

Between self-abandonment and reorientation

Remarks on the current predicament of philosophy – in view of the reception of Paul Ricœur's writings east of the Rhine

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Abstract

This article offers a brief, inevitably selective interim assessment of the reception of Ricœur's work on the east side of the Rhine to date. Confined to a description of the current state of this reception and without claiming to be exhaustive – a goal that cannot be achieved within the available scope anyway – the following reflections aim to address the question of how Ricœur demands philosophical orientation based on what demands to be thought and with regard to the *conditio historica* of human existence.

Keywords: History, Hermeneutics, Philosophical Orientation, Conditio historica.

Résumé

Cet article propose une brève évaluation provisoire, inévitablement sélective, de la réception de l'œuvre de Ricœur du côté Est du Rhin jusqu'à présent. Se limitant à une description de l'état actuel de cette réception et sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité – objectif de toute façon impossible à atteindre dans le cadre dont nous disposons –, les réflexions qui suivent visent à examiner comment Ricœur exige une orientation philosophique fondée sur ce qui demande à être pensé et en tenant compte de la *conditio historica* de l'existence humaine.

Mots-clés : Histoire, herméneutique, orientation philosophique, conditio historica.

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Questions such as what philosophy *is*, what it *can* do or *should* achieve are known to be answered in highly contradictory ways – from the famous *footnote thesis* of Alfred N. Whitehead, which Umberto Eco and Paul Feyerabend also seem to have endorsed, to Richard Rorty (2007), who wanted to refrain from any recourse to the supposed origins of philosophy and ultimately dissolve it into *cultural politics*. If there really is “not a single problem” that was not originally formulated by Plato and Aristotle (cf. Eco, 1999, p. 279), must one then, with Feyerabend (2023, p. 21), endlessly return to the origins, where philosophical problems “seem to have been formulated for the first time [...]” – and in a way that is still valid today? As so often, Ricœur takes a middle position in this regard. He admits that he has never been concerned with “massive questions of the type: what is philosophy?” (Ricœur 1998b, p. 81), but rather with what challenges philosophical thinking, what demands to be thought, how philosophy can find itself in the course of this and then promise to offer something like orientation (which Immanuel Kant was the first to explicitly demand of it). In doing so, however, philosophy repeatedly runs the risk of losing itself completely if it is unable to respond appropriately to what is given to think about and if it cannot even specify what would allow us to speak of appropriateness in this context. Ricœur defends the meaning and necessity of connecting to a diverse tradition against objections that arise at this point from a Nietzschean perspective, but he is aware that this may force us to set out into a completely unknown future that could force us to radically revise everything that had previously provided orientation, including the available words and concepts. In the following, I will limit myself to selectively highlighting how this difficulty presents itself in light of the reception of Ricœur's work in German-speaking countries, where it has to contend with particular problems of reorientation.¹

An initial assessment of the reception of Ricœur's writings published up to that point, as found in reports by Johannes Rütsche (1971), and Otto F. Bollnow (1976), culminated in 1983 with the title “Detours of Interpretation” in Bernhard Waldenfels' comprehensive documentation of phenomenology in France. Until then, Ricœur was primarily presented as a philosopher who, with hermeneutic contributions to problems of understanding, interpretation, and exegesis, tied in with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular – with special philosophical consideration given to clinical psychoanalytic theories, which at that time have also

¹ From this specific perspective, it is just as impossible to do justice to individual works (such as Ricœur's *Parcours de la reconnaissance* and its widely discussed relation to the logic of gift and giving [see ann. 21]) as it is to address Ricœur's relationships with individual philosophers – including the one who is undoubtedly the most important for the German-language reception of Ricœur: Bernhard Waldenfels.

been taken seriously by authors such Jacques Lacan (1965/1973²), Alasdair MacIntyre (1968), Jürgen Habermas (1973), Alfred Lorenzer (1973), and Hermann Lang (1973). Ricœur, who never considered himself a phenomenologist, later admitted having been a disciple of “the school of phenomenology”, which is also documented in relevant early essays, most of which were compiled in 1986 under the telling title *À l'école de la phénoménologie*.

However, until the early 1980s, readers east of the Rhine were mainly familiar with Ricœur through the (partial) translations of *Histoire et vérité* (1955;³ 1967), of *Finitude et culpabilité* (Tome II 1, 2; 1960/1971), of *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969/1973/4³), and above all of the book on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis published in 1965 under the title *De l'interprétation* (German 1974). But they were not familiar – until recently, at least not from translations – with the two important early volumes on Karl Jaspers and the philosophy of existence (published in 1947 with Mikel Dufrenne) and on Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel. The first part of *Philosophie de la volonté, Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950) also remained untranslated until 2016, when it was linked to detailed reconstructions of Ricœur's early practical philosophy (Breyer/Creutz 2019), which was based on the concept of attention (Ricœur 1940). In contrast, the German-language reception of Ricœur's writings initially referred largely to questions of guilt and to the interpretative philosophical debate on psychoanalysis (Welsen 1980/8), without specific knowledge of the previous context. That Ricœur had previously based his work on the concept of existence and had at the same time adopted a critical stance toward history has been largely ignored. Instead, Ricœur was widely regarded as a hermeneuticist (cf. Frank 1985; Ineichen 1991; Meyer 1991/2; Greisch 1993; Joisten 2009), regardless of the fact that he only became one after being particularly influenced by Gabriel Marcel and (during his five years as a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp) by Karl Jaspers in the mid-1930s and subsequently by making use of a rich symbolism of guilt.

