

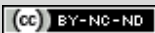
Ricœur Across the World: Intercultural Receptions and Dialogues

Ernst Wolff (KU Leuven), Andrés Bruzzone (Universidade de São Paulo) & Roberto Lauxen (Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia)

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Ricœur Across the World: Intercultural Receptions and Dialogues

Ernst Wolff (KU Leuven), Andrés Bruzzone (USP) & Roberto Lauxen (UESB)

In Memory of Rita de Cássia Oliveira¹

“I have only one way of getting out of myself: it is to disorient myself in others.”²

1. (Dis)orientation: For Philosophical Displacement

The kind of philosophy that Paul Ricœur advocates opens itself to an outside; moreover, certain aspects of his work cannot be completed by the sole, finite and situated author, and require completion by others, themselves also finite but differently situated. Thus, not only did Ricœur affirm that, in working, he entered a dialogue that had begun before him and would continue after him; he also upheld a conception of philosophical practice that finds echoes in traditions of thought from other regions of the world and that places dialogue at the very heart of philosophy. To engage in dialogue means to practice listening, translation, recognition, openness to others, appropriation, and even hospitality; but it equally means to open debate, criticize, concede, articulate dissensus and sustain the conflict of interpretations.³ Accordingly, taking stock of the receptions and debates that authors around the world have initiated with Ricœur responds to two demands: on the one hand, ongoing excavation of the potential inherent in Ricœur’s work; on the other hand, promotion of the ideas of a wide range of authors who find in this work a source of inspiration for their own thinking. Between these poles lies a rich range of relations – dialogues in the broad sense – in which Ricœur’s thought is sometimes explored for its own sake and sometimes examined to identify

¹ This special issue of *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* pays tribute to the academic career of Prof. dr. Rita de Cássia Oliveira (1958–2026), a scholar who played a decisive role in disseminating Ricœur’s thought in Brazil. With exceptional dedication, she introduced and supervised countless students in Ricœur scholarship at the intersection of philosophy and literature, a field to which she devoted a large part of her theoretical work. She was also a poet and the first woman from Maranhão to earn a doctorate in philosophy. She taught in the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral programs in Philosophy and Literature at the Universidade Federal do Maranhão (UFMA). A member of the first board of the Rede Brasil-Ricœur, she received the title of Honorary Member in 2025. She had also recently accepted the invitation to host the Third *Ateliê Ricœur na América Latina* at the Universidade Federal do Maranhão.

² Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 51 (translation modified).

³ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 53; Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics*, trans. Don Ihde et al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1969] 1974).

avenues for reflection. At times Ricœur is a stimulating interlocutor, even an intellectual adversary; at other times he is no more than a reference point in explorations and thematic fields that lead far beyond his own reflection, or even against his conclusions.

In this special issue of *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricoeur Studies*, we celebrate engagement with Ricœur's writings across all continents, in the light of extremely varied historical, social, and political situations. We acknowledge the constructive contributions of doctoral students and established scholars to the study of his work throughout the world. We also note with enthusiasm the growing tendency to foster this reception explicitly through international conferences.⁴

To carry these initiatives forward, we propose to examine (1) the modes of openness in Ricœur's thought and (2) the ways in which his readers have identified avenues for extending and surpassing his work, adding what Ricœur himself could not offer us. We are interested in how Ricœur "travels" around the world and how his readers use his ideas in their respective contexts.

2. Diversity as Aim, Opportunity, and Challenge

In keeping with this objective, the present issue brings together a highly diverse group of contributors. We ourselves – a South African living and working in Belgium, a Brazilian born in Brazil, and another born in Argentina and now half Brazilian – work in third languages. Alongside us, contributors come from Chile, Brazil, Cameroon, Spain, Belgium, Germany, Türkiye, Taiwan, and South Korea. The referees, on whose expertise we depended for peer review and whom we warmly thank here, represent an even wider range. Furthermore, the contributors also exhibit considerable diversity in terms of age, gender, mother tongue, religious convictions, and field of specialization. Finally, the number of contributions does not yet reflect the genuine interest elicited by our call for papers. Owing to a tight schedule and material constraints, several articles will be published in the journal's 17/2 (2026) issue as "Further Perspectives", thereby complementing the present special issue.

Opening the invitation to such a broad academic public has borne fruit. Thus, as we shall see, the ways in which the French philosopher's work is read and appropriated vary considerably with local realities and social or historical contexts. This variety reflects freedom with respect to the role ascribed to Ricœur's writings in the effort to think from one's own "speaking place".⁵ To some extent, this practice is already familiar in Ricœur studies: creative and critical appropriations have enabled Ricœur's work to be received in fields as diverse as literature, sociology, theology,

⁴ To name just a few recent examples: Manila, Philippines, *Paul Ricœur in Asia: Reflections on Politics, Society, and Religion* (19–21 November 2015); Stellenbosch, South Africa, *From Where Do You Speak?* (23–25 May 2018); Leuven, Belgium, *Ricœur 2020 – Ricœur as World Heritage* (19–21 November 2020); Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *Mémoires blessées, promesses inachevées. La pensée de Ricœur et les horizons africains* (25–27 April 2023); Taipei, Taiwan, *Image and Imagination: International Conference on Paul Ricœur and Philosophy for Our Time* (28–29 May 2025). These examples may readily be supplemented by the series of Ibero-American Congresses on Paul Ricœur's thought, meetings of the Rede-Ricœur Brasil, and numerous individual contributions to regular events such as the Ricœur Summer School in Paris or the annual conferences of the Society for Ricœur Studies in North America.

⁵ See Djamila Ribeiro, *Where We Stand*, trans. Padma Viswanathan (New Haven: Yale University Press, [2019] 2024). The same question was foregrounded at the Stellenbosch Ricœur conference, *From Where Do You Speak?*

law, psychology, communication, architecture, feminism, memory politics, information technologies, as well as in debates on racism, violence, democracy, decolonization, and gender issues. Many pages of *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* have indeed already been devoted to several of these themes. The present special issue extends this work of appropriation while adding an intercultural and intercontinental dimension. Accordingly, we have focused on the field beyond the central sites of Ricœur's reception (France and the United States), in order to attend primarily to what is taking place on other continents, but also in other European countries. In all these respects, the intrinsically unfinished character of Ricœur's work (pointed out above) becomes both a task and an opportunity.

Yet philosophical reflection in a context of diversity also presents a challenge, one that is not always easy to meet. As guest editors, we have had to navigate linguistic diversity (mentioned above) and different time zones. Coordinating different academic cultures and practices required sustained reflection and difficult decisions. In short, while we have sought to examine and interrogate diversity, we ourselves have been confronted by the questions it raises. A constant dilemma throughout this process has been to remain lucid about the place accorded to the thoroughly Western philosopher Paul Ricœur in this enterprise of bringing diverse worlds into relation. The long history of Eurocentrism in the sciences and in philosophy compels us to do so.

More broadly, we must ask ourselves what becomes of Ricœur's thought when it is received in the four corners of the world, where the "other" is no longer the "neighbour" sharing the same cultural horizon, but an unexpected figure arriving from foreign horizons: indigenous thought, indigenous cultures, diverse religions, or even different social and political contexts. In his socio-political writings, Ricœur shows that this philosophical questioning corresponds to contemporary political concerns. Thus, to philosophize still means clarifying concepts, arguments and conflicts, but doing so whilst questioning the conditions under which encounters between peoples of different histories and cultures are possible – without resorting to domination or conquest.⁶

A hermeneutics of cultural diversity and a reflection on asymmetrical political relations, as well as on epistemic relations, must form part of the response. Faced with this difficult question, it is essential to bear in mind that we are not alone in reflecting on it, and to make the best possible use of the perspectives reaching us from all corners of the world today.

Far from being a happy conclusion, this rather highlights just how troubled the vast field of reflection on international cooperation is. The intersection of cultural and conceptual horizons multiplies the challenges surrounding identity politics, otherness, recognition, mutuality, linguistic hospitality and justice. In contexts of historical subordination and wounded memories, in particular, these questions pose daunting challenges. The summary of the chapters below offers an insight into the range of responses this issue proposes to this challenge.

To schematize, the frame of reference taking shape in these receptions is marked by an ambiguous polarity. On the one hand, "speaking places" are not incommunicable. The foreigner remains a "fellow human being", in the sense of an "equivalence without adequation"⁷ that rises

⁶ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", *History and Truth*, 271–284, here 283.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan. New York: Routledge, 2006, 7.

“to the level of a wager and a voluntary affirmation of human identity”.⁸ On the other hand, lucid recognition of histories of violence and oppression, as well as of contemporary relations of domination and exploitation, is called for in a world in which predatory capitalism produces poverty⁹ and in which international relations of violence inherited from the past are perpetuated by other means.

3. Across the World: The Contributions

Can Ricœur’s notion of recognition be thought in cultural terms? Hsueh-I Chen opens the issue with his article “Exploring Paul Ricœur’s Course of Recognition as a Possible Pathway to Intercultural Recognition”, in which he explores possible resonances between *The Course of Recognition* and several major concepts of intercultural philosophy. Tracing the Ricœurian trajectory from identification, through self-recognition, to mutual recognition, he examines how Ricœur’s phenomenological and narrative analyses can be coordinated with intercultural frameworks attentive to plurality, asymmetry, historical difference, and dialogical or polylogical openness. The article thus proposes rereading *The Course of Recognition* as a possible preparatory anthropology for intercultural philosophy, while bringing out tensions associated with the limits of reciprocity.

Marianne Moyaert introduces suspicion at the very heart of the dialogical ideal in the following article, “Dialogue and Suspicion: Ricœur, Ideology, and the Politics of Interfaith Understanding”. If Ricœur’s hermeneutic anthropology makes it possible to think dialogue not simply as an activity human beings choose to undertake, but as a constitutive dimension of human existence, Moyaert questions the limits of such a universalization of the dialogical condition. Rereading Ricœur from the standpoint of Enrique Dussel’s decolonial critique, particularly the relation between the *ego conquiro* and the *ego cogito*, she shows that subjects do not enter dialogue under historically equal conditions. Requirements of vulnerability, reciprocity, and reflexivity encounter histories of power, inequality, and coloniality that continue to structure concrete encounters. Hence interfaith dialogue can function not only as a space of mutual transformation but also as a site at which asymmetries are reproduced: some interlocutors already appear more foreign than others, bear a disproportionate burden of translation, and remain exposed to a dominant gaze that determines what can be heard, recognised, or rendered intelligible.

A tension thus emerges, moving us from the possibility of dialogue to a critique of its historical and political conditions. It is within this same horizon of reception and critique that Noeli Dutra Rossatto, in “Ethics and Liberation. Between Paul Ricœur and Enrique Dussel”, revisits the difficult, fruitful, and still little-explored debate between Ricœur and Dussel, especially on the basis of the seminar “Hermeneutics and Liberation”, held in Naples in 1991. The article examines the transition from hermeneutics to ethics in the Latin American context by considering Dussel’s critical appropriation of the symbolic, narrative, and ethico-ontological nuclei of Ricœur’s thought. Its central focus is the ethical subject and its relation to the other: between self-esteem, otherness,

⁸ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 282, translation modified.

⁹ Paul Ricœur, “Que signifie la présence des pauvres parmi nous?”, *Foi-Éducation*, no. 31/54 (January–March 1961), 9–19.

exteriority, and liberation, Rossatto is less concerned with opposing Ricœur and Dussel than with showing the possibilities of a reciprocal appropriation of their thought.

With a particularly suggestive approach, Selami Varlik explores in “Imagination of Innocence: Ricœur and the Islamic Notion of Natural Disposition (*Fitra*)”, the possibility of a reciprocal decentering between Ricœur’s thought and the Islamic tradition. He contrasts Ricœur’s imagination of innocence with the notion of *fitra*, understood especially in al-Māturīdī as a natural disposition toward the good and a rational capacity to recognise God. Whereas Ricœur inherits a view of evil as a scandal that is always already present, *fitra* affirms, by contrast, the primacy of an original orientation toward the good. Nevertheless, the article shows that a convergence remains possible: in Ricœur too, evil can be understood only in the light of a more originary goodness. The encounter crystallizes in a twofold logic of “in spite of”: imagining the good despite evil and imagining the possibility of fault despite the primacy of the good. It does not seek to establish an easy consensus, but to show how each tradition can be displaced and revitalised in contact with the other.

In a decentering of Ricœur’s reception that remains within Europe, Burkhard Liebsch offers in “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”, a reflection on the very meaning of philosophy based on the complex trajectory of the Germanophone reception of Ricœur. The article shows that this reception has long privileged hermeneutics, at times leaving in shadow the historical, political, and existential dimensions of his work. Liebsch thus presents Ricœur as a thinker of philosophical orientation within the *conditio historica*, attentive to history, otherness, testimony, memory, and responsibility. The concluding question concerns philosophy’s capacity to respond to historical and political violence without renouncing the demand for a possible living-together, despite everything. Next, Tomás Domingo Moratalla turns our attention to another European philosophical tradition in “Paul Ricœur and José Ortega y Gasset: A Necessary Dialogue. Configurations of Hermeneutic Phenomenology”. The article identifies a convergence between two bodies of thought that, despite their apparent distance, share a common phenomenological “ground”, a similar humanist “subsoil”, and common “adversaries”, notably positivisms and reductionisms. Reading Ricœur with Ortega and Ortega through Ricœur, Moratalla shows how their reflections on life, circumstance, metaphor, narration, translation, and responsibility contribute to an understanding of hermeneutic phenomenology not only as a theory but as a living tradition and a philosophical task for our time.

A methodological detour is presented with “La défatatlisation du passé : Paul Ricœur, Jacques Revel et le réalisme critique en historiographie. Une implication scientifique et éthique pour la Corée et l’Afrique” [Defatalising the Past: Paul Ricœur, Jacques Revel and Critical Realism in Historiography. A Scholarly and Ethical Implication for Korea and Africa]. Oung Byun’s article brings Ricœur into relation with Jacques Revel and the methodology of shifting scales in order to conceive a history capable of moving beyond the opposition between memorial fidelity and historical truth. The aim is not merely to recall the past but to defatalize it: to return to situations of uncertainty, possible choices, and agents’ margins of action, where master narratives tend to transform history into destiny. This approach directly prepares the questions that follow, particularly in postcolonial contexts where historical writing must resist at once wounded memories, fixed national narratives, and fatalisms inherited from domination.

The subsequent movement takes us toward other horizons, where history itself becomes an object of debate and writing the past proves problematic in contexts marked by colonial denial,

wounded memories, and political uses of history. In “L’Historiographie africaine en contexte post-colonial : enjeux méthodologiques et débats critiques au prisme des perspectives de Mamadou Diouf et Paul Ricœur” [African Historiography in the Postcolonial Context: Methodological Issues and Critical Debates in the Light of Mamadou Diouf’s and Paul Ricœur’s Perspectives], Amélie Aristelle Ekassi examines tensions within postcolonial African historiography: restoring a dignity denied by the colonial narrative without reducing the plurality of African experiences to a unifying national novel. Drawing on Mamadou Diouf and Ricœur, the article thus examines the historian’s truth pact, the risks of chronocentrism, the value of fragments, the function of historical narrative, and the possibility of a just memory. Extending this African sequence but shifting attention from historiography to a hermeneutics of suffering, capability, and action, Ernst Wolff proposes, in “Defeat – Conscientization – Action. African Contributions to a Hermeneutics of Suffering and Capability”, to bring Ricœur into relation with certain orientations of African philosophical hermeneutics. The article first provides a historical orientation concerning Ricœur’s reception in Africa and then develops a systematic reflection around three themes: sociopolitical defeat as initial motivation, conscientization as hermeneutic work, and action as a response to the demands of practical contexts. Wolff thus shows that hermeneutics, far from being merely an academic discipline, can become a practice of raising awareness, reappropriation and support for the capacity to act. Expanding questions of historical memory, truth, justice, recognition, and reconciliation, Beatriz Contreras Tasso leads us from Africa to Latin America. In “Ricœur’s Hermeneutic Philosophy. Keys to Reflect upon the Case of Chile and Its Memory”, post-dictatorship Chile becomes a testing ground for Ricœurian categories of memory, narration, and mutual recognition. Confronted with disappearances, persistent impunity, denialism, and forms of impeded or manipulated memory, these categories shed light on the still-open wounds of Chile’s democratic transition while revealing their own limitations. The article thus demonstrates the fruitfulness of Ricœur’s hermeneutics in the face of a non-European experience of collective memory, but also the need to think through the institutional, political, symbolic, and narrative mediations that make recognition possible – or prevent it.

Brazil closes the issue in a doubly special way. First, there is the extraordinary dynamism of Ricœurian thought in the country. Second, given its triple historical configuration in which Indigenous, African, and European cultures form a unique combination, and in which erased memories, symbolic and real violence, and not always visible tensions still operate, Brazil offers both a challenge and an opportunity for testing the possibilities of a dialogical philosophy. This section proposes to do so through concrete examples. The Brazil section opens with Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, whose essay “Ricoeur à travers le monde : depuis le Brésil” [Ricœur Through(out) the World: From Brazil] offers a reflection that goes far beyond the Brazilian case alone. From her dual European and Brazilian inscription, and her founding role in disseminating Ricœur’s thought in Brazil, Gagnebin interrogates the very meaning of “reception”. She warns against excessive admiration or even pious veneration of European philosophers: reading Ricœur from Brazil does not mean applying a thought already constituted, but reactivating it, displacing it, and responding to it from another location. It is a kind of *Sapere aude!* addressed to the country’s thinkers. The essay thus stresses the fruitfulness of Ricœurian categories of memory, forgetting, amnesty, and identity for thinking slavery, dictatorship, literature, and Brazil’s plural narratives, while recalling the limits of intercultural dialogue that fails to take sufficient account of the colonial, racial, and social violence that precedes every supposedly egalitarian relationship.

A contribution in which Paul Ricœur's philosophy is significantly displaced from its usual contexts follows this call and closes the dossier: in "Élargir l'imagination pour fluidifier l'action – Paul Ricœur et Ailton Krenak" [Expanding Imagination to Make Action More Fluid – Paul Ricœur and Ailton Krenak], Cristina Henrique da Costa proposes an unusual encounter between Ricœurian thought and Ailton Krenak, a Brazilian Indigenous thinker, writer, and activist. The article starts from the idea that, for Ricœur and Krenak alike, there is no action without imagination. Yet this convergence also reveals a decisive tension: for Ricœur, imagination is thought through metaphor, narrative, utopia, and hermeneutic mediation; for Krenak, it forms part of a cosmology in which myth, the land, rivers, ancestry, and political action remain inseparable. Through the notions of ancestral future, *florestania*, and an alliance of differences, the article shows how Indigenous thought situated in Brazil can not only enter into dialogue with Ricœur, but also shift the limits of his theory of imagination and action.

4. Future perspectives

We began this introduction by asserting that Ricœur's thought displays a constitutive incompleteness, in a stronger sense than with many other philosophers. This incompleteness has a positive dimension that becomes increasingly visible as his philosophy branches out in unforeseen directions and gains in strength and vitality. Ricœurian philosophy has unfolded into a vast, multifaceted branching structure, one that cannot be harmoniously integrated into a pacified framework. Between exegetical fidelity and respectful appropriation, on the one hand, and critical debate, on the other, in which Ricœurian thought becomes one element among others within a constellation of ideas shaped by authors' own concerns, the Ricœurian afterlife has itself become a mosaic of conflicts of interpretation.

It follows that, henceforth, philosophizing "with", "alongside" or "against" Ricœur requires acute awareness of the finitude of knowledge and the impossibility of occupying all the spaces of truth. Philosophy therefore has a vocation of listening, communication, and critical hospitality toward the thought of others – not as a flight from or denial of oneself, but as a task of reflective mediation and a quest for new intellectual horizons. A "Ricœurian" philosophy would be recognized by its dialogical character, understood as a "disorientation into the other". It thereby becomes a collective undertaking.

Such a reception, which aims neither at mere transmission nor at identical repetition, would also lead to a critique of the work from which it emerges. Serious philosophical critique of Ricœur's texts is, of course, not new. What is at stake is rather a new orientation of criticism. At the center of this orientation is a reconsideration of the profile of the positions from which and for which Ricœur wrote, each time with the associated perspectives and limitations of view. Thus, thinking from Ricœur by beginning in France or the United States loses some of its self-evidence (without in any way denying the contribution of studies arising in these contexts). The plurality of receptions described above draws much of its reflective force from foregrounding a sensitivity to fractures, tensions, and wounds: in exhausted and mistreated bodies, in relations of labor and exploitation, in identity politics,¹⁰ in (in)capacities for action, in denied or distorted memories, and

¹⁰ Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, "As armadilhas da identidade", in *Paul Ricœur: Identidade e Hermenêutica Crítica*, ed. Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa and Andrés Bruzzone (São Paulo: Alameda, 2025), 89–106.

in struggles for individual or collective self-affirmation. Although the hermeneutics of the suffering human being already suggests such avenues, they would benefit from much fuller development from the standpoint of the lived experience of the people concerned. Overall, a revitalisation of the hermeneutics of suspicion is needed in order to bring to light the way domination distorts institutions, social interactions, bodies, and even the most intimate interior communication.¹¹

Certainly, other domains remain to be explored in the same spirit. Accordingly, in our call for papers, we invited scholars from all the continents to explore together questions related to the dissemination of Ricœur's work: the interpretation of his writings, teaching, and scholarly practices around this oeuvre. Part of this exploration would involve clarifying what has facilitated its reception, but equally what, on the contrary, impedes its appropriation. These questions invite investigation into the place held by different "worlds" in his philosophy, the possibilities and difficulties of translation, and the degree of innovation that a faithful reception of a heritage can accommodate, between *innovatio* and *aemulatio*. In this sense, they call for reflection on the epistemological and political stakes of memory, transmission, and innovation in cultural goods, art, languages, and traditions, but also on contemporary problems that the reception of Ricœurian ideas can illuminate on a global scale: global justice, migration, xenophobia, racism, gender equality, slavery, and other forms of exploitation. Finally, in full awareness that international relations of violence inherited from the past continue today by other means (as noted above), incessant self-criticism is required to determine whether our own philosophical practices retain any complicity with instruments of domination, humiliation, and marginalization.¹² Likewise, sustained effort is needed to identify how academic philosophy can strengthen its contribution to resisting these tendencies, fully aware of the limits of its means and remaining faithful to its vocation to cultivate informed uncertainty.

¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 55–56.

¹² We refer to the acuity with which Ebooussi Boulaga describes the first encounters with Western philosophy, in a colonial context, as an encounter with "an attribute of power"; see Fabien Ebooussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy* (Trenton: Africa World Press, [1977] 2014), 2.

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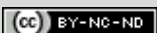
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À la mémoire de Rita de Cássia Oliveira¹

« Je n'ai qu'un moyen de sortir de moi-même : c'est de me dépayser en autrui. »²

1. (Des)orientation : pour le dépaysement philosophique

Le genre de philosophie que Paul Ricœur défend s'ouvre vers l'extérieur ; de plus, certains aspects de son œuvre ne peuvent être achevés par l'auteur seul, fini et situé, et exigent d'être complétés par d'autres, également finis, mais situés autrement. Ainsi, non seulement il affirmait qu'en travaillant il entrait dans un dialogue qui avait déjà commencé et qui continuerait après lui, mais il soutenait aussi une vision de la pratique philosophique qui trouve un écho dans les traditions de pensée d'autres régions du monde et qui situe le dialogue au cœur même de la philosophie. Dialoguer, c'est faire preuve d'écoute, de traduction, de reconnaissance, d'ouverture aux autres, d'appropriation, voire d'hospitalité, certes, mais c'est également s'efforcer de débattre, de critiquer, de concéder, de marquer des dissensus et d'entretenir le conflit des interprétations³. Dès lors, relever les réceptions et les débats que des auteurs aux quatre coins du monde ont engagés avec Ricœur répond à deux exigences : d'une part, la mise en lumière continue du potentiel inhérent à l'œuvre de Ricœur ; d'autre part, la promotion des idées d'un large éventail d'auteurs qui trouvent dans cette œuvre une source d'inspiration pour leur propre réflexion. Entre ces deux pôles s'étend une riche variété de rapports – de dialogues au sens large – où la pensée ricœurienne

¹ Cette édition spéciale des *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* rend hommage à la trajectoire académique de la professeure Rita de Cássia Oliveira (1958-2026), chercheuse qui a joué un rôle déterminant dans la diffusion de la pensée de Ricœur au Brésil. Avec un dévouement exceptionnel, elle a initié et accompagné d'innombrables étudiants dans la recherche ricœurienne à l'interface de la philosophie et de la littérature, domaine auquel elle a consacré une grande partie de ses travaux théoriques. Elle était également poétesse et la première femme originaire du Maranhão à obtenir un doctorat en philosophie. Elle a enseigné au sein des programmes de premier, de deuxième et de troisième cycles en philosophie et en lettres de l'Universidade Federal do Maranhão (UFMA). Membre de la première direction de la Rede Brasil-Ricœur, elle a reçu en 2025 le titre de membre honoraire. Elle avait par ailleurs récemment accepté l'invitation à accueillir le III *Ateliê Ricœur na América Latina* à l'Universidade Federal do Maranhão.

² Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris : Seuil, 3e éd., 1967), 62.

³ Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité*, 64 ; Ricœur, *Le Conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris : Seuil, [1969] 2013).

est tantôt explorée pour elle-même, tantôt étudiée pour y puiser des pistes de réflexion. Parfois, Ricœur est un interlocuteur stimulant, voire un adversaire intellectuel ; d'autres fois, il n'est qu'un repère dans des explorations et des thématiques qui mènent bien au-delà de sa propre réflexion, voire contre ses propres conclusions.

Dans ce numéro spécial des *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, nous saluons l'engagement envers l'œuvre de Ricœur sur tous les continents, à la lumière de situations historiques, sociales et politiques extrêmement variées. Nous reconnaissons les contributions constructives de doctorants et de chercheurs confirmés à l'étude de son œuvre partout dans le monde. Nous observons également avec enthousiasme la tendance croissante à stimuler explicitement cette réception par des colloques internationaux⁴.

Dans le but de poursuivre ces initiatives, nous proposons d'examiner (1) les modalités d'ouverture de la pensée ricœurienne et (2) la manière dont ses lecteurs ont identifié des pistes pour prolonger et dépasser son œuvre, en ajoutant ce que Ricœur lui-même n'a pas pu nous proposer. Nous nous intéressons à la façon dont Ricœur « voyage » à travers le monde et à l'usage que ses lecteurs font de ses idées dans leurs contextes respectifs.

2. La diversité comme objectif, chance et défi

Conformément à cet objectif, le présent numéro rassemble une grande diversité de contributeurs. Nous-mêmes, un Sud-Africain habitant et travaillant en Belgique, un Brésilien né Brésilien et un autre né Argentin et devenu à moitié Brésilien, nous travaillons tous dans des langues tierces. À nos côtés, nos participants proviennent du Chili, du Brésil, du Cameroun, d'Espagne, de Belgique, d'Allemagne, de Turquie, de Taïwan et de Corée du Sud. Les évaluateurs, sur l'expertise desquels nous avons dû nous appuyer pour l'évaluation par les pairs et que nous tenons à remercier vivement ici, représentent un éventail encore plus large. Par ailleurs, les participants présentent également une bonne diversité en termes d'âge, de genre, de langue maternelle, de convictions religieuses et de spécialisation scientifique. Enfin, le nombre de contributions ne reflète pas encore l'intérêt réel suscité par notre appel à contributions. En raison d'un calendrier serré et de contraintes matérielles, plusieurs articles seront publiés dans le numéro 17/2 (2026) de la revue, sous la rubrique « Perspectives complémentaires », afin de compléter le présent numéro spécial.

Le fait d'ouvrir l'invitation à un public scientifique aussi large a porté ses fruits. Ainsi, nous verrons que, selon les réalités locales et les contextes sociaux ou historiques, les façons de lire l'œuvre du philosophe français et de se l'approprier varient considérablement. Cette variété reflète

⁴ Pour n'en citer que quelques exemples récents : Manille, Philippines, *Paul Ricœur in Asia : Reflections on Politics, Society, and Religion* (19–21 novembre 2015) ; Stellenbosch, Afrique du Sud, *From Where Do You Speak ? (23–25 mai 2018)* ; Leuven, Belgique, *Ricœur 2020 – Ricœur as World Heritage* (19–21 novembre 2020) ; Kinshasa, République démocratique du Congo, *Mémoires blessées, promesses inachevées. La pensée de Ricœur et les horizons africains* (25–27 avril 2023) ; Taïpei, Taïwan, *Image and Imagination : International Conference on Paul Ricœur and Philosophy for Our Time* (28–29 mai 2025). À ces exemples, on peut facilement ajouter la série des Congrès ibéro-américains sur la pensée de Paul Ricœur, les rencontres du Rede-Ricœur Brasil, ainsi que de nombreuses contributions individuelles à des colloques réguliers, tels que l'École d'été Ricœur à Paris ou les colloques annuels de la Society for Ricœur Studies en Amérique du Nord.

une liberté par rapport au rôle attribué aux écrits de Ricœur dans l'effort de penser à partir de leur « lieu de parole »⁵. Dans une certaine mesure, cette pratique est déjà bien connue dans les études ricœuriennes : des appropriations créatives et critiques ont permis à l'œuvre ricœurienne d'être accueillie dans des domaines aussi divers que la littérature, la sociologie, la théologie, le droit, la psychologie, la communication, l'architecture, le féminisme, la politique de la mémoire, les technologies de l'information, ainsi que dans les débats sur le racisme, la violence, la démocratie, la décolonisation et les questions de genre. De nombreuses pages des *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* ont en effet déjà été consacrées à plusieurs de ces thématiques. Le présent numéro spécial prolonge ce travail d'appropriation, tout en y ajoutant une profondeur interculturelle et intercontinentale. En conséquence, nous nous sommes concentrés sur l'ensemble du domaine en dehors des lieux centraux de réception de Ricœur (la France et les États-Unis), afin de nous intéresser en premier lieu à ce qui se passe sur les autres continents, mais aussi dans d'autres pays européens. À tous ces égards, le caractère intrinsèquement incomplet de l'œuvre de Ricœur (évoqué plus haut) devient à la fois une tâche et une opportunité.

Or, mener une réflexion philosophique dans un contexte de diversité constitue également un défi qui n'est pas toujours facile à relever. En tant qu'éditeurs invités, nous avons dû composer avec la diversité linguistique (mentionnée plus haut) et les décalages horaires. Coordonner différentes cultures et pratiques universitaires a nécessité une réflexion intense et des décisions difficiles. En bref, tout en nous attachant à examiner et à interroger la diversité, nous avons nous-mêmes été interpellés par les questions soulevées par cette diversité. Un dilemme constant qui a accompagné ce processus a été de rester lucides quant à la place accordée au philosophe très occidental qu'est Paul Ricœur dans toute cette entreprise visant à mettre en relation les diversités. La longue histoire de l'eurocentrisme dans les sciences et en philosophie nous y oblige.

Plus largement, on doit se demander ce que devient la pensée de Ricœur lorsqu'elle est reçue aux quatre coins du monde, là où l'autre n'est plus le « prochain » partageant le même horizon culturel, mais l'inattendu venu d'horizons étrangers : pensées indigènes, cultures autochtones, religions variées ou encore contextes sociaux et politiques différents. Les écrits sociopolitiques de Ricœur montrent que ce questionnement philosophique correspond aux enjeux politiques contemporains. Ainsi, philosopher veut toujours dire clarifier les concepts, les arguments et les conflits, mais cela en s'interrogeant sur les conditions de possibilité des rencontres entre peuples d'histoires et de cultures différentes – sans recourir à la domination ou à la conquête⁶. Une herméneutique de la diversité culturelle et une réflexion sur les relations politiques asymétriques, aussi bien que sur les relations épistémiques, doivent faire partie de la réponse. Face à cette question difficile, il est essentiel de garder à l'esprit que nous ne sommes pas seuls à y réfléchir et de tirer le meilleur parti possible des perspectives qui nous parviennent de tous les horizons du monde aujourd'hui.

Loin d'être une conclusion heureuse, cela esquisse plutôt combien le vaste domaine de réflexion en coopération internationale est accidenté. Le croisement des horizons culturels et conceptuels multiplie des enjeux de politique de l'identité, d'altérité, de reconnaissance, de mutualité, d'hospitalité linguistique et de justice. Dans les contextes d'assujettissement historique

⁵ Voir Djamila Ribeiro, *O que é lugar de fala ?* (Belo Horizonte : Letramento, 2017). Cette même question a été mise en avant lors du colloque Ricœur de Stellenbosch, *From Where Do You Speak ?*

⁶ Cf. Ricœur, « Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales », *Histoire et vérité*, 322-338, ici 337.

et de mémoires blessées, en particulier, ces questions posent des défis intimidants. Le résumé des chapitres ci-dessous permet de découvrir l'éventail des réponses que ce numéro propose à ce défi.

Pour schématiser, le cadre de référence qui se dessine dans ces réceptions se caractérise par une polarité ambiguë. D'un côté, les « lieux de parole » ne sont pas incommunicables. L'étranger demeure un « semblable » au sens d'une « équivalence sans adéquation »⁷ qui s'élève « au rang d'un pari et d'une affirmation volontaire de l'identité de l'homme »⁸. De l'autre, une reconnaissance lucide des histoires de violence et d'oppression, ainsi que des dominations et des exploitations contemporaines, s'impose dans un monde où le capitalisme prédateur fabrique la pauvreté⁹ et où des rapports internationaux de violence hérités du passé se perpétuent aujourd'hui par d'autres moyens.

3. À travers le monde : les contributions

La notion ricœurienne de reconnaissance peut-elle être pensée en termes de cultures ? Hsueh-I Chen ouvre le dossier avec son article « Exploring Paul Ricœur's Course of Recognition as a Possible Pathway to Intercultural Recognition », où il explore les résonances possibles entre *Parcours de la reconnaissance* et certains concepts majeurs de la philosophie interculturelle. En suivant le parcours ricœurien depuis l'identification jusqu'à la reconnaissance mutuelle, en passant par la reconnaissance de soi, il examine comment les analyses phénoménologiques et narratives de Ricœur peuvent être coordonnées avec des cadres interculturels attentifs à la pluralité, à l'asymétrie, à la différence historique et à l'ouverture dialogique ou polylogique. L'article propose ainsi de relire *Parcours de la reconnaissance* comme une possible anthropologie préparatoire à la philosophie interculturelle, tout en faisant apparaître les tensions liées aux limites de la réciprocité.

Marianne Moyaert introduit le soupçon au cœur même de l'idéal dialogique dans l'article suivant, « Dialogue and Suspicion: Ricœur, Ideology, and the Politics of Interfaith Understanding ». Si l'anthropologie herméneutique de Ricœur permet de penser le dialogue non pas simplement comme une activité que les êtres humains choisissent d'entreprendre, mais comme une dimension constitutive de l'existence humaine, Moyaert interroge les limites d'une telle universalisation de la condition dialogique. En relisant Ricœur à partir de la critique décoloniale d'Enrique Dussel, notamment du rapport entre l'*ego conquiero* et l'*ego cogito*, elle montre que les sujets n'entrent pas dans le dialogue dans des conditions historiquement égales. Les exigences de vulnérabilité, de réciprocité et de réflexivité rencontrent des histoires de pouvoir, d'inégalité et de colonialité qui continuent de structurer les rencontres concrètes. Dès lors, le dialogue interreligieux peut fonctionner non seulement comme un espace de transformation mutuelle, mais aussi comme un lieu où se reproduisent des asymétries : certains interlocuteurs y apparaissent déjà comme plus étrangers que d'autres, portent une charge disproportionnée de traduction et restent exposés à un regard dominant qui détermine ce qui peut être entendu, reconnu ou rendu intelligible.

Une tension se met ainsi en place, qui nous fait passer de la possibilité du dialogue à la critique de ses conditions historiques et politiques. C'est dans ce même horizon réceptif et critique

⁷ Ricœur, *Sur la traduction* (Paris : Bayard, 2004), 19.

⁸ Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité*, 336.

⁹ Ricœur, « Que signifie la présence des pauvres parmi nous ? », *Foi-Éducation*, no 31/54 (janvier-mars 1961), 9-19.

que Noeli Dutra Rossatto, dans « Ethics and Liberation. Between Paul Ricoeur and Enrique Dussel », revient sur le débat difficile, fécond et encore peu exploré entre Ricoeur et Dussel, notamment à partir du séminaire *Herméneutique et libération*, tenu à Naples en 1991. L'article interroge le passage de l'herméneutique à l'éthique dans le contexte latino-américain, en examinant l'appropriation critique par Dussel des noyaux symboliques, narratifs et éthico-ontologiques de la pensée ricoeurienne. Le point central porte sur le sujet éthique et son rapport à l'autre : entre estime de soi, altérité, extériorité et libération, Rossatto cherche moins à opposer Ricoeur et Dussel qu'à montrer les possibilités d'une appropriation réciproque de leurs pensées.

Avec une approche particulièrement suggestive, Selami Varlik explore, dans « Imagination of Innocence : Ricoeur and the Islamic Notion of Natural Disposition (*Fitra*) », la possibilité d'un décentrement mutuel entre la pensée ricoeurienne et la tradition islamique. Il confronte l'imagination de l'innocence chez Ricoeur à la notion de *fitra*, comprise notamment chez al-Māturīdī comme disposition naturelle au bien et capacité rationnelle de reconnaître Dieu. Si Ricoeur hérite d'une vision du mal comme scandale toujours déjà présent, la *fitra* affirme au contraire la primauté d'une orientation originelle vers le bien. Toutefois, l'article montre qu'une convergence demeure possible : chez Ricoeur aussi, le mal ne se comprend qu'à partir d'une bonté plus originaire. La rencontre se cristallise alors dans une double logique du « malgré » : imaginer le bien malgré le mal, et imaginer la possibilité de la faute malgré la primauté du bien. Il ne s'agit pas d'établir un consensus facile, mais de montrer comment chaque tradition peut être déplacée et revivifiée au contact de l'autre.

