

Dialogue and Suspicion: Ricœur, Ideology, and the Politics of Interfaith Understanding

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Abstract

Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology provides a framework through which the conditions for interreligious dialogue can be understood. According to his conception of the vulnerable self, dialogue is not simply an option for people; rather, human beings are dialogical creatures, and it is only through others that we can achieve self-understanding. However, this article argues that Ricœur's account risks universalising the dialogical condition in ways that do not fully consider how histories of coloniality continue to shape concrete encounters. By placing Ricœur in conversation with Dussel's philosophy of liberation, the article demonstrates that the universalised concept of the fractured self is still rooted in a Eurocentric genealogy of subjectivity. Dussel's distinction between the "*ego conquiro*" and the "*ego cogito*" reveals the colonial underpinnings of modernity and shows how subjects engage in dialogue under unequal historical conditions. The article contends that dialogue cannot serve as a means of mutual transformation unless power asymmetries are addressed.

Keywords: Enrique Dussel, Interreligious Dialogue, Coloniality, Eurocentrism, Power, Philosophy of Liberation, Vulnerability.

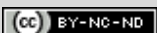
Résumé

L'anthropologie herméneutique de Ricœur offre un cadre permettant de comprendre les conditions du dialogue interreligieux. Selon sa conception du « moi vulnérable », le dialogue n'est pas une simple possibilité que les individus ont mais bien plutôt quelque chose d'essentiel pour les êtres humains qui sont des créatures dialogiques, ne pouvant parvenir à la compréhension de soi qu'à travers les autres. Cependant, cet article soutient que la réflexion de Ricœur risque d'universaliser la condition dialogique d'une manière qui ne tient pas pleinement compte de la façon dont les histoires de la colonialité continuent de façonner les rencontres concrètes. En mettant Ricœur en dialogue avec la philosophie de la libération de Dussel, l'article démontre que le concept

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universalisé du « moi fracturé » reste ancré dans une généalogie eurocentrique de la subjectivité. La distinction opérée par Dussel entre l'« *ego conquiro* » et l'« *ego cogito* » révèle les fondements coloniaux de la modernité et montre comment les sujets s'engagent dans le dialogue dans des conditions historiques inégales. L'article soutient que le dialogue ne peut servir de moyen de transformation mutuelle tant que les asymétries de pouvoir ne sont pas prises en compte.

Mots-clés : *Enrique Dussel, dialogue interreligieux, colonialité, eurocentrisme, asymétries de pouvoir, philosophie de la libération, vulnérabilité.*

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The central theme of this article is Ricœur and interreligious dialogue.¹ Although Ricœur himself did not write extensively on this particular form of dialogue, his work has become an important theoretical reference point for scholars reflecting on the foundations, conditions of possibility, and challenges of interreligious dialogue.² In particular, Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology has offered a framework for thinking of dialogue not merely as something human beings do, but as something that touches on what it means to be human. Dialogue, from this perspective, lies at the heart of the human condition; we are dialogical through and through. Yet this article takes a different focal point. It places the very framework of interreligious dialogue under critical scrutiny, asking what happens when the hermeneutical conditions Ricœur describes – vulnerability, reciprocity, reflexivity – encounter histories of power, inequality, and coloniality. I argue that Ricœur's hermeneutics, while indispensable, risks universalizing the dialogical condition in ways that do not fully reckon with how such histories continue to shape concrete encounters. As a result, some participants arrive already positioned as more different than others: as outsiders bearing a disproportionate burden of translation, exposed to a dominant gaze that shapes what can be heard and recognized in dialogue.

This critical stance arises from a growing awareness that the way dialogue is imagined in Western European and U.S. contexts, and the way it is actually experienced, do not always align. Dialogue is typically projected as a site of inclusion, reciprocity, equality, and reasonableness. It evokes the very idea of *logos*: speaking together in search of understanding, finding reasonable solutions, expressing what it means to be human as reasoning, knowledgeable, thinking creatures.³ This claim, however, is far from unproblematic. For it is precisely in the name of civilization, humanity, and reasonableness that exclusion and domination have so often been justified. Modernity understood itself as the age of reason, the age of dialogue, the age of democracy, and yet the same modernity also gave rise to the most extreme forms of war and destruction, both in

¹ I would like to thank George Taylor and Ernst Wolff for their critical and constructive comments on earlier versions of this text.

² See Roland Dubertrand, "Vérité et dialogue chez Paul Ricœur: Le philosophe et le dialogue des religions", *Chemins de dialogue* 29 (2007); J.R. Hustwit, *Interreligious Hermeneutics and the Pursuit of Truth* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014); Richard Kearney, "Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge," in *Roots, Rites and Sites of Resistance: The Banality of Good*, ed. Leonidas K. Cheliotis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 59-79; Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricœur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014); and James Taylor, "Hospitality as Translation," in *Hosting the Stranger Between Religions*, eds. Richard Kearney and James Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2011).

³ See Elad Lapidot, *The Politics of Not Speaking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2025).

Europe and its former colonies.⁴ Decolonial scholars have shown how ideals of reason and civilization were deeply entangled with colonial projects of domination, often casting Europe as the bearer of human civilization and the “rest of the world” as lacking.⁵ The idea of dialogue is itself implicated in this history of “civilization”, a history that has decided whose reason and whose humanity are recognized. The lived reality of dialogue also bears this out. Many voices, especially those from minoritized groups, experience dialogue not as an open space but as a site of marginalization or silencing.⁶ Some do not feel represented in dialogue, and others actively withdraw from it.⁷ Some have even gone so far as to describe interreligious and intercultural dialogue as a white Christian or secular space that perpetuates the colonial logic of civilization.⁸ These critiques all suggest that dialogue, despite its promise of reciprocity, can function as a space to which not all bodies have equal access.⁹ Some end up disillusioned and no longer want to participate and resort to silence. While I am not going to unpack these critiques further here, they form the horizon of concern that motivates the analysis in this article.

This article begins by revisiting Ricœur’s hermeneutical anthropology and his account of the self as both fissured and capable, a conception that makes dialogue not simply an activity between persons but a mark of the human condition itself. It then turns to the critique formulated by decolonial scholar, and, by his own account, a fervent reader of Ricœur, Enrique Dussel, who explicitly targets Ricœur’s hermeneutical anthropology and his understanding of dialogue as what he calls a form of culturalism.¹⁰ By foregrounding his claim that the *ego conquiro* precedes and enables the *ego cogito*, Dussel asks what it means to be a fractured subject under conditions of unequal power relations shaped by hegemonic and racialized orders. Whether or not Dussel’s

⁴ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Race, Religion, and Ethics in the Modern/Colonial World,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 42, no. 4 (2014).

⁵ See Anya Topolski, “Unsettling Man in Europe: Wynter and the Race-Religion Constellation,” *Religions* 15, no.1 (2024); and Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003).

⁶ See Adil Hussain Khan and Michael A. Cowan, “Why Christian-Muslim “Dialogue” is not Always Dialogical,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 28, no. 2, (2018).