Only then does Ricœur ask, alluding to Kant, how the symbol gives rise to thought (*gibt zu denken*; Ricœur 1959), drawing inspiration from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *magnum opus* on *Truth and Method*, published in 1960, and then offers “modern” hermeneutics, which essentially goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher, against trends that were more or less systematically opposed to classical hermeneutics, especially in France, above all semiotics and the very heterogeneous strands of so-called structuralism (Holenstein 1976; Dosse 1999). Ricœur (1989, p. 191) himself later explains the relative lack of success of hermeneutics in France, which was foreseeable in this situation.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that in Vincent Descombes' assessment of “forty-five years of philosophy in France 1933–1978,” which was widely received in German translation (1981) under the telling title *Das Selbe und das Andere* (not: *der Andere*), Ricœur is mentioned only in passing after Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Levinas (p. 85). As a result, Descombes' readers were not encouraged to take into account a considerable part of Franco-German philosophical interference, which had been interrupted in many respects by the Second World War (cf. Waldenfels 1988/9) – and later on remained largely unexamined in France and in Germany as well. This applies in particular to the socio-philosophical question of the Other since Levinas' and Gabrielle Pfeiffer's translation of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (French 1932;

² In the following, annual figures behind slashes refer to translations of Ricœur's respective writings into German.

³ P. Ricœur, *Hermeneutik und Strukturalismus. Der Konflikt der Interpretationen I* (München: Kösel, 1973); *Hermeneutik und Psychoanalyse. Der Konflikt der Interpretationen II* (München: Kösel, 1974).

originally presented in Paris in 1929) – with corresponding consequences to this day (cf. Liebsch [ed.] 2024, vols. I–IV).

Wasn't hermeneutics, apart from that, as in the case of Romanticism, in any case a "very German" discipline⁴ to which Ricœur resorted at an inopportune moment, after intellectual debate in France had already developed in completely different, sometimes explicitly anti-hermeneutic directions? This is also confirmed by a comparison of Michel Foucault's programmatic inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (*L'ordre du discours*) with Ricœur's courses on hermeneutics held shortly thereafter (1971–2) in Leuven. And in the case of hermeneutics, is this not a branch of philosophy that largely lacked the critical dimension that in the USA (not least in view of the Vietnam War) and then in France and Germany increasingly anticapitalist students rejected after "1968" with little tolerance – no longer content with a hermeneutics of historicity in the sense of Martin Heidegger and Gadamer, in which virtually nothing of real history could be found, and which was now only beginning to be seriously addressed? On this side of the Rhine, an intense debate on this question was initiated under the title *Hermeneutics and Ideology Criticism* between Gadamer, Habermas, and others (Apel et al. 1973), in which Ricœur, however, is not yet taken into account.

After moving to the University of Chicago in 1969, Ricœur (who had been passed over in favor of Foucault at the Collège de France in the same year) began to engage in-depth with political issues in political history and their critical evaluation from an ideological perspective. On the basis of this examination, he returned to the question of how historicity and history can be thought together – still convinced that the question of what it means *to exist historically* cannot be separated from the question of *how history should be conceived*. Ricœur never abandoned this position, which he clearly articulated in his 1963 essay on Søren Kierkegaard, available in translation into German since 1979, and which was linked to Jaspers' program of "illuminating existence". Ricœur's striving for *Existenzerhellung* in Jasper's sense already clearly shapes the collection of historical-critical essays gathered in *Histoire et vérité*, in the spirit of a commitment to democratic socialism born, at least in part, of Christian conviction. The selective translation of this work into German, published only about twenty years later, already falls into the post-1968 period and onto intellectual ground where a supposedly integral connection between history and truth, as Ricœur initially had in mind, is subjected to rigorous criticism.

This is evident in Foucault's genealogical thinking. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche, this way of thinking increasingly boils down to understanding everything that had previously been understood as history and truth as unreservedly temporalized, i.e., emerging from something else and entrusted to a possibly completely changing future, and as a matter of power (*vermachtet*). For a time, it even seemed as if questions about history (as a collective singular⁵) and comprehensive truth had fallen out of step with the present and were therefore obsolete. That did not deter Ricœur from placing his early questions about the inner and existentially significant connection between lived historicity, political criticism, and forward-looking history on a new foundation. Ricœur did

⁴ As suggested by Ricœur (1989, 187) himself.

