

Ethics and Liberation

Between Paul Ricœur and Enrique Dussel

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between the philosophies of Paul Ricœur and Enrique Dussel, especially in ethics. It also highlights the critical appropriation of the ethico-narrative core of Ricœur's hermeneutics. It then emphasizes the main impasse: the reason for the distance between the two philosophical projects lies in the ethico-ontological core of the hermeneutics of the self, more precisely in the definition of the relationship with the other. Finally, leveraging the recent historiography, the article develops a productive synthesis and mutual appropriation of both authors' thoughts.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur, Enrique Dussel, Ethics, Hermeneutics, Coloniality.

Résumé

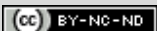
Cet article examine les relations entre les philosophies de Paul Ricœur et d'Enrique Dussel, notamment en matière d'éthique. Il met également en lumière l'appropriation critique du noyau éthico-narratif de l'herméneutique de Ricœur. Ensuite, il souligne l'impasse principale : la distance entre les deux projets philosophiques s'explique par le noyau éthico-ontologique de l'herméneutique du soi, plus précisément par la définition du rapport à l'autre. Enfin, à la lumière de l'historiographie récente, l'article élabore une synthèse productive et une appropriation réciproque des pensées des deux auteurs.

Mots-clés : Paul Ricœur, Enrique Dussel, Éthique, Colonialisme.

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Ethics and Liberation

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1. Introduction

It remains necessary to revisit the difficult, fruitful, and little-explored philosophical dialogue between Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) and Enrique Dussel (1934-2023), which took place in 1991 at the University of Naples during the first international seminar entitled *Hermeneutics and Liberation*, organized by the Italian professor Domenico Jervolino (1946-2018). The records of this event, which were later published by Dussel under the title *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la Filosofía de la Liberación*,¹ demonstrate not only a moment of intellectual exchange among important contemporary thinkers, but also the tension between two ethical traditions: one which is marked by the contemporary European context in which there is the resumption of virtue ethics and deontology, from the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology, and the other which is motivated by Latin American demands for ethics of liberation.

It is also important to clarify that, despite the theme of the seminar being “Hermeneutics and Liberation”, the emphasis here falls on ethics since the reflections shared in that event converge on a decisive question: how is it possible to move from hermeneutics to ethics in the Latin American context? More precisely: how can symbolic and literary hermeneutics contribute to an ethics of liberation?

This stage of the application of hermeneutics, which for Ricœur encompassed only the internal movement of a particular culture, is conceived by Dussel from the concrete experience of centuries-long colonial domination and from the need for an ethics of liberation for Latin America. From this emerges another question, which in our view is the central one and which we will address at the end of this study: to what extent can Ricœurian ethics, as co-original with the hermeneutics of the self, contribute to an ethics of liberation? In other words, this amounts to questioning the ethical subject itself in its relationship with and toward the other.

Three reasons justify placing ethics at the center of this debate. First, because symbolic hermeneutics, as proposed in *La symbolique du mal*, was initially taken by Dussel as the most appropriate instrument for bringing to light the ethico-mythical core of Amerindian cultures. Second, because narrative hermeneutics, as formulated by Ricœur, conceives literary fiction as the “first laboratory of moral judgment,” from which the reader can reconfigure his or her life.² Third, because, as Ricœur himself acknowledges, the dynamic that moves from text to action is analogous

¹ Enrique Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la Filosofía de la Liberación* (México: Editora de la Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993), 208.

² Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 167.

to that which leads from hermeneutics to ethics, situating us within the very trajectory that runs from the “little ethics” (*petite éthique*) to ontology in *Soi-même comme un autre*.

From Dussel’s perspective, it suffices to underscore the fact that the entirety of his work places ethics in a central and strategic position as a first philosophy. In a word: the Philosophy of Liberation is an Ethics of Liberation.

The present study is divided into three parts. The first examines how Dussel receives and applies the hermeneutics of symbols. The second focuses on the critique directed at Ricœur’s literary hermeneutics. The third part returns to the question of the subject of Ricœur’s “little ethics” from the perspective of Dussel and Levinas, with particular attention to the concepts of oneself and alterity, and it identifies several points at which Ricœur’s critique can correct Dussel’s trajectory. Finally, it suggests some respects in which a positive appropriation of the thought of both authors is possible.

2. The Ethico-Mythical Core of Symbolic Hermeneutics

In his effort to reconstruct the philosophical itinerary of Paul Ricœur, Enrique Dussel adopts, in his 1993 book *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la Filosofía de la Liberación*, an expository strategy that follows the very chronology of the French thinker’s work. This choice is not fortuitous, since it allows one to highlight, with rigor and simultaneously, both the decisive stages of Ricœurian hermeneutics and their respective influences on the different phases of the Philosophy of Liberation. Three stages stand out: (1) symbolic hermeneutics of *La symbolique du mal* (1960); (2) the literary hermeneutics of *Temps et récit* (1983–1985) and *Du texte à l’action* (1986); and (3) the hermeneutics of the self in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990).

La symbolique du mal – contained in the second volume of *La philosophie de la volonté* – inaugurates, for Dussel, the long route of phenomenological hermeneutics, in contrast to the short route of Heideggerian phenomenology. In this work, famously marked by the motto “the symbol gives rise to thought” (*le symbole donne à penser*), Ricœur understands that the ethical perspective of a culture is revealed through its symbolic production. Dussel, who attended Ricœur’s lectures in Paris, recognizes in this ethico-mythical core of symbolism the theoretical matrix that would initially give shape to his own philosophy. As he states: “‘*La symbolique du mal*’ was the first work I meditated upon in depth. It became the very foundation of my Latin American philosophical project.”³

As a result, in the 1970s Dussel would carry out a philosophical proposal that he termed a “phenomenological hermeneutics of Latin American culture.” In this proposal, Ricœurian philosophical hermeneutics is employed as a methodological key capable of opening the ethico-mythical core (*noyau éthico-mythique*) around which a culture or civilization is organized.⁴ The expression “ethico-mythical core” appears in Paul Ricœur’s article entitled “Universal Civilization

³ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 139; trans. by the author.