⁷ See Homayra Ziad, “Why I left the Muslim Leadership Initiative,” *Muslim Matters*, (June 6, 2018); <https://muslimmatters.org/2018/06/06/why-i-left-the-muslim-leadership-initiative/>.

⁸ See Judith Gruber, “Can Women in Interreligious Dialogue Speak? Productions of In/Visibility at the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Race,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 36, no. 1 (2020); Louise Lund Liebmann, “Islam and Muslims as Elephants in the Interfaith Room: Frame Governance of Dialogue and De-radicalisation,” *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 9, no. 3 (2019); Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peacebuilding* (Oxford University Press, 2023); and Prema Rahman, “Faithwashing and the Censorship of Palestine Advocacy in Interfaith Engagement,” *The Muslim Public Affairs Council*, (June 10, 2021); <https://mpac.medium.com/faithwashing-and-the-censorship-of-palestine-advocacy-in-interfaith-engagement-db730d0eb0cb>.

⁹ See Florentien Verhage, “Living With(out) Borders: The Intimacy of Oppression,” *Emotion, Space and Society*, 11 (2014), 100.

¹⁰ Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricœur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996).

interpretation of Ricœur is entirely fair – a question that Ernst Wolff has convincingly complicated¹¹ – is not the decisive issue here. Rather than seeking to save Ricœur, I want “to stay with the trouble” his thought exposes.¹² Dussel’s critique of modern subjectivity helps me see how even reflexive, self-critical accounts of the self remain entangled in histories of conquest, domination, and exclusion. This entanglement sheds light on why, despite promising inclusion and mutuality, interreligious dialogue so often reproduces the asymmetries it seeks to overcome. It also explains why minoritized voices have been so critical of the dialogue project itself.¹³ My aim, therefore, is to think both with and beyond Ricœur: with him, insofar as his hermeneutical anthropology provides dialogue theory with its ethical core, but also beyond him, by situating dialogue within fields of asymmetry where not all voices or forms of knowing are recognized as equal. This will allow us to see how the fragile hermeneutical space of dialogue can be tilted.

1. Ricœur, philosopher of dialogue

Ricœur is sometimes referred to as a *penseur de la rencontre* or a “philosopher of all dialogues.”¹⁴ He was a thinker who persistently engaged others, especially those with contradictory positions, and who, with the generosity characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition, sought to grasp what was at stake for each, to discern what insights were valuable, and to move from there toward what is true and good. He embodied the virtue of dialogue itself: cultivating epistemological humility, practicing mutual respect, and fostering intellectual collaboration rather than agonism. He regarded the conflict of interpretations not as a problem to be overcome by some overarching consensus, but as a productive tension.¹⁵ In a similar vein, and contrary to the more common interpretation, he read the story of Babel, which discusses the shattering of languages, cultures, and some would say religions, not as a curse condemning humanity to miscommunication, but as a blessing.¹⁶ For Ricœur, Babel creates an ethical and hermeneutical space for translation: while each act of translation carries the risk of meaning loss, it also opens the

¹¹ See Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie. Décolonisation, modernité, herméneutique* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2021); Id., *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery. Decolonization, Modernity, Hermeneutics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025); Id., “¿La filosofía de la liberación frente a la hermenéutica? El ‘debate’ Dussel–Ricœur y su significado contemporáneo,” in *Paul Ricœur. Vigencia y Actualidad de la Filosofía Ricœuriana*, ed. F. Díez Fischer (Ecuador: Quito, 2025); Id., “Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica? O ‘debate’ Dussel–Ricœur e seu significado contemporâneo,” in *Paul Ricœur: Identidade e Hermenêutica Crítica*, ed. R. R. Lauxen, C. Henrique da Costa, and A. Bruzzone (São Paulo: Alameda, 2025), 61–88.

¹² See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹³ Interreligious dialogue takes many forms, e.g. spiritual, theological, practical, diplomatic dialogue, depending on who participates with which aim. When I discuss interreligious dialogue in this article, I am thinking mainly about the discourse and practice of interreligious dialogue as a form of active tolerance aimed at governing religious diversity.

¹⁴ Levine Andro Lao, “Paul Ricœur: Philosopher of All Dialogues,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (December 28, 2015); <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/217705/paul-ricouer-philosopher-of-all-dialogues/>.

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (New York: Northwestern University Press, 1996a).

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *On Translation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

possibility of discovering new layers of meaning.¹⁷ Ricœur sees linguistic hospitality as the very paradigm of intercultural and interreligious dialogue “where the pleasure of dwelling in the other’s language is balanced by the pleasure of receiving the foreign word at home, in one’s own welcoming home.”¹⁸ For Ricœur, hermeneutics is never only about hermeneutics. His insistence on the passage *from text to action* signals that interpretation always bears practical consequences: it shapes how we act, how we relate, and how we organize our shared world.¹⁹ His hermeneutics is furthermore aimed at “the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.”²⁰ In this sense, as Arrien and Contreras-Tasso observe, Ricœur’s “way of being charitable and accepting the plurality of philosophical opinions” expressed an ethical-political commitment, enacted precisely through respectful engagement.²¹

Interreligious dialogue is often framed as an encounter with difference, in which identity meets alterity.²² Within this framing, a tension is commonly assumed between identity and alterity: how can I remain faithful to myself and my tradition while simultaneously opening up to the other? How can I welcome the ‘other’ without losing my sense of self?²³ Such questions suggest that alterity is something foreign or external to identity, and they risk presenting the encounter with the other as a threat, producing fears of losing one’s identity. Here Ricœur makes an important intervention by challenging the very model of subjectivity that underlies this tension. Of particular significance is his hermeneutical anthropology, developed in *Oneself as Another*²⁴, often regarded as his *magnum opus*. In it, Ricœur develops a critique of the Cartesian subject – the so-called master subject – and instead conceives of the self as fundamentally relational, mediated, and marked by alterity.²⁵ Although Ricœur’s critique of Cartesian subjectivity and the hermeneutical anthropology he develops in *Oneself as Another* are well known, it is worth briefly revisiting them here, as they

¹⁷ See Marianne Moyaert, “The (Un-)Translatability of Religions? Ricœur’s Linguistic Hospitality as Model for Inter-religious Dialogue,” *Exchange*, 37 no 3 (2018); Marianne Moyaert, “Absorption or Hospitality?: Two Approaches to the Tension between Identity and Alterity,” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics*, eds., Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway (Cascade Books, 2010); and Taylor, “Hospitality as Translation” (2011), 61-88.

¹⁸ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 12.

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (London: Athlone, 1991).

²⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

²¹ Sophie-Jean Arrien and Beatriz Contreras Tasso, “Introduction. Paul Ricœur: Reception of an Ontology of Finitude and Capability” in *From Vulnerability to Promise: Perspectives on Ricœur from Women Philosophers*, eds., Sophie-Jean Arrien and Beatriz Contreras Tasso (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

²² Jennifer Howe Peace, “Religious Self, Religious Other: Cof ormation as a Model For Interreligious Education,” in *Critical Perspectives on Interreligious Education: Experiments in Empathy*, eds., Najeeba Syeed and Heidi Hadsell (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

²³ Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (New York: Rodopi, 2011).

²⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*.

