characterises Hyppolite's book as part of a counter-current that attempts to revive metaphysics. He lists Heidegger, unexpectedly, among the protagonists of this counter-

¹⁰ See J. Colin McQuillan, "Kant, Heidegger, and the In/Finitude of Human Reason," *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 17, n° 3 (2017), 81. This article argues that the enormous influence of Heidegger's *Kantbuch* determined the interpretation of Kant in France, yet Heidegger in fact violently misread Kant to fit his own philosophical project. Kant was, in fact far more open to metaphysics than Heidegger was willing to allow.

¹¹ See Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 45.

¹² My translation, "On a vite dit que l'enjeu de la philosophie, c'est l'homme. [...] Faute d'une métaphysique ou d'une théologie communes, le seul service que le philosophe puisse rendre à ses contemporains n'est-il pas de faire de l'homme, de l'homme qui pose toutes les réponses parce qu'il pose toutes les questions, le thème même de la philosophie ? Au fond, si la phénoménologie, le marxisme, l'anthropologie culturelle, l'existentialisme ont un point commun, c'est bien cette visée « humaniste »" (Paul Ricœur, "Retour à Hegel (Jean Hyppolite)," in *Lectures 2 : la contrée des philosophes* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999], 173).

current, not because Heidegger is a fan of metaphysics, but because he aims at “the promotion of ontology against the primacy of anthropology.”¹³

In characteristic form, Ricœur does not take sides, at least not in this article. He simply describes the prevalent anti-metaphysical trends along with attempts to contest them. He does not say “because metaphysics is impossible,” but “in the absence of a *common* metaphysics.” There is no agreed framework on which to build, leaving us no choice but to start from what we *do* have in common: the human condition.

That is one reason why Ricœur himself focuses on the human condition in all his writings, characterising his entire corpus as a work of “philosophical anthropology.”¹⁴ It is not because he agrees with the critique of metaphysics, but because he wisely wants to pick his battles and keep as many dialogue partners as possible.

In fact, Ricœur did engage in metaphysical speculation at intervals throughout his career. But it was not metaphysics as conceived by its opponents. Indeed, one of the first things Ricœur questions is the narrow definition of metaphysics given by the post-metaphysical school, a definition that simply does not apply to the vast majority of philosophical writing commonly understood to be metaphysical. First of all, Ricœur questions whether metaphysics entails absolute certainty.

II. Metaphysics is not Certainty

There is a secret alliance between modernity’s great philosophers and the postmetaphysical backlash that occurred in the twentieth century. Both conceive of metaphysics as being grounded in absolute certainty. The seminal example of this is of course Descartes, whose entire philosophical project is widely understood as a quest for certainty. Descartes begins his famous *Meditations*—which he had originally intended to call *Metaphysics*¹⁵—by observing:

“the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last... Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false... Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for

¹³ My translation, “[...] promotion de l’ontologie contre le primat de l’anthropologie” (*ibid.*, 174).

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Philosophical Anthropology*, ed. Jérôme Porée and Johann Michel, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 1. See Paul Ricœur, *Anthropologie philosophique*, ed. Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013), 21.

¹⁵ John Cottingham, “Editorial Introduction”, in René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. John Cottingham, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), xxxi.

great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.”¹⁶

But Descartes is not the only one to make certainty the test of his ideas. Spinoza, for example, claimed to “know the truth of his own philosophy ‘in the same way you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles’.”¹⁷ Kant made apodictic certainty the unyielding requirement of any metaphysics and ruled out “anything that even looks like an hypothesis” as a “forbidden commodity.”¹⁸ Further examples could be given. When twentieth-century philosophy abandoned metaphysics, it did so in part because of its association with certainty which had been judged impossible.

Before he had even reached adulthood, Ricœur had been taught never to seek or claim certainty for anything. His high school philosophy teacher, a Catholic neo-Thomist named Roland Dalbiez, was also one of the first French philosophers to write a dissertation on Sigmund Freud, thereby introducing Freudian thought into philosophy. This encounter with Freud and what Ricœur would later call the “hermeneutics of suspicion” showed him the radical instability of conscious thought given the shaky foundation of the unconscious. “I owe to my first philosophy teacher,” he says much later, “the resistance that I have opposed to the claim to immediacy, adequation, and apodicticity made by the Cartesian cogito and the Kantian ‘I think’, when my subsequent university studies brought me under the influence of the French heirs to these two founders of modern thought.”¹⁹ This rejection of certainty develops in the middle of Ricœur’s career into his hermeneutical theory. As Dan Stiver puts it:

“In the end, Ricœur rejected even the kind of clarity and certainty that Kant thought one could have with phenomenal knowledge relating to objects, viewing such knowledge also as hermeneutical. This radical hermeneutical turn in reflexive philosophy placed hermeneutics at the foundation of knowledge, meaning that the Enlightenment dream of objective certainty could never be fully realized.”²⁰

Ricœur does not explicitly dissociate metaphysics from certainty. But if, as is clear, he both rejected certainty and nonetheless believed in the possibility of metaphysics, then it follows that he did not believe certainty was an essential aspect of metaphysics.