Dans un décentrement de la réception de Ricoeur, qui ne quitte pas encore l'Europe, Burkhard Liebsch propose, avec « Between Self-Abandonment and Reorientation. Remarks on the Current Predicament of Philosophy – in View of the Reception of Paul Ricoeur's Writings East of the Rhine », une réflexion sur le sens même de la philosophie à partir de la trajectoire complexe de la réception germanophone de Ricoeur. L'article montre que cette réception a longtemps privilégié l'herméneutique, en laissant parfois dans l'ombre les dimensions historiques, politiques et existentielles de son œuvre. Liebsch fait ainsi apparaître Ricoeur comme un penseur de l'orientation philosophique dans la *conditio historica*, attentif à l'histoire, à l'altérité, au témoignage, à la mémoire et à la responsabilité. La question finale porte alors sur la capacité de la philosophie à répondre à la violence historique et politique sans renoncer à l'exigence d'un vivre-ensemble possible, malgré tout. Dans la suite, Tomás Domingo Moratalla porte notre regard vers une autre tradition philosophique européenne avec « Paul Ricoeur and José Ortega y Gasset : A Necessary Dialogue. Configurations of Hermeneutic Phenomenology ». L'article met en évidence une convergence entre deux pensées qui, malgré leur apparente distance, partagent un même « sol » phénoménologique, un « sous-sol » humaniste semblable et des « adversaires » communs, notamment les positivismes et les réductionnismes. En lisant Ricoeur avec Ortega et Ortega à travers Ricoeur, Moratalla montre comment leurs réflexions sur la vie, la circonstance, la métaphore, la narration, la traduction et la responsabilité contribuent à comprendre la phénoménologie herméneutique non seulement comme une théorie, mais comme une tradition vivante et une tâche philosophique pour notre temps.

Un détour méthodologique s'impose avec « La défatalisation du passé : Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Revel et le réalisme critique en historiographie. Une implication scientifique et éthique pour la Corée et l'Afrique ». L'article d'Oung Byun met en relation Ricoeur avec Jacques Revel et la méthode des jeux d'échelles, afin de penser une histoire capable de dépasser l'opposition entre fidélité mémorielle et vérité historique. Il ne s'agit pas seulement de rappeler le passé, mais de le

défataliser : revenir aux situations d'incertitude, aux choix possibles, aux marges d'action des acteurs, là où les grands récits tendent à transformer l'histoire en destin. Cette approche prépare directement les questions qui suivront, notamment dans les contextes postcoloniaux, où l'écriture de l'histoire doit résister à la fois aux mémoires blessées, aux récits nationaux figés et aux fatalismes hérités de la domination.

Le mouvement qui suit nous porte vers d'autres horizons, où l'histoire elle-même devient objet de débat et où l'écriture du passé se révèle problématique dans des contextes marqués par le déni colonial, les mémoires blessées et les usages politiques de l'histoire. Dans « L'Historiographie africaine en contexte postcolonial : enjeux méthodologiques et débats critiques au prisme des perspectives de Mamadou Diouf et Paul Ricœur », Amélie Aristelle Ekassi examine les tensions de l'historiographie africaine postcoloniale : restaurer une dignité niée par le récit colonial, sans réduire pour autant la pluralité des expériences africaines à un roman national unificateur. À partir de Mamadou Diouf et de Ricœur, l'article interroge ainsi le pacte de vérité de l'historien, les risques du chronocentrisme, la valeur des fragments, la fonction du récit historique et la possibilité d'une juste mémoire. Prolongeant la séquence africaine, mais en déplaçant l'attention de l'historiographie vers une herméneutique de la souffrance, de la capacité et de l'action, Ernst Wolff propose, dans « Defeat – Conscientization – Action. African Contributions to a Hermeneutics of Suffering and Capability », de mettre en relation Ricœur avec certaines orientations de l'herméneutique philosophique africaine. L'article comprend d'abord une orientation historique sur la réception de Ricœur en Afrique, puis une réflexion systématique autour de trois thèmes : la défaite sociopolitique comme motivation initiale, la conscientisation comme travail herméneutique et l'action comme réponse aux exigences des contextes pratiques. Wolff montre ainsi que l'herméneutique, loin d'être seulement une discipline académique, peut devenir une pratique de prise de conscience, de réappropriation et de soutien à la capacité d'agir. En prolongeant les questions de mémoire historique, de vérité, de justice, de reconnaissance et de réconciliation, Beatriz Contreras Tasso nous conduit de l'Afrique vers l'Amérique latine. Dans « Ricœur's Hermeneutic Philosophy. Keys to Reflect upon the Case of Chile and Its Memory », le Chili post-dictatorial devient un lieu d'épreuve pour les catégories ricœuriennes de mémoire, de narration et de reconnaissance mutuelle. Confrontées aux disparitions, à l'impunité persistante, au négationnisme et aux formes de mémoire empêchée ou manipulée, ces catégories éclairent les blessures encore ouvertes de la transition démocratique chilienne tout en révélant leurs propres limites. L'article montre ainsi la fécondité de l'herméneutique de Ricœur face à une expérience non européenne de la mémoire collective, mais aussi la nécessité de penser les médiations institutionnelles, politiques, symboliques et narratives qui rendent possible — ou empêchent — la reconnaissance.

Le Brésil ferme le dossier dans une double condition spéciale. D'abord, l'énorme dynamisme de la pensée ricœurienne dans le pays. Ensuite, par sa configuration historique triple où les cultures autochtones, africaines et européennes forment une combinaison unique et où les mémoires effacées, la violence symbolique et réelle et des tensions pas toujours visibles opèrent encore, le Brésil offre à la fois un défi et une opportunité pour mettre à l'épreuve les possibilités d'une philosophie dialogique. Avec des exemples concrets, c'est ce que propose cette section. La section consacrée au Brésil s'ouvre avec Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, dont l'essai « Ricœur à travers le monde : depuis le Brésil » propose une réflexion qui déborde largement le seul cas brésilien. À partir de sa double inscription européenne et brésilienne, et de son rôle fondateur dans la diffusion de la pensée de Ricœur au Brésil, Gagnebin interroge le sens même de la « réception ». Elle met en

garde contre une admiration excessive, voire une vénération pieuse à l'égard des philosophes européens : lire Ricœur depuis le Brésil ne signifie pas appliquer une pensée déjà constituée, mais la relancer, la déplacer et lui répondre depuis un autre lieu. C'est une sorte de *Sapere aude !* adressé aux penseurs du pays. L'essai souligne ainsi la fécondité des catégories ricœuriennes de mémoire, d'oubli, d'amnistie et d'identité pour penser l'esclavage, la dictature, la littérature et les récits pluriels du Brésil, tout en rappelant les limites d'un dialogue interculturel qui ne prendrait pas suffisamment en compte la violence coloniale, raciale et sociale qui précède toute relation supposément égalitaire.

Une contribution, dans laquelle la philosophie de Paul Ricœur se trouve fortement déplacée par rapport à ses contextes habituels, fait suite à cet appel et clôt le dossier : Cristina Henrique da Costa propose, dans « Élargir l'imagination pour fluidifier l'action – Paul Ricœur et Ailton Krenak », une rencontre insolite entre la pensée ricœurienne et celle d'Ailton Krenak, penseur, écrivain et activiste autochtone brésilien. L'article part de l'idée que, pour Ricœur comme pour Krenak, il n'y a pas d'action sans imagination. Mais cette convergence révèle aussi une tension décisive : chez Ricœur, l'imagination se pense à travers la métaphore, le récit, l'utopie et la médiation herméneutique ; chez Krenak, elle s'inscrit dans une cosmovision où le mythe, la terre, les fleuves, l'ancestralité et l'action politique demeurent indissociables. À travers les notions de futur ancestral, de *florestania* et d'alliance des différences, l'article montre ainsi comment une pensée autochtone située au Brésil peut non seulement dialoguer avec Ricœur, mais aussi déplacer les limites de sa théorie de l'imagination et de l'action.

4. Perspectives à venir

Nous avons commencé cette introduction en affirmant qu'il y a une incomplétude constitutive de la pensée ricœurienne, en un sens plus fort que chez bien d'autres philosophes. Cette incomplétude comporte une positivité qui devient de plus en plus visible à mesure que sa philosophie s'étend en ramifications inattendues et gagne en force et en vivacité. La philosophie ricœurienne s'est déployée en une vaste arborescence multiforme, qui ne se laisse pas intégrer harmonieusement dans un cadre pacifié. Entre la fidélité exégétique et l'appropriation respectueuse, d'une part et, d'autre part, le débat critique où la pensée ricœurienne devient un élément parmi d'autres dans une constellation d'idées façonnée par les préoccupations propres des auteurs, la postérité ricœurienne est elle-même devenue une mosaïque de conflits d'interprétation.

Il s'ensuit que, désormais, philosopher « avec », « à côté de » ou « contre » Ricœur exige une conscience aiguë de la finitude du savoir et de l'impossibilité d'occuper tous les espaces de vérité. Dès lors, la philosophie a une vocation d'écoute, de communication et d'accueil critique de la pensée des autres – non pas comme une fuite ou une négation de soi, mais comme une tâche de médiation réflexive et une quête de nouveaux horizons intellectuels. Une philosophie « ricœurienne » se reconnaîtrait à son caractère dialogal, entendu comme un « dépaysement en autrui ». Elle devient de ce fait une affaire à plusieurs.

Une telle réception, qui ne vise ni la seule transmission ni la répétition à l'identique, déboucherait également sur une critique de l'œuvre dont elle est issue. Évidemment, la critique philosophique sérieuse des textes de Ricœur ne date pas d'hier. Il s'agit sans doute plutôt d'une nouvelle orientation de la critique. Au cœur de cette orientation se trouve une révision du profil des positions à partir desquelles et pour lesquelles Ricœur a écrit, chaque fois avec les perspectives et les limites de vue qui y sont associées. Ainsi, penser à partir de Ricœur en commençant par la

France ou les États-Unis perd de son évidence (sans rien nier de l'apport des études issues de ces contextes). La pluralité des réceptions décrite ci-dessus tire une grande part de sa force réflexive de la mise en avant d'une sensibilité aux fractures, aux tensions et aux blessures : dans les corps épuisés et maltraités, dans les relations de travail et d'exploitation, dans les politiques d'identité,¹⁰ dans les (in)capacités d'agir, dans les mémoires niées ou distordues, dans les luttes pour l'affirmation de soi individuelle ou collective. Si l'herméneutique de l'homme souffrant suggère déjà ces pistes, elles gagneraient toutefois à être élaborées plus amplement à partir de l'expérience vécue des personnes concernées. Dans l'ensemble, une revitalisation de l'herméneutique du soupçon s'impose pour mettre au jour la manière dont la domination distord les institutions, les interactions sociales, les corps et jusqu'à la communication intérieure la plus intime¹¹.

Il reste certainement d'autres champs à explorer dans le même esprit. Ainsi, dans notre appel à contributions, nous avons proposé aux chercheurs de tous les continents d'examiner ensemble les questions relatives à la diffusion de l'œuvre de Ricœur : l'interprétation de ses écrits, l'enseignement et les pratiques scientifiques autour de cette œuvre. Une partie de cette exploration consisterait à clarifier ce qui a facilité sa réception, mais aussi ce qui, au contraire, fait obstacle à son appropriation. Ces questions invitent à interroger la place qu'occupent les différents « mondes » dans sa philosophie, les possibilités et les difficultés de la traduction, ainsi que le degré d'innovation que peut admettre la réception fidèle d'un patrimoine, entre *innovatio* et *aemulatio*. Il s'agit, en ce sens, de réfléchir aux enjeux épistémologiques et politiques liés à la mémoire, à la transmission et à l'innovation des biens culturels, de l'art, des langues et des traditions, mais aussi aux problèmes contemporains que la réception des idées ricœuriennes peut éclairer à l'échelle mondiale : la justice planétaire, les migrations, la xénophobie, le racisme, l'égalité de genre, l'esclavage et d'autres formes d'exploitation. Enfin, en pleine conscience du fait que des rapports internationaux de violence hérités du passé se perpétuent aujourd'hui par d'autres moyens (et que nous avons évoqués ci-dessus), il faut une autocritique incessante afin de déterminer si nos propres pratiques philosophiques conservent quelque complicité avec les instruments de domination¹², d'humiliation et de marginalisation. De même, un effort soutenu est nécessaire pour identifier comment la philosophie universitaire peut augmenter sa contribution à la résistance à ces tendances, en pleine conscience des limites de ses moyens et en restant fidèle à sa vocation de cultiver une incertitude informée.

¹⁰ Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, « As armadilhas da identidade », dans Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa et Andrés Bruzzone (dir.), *Paul Ricœur : Identidade e Hermenêutica Crítica* (São Paulo : Alameda, 2025), 89–106.

¹¹ Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris : Seuil, 1986), 55–56.

¹² Nous faisons référence à la perspicacité dont fait preuve Eboussi Boulaga lorsqu'il décrit les premières rencontres avec la philosophie occidentale, dans un contexte colonial, comme une rencontre avec « un attribut du pouvoir » ; voir Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu. Authenticité africaine et philosophie* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1977), 8.

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Exploring Paul Ricœur's Course of Recognition as a Possible Pathway to Intercultural Recognition

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the potential resonance between Paul Ricœur's *The Course of Recognition* and key concepts in intercultural philosophy. Rather than tracing the development of intercultural thinking within Ricœur's own work, the aim is to reread and reinterpret Ricœur's philosophical concepts in light of the structural and ethical concerns articulated by intercultural philosophers such as Franz Martin Wimmer, Ram Adhar Mall, and Heinz Kimmerle. The analysis proceeds by systematically following Ricœur's course, from identification through self-recognition to mutual recognition, and identifying where these conceptual stages intersect with, complement, or illuminate principles central to intercultural philosophy. The focus remains on conceptual applicability: how Ricœur's phenomenological and narrative insights may enter into dialogue with intercultural philosophical frameworks that emphasize plurality, asymmetry, historical difference, and dialogical or polylogical openness. The discussion therefore seeks to establish both the conceptual proximity and productive tensions between Ricœur and intercultural philosophy by rereading Ricœur's *Course of Recognition* as a possible preparatory anthropology for intercultural philosophy, while also exposing questions concerning plurality, asymmetry, and the limits of reciprocity.

Keywords: *Mutual Recognition, Intercultural Recognition, Attestation, Capable Human Being, Narrative Identity, Polylogue.*

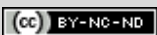
Résumé

Cet article se propose d'explorer les résonances possibles entre *Parcours de la reconnaissance* de Paul Ricœur et certains concepts majeurs de la philosophie interculturelle. Plutôt que de retracer l'émergence d'une pensée interculturelle dans l'œuvre même de Ricœur, l'objectif est de relire et de réinterpréter ses concepts philosophiques à la lumière des préoccupations structurelles et éthiques formulées par des philosophes de l'interculturel tels que Franz Martin Wimmer, Ram Adhar Mall et Heinz Kimmerle. L'analyse procède en

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suivant systématiquement le parcours de la reconnaissance chez Ricœur, depuis l'identification, en passant par la reconnaissance de soi, jusqu'à la reconnaissance mutuelle, tout en examinant les points d'intersection, de complémentarité ou d'éclairage réciproque entre ces différentes étapes conceptuelles et les principes centraux de la philosophie interculturelle. L'accent est mis sur leur applicabilité conceptuelle : il s'agit d'examiner comment les intuitions phénoménologiques et narratives de Ricœur peuvent entrer en dialogue avec des cadres philosophiques interculturels qui mettent l'accent sur la pluralité, l'asymétrie, la différence historique ainsi que sur l'ouverture dialogique ou polylogique. Cette étude vise ainsi à mettre en évidence à la fois les proximités conceptuelles et les tensions productives entre Ricœur et la philosophie interculturelle, en relisant *Parcours de la reconnaissance* comme une possible anthropologie préparatoire à la philosophie interculturelle, tout en faisant apparaître les questions liées à la pluralité, à l'asymétrie et aux limites de la réciprocité.

Mots-clés : *Reconnaissance mutuelle, reconnaissance interculturelle, attestation, homme capable, identité narrative, polylogue.*

Exploring Paul Ricœur's Course of Recognition as a Possible Pathway to Intercultural Recognition

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1. Conceptual Foundations: From Phenomenology to Intercultural Hermeneutics

1.1. The Passive and Active Dimensions of Recognition: From Ricœur's Grammar to Intercultural Reciprocity

Paul Ricœur's philosophical inquiry into recognition begins with what he calls a "rule-governed polysemy" of the verb "to recognize," traced through ordinary language and lexicographic tradition. The double structure of recognition, to recognize and to be recognized, is not merely a grammatical analysis but a point of departure for an entire philosophical itinerary. Ricœur writes:

To recognize as an act expresses a pretension, a claim, to exercise an intellectual mastery over this field of meanings, of signifying assertions. At the opposite end of this trajectory, the demand for recognition expresses an expectation that can be satisfied only by mutual recognition.¹

This initial polarity between activity and passivity, mastery and vulnerability, becomes one of the guiding threads of *The Course of Recognition*. While the active form relates to identification, recollection, or classification, functions that are associated with knowledge and perception, the passive form evokes an ethical demand: the appeal to the other for acknowledgment, esteem, or justice. In this sense, recognition exceeds cognition and becomes a relational phenomenon. Ricœur explicitly underlines that this grammatical reversal corresponds to a deeper philosophical transformation.² What begins as a cognitive or epistemological act becomes, in the course of Ricœur's analysis, a profoundly ethical and social relation. Recognition involves not only identifying the other but acknowledging the other as a moral and political subject. Ricœur himself defines this trajectory as a movement "from the most contingent to the most fundamental,"³ tracing how recognition-as-identification gives way to recognition-as-acknowledgment and finally to mutual recognition. Within an intercultural horizon, this passage from knowing to acknowledging finds a striking parallel in what Ram Adhar Mall describes as the *mutual recognition of cultures* (*gegenseitige Anerkennung der Kulturen*). For Mall, intercultural orientation "is sustained by a mutual recognition of cultures, each of which possesses its own

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 19.

² Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 19.

³ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 21.

distinctive access to the one truth"⁴. Given the risk of reading "one truth" as a substantive unity, it is important to stress that Mall's formulation can be taken procedurally. Recognition requires moving beyond the boundaries of one's own interpretive framework without presuming convergence into sameness. This statement mirrors Ricœur's transition from epistemological mastery to ethical affirmation: both thinkers underline that recognition must move beyond the boundaries of one's own interpretive framework.

Ricœur's idea of mutual recognition as a demand fulfilled only through reciprocity finds its concrete intercultural expression in Mall's vision of intercultural philosophy, according to which "intercultural philosophy thus outlines a model of philosophy that affirms the universal applicability of the concept of philosophy, while legitimately recognizing the plurality of its philosophical centers and origins."⁵ Ricœur himself insists that "we must give the greatest importance to those operations leading to community (those of *Vergemeinschaftung*, communalization or formation of community), which draws reciprocity out of asymmetry."⁶ In this perspective, reciprocity is not an abstract symmetry of equals but a dynamic process in which the self and the other engage through mediation and mutual transformation. As Ricœur writes, "the other must be my analogue, so that beyond my experience of myself I come to terms with that of others on a basis of reciprocity, even though this chain of constitutions draws its basic meaning from me as ego."⁷

Mall's formulation gives this Ricœurian reciprocity a plural and intercultural horizon: intercultural philosophy becomes the philosophical enactment of communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*) under polycentric conditions, rather than on the basis of a single center. In affirming "the legitimate recognition of the plurality of philosophical centers and origins,"⁸ Mall extends Ricœur's anthropological and ethical reflections into an epistemic and cultural practice, one that resists the absolutization of a single *philosophia perennis* by cultivating an open disposition (*Haltung*), a reflective and dialogical stance toward other traditions. Franz Martin Wimmer develops this insight on the level of intercultural communication or interaction. He situates recognition in an ethical *disposition* that grounds dialogical communication and understanding (*Verständigung und Verstehen*), a dialogical effort premised on the equality of partners, an equality of participation rather than a guarantee of agreement:

It is not merely texts that are to be interpreted, nor abstract 'cultures' that encounter one another, but human beings who ... speak together in the expectation that my dialogical partner has something to say to me which I myself could not have said.⁹

Where Ricœur describes recognition as a reversal from mastery to receptivity, Wimmer interprets this same reversal as a critique of centrism (*Zentrismus*), including the temptation to treat one's own horizon as the implicit measure of the whole. Intercultural philosophy, he writes, "is not only anti-Eurocentric, but also criticizes the dependent and exclusionary association with any

⁴ Ram Adhar Mall, *Essays zur interkulturellen Philosophie* (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2003), 116-117.

⁵ Mall, *Essays zur interkulturellen Philosophie*, 42.

⁶ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 156.

⁷ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 156.

⁸ Mall, *Essays zur interkulturellen Philosophie*, 42.

⁹ Franz Martin Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung* (Wien: WUV, 2004), 151.

cultural center.”¹⁰ In this light, the Ricœurian “course” of recognition may be reimagined as a process of *decentering* in which the self and its culture learn to relocate themselves within a polycentric network of meaning. Just as Ricœur’s “mutual recognition” refuses the hierarchy between the recognizing and the recognized, Wimmer’s rejection of Eurocentrism or any form of *centrism* refuses the philosophical hierarchy between centers and peripheries without presuming that decentering yields a final unity of perspectives.

For Ricœur, recognition completes the passage from cognition to esteem; for Mall and Wimmer, it becomes the interpretive and dialogical disposition that allows philosophy to exist within a plurality of traditions. Both trajectories resonate at certain points, yet their encounter also exposes unresolved tensions concerning plurality, asymmetry, and the limits of reciprocity. Recognition as *Anerkennung* can be interpreted as opening toward an intercultural stance, a way of thinking and existing that acknowledges the irreducible plurality of truth while sustaining dialogical orientation of reason, understood not as the anticipation of unity, but as an ongoing search for resemblance across difference. As George Taylor has suggested, understanding across cultural difference may be better conceived not as fusion or unity, but as a metaphorical convergence that preserves tension rather than resolving it.¹¹ From this shared standpoint, recognition is not a completed event but a fragile and reversible relation, contingent upon conditions of communication, power, and mutual openness.

1.2. The “Between” and the “Inter”: Hermeneutic Topologies of Encounter in Ricœur and Intercultural Philosophy

The notion of the *between* plays a decisive role in Ricœur’s final reflections on recognition. While it may first appear as a spatial metaphor, Ricœur unfolds its deeper philosophical significance as the location where mutual recognition, reciprocity, and asymmetry are negotiated under tension. His concluding meditation on the dialectic of recognition and misrecognition rests on this fragile space of relationality:

It is in the “between” of the expression “between the protagonists of the exchange” that is concentrated the dialectic of the dissymmetry between me and others and the mutuality of our relations. And it is to the full meaning of this “between” that the integration of this dissymmetry into mutuality in the exchange of gifts contributes.¹²

This *between* is neither a neutral zone nor a fixed bridge between two identities. Rather, it is a dynamic and generative space shaped by asymmetry, mutuality, and fragile recognition, a space that resists both the extremes of fusion (as closure) and the violence of total separation. As Ricœur insists, even in the most generous forms of mutual recognition, dissymmetry is never fully overcome: “The one is not the other. We exchange gifts, but not places.”¹³ Ricœur’s idea of *between* thus introduces an ethical topology of distance and relation. It marks a space where proximity and

¹⁰ Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, 54-55.

¹¹ George H. Taylor, “Understanding as Metaphoric, Not a Fusion of Horizons,” in *Gadamer and Ricoeur. Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Mootz and Taylor (New York: Continuum, 2011), 113.

¹² Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 263.

¹³ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 262.

alterity are intertwined under what he calls "a just distance that integrates respect into intimacy."¹⁴ This notion resists any ideal of complete fusion or immediate transparency, emphasizing instead the necessity of sustained dialogue and symbolic exchange.

Ricœur's reflections in *On Translation* further illuminate this point. There, he explicitly rejects the idea that translation presupposes a third language or an underlying common origin shared by all idioms. Translation unfolds not from a transcultural metalanguage but between historically situated languages, each marked by its own irreducible singularity. What makes translation possible is not prior unity but what Ricœur calls linguistic hospitality: the ethical willingness to welcome the foreign word into one's own home without erasing its strangeness. In this sense, the "between" is not grounded in an original sameness but sustained through a risky and provisional act of mediation.

Intercultural philosophy gives this *between* a more explicit theoretical contour. Heinz Kimmerle emphasizes that philosophy's renewal depends on what occurs in the between (*im Zwischen*), a space that generates novelty without presupposing a common origin "above" the interlocutors: "What emerges from this [in-between] can foster the openness of thinking, make concealed areas within one's own tradition visible, and, in any case, expand its possibilities."¹⁵ The *Zwischen* here is not a void between fixed poles but a generative medium in which new dimensions of thought encounter one another. Ricœur's *between* aligns with this vision; it both marks a hermeneutic threshold where transformation and self-revelation occur through encounter without collapsing difference into synthesis. Ram Adhar Mall further refines this relational idea through his linguistic and philosophical distinction between *trans* and *inter*.¹⁶ For Mall, *inter* does not signify transcendence beyond cultures but rather encounter within them, namely a living experience of dialogue that occurs in the *between*. His critique of *trans*-philosophical abstraction may be placed in partial dialogue with Ricœur's reservations concerning abstract or totalizing forms of synthesis: both insist that the relation between self and other must remain situated, dialogical, and open to transformation, and therefore resistant to any "third place" that would guarantee unity in advance.

Franz Martin Wimmer, finally, gives systematic form to this intuition by grounding philosophy itself in the between (*zwischen*). Wimmer transforms the *inter* from a descriptive prefix into a methodological principle: philosophy, in its very essence, takes place between culturally situated subjects. His approach extends the movement from Ricœur's phenomenology of the self and its relations with others to a communicative ethics grounded in intercultural exchange. In this light, Ricœur's *between* and the intercultural *inter* can be read as mutually illuminating, while also exposing tensions concerning mediation and asymmetry. Both designate a non-synthetic space of relation, a philosophical and ethical space where identities encounter one another under conditions of shared vulnerability and mutual incompleteness, while preserving the irreducible singularity of each self. The *course of recognition* takes place precisely in this *between*, as a fragile interval that must be sustained, not a bridge that guarantees convergence: "A just distance is maintained at the heart of mutuality."¹⁷ Such "just distance" does not designate neutrality or detached observation. It

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 262.

¹⁵ Heinz Kimmerle, *Die Dimension des Interkulturellen: Supplemente und Verallgemeinerungsschritte* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 138.

¹⁶ Hamid Reza Yousefi and Ram Adhar Mall, *Grundpositionen der interkulturellen Philosophie* (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2005), 107.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 262.

names instead a form of evaluative discernment: the capacity to acknowledge difference while critically assessing claims in light of shared ethical responsibility. Read together, Ricœur's reflections and those of intercultural philosophy clarify the *between* not as an empty space but as a living process. The *inter* and the *between* equally mark the threshold where understanding, transformation, and even misrecognition occur. They resist the closure of identity while sustaining the dialogue that makes recognition possible. Ricœur's "just distance" thus corresponds to the intercultural *Zwischen*, a fragile yet creative interval in which thinking and recognition remain open; unfinished but continually renewed through exchange.

1.3. Recognition Between Universality and Plurality

Before proceeding, a clarification is necessary regarding the conceptual vocabulary employed throughout this paper. Terms such as unity, universality, synthesis, and even framework, do not designate a completed totality or a harmonizing structure that absorbs plurality into sameness. Rather, they are used in a regulative and procedural sense: unity names a task of holding together without eliminating difference; universality is employed here not in a strong transcendental or systematic sense, but in a limited hermeneutic sense referring to openness toward plurality and dialogue. Synthesis is used here in a limited and analogical sense, referring to provisional articulation rather than a completed or totalizing unity.

Scholarship on Ricœur has increasingly emphasized the cultural and intercultural dimensions of his thought, while also exposing unresolved tensions concerning universality, asymmetry, and the limits of hermeneutic reciprocity. Suzi Adams draws attention to what she terms Ricœur's shift from a hermeneutics of culture to a cultural hermeneutics, highlighting the manner in which symbolic mediation constitutes the very condition of meaning. Timo Helenius explores recognition as a process of cultural subjectivation, interpreting *The Course of Recognition* as a hermeneutic articulation of cultural identity, while also revealing the fragility of reciprocity in contexts marked by asymmetrical relations of power. Ernst Wolff proposes rereading Ricœur from the periphery, thereby exposing tensions between Ricœur's universal aspirations and historically uneven intercultural conditions, situating his philosophy within the unfinished task of decolonization and the pluralization of hermeneutic voices. At the same time, stronger critiques concerning Eurocentrism, colonial asymmetry, and the limits of universalist hermeneutics also remain necessary for assessing the intercultural implications of Ricœur's thought.

2. Recognition as Identification: Temporal and Cultural Mediations

2.1. Recognition and Synthesis Across Time: From Ricœur's Kant Interpretation to Intercultural Continuity

The preceding section situated recognition within the fragile "between" of intercultural relation. The present section turns to Kant not merely to rehearse Ricœur's exposition but to examine a tension internal to this project: how far the Kantian language of synthesis and unity can be retained once recognition is relocated within intercultural plurality. Paul Ricœur begins his inquiry into recognition by turning to Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* plays a fundamental epistemological role concerning the concept of recognition (*Rekognition*). He notes that Kant's transformation lies in the replacement of *distinguishing* with *joining together*. As Ricœur writes: "For

Kant, to identify is to join together.”¹⁸ This emphasis on joining rather than separating reflects a decisive conceptual shift: recognition is no longer the clarification of what is already known but the very synthesis that underlies cognition itself. “Synthesis” here refers to a transcendental operation underlying the possibility of coherent cognition rather than the achievement of a completed unity. Recognition becomes the act that not only holds together experience across successive appearances but also integrates time as a structuring form of sensibility, without implying the erasure of discontinuity or the closure of meaning. Recognition is not a static act of identifying something already known but the active articulation of coherence within consciousness, a transcendental condition for the possibility of cognition rather than a substantive homogenization of experience.

At this point, Ricœur's Kantian epistemology provides a foundational model of *recognition in relation to temporal synthesis and imagination*. Yet intercultural philosophy also questions and revises this model, asking how synthesis functions when identity is not only stretched across time but also dispersed across plural cultures and worldviews. The problem becomes one of intercultural mediation and interpretation across plural cultural horizons, in which “recognition in concept” must be tested against the lived reality of encountering and interpreting others across spatial and symbolic difference without presupposing convergence into a single horizon.

Wimmer's reflections on culture may be placed in partial dialogue with Ricœur's reflections on temporality, mediation, and plurality, while remaining situated within a distinct intercultural framework. In his discussion of the concept of culture (*Zum Begriff der Kultur*), Wimmer distinguishes between two complementary dimensions: *cultura creata* (created culture) and *cultura quae creat* (culture that creates). Drawing on a Neoplatonic analogy, he explains that culture may be understood “in the static sense ... as a *cultura creata*, that is, as a state of culture ... considered from the perspective of what is already given.”¹⁹ This stands in contrast to its dynamic aspect, which he describes as “a *cultura quae creat*, that is, a cultural activity that appears under the aspect of influencing and shaping, and is therefore active or dynamic in nature.”²⁰ When both aspects are brought together, Wimmer concludes: “What we are in fact dealing with might rather be expressed by the formula *cultura creata quae creat*.”²¹

This distinction parallels Ricœur's interpretation of Kant's recognition as a temporal synthesis, an act that receives and produces coherence. Just as *cultura creata quae creat* (created culture that creates) mediates between inheritance and innovation, Ricœur's synthesis of recognition joins the receptive temporality of inner sense with the productive spontaneity of the understanding. In both cases, the human subject is not merely the passive bearer of a given order but also its ongoing interpreter and re-creator. Recognition thus functions, epistemologically and culturally, as the mediation that unites *given* and *giving*, *creata* and *creans*: a unity best understood as a task than a completed synthesis. Ricœur's own reflections on tradition reinforce this point. Tradition is not mere sedimentation but a dialectic between sedimentation and innovation.²² What

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 36.

¹⁹ Franz Martin Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie* (Wien: Turia + Kant, 2003), 120.

²⁰ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 120.

²¹ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 121.

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 68.

has been “created” can become the reservoir of future reinterpretation. Tradition, rather than culture understood as a totalized entity, remains open to reinterpretation.

Wimmer’s insight further clarifies the intercultural implications of Ricoeur’s model. Every culture, he writes, possesses “something internally universal, the particular unity of form encompassing all expressions of life within a group of people,”²³ yet this internal universality is never self-enclosed. Here “universality” functions primarily as an internal coherence of form, not as a claim to an overarching unity that cancels plurality.²⁴ Similarly, Ricoeur’s synthesis of recognition depends on the temporal openness of consciousness, its capacity to integrate new representations into a coherent identity without erasing their difference. Both perspectives resist the illusion of a purely static unity: identity, whether personal or cultural, must be continually renewed through interpretation and remains exposed to correction through encounter. This insight finds systematic articulation in *Oneself as Another*, where Ricoeur describes identity not as a substance but as a task sustained through narrative configuration and ethical attestation. The self is never given once and for all; it is constituted through the ongoing mediation between sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). In this sense, Ricoeur’s account of personal identity as an unfinished and mediated process may also illuminate certain intercultural and historical dynamics, although important differences remain between selfhood and the historical continuity of cultures and traditions.

From this standpoint, recognition through time in Ricoeur corresponds to cultural creativity through encounter in Wimmer. To recognize is to join what has been received with what can still be formed, to inhabit the tension between *cultura creata* and *cultura quae creat*. In both epistemological and intercultural senses, recognition becomes the act that transforms continuity into reinterpretation and historical renewal, thus making unity not a presupposition but an ongoing and revisable task. In this sense, Ricoeur’s engagement with Kant may be read as preserving a distinction between transcendental structures of temporality and their concrete hermeneutic actualization. What is configured is a provisional coherence open to revision rather than a closed unity. When placed in dialogue with intercultural philosophy, it gestures toward a broader horizon of intercultural mediation. Here, “recognition in concept” extends beyond the temporality of inner experience and is tested against the plurality of cultural horizons. It thereby enters the fragile and uncertain process of encountering and interpreting others across spatial and symbolic difference.

2.2. The Test of Recognition: From the Unrecognizable to Intercultural Rupture and Renewal

At the heart of Ricoeur’s analysis lies the proposition that recognition is inseparable from change. He affirms: “The one common feature that these modes of being must share to give rise to operations of recognition, it seems to me, is change.”²⁵ Ricoeur’s analysis of perceptual uncertainty and re-identification mirrors the *intercultural condition* in which the familiar categories of one’s own culture often fail to accommodate the other. Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) should therefore be understood as an inherent risk in all recognition, especially within intercultural encounters.

²³ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 120.

²⁴ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 121.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 61.

Ricœur's meditation culminates in a poetic reflection on time as both an agent of distortion and of grace: "Time, the artist, had made all the sitters portraits that were recognizable, yet they were not likenesses ... He was an artist, moreover, who worked very slowly."²⁶ This metaphor expresses the essence of intercultural recognition, not as the static matching of pre-existing identities, but as a fragile and historically mediated process shaped by memory, symbolic continuity, change, and affective engagement.

Within the framework of intercultural philosophy, Ricœur's phenomenology of temporal change finds a comparable counterpart in Franz Martin Wimmer's typology of retrospective and prospective identity (*retrospektive* and *prospektive Identität*). Defining *rupture* as "the phenomenon that something which previously (or later again) was self-evident ... is no longer (or not yet) self-evident"²⁷, Wimmer asks how unity can be conceived when rupture is the rule. Here "unity" is at stake precisely as something that must be rearticulated, not as a stable possession. He distinguishes between identities that draw continuity from the past and those that create it from the future. The retrospective identity looks back to an origin that must be preserved, "past as origin"²⁸ (*Vergangenheit als Ursprung*), and finds stability by maintaining continuity with what once was. By contrast, the prospective identity begins from rupture: "present as origin"²⁹ (*Gegenwart als Ursprung*), where continuity "is possible only afterwards.

In Ricœurian terms, the passage of recognition "through increasing degrees of misrecognition to the point of nonrecognition"³⁰ delineates precisely the experiential threshold where retrospective orientation loses its hold and a new prospective configuration must be articulated. Read in this light, Ricœur's "test" of recognition maps onto Wimmer's temporal dialectic. The backward pull of memory resonates with retrospective identification (*Vergangenheit als Ursprung*), while the forward orientation of reconfiguration embodies prospective identification (*Gegenwart als Ursprung*). Ricœur's hesitation at the moment of recognition, "to predicate two contradictory things of a single subject"³¹, expresses the same structural tension Wimmer describes when identities must be rearticulated after a rupture, that is, when coherence must be regained without erasing discordance. Just as Ricœur's recognition must reconcile the memory of what has been with the perception of what is now, Wimmer's identity oscillates between the retrospective need for coherence and the prospective openness to transformation.

3. Recognizing Oneself: Capability, Narrative, and Intercultural Responsibility

3.1. Attestation and the Capable Human Being: From Inner Rule to Intercultural Responsibility

Following the epistemological and structural themes of recognition, our focus now turns to the constitution of the self. The aim here is not merely to revisit key developments within

²⁶ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 66.

²⁷ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 92.

²⁸ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 94.

²⁹ Wimmer, *Globalität und Philosophie*, 94.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 61.

³¹ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 66.

Ricœur's philosophical anthropology, but to show how capability and attestation provide a necessary bridge between self-recognition and intercultural responsibility. This shift brings us to his phenomenology of the capable human being. Ricœur's phenomenology of the "capable human being" (*l'homme capable*) offers a systematic and differentiated account of self-recognition. Ricœur shifts attention to an anthropology, where self-recognition is articulated through a variety of interrelated capacities: speaking, acting, narrating, and, at a more reflexive level, imputing responsibility, remembering, and promising. At the center of this anthropology is the notion of ipseity. This concept exceeds the Cartesian ego and Kantian subject by the self as reflexively mediated through practices and relations without dissolving the irreducibility of selfhood. For Ricœur, this complex web of I can statements ("I can speak," "I can act," "I can promise," etc.)³² provides the foundation of what he calls a "hermeneutics of selfhood".

Ricœur's notion of attestation expresses a fundamental assertion of oneself as an acting subject, an assertion that remains exposed to the possibility of correction, challenge, or refusal by others. Without this structure of attestation, intercultural dialogue would lack an accountable subject capable of answering for its claims. It mediates between the fragility of the human condition and the stability of moral responsibility: the "I can" is always accompanied by the "I answer for." The capable self is not an independent origin but a self mediated through relations with others. Nevertheless, it remains the irreplaceable center of reflection, action, and attestation, whose claims are ethically answerable before others and within just institutions while preserving its own capacity for judgement and responsibility.