⁵ I am referring here to Reinhart Koselleck's seminal reconstruction of the history of historical theory, to which Ricœur made several references, particularly in the third volume of *Temps et récit*. See Koselleck (1989, p. 50 ff.). Koselleck's theory of history has since been widely received on both sides of the Rhine, though the connections to Ricœur have been taken into account only tentatively, if at all. See Joas/Vogt (2011); Barash/Bouton/Jollivet (2021); Liebsch (2022).

so in such a way that it became clear how the practical coexistence of those who, on the basis of their shared memory, inevitably exist historically, allows us to expect something better than just an endless repetition of the history of violence that has prevailed until now. In this sense, Ricœur's contributions to hermeneutics were always informed by his concern for our common future⁶ – a connection that the primarily hermeneutic reception of his writings east of the Rhine largely ignored or failed to recognize for a long time.⁷

During Ricœur's time in Chicago, his ties to German-language philosophy did not break off entirely. One need only think of the text *Phénoménologie et herméneutique*, first published in the German-language *Phänomenologische Forschungen* (1975), which describes how hermeneutics could be grafted onto the methods of phenomenology, as it were.⁸ However, Ricœur's philosophical thinking (including its "American" development) only became widely influential after the next translations, most of which were published in the *Übergänge*-series by the former Fink Verlag: These included the three volumes on *Temps et récit* (1983–5/1988–91), the book *La métaphore vive* (1975/1986), and *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990/1996). These translations appeared in relatively quick succession, making it difficult for readers to grasp how the problem areas that Ricœur addresses in these books are interrelated.

This situation has initially led to certain simplifications: the trilogy *Temps et récit* was predominantly interpreted in a narrativistic manner, as if it were only a matter of recounting oneself retrospectively in order to assert a narrative identity (cf. Liebsch 1996; Tengelyi 1998; Haas 2002; Stoellger 2005; Römer 2010; Scharfenberg 2011; Prammer, 2012), but not (also) about testifying to oneself in a practical, binding way (cf. Breitling/Orth/Schaaff 1999; Liebsch 1999; 2012). *La métaphore vive* was at the outset not yet seen in the connection, which is highly important for Ricœur, with political questions of semantic innovation or the rewriting and redefinition of concrete reality for the sake of a future that challenges the (utopian) sense of the possible and the impossible.⁹ Furthermore, *Soi-même comme un autre* was reduced to a contribution to the broad field of theories of "identity" and rarely linked to the issue of credible self-attestation, which is also explored in this book. Moreover, the reception was slow to recognize the extremely complex issue of *otherness*, which is already hinted at in the book's title.

⁶ "Hermeneutics without a project of liberation is blind [...]" (Ricœur 1986, p. 237).

⁷ In fact, inadequate, sparse, or even complete lack of reception of Ricœur's writings would merit a separate chapter, which must be omitted here, however. From debates on existentialism and Marxism, as conducted between Sartre and his opponents, to contributions to the history of so-called existential philosophy (by Fritz Heinemann, Rudolf W. Meyer, Rüdiger Bubner and Wolfgang Janke, for example), and the reception of Hegel in France (Schneider 2007) to philosophical anthropology (Raulet/Plas 2014) and anti-humanist thinking, Ricœur is often not given adequate consideration. This applies even to hermeneuticists on this side of the Rhine, such as Peter Szondi and Hans R. Jauß, and many younger scholars, some of them decided "post-hermeneuticists" (Mersch 2010).

⁸ Other texts by Ricœur from this period, some of which were published in German much later on this side of the Rhine: *Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?*, in *Hermeneutics and Dialectics II* (1970); *The Text as Model*, in *Seminar: Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften* (1971); *Die Metapher und das Hauptproblem der Hermeneutik* (1972) in P. Ricœur, *Vom Text zur Person* (2005); *Die Hermeneutik des Zeugnisses* (1972), in P. Ricœur, *An den Grenzen der Hermeneutik* (2008). Complete details can be found in the bibliography.

⁹ Cf. Haverkamp 1998; Breitling 2007; Dalferth et al. 2009; Stoellger 2010; Seitz/Posselt 2017; Friedrich 2024.

What kind of otherness, which seems to be “inherent” to the self from the outset, can we even talk about here? Is it relative or absolute? Or will it turn out as radical otherness, as Waldenfels has repeatedly elaborated in his discussion with Ricœur (e.g., in Waldenfels 1995), or as exteriority, as discussed by Levinas? The debate surrounding these questions continues to this day, not least in the wake of Ricœur’s commentary on Levinas published in French in 1997 under the heading *Autrement* (cf. Ricœur 2015; Liebsch 2018) – in connection with an in-depth reception of Levinas’ two major works, translated into German in 1987 and 1992 (*Totalité et infini* [1961] and *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* [1974]) and with their criticism. For example, on the part of Dominique Janicaud, who in his book on French phenomenology, available in German translation since 2014, accuses Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion (but not Ricœur) of a far-reaching ‘theologization’ of phenomenology without hesitation and thereby betraying it – or also by François Jullien (2010), who elaborates on manifold, interculturally untranslatable alterities and repeatedly encounters the question of how they relate to the alterity of the other.