⁴ Ernst Wolff, “Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica? O ‘debate’ Dussel- Ricœur e seu significado contemporâneo,” in *Identidade e hermenêutica crítica*, eds. Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa, Andrés Bruzzone (São Paulo: Alameda, 2025), 81–88.

and National Cultures,” published in *Histoire et vérité*.⁵ In this context, the task of hermeneutics would consist in interpreting the symbolic records of a human group with the aim of revealing its intrinsic ethics, much as in the tradition of Christian medieval exegesis the spiritual senses of Scripture were drawn from the literal sense.⁶

The *Filosofía de la Liberación* thus bears, from its very origins, the mark of the ethics inherent in Paul Ricœur’s symbolic hermeneutics. Dussel himself acknowledges that he composed each of the “treatises” of his Latin American ethics of liberation, published between 1973 and 1980 (especially volume III), “in the Ricœurian manner” (*a la manera ricoeuriana*), that is, beginning with a hermeneutics of symbols that seeks to disclose the ethico-mythical meaning of Amerindian cultures. This methodology served to generate categories such as “symbolic historicity,” “symbolic erotics,” “symbolic pedagogy,” “symbolic politics,” and “symbolic archaeology,” all of which are conceived as moments of a single liberating hermeneutical spiral.

However, throughout the elaboration of the five volumes of his *ética de la liberación*, Dussel faces the limits of the Ricœurian hermeneutic model.⁷ From one perspective, the hermeneutics of symbols made it possible to discover the ethico-mythical core of Amerindian cultures, confronting them with European culture. On the other hand, it proved insufficient when approaching the asymmetry between these two cultures, especially relations of domination of one over the other. From Dussel’s perspective, it was clear that symbolic hermeneutics, which was initially thought to decipher the internal sense of a culture, was not enough to explain the violence imposed by the dominant European culture in the process of Latin American, Asian, and African colonization, nor the structures of oppression and exploitation which have marked (and continue to mark) these relationships historically.

It is precisely at this point that Dussel proposes a critical inflection: just as the Reconquista (1492) of the Iberian Peninsula took place through violent struggle against Muslims and Jews in the name of Christianity, the so-called “spiritual conquest” of the Americas would be no different. European Christian culture would promote the violent destruction of autochthonous religions and of the very *modus vivendi* of Indigenous peoples. In this sense, for Dussel, the year 1492 – commonly celebrated as the Discovery of America – does not mark merely the beginning of Modernity as the triumph of European reason, but rather the very birth of a Modernity grounded in Coloniality and in a long process of the covering over of the Other.⁸ This rereading seeks not only to displace the canonical founding myths of Modernity (notably the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution), centered on Northern European hegemony, but also to push the origins of Modernity back to the Iberian colonial domination. From this perspective, Coloniality constitutes the other face of Modernity: both begin in 1492 with the Portuguese and Spanish conquests and

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1955); Olivier Abel and Jérôme Porée, *Le vocabulaire de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Ellipses, 2007), 58.

⁶ Paul Ricœur, *O conflito das interpretações. Ensaios de hermenêutica* (*Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, 1969), trans. Hilton Japiassu (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1978), 15.

⁷ See: *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*, vols. I-II (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973); *Filosofía ética latinoamericana*, vol. III (Edicol, 1977); *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana*, vols. IV-V (USTA, 1979-80).

⁸ Enrique Dussel, *1492: El encubrimiento del otro* (Buenos Aires: Docencia, 2012), 2-29.

continue throughout the historical period marked by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution.

By acknowledging the limits of Ricœurian hermeneutics in the face of the historical experience of colonial oppression, Dussel initiates a first theoretical shift: from symbolic understanding to the denunciation of domination; from the interpretation of the internal meaning of a culture to the confrontation between colonized and colonizer. In any case, this new orientation of hermeneutics does not yet result in a rupture with Ricœur's contribution but tries to respond to the demands of the Latin American context.

For Dussel, one of the most revealing aspects of the asymmetry between European and Amerindian cultures lies in the way each civilization symbolically organizes the relationship between the sexes. In European tradition, marked by a patriarchal structure, the dominant erotic order is founded on masculine control over the feminine. In contrast, within the Amerindian worldview, the feminine figure occupies a more central position. As Dussel states, "in Amerindian mythology, women have more space than in the conquering Hispanic tradition."⁹

Another point highlighted by Dussel concerns the European pedagogical tradition in contrast to the Latin American one. In European pedagogy, according to Dussel, an authoritarian vertical model predominates – one that Paulo Freire characterized as a teaching practice oriented toward the mere transmission of external content, without dialogue, without listening, and without liberation. By contrast, a pedagogy grounded in a liberatory perspective affirms a horizontal relationship, based on the recognition of the other as both bearer and producer of knowledge, and on the very organization of knowledge from the learner's class-based world.