The Ricœurian idea of attestation implies that every "I can" involves a performative claim. To say "I can speak" or "I can promise" is to assert a certain reliability of the self before others. While capacities such as speaking indicate basic forms of agency, promising introduces a higher ethical commitment through which the self attests to its own constancy across time. This attestation functions as what might be called an inner rule, understood as a commitment to truthfulness and accountability within the act itself but which cannot secure its own legitimacy apart from intersubjective validation. The capable self is therefore not absolute; rather, it is confirmed through dialogue, responsibility, and reciprocity. In this respect, attestation operates analogously, though not identically, to what in intercultural philosophy Franz Martin Wimmer calls a minimal rule (*Minimalregel*) governing philosophical communication.

Wimmer gives this openness a practical and intercultural formulation in his minimal rule. This minimal rule functions less as a normative law than as a guiding attitude, one that transforms the hermeneutic disposition of philosophy itself. He writes: "Do not consider any philosophical thesis to be well founded if only people belonging to a single cultural tradition have participated in its formation."³³ This minimal rule is an ethical imperative against intellectual monologue. It functions as an outer rule complementing Ricœur's inner rule of attestation. While Ricœur's notion of attestation asks the self to give evidence of its own capacity, Wimmer's rule asks that any claim to truth give evidence of its legitimacy across different cultures.

Taken together, Ricœur's attestation and Wimmer's *Minimalregel* establish a dual framework of responsibility, one directed inward, the other outward. The capable self attests to its agency through acting, speaking, and assuming responsibility despite the fragility of selfhood; the

³² Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 93ff.

³³ Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, 54.

intercultural philosopher exposes claims of reason to dialogue, critique, and revision across plural perspectives. Both demand faith in human capability balanced by an awareness of its limits. In Ricœur, this limit appears as the ever-present fragility of the "I can"; in Wimmer, it appears as the epistemic humility articulated in the minimal rule. Thus, attestation and the minimal rule jointly describe the ethical and methodological conditions of recognition in an intercultural era.

3.2. Narrative Identity and Intercultural Configuration: Mediating Ipseity Between Discord and Concord

Ricœur's anthropology of the capable human being finds its most dynamic expression in narrative identity (*identité narrative*), which mediates between sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). This formulation shifts the question of identity from ontology to hermeneutics. Narrative mediation does not produce a simple unity. Rather, as developed in *Time and Narrative*, narrative identity arises through the interplay of concordance and discordance.³⁴ The self becomes intelligible through the emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) of heterogeneous occurrences into a meaningful whole. "The character," he writes, "is him- or herself emplotted"³⁵, which means that the unity of the self is not pre-given but emplotted into being through narration, a narrative coherence that remains revisable as the story is retold.

In intercultural perspective, narrative identity thus becomes a space where translation and transformation take place. Every culture configures human time and agency through distinctive narrative grammars, myths, histories, or genealogies that mediate between continuity and rupture. When Ricœur insists that the self can only endure through narrative mediation, he implicitly gestures toward the plural forms of such mediation across cultures. What remains constant is not a universal story but the capacity to narrate, the performative act of making meaning through differences.

3.3. The Performative "I Can": From Speech Acts to Shared Responsibility in Intercultural Mediation

If narrative identity provides the temporal configuration of the self, the performative structure of the "I can" provides its pragmatic articulation. Ricœur's analysis of action and speech, following Austin's speech act theory, reveals that the declaration "I can" is itself an act. To say "I can speak" or "I can promise" is to perform an act of self-commitment; it transforms potentiality into actuality. The "I can" is neither descriptive nor metaphysical; it is performative, an act of speech through which the self manifests and attests to its agency within conditions it never fully masters, and whose intelligibility and public acknowledgment depend upon its uptake within a shared horizon of meaning.

This performative dimension carries deep intercultural significance. In every linguistic and cultural world, saying "I can" assumes a shared framework of meaning in which the act is understood as valid and significant. The ability to act or to make a promise therefore depends on the cultural and dialogical contexts that make such speech acts intelligible. Ricœur's hermeneutics situates capability within shared conditions of interpretation and communication without reducing agency to intersubjective constitution. Human agency is always mediated, though not

³⁴ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 229.

³⁵ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 99.

fully constituted, by culture and communication. By grounding capability in attestation, Ricœur's hermeneutics may be placed in partial dialogue with Wimmer's minimal rule: no act of reason or selfhood is legitimate if it arises from only one tradition of meaning. The "I can" implicitly gestures toward a "we can" of recognition, insofar as every performative claim presupposes a community capable of understanding, responding, and possibly contesting it. Moreover, the performative "I can" must be continuously verified by the praxis of responsibility. In Ricœur's terms, imputability marks the point where the self's performative claim encounters its ethical test. "With imputability the notion of a capable subject reaches its highest meaning."³⁶ To promise, to act, to remember, each of these "I can" statements implies an "I answer for", a structure that binds agency to accountability before others. The link between attestation, self-imputation, and responsibility forms the basis of Ricœur's moral anthropology and reflects Wimmer's idea that intercultural philosophy should move beyond abstract tolerance to concrete practices that change how we think.

From this point, the link back to intercultural mediation becomes clear. The performative structure of capability reaches beyond the individual and extends toward a community of dialogue partners. Many expressions of "I can" take on their meaning within relations with others. The statement "I can speak" finds its meaning within dialogue; while a promise may be initiated by an individual act of commitment, its validity and endurance often depend upon a shared horizon in which others can remember, respond, or hold the agent accountable. Seen through Wimmer's *minimal rule*, Ricœur's ideas of narrative identity and the performative "I can" together describe a process of intercultural dialogue and mutual interpretation. Together, narrative identity and performative capability form the hermeneutical link between individual self-recognition and intercultural dialogue.

4. Mutual Recognition: Ethics of Reciprocity and Intercultural Listening

4.1. From Mutuality to Polylogue: Structural Tensions Between Dissymmetry and Reciprocity

The move from self-recognition to mutual recognition marks not merely a further step in Ricœur's argument, but the decisive point at which recognition must be rethought in intercultural terms. If self-recognition grounds agency in attestation, mutual recognition tests that agency within relations of asymmetry, vulnerability, and historical difference. It is here that the Ricœurian framework opens toward intercultural philosophy, for recognition can no longer be understood solely at the level of selfhood but must also be enacted as a fragile ethical practice among plural and unequal interlocutors. Ricœur repeatedly warns against premature closure in the name of reciprocity. "What matters is the seriousness with which each of the two parties undertakes to overcome the dissymmetry that, in a way, persists in the background of experiences of reciprocity, leaving reciprocity to appear as an always incomplete surpassing of this dissymmetry."³⁷ While acknowledging Levinas's emphasis on ethical asymmetry, Ricœur reinterprets this relation in a way that preserves the initiative, capability, and responsibility of the self.³⁸

³⁶ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 105.

³⁷ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 154.

³⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 331.

This subtle philosophical caution resonates with positions in intercultural philosophy. Ram Adhar Mall proposes equal standing (*Gleichrangigkeit*) rather than equality (*Gleichheit*) as the principle governing intercultural dialogues. His formulation acknowledges structural historical, political, linguistic asymmetry while insisting on a dialogical form of mutual recognition that does not diminish difference. Franz Martin Wimmer's minimal rule in the previous section similarly posits that "only when a genuine mutual exchange takes place in reciprocal recognition is intercultural philosophy possible."³⁹, thereby instituting a baseline of reciprocal recognition without presuming the leveling of difference or power.

Ricœur's reflection on mutual recognition culminates in an anthropology of shared existence, in which the self and the other are bound by the fragile relation of one another (*allelon*). Yet, as Ricœur insists, this reciprocity is never pure or symmetrical. The ethical meaning of recognition lies not in its completion but in its attempt, in the continuing movement toward the other that never cancels difference. In this perspective, mutual recognition is best understood as a fragile practice of reconciliation and mediation across asymmetrical relations: a process through which agents, histories, and languages sustain an unfinished dialogue. It is here that Franz Martin Wimmer's notion of *polylog* becomes illuminating, for it provides a concrete intercultural articulation of the relational structure that Ricœur describes phenomenologically. By *polylog*, Wimmer does not simply mean dialogue extended to multiple participants. Rather, *polylog* designates a methodological and structural principle according to which philosophical claims must emerge through the interaction of several cultural perspectives, none of which can claim priority as a universal center. The quotation that follows summarizes this orientation, but *polylog* itself refers not merely to the "in-between" as a space, but to the disciplined practice of sustaining plurality within argumentation. Wimmer writes: "One of the essential tasks of intercultural philosophy is to develop methods that bring modes of thinking originating from different cultural backgrounds into a mutually enriching dialogue."⁴⁰

Wimmer's formulation clarifies what Ricœur's phenomenology leaves implicit: the *between* of recognition must itself become a shared practice of speaking and listening. While Ricœur's *allelon* captures the ethical reciprocity between self and other, *polylog* unfolds this reciprocity across a multiplicity of participants. In this sense, *polylog* can be read as a collective enactment of responsibility that parallels Ricœurian attestation, an extension of "I can" into a dialogical "we can." The *allelon* becomes the medium through which diverse traditions enter into processes of translation, comparison, and mutual interpretation without reducing difference to sameness.⁴¹ Both thinkers, in distinct spheres, resist closure: for Ricœur, the closure of reciprocity into equality; for Wimmer, the closure of universality into monologue. In each case, recognition represents not a substantive universality but an open-ended orientation toward mutual understanding.

Finally, Ricœur's contribution lies in revealing the phenomenological depth of this openness. The *mutual* in mutual recognition does not imply symmetry but the ongoing work of maintaining a just distance, a relation that holds together proximity and difference. Such "just

³⁹ Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, 19-20.

⁴⁰ Wimmer, *Interkulturelle Philosophie. Eine Einführung*, 19.

⁴¹ Ricœur's model of translation extends beyond language to the exchange of memories and narratives, providing a framework through which different historical traditions may encounter, compare, and reinterpret one another without reducing difference. See Paul Ricœur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe" (1995).

distance” implies the capacity to acknowledge difference while critically assessing claims in light of shared ethical responsibilities. In this sense, it preserves both openness to the other and the critical dimension of dialogue. Viewed in this light, Wimmer’s *polylog* does not introduce something external to Ricoeur’s ethics but rather rearticulates its relational structure under intercultural conditions. Mutual recognition, to remain true to the plurality of the human condition, must take on a *polylogical* form that preserves alterity rather than assimilating differences into a unified horizon. In this light, mutual recognition and intercultural recognition both reject the erasure of dissymmetry. Yet they also preserve the possibility of normative critique, since dissymmetry may arise not only from difference but from injustice. They rather cultivate a structural attentiveness to the *inter*, not as a median of sameness, but as a location where relational difference becomes productive.

4.2. Agape and Listening: Symbolic Generosity and the Ethics of Intercultural Encounter

Deepening the structural and ethical tension explored in mutual recognition, Ricoeur introduces the concept of *agape* as a transformative force within the phenomenology of recognition. *Agape*, for Ricoeur, is a “gift [that] neither requires nor expects a gift in return”⁴²; it radically decenters the self and resists the expectation of equivalence. It is this absence of calculation that “renders unnecessary the reference to equivalents because it knows nothing of comparison and calculation.”⁴³ *Agape* introduces a non-strategic disposition of generosity that makes possible the symbolic gestures of forgiveness, hospitality, and peace. This *agapeic* model of recognition invites comparison with Heinz Kimmerle’s methodology of *listening* (*Methodologie des Hörens*). What intercultural philosophy does is not to invent listening, but to radicalize and extend it across cultural and historical plurality. He writes:

The project of an intercultural philosophy consists, first of all, in listening, listening for a long time, to how the philosophy of another culture articulates itself as a response to certain questions and as a reaction to certain arguments. Listening, too, must be learned; it requires openness, concentration, discipline, and a methodically guided technique. Like understanding, which comes much later, it is an art.⁴⁴

In this formulation, listening is not a preparatory stage preceding understanding but a self-suspending attitude that corresponds, in its ethical structure, to Ricoeur’s notion of *agape*. Listening, as Kimmerle understands it, requires patient, non-appropriative attentiveness, a willingness to remain with what cannot yet, or perhaps never will, be fully understood. In this sense, recognition as acknowledgement should not be understood as the assimilation of the other into one’s own horizon, but rather as the ethical capacity to sustain alterity without dissolving it into sameness. In Ricoeur’s vocabulary, this non-reciprocal orientation of hearing the other without immediate comprehension mirrors the symbolic generosity of *agape*: a gift without return that acknowledges the other’s presence as irreducibly other. Yet *agape* does not eliminate critical judgment. As Ricoeur’s engagement with Freud demonstrates, generous listening may serve not to endorse but

⁴² Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

⁴³ Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 220.

⁴⁴ Kimmerle, *Die Dimension des interkulturellen: Supplemente und Verallgemeinerungsschritte*, 127-28.

to retrieve a fuller hermeneutics beyond distortion. *Agape*, therefore, does not suspend critique; it orients critique toward more humane ends.

For both thinkers, such openness entails an ethical risk. Kimmerle explicitly warns that one “must, of course, not expect that in such a dialogue everything will become comprehensible or find a place within one’s own horizon of understanding.”⁴⁵ What remains incomprehensible, the “isolated fragments” (*erratische Blöcke*) of the intercultural encounter, marks precisely the limit where listening becomes a form of acknowledgment rather than assimilation. Likewise, Ricœur’s *agape* refuses the closure of mutuality into symmetry; it is a gesture of giving that persists even in the absence of return, the counterpart to Kimmerle’s listening, which listens even when understanding fails. In this light, both *agape* and listening sustain a relation grounded in generosity, openness, and attentiveness to otherness. The act of listening, “to listen over a long period of time” (*lange Zeit hindurch zu hören*), creates the temporal and ethical space in which Ricœur’s “peaceful experiences of mutual recognition”⁴⁶ become possible across cultures. From this perspective, recognition does not consist in reducing difference but in remaining open to transformation through encounter with the other. *Agape* may thus be understood as an ethical disposition that also opens a possible mode of intercultural engagement. Yet such generosity remains embedded within relations of responsiveness. That is what Ricœur, following Mauss, describes as the dynamic of “give, receive, give in return”⁴⁷. It is within this tension between asymmetry and reciprocity that the possibility of intercultural recognition emerges as a fragile and continually renewed achievement.

5. Intercultural Recognition: From Path to Framework

Taken together, the course of recognition may be read as a heuristic cartography of intercultural philosophy. What begins as a phenomenological itinerary becomes a framework for intercultural understanding, one that remains open to revision rather than fixed as a completed system. At the methodological level, the dialogue between Ricœur and intercultural philosophy calls for practices that safeguard the *Zwischen*, the in-between space of dialogue. The *polylogue* that Wimmer envisions is not a deliberative assembly of cultures but a hermeneutic workshop where meaning is constantly renegotiated. To take part in such dialogue is to accept incompleteness, what Ricœur calls the fragility of recognition. Within this framework, attestation becomes intercultural responsibility: narrative identity turns into intercultural translation and mutual recognition unfolds as polylogical practice. The Ricœurian *between* thus takes institutional shape through Wimmer’s *minimal rule* and Mall’s principle of equal standing, while Kimmerle’s art of listening provides its affective depth.

If Ricœur provides one possible path, intercultural philosophy simultaneously extends and questions this trajectory by confronting it with plurality, asymmetry, and forms of structural difference that remain insufficiently developed within Ricœur’s own framework. Ricœur’s phenomenology of recognition, though attentive to vulnerability and reciprocity, leaves insufficiently addressed the broader question of structural power, colonial asymmetry, and

⁴⁵ Kimmerle, *Die Dimension des interkulturellen: Supplemente und Verallgemeinerungsschritte*, 126.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 243.

historically uneven conditions of recognition.⁴⁸ While exposing the limits of Eurocentrism, intercultural philosophy also lacks at times the resources through which Ricœur articulates forgiveness, reconciliation, and narrative mediation⁴⁹.

Ricœur's course of recognition may be read as a preparatory anthropology for intercultural philosophy, one whose limits become newly visible through intercultural critique, yet whose unrealized potentialities of meaning may also be reopened through such encounters. Recognition is never completed. It must be "won from the unrecognizable"⁵⁰ again and again, each time history fractures or misunderstanding returns. The course of intercultural recognition therefore has no end; it is a perpetual passage through the *between*, a disciplined openness that unites humility with creativity. What endures is not consensus but the fragile willingness to sustain dialogue across enduring cultural differences. In this sense, the ethical and hermeneutic legacy of Ricœur converges with the methodological attentiveness of intercultural philosophy to propose a shared orientation: to cultivate the just distance in which respect and intimacy, critique and openness, remain in productive tension. The path of recognition thus becomes a fragile and unfinished project, continually exposed to misunderstanding, asymmetry, and renewed misrecognition, while remaining open to intercultural correction, revision, and transformation. It is through this ongoing process that human beings and cultures may come to understand themselves anew, not by assimilating others to their own image, but by acknowledging alterity as a condition of mutual transformation.

⁴⁸ This dimension is addressed elsewhere in Ricœur's reflections on ideology, authority, and the political paradox, but it cannot be pursued here within the limited scope of the present discussion and remains underdeveloped within the framework of recognition itself.

⁴⁹ Further engagement with more critical perspectives, such as those developed by Enrique Dussel or Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, may help deepen the unresolved tensions concerning asymmetry, historical violence, and the limits of universalist hermeneutics within intercultural recognition. These questions remain important avenues for future research.

⁵⁰ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 66.

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

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Abstract

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

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

Résumé

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Ricœur, philosopher of dialogue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁸ Ricœur, *On Translation*, 12.

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

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

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

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

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

²⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*.

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

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

1.1. Descartes' *I ego cogito*

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

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

1.2. Ricœur's hermeneutical anthropology

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

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

²⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 1.

³³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 18.

³⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 5.

³⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.3. Ricœur and dialogue

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

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

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

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

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

2. Hermeneutics under the Shadow of Empire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.1. Against Eurocentrism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁸ Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," 66.

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

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

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

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

2.2. The Vulnerable Self and the Underside of Modernity

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

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

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

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

⁶³ Taylor, "Hospitality as Translation," 11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3. When Dialogue Begins as Conquest

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

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

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

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

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

2.4. When the anti-colonial horizon recedes

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

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

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

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

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

2.5. Unequal Fractures of the Self

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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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

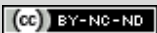
Cet article examine les relations entre les philosophies de Paul Ricœur et d'Enrique Dussel, notamment en matière d'éthique. Il met également en lumière l'appropriation critique du noyau éthico-narratif de l'herméneutique de Ricœur. Ensuite, il souligne l'impasse principale : la distance entre les deux 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

Between Paul Ricœur and Enrique Dussel

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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'idéologie 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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Imagination of Innocence: Ricœur and the Islamic Notion of Natural Disposition (*Fitra*)

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which the imagination of innocence in Ricœur resonates with the Islamic notion of *fitra*. Two major discrepancies are first identified: whereas Ricœur inherits a Christian vision of evil as an originary scandal, *fitra* designates the human being's natural disposition toward the good; and whereas Ricœurian fault resists any rational demonstration of God's existence, *fitra* – particularly in al-Māturīdī – grounds the human capacity to recognize God through reason. Yet a convergence emerges: for Ricœur, the Fall is only thinkable against the backdrop of a goodness and innocence that are more primordial and persist in superimposition. The aim here is not to establish a consensus between the two approaches, but to explore the possibility of a mutual decentering, articulated around a double logic of “in spite of”: imagining the good in spite of evil in Ricœur, and imagining the possibility of fault in spite of the primacy of the good in Islamic thought – in such a way that each intellectual tradition may revitalize its own categories through contact with the other.

Keywords: Ricœur, Imagination of Innocence, Evil, Islamic Theology, Natural Disposition (*fitra*), al-Māturīdī.

Résumé

Cet article examine la façon dont l'imagination de l'innocence chez Ricœur entre en résonance avec la notion islamique de *fitra*. Deux écarts majeurs sont d'abord relevés : là où Ricœur hérite d'une vision chrétienne du mal comme scandale originaire, la *fitra* désigne la disposition naturelle de l'humain au bien ; et là où la faute ricœurienne résiste à toute démonstration de Dieu, la *fitra* – notamment chez al-Māturīdī – fonde la capacité rationnelle à reconnaître Dieu. Pourtant, une convergence émerge : chez Ricœur la Chute n'est pensable qu'à partir d'une bonté et d'une innocence plus originaires, qui persistent en surimpression. L'enjeu ici n'est pas d'établir un consensus entre les deux approches, mais de penser la possibilité d'un décentrement mutuel articulé autour d'une double logique du *en dépit de* : imaginer le bien malgré le mal chez Ricœur, imaginer la faute malgré la primauté du bien dans la pensée islamique, de façon à ce que chaque tradition intellectuelle puisse revivifier ses propres catégories au contact de l'autre.

Mots-clés : Ricœur, imagination de l'innocence, mal, théologie islamique, disposition naturelle (*fitra*), al-Māturīdī.

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Introduction

Ricœur departs from the radical emphasis on finitude found in many phenomenological and existentialist thinkers, presenting instead the human being as defined by the tension between finitude and infinitude. Finitude is central in Ricœur's thought, as it shapes the human condition, grounds moral responsibility, and reveals the limits of knowledge and existence. Yet, *Fallible Man* establishes a tension with infinitude, creating a standard of truth achievable through reason and opening the way to spiritual joy or Intellectual Love, reminiscent of Descartes and Spinoza. Thus, human being is "no less destined to unlimited rationality, to totality, and beatitude than he is limited to a perspective, consigned to death, and riveted to desire."¹ This epistemological concern carries an ethical corollary: human disproportion prevents finitude from being seen as an original corruption. Existence is an opening toward the infinite, not closure in lack, allowing the imagination of innocence to hold that evil is secondary to the pursuit of good.

Yet, whether through Christ's suffering or the question of original sin, Ricœur was profoundly shaped, in addition to Kantian influences, by the Christian-Lutheran tradition, so that evil is always already there and possesses unfathomable depth. Even independently of Ricœur, the Christian kerygma – whether through more or less direct influence, or by way of opposition – has played an undeniable role in the development of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Yet the very notion of the Fall presupposes an original state from which it occurs. In this light, the persistence of—even imagined—innocence somewhat echoes the Quranic emphasis on human goodness: Every human being is born with a disposition toward doing good and an awareness of God's unity, which accompanies them throughout life, particularly since Adam himself was forgiven after his sin. A confrontation with Islam on this point may be fruitful, for by offering another narrative configuration of the foundational events, the Quran provides an opportunity to reconfigure some of the elements that have shaped Western memory.

Ricœur's engagement with Islam is ambivalent. On one hand, Islam has, according to him, never succeeded in combining conviction with critical reflection, unlike Western culture, which has been able to critically engage with all the traditions that have shaped it.² On the other hand, he acknowledges the significant contribution of Islamic thought to medieval Europe: "Westerners are not unaware that Muslim thought is in a way woven into their own Middle Ages: al-Kindī, al-

¹ Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (New-York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 3.

² Paul Ricœur, "La crise de la conscience historique et l'Europe", in *Ética e o Futuro Da Democracia*, ed. João Lopes Alves (Lisboa: Edições Colibri/S.P.F., 1998), 30.

Fârâbî, Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Khaldun belong to universal thought.”³ Ricœur remains convinced that a revitalized Islamic world would share a unique proximity with European civilization, rooted in a shared creative engagement. Religiously speaking, the relationship between Islam and Christianity involves both divergences, such as incarnation and crucifixion, and convergences, such as the unity of God and creation. It is at the intersection of these convergent and divergent lines that our study situates itself, comparing Ricœur’s imagination of innocence with the Islamic notion of *fitra*, usually translated as “natural disposition.”⁴ In line with Ricœur’s rejection of compromises and consensus, the aim is less to establish a conceptual proximity than to initiate a dual process of decentering. This will take place through a dynamic and complementary relationship between two paradigms: innocence despite evil in Ricœur, and fault despite good in Islamic thought.

First, I will show the profound divergence between the Islamic concept of *fitra* – an innate, optimistic disposition toward good and knowledge of God – and Ricœur’s Christian-influenced vision, where evil is always already there. While Islamic thought, notably through al-Mâturîdî, upholds a rational theology grounded in this original nature, Ricœur regards evil as an irrational scandal that precludes ontotheological certainty and requires the stripping away of absolute knowledge. However, in the second part, I will show that for Ricœur, goodness remains more original than evil and must be recovered through the imagination of innocence after the Fall. The very idea of the Fall presupposes an initial state of innocence whose loss it represents. In the third part, my goal is less to trace doctrinal convergence than to highlight that Islamic thought occupies a hybrid position between sameness and otherness, distinct both from the self and from the absolute Other. Imagined innocence thus becomes a tool of decentering, allowing both traditions to understand the other by discovering alterity at the heart of the self: goodness despite evil; evil despite goodness.

1. Natural Disposition *versus* the Scandal of Evil

1.1. Predisposition to the Good or Primacy of Evil

The Islamic conception of natural disposition (*fitra*) refers to the innate, original state in which every human being is created, oriented toward the recognition of God and the distinction of truth from falsehood. *Fitra* is, at best, more optimistic and, at worst, more neutral than the Christian perspective that – among other sources – underpins the Ricœurian vision of fault. The term evokes origin and creation, denoting the manner in which humans were fashioned by God.⁵ Humanity, by virtue of its creation, possesses an innate predisposition toward ethical goodness and recognition of the Divine. A celebrated hadith states: “Every newborn is born in a state of *fitra*. Then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian, just as an animal is born intact.”⁶ In his study on the subject, Yasien Mohamed identifies three approaches to *fitra*: the dualistic view, in which humans are equally inclined to good and evil; the neutral view, positing no particular inclination; and the

³ Paul Ricœur, “Introduction”, in *Les cultures et le temps. Études préparées pour l’Unesco* (Paris: Payot/Les Presses de l’Unesco, 1975), 30.

⁴ The proper transliteration is *fiṭra*, but I use *fitra* to facilitate the term’s appropriation.

⁵ Quran 30:30.

⁶ Muslim, *ṣaḥiḥ Muslim*, (Beirut: Dar Iḥya’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyah, 1955), Kitab al-Qadr, hadith 2658.

positive view, of an intrinsic predisposition toward the good – the dominant position in Islamic tradition.⁷ Sin brings concupiscence, evidenced by the sudden awareness of nakedness, and ends the primordial sojourn in Paradise, as Adam and Eve are commanded to descend to Earth.⁸ Yet Adam seeks forgiveness, and God accepts it.⁹ Humanity is prone to forget its origins and the Divine; prophets and revelations restore these primordial truths. Unlike the Christian figure of perpetual temptation, here the risk lies in forgetfulness, which is inherently less grave. Humans are inclined to evil insofar as they are tempted by the Devil, yet “it is not an imbalance that irremediably ruins human nature or renders man powerless to resist the Demon or perform good.”¹⁰

In an ethical sense, the primacy of *fitra* implies that every human being possesses an innate predisposition to discern and pursue the good. *Fitra* is frequently likened to the purity of a child. Moral goodness aligns with the human conscience, which experiences unease when committing evil. In a well-known hadith, the Prophet advised Wābiṣah ibn Maʿbad to consult his heart, noting that righteousness brings peace, while sin causes doubt and unrest.¹¹ Consequently, committing evil entails discomfort, as it constitutes an act of injustice against oneself.

This ethical dimension of natural disposition is particularly explicit in the thought of Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944). Al-Māturīdī, regarded as the founder of the school of theology known as Maturidism, developed a theological approach that granted an important role to reason in the understanding of faith while upholding the authority of revelation.¹² His case is of singular interest, as he was a founding figure of Sunni Islamic theology and, during the early centuries of Islam, authored a comprehensive commentary on the Quran. For al-Māturīdī, human nature is inclined toward the good, even if it may stray under external influences like Satan or the environment. Nevertheless, humans are endowed with reason and the capacity (*qudra*) to distinguish good from evil, remaining naturally predisposed to prefer the former.¹³ Individuals should act according to sound reason (*ʿaql salīm*), which reliably recognizes the good and the beautiful. Hence, humans whose *fitra* remains uncorrupted experience happiness and peace after virtuous deeds, but sorrow, guilt, and regret after base actions.

This Islamic emphasis on the good contrasts with the importance Paul Ricœur assigns to evil. For him, fault shadows finitude and is not confined to tragic philosophies; even rationalism is

⁷ Yasien Mohamed, “The Interpretations of *Fiṭrah*”, *Islamic Studies* 34, no. 2 (1995): 135. More generally, see also: Ramon Harvey, ‘Primordial Human Nature (*fiṭra*)’, *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al (2024). <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Islam/PrimordialHumanNature> accessed April 29, 2026.

⁸ Quran 7:22.

⁹ Quran 20:122.

¹⁰ Georges C. Anawati, “La notion de ‘péché originel’ existe-t-elle dans l’Islam ?,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 31 (1970), 37.

¹¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, hadith 6195.

¹² As with the term *fiṭra*, I use the simplified form “al-Māturīdī” in order to facilitate its use among scholars outside Islamic studies.

¹³ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī, *Taʾwīlāt Al-Qurʾān*, ed. Bekir Topaloğlu (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat, 2005), 11:186. The two digits indicate volume and page.

traversed by a “ceaseless, stifled, yet ever-resurging interrogation” into its enigma.¹⁴ Whether in evil committed through original sin or endured in Christ’s sufferings, Christian consciousness remains more preoccupied with evil than its Islamic counterpart. Now, as Daniel Frey notes, this conception of fault is inherited from the Christian tradition.¹⁵ Yet, although deeply attentive to sin, Ricœur distances himself from original sin because it rationalizes fault into a pseudo-concept. He rejects this pseudo-knowledge, not sin as a symbol that provokes thought. Evil is a scandal, the point where philosophies fracture and resist rationalization. Sin is thus a disconcerting and scandalous experience, making it necessary to take a detour through myth and symbol to grasp its depth.

Drawing on the Christian vision of sin and Kant’s notion of radical evil, Ricœur writes “evil does not begin because it is always already there in some fashion; it is choice *and* heritage.”¹⁶ We enter a drama that has already begun, for evil, in a sense, precedes us. In acting, the self inscribes itself within a lineage of prior evil, embodied in human fallibility. Every individual encounters this pre-existing evil and perpetuates it; no one originates it absolutely.¹⁷ Ricœur links this always already there character of evil to original sin, whose power refers to the “most radical in the confession of sins, namely, the fact that evil precedes my awareness, that it cannot be analyzed into individual faults, that it is my pre-given impotence.”¹⁸ Distinguishing itself from the individual responsibility emphasized by the *fitra*, the paradox of the “bound will” (*serf-arbitre*) arises from this *always already there* evil: the individual is both the free author of their acts and the victim of prior captivity, since evil is lodged at the heart of the will. Ricœur adopts Luther’s oxymoron to describe a freedom confronted with the radically alienated human condition. Sin reveals a freedom already captive to itself. The bound will embodies human liberty’s internal contradiction: one is responsible insofar as one could have acted otherwise, yet experiences a prior captivity that impels toward evil. Freedom is real, yet always paradoxical, rendering evil irreducible to rationalization: “Man is not part free and part guilty; he is totally guilty, in the very heart of a total freedom as complete as the power to decide, to move, and to consent. (...) I *am* free *and* this freedom is unavailable.”¹⁹ As Saint Paul, quoted by Ricœur, writes: “The good that I would I do not, and the evil I would not I do.”²⁰

The transition from innocence to fault is not a pure, instantaneous act of will but part of a “duration of temptation” that dramatizes the Fall.²¹ This duration nuances the rupture between innocence and fault implied by passage. Sin is inscribed in an abrupt event – the act of eating the fruit in Genesis 3:6 embodies the Fall’s irrationality. Yet the passage is not entirely instantaneous,

¹⁴ Paul Ricœur, “Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique,” *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 33, no. 4 (1953), 285.

¹⁵ Daniel Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Hermann, 2021), 105.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 300.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 256.

¹⁸ Paul Ricœur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Denis Savage (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 306.

¹⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 26.

²⁰ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 21.

²¹ Ricœur, “Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique,” 303.

occupying a lapse of time – the very duration of temptation. The biblical narrative transforms an instant of rupture into a complex story with temporal and psychological depth. Evil's origin disperses among characters: God who forbids, the serpent who seduces, the woman who yields, and the fruit that attracts. The dramatization of the Fall reshapes it into a drama of existence, where evil emerges not as an absurd leap, but through a seductive process embedded in human freedom. Moreover, the serpent as tempter is central to the proximity between sin and tragic fault. Human free will is no longer the sole cause of the Fall, confronted as it is by an alterity that accentuates human weakness, giving evil a tragic, almost inevitable, character. The serpent's origin remains enigmatic. The tragic dimension of its seduction lies in its mere presence: "the serpent is there; that is all."²² This quasi-exteriority makes possible the alibi of bad faith, fostering the sense of being deceived by an external force and thus echoing the tragic feeling of being a victim of destiny. Even if biblical fault differs from the more radical tragic guilt, Ricœur brings the notion of temptation closer to the Greek vision.

1.2. Theological Proofs or the Indemonstrable God

This primary ethical divergence between Ricœur and Islamic thought may be supplemented by a second, concerning the recognition of God's existence. The predisposition toward the good is inseparable from the predisposition to recognize the Divine through reason, so that one is "innately predisposed to know God and to do good."²³ In hermeneutic terms, there exists a pre-understanding of both the knowledge of the good and the recognition of divine unity (*tawhīd*). Commenting on Quran 7:157,²⁴ al-Māturīdī grounds a rational theology linking these ethical and theological axes. The good God commands through revelation corresponds to that which reason identifies as such.²⁵ By reason and intuition, humans can distinguish good from evil, truth from falsehood, and the beneficial from the harmful, for God has placed within the human constitution the faculty to know what is good and what is evil. Even before physical creation, the Primordial covenant (*al-mīthāq al-awwal*) was sealed between God and human beings, since the latter assembled all souls, asking "Am I not your Lord?" to which they replied, "Yes, we bear witness," thus entering a covenant in pre-eternity.²⁶

The link between *fitra* and the proof of God's existence is particularly evident in al-Māturīdī's work, discussed above in its ethical dimension.²⁷ In his exegesis, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, he presents *fitra* as a *disposition* (*isti'dād*) created by God for seeking and turning toward Him – less an innate knowledge than an original aptitude, or, to put it in Ricœurian terms, a capability. As fallibility in Ricœur represents the possibility of evil rather than its actuality, *fitra* denotes the possibility of divine knowledge rather than its realized state. Al-Māturīdī evokes the image of an

²² Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 305.

²³ Mohamed, "The Interpretations of *Fiṭrah*," 140.

²⁴ "Who commands them to do right and forbids them to do wrong, who makes good things lawful to them and bad things unlawful." The translation used is that of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem.

²⁵ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 6:81.

²⁶ Quran 7:172.

²⁷ Shaykh Abu Mansoor al-Māturīdī, *The Book of Monotheism. Kitaab At-Tawheed: God and the Universe. A Manual of Sunni Theology*, trans. Sulaiman Ahmed (London: Maturidi Publications, 2019), 30–33: "Proof that the Universe has a Creator."

infant instinctively predisposed to suckle.²⁸ He provides a threefold commentary on verse 30:30,²⁹ where the root *f-ṭ-r* appears twice: *fitrat Allāh* refers to the predisposition enabling recognition of God's existence and Oneness; *faṭarahum* denotes the very fact that humans were created according to this natural disposition; and finally, the verse affirms *fitrat*'s immutability, stating that there is no change in God's creation. Humans are thus born with *fitra* and retain it throughout life, despite deleterious influences.

Fitrat does not in itself guarantee recognition of God; it depends on the proper use of reason (*'aql*). In his commentary on Quran 6:79,³⁰ al-Māturīdī explains that the human constitution includes proofs of divine oneness (*waḥdāniyya*) and lordship (*rubūbiyya*), reflecting a rational nature capable of inference (*istidlāl*).³¹ It is through reasoning that Abraham concludes that the Creator God cannot perish, unlike the moon or the sun. By struggling against passions, humans can actualize this predisposition to recognize God rationally through observing the external world. Commenting on the verse, "Do the disbelievers not see how rain clouds are formed, how the heavens are lifted, how the mountains are raised high, how the earth is spread out?"³² al-Māturīdī emphasizes that reflection (*tafakkur*) enables the discernment of signs pointing to God's existence and oneness—the same term *āya* referring both to outward signs and to the verses of the Quran.³³ The Qur'ān presents the order and harmony of the world – the alternation of night and day, the sun, moon, stars, clouds, mountains, seas, and trees – as signs of God. Non-human beings are also created according to a *fitra* that inclines them toward perpetual worship of God through obedience to the inner law He has set. Al-Māturīdī distinguishes three forms of glorification: first, that of creation itself, as every being bears divine testimony within its *fitra*; second, that of knowledge, proper to humans who consciously recognize transcendence; and third, a constraining glorification in natural elements, which obey God even against their customary order, such as Moses' staff becoming a serpent.³⁴

Here again, the difference from Ricœur is profound. For him, the absurdity of evil, which belongs to the realm of the irrational, entails renouncing pretensions to absolute knowledge. The depth of evil also precludes the possibility of a rational theology capable of establishing God's existence through reason alone. Ricœur states: "We clearly reject the pretensions of an overly zealous apologetics which would pretend to derive God from nature or from subjectivity by a simple rational implication."³⁵ Accordingly, while he distances himself from Heidegger regarding the total rejection of the metaphysical tradition, he nonetheless opposes any onto-theological proof of God's existence. He rejects proofs of God, so as not to include God in our enterprise of

²⁸ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 11:186.

²⁹ "So [Prophet] as a man of pure faith, stand firm and true in your devotion to the religion. This is the natural disposition God instilled in mankind – there is no altering God's creation."

³⁰ "I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth."

³¹ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 6:144.

³² Quran 88:17-20.

³³ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 10:183-185.

³⁴ al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān*, 14:331-332.