Was this brought to light by Christianity in the wake of Judaism in such a way that the alterity in question always withdraws from appearance (*des-apparaît*) in an unprecedented manner (*inouï*) (Jullien 2019)? Does this apply primarily or only to the Other encountered here and now, even ‘personally’, or can a landscape ultimately reveal such otherness as well (Jullien 2005, p. 536)? These are questions posed by Jullien to Levinas and Ricœur, which are intended to place their fundamental problem (which also inspires the editors’ exposé¹⁰) on a seemingly completely new footing, namely the question of how it is possible to “depayer” oneself in relation to the other in order not to remain stuck in oneself (Ricœur 1967, p. 54, 62; Jullien 2018). But are we, from the outset, locked within ourselves, so to speak, only to be saved by the power of the Other (*l’Autre; autrui*) from having to remain that way?¹¹ Doesn’t human *ontogenesis*, to which Ricœur, like and with Freud, at times attached great philosophical significance, point to an original openness to others that does not first have to be confirmed by recourse to the origins of Christianity or Judaism?

For Ricœur, as for Jullien, this was also an intercultural issue; but previously it had primarily been a historical and ‘existential’ question of selfhood for him, which manifests itself as *être affecté* challenged by the other. In *Temps et récit*, the concept of otherness is ultimately interpreted historically; in *Soi-même comme un autre*, a threefold otherness (of the body, of conscience, and as something arising from the demands of the other) is then elaborated as inherent in the self from the outset. Both issues – the problem of otherness and the question of historical selfhood – converge in the phenomenon of bearing witness and testifying for others (Ricœur 2008) who have fallen victim to an eminently violent history and who, for Ricœur, must be regarded

¹⁰ I refer here to their call for contributions to the *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, vol. 17 n° 1, 2026 on Ricœur across the world: intercultural receptions and dialogues.

¹¹ For several years now, this question has been at the center of a wide-ranging discussion, particularly in connection with the reception of Levinas’s aforementioned major works, in which many authors have participated from phenomenological point of views. At this point, a few selective references will have to suffice. See Waldenfels/Därmann (1998); Röbner (2012; 2018); Waldenfels (2015); Liebsch (2017). Further references can be found in the Levinas Handbook, edited by René Daußner, Christian Röbner, and Jakub Sirovátka, to be published in 2026.

as witnesses *par excellence* of our own historicity.¹² However, only beings who may lack everything essential (Blumenberg 2006, p. 260) but who nevertheless exist in the mode of self-attestation and are dependent on finding faith as such and, in turn, being able to inspire trust, not least in the given (and then kept) word, can bear witness. Several volumes were published along these lines, including those by Andris Breitling, Stefan Orth (1999, 2002), and myself (1999), some of which were connected with lectures given by Ricœur in Germany.¹³

From the lecture held in Tübingen in 1985 on *chance and reason in history* to the topic of *memory, forgetfulness and history* (presented at the Bielefeld Center for Interdisciplinary Research in 1995), and the reflections on the enigma of the past presented at the Institute for Cultural Studies in Essen (Ricœur 1998a), the talk on foreignness developed during his Humboldt–professorship at the University of Ulm in 1999, and the question of appropriate representation of the past raised at the TU Berlin (2002) on the appropriate representation of the past, preparatory work is revealed that culminates in Ricœur’s penultimate major œuvre *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000/2004).

This work was written at a time when, half a century after the end of World War II, these concepts were gaining popularity almost everywhere in the western hemisphere. Drawing on the concept of collective memory as developed by Maurice Halbwachs (and reactualized by Pierre Nora), Jan Assmann (1992) asked whether the *collective* must not enter into a *cultural*, cross-generational memory, especially in view of the fact that the last eyewitnesses and ear witnesses to the extreme and radical crimes of the Nazis and other atrocities, such as the *Holodomor* for which Josef Stalin and his followers were responsible, would soon no longer be around. It was not until the third generation of German post-war historians that the history of the Second and First World War and the crimes associated with them could finally, in view of this fact, be researched largely free of loyalties to older historians who were still deeply entangled in the era of these crimes (cf. Berg 2003). More or less the same applies to Russian historians, who, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to examine its violent history and the history of collective and cultural memory shaped by it (Epplée 2023).

However, this also sparked a debate about the scope and purpose of commemorating this history for the future, especially as it became increasingly clear how closely the previously largely nationalized memories and histories, often linked to *lieux de mémoire* (Pierre Nora), must have been intertwined, as extensive research into places of memory led by Étienne François and Hagen Schulze has demonstrated. Diverse debates on these issues continue to this day, not only between France and Germany, but also between Germany, Czechia, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, etc.¹⁴ These debates are no longer limited to a “historians’ dispute” (the so called *Historikerstreit* primarily fought with moral arguments, as noted by Ricœur) over the question of how National Socialism

¹² See the third volume of *Temps et récit*, p. 313/Zeit und Erzählung. Bd. III, p. 350. Where these ideas were taken up in the context of phenomenology in France, their specific historical significance was often lost. References to historiography on this side of the Rhine are completely absent from László Tengelyi’s chapter on Ricœur (in Gondek/Tengelyi 2011, pp. 433–490).

¹³ At this point, it is not a matter of documenting Ricœur’s many lecture tours; rather, it is a matter of mentioning some of those that were directly related to the reception of his work in German-speaking countries. It goes without saying that the latter can only be discussed selectively within the available scope. The references provided make it easy to find out more.