²⁵ Ernst Wolff noticed that in *Oneself as Another* Ricœur situates himself between Descartes and Nietzsche, and that by focusing primarily on Ricœur’s Cartesian inheritance, this article risks presenting a one-sided picture of the Western subject, as if it contains no moment of fragmentation. The choice is, however, deliberate: my concern is specifically with how Ricœur has been appropriated in the interreligious dialogue literature, and it is Ricœur understood as the philosopher of narrative identity, capable selfhood, and mutual recognition, who has proven most influential there. The Nietzschean moment of suspicion has been largely been set aside in that reception.

will prove important not only for understanding dialogue's ethical core but also for recognizing how Dussel built on Ricœur while urging us to move beyond him in contexts marked by asymmetrical power.

1.1. Descartes' *I ego cogito*

Descartes invested the *cogito* with the ambition of discovering a "final, ultimate foundation" for knowledge.²⁶ Like Archimedes seeking a fixed point, he aimed to secure a "presuppositionless starting point" that could guarantee a "stable body of knowledge."²⁷ His strategy was the *method of universal doubt*: subjecting everything to doubt in order to arrive at what could not be doubted. In the face of modern skepticism, he discovered that the one certainty was the act of doubting itself: *cogito ergo sum*. This became the *terra firma* on which he built an edifice of certain knowledge, inaugurating the tradition of foundationalism, where knowledge is pictured as a structure erected upon an unshakable base.²⁸ In this way, Descartes sought to free reason from contingency, history, and bodily dependence, establishing a model of knowledge grounded in pure, abstract rationality.

Stephen Toulmin in *Cosmopolis* situates Descartes's eagerness to secure such a foundation against the backdrop of Europe's religious wars.²⁹ While many political, economic, and territorial factors figured into the conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their theological and hermeneutical drivers should not be overlooked, and for this reason, they have sometimes been called hermeneutical wars fought over conflicting interpretations of Scripture. In Toulmin's view, Descartes judged that the humanist tradition, with its epistemological humility, could not resolve these disputes. What was needed, he believed, was a firmer starting point, an indubitable rational foundation that could transcend interpretive conflict. It was this ambition that helped establish rationalism, with its abstract and universal concepts, as one of the dominant intellectual styles of modern Europe, evolving in ways Descartes himself could scarcely have anticipated. The Cartesian subject has often been described as the master subject, solitary and invulnerable, having found firm ground from which it can oversee and control any situation. Dussel speaks of the "modern ego—the paradigm of solipsistic consciousness."³⁰ This image of the Cartesian self as rational, sovereign, and insulated would come to dominate modern thought and stands in sharp contrast to Ricœur's fractured and vulnerable self.

1.2. Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology

Like Descartes, Ricœur stands within the reflexive tradition that affirms the possibility of self-awareness and self-knowledge alongside knowledge of others and the world. Indeed, without taking this over, "he finds in Descartes a concept of the [subject] as the transcendental ego where the 'I' as self-consciousness is the absolute ground, the foundation of all truth."³¹ However, Ricœur,

²⁶ Enrique Dussel, "Anti-Cartesian Meditations: On the Origin of the Philosophical Anti-Discourse of Modernity," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 13, no.1 (2014), 18.

²⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 4.

²⁸ Dan Stiver, *Theology After Ricœur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5.

²⁹ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

³⁰ Dussel, "Anti-Cartesian Meditations," 19.

³¹ Michael Barnes, *Traces of the Other* (Chennai: Satya Nilayam Publications, 2000), 79.

against the “immediate positioning of the subject” insists on the “primacy of reflective mediation”: any knowledge of oneself is always indirect and mediated through others and through the world.³² If Descartes projects an exalted, solitary, and autonomous subject, detached from tradition and divided from the body, Ricœur speaks instead of the *self* rather than the *subject*. This shift is not accidental. French reflexive verbs use *se*: *se dire* (to say oneself), *se raconter* (to narrate oneself), *se promettre* (to promise oneself). Ricœur draws on this reflexive grammar to show that the self is reflexive without being self-enclosed. The reflexive form indicates that the self does not grasp itself immediately (*je pense*), but only through mediation, action, and relation. “To say *self* is not to say I. The I is posited – or is deposed. The self is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self.”³³ Thus, his hermeneutics “proves to be a philosophy of detours.”³⁴ Ricœur does not position identity over against alterity or selfhood over against otherness. Rather, he conceives of selfhood as permeated by otherness, constituted through it. As he explains in *Oneself as Another*:

Otherness ... can be constitutive of selfhood as such. Oneself as Another suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other ... To ‘as’ I should like to attach a strong meaning, not only that of comparison ... but indeed that of implication (oneself inasmuch as being other).³⁵

Contrary to Descartes, Ricœur insists that the self is neither its own absolute master nor fully transparent to itself; it is, as he puts it, *brisé*: fissured and vulnerable, and yet capable nevertheless. In sum, Ricœur’s hermeneutical anthropology refigures the self as vulnerable, relational, and capable. By moving from the exalted cogito to this vulnerable self, Ricœur opens the dialogical space between self and other, enabling an authentic encounter of give-and-take.³⁶ To bring this into focus, I highlight four interrelated dimensions of this vulnerable self.

First, embodiment. Ricœur’s philosophical project counters the dualist understanding of the subject–object relation, which depicts the subject as a kind of ‘free-floating I’ dwelling in a body yet distinct from it. In such a view, the human body is reduced to a *corps objet*, an object-body, disconnected from its surrounding world and unable to relate meaningfully to others. This dualism does not do justice to human existence. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur emphasizes instead that human beings enter the world in the “mode of incarnation.” In other words, the body is not something we *have* but something we *are* (*corps sujet*). Human beings gain access to the world and to others through their bodies. This means that whatever affects the body also affects the person and vice versa. Describing this intimate intersubjective relationship in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes: “the lived body perceives the intentions of another body in its body, and at the same time its own intentions are perceived in the body of the other.”³⁷ In contrast to Descartes’ solitary and invulnerable cogito, the self is not an enclosed citadel but an embodied being, open to

³² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 1.

³³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 18.

³⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 5.

³⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

³⁶ Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*.

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 368.

and interlaced with the world. Perception is never a purely private act of consciousness but already relational. Subjectivity thus appears as porous, relational, and exposed, and therefore vulnerable. It is precisely here, in the body, that our openness to the world and to others becomes both possibility and risk, the very place where alterity inscribes itself into our being.

Second, situated freedom. This embodied vulnerability is central to what Ricœur, in his first major work, *Freedom and Nature*, calls situated freedom: “The very decision the self makes, the way it exerts effort, the way it perceives and desires, all bear the mark of the involuntary. It affects the self as a whole.”³⁸ Every willful decision to develop a project encounters *anankè*, necessity: each decision arises against a background of conditions the self has not chosen and cannot master: character, the unconscious, bodily passions, history, and even the unchosen beginning and end of life. On the one hand, these involuntary dimensions seem to withdraw from the will of the self, limiting its reach. On the other hand, they are not an inferior region of the self but intimately and intrinsically related to every step the self takes. The interplay of voluntary and involuntary implies that the subject is, in Ricœur’s words, “master of itself, yet servant of that necessity figured by character, the unconscious, birth, and death.”