³⁵ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 468.

intellectual domination.³⁶ "Listening to Christian preaching, for the philosopher, first means stripping oneself of all onto-theological knowledge," writes Ricœur, rejecting the idea of God as a concept guaranteeing the coherence of a rational system.³⁷

Certainty not only conflicts with the humility of the believer but also entails a form of arrogance. In a late text, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," Ricœur explains that renouncing certainty about proofs of God aligns with the call to lose one's life for Christ. Of God, we can know only one thing: He reveals Himself in the crucified Jesus, through the symbol of the suffering servant and its incarnation in the contingent event of the cross. In modern societies without persecution, this invitation has two meanings. First, practical: renouncing worldly goods, as in the example of Francis of Assisi. For those who have not embraced a hermit life, the second, sapiential meaning applies: the *imitatio Christi*, participating in Christ's sufferings through a life of sacrifice and self-denial. Philosophically, imitating Christ entails relinquishing any claim to the certainty of absolute knowledge. Madness and kenosis interrupt any march toward triumph or glory. To take up one's cross is to accept the overturning of the guarantee of knowledge, living a "life placed under the sign of the suffering Christ."³⁸ Academically, the threat lies in excessive knowledge and the will to power it provokes, whether in secular learning or religious doctrine. Ricœur cites Eberhard Jüngel, for whom faith represents the reversal of guarantee. He invokes Anselm of Canterbury's maxim, *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith precedes human reason, which can only understand intellectually what has first been believed.

2. Innocence in Ricœur: Before and Beyond the Fall

2.1. Imagining Innocence Before the Fall

Evil presents an *always already there*, a primary scandal that cannot truly be tamed. Yet the very idea of the primacy of the Fall is ambivalent, for a fall presupposes an initial state from which it occurs and whose loss it represents. According to Ricœur, the idea of original sin is more complex than it appears: if sin exists, it is a deviation relative to an even more primordial state. More generally, every passion is a degeneration of an original goodness. Ricœur notes that we understand passions "in their essence only as a perversion of...."³⁹ In *Fallible Man*, he presents passion as a distortion (*Sucht*) of an original quest (*Suchen*). Greed presupposes a legitimate pursuit of possession, vanity a legitimate pursuit of recognition and value. Any understanding of evil presupposes an understanding of original goodness, for "However primordial badness may be, goodness is even more primordial."⁴⁰ The historicity of perversion always relies on the structural goodness of human striving. Ricœur thus argues that the scandal of evil cannot be grasped without

³⁶ Paul Ricœur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. Donald Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 286.

³⁷ Paul Ricœur, "Entre philosophie et théologie II: nommer Dieu (1977)," in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 289.

³⁸ Ricœur, "Whoever Loses Their Life for My Sake Will Find It," 288.

³⁹ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 111–12.

⁴⁰ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 145.

the imagination of innocence, a central concept in his philosophical anthropology.⁴¹ It denotes the capacity of consciousness, through myth and poetry, to represent humanity's original goodness and integrity preceding the experience of fault. The term reflects the ambivalence of the primacy of the Fall, which is also secondary to the pre-fall state. The primacy of innocence can be apprehended only imaginatively, since it is represented retroactively. Ambiguity arises because, "we have access to the primordial only through what is fallen."⁴²

The imagination of innocence functions as a Husserlian imaginative variation, allowing the philosopher to suspend the "prestige of the fact" and approach the essence of humanity.⁴³ Original innocence can only be represented through such variation, which distances consciousness from the empirical world to focus on essence. Empirically, we encounter only deformed passions, but to judge them as evil, we must grasp their unfallen essence. The scandal of evil makes any direct description of innocence impossible. Consequently, imagination relies on myth and poetry to reconstruct primordial innocence retroactively – consciousness must pass through fiction to represent an origin that is never immediate.

While biblical sin resembles tragic fault in some respects, a fundamental difference remains: tragic fault, for Ricœur, conflates human existence with culpability, as "the hero falls into fault as he falls into existence."⁴⁴ Ricœur identifies two key distinctions between tragic and biblical fault. First, the discovery of holiness resolves the problem of a wicked god and separates divine from human culpability. Second – and more pertinent here – the connection between the myth of the Fall and the myth of creation breaks with the notion of inevitable fault. Biblical sin appears as a "primordial event occurring *within innocence*" and cannot be equated with finitude itself.⁴⁵ The myth of innocence is secondary to the creation narrative, which forms its backdrop. The Fall, occurring within creation, is distinct from it, for creation in itself is good. Thus, "sin is not being, nor a structure, nor an aspect of being; it occurs as an event within being and cannot be coordinated with the ontological structure of humanity."⁴⁶ Ricœur thereby draws a fundamental distinction between sinful being and created being. The concept of *imago Dei* perfectly captures the primacy and anteriority of innocence, which also signifies primordial goodness; for *imago Dei* is both our created being and our innocence. Consequently, regardless of the degree of evil, goodness remains more original.

This distinction between the precedence of creation and the posteriority of sin is complemented by the distinction between finitude and fault. Finitude belongs to the very structure of human existence as situated between the finite and the infinite; it is an ontological condition, not a moral deficiency. Fault, by contrast, is not structural but event-like: a rupture rather than a condition. Finitude makes fault possible but not necessary, and Ricœur seeks to preserve this non-

⁴¹ Daniel Frey distinguishes three modalities of this imagination: "*philosophical imagination* conceives the originary through the fallen; *mythico-poetic imagination* offers a figuration of both original innocence and recovered innocence; finally, *utopian imagination* calls for the courage of concrete action within the heart of history, and the theme of utopia is known to undergo significant developments thereafter." See Daniel Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur*, 151–52.

⁴² Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 76.

⁴³ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 112.

⁴⁴ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 288.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 299.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, "Culpabilité tragique et culpabilité biblique," 300.

necessity. The imagination of innocence thus allows one to conceive finitude without fault, avoiding any ontologization of evil and preserving genuine responsibility.

Ricœur argues that finitude is not the negation of a primary affirmation or infinitude. Here, innocence can only be imagined because the individual remains fallible, a fallibility marked by the disproportion between the finite and the infinite. In accordance with the complementarity between the ethical and theological dimensions, this disproportion between finitude and infinitude then opens the way to an argument in favor of divine existence, without amounting to a proof in the classical sense. The discourse on finitude is only possible through an openness to the infinite; indeed, finitude alone is impossible.⁴⁷ Barnabas Aspray views Ricœur's necessity of the infinite as an argument for God, though not a theological proof, noting that "this infinitude is only grasped apophatically, through a negation of finitude."⁴⁸ Indeed, in contrast to the vast majority of French philosophers of his time, Ricœur maintains that any understanding of human finitude is inextricably linked to the question of transcendence.

2.2. The Persistence of Goodness

The link between creation and innocence means that innocence is not merely chronologically prior but constitutes the very nature of the created being. To be created is to be originally good, and one cannot cease to be good without negating one's created being. The secondary nature of sin ensures it always remains posterior and cannot erase the enduring foundation of goodness intrinsic to humanity. In this way, Ricœur excludes any ontologization of evil: sin is neither substance, structure, nor a constitutive aspect of human being, but a contingent event occurring within existence. The "anteriority" of innocence belongs to a mythical time, signifying ontological depth rather than historical succession. Guilt, therefore, pertains to history and choice, while primordial goodness remains coextensive with created being. The Fall is situated within history as distinct from the constitution of the human being. Humanity is both created and fallen, carrying constitutive goodness while marked by historical distortion.

Innocence and fault are not successive historical stages – an age of gold followed by irreversible Fall – but coexisting dimensions of human existence. Ricœur speaks of a "superimposition" of the historical on the primordial, in which the inconceivable event of the passage from the original goodness of the created being to the acquired evil of historical man gains a synchronic dimension.⁴⁹ The myth of innocence primarily offers a symbolic figure of the primordial, which continues to be glimpsed even amid degradation, thereby revealing it.⁵⁰ Ricœur

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 25. Ricœur even asserts a certain connection to Descartes: "Descartes was correct when he said that the idea of the infinite was wholly positive and identical to being plane et simpliciter, and that the finite was at fault with respect to being." Paul Ricœur, "Negativity and Primary Affirmation," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 315.

⁴⁸ Barnabas Aspray, *Ricœur at the Limits of Philosophy: God, Creation, and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15.

⁴⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Éd. Esprit, 1995), 32.

⁵⁰ This preservation of the goodness of creation recalls the distinction that Ricœur draws between creation as a temporal beginning – which is in fact surpassed – and creation as an ontological origin that endures and persists within what has been created. See Selami Varlik, *Appropriation of Islamic Philosophy: Creation in Ricœur and Avicenna* (London: Bloomsbury, 2026), 110–18: "Difference between Origin and Beginning."

here invokes Rousseau, who consistently defends both “man’s natural goodness *and* his historical and cultural perversity.”⁵¹ Through the idea of a naturally good being, Rousseau enables us to conceive of natural goodness both as our innocence and as our nature.

As Daniel Frey rightly notes, by superimposing primordial goodness and historical evil, Ricœur “breaks with the Augustinian and Lutheran theological tradition by conceiving innocence as enduring through and despite the Fall.”⁵² In this, he departs from Heidegger, who reduces evil to finitude, notably in §58 of *Being and Time*. By deriving guilty consciousness from the finite structure of existence, Heidegger presents *Dasein*, through anxiety, as authentically being-in-debt. Ricœur criticizes this, arguing that debt is ontologized too quickly, at the expense of the ethical dimension of indebtedness.⁵³ By embedding fault within existential analytics and the unified structure of care, Heidegger overlooks the irreducible specificity of the experience of fault. This is also why Ricœur defends “the possibility of abstracting the fault”.⁵⁴ In the same way, he opposes the primacy of joy with the primacy of anxiety.⁵⁵ Spiritual Joy and Beatitude – as Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza describe – represent the ultimate ontological affect.⁵⁶ The individual is defined by the “Yes” of joy within the sorrow of finitude. The foundation of this joy is Spinoza’s *conatus*, the effort and desire to persist in being. Proposition VI of Part III of the *Ethics* is crucial for Ricœur, expressing that each being strives to persevere in its existence.

It is worth noting that in Islamic thought as well, primordial innocence is not immediately accessible, for two reasons. First, both *fitra* and *mīthāq* are conveyed through revealed, imaginative discourse that presents the origin retrospectively. The verse of the covenant itself unfolds narratively, recounting a dialogue between the souls and God in a kind of pre-eternity. Second, for al-Māturīdī, this episode is indeed real, but the verbal exchange should not be understood literally. The *mīthāq* means that the human being was created with a disposition such that, if the event had taken place literally, he would have answered *balā* (“yes”) to the question “Am I not your Lord?”.

For al-Māturīdī, Quran 7:172 means that at every stage of becoming, the human being is made to recognize that existence is not governed by parents but by a single, omniscient Creator.⁵⁷ The verse is thus read in light of “How can you ignore God when you were lifeless and He gave you life?”,⁵⁸ so that creation itself constitutes the proof that grounds recognition of the Creator. He therefore rejects literalist readings and understands the primordial covenant as inscribed in creation itself. God has placed in human constitution signs of His unity, a view reinforced by the *ḥadīth* on the *fitra* and Quran 30:30, which links *fitra* to human creation. The divine-human dialogue

⁵¹ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 145.

⁵² Frey, *La religion dans la philosophie de Paul Ricœur*, 149.

⁵³ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 351.

⁵⁴ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 25.

⁵⁵ For the profound divergences between Quranic anthropology and the emphasis Heidegger places on the notions of care (*Sorge*) and anxiety (*Angst*), see Selami Varlık, ‘Heidegger ve İslam Düşüncesi: Kaygının Hristiyan Kökeni ve Tecrübe-Akıl Karşıtlığı’, *Temaşa Erciyes Üniversitesi Felsefe Bölümü Dergisi*, no. 21 (June 2024): 150–71.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 106.

⁵⁷ al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6:105.

⁵⁸ Quran 2:28.

should thus not be taken literally but as occurring in the “language of state” (*lisān al-ḥāl*).⁵⁹ For al-Māturīdī, all beings continually glorify God through their *fitra*, albeit in an inaudible mode.

3. Innocence of the Other within the Self

3.1. Imagining the Other, Reimagining the Self

Ricœur conceives imagination as a means of approaching another religion, even the most distant: while each begins from their own religious experience, one can proceed through imaginative variation, as when one changes perspective on an object. From within a religion, one can step outside it to understand others progressively, “step by step.”⁶⁰ Ricœur advocates applying the same “assumption in imagination and sympathy” to religions other than one’s own.⁶¹ However, the case of Islam is somewhat different. We saw that Islam cannot be placed in the same category as, for example, Chinese thought, which Ricœur presents as an “absolute *other*.”⁶² It does not belong to “cultures that have not encountered each other,”⁶³ as with the Far East. Nor can it be reduced to the mere figure of the same. Given an interplay of distance and proximity, it occupies a genuinely hybrid position of sameness–otherness, where engagement with the other fundamentally requires introspection into the complexity of the self.

Thanks to this hybrid status, the imagination of the other is never independent of the self, which already reflects aspects of the other. The imagination of innocence thus does not function as a simple shared notion aimed at consensus – which Ricœur refuses – but as a *dual despite*: imagining innocence *despite* evil on one side, and fault *despite* goodness on the other. The imagination of innocence establishes a dual link with Islamic thought. Formally, it prevents finitude from closing in on itself, precisely through its disproportion with infinitude. It creates a space in which the self is already in tension with infinity, which can also be that of the other. In other words, it prevents finitude from becoming self-sufficient or closed. Here, the openness is formal rather than content-based: what matters is not the notion or experience that defines the other, but the capacity to engage with them through the fissure of finitude that the imagination of innocence reveals. The tension between finite and infinite within the self makes possible a corresponding disproportion between the self’s finitude and the other’s finitude – or even infinitude. Secondly, on the substantive level, the imagination of innocence echoes Islamic innocence and so reveals both proximity and distance between the two traditions. It allows engagement with Islam not merely from the outside, as a radical other, but also from within. Accordingly, the imagination of the other is never independent of the imagination – or re-imagination – of the self, and the *step by step* movement toward the other is inseparable from the self’s internal complexity.

In a 1993 text on the “Phenomenology of religion,” Ricœur outlines a series of hermeneutic circles in Jewish and Christian faiths, addressing their borrowings from adjacent cultures. Islam shares with these traditions a common encounter with Greek thought, exemplified in Avicenna’s

⁵⁹ al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wīlāt al-Qur’ān*, 6:107.

⁶⁰ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

⁶¹ Paul Ricœur, “Phénoménologie de la religion (1993),” in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 267.

⁶² Paul Ricœur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006), 36.

⁶³ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 22.

work.⁶⁴ Having shown that the Judeo-Christian tradition can expand step by step, Ricœur situates Islam within the initial circle through cultural and conceptual exchanges with Hellenism, granting it a status of semi-other. This proximity is not religious but pertains to the universality of the two traditions. The imagination of innocence allows this proximity – suggested by Ricœur himself – to be extended further.

He identifies three types of step by step relations: depth, lateral, and retroactive.⁶⁵ First, depth relations focus on the Greco-Judeo core, descending through its layered structure to uncover the sedimentation of Western collective memory. Ricœur thus observes, already in his work on the symbolism of evil, innocence, and fault, that Western memory includes initially unknown or unexplored layers. Second, lateral relations extend the inquiry to the networks in which sources are embedded, as Hebrew culture can only be understood in relation to the ancient Near East, which itself is only marginally part of our memory. Third, retroactive relations reshape past and present: cultural memory is continually renewed through rediscoveries, returns to sources, and reforms. Ricœur highlights restoring lost intermediaries, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and adjusting distances between traditions, showing how neo-pasts allow new incorporations into cultural memory and self-understanding. So, the imagination of innocence as a common pattern involves not only openness to the external other but also a rediscovery of otherness sometimes hidden or forgotten within the self.⁶⁶

Moreover, because innocence within the self is itself an object of imagination, it already embodies an irreducible internal otherness. The capacity to imagine innocence in the other – here, Islam – is thus facilitated by the imagination of the self's own innocence, which is never immediate but mediated through mythic origin and the distance bridged by imaginative work. This internal distance mirrors that between the self and the other's innocence, so that imagining the other entails a re-imagination of the self, or a conception of the self as another. As Kearney puts it, "between the logos of the One and the antilogos of the Other, there is the *dialogos* of the self as another."⁶⁷ Any effort to render the foreign more familiar must also make the familiar more strange – what Ricœur, following Heidegger, calls "displacing ourselves within our own origins."⁶⁸ Only that, as we have seen, the other's emphasis on innocence is even stronger. What the self carries as innocence fissuring its finitude is encountered in the other in a more fully realized form, preventing the reduction of the other to a mere likeness and further calling forth the work of imagination.

The point is not at all to find common ground for agreement, especially since Ricœur provides, notably through the imagination, the tools to conceive of the irreducible alterity of the other. The question is rather to ask what the philosophical reasons are for the self to take an interest in the other-than-self. The path I follow here is to suggest that imagining the other is also a necessary way of reimagining the self by accentuating and developing its inner possibilities.

⁶⁴ Ricœur, "Phénoménologie de la religion (1993)", 270.

⁶⁵ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

⁶⁶ See Ernst Wolff, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2021), 168–72.

⁶⁷ Richard Kearney, "Vers une herméneutique diacritique du passage. En dialogue avec Jean Greisch," in *Le souci du passage. Mélanges offerts à Jean Greisch*, ed. Philippe Capelle-Dumont et al. (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2004), 27.

⁶⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales," *Esprit* (1940-), no. 299 (10) (1961), 452.

3.2. Imagination of Fault and Mutual Decentering

For Ricœur, the self's decentering through encounter with the Other is not unilateral. Reciprocally, Islamic thought can itself be affected by engagement with the Ricœurian emphasis on evil. Not only does Islamic innocence resonate within Ricœurian thought, but conversely, Islamic thought maintains a dynamic tension with the figure of evil. Thus, Islam's emphasis on goodness can be decentered by Ricœur's insistence on evil while preserving its secondary status. Moreover, the Quran repeatedly underscores how the natural disposition to reason and believe is constantly in tension with the risk of disobedience.

Indeed, in Islam one does not find a conception of evil as a deep inner corruption in which the will is distorted at its root and guilt becomes central. However, although the soul is not understood as inherently corrupted, the various Islamic schools have nevertheless extensively debated the possibility of evil's existence. The Mu'tazilites argued that God is absolutely just and cannot create evil, which therefore arises solely from human free will. For the Maturidites – and, in a similar way, the Ash'arites – God creates all acts, yet the human being remains responsible through “acquisition” (*kasb*) and the capacity to act. Evil is thus integrated into a broader divine wisdom (*ḥikma*) without being arbitrary, even though God is not bound by the demands of reason as He is in Mu'tazilite thought.⁶⁹

Human being is created according to the *fitra* but is also prone to inconstancy and impatience.⁷⁰ He is not inherently sinful, yet he tends to forget, in line with the very etymology of *insān*, human.⁷¹ The Quran repeatedly emphasizes human weakness and the tendency to “take one's own desire for God.”⁷² Verse 30:30 is particularly revealing: it ends with “though most people do not realize it,” highlighting that the *fitra* is universal yet largely unrecognized. The verse begins with an imperative, urging remembrance of what is easily forgotten.

Verses 95:4-6 are particularly striking for the tension they establish regarding human ethical nature: “We create man in the finest state (*aḥsani taqwīm*), then reduce him to the lowest of the low (*asfali sāfilīn*), except those who believe and do good deeds.” The passage is marked by two reversals. First, humans are created in the most perfect form – often interpreted as the *fitra* – but the same humans are subsequently reduced to the lowest state, which carries an almost primordial character, being established by God Himself. The verb *radadnāhu*, from the root *r.d.d*, can mean “to return” to a previous state; but it can also imply a reversion to an inferior or opposite condition. Second, those who believe and perform good deeds are exempt from this duality of human nature. Thus, goodness ultimately prevails, yet the central verse underscores human susceptibility to evil. As we saw with al-Mâtūrîdî, the *fitra* is a disposition toward faith and goodness, not their automatic realization, and thus allows for the possibility of disbelief. Its fulfillment requires proper use of reason. Al-Mâtūrîdî's commentary on this Quranic passage is illuminating: the tension between *aḥsani taqwīm* and *asfali sāfilīn* stems from human freedom, which can act in accordance with or against its nature by yielding to passion. Al-Mâtūrîdî interprets the first expression as a

⁶⁹ Shia Islam represents an interesting exception, as evil is understood in a dramatic sense through the lens of the Karbalā' tragedy. Historical evil finds its answer in the awaited return of the Occult Imam, whose coming will restore universal justice.

⁷⁰ Quran 70:19-21.

⁷¹ Quran 4:28.

⁷² Quran 25:43.

reference to human intellectual, volitional, and moral capacities. Human excellence lies in the dual capacity to reason and to will; reason can discern God's signs, yet the will remains free and may reject them.⁷³

In creation, humans occupy an intermediate status. On one hand, they possess a physical nature marked by finitude and fragility: they change, grow weak, and cannot always correct their flaws, linking them to other creatures. On the other hand, they have innate faculties – reason, will, and moral conscience – that distinguish them and make them capable of both the best and the worst. Thus, an individual can move from *aḥsani taqwīm* to *asfali sāfilīn*. Al-Mâtūrîdî reads this expression in an intellectual and ethical sense: just as the highest form reflects the proper use of reason and will, the lowest reflects their misuse.

The possibility of evil arises from the distinction in humans between *fitra* and *ṭab'*, i.e. human nature.⁷⁴ The *ṭab'* inclines humans toward excess and fleeting pleasures, so that natural impulses may diverge from the ethical and theological conclusions of reason.⁷⁵ Humans possess this nature to meet earthly needs, ensure offspring, maintain bodily vitality, and complete their lifespan; pleasure and enjoyment are necessary to a certain balance. Al-Mâtūrîdî explains negative human tendencies mentioned in the Quran – such as greed and impatience – as rooted in this nature, which can lead to forgetfulness (*ghafla*) of the primordial covenant and to sin. Humans may succumb to attachment, laziness, selfishness, love of power, or ingratitude, seeking limitless satisfaction that only Paradise can provide. Yet through reason, education, patience, and ascetic practice, they can resist these inclinations. So, human conflict lies between reason and nature. Yet this very freedom makes humans superior to angels, as they can choose faith and goodness despite the pull of evil; moral merit requires that good not be automatic but freely chosen. In his commentary on 30:30, al-Mâtūrîdî emphasizes that humans would naturally act according to *fitra* if left solely to their reason, unimpeded by the demands of their passionate nature.⁷⁶ Yet they are constantly subject to psychological and environmental influences and may yield to their desires. Choosing good is then never automatic; it requires continuous effort.

Thus, while Ricœur emphasizes evil first, tempered by the imagination of innocence, al-Mâtūrîdî prioritizes the good but do not ignore the real possibility of evil. Though less central and largely conceived as the absence of good, this danger could be framed as an “imagination of fault,” analogous to Ricœur's imagination of innocence. Avicenna's poetic narrative *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan* exemplifies this imaginative engagement: it depicts the soul's ceaseless struggle to attain absolute truth against the ever-present threat of evil. Like Ricœur's parables, which disorient the soul through narrative identification, Avicenna's story imitates action, so that the reader identifies with the rational effort combating evil. Imagination is internally tensioned, capable of both guiding

⁷³ See Fatma Aygün, “Mâtūrîdî'nin Ahsen-i Takvīm ve Esfel-i Sâfilīn Yorumu: Tîn Sûresi'nin Te'vîli Bağlamında İnsan Anlayışı,” *Diyanet İlmi Dergi* 56 (2020): 807–40.

⁷⁴ al-Mâtūrîdî, *Ta'wîlât al-Qur'ân*, 2:9.

⁷⁵ See Osman Nuri Demir, “İmam Mâtūrîdî'de Akıl, İnsanî Doğa (Tab') ve Fitrat,” *Diyanet İlmi Dergi* 56 (2020): 181–193.

⁷⁶ al-Mâtūrîdî, *Ta'wîlât al-Qur'ân*, 11:185–187.

and misleading, and its depiction itself is imaginative. In this way, imagination cultivates the laborious ethical effort intrinsic to the act of thinking, both against and with its own influence.⁷⁷

Thus, even if Ricœur's emphasis on evil does not lie at the core of Quranic anthropology, it may still offer insight for Islamic thought, which sometimes risks overemphasizing the primacy of good, emphasizing what ought to be rather than what actually is. Ricœur advocates a "reasonable disagreement" between Europe and Muslims, avoiding consensus: "to accept that they tell history in their own words as we tell our history in our own words, and that these histories compete against each other in a kind of competition of discourse, what Karl Jaspers called a loving conflict."⁷⁸ This opens the possibility of mutual decentering along a Ricœurian *in spite of*: on one side, imagining the good *in spite of* the seeming dominance of evil; on the other, imagining the reality of evil *in spite of* the primacy of good.

This produces neither an equivalence between two conceptions of good or innocence, nor a strict opposition between good and evil, but rather a productive tension between two ways of calibrating the relation between good and evil. Each emphasis on good or evil can serve to nuance, decenter, and rebalance the corresponding emphasis in the other tradition. This yields different ways of orienting the "judgment of importance" in Ricœurian textual hermeneutics, where a shift in scale can make one element suddenly appear larger while another simultaneously seems smaller.⁷⁹ It is precisely a matter of *perspective* – as we find in *Fallible Man*: even when dominant in one tradition, it remains aware of the possibility of another perspective, grounded in the potentiality of the infinite Word. Except that this other perspective is not only the one dominant in the other tradition; it is also the perspective that, even subtly, resides at the very heart of the self.

4. Conclusion

On the one hand, Ricœurian thought already contains an *imagination of innocence*, even if it is dominated by an always already present evil. The opening toward Islamic thought is all the more possible insofar as innocence is already imagined within the self. The distancing of original goodness thus becomes an asset for rapprochement with Islamic thought. On the other hand, Islamic thought – particularly in al-Mâturîdî – is internally worked by an *imagination of fault*, despite the importance of the notion of *fitra*. Although the anthropology of the good remains predominant, the Quran is traversed by an internal tension between the primacy of *fitra* and the imminent possibility of fault, since human nature also inclines one to follow one's passions.

What emerges here – is not a conceptual proximity between two traditions centered on innocence or fault – as such common denominators tend to erase dissimilarities, and Ricœur rightly distrusts such compromises. Rather, what we find is the possibility of a complementarity between two figures of the "in spite of" (*en dépit de*): in one case, the good must always be imagined in spite

⁷⁷ See Selami Varlik, "Imagination et éthique de l'intellection : une lecture ricœurienne d'un récit d'Avicenne," *Etudes Phénoménologiques – Phenomenological Studies* 10 (2026), 81–109.

⁷⁸ Paul Ricœur, "Imagination, Testimony and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricœur," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Marc Dooley (London-New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.

⁷⁹ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blarney and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 158.

of evil; in the other, the possibility of evil must always be imagined in spite of the good.⁸⁰ These two instances of *in spite of* do not operate on the same level; however, this interplay demonstrates, at the very least, that the encounter with the other is not merely a possibility; it remains a necessity, for it actualises certain perspectives of the self that had remained in the shadows – much as in the hermeneutics of the text, where a judgment of importance highlights notions that seemed secondary but suddenly revive the whole by reconfiguring the general configuration.

Consequently, I find it sometimes difficult to speak of “intercultural philosophy” with regard to certain notions in Islamic thought, as if the term might exaggerate the idea of a gap between the two traditions, even when intended to bridge it. The question of innocence has, I hope, shown that the attention given to Islamic thought here is motivated less by any ethical concern to engage with the other than by the internal complexity of Ricœurian philosophy itself, aimed at developing and re-problematizing a notion he is already exploring.

These reflections echo the continental contrast between two models of the relation between finitude and infinitude: Ricœur’s moderate view, in which the infinite conditions finite knowledge, and Falque’s radical view, in which it threatens the finite. Like Ricœur, Falque refuses to reduce finitude to sin, linking it instead to the mortality of the created. However, Falque insists that finitude is an absolute, positive horizon—not a deficiency or fall from a purer state. Finitude is “a horizon initially set as insurmountable” rather than a secondary state awaiting restoration.⁸¹ He even cites Ricœur’s critique of “the speculations on the supernatural perfection of Adam” to underscore this raw, original meaning.⁸² Yet, they diverge fundamentally: Ricœur’s subsequent imagination of innocence maintains a space for the infinite, even if this infinite is not strictly theistic.

Islamic thought radicalizes this awareness of the infinite by grounding it in rational certainty. With the *fitra*, to recognize God as infinite is not to possess the infinite, but to acknowledge one’s non-infinitude. In the Primordial covenant, which takes place precisely with the name *rabb* rather than *Allah*, the acceptance of the Lord (*rabb*) establishes a relational bond that defines the individual as a servant (*‘abd*) capable of distancing themselves from their passions. For Ricœur, the refusal of demonstrative certainty about God aligns with the call to “lose one’s life” for Christ, where *imitatio Christi* entails renouncing absolute knowledge in favor of a God addressed in prayer. Yet the God grasped through the remembrance of the Covenant is not an abstraction but a Lord. Al-Mâturîdî similarly stresses both divine unity and lordship (*rubûbiyya*), as the Quran repeatedly names God the “Lord of the worlds,” to whom all praise is due.⁸³ This lordship defines an asymmetrical relation of worship (*‘ibāda*), in which the believer recognizes their own weakness. Thus, certainty of the infinite is simultaneously certainty of one’s limits.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Especially as the experience of evil remains more significant in Sufi literature, while maintaining the theological divergences observed between the two religions.

⁸¹ Emmanuel Falque, *Parcours d’embûches. “S’expliquer.” Disputationes: Objections et Réponses* (Paris: Ecole franciscaine de Paris, Editions franciscaines, 2016), 86.

⁸² Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 233. See Emmanuel Falque, *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anxiety, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 13.

⁸³ Quran 45:36.

⁸⁴ See Selami Varlik, “Causality and Calculative Thinking: An Avicennian Response to Heidegger,” *Nazariyat. Journal for the History of Islamic Philosophy and Sciences*, 2024, 1–35.

The aim here is not to rehabilitate the idea of a proof of God's existence, but to show that – on an ethical or theological level – Quranic anthropology is not entirely foreign to debates on different models of finitude that run through continental philosophy itself. The status of sameness-and-otherness in Islamic thought can thus allow it to participate in the very development of contemporary philosophy, precisely because it offers a different emplotment of the characters and narratives that have shaped Western memory. As we know, Ricœur places great emphasis on the ethical and heuristic significance of the capacity to recount the same events differently.

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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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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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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 Mitterrand, 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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Paul Ricœur and José Ortega y Gasset: A Necessary Dialogue Configurations of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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Abstract

In this work, I would like to show the confluence between the philosophies of Paul Ricœur and José Ortega y Gasset. Their philosophies appear to be distinct, but only at first glance. The goal is to demonstrate the convergence between both thinkers. They share the same “soil,” a similar “subsoil,” and identical “adversaries” (using Ortega’s expressions). The opportunity presented by their philosophies allows their intersection to contribute to what has come to be called “hermeneutic phenomenology.” From their perspectives, from the joint reading of one with the other, and one through the other, we can better understand what this school of thought is and consider it not only as a theory but also as a possibility for the philosophical task of our time. In this paper, I aim to offer some insights derived from previous work, in which many of these points are explored in greater depth. At the same time, I would like to suggest possible lines of research to the philosophical community. It is, therefore, a work that seeks continuity and further development.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Vital Reason, Metaphor, Translation.*

Résumé

Dans ce travail, je souhaite montrer la convergence entre les philosophies de Paul Ricœur et de José Ortega y Gasset qui semblent distinctes en apparence, mais dont nous verrons qu’elles partagent le même « sol », un « sous-sol » semblable et des « adversaires » identiques (en utilisant les expressions d’Ortega). À partir de leurs perspectives, par une lecture conjointe de l’un avec l’autre et de l’un à travers l’autre, nous pouvons mieux comprendre ce qu’est l’école de pensée de la « phénoménologie herméneutique » et la considérer non seulement comme une théorie, mais aussi comme une possibilité pour la tâche philosophique de notre temps. Je présenterai quelques réflexions issues de travaux antérieurs, dans lesquels bon nombre de ces points sont approfondis. Parallèlement, je voudrais proposer des pistes de recherche à la communauté philosophique. Il s’agit donc d’un travail qui vise à assurer la continuité et à ouvrir la voie à de nouveaux développements.

Mots-clés : *phénoménologie, herméneutique, raison vitale, métaphore, traduction.*

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Configurations of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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Hermeneutic phenomenology is not merely a philosophical theory, but an attitude and a way of facing life itself. It can come to shape a working method and, above all, a perspective. It is not something already given and established; rather, it is a project, a living and ongoing tradition. It is therefore not a matter of “remaining,” of “staying put,” or of being “labeled,” but a way of moving within the fabric of life and the world. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a journey, an adventure. This is how I would like to characterize it. It implies movement and action, a way of setting out, projecting and projecting ourselves.

1. The horizon of an encounter

For this tradition of thought, it is essential to begin from one’s own situation, whether we call it “circumstance,” “situation,” or “world.” Once we approach Ricœur’s hermeneutics through the notion of creativity, in the text (metaphor and narrative) and in action, we then proceed to show its depth by means of an anthropological grounding–inquiry, and its scope in the field of practical philosophy. Among other things, I have considered the concept of “deliberation” as a key to this line of thought, understood as a method of practical philosophy.¹

My Ortega-inspired path was marked by my reading of Ricœur. I saw Ortega putting into practice, bringing into effect, what Ricœur formulated.² In this way, I explored Ortega’s writings on metaphor, which give substance to the theory set out in *The Rule of Metaphor*, just as Ortega’s ideas on the novel did for Ricœur’s analyses of time and narrative. Thus, a question that emerged from both of them, in their confluence and convergence, was the understanding of human life as narrative: we are stories in search of a narrator (Ricœur) and novelists of ourselves (Ortega). Once again, I found in Ortega – consider the various biographies he wrote (on Vives, Velázquez, Goethe, etc.) – the practical enactment of Ricœur’s theoretical proposal of narrative identity. I have also observed how, in the practical orientation of Ricœur’s philosophy, many Orteguian motifs continue to resonate, especially those that have to do with the question of responsibility.

Resonances thus began to appear everywhere, and I realized that they were not mere projections, but clear and evident references between them, though never explicit. Careful reading,

¹ See my work “Deliberation, the Art of Being Able Not to Be Right”, *Argumenta Philosophica*, 2 (2023), 59–74.

² I had already presented it in this way in “José Ortega y Gasset in Hermeneutical Phenomenology: The Experience of Translation as a Hermeneutic Paradigm”, in Fernando Llano (ed.), *Meditations on Ortega* (Madrid: Tébar, 2005), 373–410.

along with seminars, meetings, and lectures, has gradually given consistency and validity to this encounter between the two.

The key to this encounter lies in the theme that dominates both approaches, both philosophies. Both seek to elaborate a philosophical anthropology centered on the idea of life, through different detours and perspectives, depending on their stages and moments. They do not speak explicitly very often of “philosophical anthropology,” although this is in fact what they are doing. This is very evident in Ortega, and Ricœur himself comes to acknowledge it and to describe his entire work as “philosophical anthropology.”³

Moreover, this coincidence is reinforced when we observe that they share the same philosophical ground: a phenomenology transformed hermeneutically. In the French thinker, this appears in a programmatic way, guiding his thought; in the Spanish thinker, it is effective and enacted, although not explicitly acknowledged in those terms.

1.1. Tracing hospitality

These are two philosophies destined to encounter one another. Both are concerned with life: Ortega’s comes to be regarded as a “vitalist philosophy,” while in Ricœur the theme becomes explicit as his philosophical program develops. Before entering into detail, however, I would like to point out that the encounter between these two thinkers is possible because their philosophies themselves, in a way, prepare that encounter, that receptivity and reciprocity. It is no minor point that both philosophies are philosophies of the “between,” that is, they are shaped through dialogue with others, with other philosophies and other forms of knowledge, and with the world and culture they inhabited. In a sense, we can say that this is their major shared theme: the elaboration of the conditions of possibility for a common “between.” Not only the thematization of that space, or its exemplification in various topics, but also bringing to light the conditions of encounter. These are philosophies that provide us with keys for thinking a necessary hospitality, both in our discourses and in our lives.

However, to inhabit the “between,” to dwell in the space of the “between,” is not a quiet situation; quite the contrary. They are subject to tensions, always in search of difficult equilibria. In giving room to positions that are so diverse and dispersed, the reasons for tension multiply. In them, interdisciplinarity is not a mere “pose,” but rather an effort of sincerity and commitment to philosophy itself.

Their philosophies and their lives can be understood in terms of the two concepts we have already been sketching: “situation” and “between.” For two philosophers who give such priority to these concepts and to the experiences they involve, it is not surprising that they converge. Thus, for example, both are in dialogue with the sciences, with art, and with politics. They give priority to mediation over immediate affirmation. It is not surprising either that Ricœur should opt for the long route (*le détour*) rather than Heidegger’s short path, just as Ortega pursues turns, series, and perspectives around a single issue. Nor is it surprising that both were at some point “accused” of being “positivists” or of being excessively concerned with “methodological questions.” Both received this accusation: Ortega from Heidegger, Ricœur from Gadamer. Two temperaments and talents of mediation, advocates of the long route.

³ Thus, he refers to his entire philosophy as a “philosophical anthropology,” a fundamental philosophical anthropology. Paul Ricœur, *Vivant jusqu’à la mort. Fragments* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 107.

Beyond specific themes, however, I would now like to highlight something more essential in their confluence: their attitude. Their attitude is one of inquietude, always from a certain vital disposition closely linked to vitality, cheerfulness, or a sporting character, to use Ortega's expression; an attitude quite different and opposed to other philosophies that privilege despair, pessimism, or anguish.

My aim is not to determine who anticipated whom, or how they relate to common masters. Nor do I merely intend to point out coincidences, although these certainly exist and are many. That is not what is most important. I seek to carry out a hermeneutic reading, in this case a double one: I seek to read one with the other and to read one through the other. Yet what matters most is that, in this cross-reading, we are in fact reading ourselves. This interplay of perspectives offers powerful insights for interpreting the challenges of our world. It is a hermeneutical space that goes beyond clichés and commonplaces of contemporary thought. From this multiple interweaving there emerges a distinctive family resemblance, different from other forms and tonalities of contemporary philosophy⁴.

1.2. "In the school" of Ortega and Ricœur

We find ourselves "in the school of Ortega and Ricœur." And we know, from Ricœur himself, the deep significance of being "in the school of..."⁵. Before delving into their philosophies, someone, quite reasonably, might ask whether they ever met or read one another.