Thus, the contrast between the two ethico-mythical cores – the European and the Amerindian – reveals not only a difference in worldview, but, beyond class conflict, the existence of a long historical process of domination. Therefore, it is not a matter of a simple dialogue between cultures, but rather of a confrontation marked by the imposition of one culture over another and the consequent destruction of original myths and practices in the name of Christendom and the European civilizing project. This forceful diagnosis ultimately leads to the demarcation of the limits of Ricœurian symbolic hermeneutics itself. As Dussel categorically states: "All this would place the Ricœurian model in crisis, suitable as it is for the hermeneutics of a single culture, but far less so for the asymmetrical confrontation between multiple cultures (one dominant and others dominated)."¹⁰

In an attempt to overcome this impasse, Dussel undertakes another important theoretical shift: after acknowledging that Ricœur's hermeneutic model is effective for understanding a culture, but ineffective when dealing with conflicts between cultures under conditions of domination, on the one hand, he turns to the philosophy of Karl Marx (1818-1883), especially to his critique of bourgeois morality, traditional theology, economic exploitation, and social hierarchies. On the other hand, he draws on Emmanuel Levinas's (1906-1985) Philosophy of Alterity.

The new direction taken by Dussel is expressed in the introductory words of his text *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la Filosofía de la Liberación*. In this work, he reaffirms the need for a return, "against

⁹ Dussel, *Filosofía ética latino-americana. De la erótica a la pedagógica de la liberación*, vol. III, 59; trans. by the author.

¹⁰ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 140; trans. by the author.

the fashion of the time,” to Marx’s philosophical and critical discourse, now reinterpreted considering Levinas, as an attempt to construct a new philosophical discourse aimed at the liberation of the poor.¹¹

Three elements henceforth come to guide the Dusselian turn. First, the gradual abandonment of the application of symbolic hermeneutics, which will now be explicitly revised in *Más allá del culturalismo*, due to its inability to perceive asymmetries between cultures, nations, genders, and classes; due to its naïve and conservative outlook; also, because it reduces social complexity. Second, the appropriation of Marx’s thought, not merely as an economic theory, but as a philosophical discourse and as a critique of bourgeois and colonizing morality. And third, the valorization of Levinas’s Philosophy of Alterity in the attempt to conceive an ethics oriented towards the appeal of the other: the poor, the oppressed, the wronged, the peripheral other.

It is at this point that we reach the second stage of Dussel’s appropriation of Ricœurian ethics, which turns more precisely toward a critical reading of literary hermeneutics, under the sign of the return to Marx and Levinas.

3. The Ethico-Narrative Core of Literary Hermeneutics

The second major moment of Ricœurian hermeneutics, in Enrique Dussel’s critical reconstruction, is circumscribed by the three volumes of *Temps et récit* (1983–1985) and by the complementary volume *Du texte à l’action* (1986).

In the passage from symbolic hermeneutics to narrative theory, it is possible to understand that the idea of an ethico-mythical core already anticipated that of an ethico-narrative core, which would later be addressed in terms of narrative identity, the dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*, and between ipseity and alterity¹². We designate this moment as the ethico-narrative core of literary hermeneutics, which is grounded in the idea that the text – especially the novel, as has already been noted – is a laboratory of ethics in which life is configured through writing and writing, through the act of reading, is transformed into life.

From Dussel’s perspective, this second step of Ricœur’s phenomenological-hermeneutic project reproduces, at another level, the same limitation already identified in *La symbolique du mal*, namely, its inability to address asymmetries and the consequent cultural domination. To arrive at this conclusion, Dussel’s critique focuses on the three mimeses discussed in the first volume of *Temps et récit*. It is precisely in Mimesis II, the moment of configuration in which action becomes text, that Dussel identifies a first point of weakness. In his view, Ricœur neglects something in the process of the author’s production of the text, that is, when “action becomes text” (*el devenir texto de la acción*)¹³. This omission obscures the socio-economic conditions under which a text is produced by an author, especially when dealing with narratives transferred from a context of domination to another marked by domination.

Moreover, Dussel points to a second weak point, located in Mimesis III, in which life is refigured by narrative – that is, the moment in which, through the act of reading, “the text becomes

¹¹ Dussel, Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación, 7.

¹² Abel and Porée, *Le vocabulaire de Paul Ricœur*, 58.

¹³ Dussel, Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación, 148, 175.

action" (*el devenir acción del texto*). At this precise moment, he argues, the reader may undergo an alienating and estranging experience, one that may even run counter to the reader's ethical purposes.

To arrive at this result, Dussel applies the theory of commodity fetishism developed by Marx in *The Capital*, a text he had been exploring at the time in works such as *El último Marx* (1990) and *Las metáforas teológicas de Marx* (1993). The analogy is clear: just as the commodity, once produced, becomes an autonomous "thing" that conceals the social relations of production, so too can the text become an object of fetishism. In Ricœur's theory of the autonomy of the text, both author and reader would be reduced to the condition of mere instruments: the former, as a channel for the text's "social realization"; the latter, as a consumer or passive follower of the "thing of the text," the text-as-commodity.

Dussel concludes his assessment with an even more forceful diagnosis: "In both cases, a 'fetishistic inversion' takes place: the person is transformed into a thing (a means), and the thing (the text or capital) is transformed into a person."¹⁴

It remains to be examined to what extent Dussel overlooks certain essential aspects of Ricœur's theory of the autonomy of the text as developed in *Du texte à l'action* (1986), among them the notions of the implied author, the implied reader, and the hermeneutics of distanciation. However, we will not dwell on this point. Nor will we address the difference between objectification (or reification), in which the person becomes a thing, and fetishism, in which the thing acquires the properties of a person. We will merely note that Dussel treats both phenomena under the same register of fetishism. In Marxist vocabulary, fetishism applies to the case in which the thing incorporates the qualities of the person, whereas reification or alienation refers to the case in which the person acquires the properties of objects or is treated as such.