¹⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 23, 33.

¹⁷ Cited in Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza’s Religion: A New Reading of the Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 1.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 99–102.

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, 4. “Je suis persuadé aujourd’hui que je dois à mon premier maître de philosophie la résistance que j’opposai à la prétention à l’immédiateté, à l’adéquation et à l’apodicticité du *cogito* cartésien, et du « je pense » kantien, lorsque la suite de mes études universitaires m’eut conduit dans la mouvance des héritiers français de ces deux fondateurs de la pensée moderne” (Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite* [Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1995], 12).

²⁰ Dan Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 10–11.

III. Metaphysics is not Conceptual Closure

Closely related to the modernist drive for certainty is the belief that metaphysics implies a perfect correspondence between knowledge and being, which in turn brings about the possibility of a closed philosophical system, sometimes called a “totalizing system.” This rejection of closed systems is the driving force behind Heidegger’s onto-theology critique and thus the central reason for his rejection of metaphysics and the post-metaphysical turn. We can see this if we turn to the crucial paragraph in Heidegger’s 1957 lecture, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics.” Near the end, he answers the question: “How does the deity enter into philosophy?”

“The deity enters philosophy through the perdurance of which we think at first as the approach to the active nature of the difference between Being and beings. The difference constitutes the ground plan in the structure of the essence of metaphysics. The perdurance results in and gives Being as the generative ground. This ground itself needs to be properly accounted for by that for which it accounts, that is, by the causation through the supremely original matter—and that is the cause as *causa sui*. This is the right name for the god of philosophy. Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”

He then remarks in conclusion: “The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God [*göttliche Gott*].”²¹

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of this dense paragraph, which has received more commentary than almost any other written in the twentieth century.²² For the purposes of my argument, the following points are salient. First, Heidegger is not against religion or belief in God *per se*. This is abundantly clear from the concluding sentence. He is against a god who in Hegelian fashion “enters into philosophy” as a guarantee or ground for the whole philosophical edifice, a *causa sui*. It is too often forgotten that the essay in which this paragraph is found introduces itself as a “conversation with Hegel.”²³ Granted, Heidegger thinks that his critique applies beyond Georg W. F. Hegel to the whole history of Western philosophy since Plato. But that is precisely the

²¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 71–72. “Gott kommt in die Philosophie durch den Austrag, den wir zunächst als den Vorort des Wesens der Differenz von Sein und Seiendem denken. Die Differenz macht den Grundriß im Bau des Wesens der Metaphysik aus. Der Austrag ergibt und vergibt das Sein als her-vor-bringenden Grund, welcher Grund selbst aus dem von ihm Begründeten her der ihm gemäßen Begründung, d. h. der Verursachung durch die ursprünglichste Sache bedarf. Dies ist die Ursache als die *Causa sui*. So lautet der sachgerechte Name für den Gott in der Philosophie. Zu diesem Gott kann der Mensch weder beten, noch kann er ihm opfern. Vor der *Causa sui* kann der Mensch weder aus Scheu ins Knie fallen, noch kann er vor diesem Gott musizieren und tanzen. // Demgemäß ist das gott-lose Denken, das den Gott der Philosophie, den Gott als *Causa sui* preisgeben muß, dem gött-lichen Gott vielleicht näher” (Martin Heidegger, “Die Onto-Theo-Logische Verfassung Der Metaphysik,” in *Identity and Difference*, 140–141).

²² One of my favourites is Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

²³ Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” 42; “Gespräch mit Hegel” Heidegger, “Die Onto-Theo-Logische Verfassung Der Metaphysik”, 107.

problem, as Ricœur points out in his criticism which we will examine shortly. Heidegger reads the history of philosophy through the lens of Hegel, and thus the totality of “Western philosophy” becomes guilty of Hegel’s crimes.

Second, Heidegger’s problem with the god of philosophy is that the philosopher makes recourse to it/him/her as the “ground” of being, thus providing not only certainty but conceptual closure on reality itself. There is an equivocation, of which Heidegger is fully aware, in the word “ground” (*Grund*) and “begründen” which Stambaugh translates as “account for” but which could also be translated as “justify/substantiate/prove,” or even the English verb “ground” in the philosophical sense of “to ground one’s ideas.” The equivocation leads to a conflation of metaphysics with epistemology. God is given as the *metaphysical* “ground” (cause, origin, source) of reality in order to make him the *epistemological* “ground” (that proves, justifies, substantiates) Hegel’s philosophical system. It is this equivocation that is the problem, since it postulates a perfect correspondence between thought (the epistemological ground) and being (the metaphysical ground). This introduces Godlike qualities, making the philosopher purportedly able to master reality perfectly and completely, without remainder, in what Hegel called “absolute knowledge.”