¹⁴ Historians such as Omer Bartov (2025) also show how closely related the seemingly disparate “factions” in these conflicts actually are.

and Antisemitism belonged to German history. After the dissolution of the East-West confrontation, it temporarily seemed as if this problem would also have to be addressed on a European level, in such a way that no neighboring country would be spared similar questions. Without neglecting or underestimating their specifically German aspects, since around 1989, with the fall of the wall separating East and West Germany, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, there has been a growing trend toward Europeanization of the framework in which these questions should be raised and answered as far as possible.

Without wanting to talk about a “European house” (Michail Gorbachev), philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (1992) and Rémi Brague (1993), as well as Ricœur (1992), questioned the genealogy of Europe and saw themselves confronted with its previously noted self-destructiveness. Didn’t Europe already commit suicide in the First World War? How was it then possible for it to survive, so to speak? Are the phenomenological analyses that initially drew on Husserl’s *Crisis*-treatise in the cases of Jan Patočka, Ricœur, and Derrida still sufficient for understanding the path that the memory of European history has taken and the path it should take from now on?¹⁵ Is what we should remember adequately described as (First and Second World) War, genocide, or mass murder?

Didn’t the crimes against the Jews, which some of them began to call *Shoah* (after the *Wannseekonferenz* in 1942), shatter all the traditional concepts we had of evil? Must we also ‘historicize’ this, even though it can take previously unknown ‘industrial’ and seemingly ‘banalized’ forms (if we follow Hannah Arendt on this point)?¹⁶ Have we become strangers to ourselves to the extent that the entire arsenal of philosophical concepts no longer seems sufficient to do justice to these questions, as Arendt (1989, p. 207) explicitly claimed? Is this not why Derrida spoke of an irrevocable self-alienation that has befallen us and can hardly be grasped in Husserlian terms as a mere “crisis” of reason?

In *L’écriture et la différence* (1967), Derrida speaks of a dislocation of our identity, or rather of all identity, which seems to have become radically alienated in the face of a violence that even Hegel’s concept of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) can no longer take into account. But is this a specifically German problem? Or a European one? Or is it a radical fundamental problem of reason as such, insofar as it is conceived on a “Greek”, ontological and, in this respect, metaphysical basis – at the price of excluding everything that is radically foreign? Or can reasonable memory still behave in an understandable way? Does this require a moral forgetting in the sense of forgiveness – in contrast to reconciliation in the Hegelian sense of this concept?

After Ricœur had dealt with the question of the Europeanization of collective and cultural references to the past in the early 1990s, which, in his view, could be brought together in a hospitable manner according to the “model of translation,” he insists in *La mémoire, l’histoire et l’oubli* on the ultimately conciliatory meaning of confronting even the most traumatic past. He has long since ceased to believe in a logifiable historicity à la Hegel that could subsume the tragic or

¹⁵ Cf. Derrida 1962/1987; 1990/2013; Patočka 2024; Liebsch 1999; 2010; 2023. In the mid-1990s, Ricœur confessed that the “monstrous” dimension of the events of the 1940s had always remained at the center of his thinking. “Nous ne sommes qu’au début d’une histoire,” he subsequently remarked (Ricœur 1995, p. 70, 72), referring to Patočka’s speech about Europe’s impending suicide in 1914. See Liebsch 2025, vol. I, p. 69 f.

¹⁶ See also, with regard to Ricœur and Arendt, the *Journal Phänomenologie*. Special Issue on ‘Evil’, vol. 37 (2012).

the excessively mournful as merely “negative.” Like Derrida, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and others, he takes seriously the unforgivable, the intolerable, and the utterly unjustifiable (apparently substitute terms for ‘evil’, which is encountered in a multitude of misdeeds [*les maux*]) in order to demand of himself and his readers that they not reduce future history, which is still to be shaped, to these things. Accordingly, Ricœur maintains, despite all our misdeeds, we are not a damned species (*espèce condamnée*) if we do not allow this to happen time and again.¹⁷ In the aforementioned book, Ricœur employs all the means at his disposal from phenomenology and hermeneutics, but also from critical engagement with philosophy (which since Hegel at the latest has been entirely focused on spiritual reconciliation), in order to do justice to this situation, whereby a Christian-inspired eschatological horizon of forgiveness, already clearly articulated in his early writings, is obvious.

This horizon is almost entirely absent in Heidegger, apart from secularized set pieces borrowed by the German philosopher from the theology of his time. Furthermore, Heidegger disrupted the connection between ontology and the one hand and anthropology and history on the other hand. This connection remained central to Ricœur, whereas the later Heidegger favored a pure ontology that ultimately tried to strip off any anthropological, existentially significant (and existential-philosophical) thinking.