Ricœur's oral response to these criticisms during the Naples seminar is, as one might expect, quite pointed and selective. On the one hand, he expresses a certain discomfort with the "return to Marxism" promoted by Dussel without first considering the harsh experience of existing socialism, especially Leninism. In contrast, Dussel insists on the ethical potential of the late Marx, particularly in his critique of bourgeois morality. As Dussel would later write: "*The Capital* (by Marx) is an ethics, insofar as it constitutes a critique of bourgeois 'morality.'"¹⁵

Regarding Dussel's "return to Marx," the critical observations of Ricœur – as well as those of Karl-Otto Apel – are situated within the European perspective of reforming the capitalist system, in clear opposition to the Latin American perspective of transforming the system itself. In philosophical terms, this reflects two different receptions of Hegelianism: one that understands (Protestant) reform as the final and highest manifestation of spirit in history; and another (Marxist, but also Catholic Counter-Reformation) that sees revolution (the French Revolution) as the

¹⁴ Dussel, Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación, 147-148; trans. by the author.

¹⁵ Enrique Dussel, *La ética de la liberación: ante el desafío de Apel, Taylor y Vattimo con respuesta crítica inédita de K.-O. Apel* (México: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 1998), 81; trans. by the author.

triumphant spirit riding the final stage of human history. All of this leaves a fundamental question unresolved, which will remain open here.¹⁶

Rather than censuring Latin American philosophy for returning to a Marxist *vulgate*, it would be better to ask instead: why is Latin American thought now interested in Marx? Or further still: why take an interest in an ethical, critical, and theological Marx? Throughout his work, Dussel points to three facts that justify his “return to Marx”: (a) the growing misery of the Latin American continent; (b) the urgency of a critique of capitalism; and (c) the need for an economics for the Philosophy of Liberation.¹⁷

1. Regarding narrative theory, especially the cycle of the three *mimeses*, Ricœur presents two arguments in its defense. First, he argues that the most important aspect is not so much the register or the writing in which action becomes text (*devenir texto de la acción*), but rather the critical reading that opens the possibility for the text to become action (*devenir acción del texto*). Second, he adds: “this movement of the text (toward action) is not different from the movement that leads from hermeneutics to ethics, more precisely to an ethics that reserves a central place for the phenomenon of alterity.”¹⁸

Ricœur’s response evidently centers on the relationship between the reader and the text, leaving aside the author-text relationship, that is, the question of the context of production of literary work. For him, a critical reader would know how to sufficiently distinguish and circumvent the problems of alienation, manipulation, and propaganda conveyed by a text. The second part of the response, which also concerns the act of reading, brings us back to the hermeneutic phase of application (*applicatio*), which means that the problem lies in the passage from text to action, or from hermeneutics to ethics, through the act of reading.

For Dussel, however, the evaluation of the ethico-narrative core of Ricœurian hermeneutics is not very different from that which he had previously attributed to symbolic hermeneutics. There has only been a shift in the object to be interpreted: symbolic hermeneutics was directed toward the myths and symbols of a culture in search of their hidden ethical meaning; literary hermeneutics takes fictional narratives – more precisely, the French, English, and German novel of the first half of the twentieth century – as a “laboratory” from which it will extract a veiled ethical meaning.

Finally, Dussel counters regarding literary hermeneutics:

At bottom, hermeneutic phenomenology takes the subject as a “reader” standing before a “text.” The philosophy of liberation, however, discovers a “hungry person” standing before a “non-bread” (that is, without a product to consume, whether because of poverty or because of the theft of the fruit of their labor), or an “illiterate person” (who does not know how to read) standing before a “non-text” (which they cannot afford to buy, or which belongs to a culture in which they cannot express themselves).¹⁹

¹⁶ Berthony Saint-Georges, *L'éthique de la libération d'Enrique Dussel. Penser l'altérité et l'utopie à partir du contexte latino-américain* (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2016), 159.

¹⁷ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 145.

¹⁸ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 175.

¹⁹ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 143; trans. by the author.

About literary hermeneutics, we must finally acknowledge that Ricœur and Dussel work with two quite different kinds of characters in their respective ethical laboratories. Ricœur operates within the world of the text (*monde du texte*), inhabited by characters from European literary fiction (German, English, and French novels) from the beginning of the last century. In Dussel's laboratory, by contrast, the characters of the European bourgeois novel give way to those of the Latin American lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), inhabited by a legion of poor, hungry, and illiterate people from the peripheries of the late twentieth century.

At this point, we take up the incisive questions raised by Jeanne Marie Gagnebin regarding Ricœur's theory of personal identity:²⁰ to what extent does the linkage between identity (personal or collective) and autonomy result in the tacit affirmation of privileges that conceal the social and political constraints to which so many subjects (women, enslaved people, colonized peoples) are subjected? Or, more directly: how can one construct a narrative identity that does not take the affirmation of privileges as its model?

This seems to be precisely the crucial problem Dussel faces: the affirmation of the self as the affirmation of an ethical subject who esteems itself from a privileged point of departure and position. Along this path, we are led to investigate who the subject of the ethico-ontological core of the hermeneutics of the self is.

2. Regarding Dussel's Marxist turn, three critical points in his approach must be noted. First, Dussel calls for a return to Marx without taking into account what Ricœur himself had already accomplished with regard to the Marxist legacy, especially in his studies on ideology and utopia, which helps explain Ricœur's expressed discomfort with a return to Marxism.

Secondly, it is necessary to assess the question of the subject. Dussel seeks to find in Marxism an embodied, situated, and historical subject, represented in the figures of the poor, the oppressed, and those who cry out for justice. Ricœur's reading of Marx in *L'idéologie et l'utopie* focuses on the elimination of the subject and history by Marxist structuralism (especially that of Louis Althusser), in its defense of a structure without a subject. In short, the subject is dissolved into the performance of a structural function or reduced to a mere surface effect, rather than being understood as a human being embodied in specific circumstances and endowed with the capacities for action and for transforming the world in the pursuit of justice.²¹ It is therefore undeniable that, if we consider Ricœur's written work (and not merely his oral response to Dussel), we find more affinities between the two thinkers than insurmountable barriers.