What Heidegger hates about onto-theology, in brief, is that it brings closure to the question of being, which, according to Heidegger, ought not to be closed. Heidegger is against any kind of final or conclusive answer that puts an end to philosophical inquiry. For him, the question of being has primacy over any hasty attempts to foreclose it in favor of any totalizing system, whether religious or philosophical. It is this understanding of metaphysics—totalizing closure and perfect adequation of thought to reality—that took root and flourished across the Francophone and Anglophone world and gave rise to what has come to be known as the post-metaphysical school.²⁴

It is not relevant for our purposes how Ricœur appropriates the term “onto-theology”—to which he gives a slightly different meaning.²⁵ What is relevant is that even though he agrees with Heidegger that philosophy should be open-ended, he refuses to follow either Heidegger’s reading of the philosophical tradition or his definition of metaphysics as necessarily onto-theological, i.e. as demanding conceptual mastery and foreclosing on the mystery of being.

Ricœur criticizes Heidegger’s account of metaphysics in two ways. First, he rejects Heidegger’s reading of the history of Western thought as characterized by totalizing ambitions. One example of a “closed system” that Heidegger gives is the categorizing of all reality under the distinction between the visible and the invisible. Ricœur simply retorts: “I am afraid that only a

²⁴ More influential examples include Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Kevin W. Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁵ As seen in, e.g. Paul Ricœur, “Evil, A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 253.

reading forced beyond any justification can make Western philosophy lie on this Procrustean bed.”²⁶ He goes on:

“The unity of ‘the’ metaphysical is an after-the-fact construction of Heideggerian thought, intended to vindicate his own labour of thinking and to justify the renunciation of any kind of thinking that is not a genuine overcoming of metaphysics. But why should this philosophy claim for itself alone, to the exclusion of all its predecessors, that it breaks through and innovates? It seems to me time to deny oneself the convenience, which has become a laziness in thinking, of lumping the whole of Western thought together under a single word, metaphysics.”²⁷

Anyone familiar with Ricœur’s irenic style will be surprised by the uncharacteristic level of aggression he betrays here. It indicates how much Ricœur is bothered by Heidegger’s arrogant dismissal of Western philosophy. In a classic *tu quoque* reversal, Ricœur accuses Heidegger of the same totalizing closure of which Heidegger accuses metaphysical discourse. Ironically, it is Heidegger who is foreclosing on Western thought by dismissing it as “all the same.”

But Heidegger has not only misread the Western philosophical tradition, in Ricœur’s view. He is working with a faulty definition of metaphysics to start with: “What are we to understand by speculative discourse [i.e. metaphysics]? Must we see it as the equivalent of what above we repeatedly termed conceptual determination, in opposition to the semantic sketches of metaphorical utterances?”²⁸

Ricœur insists that metaphysics need not be seen as adequation of thought and being, as a comprehensive grasp on reality, as a closed or totalizing system. Ricœur is swimming against the current, given Heidegger’s titanic stature in French philosophy. His stance puts him at odds not only with Heidegger but with the entire post-metaphysical tradition that emanates from him. When one scholar labelled Ricœur a “postmetaphysical” thinker, he responds that he would

“resist applying the term ‘postmetaphysical’ to describe my form of philosophy. It does not seem to me that metaphysics can be identified with onto-theology, as has so often been done in France, or with idealism taken in the sense of the philosophy of the immediate and the transparent. I have pleaded on several occasions in favor of a return to speculation

²⁶ Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge, 1978), 334. “Je crains que seul un coup de force, impossible à justifier, couche la philosophie occidentale sur ce lit de Procuste” (Paul Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975], 360).

²⁷ Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 368. “L’unité de « la » métaphysique est une construction après coup de la pensée heideggerienne, destinée à justifier son propre labeur de pensée et le renoncement dont il voudrait qu’il ne soit plus un dépassement. Mais pourquoi cette philosophie devrait-elle refuser à tous ses devanciers le bénéfice de la rupture et de la novation qu’elle s’octroie à elle-même ? Le moment est venu, me semble-t-il, de s’interdire la commodité, devenue paresse de pensée, de faire tenir sous un seul mot – métaphysique – le tout de la pensée occidentale” (Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, 396).