Third, particularity. The Cartesian subject is generic and ahistorical; it is everyone and no one. The cogito speaks from nowhere, claiming to speak for everyone, but in doing so, it strips away the concrete features of identity. Ricœur by contrast, projects a self that is embodied and embedded. Here Ricœur takes up Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological starting point of embodiment and develops it hermeneutically. Whereas Merleau-Ponty stresses the intentionality of the embodied subject and the intercorporeal field of perception, Ricœur emphasizes the hermeneutical mediation of embodiment: the body is never experienced apart from the symbolic, cultural, and narrative registers through which we interpret ourselves and others. These mediations shape both how we make sense of who we are and how we perceive those around us.

Fourth, responsibility. Although Ricœur contributed to the decentering of the Cartesian cogito, he did not embrace the “alternative” of a humiliated or shattered subject. He rejects the idea of the subject as nothing but the product of contexts, deprived of freedom. Instead, Ricœur affirms that the human person is called to act and interact self-reflexively in the world and with others. Self-reflexivity, one’s capacity to turn back on oneself, is, for him, the precondition of responsibility. And responsibility, in Ricœur’s view, is one of the things that makes us human. Responsibility not only means carrying the weight of our choices and actions; it also means the capacity to make deliberate, significant decisions in complex and ambiguous situations. This “philosophy of practically wise responsible action – in relation to close-by others and in politics – forms the culmination of” Ricœur’s hermeneutical anthropology.³⁹

1.3. Ricœur and dialogue

Ricœur’s hermeneutical anthropology offers a frame for thinking dialogue not merely as something human beings do, but as something that touches on what it means to be human. Dialogue lies at the heart of the human condition; human beings are dialogical through and through. This becomes clear when set against Descartes’ figure of the master subject: solitary, self-

³⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (New York: Northwestern University, 1966).

³⁹ Wolff, *Liberation Philosophy versus Hermeneutics?*, 3.

sufficient, and invulnerable. Such a subject cannot be touched, changed, or transformed by others. It is monological, determining the world from within itself. By contrast, Ricœur's self is fragile and vulnerable. For him, subjectivity can never serve as an ultimate foundation; it is permanently marked by incompleteness (*inachèvement*). We do not fully belong to ourselves; we are not masters in our own house. That is why he prefers to speak of "oneself" (*soi-même*) rather than "myself." As he puts it, "We never know ourselves directly."⁴⁰ Selfhood is not the exalted cogito but a wounded cogito: fractured, vulnerable, never coinciding with itself, and never positing itself as a final ground. Where the Cartesian subject remains untouched by others, the fractured self is forced onto the hermeneutical detour: all reflection is mediated; there is no immediate self-consciousness. The shortest route from self to self is through the other. Because the self is fissured, it is both vulnerable and capable at once. Likewise, our capacities are always ambivalent: we can speak, but also distort or refuse to listen; we can act, but also harm or deny agency; we can narrate, but also silence parts of our story; we can take responsibility, but also evade it. And yet, these very capacities open up the possibility of transformation: we can receive new insights, we can regain our own traditions enriched and refigured, we can act together in new ways, and we can discover unexpected forms of recognition and responsibility.

Ricœur's work thus allows us to imagine dialogue as a fragile hermeneutic space: a place where people, with their different commitments, opposing beliefs, unique experiences, and personal perspectives, speak, tell stories, bear witness, and translate, in the hope that others will listen, take them seriously, understand them, and do justice to what they say, while knowing that this is all too often not the case. Fragile, because dialogue always carries risks – the risk of being silenced in speech, distorted in narration or denied in action. But it is also fragile because it carries the possibility of recognition, and transformation, and unexpected solidarity. Dialogue will always be marked by misunderstanding, lost meanings. Yet precisely through these same capacities, when we do listen, act responsibly, and allow our stories to be retold, dialogue can become the place where traditions are returned enriched and where people are stretched to imagine otherwise.

2. Hermeneutics under the Shadow of Empire

Ricœur's critique of the Cartesian cogito resonates with the concerns decolonial scholars have raised about the modern subject. They describe this figure as a master subject to expose the colonial mentality of the white, European, Christian male that underlies and is reinforced by it.⁴¹ Some, like Oswald de Andrade⁴², have even called for a "de-Descartialization of philosophy and its culturally enclosed cogito, in favor of the dialogical devoration of the 'other' typical of anthropophagy."⁴³ Likewise, Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology moves beyond an ontological understanding of the self and refigures subjectivity as vulnerable, relational, and capable. And yet, Ricœur's hermeneutics has itself become the object of sustained critique. The critique is not only that his hermeneutics remains Eurocentric, but also that it fails to reckon with the underside of

⁴⁰ Ger Groot, "De Ruimte van de Verbeelding Vergroten: Paul Ricœur Interviewed by Ger Groot," in *Twee zielen*, ed. Ger Groot (Amsterdam: Sun, 1998), 224.

⁴¹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁴² Oswald de Andrade, *A Crise da Filosofia Messiânica* (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 1950).

⁴³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 2014), 380.

modernity, where colonial violence was woven into the making of modernity, as well as with the ongoing realities of coloniality that continue to shape knowledge, subjectivity, and dialogue. This critique was formulated powerfully by Enrique Dussel, a decolonial philosopher who describes himself as a former student and “avid reader” of Ricœur.⁴⁴ He acknowledges that Ricœur’s work shaped him, but he later distanced himself from it. In 1996, he engaged Ricœur in a debate, a debate which Purcell later described as a “missed encounter.”⁴⁵

According to Dussel, the form of dialogue that emerges from hermeneutics risks becoming “culturalism”: a framework that, as Wolff notes, reflects a “blindness to power asymmetries between dominating and dominated cultures,” and ultimately to multiple forms of domination.⁴⁶ At the heart of this critique lies the claim that Ricœur, despite his ethical intentions, “remains modern under the empire of the soi-même as origin.”⁴⁷ While Wolff has convincingly shown that Dussel’s reading of Ricœur is not always fair and at times even reductive, I nevertheless find Dussel’s decolonial critique deeply insightful, especially for understanding the power asymmetries that continue to mark interreligious dialogue. I therefore suggest revisiting Dussel’s critique as a way of thinking through the power asymmetries that continue to shape interreligious dialogue. To fully grasp Dussel’s concern, I do not limit myself to his so-called failed debate with Ricœur but situate this encounter within the broader context of his work, centering what he calls “the underside of modernity”.

It is important to stress that what is at stake here is not merely the decentering of European modern civilization in the sense of recognizing it as one civilization among many, and thus relativizing its hegemonic claim to universality. The point Dussel is making is more radical: European modern civilization, centered around modern subjectivity and its claims to reason and universality, was made possible only through conquest, domination, and the denial of humanity to non-European peoples. A decolonial approach, in this sense, is not simply about pluralizing the idea of civilization, but about confronting the violence at the heart of modernity itself and taking the Global South as a source of epistemology that can disrupt hegemonies by

⁴⁴ Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 74.