Later, we shall return to this rapprochement between the two authors with the aid of Ernst Wolff's well-established scholarship, in which he argues for a return to the works of the "young Ricœur," particularly his more "peripheral" writings in social and political philosophy, in order to revisit the debate more productively.²²

²⁰ Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, "As armadilhas da identidade", in Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa, and Andrés Bruzzone (eds.), *Identidade e hermenêutica crítica* (Alameda, 2025), 104-105.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *L'idéologie et l'utopie* (Paris: Seuil, 1997); Paul Ricoeur, *Hermenêutica e ideologias* (Editora Vozes, 2008), 71-98.

²² Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie. Decolonisation, modernité, herméneutique* (Éditions de la Université de Bruxelles, 2021), 9-10; Wolff, "Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica?," 61-88.

Before doing so, we enter the third and final step of Dussel's reconstruction of Ricœur's ethics. This step consists in the critique directed at the subject of the ethics proposed in *Soi-même comme un autre*.

4. The Ethico-Ontological Core of the Hermeneutics of the Self

After examining the mediations of ethics through symbolism and narrative, Dussel turns to the third core of Ricœur's philosophy: the ethico-ontological constitution of the subject (*soi-même*) through the hermeneutics of the self. The text in question is *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), especially the part that addresses the passage from ethics to ontology, in which the notions of oneself (*soi-même*), self-esteem (*estime de soi*), and alterity occupy a central place in the debate.

Before properly entering the hermeneutics of the self, it is necessary to reflect on two points. First, just as in the case of symbolism, Dussel acknowledges the relevance of the ethico-narrative project for the description and understanding of cultural identities, including their everyday and popular dimensions. The ethico-narrative model offers, in his words, "immense hermeneutical material" for intercultural dialogue, especially when applied to fictional, poetic, and metaphorical narratives, which express the multifaceted fabric of popular culture²³.

The second consideration concerns the unreserved acceptance of the ethico-narrative core regarding the effective dialogue between cultures, an aspect that had previously been the main reason for the critique of "culturalism," a term that Dussel used to distance himself from the initial phase of his work inspired by symbolic hermeneutics.

Despite these two concessions, Dussel points to an even greater impasse: the subject of narration, understood in terms of the oneself (*soi-même*), does not translate into a subject of transformative political action, nor into an agent of liberation ethics. In other words, the question returns: who is the subject (the oneself) of Ricœur's ethics? What is the ontological status of the subject of Ricœurian ethics? And to what extent can Ricœur's ethics, as co-original to the hermeneutics of the self, be reconciled with *la ética de la liberación*?

As an attempt to respond to these questions, we distinguish two criticisms directed by Dussel at the subject of Ricœur's ethics. The first lies in the crossed conception of alterity, in which, in Ricœur's hands, self-esteem gains primacy over the other; the second concerns the theme of exteriority, in which Dussel, following Levinas, understands that the other has primacy over the oneself and over self-esteem.

1. The proposal of a "crossed conception of alterity" (*conception croisée de l'altérité*) was presented by Ricœur in the tenth study of *Soi-même comme un autre*, entitled *Vers quelle ontologie*? This alone already indicates the path Ricœur intends to follow: an ethics with ontology, as opposed both to an ontology without ethics (Heidegger) and to an ethics without ontology (Lévinas–Dussel).

Moreover, the crossed conception of alterity is situated within the context in which Ricœur rejects both the derivation of the *alter ego* from the ego, typical of Husserlian phenomenology (which, in his view, reduces the Other to the Same), and the Levinasian ethics that attributes to the other the exclusive initiative in calling the self to responsibility and justice. As an alternative to

²³ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 138.

these two antagonistic positions, Ricœur proposes a crossed dialectic between the Same and the Other, in which the primacy of self-esteem is completed by the summons issued by the other to justice.²⁴

Dussel, in turn, following Lévinas, understands that beginning ethics with self-esteem amounts to reaffirming twice over the Philosophy of the Same in terms of personal identity: it affirms it first as *idem*-identity and a second time as *ipse*-identity, thereby disregarding from the outset the other in their condition as oppressed, in their difference and asymmetry in the real world. Likewise, remaining within the framework of ontology means continuing the logic of domination, expressed in the terms of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, in which, in Dussel's reinterpretation, Being is and non-being is not; Being is the Master (white, male, European), and non-being is not, in the various figures of the poor: the enslaved Black person and the massacred Indigenous peoples, the violated woman, and the peripheries impoverished by European, colonialist, and capitalist modernity. For Dussel, the ontological totality envisioned by Ricœur not only "softens the relationship between *ipse* and alterity" but ultimately ends up diluting alterity itself.²⁵

Ultimately, remaining within the framework of ontology means perpetuating the logic of colonial domination, in which a masterly subjectivity imposes itself upon other subjectivities that are subjected and enslaved, repeating the modern developmentalist fallacy according to which the slave is conceived as a "free master at an infantile stage."²⁶ One need only recall here the characterization of the Amerindian, the African, or the mestizo in the classics of European thought. Hegel, for example, considers the African to be a being without moral sentiments, idolatrous and savage.²⁷ For Tocqueville, the Black person is a kind of intermediate being between the animal and the human; and according to Voltaire, miscegenation – the mixing of races – is an anomaly.²⁸

Dussel, in turn, concludes: "the praxis of liberation starts from the negated other as an *affirmation* of Exteriority and as the origin of the movement of the negation of negation."²⁹

Here it becomes clear that, for Dussel, the original statement cannot take as its starting point the first person of ethics, understood as self-esteem, since it must be conceived in terms of the affirmation of the other from their exteriority. This not only denies the dialectic of the Master and the Slave but also the very ontology that sustains this dialectic. It is in this sense that we must understand Dussel's proposal of an *analectics*, rather than a *dialectics*. In doing so, it also rejects the possibility of maintaining an ontological totality formed by a Master and a Slave. The other – denied, disregarded, vulnerable – who makes up the multitude of impoverished faces, must be the starting point of the ethics of liberation. There is no doubt that the starting point can no longer be a supposedly ethical subject, from the height of their self-esteem, but a non-subject who, disregarded, renounces their own negation.