²⁸ Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 355. “Que faut-il entendre par discours spéculatif ? Faut-il le tenir pour équivalent à ce qu’on a constamment appelé ci-dessus détermination conceptuelle, par opposition aux esquisses sémantiques de l’énonciation métaphorique ?” (Ricœur, *La Métaphore vive*, 380).

concerning the ‘great kinds’—being, nonbeing, the one, the other, the multiple... For a brief outline of this, the reader may be referred to the final chapter of *The Rule of Metaphor*, and to the final chapter of *Oneself as Another* for a more extensive discussion.”²⁹

In short, the postmetaphysical school is defined, in Ricœur’s view, by “a sense of metaphysical that is, to my mind, overly narrow in its Heideggerian sense.”³⁰

Yet why did anyone associate Ricœur with the postmetaphysical school? The answer is that he agrees with that school that conceptual closure is impossible. Anyone familiar with Ricœur’s work knows that his philosophy is a masterclass in openness. He is no less aware than these critics of the dangers of totalizing systems and pretensions to have a comprehensive grasp on being. In *Fallible Man*, he writes:

“Nothing gives rise to deception more than the idea of totality. All too quickly it has been said: It is here, it is there, it is Mind, it is Nature, it is History. Violence is the next step—first violence to the facts and then violence to man, if, to top it off, the philosopher of totality has power over man.”³¹

Here Ricœur shows the connection between totalizing systems of thought and their refusal to respect otherness or acknowledge features of reality that do not fit neatly into their system. When such closed systems gain political power, they impose their procrustean bed on the world, with harmful consequences.

Similarly, Ricœur defines his hermeneutic philosophy in direct opposition to Hegelian absolute knowledge.³² The final sentence of one of his essays dramatically pronounces: “Between the hermeneutics of testimony and the philosophy of absolute knowledge, we must choose.”³³ In other words, our philosophy is always provisional and we can never be sure what future argument or evidence will overturn our verdict. This is evident at the end of *Oneself as Another*, where he explicitly outlines that the kind of ontology he wants to engage in is the kind that is always open:

²⁹ Ricœur, “Reply to G.B. Madison”, 93–94.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹ Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 49.

“Rien ne prête plus à l’imposture que l’idée de totalité ? On a trop vite dit : elle est ici, elle est là ; elle est Esprit, elle est Nature, elle est Histoire ; la violence n’est pas loin ; d’abord la violence sur les faits et bientôt la violence sur les hommes, si par surcroît le philosophe de la totalité a pouvoir sur les hommes” (Paul Ricœur, *Finitude et culpabilité* [Paris: Éditions Points, 2009], 89).

³² This is not to say that Ricœur was opposed to every aspect of Hegel’s philosophy. For a set of careful distinctions in Ricœur’s use of Hegel, see Robert Piercey, “Too Many Hegels? Ricœur’s Relation to German Idealism Reconsidered,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Phenomenology*, ed. Cynthia D. Coe (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 547–565.

³³ Paul Ricœur, “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” trans. David Stewart and Charles Reagan, *Anglican Theological Review*, vol. 61, n° 4 (1979), 461; Translation adapted. “Entre la philosophie du savoir absolu et l’herméneutique du témoignage, il faut choisir” (Paul Ricœur, “L’herméneutique du témoignage,” in *Lectures 3 : Aux frontières de la philosophie* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994], 61).

“Ontology remains possible today inasmuch as the philosophies of the past remain open to reinterpretations and reappropriations, thanks to a meaning potential left unexploited, even repressed, by the very process of systematization and of school formation to which we owe the great doctrinal corpora that we ordinarily identify under the name of their authors: Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and so on.”³⁴

Here, Ricœur draws a connection between openness and rootedness in tradition. It is not an obvious connection: many think that tradition has the opposite effect and closes down the possibility of new discoveries. But both Jaspers and Heidegger are counter-examples who challenge this notion. Heidegger’s rejection of past philosophies was due to his closure to any kind of metaphysics that did not fit Heidegger’s own definition. Jaspers, on the other hand, had an open metaphysics because he was open to learning from pre-modern philosophies.

More examples could be given. The idea of openness in philosophy flowers everywhere in Ricœur’s writings. The founders of the Fonds Ricœur considered the openness of philosophy to be so central to Ricœur’s thought that they put the following quote on the wall as the first thing anyone sees when they walk in:

“The modesty of philosophical work is to know and to accept that I am in the middle [*dans le rang*], that my work, if it has any value, will give others a vis-à-vis, a chance to oppose or continue it, a provocation to question better, to think more radically and more rigorously.”³⁵

This attitude exhibits a humility that is absent from anyone who inhabits a closed system of thought. Hegel thought he was at the “end of history,” meaning (roughly) that he had achieved the completion of philosophy such that nothing after him could improve on it. By contrast, Ricœur shows awareness that future thinkers will sift through his writings, agreeing with some parts and disagreeing with others, building on it and developing it into new shapes and forms.

IV. Metaphysics can be Apophatic by Nature

Yet what we might call an “open metaphysics” is not original to Ricœur. It comes in part from Karl Jaspers, who gave the title “metaphysics” to book three of his 900-page tome, *Philosophy*. Ricœur says of this book that “it is difficult for me to express today to what extent I was fascinated,

³⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 298. “Une ontologie reste possible de nos jours, dans la mesure où les philosophies du passé restent ouvertes à des réinterprétations et des réappropriations, à la faveur d’un potentiel de sens laissé inemployé, voire réprimé, par le processus même de systématisation et de scolarisation auquel nous devons les grands corps doctrinaux que nous identifions d’ordinaire par leurs maîtres d’œuvre : Platon, Aristote, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc.” (Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015], 346–347).