⁴⁵ See Sebastian Purcell, “Space and Narrative: Enrique Dussel and Paul Ricœur: The Missed Encounter,” *Philosophy Today* 54, no.3 (2010). For Dussel, Ricœur’s hermeneutics remains confined within a European horizon and fails to recognize how Europe’s colonial expansion was constitutive of modernity itself. Ricœur’s work operates from a logic of separation; the history of Europe and the history of Latin America have different starting point even to the extent that these histories are incommensurable and incommunicable (Mendieta, 1996, p. xxv). Thus, he neglects to see these histories from a decolonial lens of entanglement. In this sense, Ricœur remains paradigmatic for the philosophical problem of Eurocentrism (Dussel, 2013). In his unpublished lecture, *Liberation philosophy versus hermeneutics? The Dussel-Ricœur “debate” and its contemporary significance*, liberation philosopher and Ricœur scholar, Ernst Wolff, also speaks about a failed conversation, not only because Dussel did not do justice to Ricœur’s scholarship in his lecture, but also because Ricœur himself seems to have “severely misjudged the significance of the encounter with Dussel” (14).

⁴⁶ Ernst Wolff, “Liberation Philosophy versus Hermeneutics? The Dussel–Ricœur ‘Debate’ and Its Contemporary Significance,” paper presented at the Federal University of Piauí, Teresina, Brazil, August 18, 2023, 6.

⁴⁷ Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 80.

reinterpreting the North as well, without, however, essentializing the South as a unified epistemological position.⁴⁸

2.1. Against Eurocentrism

Dussel challenges the Eurocentric myth of modernity, which portrays Europe's rise to progress as a purely internal achievement, geographically located in Europe, temporally beginning in the seventeenth century with the Enlightenment, and with Descartes as its pivotal figure. Against this narrative that modernity emerged solely from the rational breakthroughs of the Enlightenment, Dussel argues that modernity began earlier, in 1492, not, however, as Stephen Toulmin would have it with the birth of Renaissance humanism, but with colonial conquest.⁴⁹ Modernity, in his view, was forged in and through coloniality: the violent processes of domination, racialization, and dispossession that made possible Europe's self-image as the center of world history. Its "brighter side" of emancipation, reason, and progress was inseparable from its "darker side" of domination, racialization, and exploitation. As Dussel puts it: "Modernity includes a rational 'concept' of emancipation that we affirm and subsume. But, at the same time, it develops an irrational myth, a justification for genocidal violence."⁵⁰ This means that the very ideals of freedom and progress celebrated by modernity were never universal; they were made possible by, and complicit with, a colonial myth that denied full humanity to non-Europeans and legitimized their domination. At stake from the outset is a play of exclusion, masking, and legitimization: European particularity is elevated to the status of a powerful universality, while the "others" of Europe are relegated to the periphery, particularized, and inferiorized.

To make this point, Dussel reconstructs the intellectual genealogy leading to modern European skepticism, arguing that before Descartes' methodological doubt there existed a *colonial* form of doubt, one that arose in the context of the "discovery" of the New World and the Valladolid debates about the humanity of Indigenous peoples (1550–51). During these debates, European theologians and jurists questioned whether Indigenous peoples had souls, whether they could be

⁴⁸ Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 8.

⁴⁹ See also chapter 1 of (Moyaert, 2014), where I myself developed a typical Eurocentric approach to reflexive philosophy. I am deeply indebted to Decolonial Jewish scholar Santiago Slabodsky for having taught me to look at the history of modernity from the perspective of the Global South and with a decolonial lens. He writes: "Spanish-speaking theorists typically locate [the dawn of modernity] at the turn of the sixteenth century, with the inauguration of Iberian, and later pan-European imperialism in the Americas. This school of thought designates imperial developments as initiating the first modernity, and major revolutionary upheavals as precipitating the second [modernity]. The first modernity starts with a process of capitalist primitive accumulation. It is the result of the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from the continent, the subjugation of the Native populations in the Americas, and the enslavement of Africans that Europe was able to find the resources that later would become critical to launching the Industrial Revolution and the second modernity. In other words, what became of colonial racialization of people funded the possibility of an economic revolution that gave a new bourgeois class the chance to demand individual freedom. It is thus at the expense of exploitation, expropriation, and enslavement of, among others, barbarians, that Western liberties were achieved." Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking*, 8.

⁵⁰ Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures)," *Boundary 2*, no. 3 (1993), 66.

saved, whether they were rational beings.⁵¹ Unlike Descartes' methodical doubt, which sought to ground knowledge, this earlier skepticism questioned the humanity of colonized peoples themselves.⁵² Nelson Maldonado-Torres has called this "racist/imperial, Manichean, misanthropic skepticism" and explains:

Skepticism becomes the means to reach certainty and provide a solid foundation to the self. And just like the *ego conquiro* predates and precedes the *ego cogito*, a certain skepticism regarding the humanity of the enslaved and colonized sub-others stands at the background of the Cartesian certainties and his methodic doubt... Unlike Descartes's methodical doubt, Manichean misanthropic skepticism is not skeptical about the existence of the world or the normative status of logics and mathematics. It is rather a form of questioning the very humanity of colonized peoples.⁵³

This skepticism subsumed the non-European, non-white, non-Christian 'other' under the category of the barbarian, a figure whose supposed irrationality and lack of humanity secured the European self as rational, universal, and sovereign.⁵⁴ This skepticism forms "the point of departure for modern European philosophy with its universality claim."⁵⁵ For Dussel, Descartes' *ego cogito* marks only the second stage of modernity, the stage that could emerge only after the *ego conquiro*, the conquering subject of the colonial enterprise, had already asserted control over the world. The mentality of conquest, however, saturates the Cartesian project, shaping its conception of reason and subjectivity. The *ego cogito* feeds on the *ego conquiro*, and the *ego conquiro* feeds on the production of the Other. The modern subject's reflection begins not with innocent doubt but with the colonial act of defining who counts as fully human. Crucially, the Cartesian division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* must be read within this horizon of coloniality and the making of the Other.

By defining the soul as immaterial thinking substance and the body as mere extension, Descartes produced an abstract 'universal' body stripped of qualities such as color, sex, or culture. Yet this universality masked its particularity: it presupposed the unmarked white, male, European body as normative. As Dussel bluntly observes, "The Cartesian dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is built upon an anthropological colonial difference between the *ego conquistador* and the *ego conquistado*."⁵⁶ From this "zero point" of subjectivity, only Europeans could occupy the position of *res cogitans*, the rational subject, while colonized and enslaved peoples – Black, Indigenous, and non-European, non-Christian –were relegated to *res extensa*, aligned with nature and reduced to exploitable objects. In his words

⁵¹ For a discussion of the religio-racialized logic of this discussion see Chapter 4 of my recent book *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other: a History of Religionization* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2024)

⁵² Enrique Dussel, "Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue," *Buddhi* 17, no.1 (2013), 9.

⁵³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 245-246.

⁵⁴ For an in-depth discussion of the figure of the barbarian see Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014). He refuses Europe's modern civilizational logic and insists that that critique must start from the barbarian position, not from the center.

⁵⁵ Dussel, "Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue," 13.