This made the scandal (unexpected only for some) caused by the publication in 2014 of the so-called *Schwarze Hefte* (from the years 1939–41) all the greater when it became clear what a nasty downside the supposedly deeper meaning his way of thinking had. This raises the question of whether there is such a thing as philosophical garbage that deserves to be treated as such. Instead, more than five decades after the end of World War II, people continued to focus on the “H. and H. affair” (Hitler and Heidegger)¹⁸, with the latter’s (in the eyes of many) unforgivable silence on the Nazi-time and his deep-seated, thoroughly verbose antisemitic resentments, in order to search for “explanations” for how the question of the “meaning of being” (*die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein*) could go hand in hand with them.

However, the wider scandal remained largely hidden, namely that far less attention continued to be paid to those philosophers who sought to engage unreservedly with Europe’s violent history in order to find out how it might force us to *think differently* today and in the future. Apart from various anthologies on the aforementioned journals, one searches in vain in the programs of renowned publishers for a comparably detailed and publicly visible examination of this question, which would also include a broad critique of history, that is by no means an exclusive feature of any particular philosophy (cf. Liebsch [ed.], 2023). Even Derrida, Levinas, Jankélévitch, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as Maurice Blanchot with his *L’écriture du désastre*, have remained relatively marginal in this regard. As far as Ricœur is concerned, several attempts have been undertaken to trace his paths from the primarily hermeneutic phase of his work to historical theory (cf. Stückerath/Zbinden 1997; Breitling 2007; idem/Orth 2004). However, to date there has been a lack of closer cooperation between historical theory and philosophy on the one hand and historiography on the other, which could do justice to the questions raised about the internal connection between attested historical existence and specifically European violent history at the current state of historiographical research.

¹⁷ Cf. Changeux/Ricœur 1998, p. 239, 306; Bernhardt (2014).

¹⁸ Cf. Altwegg 1998, p. 241; Blanchot 1988.

However, attention has been paid to the state of German and German-language philosophy during the Nazi era.¹⁹ But this chapter of German history also includes the emigration and subsequent exile of so many intellectuals who, as in the case of Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Hermann Broch and others, were forced to ask themselves long after 1945 what could withstand the history of violence they had witnessed. The editor's preface to Ricœur's *Chicago Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986) rightly refers to Ricœur's demand, made with reference to Arendt, "to identify the most enduring features of [our] temporal condition [...] those which are the least vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modern age" (Taylor 1986, p. xi; Ricœur 1987, p. 16). But what exactly are these features? Can they still be adequately understood in line with Husserl's treatise on *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, as Ricœur first commented on in 1949 and took up again in connection with Reinhart Koselleck and others in the *Castelgandolfo Conversations* (Michalski 1986)? Or better with Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*, to which Ricœur repeatedly referred (1977, 1981, and 1990; cf. his *Lectures* 1)?

After he had declared that he had closed the doors on his five years of war and camp experience (Reagan 1998, p. 57), these questions caught up with him again with full force in the last decade of his life. In the meantime, Ricœur had repeatedly sought to engage with German-language philosophy and its historical-critical significance, for example with Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas. Like most people, however, he was surprised after the end of the Cold War by the subsequent emergence of a partly optimistic-naïve, but also partly pessimistic or supposedly only realistic renaissance of historical-philosophical thinking, which Ricœur had previously traced back to a moderate Kantianism oriented toward regulative ideas of possible progress "in a cosmopolitan perspective," but which, unlike the Hegelianists, did not trust in a spiritual force immanent in history. In the 1990s, the achievements of a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* such as in South Africa, the *Mothers of the Disappeared* in Argentina, or Israelis and Palestinians, led by Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Yasser Arafat, in favor of lasting peace in the Middle East, could not be accepted as proof of the effectiveness of such a force. The grief over what admitted of no reparation was apparently too deep, and the danger of becoming traumatized, even as someone indirectly affected, seemed too great in view of the demise of millions for whom, to quote Hegel (1994, p. 80), "no conciliatory result can hold the counterweight."

Nevertheless, a more conciliatory tone is increasingly prevalent in these matters, with many signs of this evident in certain gestures made by Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle (in Reims) through to Helmut Kohl, François Mitterand, and Tadeusz Mazowiecki (in Bitburg and Kreisau, respectively) (cf. Liebsch 2011), there are many signs that on both sides of the Rhine – even beyond Poland and Ukraine to Russia – one does not have to fall back on a conception of history that Kant would have branded "terroristic." While historians from Moscow (think of the NGO *Memorial*) to Frankfurt/O. (think of the work of Karl Schlögel) to the far west of the United States (think of Omer Bartov and Timothy Snyder) continued to work on determining what actually happened in Europe at that time²⁰, the last tsar *in spe* in the Kremlin has ruined everything that was believed to have been achieved through a lateral and, in Ricœur's sense, hospitable intertwining of

¹⁹ One representative example is Sandkühler (2009).

²⁰ However, since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine, *Memorial* has been banned in Russia and can only continue its work in Western Europe.

European memories, in order to at least open up to one's own children and grandchildren on all sides what one has become accustomed to calling, with a hackneyed phrase, "a better future."