³⁵ My translation. “La modestie du travail philosophique c’est de savoir et d’accepter que je suis dans le rang, que mon œuvre, si elle a quelque valeur, va fournir à d’autres un vis-à-vis, une possibilité d’opposition ou de reprise, une provocation à mieux interroger, à penser plus radicalement et plus rigoureusement” (Fragment from the Ricœur archive, cited in Olivier Abel, “Mémoire, livre, histoire chez Paul Ricœur,” *Revue de la BNF*, vol. 51, n° 3 [2015], 9).

in the 1950s, by Jaspers's great trilogy, most specifically by the final chapter of the third volume devoted to the 'ciphers' of Transcendence."³⁶

Unlike Heidegger, Jaspers is aware of the difference between modernist metaphysics as done by Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, etc., obsessed with certainty and closure, and pre-modern metaphysics which has none of these obsessions. Jaspers's *Philosophy* is almost without footnotes, so tracing the genealogy of its ideas is a non-trivial task. Nonetheless, when reading Jaspers' treatment of transcendence it is hard not to see echoes of the third-century Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus. This is supported by the fact that whenever Jaspers lists his major influences, Plotinus frequently comes second or third in the list.³⁷

Plotinus is the inaugurator of an apophatic metaphysical tradition that humbly confesses the reality of things beyond the mind's capacity to comprehend, summarized in the affirmation of a "One beyond Being" (where Being here is best understood as the domain of what can be intellectually grasped). Plotinian metaphysics is taken up and deployed in Christian theology by the fifth/sixth-century thinker known as (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite, who identifies God as the "One beyond Being" in a move that could not be more different from Hegel. Through Dionysius, Plotinian apophaticism becomes deeply influential on all pre-modern metaphysical speculation.

In "Book Three: Metaphysics," the volume that so fascinated Ricœur for a decade, Jaspers defines transcendence apophatically in a complete reversal of Heideggerian onto-theology. For Jaspers, transcendence is by definition what is beyond the grasp of any totalizing system: "I reject, as inapplicable to transcendence, whatever I can conceive. I must not define transcendence by any predicate, must not objectify it in any idea, must not conceive it by any inference."³⁸ "A closed reality of the world," Jaspers insists, "would void transcendence."³⁹ Jaspers admits that it can be hard "to refrain from fixing transcendence within the world in some form, especially since a transient form is unavoidable for the appearance of transcendence. Pursuing the mundanization [i.e. the 'making

³⁶ Ricœur, "Intellectual Autobiography," 13. "Je ne saurais dire aujourd'hui à quel point j'étais fasciné, dans les années cinquante, par la trilogie – *Philosophie* – de Jaspers et plus précisément par le dernier chapitre du tome III consacré aux « chiffres » de la Transcendance" (Ricœur, *Réflexion faite*, 25).

³⁷ See *inter alia*: Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1948), vi; Karl Jaspers, "On My Philosophy," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 137.

³⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 35. "Alles Denkbare wird zurückgewiesen als nicht gültig von der Transzendenz. Transzendenz darf durch kein Prädikat bestimmt, in keiner Vorstellung zum Gegenstand, in keinem Schluß erdacht werden" (Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 707).

³⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969 [1932]), 135 (italics original). "Eine geschlossene Weltwirklichkeit . . . höbe die Transzendenz auf" (Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 88). The German *aufheben* is notoriously difficult to translate, but I believe Ashton has correctly grasped what Jaspers is getting at in this case.

an object in the world'] of transcendence into its every hiding place is a task that can never be finished and must always be repeated."⁴⁰

Jaspers knows about the temptation to produce closed systems and the need to be ever vigilant against it. He sees the apophatic tradition of metaphysics as a helpful tool to this end, due to its assertion of a transcendence beyond conceptual grasp.

It is precisely this apophatic tradition, Ricœur observes, that is non-existent in Heidegger's genealogy: "Heidegger ignores the constant pressure exercised on ontology by the [Plotinian] thought of a One beyond Being, and by Dionysius's apophaticism, which, we have seen, runs throughout medieval ontology."⁴¹ Jaspers, on the other hand, achieves a synthesis of Plotinian-style apophatic metaphysics with the existentialist drive to openness and rejection of closed systems. He is able to do this because both philosophies insist, contrary to modernity, that the human mind cannot grasp ultimate reality with any kind of closure.

V. What Metaphysics in View?

So far all we have established is the possibility (and perhaps the necessity) of metaphysics for Ricœur. Any metaphysics that follows Ricœurian principles must: (1) acknowledge its own uncertainty; (2) be open to change, dialogue, and newness; and (3) acknowledge the possibility of things beyond the human mind's capacity to comprehend. But all of this only describes what metaphysics ought to look like without making any concrete claims. What constructive metaphysical proposals did Ricœur offer?