⁵⁶ Dussel, "Anti-Cartesian Meditations," 20.

The European 'I', which had enunciated to the South for over a century and a half, beginning in 1492, its formulation, '*I conquer the New World*', now assumed itself as a universal ontological foundation as 'I'. This central Ego... around which everything revolved, was inadvertently European: a European 'I' with the pretension of discovering itself to be universal and ultimate, which knows itself, and which can reconstruct *all of the world* (including all of the worlds contained within the South).⁵⁷

What Dussel's decolonial reading makes possible is a shift of perspective. In his philosophy of liberation, he insists that critique must be carried out from *exteriority*, i.e., from the standpoint of those rendered invisible or excluded from rational subjectivity. From exteriority, the myth of modernity is unmasked: indeed, what presents itself as universal reason is in fact sustained by violence and exclusion. For Dussel, modernity was "born" not with the publication of the *Discourse on Method* in 1637 but in 1492, when Europe constituted itself as a unified ego confronting, conquering, and covering over its colonial other.⁵⁸ From this position of *exteriority*, what the cogito hides becomes visible: it does not transcend history but conceals the material and political conditions of conquest that made it possible. Europe's claim to universality is unmasked as self-enclosure, "an order already dominated by the triumphant bourgeoisie,"⁵⁹ dependent on the concealment of colonial being.

Building on this decolonial analysis of modernity, Dussel formulates a sharp criticism of Ricœur, arguing that Ricœur's hermeneutics remains Eurocentric and becomes a form of culturalism devoid of a power analysis and oblivious to colonial violence and domination, especially in its reception as a paradigm of reciprocal intercultural, and I would add interreligious, dialogue.⁶⁰ Dussel is no longer interested in developing some kind of intercultural hermeneutics in line with Ricœur or a Latin American hermeneutics, but he rather wants develop a philosophy of liberation, which starts from the first exteriority, i.e. the position of the oppressed, excluded, colonized; assumes asymmetry and recognizes that knowledge is produced in the midst of struggle and violence.

As mentioned above, Wolff has convincingly complicated Dussel's critique, showing that his reading is somewhat reductive and glosses over Ricœur's more political writings, in which he takes a strong anticolonial position, fiercely condemning Europe's colonial violence and its racist logic, calling for an intercultural dialogue that decenters Europe and recognizes plural claims to civilization, and revealing (though this would require further elaboration), the close connections between his hermeneutical anthropology and socio-political commitment.⁶¹ Nevertheless, in my

⁵⁷ Dussel, "Agenda for a South-South Philosophical Dialogue," 12.

⁵⁸ Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," 66.

⁵⁹ Dussel, "Anti-Cartesian Meditations," 51-52.

⁶⁰ See Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 81.

⁶¹ Wolff's retrieval of Ricœur's early socio-political writings makes clear that Ricœur was acutely aware of colonial violence, power asymmetries, and the need to decenter Europe's claims to civilization. This raises an important question for the reception of Ricœur in interreligious and intercultural dialogue. While IRD scholarship has drawn heavily on Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology, especially on *Oneself as Another*, this text, written in the 1990s, largely lacks the decolonial sensibility present in

reading, Dussel's decolonial liberation philosophy sheds light on a problem that mainstream scholars of interreligious dialogue often neglect and that minoritized voices have been trying to bring into focus: namely, how interreligious and intercultural dialogue itself can become a site where colonial violence is perpetuated and power inequalities are reproduced, to the extent that the fragile self comes to a breaking point. It is precisely here that I want to focus this article's attention. I therefore ask what Dussel's decolonial approach means in view of Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology of the fissured self, and, by extension, for the endeavor of intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

2.2. The Vulnerable Self and the Underside of Modernity

Like Dussel, Ricœur criticizes Descartes' *ego cogito*, the self-enclosed, self-sufficient "I think." Against this modern ideal of autonomy, he develops an image of the *vulnerable* self: a self that is fissured and fractured, never fully at home, and always coming to self-understanding through the detour of the other. Yet this self, though fragile, is also *capable*; capable of speaking, acting, narrating, remembering, promising, and taking responsibility. For Ricœur, this capacity defines the human condition in its universality. We are, to borrow a theme from Julia Kristeva, all *strangers to ourselves*.⁶² As I argued earlier, this fractured self is dialogical through and through. We know ourselves only as we encounter others, only as we receive ourselves back, transformed through dialogue. Connecting this to intercultural and interreligious dialogue: because we are strangers to ourselves and to one another, we are called to *linguistic hospitality*. It is by *venturing into the world of the cultural and religious other* and "translating the stranger's world – his symbols, narratives, rituals and practices – into my world" and allowing my own world to be translated into a strange idiom that we gain a transformed understanding of both self and other.⁶³ Thus, the risk of meaning loss, which is undoubtedly real, can be matched by the gain of meaning and the discovery of unexpected layers of meaning.

While I think Dussel would, to a large extent, agree with Ricœur's critique of Descartes and his portrayal of the fractured self, he radicalizes this critique of Cartesian modernity and, in doing so, exposes the Eurocentric horizon within which Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology remains situated.⁶⁴ For Dussel, Ricœur remains caught in what he calls *the myth of modernity*: the

Ricœur's earlier work. Its dominance in the field has enabled a more depoliticized reading of dialogue, detached from ideology critique and structural analysis. A similar dynamic can be observed in the enthusiastic uptake of Ricœur's *On Translation*, where the ethics of translation and the metaphor of linguistic hospitality have offered a compelling normative model for interreligious encounter, yet without the sharper political reflections that accompany Ricœur's earlier thinking on civilization, violence, and power. Whether this signals a depoliticization in Ricœur's later work, or a selective reception that separates his anthropology from his ideology critique, remains an open question and exceeds the scope of this article. What can be said, however, is that Wolff's work reveals that Ricœur's oeuvre contains more resources for a critical, decolonial approach to interreligious dialogue than is often assumed.

⁶² Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁶³ Taylor, "Hospitality as Translation," 11.

⁶⁴ See Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 80. This is particularly clear in Ricœur's response to Dussel. Consider the following passage: "Thus, the Latin American philosophies of liberation depart from a

story Europe tells about itself as a project of emancipation, reason, and progress, while concealing the colonial violence that underwrote its very possibility. According to Dussel, Ricœur, like much of modern philosophy, does not reckon with the entanglement of modernity and coloniality or with what he terms *the underside of modernity*: the histories of conquest, enslavement, and racialization that made Europe's self-image of universality possible.