The first thing to note is that they belong to different generations. Ortega y Gasset was born in 1883 and died in 1955; Ricœur was born in 1913 and died in 2005. The former developed his philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, the latter throughout the entire century. According to Ricœur's own words, his knowledge of Ortega was limited⁶. He read him as a major figure of European culture, and his main reference was the most widely read of Ortega's books in France, *The Revolt of the Masses*. He understood Ortega more as a sociologist and erudite interpreter of an era than as a major philosopher. We can also reasonably assume that, if Ricœur read little of Ortega, still less did Ortega read Ricœur, since when the Spanish philosopher died (1955) the French thinker had barely published a couple of significant books (basically his thesis on the philosophy of the will). However, consulting Ortega's personal library, we have been able to confirm that he owned Ricœur and Dufrenne's *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Le Seuil, 1947), as well as *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers. Philosophie du mystère et philosophie du paradoxe* (Le Seuil, 1948). He did not simply possess these books, as they were also underlined/annotated. This may be anecdotal and inconclusive as evidence of a sustained reference but let the anecdote nonetheless serve as an invitation to think and explore deeper encounters. This is what we set out to do here.

I have allowed myself to speak of "hermeneutic phenomenology" in both cases, as I do also in the case of H.-G. Gadamer. In all three, and with all three, hermeneutic phenomenology takes shape in a particular way. Perhaps the expression "hermeneutic phenomenology" should be

⁴ Today Ortega y Gasset's work is available almost in its entirety in the new edition of his complete works: José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras completas*, 10 vols. (Madrid: Taurus-Fundación Ortega-Marañón, 2004–2010).

⁵ See Paul Ricœur, *À l'école de la phénoménologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2004).

⁶ In conversations with the author of the paper: Ricœur himself told me that he knew only certain references to Ortega's most successful book in France, *The Revolt of the Masses*.

reserved strictly for Heidegger, or at least in a stricter sense, since it is he who, in continuity with the master Husserl, proposes the break and the turn toward hermeneutics with different aims and a different depth. I nonetheless believe that it is with these three thinkers that hermeneutic phenomenology, as such, acquires a clear presence on the contemporary scene and establishes itself as a distinct voice.

Why this encounter? Where and how is this peculiar connection established? Without dwelling on the complex relations each of them entertains with Husserl and also with Heidegger, I would like to point out that the three share a family resemblance; more than that, they belong to the same family. Following a very clear and didactic schema proposed by Ortega for understanding a philosophy, we can fully grasp what I am asserting. According to Ortega, to understand a philosophy we must grasp its “soil,” its “subsoil,” and its “adversaries.” Well, our three philosophers share the same soil, point toward a very similar subsoil, and have common adversaries, common enemies. Who are these adversaries? Their adversaries are the various positivisms and reductionisms that, since the late nineteenth century, have threatened from different directions; the reduction of reality to the realm of “pure” facts, of the measurable and quantifiable, is the great enemy for all three, as it is for phenomenology and hermeneutics in general. They also share a common soil: where do they train, with what intellectual resources? Their philosophical soil is phenomenology, for however much they may surpass it – whether through the influence of Heidegger, the pursuit of a distinctive vitalist philosophy, or the insistence on necessary mediation – they remain within it in a certain way. This way of “going beyond” phenomenology is, I claim, the hermeneutic way. And they also share a common subsoil: they all aim at the recovery or defense of a rich and full Humanism, which each of them discovers in different (in this case more cultural–national) traditions. Soil, subsoil, and adversaries are common; it is therefore not surprising that their philosophies can be read in convergent ways and as belonging to the same family.

Another convergence, which I will not develop here but would like at least to mention, concerns the methodological proximity among the three, both in the way they conduct their research and in the way they present their results. Gadamer repeatedly refers to and employs the so-called hermeneutic circle, taken up from classical hermeneutics by way of Heidegger; Ricœur, in the same vein and in contrast to the image of the hermeneutic circle, speaks of a hermeneutic spiral to emphasize how, at each turn around a question, a new perspective is gained, a new point of view. Something similar occurs with Ortega’s proposal of dialectical series or, in a more literary and biblical register, the Jericho method, according to which, just as the Jews besieged Jericho by circling around it, so too does the philosophical method circle around its questions. The convergence is clear, notable, and evident: in each turn, in each rotation, there is a gain in meaning. In other words, circularity is productive and creative.

If these reasons were not enough, I would like to mention a brief anecdote – or small coincidence – that points to the intimate connection among these three philosophies. In 1983, on the occasion of the centenary of Ortega’s birth, Gadamer was invited to give a lecture in his honor in Madrid. His lecture was brilliant and comprehensive. His aim was to show how his own philosophy, and perhaps also Ortega’s, was marked by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and metaphysical aspirations, and he gave it the title “Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and

Metaphysics.”⁷ In this lecture, especially at the beginning and at the end, there are explicit references to Ortega. Ten years later, in 1993, he was invited to a tribute to Ricœur in Munich and, surprisingly, he delivered the same lecture. Beyond the academic principle of economy that leads one to reuse a lecture in different venues, it is striking that the lecture which served for Ortega should also serve for Ricœur, with only the names changed. As I say, it is no more than an anecdote, but a very significant and expressive one, indicative of this confluence. The relationship between them and Gadamer is more complex and extended. I will not go into that relationship here, although I will turn to this author to better understand this intersection between Ortega and Ricœur.

One of the great themes of Ortega’s philosophy is the complex relation between history and truth. This is what he called “the theme of our time” (1923). How is it possible to understand truth as something universal and beyond time while at the same time underscoring the historical dimension of everything human? How can we reconcile truth and history? How can we defend a perspectivism that is not relativistic? This is “the theme of our time.” It concerns nothing less than what Gadamer would describe as the discovery of “historical consciousness,” that is, the historically constitutive dimension of all that is human. It is hardly a coincidence, or perhaps not at all, that one of the first volumes in which Ricœur collects his own essays bears the title *History and Truth*. Moreover, it is important to note that Gadamer and Ricœur met at the lectures Gadamer gave in Leuven, entitled “The Problem of Historical Consciousness” (lectures that would become the origin of Truth and Method), in 1958.

Ricœur and Gadamer are usually presented at the intersection of phenomenology and hermeneutics, the one being said to be more hermeneutical than the other, the other more phenomenological than the one, and commentary often focuses on their respective affinities and distances, especially in relation to Heidegger.⁸ But what about Ortega? He is largely unknown, not only outside Spain but also within it. He is often regarded as a fine writer (at times even as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature) and as a great expositor and pedagogue, but rarely as an original philosopher and, occasionally, not even as a philosopher at all. Yet Ortega is a great philosopher⁹. I consider how a correct understanding of his work requires situating it in relation to phenomenology and, I would add, to hermeneutics as well. The comparison and confluence with Ricœur reinforce this thesis.

⁷ Therefore, there are different versions of this lecture (with minor modifications). Here I have used: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Metaphysics”, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Hermeneutic Turn* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1998), 27–37.

⁸ Tomás Domingo Moratalla. “¿Es Paul Ricœur un fenomenólogo? Entre fenomenología y hermenéutica”, *Escritos* nº26, vol.57 (2018), 251–82. <https://doi.org/10.18566/escr.v26n57.a02>.

⁹ My intention is precisely to break with this image, just as other many experts on Ortega have done over the last 30 years. See, for example, the tips I propose in “Reading Ortega at the Height of Our Time”, in a collective book devoted to demonstrating the philosophical power of Ortega: Javier Zamora Bonilla (ed.), *Guía Comares de Ortega* (Granada: Editorial Comares, 2013), 331–353.

It is essential to understand Ortega as a philosopher and to comprehend him in the context of phenomenology, even if he takes some distance from it¹⁰. It is also important to recognize his aims and his distinctive style. What the Madrid philosopher seeks is not only philosophical penetration and depth, but above all clarity. He sees himself as an educator, a cultural guide for people in need of culture. For this reason, he turns to the media through which this educational task can be carried out: the public square. If Spain's problem is a lack of culture – as this author thinks – the young Ortega finds the solution in Europe: culture. Hence his first task is to bring this culture to Spain, a task of dissemination and translation. He sought to achieve this through ongoing efforts to promote translations, political engagement, contributions to newspapers, and the creation of academic journals such as *Revista de Occidente*, founded in 1923, still in publication today and in which many of Ricœur's own works have been published.

To fulfill this vocation, already apparent in his early writings and letters, he had to pursue his education in what he regarded as the cradle of European culture: Germany.¹¹ He sought guidance to undertake this task, and during his journey to Germany he immersed himself fully in the Neo-Kantian movement, sharing concerns and friendships with many of its members (Cohen, Natorp, Cassirer, etc.). Yet he also detected problems and inadequacies in their positions that, as for many others of his generation, led him toward Husserl and phenomenology. From his readings, interpreted in a highly original manner, incorporating phenomenology as a distinct way of thinking and anticipating concepts – such as circumstance, project, etc. – that other authors would later use, his first major book, *Meditations on Quixote*, was born.¹² Many of its themes are steeped in phenomenology, especially the analyses of perception by W. Schapp, one of Husserl's disciples. Ortega would later say that for us, for him and his generation, phenomenology was not a philosophy but “a stroke of good fortune.” In 1913, Ortega wrote two brief articles on phenomenology, magnificent texts in which he inquires into what phenomenology is and what its scope might be. One bears the title “The Concept of Sensation” and the other “Sensation, Construction, Intuition,” where he clearly contrasts the sensation of the “ancients” and the construction of the “moderns” (the Kantians) with intuition, a key concept of phenomenology. These texts by Ortega on phenomenology are probably the first written in a language other than German.

¹⁰ To understand the presence of phenomenology in Ortega's thought, the works of Javier San Martín are key. From the interpretation of the “new” Husserl, he has led us to new interpretations of Ortega's philosophy. I like to speak, following in his wake, of a “new” Ortega. On his work, his interpretation, and with abundant references, see: Tomás Domingo Moratalla / Noé Expósito (eds.), *Ortega y la fenomenología. Diálogos con Javier San Martín* (Madrid: Dykinson).

¹¹ Ortega always maintained his admiration for Germany, beyond the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. See, for example, the lecture Ortega gave in Berlin in 1949 (*Meditación de Europa y otros ensayos* [Madrid: Alianza, 2015]). I would also recall that we find something similar in Ricœur: in the concentration camp in Poland during the world war, Ricœur was reading (and translating) Husserl and other German authors, in order to indicate that Germany, as a culture and a nation, stood above Nazism (see for example François Dosse, *Paul Ricœur. Le sens d'une vie* [Paris: La Decouverte, 1997]).

¹² See N. Orringer, *Ortega y las fuentes germánicas* (Madrid: Gredos, 1980).

It is also interesting to see Ortega seeking his own way of doing phenomenology, one that connects with some of Husserl's own intentions¹³. Certain themes in his philosophy are central and of profoundly phenomenological lineage. In *Meditations on Quixote*, Ortega formulates his great philosophical maxim: "I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself." There is no better way to describe Husserlian intentionality, the correlation between consciousness and world, than by highlighting this co-implication. Moreover, he points to a mission of salvation, of responsibility with regard to the circumstances in which we are – that we are. The phenomenological key is present from that moment on, and many of his later works can be read as a debate with phenomenology and even as a surpassing, a shift from it; and I would say, from phenomenology to hermeneutics. This is my interpretation. His vitalism, his philosophy of life, his perspectivism, and so on, deepen this intertwining of traditions (phenomenology and hermeneutics). Some of his major works in this respect are *What Is Philosophy?*, *The Revolt of the Masses*, *Man and People*, and *History as a System*, the latter being the consummation and crystallization of an Orteguian hermeneutic phenomenology. Vital reason (an expression coined by Ortega) becomes historical reason and narrative reason (as the philosopher himself would later call it). Is this "reason," so brilliantly qualified by Ortega, not precisely "hermeneutic reason"? I believe so, and there are sufficient arguments to describe Ortega's philosophy as a "hermeneutic phenomenology" as well.

2. What is hermeneutic phenomenology?

It might be helpful, to assess the suitability of the designation "hermeneutic phenomenology" as applied to both Ricœur and Ortega, to clarify what we mean by it. For this purpose, it is appropriate to turn to Gadamer. In the essay mentioned earlier he honored them both. And he thought of them under this dual tradition of phenomenology and hermeneutics. All three thinkers, in one way or another, correspond with good reason and precision to the characteristics that can be drawn from Gadamer's text. What is hermeneutic phenomenology? Let us briefly review Gadamer's characterization. This characterization serves not so much to help us understand Gadamer – that is not our aim in this paper – but rather to show how Ortega and Ricœur can be understood under the heading of "hermeneutic phenomenology," and in what sense they can be understood in this way.

- 1) First: we start, as the German thinker notes – and this applies to the French and Spanish philosophers as well – from phenomenology, but we do not understand it merely as a theory of knowledge; it is much more, something broader. It implies a new vision, as well as a paradigm shift in the realm of practical reason.

¹³ Much could be said about the relationship between Husserl and Ortega. As a reference and example of this relationship, consider the reference we find in a letter that Husserl wrote to Ingarden after Ortega's visit in 1934: "In the last week we had a very interesting philosophical visit: Ortega y Gasset, who greatly surprised us. He is deeply versed in my writings. There were long conversations with Fink and me; his questions penetrate to the most difficult depths. In fact, he is not only, as a publicist, the educator of the new Spain, but also, as a professor, the leader of a phenomenological school. Now a translation of his own of the *Meditations* will follow, and later the other works (the Spanish edition of the *Logical Investigations* is in everyone's hands). Otherwise, a wonderful man." See Javier San Martín, "José Ortega y Gasset's Visit to Husserl in 1934: Ortega's Objections to Phenomenology," *Revista de Estudios Orteguianos*, no. 45 (2022), 123–155.

- 2) From phenomenology, and on its basis, we develop a philosophy of experience, what in Husserlian terms we would call a philosophy of the “Lebenswelt.”
- 3) Despite the force and presence of phenomenology, it is necessary to move beyond and overcome the idealism still present in Husserl, and the way to do so is through Heidegger, with his help. Here, with respect to Heidegger, there are of course profound differences among them, but they agree on the need to exit idealism (which they somewhat naively attribute to Husserl, though influenced by Heidegger himself).
- 4) With Heidegger, and from Heidegger – often without explicit reference to him – they operate within what he termed the “hermeneutics of facticity.”
- 5) As Gadamer would say, we must take into account the essential linguistic character of experience, that is, “language as the house of being,” or the necessary linguistic mediation.
- 6) But this does not mean remaining enclosed in language; in all three there is a need to go with language beyond it, toward the world, toward life. This is to recognize, in Ricœur’s words, the “ontological vehemence” of language.
- 7) Language points toward dialogue, which occurs in play, in conversation, in the mutual recognition of a shared experience.
- 8) This defense of life, of the word and dialogue, connects with the defense of a humanist culture.
- 9) Moreover, it adds the need to balance a “knowledge for domination” and a “knowledge that seeks the good,” that is, the necessary “moral intention,” critical, pedagogical, or, as Ortega would put it, “salvific.” The ethical dimension is constitutive of hermeneutic phenomenology.

2.1. Resonating themes: episodes

What is most interesting in the relationship between Ricœur and Ortega, with Gadamer in the background, is that within and from this shared space outlined here – hermeneutic phenomenology – major themes resonate, with coincidences not only in topics but also in the ways of addressing them. Let us examine some of them, for it is these that embody hermeneutic phenomenology in its most proper sense.

The first resonating theme is the attention given to circumstance, to context, both at a theoretical level and at a practical or applied level. At the theoretical level, the Orteguian phrase “I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself” leaves no room for doubt. Circumstance constitutes me and demands a commitment, a responsibility. Something similar is found in Ricœur, for whom reality, circumstances, the third moment of ethical experience (practical wisdom), is crucial – already in his early writings when he spoke of “risk” in decisions.

Precisely this attention to circumstances is what makes us encounter two engaged philosophers, concerned with politics, education, and the regeneration of a society in crisis. They

are concerned with culture (the work of dissemination and translation),¹⁴ with the university, or with illuminating politics.

Another major theme that resonates in their philosophies is the search for meaningful action; they seek the conditions for an autonomous action, from oneself, and with meaning. But what do “conscious,” “will,” “freedom,” etc., mean? Here a detour is required, one we encounter – in another coincidence – in both: the need to take Freud and psychoanalysis into account. Ricœur’s works on Freud are well known, a great many articles and books, since Ortega himself, several decades earlier, was an enthusiast of Freud; indeed, thanks to him psychoanalysis was translated and gained special prominence in the Hispanic American context. Both agree in criticizing a certain interpretation of psychoanalysis as a biologicist reductionism (and a certain pansexualism), or in the understanding of the human psyche as an equilibrium of energies and self-regulating mechanisms.

They are two philosophers who, albeit in different ways – one more systematic, the other more topical – elaborate an ethics, a practical philosophy. Without characterizing them now, we can say that these are Aristotelian-inspired ethics in which prudent, responsible action is essential, rather than mere compliance with a norm or a formal-rational imperative. Ricœur’s “little ethics” is famously well articulated. In Ortega, we find an ethics of deliberation, of choice, of elegance that affects the world and one’s own life. The motto of Orteguian philosophy and ethics is Aristotle’s phrase from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “let us in our lives be like archers who have a target.” The importance of the “target,” of hitting the mark in decisions, or of finding that vocation that moves and structures our life, or of finding or creating that ethical intention, defines our ethical life, our full living.

Moreover, specifying what I previously called care for circumstance, there are close and convergent political philosophies in both thinkers. They see the need for philosophical reflection on the social-political; further, they carry out exercises and practices of these political implications, sometimes not without frustration.¹⁵

Another important site of resonance is the importance they attribute to texts and, with them, to philosophical tradition. Dialogue with the world, with circumstance, is enriched and mediated by the texts of tradition. Thus, the history of philosophy acquires capital importance, and we see how both, from different paths, trace similar itineraries: a special interest in Descartes (the beginning of reflexive philosophy for Ricœur, the search for a vital Cartesianism for Ortega) and, later, in Kant, the key to our modernity (also the two). Also, a concern and engagement with what Ricœur called the “masters of suspicion,” and of course with the phenomenological tradition (Husserl, Scheler, etc.) and hermeneutic tradition (Dilthey, Heidegger). I would also like to highlight a philosopher whom both cite, work on, and appreciate (with Gadamer, too): Hegel. I

¹⁴ See this collection of articles: Tomás Domingo Moratalla, *Voluntad de responsabilidad. Cuidar la vida, cuidar la ciudad. 10 textos de Paul Ricœur sobre ética, política y responsabilidad* (Madrid: Dykinson SL, 2020).

¹⁵ On practical-political philosophy, the compilation of Ricœur’s brief and insightful texts available in Spanish is noteworthy: Paul Ricœur: *Voluntad de responsabilidad. Cuidar la vida, cuidar la ciudad. 10 textos de Paul Ricœur sobre ética, política y responsabilidad* (Madrid: Dykinson SL, 2020). These include: “Ethics, Morals, and the Rule”; “Ethics and Politics”; “Doubt and Suspicion”; “Responsibility, Limited or Unlimited?”; “Responsibility and Fragility”; “Risk”; “You Are the Salt of the Earth”; and “Fragile Identity: Respect for the Other and Cultural Identity.”

would venture to say Hegel is one of the philosophical horizons for our authors, but always remaining as a temptation, a renunciation, approached with extreme caution. Following some of their expressions, I would say that their hermeneutic philosophies are failed Hegelian philosophies (without the Absolute), or that Hegelian philosophy is an unrealized hermeneutic philosophy (which closes upon an absolute, the Absolute). Hegelian philosophy, the great philosophy of mediation, pulses in their approaches, but Hegel fails to grasp what Ortega and Ricœur know well: the tragedy of action, the irruption of the tragic, which precludes any closure of history and admits only narration, an open historical reason. The idea of “historical consciousness,” central for them (Ricœur, Ortega, and Gadamer), undeniably has a Hegelian root.

There are also resonances at more concrete levels. One is particularly timely and characteristic: their philosophies of metaphor. Ricœur wrote a major book, *The Rule of Metaphor*, probably one of the great studies on the subject. Perhaps one of the book’s major shortcomings – something I dared to mention to Ricœur himself – is that it never considers Ortega’s texts on metaphor. The coincidence is absolute. The difference is that in Ortega they appear in scattered texts, without formulating a theory as such, and to be sure, more than fifty years earlier. That metaphor is not merely an ornament of language, that it has an ontological vehemence, that it is a means of knowledge, etc., is masterfully expressed by Ortega. The question of the relations between metaphor (literature) and concept (philosophy) constantly pursued the Madrid philosopher. What Ortega states directly and intuitively we see in Ricœur articulated in a magnificent conceptual work like *The Rule of Metaphor* (Ricœur himself was astonished when he learned of these texts)¹⁶.

And alongside metaphor, narration. Following his investigation of metaphor, Ricœur unfolds a meticulous analysis of narrative activity, how it configures time and human life, arriving at the notion of narrative identity. Well, Ortega, who is said to have developed a vital and historical reason, speaks in his mature period of “narrative reason”; the human becomes “something” transparent before this narrative knowledge. Many texts of Ortega point in this direction¹⁷. I would highlight in particular his biographies of Velázquez, Goethe, Goya, Vives, etc., which are exercises of biographical narrative reason. What Ortega carries out here is what Ricœur systematizes in some of his writings, for example, in his short but great text “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator.”¹⁸ They are two great narrative philosophies; they constitute a great narrative hermeneutics.

There is an impressive and paradoxical consonance or resonance (confluence). It is astonishing that many Ortega scholars have not noticed this confluence, or that Ricœur scholars are unaware of this approach. They would spare themselves much headache. In some sense, this article seeks to offer bridges of communication and for future research.

¹⁶ On Ortega, Ricœur, and metaphor, see Tomás Domingo Moratalla, “The Hermeneutics of Metaphor: From Ortega to Ricœur,” *Espéculo: Revista de Estudios Literarios*, no. 24 (2003). Also, “Ortega y Gasset: When Metaphor Gives (Much) Food for Thought. The Metaphorical Warp of Cordial Reason,” *Red de Investigaciones Filosóficas. SCIO*, June 2020, <https://proyectoscio.ucv.es/articulos-filosoficos/ortega-y-gasset-metaphora/.dialnet.unirioja+1>.

¹⁷ I have developed it in “Vida e narração: parcours da razão narrativa. Um encontro possível entre Paul Ricœur e José Ortega y Gasset,” in Claudio Reichert do Nascimento (ed.), *Pensar Ricœur: vida e narração* (Clarinete, 2016), 351–372.

¹⁸ Paul Ricœur, “Life: A Narrative in Search of a Narrator,” in *Écrits et conférences 1. Autour de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008), 257–276.

On the topic of narrativity in both approaches, I would like to mention a small detail that shows and grounds this confluence. Ortega's first major philosophical book, as I mentioned earlier, is *Meditations on Quixote* (1914), which pulses with phenomenological presuppositions. In fact, it was the reception of Husserl's *Ideas I* – along with Scheler's ethics – in 1913 that prompted Ortega to write it. It draws on phenomenological concepts he had read/heard in Husserl, but above all on elements of a phenomenology of perception that Ortega already knew through one of Husserl's most daring disciples: Wilhelm Schapp who elaborated, even before the master, a phenomenology of perception (*Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, 1910). Schapp influenced Ortega greatly, and he always held him in special affection, to the point that, despite Schapp's abandonment of philosophy for the world of law, Ortega promoted the translation of Schapp's works on the philosophy of law even beyond its phenomenological contexts.

In 1936, a major tribute to Cassirer was organized. Ortega was invited to participate, and he did so with a text of special relevance: *History as a System*. Probably Ortega's most hermeneutic text, it lays the foundations for narrative reason and highlights the substantial narrativity of human life, going beyond Dilthey. This text was published in English, even before German, and thus became one of Ortega's most "international" works¹⁹.

Schapp, after retiring from law toward the end of his life, renewed his interest in philosophy and elaborated a philosophy of history and a narrative-oriented anthropology. It is no surprise that he read the tribute to Cassirer and Ortega's text. His title was *Entangled in Stories* (*In Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Ding und Mensch*, 1953). In this study, with scarcely any citations or references, Orteguian themes are unmistakably present.

This text by Schapp, deeply marked by Ortega, became one of the inspirations and leitmotifs of Ricœur's approach. He repeatedly states that we are "beings entangled in stories." Ricœur's narrative hermeneutics has, unbeknownst to him, an Orteguian background.

I would also like to add one more resonance–confluence regarding a theme of great importance for our time: the idea of translation.

All authors in the hermeneutic tradition have elaborated a reflection on translation. The experience of translation resonates with the hermeneutic task, regardless of how we understand it. The importance and relevance of translation is evident in our two authors from the moment we recognize the importance they attach to communication and cultural transmission; both, in different ways and with different impact, promoted translations of philosophical and literary works. Many are the texts that have marked Ricœur's intellectual life with respect to translation. Probably the most prominent is "Défi et bonheur de la traduction." I will not go into his theses now. I would only ask the reader to note Ortega's most relevant text, "Misericordia y esplendor de la traducción" ("The Misery and the Splendour of Translation") Same tone and same ambivalence.²⁰

¹⁹ Originally written in English and German in 1935, *History as a System* appeared in 1936 in the collective volume *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) and had already appeared in German as "Die Lage der Wissenschaft und die historische Vernunft," *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, October 1935.

²⁰ P. Ricœur, *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), accompanied by two other texts, "Le paradigme de la traduction" and "Un 'passage': traduire l'intraduisible." The title of Ortega's text ("Misericordia y esplendor de la traducción")

Ortega's text is a classic of translation studies. Perhaps, alongside Walter Benjamin's text on translation, it is one of the most significant of the twentieth century. Their coincident theories of translation bring to light essential elements of hermeneutics as they understand it, which I have sought to highlight in several works.²¹

I point to one last theme of encounter. A theme that occupied and concerned Ortega was the question of technology. He is one of the great philosophers of technology. Unfortunately little known beyond the Hispanic world, he offers a reflection on technology of great scope. One of his most famous texts revolves around it: a lecture he gave alongside Heidegger in Darmstadt, before an audience of engineers and architects, at one of the Darmstadt Colloquia. Heidegger's brilliant lecture ("Bauen, Wohnen, Denken") was loudly booed, perhaps because, as Ortega said, it was not understood by the audience. Ortega, chivalrously (in Heidegger's own expression), intervened in Heidegger's favor, though he then argued the opposite.²² It is a philosophy of technology that captures its ambivalence but does not necessarily qualify it as "evil" or as an irreversible disposition. It is a much more positive attitude. Technology is the fruit of human imagination, of creativity; thus, perhaps we can also find in it possibilities of humanization. I believe that in the philosophy of culture traceable in many of Ricœur's texts, this power of imagination and creativity shines through, applicable not only to literature but also to the worlds of culture and technology²³. The confluence of their approaches regarding cultural and technical creations can offer truly novel and original elements for thinking the technological world in which we live, even the world of artificial intelligence²⁴. With them and from them, we could well speak of a digital hermeneutics, critical, but not reactive or nostalgic (as occurs with others inspired by Heidegger or in Jonas's proposal, which, despite differences with Heidegger, coincides here in underscoring the irreversible danger to which technical development leads us).

Many points in common, many resonances. This makes sense if we recall the common soil, subsoil, and adversaries I mentioned earlier. The phenomenological dimension is expressed and manifested in this broad range of coinciding themes. Linking them all, we can say that the great theme both addressed, which defines their philosophies, is the question of human life, the analysis

de la traducción," vol. V, 1937, 705–724), like Ricœur's, refers—although neither makes it explicit—to one of Balzac's most famous novels: *Esplendor y miseria de las cortesanas* (1847). Ironically, they invert the title: first highlighting the misery, the difficulty, near impossibility, the courtly character, before affirming, in a second moment, the majestic, exorbitant, joyful—indeed, noble—nature of the task of translation.

²¹ See my work "Translating Reason. J. Ortega y Gasset and P. Ricœur: Hermeneutic Horizons of Translation," *Critical Hermeneutics*, special 2 (2019), 85–108. Also, "Translation and 'Plot.' Around the Genesis of Hermeneutic Thought: José Ortega y Gasset and Paul Ricœur," in M. Leclerc-Olive (ed.), *Traductions et génétique d'une pensée: de Ricœur à Aristote* (Modena: Stem Mucchi Editore, 2020), 65–116.

²² On what happened in Darmstadt, see what Ortega reports ("En torno al 'COLOQUIO DE DARMSTADT, 1951,'" vol. VI, pp. 797–817). Ortega begins: "Above the sea level of the architectural colloquium, two philosophical eruptions occurred in Darmstadt: one, Heidegger's lecture in the morning of a day; the other, my lecture in the afternoon of the same day. About these two lectures, I would like to say something that does not properly refer to the doctrines enunciated in them, but to certain non-doctrinal aspects. This will be addressed in the next articles" (Vol. VI, p. 800).

²³ See P. Ricœur, "Tasks of the Political Educator," especially the first part of the article.

²⁴ From a Ricœurian perspective, the numerous works of F. Nascimento and A. Romele are very interesting.

of what the human being is. Their philosophies can be read, despite the resistances of many interpreters (and sometimes even of themselves), as “philosophical anthropology.” They are two explicit philosophical anthropologies. In Ricœur, we find the precise and explicit reference to this designation. And Ortega’s philosophy, despite rarely or never speaking of philosophical anthropology, can be understood as an analysis of life as “radical reality.” Given the current urgency to develop a philosophical anthropology, it is very interesting to read one alongside the other, one through the other, also in search of a philosophical anthropology adequate to our time. The categories and concepts do not cease to resonate and, above all, to enrich our debates.

2.2. The plot of hermeneutic phenomenology

This multitude of themes in which our philosophers converge can be articulated in such a way that the articulation itself reveals the profound coherence of their philosophies and of the approach I propose. The guiding thread of their themes, their fabric, will give us the backbone of their (common) hermeneutic phenomenology.

The first key point I would like to highlight concerns the definition of reason they propose. In Ricœur, we find a concept of expanded rationality that incorporates cognitive elements, emotive-sentimental elements, and ethical-practical elements. Reason, Ricœur tells us, must be considered in its complexity, and he comes to speak of a “full reason,” or what some, from his philosophy, have termed “hermeneutic reason,” speaking – and I believe with propriety and rigor – of a hermeneutic age of reason.

I consider that Ortega is probably the one who best understood what this “full reason” or “hermeneutic reason” entails. His entire work, rooted in a more Mediterranean than Central European or Anglo-Saxon mode of thinking, revolves around a new concept of reason that is closer, more everyday, concrete, and proximate to life itself. Hence he did not hesitate to speak of “vital reason,” and from the 1930s onward he frequently spoke of “historical reason” and “narrative reason.” Vital reason, historical reason, or narrative reason are the expressions reason takes in its hermeneutic age. Thus both advance in rethinking rationality otherwise.

The second structuring key of their philosophies (and of hermeneutic phenomenology) is the development of a theory, a philosophy, of responsibility. Whether it is Orteguian salvation of circumstance or the search for the fitting action, these are ways of expressing and articulating this responsibility. Ricœur unpacks his vision of responsibility in numerous texts (from his early writings to his latest). Ortega’s references are also multiple. In the text *Man and People*, Ortega opposes a common, everyday doing, an impersonal “one does,” to an authentic doing, from oneself, autonomous, personal. Responsibility expresses the archer’s effort to hit the target, to do “what must be done.” Their ethics, their philosophies, are ethics of responsibility and contribute, as few do, to grounding an ethical paradigm indispensable for our era.

The third key is also fundamental to their understanding: the idea of recognition. Alongside it, the ideas of reciprocity, dialogue, communication. This capacity to be with others, to be through others, constitutes one of the fundamental ideas of their proposals. We see it clearly in the question of translation (what is translating for both authors if not going out from oneself to return to oneself enriched, been others?). Or, from an ethical-political viewpoint, what is seeking the best action, the timely action, if not putting oneself in the other’s place and coming to think, as their common friend Gadamer would say, that to deliberate or to do hermeneutics is the art of being willing not to be right? Being oneself as another or being in the dialectic of man and people

is to affirm recognition as a key to our phenomenological-hermeneutic configuration.²⁵ We thus find ourselves before theories of recognition with phenomenological roots, both Hegelian and Husserlian, which need to be articulated and mediated in the lifeworld, in culture (hence the necessary hermeneutics). Contemporary theories of recognition, we believe, cannot afford the luxury of dispensing with these brilliant contributions.

3. Conclusion. Hermeneutic Phenomenology: A Philosophy of Life for Life

I would like to clarify what we mean when we speak of hermeneutic phenomenology. It is not something that Ricœur, Gadamer, or Ortega elaborated as such. They configure this space of reflection, this framework, within which we can move or from which we can address the challenges of our world. But it is not something concluded or fixed; rather, for its realization, it must be carried to other places. It is not a general framework already elaborated, to which we need only apply it: it is not so. Application must necessarily be creative. We must take into account the circumstances, our circumstances. Only thus can hermeneutic phenomenology be realized and make sense.

Therefore, in what we call – following Ortega, Gadamer, and Ricœur – “hermeneutic phenomenology,” a particular point of view, a specific and applied perspective, is required. Our perspective (that of each one, of each individual) is needed. The particular point of view, the concrete – and therefore unique – perspective, is necessary for this philosophical project. Circumstantial contribution is not a mere complement but an essential contribution to its realization. Only by adding perspectives do we achieve the most complete vision.

These three masters of hermeneutics have taught us to read and interpret texts and philosophies. We cannot think that their philosophies simply exist there, waiting to be transported from one place to another. It is not so. They constitute and configure themselves to the extent – and only to the extent – that they are read, always in a context, in an appropriation, in a fusion of horizons. Every reading of a text (a work), following Ortega, is deficient, for it does not say everything the author would wish, but at the same time exuberant, for it is open to new interpretations and readings. This interplay of the deficiency of expression and its exuberance is the heart of hermeneutic phenomenology, the soul of interpretation. Reading Ricœur, for example, from a particular key, with a specific gaze, does not apply him; it constitutes him. Every text, insofar as it is read and interpreted, is alive. And that is the key of hermeneutics.

With this reflection, we touch upon that around which these philosophies revolve; more explicit in one, more implicit in the other. I refer to the question of life. I have already said that Ortega’s great proposal revolves around the discovery of a new starting point for philosophy: life as radical reality. In a sense, it is a vitalist philosophy in a phenomenological key. A vitalist philosophy from the idea of vital reason, uniting reason and life (in their complexity). In Ricœur, too, we find this concern for life. At different stages and moments of his work, especially toward the end, in his reflections on death, it appears explicitly: what is life? How are we to understand it? They are philosophies of life; and they are “vivacious,” living philosophies. To speak of vitality (“until death”) is to speak of enthusiasm, admiration, energy, project, dynamism, wakefulness; to

²⁵ The fundamental texts would be those cited by Gadamer (“Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Metaphysics”), Ortega (“History as a System,” vol. VI, 45–81), and Ricœur, “Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl” (1975), in *Du texte à l’action*.

know and savor life, and to acquire that experiential knowledge in the fabric of lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a philosophy of the knowledge of lived experiences, of the experience of life, which seeks to enrich life itself from within.

To conclude, and to continue weaving this encounter between Ortega and Ricœur, I would like briefly to refer to the concept of "*vivencia*" (lived experience). This is a Spanish word that has entered other languages (Portuguese, French); both "*vivencia*" and living-with-others, "*convivencia*." It is a very peculiar word that appears even in one of Ricœur's last texts, speaking of life and death. Ricœur reads it in Jorge Semprún, makes it his own, and employs it, noting that he uses it in the sense it has in Spanish, which is not the same as "*vécu*" or "*Erlebnis*." Ricœur... using a Spanish word! (and pointing to it as untranslatable).²⁶ Let the reader know that this word ("*vivencia*") is of recent appearance in Spanish, and was in fact the fruit of an invention, a creation, by... Ortega y Gasset himself! It was Ortega who coined this word in an article dedicated to Husserl and phenomenology, explaining that, lacking a way to translate *Erlebnis* or "*vécu*," he would invent a word, not knowing the fortune it would have, and risks speaking of "*vivencia*." The word is invented/created in 1913 and soon appears incorporated in the *Dictionary of the Spanish Academy*. Once again, by chance, Ricœur encounters (without knowing it) Ortega.

The philosophies of our thinkers remain to be read, to be co-read, read together. And they are philosophies that give much to think about and much to do. This is what we seek with this joint reading, with this interpretation: to discover and rediscover possible readings. And it is not a matter of repeating or applying a label. It is not something done, closed, or concluded. Ricœur spoke of hermeneutic phenomenology as a project. That is, something we ourselves must do, and on this I insist. We must get to work. It is also, here, a question of creativity and imagination; hermeneutic phenomenology, if it is anything and if it is worthwhile, is because it is something living that illuminates our circumstance and allows us to rise to the height of our time. Let us not remain at the expression, sometimes difficult, sometimes controversial, and go to the things themselves, to experience, to *vivencia*.²⁷

These dark times we live in – perhaps all times have been so – require clarity, a special clarity. This philosophy, these philosophers so close to us, offer tools to sustain illusion, enthusiasm, effort, inquietude, vitality, joy, and elegance in life. I think we could well read Ricœur's philosophy, as he himself did, from Rembrandt's symbolic painting that he so liked. And I believe Ricœur's philosophy could also be understood from Ortega's symbolic image of the archer, who, by tensing the bow, aims his arrow and hits the target, from tension, force, prudence.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, thus outlined, is this effort to hit the mark, whether in life or in actions, from the archer's tension in the chiaroscuro of life in which the philosopher, gaze extended toward the horizon, does not cease to rest his hand on this world. I invite consideration of the hermeneutic gesture, the gesture of hermeneutic phenomenology, in the interweaving of

²⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort. Fragments*, (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 64-65.

²⁷ Ortega states: "After turning it over for years, hoping to stumble upon some existing word in our language sufficiently apt to transcribe it, I have had to give up and seek a new one. It concerns the following: in phrases like 'to live life,' 'to live things,' the verb 'to live' acquires a curious sense. Without losing its deponent value, it takes a transitive form, signifying that kind of immediate relation into which the subject enters or can enter with certain objectivities. Well then, how to call each actualization of this relation? I find no other word than 'vivencia.' Everything that reaches my self with such immediacy that it becomes part of it is a *vivencia*" (*Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 634).

these two representative images of human life and philosophy itself: the Orteguian archer and Rembrandt's philosopher²⁸. Perhaps they are two images in which we can see ourselves, the human being, each of us, as the unique theme of philosophy.