Ricœur, who remained committed to existentialist thinking (but not to the so-called existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir or Albert Camus) and, after detours through a variety of interpretative problems, attempted to determine what he could contribute to the understanding of human action in forms of mutual giving and recognition, as well as to the *praxis* of liberal ways of life²¹, never lost sight of the question how a philosophy developed on this basis can contribute to a future for all human beings that should not and must not amount to a mere repetition of the same. Seen in this light, in the current political climate, which unfortunately points in the opposite direction, not only in Europe, there is every reason to remember his philosophical beginnings in the era of the fatal triumphs of Hitlerism and Stalinism – a time that, like hardly any other before it, plunged millions into despair and destruction. Looking back, one wonders what Ricœur believed he could offer as a philosophical counterpoint at that time. And what lessons can be drawn from this for our own present, whose historical-philosophical profile Ricœur ultimately attempted to redefine in such a nuanced way more than fifty years later in his great work *La mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*?

Given this considerable time gap, it is astonishing how consistent Ricœur's thinking has remained in some of his fundamental convictions and motifs: the claim to "illuminate" our existence has already been mentioned. He did not dispute that we may have to develop different ideas in the future about what constitutes truly 'existing' life. But Ricœur does not attempt, as Jullien (2022), who most recently addressed this question, and others before him, to simply break away from Greek, ontological, and metaphysical thinking in order to gain a foothold somewhere else entirely and thus overcome, as far as possible, human beings – these extremely fallible and vulnerable creatures²², capable of causing harm and constantly incurring guilt. Rather, in the style of hermeneutic anthropology (cf. Greisch 2009), he tirelessly inquires into the comprehensibility and interpretability of the "being" of these beings – not least in view of how it presents itself in practical, political, but also literary and imaginative terms (cf. Künle 2014; Gutjahr 2014; Weiland 2019).

Did Aristotle not ask a similar question, in practical terms, in the third book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which Ricœur repeatedly refers? Are there not traces of this question, which ultimately forces us to radically question ourselves, in various mythopoetic sources (from our own childhood to the poetics of Gaston Bachelard)? Will we ever get past the polysemy of terms such as "being," which Ricœur considered the most important (Aristotelian) legacy of the West? If being and beings are inevitably (or must be) expressed linguistically in irreducibly diverse ways, then

²¹ Ricœur had focused on practical philosophical thinking (attempting to make Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of Lebensform fruitful in social philosophy) before, following the renaissance that Marcel Mauss's theory of gift-giving experienced, particularly through Derrida, he also addressed this concept in connection with that of recognition. In this context, his later writings, including *Le Juste 1/2* and *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004), have also been widely received on this side of the Rhine (Schnell 2011; Quadflieg 2011; Bauer 2012; Hoffmann/Link-Wieczorek/Mandry 2016; Orth/Reifenberg 2018), whereas the older practical philosophical discussion is referred to far less frequently. Cf. Waldenfels/Broekman/Pažanin 1979.

²² With his reflections on human vulnerability, which draw on Hans Jonas but also follow on from Georges Canguilhem, Ricœur (e.g. in *Le Juste 2*) addresses a concept that is now also subject of widespread discussion on this side of the Rhine. Cf. Liebsch 2021; Coors 2022.

there can be no direct (monological) ontology and metaphysics. Instead, we remain dependent on mutual, open and social understanding and interpretation of our “being”. This begins with listening to others, hearing and paying attention to the voices and addressees of others who demand answers, to caring for places and spaces where dissident speech can become visible, which should not be lost in a cacophony of ‘opinions’ that show no interest in deviating responses and consequently only manifest a self-righteousness that is the opposite of ‘philosophy’.

Thus, one thing in particular is in danger of being ruined, something that Ricœur invoked in ever new ways: *living together* (*wanting to*, but also *having to*) – and doing so in the best possible way, in just institutions and *despite everything* that speaks against it, being able to endure a notoriously unpleasant, violent, and unjust life among and with others in the long term.

This is how Ricœur’s finding should be understood: “le politique est le lieu où se conjoignent le perdurable et le fragile” (*Lectures 1*, p. 18). However, it is we ourselves who are the most fragile, vulnerable, and constantly “precarious” beings, as Ricœur already noted in his early writings on Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers. That is why we demand reliability, not something substantial that would not be exposed to time and violence, but precisely that which calls our responsibility into play because it is *exposed* to both, but must *rely*, for that very reason, *on not being unreservedly at the mercy of either the passing and all-destructive time or the violence of others*.

In this sense, Ricœur also took up Hans Jonas’ concept of responsibility and came to the conclusion that such “exposed” life actually calls for the responsibility for others. As a result, he deliberately distances himself from his earlier starting points within the framework of a Judeo-Christian culture of guilt and moves closer to a philosophy of *compassion*, which – again converging with corresponding approaches east of the Rhine – would first have to determine what, *in the mode of the pathetic*, demands philosophical consideration. In this sense, Ricœur emphasizes the dependence of philosophical questioning on an initially *non-philosophical* first articulation, especially of negative experiences such as those of more or less blatant or even subtle injustice. In his understanding, nothing better shows how one finds oneself in the world than the *cri de douleur* or the complaint about injustice, to which we cannot oppose any “un-injustice” (*Un-Ungerechtigkeit*; Peter Noll) that would cancel it out to counteract it. This intensifies the negative impulse that arises from the experience of what is suffered (cf. Liebsch/Hetzel/Sepp 2011). There is no longer any prospect of ideal justice, nor of finding a suitable place and appropriate form for lamenting it – apart, perhaps, from manifestations such as the public, silent mourning of millions after the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*.