The "other" of the modern subject was the non-white, non-European, non-Christian: the Jew, the Muslim, and the "pagan"; those marked by "black, red, and yellow skin."⁶⁵ This religio-racialized logic was not external to modern thought but integral to the very formation of the philosophical subject. The Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, rational *ego cogito* depended on its shadow figure – the colonized, racialized, and non-Christian other – whose supposed lack of reason secured Europe's claim to universality. Over time, this religio-racialized logic sedimented in the West's cultural archive: it has permeated our language, our philosophical concepts, and even our affective dispositions. Modern philosophy has 'forgotten' this genealogy and further masks it through the very ideals of freedom, equality, and reason, which were themselves forged within the colonial matrix of power. What Dussel exposes, then, is that modern reflexivity itself – of which Ricœur's hermeneutics is a descendant – rests on this violent structure of selfing and othering. What is more, we still live in a time of coloniality; in the enduring afterlives of empire. As decolonial scholar Aníbal Quijano argues, *the coloniality of power* continues to structure the modern world: our social, political, and intellectual life remains organized through hierarchies of race, knowledge, and being that were born in colonialism but now define modernity itself.⁶⁶ Decolonization, understood as the political emancipation of formerly colonized peoples, did not end coloniality, nor did it undo the hermeneutical injustices that continue to shape how subjects meet, speak, and are understood. Therefore, before we ever meet the other, the other has already been imagined, signified, and positioned within this inherited colonial archive of meanings.⁶⁷ Every encounter thus carries traces of these histories; it is never simply an exchange between equals, but a meeting already mediated by asymmetries of power and imagination. While Ricœur may have dethroned the *ego cogito*, with Dussel one must wonder whether he has sufficiently taken into account the weight of history. Has he reckoned with the structural entanglement of

precise situation of economic and political pressure which puts them in direct confrontation with the United States. However, in Europe our experience of totalitarianism, in its double aspects, Nazism and Stalinism – eight million Jews, thirty or fifty million Soviets sacrificed, Auschwitz and the Gulag—serves as a different point of departure.... If I insist on the heterogeneity of the histories of liberation, it is in order to prepare our spirits to admit not only that these experiences are diverse, but perhaps even incommunicable. Furthermore, the self-understanding that is attributed to the one, creates obstacles to the full comprehension of the other, and a certain controversy with respect to this intention is perhaps insurmountable for us as well" (Ricœur, 1996b, 205-6) This passage is permeated by the exact logic of separation which Dussel contests. It splits the history of Europe and modernity from colonial histories, thereby missing that both are entangled to such a degree that (the one is not possible without the other. Dussel, in his response makes his position clear: "This hermeneutics of incommunicable histories leaves the dominator from the metropolitan center in total innocence with respect to all the cruelties committed in the periphery during the whole of modernity " (Dussel, 1996a, 215).

⁶⁵ See Jennings, *After Whiteness*; and Moyaert, *Christian Imaginations of the Religious Other*.

⁶⁶ Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 168–78.

⁶⁷ See Edward W. Said, *Culture and imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1994); and Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003).

modernity and coloniality, and how the religio-racial colonial logic continues to shape the hermeneutics of selfing and othering?

Indeed, Ricœur's hermeneutics of the vulnerable self retains an air of innocence, an innocence that certainly extends to his understanding of linguistic hospitality. This innocence is sustained by a lack of sustained and explicit engagement with past and present colonial violence in both his hermeneutical anthropology and his ethics of translation. Building on Dussel, the question we should ask is whether Ricœur's meeting between self and other, precisely because the underside of modernity remains underthematized in his hermeneutical anthropology, does not risk reinforcing European, white, and secularized Christian normativity, even when the encounter takes place between fractured and vulnerable subjects. In the end, both self and other remain caught within the gravitational field of empire.

2.3. When Dialogue Begins as Conquest

To see what is at stake when the underside of modernity remains underthematized, we must return to the scene where modernity was forged. For Dussel, this scene is not primarily philosophical but historical: the colonial encounter itself, in which interpretation, translation, and dialogue first took shape under conditions of conquest. Dussel insists that *modernity is born from coloniality* and that this birth, far from being a purely philosophical event, took the form of a concrete intercultural and interreligious encounter. We are dealing with the Spanish and Portuguese Catholics who, after reconquering the Iberian Peninsula from Muslims and expelling Jews, set sail to conquer the so-called *terra incognita*, i.e. lands unknown to them but already inhabited by peoples they called *pagans*. This encounter, however, was not one between equals; it was an encounter of domination. Dussel illustrates this with a striking example from the sixteenth century: the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, nicknamed *Tonatiuh*, "the sun," by the Maya for his blond hair, invaded Guatemala, imposing his world upon the Mayan world. The Mayas were *readers* of their own sacred texts, among them the *Popol Vuh*, a cosmological and ethical narrative that ordered their life and world. Alvarado, by contrast, came as a *reader* of another text, the Hebrew-Christian Bible. But rather than entering into dialogue, he imposed his text upon theirs.⁶⁸ Dussel makes this critique painfully concrete through a scene of colonial encounter permeated by hermeneutical injustice:

[...] just as a product is achieved through work, and a worker can be dominated by another (c.g., conquistador) – and injustice here means the robbery of the value of the work of the dominated – in an analogous manner, the dominator (the conqueror of the Mexican Yucatan) who has written a "text" (for example, the Christian New Testament), does not live by the rules of hermeneutic justice, first, when they impose on the Mayas of Yucatan a "foreign text" under threat of violence, and second, when they ignore the "dominated text" – for example, the *Popol Vuh* of the Mayas. That is, and this is the question not answered by Ricœur; Is not hermeneutics implicated with concrete historical cases such as those of the conquest of America by the Spaniards or of Canada by the French? To what [...] extent can the dominated read the "text" of the dominator, or the dominator the "text" of the dominated? Which are the hermeneutical difficulties, the categories that would have to be developed in order to be able to analyze these cases which are our interest in Latin America?

⁶⁸ Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 86.

It concerns, then, developing hermeneutical themes not developed in the center, but of great interest for the periphery. Not more, not less.⁶⁹

As Dussel explains, what was called “evangelization” functioned as a process of substitution: through military, political, and economic conquest, the European text displaced the Mayan text. The conquered people were forced to interpret an alien text. Here, interpretation unfolds not in reciprocity but under domination. Ricœur, as we shall see, was not unaware of this; his early work contains a fierce condemnation of colonial violence. The question, however, is why this awareness does not find its way into his hermeneutical anthropology and his ethics of translation.

2.4. When the anti-colonial horizon recedes

At this point, two things must be said in defense of Ricœur. First, it cannot be claimed that Ricœur was naïve or ignorant of colonial violence or of its racialized logic. In his early work, especially between the 1940s and 1960s, Ricœur took a clear anticolonial political stance. He explicitly condemned the multiple regimes of oppression imposed on colonized peoples, critically analyzed racism and violence, and consistently argued for the need to decenter Europe’s claims to civilization, most notably in his essay “Universal Civilization and National Cultures.”⁷⁰ His philosophical engagement during the era of decolonization was shaped by, and responsive to, the emancipatory struggles of that period. Second, Ricœur’s early vision of intercultural dialogue was itself oriented toward the decentering of Eurocentric universality. Dialogue, for him, was not meant to be an extension of European self-understanding, but an encounter in which Europe, too, would be unsettled and provincialized.