²⁸ I recommend contemplating the two images: *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (Rembrandt) <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437394>. *The Archer* (Orteguian symbol) https://ortegaygasset.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/el_arqueroV1-jpg.webp.

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La défatalisation du passé : Paul Ricœur, Jacques Revel et le réalisme critique en historiographie

Une implication scientifique et éthique pour la Corée et l'Afrique

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Abstract

Confronted with the “memory saturation” of the 2000s, Paul Ricœur, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, enters into a fruitful, though often implicit, dialogue with the critical historiography of the Annales School, embodied here by Jacques Revel. This article aims to construct this intellectual encounter, the methodological significance of which has been under-theorized. By moving beyond the classic opposition between explanation and understanding and integrating the “scale games” (jeux d'échelles) methodology, Ricœur refounds an epistemology of the “attested fact” (fait avéré) that grounds history in a critical realism. We demonstrate how this theoretical convergence enables a “défatalisation” of history, restoring to past actors their capacity for action and their margin of uncertainty. This approach offers a civic alternative to the mere “duty of memory”: a duty of critical intelligence, based on a history conceived as a science of complexity. The implications of this approach are explored for post-colonial contexts, particularly in Korea and Africa, where the défatalisation of the past is a condition for opening new horizons.

Keywords: *défatalisation, Ricœur, Revel, Variation of Scale, Annales, Korea, Africa.*

Résumé

Face à la saturation mémorielle des années 2000, Paul Ricœur, dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, engage un dialogue fécond, bien que souvent implicite, avec l'historiographie critique de l'École des Annales, incarnée ici par Jacques Revel. Cet article se propose de construire cette rencontre intellectuelle, dont la portée méthodologique a été jusqu'ici sous-théorisée. En dépassant l'opposition classique entre explication et compréhension et en intégrant la méthodologie des « jeux d'échelles », Ricœur refonde une épistémologie du « fait avéré » qui ancre l'histoire dans un réalisme critique. Nous démontrons comment cette convergence théorique permet une « défatalisation » de l'histoire, rendant aux acteurs du passé leur capacité d'action et leur marge d'incertitude. Cette approche offre aux contemporains une alternative civique au seul « devoir de mémoire » : un devoir d'intelligence critique, fondé sur une histoire qui se veut science de la complexité. Les

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implications de cette démarche sont explorées pour des contextes post-coloniaux, notamment en Corée et en Afrique, où la défatalisation du passé est une condition pour ouvrir de nouveaux horizons.

Mots-clés : défatalisation, Ricœur, Revel, jeux d'échelles, Annales, la Corée, l'Afrique.

La défatalisation du passé : Paul Ricœur, Jacques Revel et le réalisme critique en historiographie

Une implication scientifique et éthique pour la Corée et l'Afrique¹

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1. L'enjeu d'une nouvelle écriture de l'histoire

L'an 2000. Le siècle s'achève sur une inflation mémorielle sans précédent, un phénomène que d'aucuns qualifient de « tyrannie de la mémoire » en Occident. C'est dans ce contexte de saturation que Paul Ricœur publie *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, une œuvre monumentale qui n'est pas une méditation abstraite, mais une intervention civique. Dès les premières lignes, le philosophe confesse son trouble. Son intention est claire, sa volonté de prendre position, sans ambiguïté, à propos de la situation qu'il juge « inquiétante » de la société occidentale menacée par la vague mémorielle est manifeste :

Je reste troublé par l'inquiétant spectacle que donne le trop de mémoire ici, le trop d'oubli ailleurs, pour ne rien dire de l'influence des commémorations et des abus de mémoire — et d'oubli. L'idée d'une politique de la juste mémoire est à cet égard un de mes thèmes civiques avoués².

Cette formulation signale une rupture avec l'optimisme commémoratif des décennies précédentes, portées par la légitime reconnaissance des victimes mais menaçant de submerger la distance critique nécessaire à la discipline historique. Face au risque d'une mémoire tyrannique, qui enferme les communautés dans leur souffrance et entrave l'accès à une justice équitable, Ricœur ne se positionne pas contre la mémoire, mais pour une « politique de la juste mémoire ». Pour la communauté savante, cet ouvrage est reçu comme un moment décisif. Comme l'écrit François Dosse, historien et biographe de Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* constitue à cet égard un « évènement », au sens où il surprend les historiens en leur offrant une « réponse éclairante qu'il donne aux exigences du moment »³. Dix ans plus tard, l'historien Christian Delacroix réaffirmera

¹ Le présent article constitue une version remaniée et substantiellement développée d'une réflexion initialement menée dans l'introduction de ma thèse de doctorat. Il vise à articuler la méthodologie historiographique de l'École des Annales à la philosophie de Paul Ricœur. Le manuscrit initial a été élaboré avec le précieux soutien de mon directeur de thèse, Jacques Revel, dont le décès en mars 2026 suscite ma profonde tristesse. En hommage à mon maître inestimable, ce travail est dédié à la mémoire de Jacques Revel ainsi qu'à sa grande amitié avec Paul Ricœur qui est aussi mon grand maître à penser.

² Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris : Le Seuil, 2000), I (avertissement).

³ François Dosse, « Le moment Ricœur de l'historiographie », *Vingtième siècle, Revue d'histoire*, no. 69 (2001), 137–38. L'auteur est également le biographe de Ricœur, cf. François Dosse, *Paul Ricœur : Les sens d'une vie* (Paris : La Découverte/Poche, 2008).

l'importance de l'ouvrage, tout en notant que ses effets sur la pratique historique cheminent encore lentement⁴.

La problématique qui sous-tend notre analyse est la suivante : comment l'histoire peut-elle maintenir sa prétention à la vérité face à la concurrence des mémoires blessées et à la tentation du relativisme narratif qui la guette depuis le « tournant linguistique » ? Notre thèse est que la réponse de Ricœur, particulièrement dans sa phase la plus tardive, réside dans une alliance épistémologique, à la fois inattendue et profonde, entre sa phénoménologie de l'homme capable et la micro-analyse sociale développée au sein de l'École des Annales, notamment par Jacques Revel. Cette convergence, que nous nous proposons de mettre au jour, aboutit à un réalisme critique capable de « défataliser » le passé. Pour ce faire, nous commencerons par examiner l'état de la recherche sur les rapports entre Ricœur et les *Annales* afin de justifier la pertinence de notre approche. Nous analyserons ensuite l'aporie de la représentation qui oppose la fidélité mémorielle à la vérité historique. Puis, nous détaillerons l'architecture de la connaissance historique selon Ricœur, avant de nous concentrer sur le cœur de notre argument : le dialogue entre les jeux d'échelles de Revel, contextualisés au sein des débats internes des *Annales*, et la quête de défatalisation de Ricœur. Enfin, nous explorerons les enjeux éthiques et politiques de cette posture pour l'historien et le citoyen en introduisant le cas coréen et celui africain afin de démontrer la validité de la défatalisation.

2. Ricœur et les Annales : État des lieux d'un dialogue et justification d'une rencontre

L'étude des relations intellectuelles entre Paul Ricœur et l'École des Annales révèle un tableau complexe, marqué par une réception qualifiée de « profondément ambiguë », oscillant entre respect et suspicion⁵. Dès les années 1950, une période décrite comme « peu propice aux épistémologies hybrides », l'intervention de Ricœur en théorie de l'histoire fut à peine entendue⁶. Plus tard, sa trilogie *Temps et récit* (1983-1985) suscita une plus grande attention, mais resta souvent confinée aux cercles philosophiques. C'est avec *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* que le dialogue s'intensifie, à une époque où les historiens eux-mêmes, après le « tournant critique » de la fin des

⁴ Christian Delacroix, « La réception historique de *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* » (article présenté au colloque, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*: 10 ans après, Paris, Décembre 3-4, 2010). Il y estime que les résultats de l'influence de Ricœur « restent encore modestes, et cheminent lentement au sein de la nouvelle génération de chercheurs ». Il ajoute : « [...] les analyses de Ricœur ne sont que très peu mobilisées lors du récent débat sur la mémoire. [...] De la même façon que je n'ignore pas qu'il existe des appropriations plus déliées de certaines propositions de Ricœur, souvent moins visibles, et dans la mesure où l'on essaie de les appréhender en se créant l'espace restreint d'un séminaire à travers des travaux non publiés ou en cours notamment de la part des jeunes chercheurs. »

⁵ Christian Delacroix, « Ce que Ricœur fait des Annales: méthodologie et épistémologie dans l'identité des Annales », in *Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines*, ed. Jonathan Roberge (La Découverte, 2007). Delacroix y décrit une réception « profondément ambiguë », oscillant entre respect et suspicion. Notre démarche consiste à analyser les raisons de cette ambiguïté en construisant un dialogue spécifique.

⁶ La période est qualifiée de « peu propice aux épistémologies hybrides » par Christian Delacroix, qui note que l'intervention de Ricœur en théorie de l'histoire fut à peine entendue dans les années 1950. Delacroix, « Ce que Ricœur fait des Annales ».

années 1980, s'interrogent sur les fondements de leur discipline : la vérité, la causalité, la mémoire, le récit et le temps⁷.

Cette évolution de la réception s'éclaire lorsqu'on la replace dans l'histoire même de l'École des Annales. La première génération, avec Marc Bloch et Lucien Febvre, avait ouvert le champ de l'histoire aux sciences sociales et initié l'« histoire des mentalités », s'intéressant à l'« outillage mental » d'une époque⁸. La deuxième génération, dominée par la figure de Fernand Braudel, a privilégié une approche structuraliste, quantitative et focalisée sur la « longue durée ». Dans ce paradigme, l'événement, considéré comme l'« écume » de l'histoire, était marginalisé, et la dimension narrative, suspectée d'être non scientifique, était rejetée⁹. C'est contre cette « autosatisfaction triomphaliste »¹⁰ de l'histoire structurale que Ricœur a d'abord développé sa critique, en défendant la réhabilitation de l'événement et du récit.

La troisième génération, celle de la « Nouvelle Histoire » avec des figures comme Jacques Le Goff, Pierre Nora et Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, a marqué un tournant. L'intérêt s'est déplacé des structures socio-économiques vers l'anthropologie historique, le culturel, le symbolique et l'imaginaire¹¹. Ce « tournant critique » de 1989, mené par des historiens comme Jacques Revel, Bernard Lepetit et Roger Chartier, a créé un terrain beaucoup plus favorable aux questionnements de Ricœur. La littérature existante documente ainsi des tensions spécifiques mais aussi des dialogues fructueux avec plusieurs figures de cette mouvance. Le débat avec Roger Chartier sur la narration historique et le concept d'histoire comme fiction, ou encore le dialogue avec Michel de Certeau sur l'opération historiographique, sont bien établis¹². Ricœur a également explicitement contesté la marginalisation de l'événement par Braudel, arguant que l'événement constitue une composante intégrale du triptyque structure-conjoncture-événement¹³. Ces échanges, bien que parfois conflictuels, témoignent d'un engagement mutuel sur des questions épistémologiques

⁷ Le « tournant critique » des Annales est marqué par l'éditorial programmatique de 1989, qui appelait à un réexamen des fondements de la discipline. Ce contexte a rendu les historiens plus réceptifs aux questions de Ricœur sur la vérité, la causalité et le récit. Voir : La Rédaction, « Tentons l'expérience », *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 44, no. 6 (1989), 1317–23.

⁸ Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle : la religion de Rabelais* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1942). Febvre y développe le concept d'« outillage mental » pour décrire les catégories de pensée et de sensibilité propres à une époque, qui limitent ce qu'il est possible de penser.

⁹ Fernand Braudel, « Histoire et Sciences sociales : La longue durée », *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 13, no. 4 (1958), 725–53.

¹⁰ L'expression est de Ricœur, utilisée pour caractériser l'attitude de l'école des Annales à laquelle il s'opposait par sa proposition de dialogue entre philosophie et histoire.

¹¹ Voir Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds., *Faire de l'histoire*, 3 vols. (Paris : Gallimard, 1974). Cet ouvrage-manifeste de la « Nouvelle Histoire » explore de « nouveaux problèmes », de « nouvelles approches » et de « nouveaux objets », marquant le tournant vers une histoire culturelle et anthropologique.

¹² Pour une analyse de la relation Ricœur-Certeau, voir François Dosse, Paul Ricœur et Michel de Certeau : L'histoire : entre le dire et le faire (Paris : L'Herne, 2006). Ricœur reprend et discute la tripartition de l'opération historiographique de Certeau dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

¹³ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, tome 1 : L'intrigue et le récit historique (Paris : Le Seuil, 1983). La critique de la conception braudélienne du temps et de l'événement y est un fil conducteur.

fondamentales, qui culmineront dans ce que certains ont appelé une « guerre des mémoires » après la parution de son grand œuvre de 2000¹⁴.

Cependant, un examen attentif de la littérature secondaire révèle une lacune surprenante : bien que les interactions de Ricœur avec Chartier, de Certeau ou Braudel soient abondamment commentées, la relation spécifique avec Jacques Revel reste sous-théorisée. Cette absence est d'autant plus remarquable que Revel est une figure centrale de la troisième et quatrième génération des *Annales*, et que son travail, notamment sur la micro-histoire et les « jeux d'échelles », offre des résonances méthodologiques et épistémologiques frappantes avec les préoccupations tardives de Ricœur. En effet, Ricœur lui-même cite et rend hommage à l'ouvrage *Jeux d'échelles* dans ses propres écrits et interventions¹⁵, et les deux hommes ont directement échangé lors d'émissions radiophoniques¹⁶.

C'est précisément cette lacune théorique qui fonde la légitimité et l'originalité de notre présente étude. Plutôt que de découvrir une relation inexistante, nous proposons de construire la rencontre qui n'a pas été explicitement thématisée. Nous soutenons que la méthodologie critique de Revel, axée sur la variation des échelles d'observation comme outil de déconstruction des certitudes et de mise au jour de la complexité sociale, fournit une réponse pratique et historiographique aux apories philosophiques que Ricœur cherche à résoudre. En mettant en regard la notion de « défatalisation » de l'histoire, chère à Ricœur, et l'effet d'« estrangement »¹⁷ produit par les jeux d'échelles de Revel, nous entendons démontrer une convergence épistémologique puissante. Cet article vise donc à articuler ce dialogue manquant, révélant comment la pratique de l'historien (Revel) et la réflexion du philosophe (Ricœur) convergent vers un même objectif : fonder un réalisme critique qui rend justice à la fois à la réalité du passé et à la liberté des acteurs qui l'ont façonné.

3. Entre fidélité et vérité, le défi de la représentation

L'urgence avec laquelle Paul Ricœur tente de refonder l'opération historiographique ne saurait être saisie indépendamment des séismes épistémologiques qui ont fracturé la discipline

¹⁴ L'expression « guerre des mémoires » est utilisée pour décrire les controverses déclenchées par la publication de *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, notamment autour des pathologies de la mémoire collective et du « devoir de mémoire ».

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, « La juste mémoire », *Répliques*, France Culture, Septembre 9, 2000. Dans cette émission, il déclare : « j'attache beaucoup d'importance à la micro-histoire parce que, si la fatalité semble associée dans la macro histoire mais dès qu'on descend des échelles, (ici, je rends hommage à Jacques Revel et à son livre *Jeux d'échelles* auquel je dois beaucoup), c'est que l'on ne voit pas les mêmes choses à différent d'étages. » Cette reconnaissance directe justifie notre insistance sur la convergence entre les deux penseurs.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur and Jacques Revel, « Le grand entretien », *Les Lundis de l'histoire*, France Culture, janvier 22, 2001. Cette émission, animée également par Roger Chartier, fut organisée à l'occasion de la parution de *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* et constitue une source primaire de leur dialogue.

¹⁷ Jacques Revel, « Microanalyse et construction du social », in *Jeux d'échelles : La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. Jacques Revel (Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1996), 32. Revel emprunte ce concept aux formalistes russes pour décrire l'effet de dépaysement cognitif produit par la variation d'échelle.

depuis les années 1970. Le premier de ces défis fut posé par l'offensive du narrativisme¹⁸, magistralement incarnée par les thèses de Hayden White. En démontrant que tout récit historique est inévitablement pré-structuré par des tropes poétiques, le tournant linguistique a eu le mérite de dévoiler les artifices de la mise en intrigue ; toutefois, il a simultanément engendré un relativisme vertigineux, menaçant de réduire l'histoire à une sous-catégorie de la fiction littéraire.

Si cette dissolution de la frontière entre vérité et fiction pouvait n'apparaître que comme une aporie théorique, son instrumentalisation idéologique a prouvé son danger existentiel. C'est dans la brèche ouverte par ce relativisme que s'est engouffré le négationnisme contemporain¹⁹. Les travaux pionniers de Pierre Vidal-Naquet, dans sa riposte face aux distorsions meurtrières de Robert Faurisson, ont marqué une étape cruciale : ils ont mis en évidence que face à la falsification organisée, l'histoire ne pouvait se contenter de sa dimension narrative. L'historiographie se devait de revendiquer une fonction d'attestation irréductible. À l'heure où les régimes de post-vérité²⁰ exacerbent cette équivalence des discours, la quête d'une assise référentielle solide devient un impératif de salubrité publique.

¹⁸ L'épistémologie de l'histoire, redéfinie comme une construction fondamentalement narrative et linguistique plutôt qu'une science strictement objective, a été initialement illustrée par Arthur C. Danto dans *Analytical Philosophy of History* (1965) à travers son concept de rétrodiction asymétrique et de « phrase narrative », ainsi que par Paul Veyne dans *Comment on écrit l'histoire : essai d'épistémologie* (1971), qui qualifie la discipline de « roman vrai » subjectif et strictement idiographique. Cette perspective est ensuite théorisée et radicalisée par Hayden White dans *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), qui démontre que tout travail historique repose inévitablement sur une « mise en intrigue » poétique inavouée utilisant des tropes littéraires, et par Franklin R. Ankersmit dans *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (1981), qui conclut que le récit historique fonctionne de manière globale comme une vaste structure métaphorique autonome, coupant ainsi le lien de véridiction directe avec la réalité factuelle du passé.

¹⁹ Face à la falsification de l'histoire, Jean-François Lyotard théorise dans *Le Différend* (1983) la perversité logique du déni qui réduit au silence les victimes décédées, une réflexion complétée sur le plan de l'éthique historique par Pierre Vidal-Naquet dans *Les Assassins de la mémoire : « Un Eichmann de papier »* et autres essais sur le révisionnisme (1987), qui refuse catégoriquement tout débat avec ceux qui nient l'existence de la réalité factuelle. Cette défense de la vérité est ensuite empiriquement et structurellement analysée par Deborah Lipstadt dans *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (1993), qui démontre comment cette attaque globale contre la mémoire instrumentalise insidieusement le relativisme académique, et par Valérie Igounet dans *Histoire du négationnisme en France* (2000), qui dresse une cartographie rigoureuse de l'ingénierie intellectuelle de la haine et des réseaux de propagation de ce courant depuis 1945.

²⁰ L'analyse des fondements et des dangers de l'ère post-vérité est conjointement menée par Myriam Revault d'Allonnes dans *La Faiblesse du vrai : Ce que la post-vérité fait à notre monde commun* (2018), qui démontre comment l'indifférence toxique à la réalité menace de détruire le « monde commun » d'Arendt, et par Lee McIntyre dans *Post-Truth* (2018), qui souligne empiriquement que ce mépris des preuves constitue avant tout une stratégie politique délibérée d'affirmation du pouvoir. Face à cette crise idéologique, des solutions philosophiques émergent avec Maurizio Ferraris dans *Post-vérité et autres énigmes* (2019), qui lie ce phénomène au relativisme postmoderne et milite pour le retour d'une ontologie forte face aux faits, une exigence métaphysique que parachève Claudine Tiercelin dans *La Post-vérité ou le dégoût du vrai* (2023) en plaidant vigoureusement pour le réarmement de nos vertus épistémiques comme ultime antidote contre la manipulation numérique et le nivellement par l'émotion.

De surcroît, le champ de l'histoire globale est aujourd'hui traversé par les remises en question fondamentales du postcolonialisme²¹. Bien que ce courant ait accompli une salubre déconstruction de l'hégémonie conceptuelle occidentale, il porte en lui le risque d'une nouvelle sclérose déterministe. La tendance à substituer aux grands récits impériaux de nouvelles mythologies fondées sur la fixité de l'oppression risque de nier la complexité des stratégies d'acteurs. Face au narrativisme qui dissout le réel, au négationnisme qui le mutile, et aux dérives de certaines postures postcoloniales qui le figent dans le marbre de la victimisation, le « réalisme critique » ricœurien s'offre non comme un retour nostalgique au positivisme, mais comme une thérapeutique épistémologique et éthique de la complexité.

Dans ce contexte de la nébuleuse historiographique de son temps, l'intervention de Ricœur en 2000 marque une évolution majeure dans sa propre pensée. Alors que dans *Histoire et vérité* (1955)²² ou *Temps et récit* (1983-1985)²³, la question de la mémoire restait absente ou subordonnée, elle devient ici le problème central. À contre-courant de la vague mémorielle, il reprend à bras le corps la question de la mémoire en relisant Henri Bergson²⁴. Ce retour aux fondamentaux n'est pas un repli ; c'est une stratégie pour affronter l'énigme de la survivance du passé et de sa « reconnaissance » : comment être sûr que ce dont on se souvient a réellement été ? Ricœur montre que la mémoire est liée à la question d'« un rapport au passé par l'absence de ce qui a été autrefois mais qui n'est plus ». À partir de là, une double question se pose : comment se souvenir fidèlement de ce qui a été, et comment représenter ce qui fut en termes de vérité historique²⁵ ?

²¹ La déconstruction de l'hégémonie occidentale et l'affirmation de l'agentivité des peuples colonisés ont été magistralement initiées par Edward W. Said dans *Orientalism* (1978), qui démontre comment l'Occident a institutionnalisé une représentation stéréotypée de l'Orient pour légitimer structurellement son impérialisme, une démarche complétée sur le terrain par Ranajit Guha dans *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), qui décrypte la grammaire des soulèvements pour prouver que les paysans assujettis étaient des agents historiques conscients dotés de leurs propres logiques d'insurrection. Cette critique radicale est ensuite élargie sur le plan conceptuel et politique par Dipesh Chakrabarty dans *Provincializing Europe : Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), qui conteste l'universalité des modèles occidentaux et appelle à repenser les temporalités plurielles sans faire de l'Europe le gabarit par défaut, ainsi que par Achille Mbembe dans *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (2000), qui analyse les formes entremêlées de domination dans les États postcoloniaux tout en exposant les modes de subjectivation par lesquels les citoyens ordinaires inventent leur résistance et leur agentivité au quotidien.

²² Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Esprit, 1955).

²³ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit*, 3 volumes (Paris : Le Seuil, 1983-1985).

²⁴ Sur l'importance de cette relecture, voir François Azouvi, *La gloire de Bergson : essai sur le magistère philosophique* (Paris : Gallimard, 2007).

²⁵ Dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, la mémoire se voit attribuer une place centrale pour sa fonction de reconnaissance du passé. Cependant, Ricœur a renversé cette perspective trois ans plus tard. En reprenant la dialectique entre mémoire et histoire, il commence par l'écriture de l'histoire destinée à être réappropriée par les lecteurs. La mémoire n'est plus une matrice fondatrice mais doit être instruite et corrigée par l'histoire. Il écrit : « Ce que je propose aujourd'hui, c'est de déplacer le point de vue adopté de l'écriture à la lecture, ou, en termes plus larges, de l'élaboration littéraire du travail historique à sa réception, soit publique, soit privée, selon les lignes d'une herméneutique de la

La première question, celle de la reviviscence mémorielle, est régie par un vœu de fidélité. La seconde, celle de l'écriture du passé, vise la vérité. Ces deux régimes, bien que distincts, sont dans un « rapport compétitif ». C'est ici que Ricœur opère un virage décisif vers ce que Johann Michel nomme un « réalisme critique »²⁶. Alors qu'il avait longuement exploré la dimension narrative de l'histoire, insistant sur sa proximité structurelle avec la fiction²⁷, il défend désormais la « positivité du verbe "être" en histoire ». Face aux défis du narrativisme radical et du négationnisme, il établit une distinction forte :

[...] l'un des arguments de mon livre c'est que les difficultés que rencontrent les histoires sont déjà présentes d'une façon tout à fait spécifique avec la mémoire. [...] ce que la mémoire apporte comme problématique irréductible, c'est un rapport au passé par l'absence et cette question me tourmente de bout en bout, à savoir comment on peut représenter l'absent qui a été autrefois mais qui n'est plus. [...] Or avec la question de la représentation vient la question de la vérité ; comment peut-il y avoir vérité de ce qui n'est pas présent mais de ce qui néanmoins ne doit jamais être confondu avec la fiction ? Parce que la fiction, elle aussi, a un rapport à l'absence. C'est bien en fait, c'est comme un débat entre deux absences. Une absence d'un irréel qui jamais ne fut [...] Tandis que si le personnage historique ou les événements historiques [...] ont une prétention à être historiques et non pas fictives à travers l'absence à l'avoir été.²⁸

Cette distinction entre la visée référentielle de l'histoire (l'avoir-été) et l'irréalité de la fiction est au cœur de son réalisme critique. Pour Ricœur, l'histoire n'est pas une simple construction discursive ; elle a une dette envers le réel. Le « fait historique » n'est pas une donnée brute, mais un « fait avéré ». Ricœur insiste sur cet adjectif : « "avéré", c'est-à-dire, il est rendu vrai par les procédures de vérification et d'observation et alors de grand travail d'explication et de

réception. [...] Les questions en jeu concernent la mémoire, non plus comme simple matrice de l'histoire mais comme réappropriation du passé historique par une mémoire que l'histoire a instruite et bien souvent blessée ». Cf. Paul Ricœur, « Mémoire, histoire, oubli », *Esprit* (2006), 21. Cet article est la traduction d'une conférence prononcée à Budapest le 8 mars 2003.

²⁶ Johann Michel, « L'énigme de la représentance entre l'onto-poétique et la pulsion réaliste » (l'article présenté au colloque, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli : 10 ans après*, Paris, Décembre 3-4, 2010).

²⁷ Dans *Temps et récit*, Ricœur résiste à la substitution du problème de la causalité par celui de la narrativité, tout en reconnaissant la fonction cognitive du récit. Il écrit : « La fonction cognitive de la narrativité me paraît, tout compte fait, mieux reconnue si elle est reliée à la phase représentative du passé du discours historique. [...] Dans la mesure où la représentation n'est pas une copie, une mimésis passive, la narrativité ne souffrira aucunement d'être associée au moment proprement littéraire de l'opération historiographique. » (Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 235-36). Jacques Revel s'accorde avec cette vision, notant que si le récit peut sembler un recul scientifique, il est aussi « investi aujourd'hui de fonctions cognitives nouvelles » (Jacques Revel, « Ressources narratives et connaissance historique », *Enquête*, no. 1 (1995), 43). La célèbre analyse par Ricœur de *La Méditerranée* de Braudel comme un récit qui veut tourner le dos au récit en est une autre illustration. Revel a commenté cette analyse en soulignant sa portée philosophique (Jacques Revel, « Histoire, récit et fiction », intervention lors de la Semaine de l'histoire 2009 : Histoire et fiction, École normale supérieure, Paris, Janvier 29, 2009).

²⁸ Paul Ricœur, in « *Le grand entretien* ».

compréhension »²⁹. Ce n'est pas un réalisme naïf à la post-Ranke³⁰, qui croirait pouvoir ressusciter le passé « tel qu'il fut », mais un réalisme procédural, qui passe par le travail critique de l'historien.

Cette posture s'ancre dans sa théorie plus large de la triple *mimesis*, développée dans *Temps et Récit*. *Mimesis I* est la préfiguration, le monde de l'action déjà structuré par des symboles, des règles et une temporalité vécue. L'histoire, comme la vie, est déjà pré-narrée. *Mimesis II* est la configuration, l'acte de « mise en intrigue » (*emplotment*) par lequel l'historien, comme le romancier, compose une totalité intelligible à partir d'événements dispersés. C'est l'opération créatrice qui transforme une succession en une configuration. Enfin, *Mimesis III* est la refiguration, le moment où le lecteur reçoit l'œuvre et où le monde du texte rencontre le monde du lecteur, transformant sa compréhension de l'action et de sa propre existence³¹. Dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Ricœur renforce la dimension référentielle de *Mimesis II* pour l'histoire : la mise en intrigue de l'historien n'est pas libre, elle est contrainte par la phase documentaire et la visée de vérité. L'histoire, bien que narrative, « se rapporte à ce qui a réellement eu lieu »³².

4. L'architecture de la connaissance historique

Pour structurer cette épistémologie du « fait avéré », Ricœur reprend et enrichit la tripartition de l'opération historiographique proposée par Michel de Certeau³³ : la phase documentaire (l'archive), la phase d'explication/compréhension, et la phase représentative (l'écriture). À chaque étape, il souligne le rôle de l'interprétation, non comme un biais subjectif, mais comme une composante essentielle de la quête de vérité.

Loin de récuser l'importance de la notion d'interprétation je propose de lui donner une aire d'application beaucoup plus vaste que celle que lui assignait Dilthey ; il y a, selon moi, de l'interprétation aux trois niveaux du discours historique, au niveau documentaire, au niveau de l'explication/compréhension, au niveau de la représentation littéraire du passé. En ce sens, l'interprétation est un trait de la recherche de la vérité en histoire qui traverse les trois niveaux.³⁴

La première phase, documentaire, marque la rupture avec la mémoire vive. L'archive n'est pas la mémoire ; elle est une trace institutionnalisée, un reste matériel qui atteste que quelque chose

²⁹ Paul Ricœur, in « *Le grand entretien* ».

³⁰ Cependant, la promotion par Ricœur de la « positivité du verbe "être" » nécessite de purger le débat historiographique d'un malentendu persistant. Il est d'usage d'opposer le réalisme ricœurien à un prétendu « réalisme naïf » dont Leopold von Ranke serait le père fondateur. Or, une lecture rigoureuse de son essai sur *Le concept d'histoire universelle* (1831) révèle une matrice conceptuelle infiniment plus sophistiquée. Loin d'un fétichisme du document brut, Ranke érigeait sa méthode en opposition à la philosophie spéculative de Hegel. Il ambitionnait de saisir le développement du divin (*das Göttliche*) dans l'immanence de la contingence événementielle, concevant l'histoire universelle comme une totalité où la liberté humaine et les nécessités politiques tissent une épopée providentielle. Ricœur ne bataille donc pas contre Ranke, mais contre l'amnésie épistémologique du positivisme tardif.

³¹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 1 : L'intrigue et le récit historique* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1983), 85–119.

³² Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit, tome 3 : Le temps raconté* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1985), 208.

³³ Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris : Gallimard, 1975), 358.

³⁴ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 235.

a eu lieu. C'est le moment de la preuve, de la critique des sources, où l'historien établit la base factuelle de son travail. Cette phase est déjà interprétative, car le choix de l'archive, la question posée au document, orientent l'enquête.

La phase d'explication/compréhension est particulièrement décisive. C'est ici que Ricœur résout le vieux dualisme hérité de Wilhelm Dilthey qui opposait l'« expliquer » (*Erklären*) des sciences de la nature à la « comprendre » (*Verstehen*) des sciences de l'esprit³⁵. S'appuyant sur Max Weber et la philosophie analytique de l'action (notamment G. H. von Wright), il propose un modèle mixte de « compréhension explicative ». L'historien ne se contente pas de revivre le passé par empathie ; il demande « pourquoi ? ». La spécificité de la réponse historique réside dans la pluralité des schémas causals, cet « éventail du "parce que" » qui intègre causes matérielles, motifs psychologiques et raisons sociales. C'est cette multiplicité qui distingue radicalement l'histoire de la mémoire, laquelle tend à l'unicité et à la simplification du récit.

Je dois beaucoup à la philosophie anglaise [...] avec l'idée de multiplicité des réponses à la question « pourquoi ». L'éventail du « parce que » qui m'a fait éliminer complètement la querelle diltheyenne : l'opposition entre expliquer et comprendre. C'est Max Weber d'ailleurs qui, de très longtemps, m'en avait écarté avec l'idée qu'expliquer c'est comprendre, c'est-à-dire, c'est une compréhension explicative³⁶.

Enfin, la phase de l'écriture, ou « représentance », n'est pas une simple mise en texte. Elle est gouvernée par ce que Ricœur, s'inspirant de Kant, nomme le « jugement d'importance » de l'historien³⁷. C'est la subjectivité de l'historien, en tant que sujet épistémique appliquant rigoureusement des catégories d'analyse, qui construit l'objectivité historique. L'objectivité n'est pas une neutralité passive, mais le résultat d'une subjectivité méthodique qui choisit, découpe et hiérarchise. L'interprétation n'est donc pas une passion personnelle, mais un acte épistémique : « la clarification des concepts et des arguments, l'identification des points de controverse, la mise à plat des options prises »³⁸. C'est en cela que l'histoire est, pour Ricœur, une « science herméneutique »³⁹ par excellence, où l'intention de vérité qualifie chaque étape du travail.

³⁵ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction à l'étude des sciences humaines* (1883). Dilthey est la figure centrale de l'historicisme allemand qui a cherché à fonder l'autonomie épistémologique des *Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences de l'esprit) par rapport aux *Naturwissenschaften* (sciences de la nature).

³⁶ Paul Ricœur, in « *Le grand entretien* ».

³⁷ Cette idée apparaît dès *Histoire et vérité*. Cf. Paul Ricœur, « Objectivité et subjectivité en histoire », in *Histoire et vérité* (*Esprit*, 1955), 30.

³⁸ Paul Ricœur, « L'écriture de l'histoire et la représentation du passé », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 55, no. 4 (2000), 746–47.

³⁹ Pour une synthèse, voir Johann Michel, « L'histoire comme science herméneutique : la contribution épistémologique de Paul Ricœur », in *L'Histoire*, ed. Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia (Paris : Vrin, 2010), 209–29.

5. *Jeux d'échelles* et défatalisation : le cœur du dialogue Revel/Ricœur

C'est dans la phase explicative que la convergence entre Ricœur et Jacques Revel devient la plus manifeste et la plus féconde. Revel, commentant Ricœur, souligne que c'est précisément dans ce registre de l'explication que l'histoire « prend les distances maximales avec la mémoire »⁴⁰. Le temps organique et fluide de la mémoire s'oppose au temps de l'historien, qui est une construction plurielle, hétérogène, faite de durées et de séquençages discontinus. Pour Revel, le « talent de l'historien » consiste à maîtriser cette « multiplicité des durées ». L'outil privilégié de cette construction est la variation des échelles d'observation, théorisée dans l'ouvrage collectif *Jeux d'échelles*⁴¹.

Et ce qui est fait au niveau du temps se retrouve au niveau de ce qu'on appelle maintenant les [...] échelles, les échelles temporelles comme il y a les échelles spatiales, celle de la norme et des processus. L'idée étant que lorsqu'on observe une réalité ou l'ensemble à des échelles différentes n'est pas la même chose qu'on observe mais des organisations et des configurations qui sont discontinues.⁴²

Cette approche, au cœur de la micro-histoire, n'est pas un simple effet de zoom. Changer d'échelle, c'est changer la nature de l'objet observé et les questions qu'on lui pose. La micro-histoire, dont les figures de proue italiennes sont Carlo Ginzburg et Giovanni Levi, s'est développée en réaction contre une histoire sérielle et quantitative qui risquait de dissoudre les individus dans des moyennes statistiques. En se concentrant sur un cas singulier, un village (comme Le Roy Ladurie dans *Montaillou*⁴³), un individu (comme Ginzburg avec son meunier Menocchio⁴⁴), ou un événement apparemment mineur, l'historien cherche à révéler les logiques sociales à l'œuvre. Il ne s'agit pas de considérer le cas comme représentatif de la totalité, mais comme un « exceptionnel normal » (selon l'expression d'Edoardo Grendi) qui, par son anomalie même, met en lumière les normes, les conflits et les stratégies d'acteurs habituellement invisibles. L'effet critique de ce changement d'échelle est ce que Revel, citant les sémioticiens, appelle l'« étrangement » : un « dépaysement par rapport aux catégories d'analyse et aux modèles interprétatifs du discours historiographique dominant »⁴⁵. En descendant du macro au micro, on brise les évidences, on déconstruit les grandes entités (l'État, la Classe) pour observer comment elles sont vécues, négociées ou contournées par les acteurs.

Cependant, l'analyse microscopique ne garantit pas automatiquement l'affranchissement de la fatalité historique. Sans réflexivité, la micro-histoire risque de sombrer dans l'érudition anecdotique ou un manichéisme réducteur figeant le récit dans l'opposition entre élites oppressives et subalternes romantisés, ce qui ne ferait que relocaliser la fatalité. Pour éviter cette calcification, l'approche formalisée par Jacques Revel dans *Jeux d'échelles* (1996) déploie toute sa puissance

⁴⁰ Jacques Revel, in « *Le grand entretien* ».

⁴¹ Jacques Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles : La micro-analyse à l'expérience* (Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1996).

⁴² Jacques Revel, in « *Le grand entretien* ».

⁴³ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Gallimard, 1975).

⁴⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, *Le Fromage et les Vers : L'univers d'un meunier du XVI^e siècle* (Flammarion, 1980).

⁴⁵ Jacques Revel, « Microanalyse et construction du social », p. 32.

heuristique grâce à la *variation dynamique des échelles*⁴⁶. C'est l'aller-retour constant entre les focales qui brise la linéarité du récit : l'observation macroscopique d'un État répressif révèle, à l'échelle locale, des aménagements tactiques, des silences stratégiques et des zones de négociation.

En soumettant le passé à des décentrement successifs, le jeu d'échelles *défamiliarise* le monde social et arrache les objets historiques à leur évidence naturelle. Cette procédure constitue l'instrument technique le plus abouti de la défatalisation voulue par Ricœur. Elle démontre empiriquement que les contraintes globales n'ont jamais totalement aboli la marge d'incertitude dans laquelle les acteurs passés ont exercé leur intelligence tactique et leur liberté.