What Ricœur ultimately conceived of as philosophy finds itself, against this backdrop, in a complicated predicament: it is required to respond to what it perceives as excessive violence, war, terror, and injustice, forcing it to situate itself under certain historical conditions in the context of a political culture to which it must expose itself in order to provide effective guidance. In any case, according to his understanding, it can only be preserved from a certain academicism, which was never Ricœur’s thing, if it does not lose sight of the question of what meaning a philosophy can have, “qui n’arme pas mieux pour la décision morale et pour le jugement politique” (*Lectures 1*, p. 156). However, it remains an open question whether this is not too much to ask of philosophical work. How can its communicative effort to go in this direction beyond itself and truly open up to the foreign be successful without running the risk of abandoning itself, especially in radically changed, unforeseen situations that at best still allow us to speak of a *conditio historica*,

but no longer have sufficient support in an already established, ahistorical anthropology?²³ As Helmuth Plessner (1931) has already shown, the latter, as a philosophical discipline, must be radically questioned in the light of historical, especially violent, experience²⁴ if it wishes to continue to claim to offer guidance for the future.

Are we, in a sense, reverting to the state of philosophical anthropology as it had essentially already taken shape before World War II? That would be an overly simplistic conclusion. For it cannot be overlooked that philosophy only began to examine the violence in question here in detail during the last third of the 20th century, and that it could only make progress in doing so through close cooperation with a whole range of related disciplines. Although violence has long been a topic of discussion – at the latest since Georges Sorel and subsequently especially in the works of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Ricœur, and Levinas – until just a few years ago there was no detailed phenomenological-hermeneutical examination of the subject. Thus, Ricœur, too, (re-)discovered vulnerability (*vulnérabilité*) – without which the violence perpetrated by humans and prevailing among us is inconceivable – especially in connection with his engagement with the writings of Hans Jonas in the 1990s (Ricœur 1991, p. 312; 1998c, p. 24f.; 2001, pp. 85–105; LaCocque/Ricœur 1998, p. 174). Since then, a deeper engagement with this concept and with phenomena of radical, excessive, and intense violence has also been unfolding on this side of the Rhine; and in a way that ultimately calls into question the orientation²⁵ that Ricœur demands of a philosophy that can claim to be in step with the times. For him, however, this could never simply amount to surrendering to them, given that it had to renounce absolute knowledge – a fact that, in retrospect, may make its history appear like a long process of mourning (cf. Dufrenne/Ricœur 1947, p. 137; Ricœur 2013). Thus, Ricœur never treads on safe ground where philosophy could be self-sufficient – neither in the “vue ‘mondain’ de la philosophie” (Ricœur 1936), which engages with the world and assumes responsibility there, nor in the connection between reflective philosophy and existential philosophy that he repeatedly sought later on, nor in the relationship – maintained until the very end – to what Ricœur calls “non-philosophy”²⁶ that gives philosophy something to think about in the first place and, precisely because of this, compels it never to become self-satisfied in the future. Philosophy cannot simply begin with itself if it does not wish to remain confined within its own history. For the same reason, it had to abandon its former claim to become congruent with human existence that has never and will never become entirely transparent to it. Yet rather than inevitably ending in a regrettable failure, philosophy can, precisely for this reason, rediscover itself as a *social* endeavor. For what we are called upon to think – yet cannot grasp through monological means – we must first and foremost prompt one another to reconsider, while remaining open to placing everything that demands to be thought up for discussion in a dialogical manner. In this sense, the early Ricœur seemed to sympathize with *symphilosophical* ideas that traced their roots back to the Jena period of German philosophy (Röttgers 1981). However, even these ideas – which Jaspers revisited from the perspective of a theory of communicative reason (Dufrenne/Ricœur 1947, p. 204)

²³ Here, too, it makes sense to reestablish German-French cross-connections. See Ebke/Hoth 2018.

²⁴ Two supplementary volumes (Liebsch 2024b/c) refer to both the phenomenology and hermeneutics of the experience in question and the violence that threatens to distort it. They were part of an international cooperation project completed in the same year, which was dedicated to the “fundamental questions of hermeneutic anthropology” raised in Ricœur’s life’s work.

²⁵ Cf. Stegmaier 2008; Liebsch, Stegmaier 2022.

²⁶ Ricœur 1955/31967, p. 22. On this side of the Rhine, the reciprocity between philosophy and non-philosophy – which was also central to Merleau-Ponty – was recognized early on; cf. Waldenfels 1964.

– would need to be reexamined from scratch today, given a history of violence that was scarcely foreseeable at the time. Since then, violence has threatened to transform the inescapable facticity of human coexistence – in which we are *exposed* to one another – into a state of being *unreservedly vulnerable* that radically calls into question what Ricœur has upheld as the guiding, hyperbolic principle of his entire philosophical life: the will to live together, despite everything (*malgré tout*).

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