Many could be given.⁴² This article will focus on three of the earliest in Ricœur's corpus which I believe to be central to Ricœur's thought, underpinning his entire philosophical outlook: (1) Ricœur is what might be called a "critical realist"; (2) Ricœur believes in the primacy of positivity over negativity, not only as an attitude but as an inescapable feature of reality itself; (3) Ricœur opts for what he calls the "metaphysical choice" of consent to the unchosen features of reality. Let us examine each of these in turn.

First, although Ricœur accepts the essential insights of idealist philosophy, namely, that every concept of what is real bears the stamp of the human mind which holds it, he ultimately rejects idealism as failing to grasp the priority of being over concept. Initially, Ricœur is in dialogue with the French reflexive tradition of philosophy which combined insights from Descartes, Kant,

⁴⁰ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, 1969, 3–35. "Es ist eine außerordentliche Anstrengung, die Festsetzung der Transzendenz in irgendeiner Gestalt innerhalb der Welt zu verhindern, zumal Gestalt als vorübergehende Form für die Erscheinung der Transzendenz unausweichlich ist. Die Verweltlichung der Transzendenz in jeden Schlupfwinkel zu verfolgen, ist eine nie zu vollendende und eine immer zu wiederholende Aufgabe" (Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 707).

⁴¹ André LaCocque and Paul Ricœur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 356. "Est ignorée par Heidegger la pression constante exercée sur l'ontologie par la pensée de l'Un au-delà de l'Être, et par l'apophatisme de Denys, dont on a vu qu'il poursuivait sa course au cœur de l'ontologie médiévale" (Paul Ricœur and André LaCocque, *Penser la bible* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998], 378).

⁴² I explore more metaphysical *motifs* in Ricœur's thought in my book, *Ricœur at the Limits of Philosophy*.

and Maine de Biran among others. Later, in dialogue with Anglophone forms of neo-Kantianism in the philosophy of science, he comes to identify his position as “critical realism.”

We see the first signs of Ricœur’s position regarding idealism in his 1934 *License* (loosely the French equivalent of a Master’s thesis), written on two nineteenth-century idealist philosophers, Jules Lachelier and Jules Lagneau. While Ricœur respects them both, in his concluding chapter, he offers some critical remarks. Idealism, he says, has a tendency to claim mastery over reality by founding it on the human subject. This too easily leads to the implication that the idealist philosopher is him/herself laying the foundations of being, a dangerous illusion. “We must remember,” Ricœur says, “that our [philosophical] creations necessarily depend on something that did not come from us.”⁴³ Being is not our invention, but a gift given to us: “we do not have it within us to create being, but in a way, to receive it... We are not only meant to make our life but, in a way, to accept it.” He speaks of idealism as the “exaggeration of a philosophy that would like to make man bear all the weight of certainty.”⁴⁴

In his early years, Ricœur saw realism and idealism as mutually opposed positions. When in 1947 he compared the philosophies of Jaspers and Heidegger, he characterized them as being realist and idealist respectively: “To return to traditional language, one could say that every philosophy of transcendence is realist at heart, in the sense that it conceives being as *given*, and on the other hand a philosophy without transcendence like that of Heidegger is idealist in the sense that it attempts to ‘found’ being.”⁴⁵

This quote extends what Ricœur said thirteen years earlier in his *License*. There, he simply criticized idealism for failing to understand that we receive being rather than invent it. Here, he identifies realism (with Jaspers and through Jaspers with pre-modern philosophy) as the alternative that receives being as a gift.⁴⁶ There is no question as to which side Ricœur is on in this comparison.

There is more nuance in how Ricœur relates realism and idealism in his development of the concept of the “second Copernican revolution,” a trope which appears nine times in Ricœur’s corpus, several of which are the final conclusion of a text. It shows that Ricœur neither desires nor thinks it possible to return to pre-modern naïve realism. Kant’s first Copernican Revolution, which

⁴³ My translation. “Il faut reconnaître que nos créations s’appuient nécessairement sur quelque chose qui ne vient pas de nous” (Paul Ricœur, *Méthode réflexive appliquée au problème de Dieu chez Lachelier et Lagneau* [Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2017], 232).

⁴⁴ My translation. “Nous n’avons pas en nous à créer l’être mais en quelque façon à le recevoir. [...] Nous n’avons pas seulement à faire notre vie, mais en quelque façon à l’accueillir. [...] l’exagération d’une philosophie qui voudrait faire porter à l’homme tout le poids de la certitude” (*ibid.*, 230).

⁴⁵ My translation: “L’on pourrait dire, pour revenir au langage traditionnel, que toute philosophie de la transcendance est au fond réaliste, en ce sens qu’elle pense l’être comme *donné* ; et au contraire une philosophie sans transcendance comme celle de Heidegger est idéaliste en ce sens qu’elle tente de « fonder » l’être” (Mikel Dufrenne and Paul Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence* [Paris: Seuil, 1947], 47n61).