C'est ici que se noue l'enjeu philosophique et politique majeur : la « défatalisation » de l'histoire, pour laquelle Ricœur a longtemps affronté la fatalité philosophique de Martin Heidegger afin de sauver « l'être vivant » contre « l'être-pour-la-mort »⁴⁷. Cependant, Ricœur emprunte, dans le cadre de l'intervention philosophique dans le champ historiographique, ce concept à la thèse de Raymond Aron de 1938⁴⁸, mais il lui donne une nouvelle vie en le connectant à la pratique de la micro-histoire et aux travaux de Bernard Lepetit sur la théorie de l'action⁴⁹. L'histoire macroscopique, celle de la longue durée braudélienne, risque toujours de produire un effet de destin, où les événements semblent s'enchaîner avec la force de la nécessité. La variation d'échelle est l'antidote à cette fatalité rétrospective. Ricœur rend explicitement hommage à cette approche :

Justement, peut-être, c'est ici que l'histoire reprend avantage [...] et à savoir la défatalisation.
[...] Mais qu'est-ce que cela veut dire la défatalisation ? C'est revenir en imagination au moment où il y avait des choix et par conséquent, c'est rétablir la situation d'incertitude. Je

⁴⁶ Les italiques sont de nous.

⁴⁷ Cependant, l'exigence de « défatalisation » du passé, que Ricœur érige en horizon épistémologique ultime de l'opération historiographique, ne saurait être cantonnée à un simple ajustement de la méthode. Elle plonge ses racines dans une vaste confrontation ontologique avec la phénoménologie de Martin Heidegger, dont les termes se cristallisent magistralement dans l'article de Ricœur paru dans *la Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* en 1998, « La marque du passé ». Dans le cadre analytique posé par Heidegger dans *Être et temps* (1927), l'historicité du *Dasein* repose sur une « répétition » qui l'assujettit inévitablement au « destin » (*Geschick*) de sa communauté. Ce biais téléologique enferme ainsi l'histoire dans une fatalité ontologique, oblitérant la contingence radicale et la liberté humaine. À l'inverse, Ricœur entreprend de démanteler ce paradigme destinal. Il refuse de concevoir le passé sous le signe de la privation, postulant au contraire la densité ontologique absolue de l'« avoir-été-vivant ». Les acteurs historiques n'étaient pas les rouages résignés d'un destin aveugle, mais des individus capables confrontés à l'incertitude de leurs projets. De ce basculement découle une mutation épistémologique et éthique majeure : Ricœur substitue le statut dynamique du *témoignage* à la métaphore passive de la trace, et remplace le destin par la notion de *dette éthique*. La défatalisation est alors redéfinie comme un *travail critique de remémoration* qui déchire l'évidence rétrospective pour restituer aux événements passés leur incertitude fondatrice. En s'appuyant sur cette ontologie de l'« homme capable », l'écriture historique libère définitivement l'action humaine de l'illusion de la nécessité.

⁴⁸ Raymond Aron, *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire : Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique* (Paris : Gallimard, 1938). Ricœur analyse ce thème en détail dans *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 497–98.

⁴⁹ L'appropriation par Ricœur de la tradition des Annales est soulignée par Christian Delacroix. Cf. Christian Delacroix, « Ce que Ricœur fait des Annales : méthodologie et épistémologie dans l'identité des Annales », in *Paul Ricœur et les sciences humaines*, ed. Jonathan Roberge (Paris : La Découverte, 2007).

me permets de dire que je rejoins sur le plan historique les microhistoriens italiens. J'attache beaucoup d'importance à la micro-histoire parce que, si la fatalité semble associée dans la macro histoire mais dès qu'on descend des échelles, (ici, je rends hommage à Jacques Revel et à son livre *Jeux d'échelles* auquel je dois beaucoup), c'est que l'on ne voit pas les mêmes choses à différent d'étages. [...] Le travail de l'historien est de remonter au révolu de l'avoir été et c'est de remonter à des situations d'incertitude et de négociation des acteurs de l'histoire.⁵⁰

En rejoignant « le meunier italien du 17^{ème} siècle négociant sa survie », l'historien retrouve l'incertitude des acteurs et leur redonne leur statut d'agents capables de décision. Ce recentrement de l'histoire sur une philosophie de l'action opère une « réouverture du champ de la décision ». Il devient possible de montrer que les acteurs sociaux ont été des « êtres de décisions non pas simplement de nécessité »⁵¹. La multiplicité des savoirs historiques, loin d'être un émiettement⁵², devient ainsi la condition épistémologique et morale de l'écriture d'une histoire libératrice. Cette pensée de la discontinuité, bien que distincte de celle de Foucault, est intégrée par Ricœur comme une composante essentielle de la temporalité historique⁵³.

6. Éthique de l'historien et politique de la mémoire

Cette convergence épistémologique débouche sur une posture éthique et civique partagée. Face à l'injonction contemporaine du « devoir de mémoire », Ricœur et Revel proposent une voie plus exigeante. Cette problématique s'inscrit dans un débat plus large sur la mémoire collective, initié par le sociologue Maurice Halbwachs. Pour Halbwachs, toute mémoire individuelle est socialement encadrée ; nous nous souvenons à travers les « cadres sociaux de la mémoire » (langage, espace, temps) fournis par les groupes auxquels nous appartenons⁵⁴. Il distingue la mémoire collective, vivante et portée par un groupe, de l'histoire, qui est une reconstruction savante et distanciée. Plus tard, Pierre Nora prolongera cette intuition en affirmant que nous vivons à une époque où les « milieux de mémoire » (où la mémoire se transmettait organiquement) ont disparu, nous obligeant à créer des « lieux de mémoire » (archives, musées, commémorations) pour ancrer artificiellement un passé qui nous échappe⁵⁵.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricœur, « *La juste mémoire* ».

⁵¹ Paul Ricœur, « *La juste mémoire* ».

⁵² Du point de vue de Ricœur, l'accusation d'« histoire en miettes » adressée aux *Annales* par François Dosse (*L'histoire en miettes : Des « Annales » à la nouvelle histoire* [La Découverte, 1987]) semble injuste. Pour le philosophe, la multiplicité des savoirs historiques n'est pas un problème à résoudre mais une condition vitale, à la fois épistémologique et morale, de l'écriture de l'histoire.

⁵³ Ricœur intègre la discontinuité à son approche générale, à la différence de Foucault. Il écrit dès 1955 : « il n'est pas mauvais, pour se garder soi-même du fantasme, non seulement de multiplier les perspectives explicatives, mais de garder pratiquement le sentiment de la discontinuité des problèmes ». Cf. Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité*, 89–97.

⁵⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1994); et *La Mémoire collective* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1997).

⁵⁵ Pierre Nora, « Entre Mémoire et Histoire : La problématique des lieux », in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, t. 1 : La République, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), XVII–XLII.

C'est dans ce contexte de rupture que le « devoir de mémoire » émerge comme une injonction morale. Ricœur, tout en reconnaissant sa légitimité, notamment la justice due aux victimes, y voit un danger. Il préfère parler de « travail de mémoire » pour éviter une moralisation qui court-circuiterait l'analyse critique et risquerait de figer les communautés dans une « humeur de la victimisation »⁵⁶. Le travail de mémoire, pour être juste, doit être « instruit et bien souvent blessé » par l'histoire⁵⁷. L'histoire, par sa critique des sources, sa mise en contexte et sa pluralité explicative, a une fonction thérapeutique : elle corrige les abus de la mémoire (mémoire empêchée, mémoire manipulée) et de l'oubli (oubli commandé, comme l'amnistie)⁵⁸.

Jacques Revel adopte une position qui peut sembler plus radicale, mais qui rejoint le même objectif. Il revendique un « devoir d'histoire » contre le devoir de mémoire, fondé sur une lutte contre l'identification. Cette froideur méthodologique n'est pas une insensibilité, mais une condition de la production d'une vérité partageable, qui transcende les appartenances.

[...] quand je parle du devoir d'histoire, je le fais face à l'invasion mémorielle qui envahit nos contrées depuis vingt-cinq ou trente ans [...]. Et je le fais avec l'idée que ce qui est pour moi maîtresse dans l'histoire : c'est qu'elle ne propose pas d'identification. Je peux dire un mot un peu personnel : je n'ai pas de sentiment d'identification et je n'ai pas de sympathie pour le passé. Je pense que le passé c'est un objet d'analyse particulier [...]. Pour moi, faire de l'histoire, c'est précisément lutter contre l'identification.⁵⁹

Cette posture, loin d'être un repli dans une tour d'ivoire scientifique, est un engagement civique. L'histoire, en défatalisant le passé et en luttant contre l'identification, permet de sortir de la répétition traumatique et de la concurrence victimaire. Elle offre une médiation critique qui arme le citoyen pour juger avec équité. Comme le souligne Revel, l'histoire mêle inextricablement une « pratique de connaissance » et une « fonction sociale »⁶⁰. Cette fonction n'est pas de consoler ou de fonder des identités, mais de produire une intelligibilité critique du passé à partir des questions du présent.

Cependant, Ricœur rappelle que cette fonction critique et morale ne doit pas occulter la dimension cognitive et même esthétique de la discipline. Il y a aussi la simple « curiosité », l'étonnement devant ce qui est arrivé.

[...] il n'y pas que l'obligation [morale des historiens] mais il y a la curiosité ! L'esprit scientifique est la curiosité. [...] Il y a un problème de scientificité et l'histoire est une science

⁵⁶ Paul Ricœur, « L'écriture de l'histoire et la représentation du passé », p. 736. Il y écrit : « ... le devoir de mémoire est aujourd'hui volontiers convoqué dans le dessein de court-circuiter le travail critique de l'histoire, au risque de référer telle mémoire de telle communauté historique sur son malheur singulier, de la figer dans l'humeur de la victimisation, de la déraciner du sens de la justice et de l'équité. C'est pourquoi je propose de dire travail de mémoire et non devoir de mémoire. »)

⁵⁷ Paul Ricœur, « *Mémoire, histoire, oubli* », 21.

⁵⁸ Ces catégories sont développées dans la troisième partie de Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, intitulée « L'oubli ».

⁵⁹ Jacques Revel, « *Un parcours critique : entretien avec Jacques Revel* », *Les lundis de l'histoire*, France Culture, December 26, 2006.

⁶⁰ Jacques Revel, « Présentation », in *Un parcours critique : Douze exercices d'histoire sociale* (Paris : Galaade, 2006), 10–11.

humaine dont la vérité est un bel objet auquel nous sommes certes endettés, mais que, à distance, nous considérons et admirons. Il faut s'étonner devant ce qui est arrivé et ne pas simplement se demander ce que je dois. Mais voir qu'il est là dans sa somptuosité d'être simplement arrivé⁶¹.

En fin de compte, la compétition entre la fidélité de la mémoire et la vérité de l'histoire reste ouverte. Pour Ricœur, l'arbitre ultime de ce débat n'est ni le philosophe, ni l'historien, mais « le lecteur, et dans le lecteur le citoyen »⁶². C'est dans cet espace public, éclairé par une histoire critique, que peut s'élaborer une « juste mémoire », et peut-être, au-delà, s'esquisser la possibilité d'un « difficile pardon », qui, pour Ricœur, ne peut se confondre avec l'oubli mais suppose au contraire le travail de la mémoire et de l'histoire⁶³.

L'exigence d'une histoire critique et défatalisante, indispensable à l'élaboration d'une « juste mémoire », ne saurait toutefois se cantonner à une réflexion purement théorique. Elle appelle impérativement une mise à l'épreuve sur des terrains empiriques complexes, ce qui justifie notre choix de mettre en dialogue les trajectoires historiques de la Corée et du continent africain. Ces deux espaces géographiques partagent en effet des similitudes frappantes, intrinsèquement liées au traumatisme de l'expérience coloniale et aux douloureux défis posés par la formation de l'État moderne post-indépendance. Ils présentent néanmoins des divergences majeures, qu'il s'agisse de la nature de l'impérialisme subi (assimilationnisme ou militarisme japonais d'un côté, domination européenne de l'autre) ou des architectures étatiques héritées (allant de l'État-nation centralisé à la fragilité structurelle de l'« État-portier »). En mobilisant la méthodologie des jeux d'échelles, voir la défatalisation, sur ces deux contextes à la fois résonnants et asymétriques, les sections suivantes démontreront comment l'analyse des raisons locales permet de dissoudre les lectures déterministes victimaire pour restituer l'agentivité des sociétés postcoloniales.

7. Le Cas Coréen : Nationalisme victimaire, zones grises et modernité coloniale

L'écriture de l'histoire, tout particulièrement dans les contextes postcoloniaux, s'est longtemps heurtée à une lecture déterministe et téléologique dictée par les exigences impérieuses de l'édification de l'État-nation. Ce paradigme historiographique traditionnel a eu pour effet de

⁶¹ Paul Ricœur, « La juste mémoire ». Sur la fonction esthétique, Ricœur souligne qu'il ne s'agit pas de la théorie pure mais de la « pratique théorique » qui crée la beauté des sciences. Voir Paul Ricœur, « Que la science s'inscrit dans la culture comme "pratique théorique" » (Session Plénière de l'Académie Pontificale des Sciences, Cité du Vatican, November 8–11, 2002).

⁶² Paul Ricœur, « L'écriture de l'histoire et la représentation du passé », p. 747. Ricœur développe cette idée : « Reste ainsi ouverte la question de la compétition entre la mémoire et l'histoire dans la représentation du passé. À la mémoire reste l'avantage de la reconnaissance du passé comme ayant été quoique n'étant plus ; à l'histoire revient le pouvoir d'élargir le regard dans l'espace et dans le temps, la force de la critique dans l'ordre du témoignage, de l'explication et de la compréhension, la maîtrise rhétorique du texte et, plus que tout, l'exercice de l'équité à l'égard des revendications concurrentes des mémoires blessées et parfois aveugles au malheur des autres. Entre le vœu de fidélité de la mémoire et le pacte de vérité en histoire, l'ordre de priorité est indécidable. Seul est habilité à trancher le débat le lecteur, et dans le lecteur le citoyen. »

⁶³ Voir l'épilogue de Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, intitulé « Le pardon difficile ». Pour Ricœur, le pardon est un horizon, un don qui vient briser la logique de la dette, mais il ne peut s'exercer qu'après la reconnaissance pleine et entière de la faute, travail auquel l'histoire contribue.

lisser les aspérités du passé, d'effacer les contradictions inhérentes aux sociétés dominées et d'imposer un récit binaire opposant hermétiquement l'opresseur absolu à la victime héroïque et immaculée. Face à cette rigidité, le processus de « défatalisation » de l'histoire propose une rupture épistémologique majeure. Il s'agit d'une démarche critique visant à restituer la contingence des événements, à embrasser la complexité morale des acteurs historiques et à réhabiliter la pluralité des trajectoires.

7.1 Les Dynamiques de la Mémoire en Asie de l'Est : L'Emprise du Nationalisme Victimaire

La Mémoire comme Capital Politique Héritaire

Les travaux de l'historien Jie-Hyun Lim constituent la pierre angulaire de cette réflexion. Dans son ouvrage de référence⁶⁴ le nationalisme victimaire est défini comme un paradigme narratif qui octroie à une nation une supériorité morale et une légitimité politique fondées sur un héritage de souffrance ancestrale. La nation se redéfinit comme une communauté de victimes, dont l'identité repose sur le souvenir sacralisé d'un traumatisme collectif. Ce nationalisme exclusif est souvent amplifié par le régime mondial des droits de l'homme, qui tend à élever des souffrances spécifiques au rang de causes universelles.⁶⁵

En Asie de l'Est, cette dynamique opère à travers un jeu de miroirs mémoriels intrinsèquement antagoniste. D'un côté, la Corée assoit la légitimité idéologique de son État sur le narratif indépassable de la résistance face à l'impérialisme japonais. De l'autre, le Japon a développé un nationalisme victimaire concurrent, focalisé presque exclusivement sur l'expérience traumatique des bombardements atomiques d'Hiroshima et de Nagasaki. Cette polarisation opère comme une « mémoire écran » qui occulte le rôle initial d'agresseur du Japon impérial. L'illustration la plus frappante de cette rigidité s'observe dans la réception tumultueuse de l'ouvrage de Park Yu-ha,⁶⁶ dont l'analyse sociologique du système des femmes de réconfort, fondée sur des archives méticuleuses, a déclenché une violente controverse nationale et des procédures judiciaires pour diffamation.

Dictature de Masse et Solidarité Mémorielle

Afin de s'extraire de l'essentialisation de la victime, le concept de « dictature de masse »⁽⁶⁷⁾ s'est imposé comme outil heuristique. Ce paradigme examine les mécanismes par lesquels les régimes totalitaires ou coloniaux ont obtenu l'enthousiasme volontaire et le consentement d'une

⁶⁴ Jie-Hyun Lim, *Victimhood Nationalism: History and Memory in a Global Age* (Columbia University Press, 2025).

⁶⁵ Jie-Hyun Lim, « Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories: National Mourning and Global Accountability », in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, dir. Aleida Assmann et Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 138-162.

⁶⁶ Park Yu-ha, *Comfort Women of the Japanese Empire: Colonial Rule and the Battle over Memory* (Routledge, 2024 ; éd. orig. coréenne : *Jeguk ui ianbu*, 2013). L'affaire Park Yu-ha est emblématique de la rigidité idéologique du nationalisme victimaire, l'universitaire ayant été visée par des procès en diffamation intentés par la Maison Nanum et d'anciennes victimes. L'exemple de la statue annulée de Freiburg en 2016 illustre l'exportation de ce conflit mémoriel en Europe.

⁶⁷ Paul Corner et Jie-Hyun Lim (dir.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Mass Dictatorship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

partie des masses. L'analyse gagne en épaisseur grâce à l'histoire comparée transnationale : la comparaison entre la Corée et la Pologne met en lumière des trajectoires mémorielles similaires.⁶⁸ L'horizon normatif ultime de cette déconstruction est l'émergence d'une « solidarité mémorielle »⁽⁶⁹⁾ invitant à une reconnaissance mutuelle des responsabilités partagées au-delà des frontières nationales.

7.2 Le Champ de Bataille Historiographique Coréen : De la Nation à la Zone Grise

Pendant des décennies, l'histoire moderne de la Corée s'est écrite exclusivement au prisme d'un antagonisme manichéen. Cette grille de lecture rigide est progressivement devenue caduque sous l'influence de l'histoire culturelle et des études postcoloniales.

Vers la Modernité Coloniale et la Zone Grise

L'historiographie sud-coréenne fut longtemps dominée par la « théorie du développement interne » (naewoo baljeon ron). Pour dépasser cette aporie, Gi-Wook Shin et Michael Robinson ont formalisé le concept de « modernité coloniale », soulignant que l'expérience coloniale a engendré des sujets hybrides insérés de force dans le capitalisme mondial.⁷⁰ L'application la plus aboutie de cette défatalisation réside dans l'œuvre de Yun Hae-dong, qui introduit l'idée d'un continuum éthique nuancé en empruntant le concept de « zone grise » formulé par Primo Levi pour décrire l'ambiguïté tragique des déportés, et le transpose au système colonial coréen.⁷¹ Parallèlement, Namiki Masato a démontré que la collaboration avec le Japon constituait le lieu exact où de nombreux Coréens entrèrent en contact avec la modernité bureaucratique et politique, et qu'elle pouvait servir à défendre les intérêts communautaires à l'échelle micro-locale.⁷²

La Modernité Vernaculaire au Quotidien

La démystification du narratif nationaliste passe également par l'histoire de la vie quotidienne⁽⁷³⁾. La période coloniale fut le théâtre de l'émergence des Modern Boys et Modern Girls à Séoul. En investissant de nouveaux espaces (usines, hôpitaux), les femmes coréennes entraient en négociation avec l'appareil d'État, naviguant entre tradition néo-confucéenne et rationalité moderne. Ces trajectoires individuelles — dont la fin tragique de la chanteuse Yun Sim-

⁶⁸ La comparaison entre la Corée et la Pologne autour de l'image de « Christ des nations » et l'analyse de l'impact du livre *Neighbors* de Jan T. Gross (Princeton University Press, 2001) sur le massacre de Jedwabne sont cruciaux pour appréhender la difficulté à accepter la position de victime-bourreau.

⁶⁹ Jie-Hyun Lim, *Mnemonic Solidarity: Global Interventions* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁷⁰ Gi-Wook Shin et Michael Robinson (dir.), *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁷¹ Yun Hae-dong, *Singminji ui hoesaek chidae* [La zone grise de la colonisation] (Séoul : Yeoksa Bipyongsu, 2003). Yun transpose le concept éthique formulé par Primo Levi dans *Les naufragés et les rescapés* (Gallimard, 1989).

⁷² Namiki Masato, « Chōsen ni okeru shokuminchi kindaisei, shokuminchi kōkyōsei, tai Nichi kyōryoku » [Colonial Modernity in Korea, the Colonial Public Interest, and Collaboration with Japan], *Kokusai kōryū kenkyū*, vol. 5 (2003).

⁷³ Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945* (University of California Press, 2008).

deok⁷⁴ en 1926 est l'une des illustrations les plus saisissantes — échappent aux grilles de la résistance politique classique et restituent aux acteurs historiques leur pleine agentivité.

8. L'Afrique Postcoloniale : Agentivité, État-Portier et Dépassement du Déterminisme

Le champ des études africaines postcoloniales s'est pareillement engagé dans une refonte paradigmatique pour s'extraire des lectures lourdement déterministes. Face aux théories de la dépendance absolue et au nationalisme territorial exclusif, les chercheurs ont mis en lumière l'agentivité des populations locales et interrogé les rhétoriques contemporaines de la décolonisation.

8.1 Frederick Cooper et l'État-Portier

L'historien Frederick Cooper incarne ce renouvellement épistémologique. En descendant à l'échelle micro-analytique des mouvements sociaux des années 1940 et 1950 (grèves de Dakar, Mombasa), il démontre que les leaders syndicaux africains se sont approprié le langage de la citoyenneté sociale française et britannique pour exiger l'égalité devant le Code du travail.⁷⁵ Face au coût insoutenable que représentait cette exigence d'égalité, les métropoles ont précipité des indépendances territoriales strictes, abandonnant l'idée d'une vaste fédération supranationale. Le résultat fut le legs d'une architecture institutionnelle viciée : l'« État-portier » (Gatekeeper State), structurellement déficient pour pénétrer et réguler l'intérieur des territoires, survivant uniquement par sa capacité à garder la « porte » régulant les flux entre l'économie locale et le marché mondial.

8.2 Agentivité Postcoloniale et Créolisation

Afin de s'affranchir d'un paradigme confinant les subalternes à une condition exclusive de victimes systémiques, l'historiographie a récemment valorisé leur pleine capacité d'action. Illustrant ce tournant théorique majeur dans l'étude de l'esclavage transatlantique, Sidney W. Mintz et Richard Price ont établi que les déportés africains ne pouvaient être réduits au seul statut de marchandises, soulignant au contraire qu'ils ont su édifier des institutions inédites par le biais d'une dynamique continue de créolisation.⁷⁶ S'inscrivant dans une démarche similaire visant à réhabiliter l'agentivité des groupes marginalisés, l'analyse de Joseph J. Bangura met en exergue la puissante organisation collective orchestrée par les migrants ruraux Temne au cours des années

⁷⁴ Yun Sim-deok (1897-1926), la première soprano professionnelle de Corée, est une figure paradigmatique de la modernité sous la domination coloniale japonaise. Étudiante au Japon, elle devient l'icône de la « Nouvelle Femme » (Sinyeoseong), incarnant l'émergence d'une subjectivité moderne fondée sur le libre arbitre, l'amour romantique et l'indépendance artistique. Sur le plan académique, sa trajectoire illustre la violente collision entre les désirs individuels modernes et les structures patriarcales et coloniales oppressives. Son célèbre enregistrement « L'Hymne à la mort » (1926) et son double suicide tragique avec l'écrivain Kim U-jin symbolisent l'esthétisation du désespoir. Ce drame révèle ainsi les limites et les frustrations d'une modernité coloniale inachevée, où la pleine réalisation de l'individu restait impossible.

⁷⁵ Frederick Cooper, *L'Afrique depuis 1940*, trad. Christian Jeanmougin (Paris : Payot, 2008). Cooper forge le concept d'État-portier (Gatekeeper State) pour décrire la décolonisation tronquée.

⁷⁶ Sidney W. Mintz et Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston : Beacon Press, 1992).

1920. En s'appuyant sur l'établissement de mosquées autonomes et de confréries dédiées à la danse et à la solidarité (telles qu'Ariah, Alimania et Ambas Geda), cette force démographique a réussi à renverser la domination sociopolitique créole, forçant ainsi l'administration britannique à s'incliner face à la loi de la majorité.⁷⁷

8.3 Critique de la Décolonisation Absolue

Considérer que l'héritage de la modernité et des Lumières se trouve irrémédiablement altéré par l'eurocentrisme aboutit, paradoxalement, à infantiliser les intellectuels africains. C'est la critique incisive formulée par le philosophe Olúfemi Táíwò face à l'injonction contemporaine et omniprésente appelant à la « décolonisation des savoirs ». ⁷⁸ En parfaite résonance avec la réhabilitation de l'agentivité historique, ses travaux rappellent qu'une réelle prise en compte de cette capacité d'action implique d'envisager la captation des idées globales par les acteurs africains non pas comme une aliénation, mais comme le résultat de décisions stratégiques éclairées et d'innovations délibérées. Cette appropriation sélective s'érige, de fait, en l'expression par excellence d'une subjectivité politique résolument moderne.

9. En guise de conclusion : Défatalisation, réalisme critique et émancipation historiographique

La rencontre intellectuelle que nous avons construite entre la philosophie de Paul Ricœur et l'historiographie de Jacques Revel révèle, au terme de cette analyse, une convergence profonde autour d'un projet épistémologique commun : refonder l'écriture de l'histoire sur un réalisme critique capable de répondre aux défis de notre temps. Face à la double menace de la saturation mémorielle et du relativisme narratif issu du « tournant linguistique », leur dialogue — largement implicite mais épistémologiquement cohérent — offre une voie exigeante. En intégrant la puissance heuristique des « jeux d'échelles » à sa théorie du « fait avéré », Ricœur trouve dans la pratique des historiens des Annales le complément procédural que sa phénoménologie appelait de ses vœux. La vérité historique n'est plus une copie du passé, mais une construction rigoureuse qui assume la part d'interprétation tout en maintenant une dette irréductible envers le réel : ni positivisme naïf, ni relativisme narratif, mais un réalisme procédural fondé sur la critique des sources, la pluralité explicative et le jugement d'importance de l'historien.

Sur le plan épistémologique, la notion de « défatalisation » constitue le point de cristallisation de cette convergence. Elle désigne la capacité de l'histoire critique à briser le sentiment de nécessité rétrospective qui tend à présenter le passé comme l'unique déploiement possible d'un destin préétabli. Cette opération n'est pas un simple exercice rhétorique ; elle repose sur une discipline méthodologique rigoureuse. La variation des échelles d'observation — en

⁷⁷ Joseph J. Bangura, *The Temne of Sierra Leone: African Agency in the Making of a British Colony* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁷⁸ Olúfemi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022).

révélant des configurations sociales invisibles à l'échelle macro — restaure la contingence des événements et, avec elle, la marge d'incertitude et de décision propre aux acteurs historiques. C'est en ce sens que Ricœur peut affirmer rejoindre « les microhistoriens italiens » : non par goût de l'anecdote, mais parce que la descente vers l'échelle micro accomplit philosophiquement ce que la phénoménologie de l'« homme capable » exigeait — restituer à l'être humain sa pleine capacité d'agir au sein même des contraintes les plus impérieuses. La défatalisation n'est donc pas une consolation ; c'est une exigence de rigueur intellectuelle.

C'est précisément cette portée anthropologique de la défatalisation qui lui confère une résonance particulière dans les contextes postcoloniaux que sont la Corée et l'Afrique. Dans ces deux espaces, les historiographies nationales ont longtemps oscillé entre deux formes symétriques de déterminisme. D'un côté, les récits de la domination coloniale ont eu tendance à réduire les sociétés colonisées à leur condition de victimes passives, oblitérant la pluralité des trajectoires individuelles et collectives. De l'autre, les contre-récits nationalistes, en réaction, ont substitué à cette victimisation passive l'héroïsme d'une résistance sans fissure, tout aussi réducteur dans sa logique téléologique. Le cadre théorique issu du dialogue Ricœur-Revel propose une troisième voie épistémologique : ni l'effacement de la domination, ni sa sanctification fataliste, mais une enquête rigoureuse sur la complexité des stratégies d'acteurs au sein de structures contraignantes — une enquête que rend possible, précisément, la variation des échelles d'analyse.

Sur le plan de la philosophie de l'action, l'apport le plus décisif du cadre Ricœur-Revel réside dans la catégorie de l'« homme capable ». Loin d'être un simple concept philosophique, elle constitue le fondement normatif de toute historiographie qui se veut émancipatrice. Admettre que les acteurs du passé — qu'ils soient coréens sous la colonisation japonaise ou africains face à la structuration de l'État postcolonial — étaient des « êtres de décisions et non simplement de nécessité » revient à leur restituer une dignité que l'histoire, tantôt coloniale, tantôt nationaliste, leur avait confisquée. Cette restitution n'est pas sans implications éthiques pour le chercheur lui-même : elle l'engage à embrasser l'ambivalence morale inhérente à toute existence sous contrainte, à reconnaître les zones de cohabitation entre résistance et accommodation, à refuser la clarté idéologique illusoire des récits manichéens. En ce sens, l'historiographie de la défatalisation est aussi une exigence épistémologique et morale.

Cette posture historiographique dessine, en outre, une éthique civique nouvelle pour des sociétés encore engagées dans des conflits mémoriels aux enjeux politiques considérables. Là où le « devoir de mémoire » risque d'enfermer les communautés dans une logique de la dette et de la victimisation — figeant les relations diplomatiques coréano-japonaises autant que les rapports postcoloniaux Afrique-Occident —, le « devoir d'intelligence critique » défendu conjointement par Ricœur et Revel propose une alternative : substituer à l'affrontement des mémoires concurrentes l'élaboration d'une « juste mémoire », instruite et corrigée par le travail historique. C'est à cette condition seulement que peut s'esquisser, dans ces deux espaces postcoloniaux, une forme de solidarité mémorielle transnationale — une reconnaissance mutuelle fondée non sur l'effacement des asymétries historiques, mais sur leur compréhension critique et partagée. À l'ère de la « post-vérité », la défense de ce régime de vérité spécifique à l'histoire demeure une tâche intellectuelle et civique de la plus haute actualité.

En tant que chercheur engagé dans l'étude comparée de ces deux espaces, nous formulons l'espoir que l'étincelle intellectuelle portée par ce dialogue entre Ricœur et Revel continue d'alimenter un programme de recherche qui reste largement ouvert. Si les cas empiriques examinés dans les sections précédentes offrent des illustrations convaincantes de la puissance heuristique de

la défatalisation, celle-ci excède les frontières de la Corée et de l’Afrique : elle engage une réflexion sur les conditions universelles de possibilité d’une histoire libératrice — une histoire qui, loin d’être un fardeau pesant sur le présent, deviendrait une ressource pour penser et construire les horizons du possible. Telle est, en définitive, la direction que prendront nos futures recherches : non par souci d’abstraction théorique, mais parce que la rigueur philosophique est, dans le monde de la post-vérité, la condition première d’une histoire qui soit, à la fois, une science et un bien commun.

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L'historiographie africaine en contexte post-colonial : enjeux méthodologiques et débats critiques au prisme des perspectives de Mamadou Diouf et Paul Ricœur

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Abstract

To recount the past in order to build the present and the future; such was the ambition of historians in the post-colonial nation-states of sub-Saharan Africa. This claim, fueled by the desire to restore a trampled dignity, has put to the test the bond of truth between the African historian and their reader. The reconquest of a broken self and the reconstitution of the great African personality have politically oriented the quest to recompose the traces of the African past. At the time when we are witnessing the cracks or destruction of the national master-fiction, it is necessary to re-examine the challenges and epistemological orientations involved in the work of the historian. The historian's truth is not knowledge for contemplation, but for action. Therefore, according to the analyses of Mamadou Diouf and Paul Ricœur, it is essential to uproot the various ideological or partisan affiliations that may, explicitly or tacitly, manipulate, falsify, or hinder the diverse historical conjectures recalling the human life in Africa.

Keywords: *Chronocentrism, Fragments, Historiography, Nationalism, Objectivity, Post-Colonialism.*

Résumé

Relater le passé afin de construire le présent et le futur, telle fut l'ambition des premiers historiens « professionnels » dans les États-nations post-coloniaux d'Afrique subsaharienne. Cette prétention, nourrie par la volonté de restaurer une dignité bafouée, a éprouvé le gage de vérité entre l'historien africain et son lecteur. En effet, la reconquête d'un soi brisé et la reconstitution de la grande personnalité africaine ont politiquement orienté la quête de recomposition des traces du passé africain. À l'heure où on assiste aux fissures ou à la destruction du roman national, il est question d'examiner à nouveaux frais les défis et les orientations épistémologiques qu'implique le travail de l'historien. Sa vérité n'est pas une connaissance pour la contemplation, mais pour l'action. Aussi importe-t-il, selon les analyses de Mamadou Diouf et de Paul Ricœur, de « dessouder » les différentes affiliations idéologiques ou partisans qui peuvent, explicitement ou tacitement, manipuler, falsifier, ou empêcher la diversité des récits retraçant la vie des humains en Afrique.

Mots-clés : *chronocentrisme, fragments, historiographie, nationalisme, objectivité, post-colonialisme.*

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L'historiographie africaine en contexte post-colonial : enjeux méthodologiques et débats critiques au prisme des perspectives de Mamadou Diouf et Paul Ricœur¹

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1. Introduction

Mamadou Diouf définit l'écriture de l'histoire comme une réflexion sur les relations entre la réalité historique et ses représentations discursives². Si le déni historique dont ont été victimes les sociétés subsahariennes reposait sur l'idée que celles-ci étaient dépourvues de faits historiques et incapables de structurer leur passé autrement que par le mythe ou les contes, il convient de souligner que la notion même de « représentation historique » était au cœur de la négation. Face à cette exclusion de l'humanité, la première génération d'historiens universitaires africains s'est concentrée sur la production d'un récit national arrimant le travail de terrain aux desseins politiques. En effet, il fallait prouver, en produisant une histoire pour ces communautés nouvellement indépendantes et naguère qualifiées de « sans écriture », qu'elles étaient capables de reprendre leur initiative historique. Cette juxtaposition de l'écriture historique à un projet politique nationaliste ou panafricain a considérablement éprouvé le rôle de l'historien dans ces jeunes États-nations, écartelé entre la sommation du politique à produire des « Master fictions » ou romans nationaux et par un récit colonial qui a réifié des communautés historiques traditionnelles. Il appartenait désormais à l'historien de réinscrire l'Afrique dans le temps du monde. Cela s'est fait, selon Mamadou Diouf, en oblitérant la multiplicité des récits et des trajectoires de vie et de lutte, et en ne retenant que des narratifs qui pouvaient légitimer les aspirations à une politique unitaire et souvent autoritaire.

S'il a échoué un si grand rôle à l'historien dans la construction de l'identité personnelle, communautaire et nationale, c'est parce que l'histoire n'est pas une simple collection de faits du passé. Selon Paul Ricœur, l'histoire des historiens aide à édifier la subjectivité des hommes. Dès lors, l'objectivité en histoire est inséparable de la subjectivité de l'historien qui est nécessairement impliquée³. De même que le physicien veut rectifier les premières impressions des perceptions sensibles, l'historien tend, lui aussi, à reformer la première narration officielle établie par les sociétés traditionnelles. Les conjectures ou les choix historiques dépendent du jugement d'importance. Ce dernier, s'appuyant sur une composition de causalités ayant pour but de faire approcher le lecteur des réalités d'autrefois, suppose une sympathie de la part de l'historien pour l'objet traité. Cette affinité exige d'effectuer une distinction entre le moi de la recherche et le moi

¹ Cet article s'inscrit dans le cadre du projet de recherche du FWO, « Ricœur : (de)colonization yesterday and today » (numéro de projet G030523N).

² Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat* (Paris : Karthala, 1999), 27.

³ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris : Seuil, 1967), 28.

pathétique en histoire. Le premier comprend sans juger (du moins ouvertement et vertement), le second, quant à lui, concentre les réquisitoires, les ressentiments, les haines, la vengeance.

Comment exercer sa tâche d'historien quand l'urgence de sédimentation identitaire est présentée comme la condition de survie de l'État, voire, de tout un continent ? Ce conditionnement permet-il de respecter le pacte de vérité qui engage l'historien vis-à-vis du lecteur ? Les fragments, la *microstoria* délaissés et dépréciés par ces maîtres-récits nationaux constituent-ils, à leur tour, les garants d'une histoire alternative non-sentencieuse ? C'est à l'aune de ces questions qui engagent la finalité de l'écriture de l'histoire en contexte post-colonial que nous analysons certaines des thèses de Mamadou Diouf et de Paul Ricœur. Le premier, historien, en appelle à une pratique rigoureuse du métier qui produira nécessairement des histoires alternatives longtemps étouffées par le récit colonial d'une part, et le récit nationaliste d'autre part. À partir de leur actualité, politiques et historiens nationalistes vont apposer un sceau fossilisant sur le passé africain alors que ce dernier peut raconter d'autres histoires. C'est en ceci que l'historien sénégalais rejoint Paul Ricœur. Pour le philosophe, faire de l'histoire, éloigne de l'apologétique et de l'hagiographie, car si l'historien s'intéresse à la vie des hommes d'autrefois qu'il veut faire revivre, il doit, pour le besoin de son ouvrage, neutraliser sa foi dans ses héros. Pourtant, Ricœur se détache de Diouf dans la mesure où les fragments sans dialectique ou sans rapport à l'institution ne peuvent d'eux-mêmes, produire une histoire autonome. Sans une référence à la structure, le risque de « suragentification » des subalternes obère l'intention de vérité qui anime la recherche historique. Par ailleurs, le chronocentrisme attribué aux Lumières, s'il doit être critiqué, n'épuise pas la nécessité immanente à l'histoire de configurer le temps. Nous explorons, l'une à la suite de l'autre, les perspectives de Diouf et Ricœur pour ressortir le type d'objectivité applicable à l'histoire, la singularité de l'esthétique narrative historique et, enfin, la place ou la fonction de la corporation des historiens en situation post-coloniale.

2. Mamadou Diouf

Les thèses ici présentées s'articulent autour des écrits de Diouf qui explorent la question métathéorique du rapport de l'histoire à la vérité ou de l'histoire à l'objectivité.