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 382.

²⁵ Enrique Tellez-Fabiani, "Ricœur and Dussel: Symbolics and the Critique of Ethical Ontology," *Journal of Philosophy*, v. 13 (Spring 2022), 12.

²⁶ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 16.

²⁷ Georg W. F. Hegel, *Filosofia da História* (Editora da Universidade de Brasília, 1995), 83-88.

²⁸ Walter Praxedes, "Eurocentrismo e racismo nos clássicos da filosofia e das ciências sociais, Espaço Acadêmico" (2008), 1-5.

²⁹ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 73; trans. by the author.

2. At this point, we not only adopt Ricœur's critique of Levinas in *Soi-même comme un autre* as valid, but also maintain that it applies equally well to Dussel's position. In our view, three objections may be raised against the ethics of liberation.

Ricœur's first decisive criticism is that Levinas "reserves to the Other the exclusive initiative" (*réserve à l'Autre l'initiative exclusive*), a feature that, as we have seen, reappears in Dussel's proposal. By contrast, Ricœur's notion of a crossed conception of alterity seeks to alternate points of departure and intensify the movement of the dialectical spiral: at times it proceeds from the primacy of self-esteem toward the call of the other to responsibility; at other times it grants priority to the movement that goes from the call of the other to responsibility toward self-esteem. From the perspective of *L'idéologie et l'utopie*, one may further add that to begin solely from the standpoint of the Other – the oppressed, the poor, the victim of the colonial system – amounts to postulating the existence of a position external to culture and power themselves, without acknowledging that we are always already embedded in traditions and within a shared ideological and utopian horizon.

Second, dialectics itself – so central to the Marxism that Dussel claims to embrace – disappears once it ceases to operate within the circuit of reciprocity. Outside this circuit, what remains is merely an asymmetrical position that reverses the relation of slave and master; or, alternatively, a displacement from the second person (the other) or the third person (the poor) to the first person (self-esteem). It is therefore no coincidence that Dussel comes to speak of *analectics* rather than dialectics.

Thirdly, the decision to begin from exteriority is not dissociated from the proposal of the analectical method. Ricœur's criticism is that there can be no position outside culture from which the subject could occupy an axiologically neutral standpoint, since the subject is always already situated within the world, with its traditions and conflicts, and anchored in a shared ideological substratum and utopian horizon³⁰. Consequently, it would be a methodological illusion to place oneself outside the system in an attempt to oppose it. Finally, the discourse of liberation makes use of the very modern conceptual tools that it so vigorously seeks to reject.

With this, we move on to Dussel's second critique of Ricœur's ontological ethics. This concerns the theme of exteriority.

3. Dussel³¹ analyzes a second passage from *Soi-même comme un autre* in which Ricœur observes that the theme of exteriority – central in Levinas – can only reach its fullness as "a responsible response to the call of the other" if it "presupposes the capacities for reception, discrimination, and recognition," stemming from another Philosophy of the Same, different from that (Philosophy of the Same) rejected by the Philosophy of the Other.³²

In this passage, Ricœur openly criticizes the Levinasian (and Dusselian) theme of exteriority, reiterating the primacy of the first person of ethics as self-esteem. It is important to remember that, in Levinas – and consequently in Dussel – the scope of the category of exteriority no longer pertains to the ontological domain of the other's transcendence, nor to the dialectical

³⁰ Ricœur, *Herménêutica e ideologias*, 73-79.

³¹ Dussel, *Apel, Ricœur, Rorty y la filosofía de la liberación*, 37.

³² Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 391.

relationship between the Same and the Other, but rather corresponds to the metaphysical regime of exclusion, domination, and social, economic, and political oppression.³³ From this perspective, the starting point cannot be self-esteem, but the other without any esteem, for it is the other who is negated as poor, unjustly treated, enslaved, second sex, abandoned child, or tortured body.

Instead, Ricœur proposes a cross-dialectic in which self-esteem is maintained as the starting point, while at the same time a place is granted to the ethics of the call of the other to justice. He notes, however, that this dialectic can only be fully realized in a subject capable of accommodating three basic conditions: the capacity to receive, to discriminate, and to recognize the other.

With these three conditions, Ricœur certainly refers us to his onto-anthropology of capacities (*l'homme capable*) in an attempt to smooth over the most visible rough edges of Levinas' Philosophy of Alterity, among them the absence of reciprocity or the presence of a unilateral relationship; and, as a consequence, the very erasure of the dialectic between the Same and the Other³⁴. In this sense, Ricœur has three precise objectives in view. The capacity to receive seeks to mitigate or even eliminate the hostility carried by the Levinasian figures of the other as judge – and later, as offender – aiming to restore the full dialectic between the Same and the Other. This is reflected in Dussel's tendency to view existing political institutions and established power solely as oppressive instances, bearers of ideologies (false consciousness) that must be overcome through the praxis of liberation. For the Ricœur of *L'ideologie et l'utopie*, however, ideology also performs a positive function of social integration, implying that a society cannot survive on utopias of liberation alone. Moreover, the danger of rejecting every form of power in the name of liberation is that institutions cease to serve as safeguards of justice, which ultimately leads to the erosion of the rule of law.