Yet this anticolonial horizon seems to recede in Ricœur’s later work, including the writings that have been most formative for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In his reflections on translation, dialogue, and linguistic hospitality, Ricœur does not return to his earlier analysis of colonial violence or to the question of how power asymmetries persist beyond formal decolonization. Nor do those who have appropriated his work for the field of interreligious dialogue generally do so. One may wonder whether Ricœur’s acute sensitivity to colonial violence in the 1940s–1960s was tied to decolonization as an overt political process, and whether, once political emancipation became a fact rather than a visible struggle, the ongoing logic of coloniality, its continuation through institutions, norms, and epistemic hierarchies, receded from view. Consider in this regard, once again, *On Translation*, which was published ten years after Dussel’s critique, which means the opportunity existed to engage Dussel’s critique directly and integrate it in his reflections on interreligious and intercultural hermeneutics. Here, Ricœur develops his ethics of linguistic hospitality, which projects vulnerability, receptivity, and mutuality as ideals. His hermeneutics does not revolve around grasping or conquering but around the humble recognition that every act of translation comes at a cost. Those who cannot live with that loss, those who want to stay in control of meaning, will avoid translation and, by consequence, avoid encounter. Yet, for Ricœur, translation is also a gift: alongside loss, there is gain: the retrieval of forgotten meanings,

⁶⁹ Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 86.

⁷⁰ Paul Ricœur, “Universal Civilization and National Cultures”, in *History and Truth* (New York: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 271–84.

and the discovery of new insights that emerge only through encounter. Against an understanding of encounter as conquest, Ricœur sets the image of mutual hospitality: transformation does not happen through the appropriation of the other, but through the dis-appropriation of the self, i.e. through the willingness to be unsettled, to let one's own categories be translated, even transformed, by the other. He does speak about the violence of translation. He even writes that translators suffer under this violence, since to translate is always, in some sense, to betray. This violence, for him, is inherent to the act of translation itself and can even be generative of meaning: it is through tension and loss that new insight arises. Yet Ricœur does not further differentiate this. He treats this violence as universal, without asking who suffers it, and under what conditions.

2.5. Unequal Fractures of the Self

This hermeneutical limitation has concrete consequences, certainly when thinking through interreligious dialogue. When Ricœur envisions interreligious encounters as a process of translation, he does not address the problem of cultural and religious hegemony. Because dominant languages, symbols, and worldviews already function as the unmarked norm of intelligibility, translation is never distributed symmetrically. As a result, the burden of translation falls disproportionately on those who deviate from dominant norms. Those who inhabit the dominant culture, who embody its language, symbols, and worldview, can choose whether to translate or not, whether to be enriched by encounter or to remain at home. They can opt in and out of interculturality and interreligiosity. For those who do not belong to the majoritized culture, this choice does not exist. They cannot but translate, navigate, and mediate. They must constantly move between worlds, making their own worlds understandable, relatable, legible, even reasonable within the terms of the dominant one. And when they fail to do so, when their words, rituals, or truths resist translation, they are too often dismissed as irrational, closed, or non-dialogical. They once again become the Other: the one outside the circle of mutual understanding. This brings us back to the lived reality of dialogue with which I began. The critiques voiced by minoritized participants, the experiences of withdrawal, fatigue, exclusion, and refusal, are symptoms of a deeper anthropological and genealogical problem. They point to a misalignment between how dialogue is imagined in theory and how it is inhabited in practice. It is at this level that Ricœur's anthropology of the fractured self must be reconsidered.

Ricœur's understanding of dialogue is underpinned by his anthropology of the fissured or fractured self. We are, as he writes, all strangers to ourselves and to one another. Yet this universal claim passes too quickly over the fact that some are more strange than others, precisely because they deviate from the norm. As Florentien Verhage puts it,

When we are all strangers to each other then we lose sight of why some people are conceived as stranger than others. When we are all intimately adhering to one another, then we cannot explain why some fit easily and freely into the intersubjective dance, why some are the masters of this dance, and why others are systematically subjected and pre-figured as lesser partners or even simply excluded from participation.⁷¹

Likewise, Ricœur's idea that we come to deeper self-understanding through the detour of the other, through translation, overlooks that the image some others receive back through that

⁷¹ Verhage, "Living With(out) Borders," 100.

detour is not affirming but distorted. What they receive back are deep collective prejudices, sedimented cultural images, and affective residues of a long history of racialization and exclusion. These distortions are not merely interpersonal; they are involuntary dimensions of subject formation under coloniality, structures that shape self and other differently, long before any conscious act of dialogue takes place. Despite the claim 'we' live in a postcolonial or postracial era, coloniality persists as an ongoing structure of power that organizes space, knowledge, and subjectivity. It determines who moves freely and feels at home, and who is marked as stranger, suspect, or out of place. What appears to some as a space of reciprocity and openness may, for others, be a space of double pain: the promise of dialogue shadowed by the reality of alienation. Interreligious and intercultural encounters, even when they are imagined in terms of mutual hospitality, are structured by histories that are not past. The relational model 'self/other' appears symmetrical, but it is genealogically unequal: the Western self came into being by casting the racialized, colonized, or non-Christian body as its foil. Some fractures are historically produced and continuously reproduced by coloniality. This brings us to the deepest level of the problem. To begin dialogue as if both parties were simply human interlocutors is to begin from a fiction of mutuality, a fiction that conceals the very power relations that made the distinction between self and other possible in the first place and that continues to structure the underside of modernity.

3. Conclusion

Dialogue is often imagined as a humanizing encounter: a space where differences are exchanged, where self and other listen, respond, and return to themselves enriched. Ricœur gives this vision philosophical depth. By projecting the self as fissured, fragile, and never fully at home, he counters the self-enclosed ego cogito and opens space for mutuality and reflexivity. Yet, as this article has argued, Ricœur's hermeneutics remains situated within a Eurocentric genealogy of reflexive philosophy. His anthropology of the fractured self does not fully reckon with how the coloniality of power continues to shape encounters today. The fissure may be universal in structure, but the fractures of coloniality cut unequally. Dialogue, therefore, is not always a meeting of equals.

For those already marked by racialization or religious minoritization, dialogue is often experienced not as mutual hospitality but as asymmetrical demand. They are asked to explain, justify, or translate themselves within spaces that were never designed for them. What appears to some as a humanizing exchange may, for others, feel like a repetition of epistemic injustice. This is why interreligious and intercultural dialogue is so often described as a space oriented around European norms. When the labor of adjustment and translation remains unrecognized, it accumulates as fatigue. In this light, refusal to engage in dialogue is not apathy but critique. It exposes the limits of a dialogical imaginary that presumes reciprocity, where asymmetry persists.⁷² Reading Ricœur through the eyes of Dussel has enabled me to better understand the critiques that minoritized voices have articulated against dialogue, not to reject dialogue as such, but to refuse dialogical forms that reproduce asymmetry while claiming reciprocity.

To return to Ricœur: those of us working in dialogue have been drawn to his anthropology because it imagines encounter as transformative. But this model risks masking what Dussel has

⁷² See Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

made visible: that the categories of “self” and “other” have been historically produced through empire. The Western self came into being by casting the racialized, colonized, or non-Christian other as its negative mirror. These histories continue to shape who is legible as a dialogical subject today. If dialogue is to move forward, it requires tracing how colonial, racial, and Christian normativities shape who speaks from “home” and who appears as “out of place”. Only by exposing these concealed genealogies and orientations can dialogue begin to approach the ethical and transformative practice it promises to be.

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