⁴⁶ Ricœur’s focus on “being as gift” predates Jean-Luc Marion’s work by over forty years and deserves more attention. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jean-Luc Marion, *Étant donné: Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: PUF, 1997).

exposed the subjective dimension of all thought, represents a decisive advance in philosophical understanding. Yet Kant should not have the last word. What he forgot was that “The *Cogito* is within being, and not vice versa.”⁴⁷ A second Copernican revolution is thus called for, one which displaces subjectivity from its throne as the master of being and recovers the primacy of reality, yet without abandoning the true insights of German idealism.⁴⁸

In 1975, Ricœur comes to identify his position with a school in Anglophone philosophy of science known as “critical realism.” Although the context is different, critical realism represents a response to neo-Kantianism with regard to how scientific models relate to reality (the context is less different if we remember that the original goal of Kant’s transcendental idealism was to save the sciences from Humean scepticism). Borrowing the basic contours of the notion from the great philosopher of science Ian Barbour,⁴⁹ he describes critical realism in the following way:

“On the one hand, the heuristic fiction is a form of realism in the sense that its models are not only useful, but a new aspect of reality corresponds to its extension of our concepts. Reality itself looks differently. The world itself is described in another way. [...] On the other hand, [...] the realistic intent is symbolic of reality, it’s an indirect grasp of reality, since we see things through the lens, through the screen, of the model. We think *about* things but *through* models. [...] It’s always through an available syntax that we may grasp reality.”⁵⁰

This statement is at the epistemological edge of metaphysics, yet it still entails a definite metaphysical position since metaphysics, as discourse concerning reality, must always be attentive to the “discourse” element and to the possibility of such discourse being meaningful. Without rejecting any of idealism’s insights, Ricœur firmly believes that we can engage in meaningful discourse about reality.

Secondly, Ricœur argues for a positivity at the very bottom of reality that cannot be negated. This argument depends on two thinkers: Jean Nabert (1881–1960) and Albert Camus (1913–1960). Jean Nabert, one of the last philosophers belonging to the French reflexive school, developed an idea he referred to as the “original affirmation” (“*affirmation originnaire*”). This concept seems to be Nabert’s route out of idealism, since it entails the idea of an affirmation that rises out of the core of one’s being as prior to it and its foundation. Our own “affirmation,” Nabert says, is “worthless unless it is the absolute affirmation which affirms itself in me and through me and thus

⁴⁷ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 356. Translation modified: “Le *Cogito* est à l’intérieur de l’être et non l’inverse” (Ricœur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, 576).

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive survey of the metaphor of a “second Copernican Revolution” in Ricœur’s writings, see Barnabas Aspray, “Faith, Science, and the Wager for Reality: Meillassoux and Ricœur on Post-Kantian Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, vol. 84, n° 2 (2023), 133–156.

⁴⁹ Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 37. Barbour explains critical realism in more detail, comparing it with competing theories of scientific knowledge, in *Issues in Science and Religion* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 172–174.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Imagination*, ed. George H. Taylor *et al.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 278.

guarantees my affirmation and sustains it."⁵¹ I interpret this as saying that our own epistemological grasp of ultimate reality is worthless unless it is met by the positive bedrock of reality itself, because it is reality itself that enables me to affirm anything at all.⁵²

In a short yet powerful article written in 1956, Ricœur takes up Nabert's idea of original affirmation and pairs it with an insight from Camus' *The Rebel*. The central idea of Camus' book is that a rebel cannot be against anything unless he/she is, prior to that, for something: "What is a rebel? a man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion."⁵³ Ricœur writes of this idea that "Camus so rightly expressed it, without perceiving all its metaphysical implications."⁵⁴ Ricœur believed his own age to be characterized by negativity, rebellion, rejection of previously held truths and values.⁵⁵ This negativity culminated, Ricœur believed, in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, and in fact the article's primary purpose is to refute Sartre's nihilism. In Camus and Nabert, he found the metaphysical insight that negativity cannot have the final word even in the negating individual: "one can always find an affirmation implicit in the most virulent negations of consciousness."⁵⁶ One can only reject something on the basis of what one accepts. One cannot even call a philosophy wrong except insofar as it fails to align with what one believes is right. Thus, there is an affirmation prior to everything. Being itself begins in affirmation.

Thirdly and finally, building on both his critical realism and the original affirmation, Ricœur develops a notion he calls "consent" which denotes the ultimate reconciliation of the human subject with unchosen reality.

"Consent" is the culmination of Ricœur's argument in *Freedom and Nature*.⁵⁷ Ricœur's purpose in this book is to show free decisions and actions in their relationship to what we do not choose and cannot change. Things like our motivations, our bodies, our birth parents, our

⁵¹ Jean Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, trans. William Petrek (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 48.

⁵² On the crucial influence of Nabert on Ricœur throughout Ricœur's entire corpus, see Amalric, "Affirmation originaire, attestation et reconnaissance ;" Pierre Colin, "Herméneutique et philosophie réflexive," in *Paul Ricœur : les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, ed. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1991).