The capacity to discriminate aims to introduce critical distance in relation to the other, since not every demand can be received as a moral imperative or glorified as good.

In this regard, the call of the other to justice cannot be accepted by Ricœur without first losing the Levinasian tone that links it solely to the predicate "obligatory," as in the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," understood as an extension of Kantian morality. In turn, Ricœur understands that, in addition, the call of the other to justice or responsibility must be governed by the predicate "good," expressed in the first person as self-esteem, and in the second as friendship-solicitude, thus continuing a teleological ethics rooted in Aristotle.

Finally, the third objective: lack of recognition. From the beginning to the end of Ricœur's work (from *Sympathie et respect* in 1954 to *Parcours de la reconnaissance* in 2000, passing through *Soi-même comme un autre* in 1990), the discussion of the capacity for recognition is marked by a dual aspect. On one hand, it serves to show that positive recognition, triggered within phenomenology, can lead to fusion with the other, in the forms of empathy (Husserl) and sympathy (Scheler); on the other hand, negative recognition, expressed through feelings of fear (Hobbes), contempt (Hegel), shame (Sartre), and struggle (Hegel and Marx), leads to the deposition of the other.

In another sense, Ricœur seeks to advance the pursuit of positive recognition, but in a critical manner. This endeavor entails two main implications. In the ethical domain, solicitude and

³³ Saint-Georges, *L'Étique de la Libération d'Enrique Dussel*, 320.

³⁴ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 380.

the economy of the gift would assume the function of rebalancing situations of inequality, asymmetry, and domination. In the moral domain, respect for others, according to deontological morality (Kantian), would contribute to maintaining a proper distance and the dialectic between the Same and the Other, thus avoiding a lack of differentiation or an excluding separation in relation to the other.

Perhaps these are the aspects in which Ricœurian ethics comes closest to *la ética de la liberación*. However, this possible convergence should not mislead us regarding some important questions. From Dussel's perspective, one could still ask: to what extent would solicitude and goodness alone be capable of rebalancing relations of inequality in historical situations of privilege, domination, and extreme poverty? To what extent would the economy of the gift and solicitude be sufficient to reduce asymmetry, repair damage, and redistribute goods? To what extent is friendship, understood by Ricœur according to Aristotelian *philia*, once again secured by socio-political privileges of caste (free and equal men) and by domestic hierarchies to the detriment of women, the enslaved, and foreigners?

Moreover, as Marilena Chauí warns about the relations of symmetry and asymmetry in our authoritarian social formation: "the relations among those who consider themselves equal are of 'kinship,' that is, of complicity or camaraderie; and among those who are seen as unequal, the relationship takes the form of favor, clientelism, guardianship, or co-optation."³⁵

It is salutary to remember, finally, that, within the realm of the second person, "it is not merely a question of invoking the ethical necessity, for the autonomous subject, to help the other, the vulnerable, but much more of refraining from subjugate."³⁶

This may be the moment to revisit, considering Ricœur and Dussel, the thesis that the growth of struggles for recognition has become inversely proportional to the growth of struggles for economic redistribution. Or, put differently, that in today's globalized society, the political demands of social movements have gradually given way to struggles for the recognition of identities (gender, ethnic, cultural, national, among others). The question now is how to rebalance this scale.

4. The moment has now arrived, as previously announced, when we consider the three suggestions advanced by Ernst Wolff as his general conclusions³⁷. Up to this point, our analysis has privileged a confrontation with Dussel based on Ricœur's most systematic texts, especially *Soi-même comme un autre*, seeking not only to uncover an implicit critique of Dussel but also to identify points of convergence between the two thinkers. With Wolff, we now encounter the opposite movement: the more explicit and direct critique gives way to a productive rapprochement between the two authors, proceeding from the "periphery" of Ricœur's work toward its core, namely, his most systematic writings.

The first suggestion proposed by Wolff, which we fully endorse, highlights an aspect neglected by Dussel: namely, that from the very beginning of his intellectual trajectory Ricœur was

³⁵ Marilena Chauí, *Brasil. Mito fundador e sociedade autoritária* (São Paulo: Perseu Abramo, 2000), 93, trans. by the author.

³⁶ Gagnebin, "As armadilhas da identidade," 102, trans. by the author.

³⁷ Wolff, "Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica?," 85-86.

deeply engaged with socio-political questions, and that these concerns continued to be developed throughout his later systematic writings.

The second suggestion emphasizes that, for Ricœur, evil is not an abstract or empty category. Rather, it concerns the evil experienced by the victims of war and colonization, exploitation and torture, racism and painful processes of modernization. In this respect, Ricœur's concern is not fundamentally different from what Dussel describes as the "fate of the poor."

Finally, Wolff grants an essential point to Dussel's critique: it can reorient our reading of Ricœur toward his early socio-political philosophy. For although these concerns remain present throughout Ricœur's later work, he never developed them in a fully systematic manner.

5. Conclusion

Largely, we have seen that Enrique Dussel drew on Paul Ricœur's phenomenological-hermeneutic model through three major cores, based on which he assessed both the convergence and divergence between these two ethics.

We consider that, through the application of symbolic hermeneutics, Dussel positively evaluated the possibility of reconstructing the ethical-mythical core of different Amerindian cultures.

We consider that, through the application of literary hermeneutics, Dussel envisaged the possibility of unveiling the ethical-narrative core of Latin American culture on the grounds that this intention, instead of leading to reception, discrimination, and through literature, which can serve as a kind of ethics laboratory, in which life is shaped through writing and reshaped through the act of reading.

Finally, we consider that ontological ethics has been treated as the most problematic core for continuing the dialogue between the two philosophical projects. Dussel does not accept the cross-dialectic between identity (*idem* and *ipse*) and alterity, arguing that a starting point based on self-esteem ends up reducing the other twice to the same (it refers to the two dimensions of Ricœurian identity, *idem* and *ipse*). Moreover, it maintains as the starting point the position of privilege and domination of a Master over a slave. Ricœur, in turn, reaffirms the subject in the initial position of self-esteem and rejects the Levinasian notion of exteriority, which is constituted as one of the pillars of the ethics of liberation, recognition, expresses a will for separation, polarization, and deposition of the other.

In any case, the comparative analysis between the two ethics allowed us to identify some traits common to the models, especially the productive use of certain Ricœurian notions by *la ética de la liberación*.

In this sense, we emphasize the fruitful use of symbolic hermeneutics in unveiling the latent ethico-mythical core in Latin American cultures, which could continue to inspire and support the study of mythology and symbolism of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and even the different underground strands of popular, unofficial, heterodox, and often heretical Christianity. All of this, in some way, forms part of the founding myths of our countries and of our democratic and/or authoritarian cultures.

Similarly, literary hermeneutics can continue to be used and refined as a theoretical tool applicable to the study of personal and collective identities, based on the vast corpus of Latin American literature, as exemplified by some studies already carried out in our context.

Dussel's main critique of Ricœurian hermeneutics is that, even when it remains open to the other, it continues to be subsidiary to the logic of the Same, which would render it incapable of addressing the ethical challenges arising from coloniality, institutional violence, and the historical exclusion of peripheral cultures. For this reason, he gradually not only distances himself from symbolic and literary hermeneutics, but also, by drawing on the Levinasian and Marxian conceptual apparatus, seeks to rearticulate a subject-other for *la ética de la liberación*.

In this regard, it is worth asking whether, after all, Ricœur's (and Apel's) assessment was not somewhat misplaced concerning Dussel's Marxism-Leninism. Could it be that the collective subject, the class-subject, identified with the notion of the "poor," once again fulfills the function of the subject of history, previously envisioned in the proletariat (Marx), later in the party (Lenin), and now in the "poor"? Moreover, could the glorification of the poor, by identifying them unconditionally with the predicate "good," merely serve to reaffirm an ethics of resignation that conceals the true condition of misery?

In this respect, it is necessary to reconsider a final point of inflection in this debate. Just as Ricœur, in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000), acknowledged that he had until then devoted more attention to imagination than to memory, perhaps now it is the moment for scholars of his work in Latin America to advance toward economic redistribution in order to counterbalance identity-based agendas and to make states of peace a reality.

Nevertheless, a final word is in order regarding Wolff's three suggestions, as they point toward a positive appropriation of the work of both authors.

First, these suggestions effectively synthesize what has been identified as one of the principal limitations of Dussel's reading of Ricœur: the neglect of the fact that, from the very beginning of his work, he was engaged with socio-political issues. Second, they bring into relief the most fruitful aspect of Dussel's critique, namely, its social and political commitment.

The first two observations function as corrections to Dussel's interpretation. By emphasizing Ricœur's continuous engagement with socio-political questions and the centrality of the historical experience of suffering in his reflection on evil, Wolff seeks to demonstrate that Ricœur's philosophy cannot be reduced to an abstract ethics or to a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach detached from concrete conditions of oppression. Concern for victims, historical violence, and the various forms of domination runs throughout Ricœur's work from his earliest writings onward and remains present, albeit under new formulations, in his later works.

The third observation, however, introduces an important qualification. Wolff acknowledges that Dussel's critique should not simply be dismissed, for it reveals a genuine gap in Ricœur's own intellectual trajectory: the absence of a systematic elaboration of a socio-political philosophy. Although themes such as justice, institutions, power, violence, and recognition appear at different moments throughout his work, they were never brought together into a comprehensive theory of domination or liberation. In this respect, Dussel helps to bring back into focus a dimension that, despite its persistence, often remained dispersed and overshadowed by other theoretical concerns.

Wolff's position is particularly compelling because it avoids both opposition and assimilation between the two thinkers. Rather than presenting Dussel as an external critic who merely exposes Ricœur's shortcomings, he suggests that the philosophy of liberation can function as a hermeneutical key capable of revealing possibilities within Ricœur's thought that have not yet been fully explored. Dussel's critique thus ceases to be viewed merely as a challenge and instead becomes an invitation to reread Ricœur from the perspective of victims, structures of exclusion, and the demands of social transformation. In this way, the tension between the two authors appears less as a theoretical incompatibility than as an opportunity for mutual enrichment and deeper philosophical engagement.

Ultimately, reading Ricœur from the periphery entails three distinct dimensions within the framework of the productive dialogue with Dussel. Broadly, it implies an interpretation of Ricœur's work that takes as its departure point the experiences, problems, and perspectives situated outside the hegemonic core of the Western philosophical tradition – for example, the historical experiences of marginalized peoples, situations of exclusion, poverty, coloniality, or social injustice. It can also signify, more specifically, a reading of Ricœur's work carried out from the perspective of peripheral subjects, that is, by questioning how his hermeneutics of the self – his ethics and his reflection on recognition, alterity, justice, and institutions – can respond to concrete situations of suffering and oppression. Finally, it can also signify a reading that takes as its starting point the more peripheral texts of the “young Ricœur”, which, in a less systematic way, address socio-political issues.

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