⁵³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Vintage, 1991), 13. "Qu'est-ce qu'un homme révolté ? Un homme qui dit non. Mais s'il refuse, il ne renonce pas : c'est aussi un homme qui dit oui, dès son premier mouvement" (Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, 30th ed. [Paris: Gallimard, 1954], 25).

⁵⁴ Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 323. Translation modified. "[...] comme le disait si justement Camus, sans en apercevoir toutes les implications métaphysiques" (Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et Vérité* [Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001], 399).

⁵⁵ On this topic, see Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricœur and the Negation of Happiness* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 324. "On peut toujours retrouver une affirmation implicite aux négations les plus virulentes de la conscience" (Ricœur, *Histoire et Vérité*, 400).

⁵⁷ This book is also his doctoral thesis and the first volume of his great early project, *Philosophy of the Will*.

ethnicity—these are things we do not choose yet they inform our choices. The voluntary is always tied to the involuntary and limited by it.

The final standoff between our free choices and the circumstances we are not free to choose concerns our *response* to the unchosen aspects of our lives. There are two alternatives according to Ricœur: refusal, and consent. Refusal means angry and bitter defiance of the realities we have no control over and do not want, shaking our fist at the world in powerless frustration. Consent means acceptance, the difficult path by which we reconcile ourselves to unwanted realities and find peace.

Up to this point, Ricœur has been doing phenomenological analysis. But when it comes to the alternatives of refusal and consent, Ricœur says that here “phenomenology is transcended in a metaphysics.”⁵⁸ He means one’s beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality are the only possible basis for making a choice. Either we believe that reality at its heart is rotten and hostile, and there is no reconciling with it. Or we believe that, however unbearable our present circumstances are, they are not the final word: what is good and true and beautiful will outlast even the most horrendous evil.

Here, again, Ricœur does not attempt to prove the value of consent with any rational certainty. He obviously favours consent as the better alternative, and seeks to persuade his readers to do the same. But it remains a “metaphysical choice”⁵⁹—a noteworthy phrase given all we have seen about metaphysics so far.

Consent is the pinnacle of early Ricœurian metaphysics because it builds on the two metaphysical principles discussed above: realism and original affirmation. With regard to realist metaphysics, consent is to the gift of the real. Our very existence, along with the circumstances in which we are thrown, is a gift. Calling it a gift does not imply it is always welcome or wanted. It is a gift, because it is given to us prior to and without regard for our choosing. With regard to the original affirmation, to consent is to affirm the positivity at the base of reality in spite of all negativity that overlays it. In short, like the original affirmation, to consent is to say “yes.”

Conclusion

Ricœur’s willingness to make metaphysical claims is one of many things that make him unusual for his period. Other French philosophers accepted Heidegger’s attack on metaphysics and his representation of Kant almost uncritically as the new orthodoxy. But Ricœur had other influences—I have highlighted Nabert and Jaspers in particular—who give him reason to question Heidegger’s definitions and his way of reading the philosophical tradition. These influences taught him, not to side with Hegel against Heidegger and produce a closed philosophical system grounded in certainty, but to look back behind both thinkers to the way metaphysics was done

⁵⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966 [1950]), 467. “La phénoménologie se transcende elle-même dans une métaphysique” (Paul Ricœur, *Le volontaire et l’involontaire* [Paris: Aubier, 1949], 439).

⁵⁹ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 466. “[...] des options métaphysiques” (Ricœur, *Le volontaire et l’involontaire*, 439).

before modernity: without pretensions to certainty or closure, and with an apophatic core. As Dominique Janicaud puts it:

“Through his vision of metaphysics and his conception of the status of reflection in the context of an ontology of action, Ricœur is completely *opposed* to Heidegger’s injunctions or suggestions. He aims at *reactivating* the treasures of metaphysical thought, from Aristotle to Kant, from Spinoza to Schelling. This attitude is quite antithetical to that of the overcoming of metaphysics, and to the idea of an ‘end of metaphysics’ (and perhaps even more to the deconstruction of metaphysics conceived as an end).”⁶⁰

The word “reactivating” is key here. Ricœur is never one to slavishly repeat or defend traditional formulas, but to use and develop them dynamically to address present-day concerns. He had his own originary metaphysical insights which respond in crucial ways to his contemporary situation. In response to idealist philosophies that claim to centre reality on the human subject (including, in his view, Heidegger’s), Ricœur reminds them that we all exist in a world that we did not create or invent but must receive as a gift. In response to negative philosophies like that of Sartre, Ricœur points to the unshakeable positivity at the basis of reality. In response to philosophies characterized by defiance, Ricœur offers the choice of an alternative: consenting to the reality in which we find ourselves and thereby making peace with our own finitude.

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⁶⁰ Janicaud, *Heidegger in France*, 288.

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