2.1. Le roman national

En colonisant l'Afrique, les puissances européennes ont expulsé le continent du territoire de l'histoire qu'il occupait depuis fort longtemps. En effet, l'historien britannique John Iliffe pense que les Africains ont colonisé une région particulièrement hostile au nom de toute la race humaine⁴. Loin d'une essentialisation et d'une fétichisation des origines, les propos d'Iliffe mettent en exergue l'importance des modèles africains pour l'intelligence du passé commun⁵. Pourtant, à partir du moment colonial, l'objet « Afrique » est devenu arbitrairement lisible dans des catégories forgées par une ethnologie et une anthropologie d'inspiration expansionniste. Le savoir ainsi produit organisait le continent en castes, classes d'âge, groupes de parenté, principautés, sociétés

⁴ John Iliffe, *Les Africains. Histoire d'un continent* (Paris : Flammarion, 1997), 11.

⁵ François Bon et François-Xavier Fauvelle, « Les archives africaines du monde. Empreintes, fossiles, vestiges, langues et récits de la préhistoire » dans François-Xavier Fauvelle et Anne Lafont, *L'Afrique et le monde : histoires renouées. De la préhistoire au XXI^e siècle* (Paris : La Découverte, 2022).

hiérarchisées ou acéphales, ethnies, le tout s'exprimant dans un cadre exclusivement tribal⁶. Le projet politique nationaliste qui veut succéder à la bibliothèque coloniale entend opposer à ce savoir ethnologique un récit qui rattache la vie des communautés précoloniales à celle des peuples qui résistèrent à la conquête et à la domination coloniales d'une part, et, d'autre part, à celle des peuples qui combattirent pour l'indépendance : « Dans son souci d'élaborer une modalité africaine singulière d'être dans le temps et au monde, l'historiographie nationaliste ne s'est pas contentée de monter à l'assaut des savoirs coloniaux, elle a cherché à élaborer un savoir alternatif conforme au projet politique de l'indépendance »⁷.

Faire entrer l'Afrique dans le temps du monde, c'est lui assurer une présence alors qu'elle a été frappée de néantisation. En recherchant un passé sur lequel pouvait s'adosser une existence individuelle ou collective, l'objectif poursuivi par la première génération d'historiens africains est d'établir une continuité dans la mémoire et d'installer le continent sur la flèche de l'histoire sans que celle-ci porte la marque du Maître : se libérer du joug colonial et du savoir ethnologique qui lui est associé, exhumer une mémoire qui se coule dans des formulations commémoratives, des lieux de mémoire, un hymne, des dénominations indigènes, des victoires et des défaites, un drapeau, des couleurs. C'est ainsi que s'est construit un passé utilisable qui enracine, authentifie et légitime une communauté politique par laquelle elle se reconnaît et exclut⁸.

Dans cette tâche, l'une des premières entreprises fut de ressortir une antiquité non-occidentale. Tout le travail de Cheik Anta Diop va dans ce sens. Pour l'érudit sénégalais, il fallait opposer aux dénis de raison et d'histoire une civilisation africaine engendrée en Égypte. Diop veut aussi conjurer l'émiettement du continent en lui fournissant la matrice mémorielle qui oriente et justifie le panafricanisme. Ses travaux ont donc une orientation politique et polémique, il veut « retrouver des voix étouffées, des corps démembrés et des traditions mutilées »⁹. L'enracinement d'un projet politique de libération intellectuelle et scientifique d'une part, et de développement économique d'autre part sont les deux ambitions principales de Diop. Aussi, les débats autour du phénotype des pharaons auxquels ses contempteurs aiment le réduire n'effleurent-ils pas la profondeur de ce projet politique radical. Il y a une civilisation créatrice qui fut portée par des nations noires : l'Égypte antique. Afin de faire écho à cette pionnière, seul un État fédéral africain peut enjamber la parenthèse coloniale et affronter les défis qui sont actuellement les siens. L'antériorité de la civilisation noire oblige les Subsahariens à poursuivre le développement scientifique initié par leurs illustres devanciers Égyptiens. La réécriture de l'histoire africaine de Cheik Anta Diop déborde donc les limites étriquées des États-nations coloniaux et post-coloniaux. Pour lui, il faut critiquer l'ignorance ou le manque de sens historique de ceux qui adoubent le principe de l'intangibilité des frontières héritées de la colonisation. Les pays qui sacralisent ce dogme, valident le huis-clos berlinois de 1885 et assument, au même moment que les puissances impérialistes, la falsification de l'histoire africaine. C'est dans une perspective de longue durée qu'il est possible de penser l'histoire de l'Afrique. L'écrire à partir de territoires coloniaux métamorphosés en nations est incompréhensible. Selon Diop, l'histoire africaine s'organise autour de trois éléments : un territoire (l'Afrique), une race (les Noirs) et une culture produite par la conjonction des deux premiers facteurs dont on trouve des vestiges

⁶ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 12.

⁷ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 12.

⁸ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde* (Paris : Rot-Bo-Krik, 2023), 12.

⁹ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 6.

importants partout où, du fait de la migration interne au continent, les Négro-africains se sont installés.

Avec la même ambition que Diop, des universitaires africains se sont astreints à un travail minutieux, allant de la rigueur du recueil et du traitement des traditions orales à la collecte des objets de la civilisation matérielle : « Il s'agissait d'être à la hauteur du défi lancé par l'historiographie européenne pour pouvoir obtenir la certification de matériaux et de méthodes inédites et faire admettre, selon la formule de Paul Veyne, *que les peuples sans histoire sont des peuples dont on ignore l'histoire* »¹⁰. À cet effet, la construction de l'État-nation par un contre-discours colonial a accru la primauté de l'histoire politique. En assignant à l'écriture de l'histoire l'élaboration d'un savoir pour la construction et l'unification des communautés politiques africaines, il était inévitable que décideurs et historiens nationalistes se méfient du pluralisme identifié comme un vecteur de division. Élevées au rang de mantra, l'unité et l'intégration fondaient des généalogies à rebours : « Il fallait trouver ce qui rattachait le président Houphouët-Boigny à la reine Pokou qui avait conduit le peuple Baoulé, Modibo Keita à l'empereur Soundiata Keita, Sékou Touré à l'Almany Samory Touré, Mohammed Bello au califat du Sokoto, Kwame Nkrumah à la titulature Ashantie »¹¹.

Pour autant, Mamadou Diouf pense que cette histoire qui se veut résolument anathème contre la tentative coloniale d'effacer l'homme Noir de l'humanité ne sort pas elle-même de la matrice de la rationalité occidentale. En effet, Cheick Anta Diop n'a fait que détourner l'ethnocentrisme occidental. En reconstruisant l'humain et en lui attribuant une origine africaine, il redonne « au passage, mais seulement au passage, les lignes générales du texte africain qui donne sens à tous les récits africains, de quelque manière qu'ils soient générés, de quelque lieu qu'ils proviennent et de quelque culture qu'ils se réclament. Il reste prisonnier des déterminations d'une histoire linéaire telle qu'elle est proposée par la philosophie des Lumières »¹².

2.2 Chronocentrisme vs histoire fragmentaire

Mamadou Diouf pense que le XVIII^e siècle a investi l'histoire sociale occidentale de l'exceptionnalité de l'universel. En effet, elle serait la seule capable de récapituler les étapes vers la modernité où elle se trouve. Dès lors, la philosophie des Lumières va vulgariser les notions de Progrès, de Raison, de Science et d'Histoire. Cet ordonnancement vers le progrès gomme les autres récits historiques et les autres régimes de vérité. Contre ceci, les historiens des *Subaltern Studies* refusent la chronologie de l'histoire linéaire en passé, présent et futur. En combinant les approches de Gramsci et de Foucault, le groupe d'étude sur les subalternes a voulu s'intéresser à la conscience subalterne, libérée autant que faire se peut de la volonté des élites nationalistes et coloniales. La principale difficulté à laquelle seront confrontés Ranajit Guha et les autres membres de la *Subaltern History* est la provenance des traces historiques, les archives coloniales constituant l'essentiel de leur fonds documentaire. Or la bibliothèque coloniale a réduit au silence, déplacé ou transformé la voix des subalternes par la grammaire de ses discours officiels : « Résultat, les paysans sont mis en texte exclusivement dans une prose coloniale qui contient, contrôle et récuse leur subjectivité »¹³.

¹⁰ Paul Veyne, *apud* Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 68.

¹¹ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 73.

¹² Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 8.

¹³ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 17.

Afin de rendre leur recherche opératoire, les historiens indiens se sont attelés à étudier patiemment et minutieusement les codes coloniaux pour retrouver la complexité des forces paysannes ensevelies par le pouvoir colonial et son discours. L'histoire nationale est faite de contingences. Lire les silences du paysan, repérer la voix des fragments, c'est faire de l'histoire par le bas. Ce que l'histoire produit est destiné à la consommation et à la mobilisation, avec une conséquence majeure sur la détermination du propre par rapport à l'étranger. Cette implication est encore plus forte dans les anciens territoires colonisés. Contrairement aux historiens indiens, un Cheik Anta Diop ne remet pas en cause les catégories de l'histoire coloniale, il leur donne un visage africain. Mamadou Diouf trouve que telle est la raison pour laquelle l'historiographie nationaliste en Afrique n'a pas su gérer la pluralité des histoires. En s'inspirant de la définition de Partha Chatterjee, Diouf affirme que les historiens nationalistes ont conçu l'histoire comme un récit linéaire, un instrument visant à rendre intelligible le passé plutôt « qu'un discours permettant aux acteurs historiques (y compris les historiens) de déployer leurs ressources pour occulter, réprimer, s'approprier et souvent négocier avec d'autres modes d'écrire le passé et, en conséquence, de construire le présent et le futur »¹⁴.

L'histoire nationaliste conçoit la nation comme le sujet singulier de l'histoire et l'histoire comme le mode d'être spécifique de la nation. Doit-on dès lors narrer l'histoire des post-colonies uniquement sous le mode sanctionné par la philosophie des Lumières ? Pour Cheik Anta Diop, affirme Diouf, la réponse est positive. Or Diouf soutient qu'une histoire qui suit les traces et les emblèmes caractéristiques de la philosophie des Lumières pose nécessairement que « les nations se réalisent dans le monde comme seuls acteurs (sujets) d'Histoire mais que l'Histoire s'institue comme base et comme mode d'être de la nation »¹⁵.

Toutefois, les programmes d'ajustement structurels qui ont mis fin à l'État providence ont assuré, avec la conjonction du postmodernisme sur le plan idéologique, la fin du rêve unitaire et le développement des mouvements irrédentistes sur l'ensemble du continent. La fragmentation de l'intégration nationale ou continentale a considérablement influencé la pratique de l'histoire qui était jusqu'alors fortement orientée vers la construction d'une personnalité nationale compacte, lisse et sans lézardes. Les revendications identitaires ou démocratiques ont conduit à une nouvelle écriture de l'histoire avec de nouveaux objets tels que la prostitution, la sorcellerie, la santé, la sexualité et de nouveaux récits tels que ceux des femmes ou des jeunes. Elle se fraie un chemin entre histoires nationalistes et « histoires locales ou régionales, en revendiquant de nouveaux objets et un certain professionnalisme »¹⁶. Les maîtres-récits (master fiction) délivrés par les politiques ou les premiers historiens universitaires sont désormais remis en cause : « D'autres récits et d'autres acteurs leur contestent désormais un espace public fragmenté : ils revendiquent la pluralité des lieux de l'historicité et de la conscience historique africaines »¹⁷. Le retour à une démarche professionnelle ne crée plus une barrière étanche entre l'histoire des grands empires africains (rédigée pour la plupart par des Européens) et des histoires locales (rédigées par des locaux). Cette nouvelle donne explique un intérêt croissant pour l'histoire économique longtemps éclipsée par l'histoire politique. Mamadou Diouf pense que l'histoire économique gagnerait à s'intéresser aux travaux d'Abdoulaye Ly, historien exigeant, qui a refusé de phagocytter la

¹⁴ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 14.

¹⁵ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Historiographie indienne en débat*, 23.

¹⁶ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 75.

¹⁷ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 75.

recherche historique par l'écriture de l'histoire. Pour lui, dans la première entreprise de mondialisation, l'Afrique y occupait une place de choix qu'il importe de documenter si on veut transformer le continent.

2.3. Trois maîtres du soupçon : Sembène, Nandy, Mafeje.

Contre l'histoire nationaliste et la patrimonialisation arbitraire de l'espace public par les pères de la nation, plusieurs voix se sont élevées. Nous avons retenu, à la suite de Mamadou Diouf, celles de Sembène Ousmane, Ashis Nandy et Archibald Mafeje.

Le choix du passé implique aussi la sélection du futur. Le cinéaste Sembene Ousmane rejette l'histoire académique qu'il trouve plate et chronophage, car les historiens y mangent le temps en le disciplinant : « Ils réduisent la multiplicité des discours et le chevauchement multiple, bigarré et tout en zigzag des événements. Par cet aplatissement, ils rendent, paradoxalement, le temps et l'événement sans importance »¹⁸. Pour Sembène, l'histoire n'a pas à trier, organiser et simplifier. Il faut rendre au temps vécu ou au temps habité toute sa tension et sa contradiction afin d'en faire une école pour le présent. Les historiens de l'académie ont imposé l'inscription dans l'histoire mondiale aux sociétés post-coloniales, muselant ainsi la mémoire. Ne considérant pas cette dernière comme une source fiable, ou un objet, ils sont à la recherche de traces disparates qu'ils veulent conformer à une certaine normalité. Dans une autre géographie, Ashis Nandy partage les thèses de l'artiste sénégalais ; pour lui, « l'histoire des historiens s'est trop compromise avec le colonialisme pour ne pas exiger à la fois une introspection de leur part et une étude des historiens eux-mêmes »¹⁹. Si Archibald Mafeje, quant à lui, pense qu'il faut reprendre l'écriture de l'histoire à partir d'une perspective africaine, il précise que cela devrait se faire selon deux orientations : « L'authenticité de la représentation des actrices et des acteurs et la qualité de celles et ceux qui prétendent déchiffrer cette histoire »²⁰. Mafeje soulève la question de l'authenticité parce que l'histoire de l'Afrique édifée par la colonisation est celle des conquérants. La reconquête d'une histoire africaine consiste à retrouver de nouvelles identités mais aussi, à affirmer que seule une intelligence indigène est capable de la narrer. Pour Sembene, Nandy et Mafeje l'historiographie ne devrait pas domestiquer la mémoire. Il n'y a pas d'obligation à tirer des souvenirs mémorables et commémorables, à identifier des lieux de mémoires qui célèbrent l'État-nation en excluant les dissonances et les dissidences.

Loin d'adouber le relativisme qui nie un quelconque rapport de l'histoire à la vérité, ou encore de donner l'exclusive aux thèses narrativistes, selon lesquelles l'objectivité de l'histoire ne se vérifie pas dans la preuve documentaire ou les archives, mais juste dans la mise en intrigue qu'elle partage avec les autres récits, nos trois maîtres du soupçon critiquent le choix d'importance des historiens quand celui-ci est mis au service des gouvernants. Une histoire qui ne reflète plus la tradition, sans cesse reformulée, par laquelle les communautés se sont construites, une histoire qui n'est pas celle des modes de vie ordinaires de communautés locales, n'est pas une histoire pour le peuple. Au contraire, on a affaire à une histoire pour l'élite. Sembène et Mafeje demandent donc de revenir à la fidélité de la mémoire, le dernier rempart pour témoigner de la survenance d'une chose passée. Étant donné que les souvenirs dont elle est la gardienne ne sont pas commandés par l'écriture de la « grande histoire », cette mémoire est le réceptacle de la vie des communautés

¹⁸ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 28.

¹⁹ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 30.

²⁰ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 30.

d'autrefois. Ici, la tension entre l'ambition véridictive de « l'histoire officielle » et la fidélité de la mémoire des communautés locales est portée à un niveau de complexité supérieur, car ces deux mouvements revendiquent le titre de représentation du passé. S'il est d'avis que Sembène, Nandy et Mafeje critiquent à juste titre l'écriture de l'histoire qui signe la fin des temps, qui se veut sa propre eschatologie alors que des temps en Afrique sont encore à venir, la mémoire et l'indigénisation des historiens ne peuvent à elles seules suffire à asserter les faits historiques qu'une société élit comme éléments fondateurs ou significatifs pour la constitution et l'évolution de son identité. Peu importe ici le niveau d'échelle (village ou État), le choix du passé a une conséquence directe sur la constitution de l'espace public. Si ce dernier doit être ouvert et pluriel, inabouti, il importe aussi que s'y pratique une justice vraie qui légitime le travail de mémoire par la recherche historiographique.

Ces débats sur l'écriture de l'histoire sont organisés autour de la volonté d'explorer cet autre de l'Afrique qui a été oublié ou recouvert par les nécessités de l'intégration et de l'unité nationales. Si Sembène et Mafeje partagent encore le dessein panafricain qui serait mieux réalisé par l'éclosion de mémoires plurielles, Mamadou Diouf pense que l'histoire fragmentaire se suffit à elle-même, elle n'a pas besoin d'être alignée sur une philosophie de l'histoire ou à un horizon politique quelconque. La crise de l'État-nation et l'accélération de la mondialisation rendent tout projet d'histoire monumentale ou nationale vain. Il est venu le temps des histoires locales ou communautaires dépeignant l'envers de cette modernité ou du nationalisme qui sacrifia tant sur l'autel de la sauvegarde de la souveraineté. Dans une Afrique fragmentée, l'histoire doit s'écrire de plusieurs façons, traiter de plusieurs objets et surtout éviter de rejeter les rigidités du présent sur un passé partiel. Mamadou Diouf estime qu'il faut écouter les histoires des femmes, des paysans et autres subordonnés en tant que sujets autonomes et agissants ; ils participent aussi de ceux qui ont vraiment fait l'histoire africaine et qui n'ont pas seulement été utilisés. En les représentant comme des agents de leur propre histoire, on les perçoit comme capables d'initiative historique. Les luttes anticoloniales, les circulations entre administration coloniale et autorité indigène ne furent pas l'exclusive des élites. Il existe une politique qui n'est pas celle des auxiliaires d'administration indigènes dont les représentations sont travaillées par l'exploitation.

On peut donc affirmer que Mamadou Diouf pense que l'histoire n'est pas un temps homogène qui partout suit le même schéma ; c'est en oubliant cela qu'il y a eu compromission entre historicisme et européocentrisme. C'est ce qui explique aussi l'ethnocentrisme et le *chronocentrisme* à partir desquels a été envisagée l'histoire des peuples colonisés. Il en découle que la possibilité d'une généralisation/clôture en histoire est un vœu pieux. À ce niveau, la question qui peut être posée à Mamadou Diouf est la suivante : comment peut-on écrire une histoire des fragments quand les sources sont très parsemées et principalement consignées dans les archives coloniales ou retravaillées par le roman national ? Peut-être nous répondra-t-il qu'il faut les lire à rebrousse-poil (*against the grain*) comme l'a soutenu Ranajit Guha. Mais encore, comment pourrait-on, dans ce cadre, respecter les normes d'une écriture « scientifique », professionnelle qui a manqué selon lui à la première génération d'historiens universitaires africains ? Faire de l'histoire à partir du bas suffit-il à respecter le pacte de vérité entre lecteur et historien ?

Munis de ces questions au sortir de la lecture de l'historien sénégalais, nous abordons la deuxième partie de notre réflexion. Ricœur, en parlant du même sujet (l'écriture de l'histoire) ne l'a pas abordé du même *topos* que Diouf. Néanmoins, ses analyses sur le type de subjectivité propre à l'histoire, sur la chronosophie que critique Mamadou Diouf dans le chronocentrisme de l'histoire linéaire, et sur la nécessaire empreinte configurative du récit historique qui ne se limite pas

seulement à l'écriture mais qui est déjà présente à la phase documentaire, apportent d'autres esquisses de solutions à notre problématique.

3. Paul Ricœur

Le dialogue de Ricœur avec les historiens remonte à son texte de 1955²¹. Déjà il y était question de limiter l'enthousiasme positiviste de l'école méthodique en histoire et de démontrer l'inévitable implication de l'historien dans son objet de recherche et l'horizon inachevé de l'histoire²². À partir de là, Ricœur n'a cessé d'œuvrer à l'avènement d'une juste mémoire. Cette problématique rejaillit sur la constitution et la solidification d'un espace public en tant qu'agora équitable. Cela s'entend puisque cette dernière épargne au travail de mémoire (et non au devoir de mémoire qui est une injonction), la frénésie commémorative ou l'oubli commandé.

3.1 Comprendre, ne pas juger

Afin de souligner la spécificité du jugement ou de la prédication historienne et le degré d'implication du chercheur dans le rendu qu'il présente au public, Ricœur juxtapose les rôles du juge et de l'historien. L'historien et le juge se veulent impartiaux, néanmoins est-il réellement possible d'avoir un tiers exclu ? La neutralité désigne du point de vue épistémologique la capacité de faire abstraction de son idiosyncrasie et de s'intéresser à d'autres choses ou à d'autres êtres. Sur le plan moral, la neutralité pose l'égalité de tous les points de vue. À cet effet, l'historien et le juge satisfont à la règle de « ni complaisance, ni esprit de vengeance »²³. Le juge et l'historien partagent le même souci de la preuve et de l'examen critique de la crédibilité des témoins²⁴. Pour cela, ils sont maîtres dans le maniement du soupçon²⁵. Mais, si les scènes de procès se prêtent à une comparaison avec l'investigation historiographique au niveau de leurs phases délibératives et de la phase conclusive du jugement, la différence la plus évidente entre l'approche juridique et l'approche historiographique reste la sentence :

Le juge doit juger – c'est sa fonction. Il doit conclure. Il doit trancher. Il doit remettre à une juste distance le coupable et la victime, selon une topologie impérieusement binaire. Tout cela, l'historien ne le fait pas, ne peut pas, ne veut pas le faire ; s'il le tente, au risque de s'ériger tout seul en tribunal de l'histoire, c'est au prix de l'aveu de la précarité d'un jugement dont il reconnaît la partialité, voire la militance²⁶.

Le cercle potentiellement illimité de l'explication (par causes, raisons, lois...) en histoire se referme dans le cadre juridique sur le jugement. L'investigation historique lie les personnages à des foules, à des courants et à des forces anonymes, là où le procès ne voit que des protagonistes individuels. Ce premier argument démontre qu'il aurait été pénible pour les historiens

²¹ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris : Seuil, 1955).

²² François Dosse, « Travail et devoir de mémoire chez Paul Ricœur », *Inflexions* (2014, n° 25), 61.

²³ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris : Seuil, 2000), 415.

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 416.

²⁵ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 417.

²⁶ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 421.

nationalistes d'éviter la militance. Ce penchant, qui ne concerne pas seulement les nationalistes africains, affecte tout historien qui se sert de sa discipline comme d'une ode à la patrie.

Pourtant, l'histoire reste interprétation des signes du passé. Cette caractéristique qui n'est pas l'exclusive de la mise en récit, intervient dès la phase de la constitution des archives. En effet, les faits de l'histoire sont des faits propositionnels. Contrairement au théoricien des mathématiques, l'historien ne fait pas surgir son objet en le nommant (par exemple, un Euclide aurait pu dire : « j'appelle cercle toute figure dont les points sont équidistants au centre » ; ce qui n'aurait pu être le cas de Thucydide, il n'aurait pu faire surgir de sa seule spéculation l'histoire de la guerre du Péloponnèse). C'est du réellement passé ou existant qu'il est question en histoire. Il est donc difficile pour l'historien d'entreprendre un remodelage s'il ne s'implique pas. À son tour, cet engagement ne saurait le conduire à épiloguer sur la fin ou le sens de l'histoire. Par son étymologie, l'histoire est une recherche, c'est une riposte à une condition d'être inscrit dans le devenir temporel. Parce qu'on ne veut être transportés par le flux des événements, nous participons, par le choix d'une certaine connaissance de l'histoire, à l'édification des sociétés humaines grâce à une entreprise raisonnée d'analyse²⁷. Ceci rend l'intelligibilité appliquée à l'histoire proche d'un rationalisme approché.

Ce que l'historien veut étudier, c'est le passé des hommes. Dès lors, on ne pourrait prétendre pénétrer ou effleurer ce passé sans une certaine sympathie qui guide les jugements d'importance et la fin de l'analyse raisonnée. L'histoire devient donc une rencontre qui appelle une présence, car pour rencontrer des hommes il ne faudrait pas être absent. Pour faire surgir leurs valeurs, il faut que l'historien soit :

vitalement intéressé à ces valeurs et ait avec elles une affinité en profondeur ; non que l'historien doive partager la foi de ses héros ; il ferait alors rarement de l'histoire, mais de l'apologétique, voire de l'hagiographie ; mais il doit être capable d'admettre par hypothèse leur foi, ce qui est une manière d'entrer dans la problématique de cette foi tout en la suspendant, tout en la neutralisant comme foi actuellement professée²⁸.

L'historien fait partie de l'objet étudié puisqu'il s'agit la plupart du temps de son passé, et aussi parce qu'il partage avec les hommes du passé une commune humanité. L'histoire nous permet de répéter notre appartenance à la même humanité et, en cela, elle est une modalité du dialogue. Les positions subjectives sont les dimensions de l'objectivité historique elle-même. En tant que disponibilité, soumission à l'inattendu et ouverture à autrui, l'histoire permet de surmonter la mauvaise subjectivité qui émane du moi pathétique.

Le dialogue, la disponibilité et la rencontre sont les modalités de la subjectivité historique qu'on ne pourrait détacher des phases d'archivage, de documentation ou d'explication/compréhension. Resituer l'histoire dans le giron de l'herméneutique (le passé, lui aussi se dit en symboles et l'historien déchiffre et interprète ces signes) prémunit contre un positivisme naïf qui voudrait faire de cette discipline la restitution intégrale du passé. Les premiers historiens africains ont eu à naviguer entre deux extrêmes : relever le défi lancé par l'ethnocentrisme colonial qui niait tout fait ou école historique africaine, préjugé – faut-il le préciser – qui s'inspire du positivisme naïf que nous évoquions ci-dessus et qui pose que tant qu'il n'y a

²⁷ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris : Seuil, 1967), 32.

²⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité*, 36-7.

pas d'archives écrites (alphabétisées), il ne saurait y avoir d'histoire ; l'autre extrême fut celui de la construction d'un État par une unification isolante. Pour ce qui est du premier excès que nous analysons ici, remettre l'histoire dans le giron l'interprétation comme Ricœur l'a fait, ajourne ou supprime la lubie d'une quelconque résurrection du passé tel qu'il fut, sans pour autant minorer les éléments objectifs qui font de l'histoire une science des hommes dans le temps.

3.2. Chronosophie et *microstoria*

L'un des griefs de Mamadou Diouf à l'endroit de l'historiographie coloniale est sa sacralisation d'une chronologie linéaire héritée de la philosophie des Lumières. Cette temporalité exclut d'autres temporalisations et installe les peuples colonisés à la remorque du temps historique européen. Sans ignorer les risques du chronologisme, examinons, après une brève présentation des termes du débat, l'offre ricœurienne sur la périodisation en histoire.

La chronologie peut se définir comme le temps linéaire des périodes longues qui ordonne les événements en ignorant la séparation entre nature et histoire. Quand cette dernière est associée à ce que Krzysztof Pomian nomme la chronosophie, il s'opère un excédent du temps sur l'histoire raisonnée. La chronosophie s'appréhende par les grandes périodisations de l'histoire (islam et christianisme par exemple) qu'on veut faire correspondre à la chronologie : « Dans ce champ s'affrontent les chronosophies religieuses et les chronosophies politiques ; apparaît à la renaissance une périodisation en termes d'*époques* de l'art et au XVIII^e siècle en termes de *siècles*. C'est à la chronosophie que nous devons le terme de temps cyclique ou linéaire, le dernier pouvant être progressif ou régressif »²⁹. Selon Pomian, il est difficile d'échapper à la vision cyclique ou linéaire du temps, surtout la dernière qui est supportée par la croissance démographique, l'énergie disponible et le nombre d'informations emmagasinées dans la mémoire collective³⁰. Par ailleurs, la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes, la nostalgie du temps perdu, la tradition à protéger ou la modernité corruptrice des mœurs sont autant d'articulations qui marquent notre attachement à la chronosophie. Ricœur pense que la philosophie de l'histoire de Hegel offre à cet égard une synthèse impressionnante « des multiples mises en ordre du temps historique. Et après Hegel, et en dépit du vœu de *renoncer à Hegel*, la question se pose à nouveau de savoir si tout résidu chronosophique a disparu de l'emploi de termes tels que *palier* (stages) adoptés en histoire économique, au plan où cycles et segments linéaires se croisent »³¹. Pour l'historien, renoncer à un temps chronosophique signifierait une histoire sans direction ni continuité : peut-on faire de l'histoire sans périodisation ? À cette question, Mamadou Diouf répondrait par la négative, car le débat ne se situe pas au niveau de la périodisation, mais au niveau de la flèche du temps occidentale qui a renvoyé les autres périodisations dans l'atmosphère embrumée des mythes et des légendes.

Du côté de la *microstoria*, Carlo Ginsburg propose de revenir à l'échelle du village et de se concentrer sur les événements liés aux individus. La *microstoria* italienne a affaire à des ensembles moins grands et des temps moins longs que la macrohistoire. Pour la microhistoire, la macrohistoire a soumis invariablement les individus de dernier rang aux pressions symboliques, les personnes y sont soumises aux contraintes sociales alors que la *microstoria* fait resurgir les

²⁹ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 195.

³⁰ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 197.

³¹ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 197.

négociations, les conflits, les stratégies aléatoires, l'incertitude³². À une échelle moindre, on perçoit des choses qu'on ne voit pas à l'échelle supérieure. La *microstoria* a mis en exergue l'idée de variation d'échelle qui permet de déplacer l'accent sur les stratégies individuelles ou familiales. La *microstoria* met en exergue les tactiques de circulation, de négociation et d'appropriation en opposition aux systèmes binaires de force/ faiblesse ; autorité/ résistance.

Reste qu'il y a quand même un trait long des mentalités. L'institution crée l'identité et la contrainte³³. À cet effet, Paul Ricœur pense que « si la lecture destinée au peuple ne doit pas occulter la littérature produite par le peuple, il faut encore que celle-ci existe et soit accessible »³⁴. Afin de ne pas sombrer dans l'histoire indiciaire que représenterait l'échelle toujours plus petite de l'histoire éclatée de la *microstoria*, Ricœur propose le concept d'histoire des représentations. Avec l'histoire sociale, c'est le lien social et toutes les pratiques qu'il charrie qui deviennent l'objet de l'historien. Pour Ricœur, la microhistoire ne saurait mettre fin à la macrohistoire parce que le processus d'institutionnalisation établit un rapport dynamique entre production de sens et production de contrainte, le côté coercitif de l'institution ne devant pas toujours être opposé au côté subversif de l'expérience sociale. Ni la *microstoria*, ni la *macrostoria* ne peuvent rester à une échelle fixe, il se joue constamment des changements d'échelle. Aussi ajoute-t-il avec Jacques Revel que « les hommes ont besoin des institutions, ce qui est une autre manière de dire qu'ils se servent d'elles autant qu'ils les servent »³⁵.

S'il est vrai que les fragments (individus ou communautés) ou les subalternes ont combattu ou contourné les outrances de la contrainte coloniale et nationaliste, les poser comme sujets de leur propre histoire ne saurait se faire en les coupant de tout appareil institutionnel. Afin de prémunir l'histoire fragmentaire de Mamadou Diouf du piège de l'histoire anecdotique et de la « sur-agentification » des masses invisibilisées (dont le déploiement est souvent orienté par le pouvoir qui les musèle), nous estimons que la dialectique ricoeurienne entre l'institution et l'individu ou le groupe demeure importante. La *microstoria* peut prétendre, par la dimension de son échelle, à être plus près de la réalité, ce qui ne veut pas toujours dire qu'elle respecte plus le pacte de vérité entre l'historien et le lecteur. De même que la *microstoria*, à force de donner les détails de la vie passée, peut devenir pittoresque, de même l'écriture de l'histoire à grande échelle peut faire naître des narratifs qui tendent à l'autoréférentialité³⁶. De là, l'importance des jeux et variations d'échelle.

3.3. L'histoire est mise en ordre

Le roman national a créé une histoire monumentale de l'Afrique. Bien que fort considérable, Mamadou Diouf pense que le travail de terrain et les mises en perspectives (interprétations) étaient trop parcellaires pour prétendre à la clôture du récit national ou continental. Le dossier scientifique n'étant jamais loin des usages politiques, « Le travail historique est alors réduit à une fiction ou l'invention, la reconstruction, les dérives et les remodelages deviennent des modes de production de faits historiques »³⁷. En appréciant le travail d'Abdoulaye

³² Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 281.

³³ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 283.

³⁴ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 272-3.

³⁵ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 283.

³⁶ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 362.

³⁷ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 25.

Ly, premier docteur en histoire du Sénégal (Université de Bordeaux 1955) qui avait une prédilection pour la recherche plutôt que pour les interprétations historiennes, Mamadou Diouf opère une scission entre recherche documentaire ou archivistique et écriture de l'histoire. Cette dernière relève plus de l'ordre narratif du récit avec une association à l'idéologie quand il s'agit d'historiens nationalistes. Y a-t-il une césure entre la recherche historique et la mise en récit ? Pour Ricœur, l'histoire est écriture de bout en bout. Ceci ne veut pas dire que la structure narrative dilue l'histoire dans la fiction. Au contraire, depuis le mythe de Theut, les *grammata* (écrits) ont pour première fonction de suppléer la faiblesse de la mémoire naturelle. Parce qu'ils (les écrits) peuvent être sujets à l'erreur, Ricœur complète sa conception de l'écriture historique en affirmant que celle-ci est écriture indiciaire. L'histoire est donc réécriture. En cela, le jugement de l'historien est provisoire, contrairement au jugement du juge qui est définitif. C'est dans ce trait que les procédures de vérification historiques se rapprochent du falsificationnisme de Karl Popper : les thèses historiques, par leur ouverture, sont disponibles à la critique, à la corroboration ou à la révision et même au rejet. Ceci est rendu possible par l'archive ou la preuve documentaire qui confond les négationnistes. Toutefois, ce réseau vérificationniste ne peut gommer la base conjecturale dont procède l'historien, et la forme narrative que prend la composition historique. Le récit de fiction et l'histoire reconfigurent. L'intelligence narrative et l'intelligence explicative ne sont pas des factions concurrentes, pour ce qui est de l'histoire, elles sont concourantes. En effet, la narration apporte une sorte de synthèse de l'hétérogène, une coordination entre causes, intention multiple dans des mêmes unités de sens : « L'intrigue est la forme littéraire de cette coordination : elle consiste à conduire une action complexe d'une situation initiale à une situation terminale par le moyen de transformations réglées qui se prêtent à une formulation appropriée dans le cadre de la narratologie »³⁸. Il y a une identité structurale entre historiographie et récit de fiction. Et le fondement de cette identité se trouve dans le caractère temporel de l'expérience humaine³⁹. D'un autre côté, le récit n'est pas un compte-rendu de l'action. Il ajoute à cette dernière des traits discursifs qui lui sont propres et ceci est valable aussi bien pour les récits de fiction que pour les discours historiques⁴⁰. Le récit historique et le récit de fiction ont les mêmes opérations configurantes ; « en revanche, ce qui les oppose ne concerne pas l'activité structurante investie dans les structures narratives en tant que telles, mais la prétention à la vérité par laquelle se définit la troisième relation mimétique »⁴¹.

Il y a un pacte de vérité, de réalité ou de lecture (cela s'est effectivement passé) entre l'historien et son lecteur qui, par les phases d'explication/compréhension, arrive jusqu'au point de liaison de la mémoire à l'histoire :

C'est en vain que l'on cherche un lien direct entre la forme narrative et les événements tels qu'ils se sont effectivement produits ; le lien ne peut être qu'indirect à travers l'explication et, en deçà de celle-ci, à travers la phase documentaire, laquelle renvoie à son tour au témoignage et au crédit fait à la parole d'un autre⁴².

³⁸ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 313.

³⁹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit. 1. L'intrigue et le récit historique* (Paris : Seuil, 1983), 17.

⁴⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit. 1*, 111.

⁴¹ Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit. 2. La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Paris : Seuil, 1984), 12.

⁴² Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 315.

Le discours historique emprunte tour à tour les voies du narratif, de la rhétorique et de l'imaginaire. La forme scripturaire de l'histoire (interprétation) contribue à sa valeur cognitive. L'histoire-idéologie, les romans nationaux peuvent être limités et repensés par l'exposition d'interprétations rivales datant des mêmes périodes historiques. Si Roland Barthes pense que le fait n'a jamais qu'une existence linguistique, Ricœur répond en arguant que « nous n'avons pas mieux que le témoignage et la critique du témoignage pour accréditer la représentation historique du passé »⁴³. La vérité en histoire, le réel de l'histoire n'est pas celui de l'imitation/copie. La représentation (interprétation) historique est une fonction de lieutenance face à ce qui s'est réellement passé. Le passé, c'est ce qui n'est plus, mais qui a été. Il y a donc une supériorité de la possibilité de l'avoir-été sur la négativité de n'être plus qui accrédite la thèse de l'impossibilité de dissolution de l'histoire dans la fiction.

4. Présentisme, mémoire et oralité

On pourrait ramener la saillie critique de Mamadou Diouf à l'endroit des historiographies colonialiste et nationaliste au porte-à-faux du présentisme. De manière succincte, nous interprétons le présentisme comme une variante de relativisme subjectif qui nie la positivité de l'histoire et considère celle-ci comme une projection de la pensée et des intérêts présents sur le passé⁴⁴. En calquant l'historicité des sociétés qu'elle colonisait sur sa propre échelle temporelle et en leur réservant tous les attributs de l'enfance de l'humanité, l'historiographie coloniale a écrit l'histoire de l'Afrique subsaharienne à partir de la « mission civilisatrice ». Il en est de même de l'historiographie nationaliste qui a forgé un récit national à la mesure des ambitions autonomistes et uniformistes des « pères de la nation ». Même si ces deux variantes historiographiques n'admettent pas la relativité du jugement historique et posent au contraire leur vérité historique comme la seule qui soit vraie, il reste qu'elles ont globalement aligné leurs perspectives véridiques sur leurs ambitions du moment. Pourtant, l'histoire fragmentaire de Diouf n'échappe pas totalement au présentisme, car l'attention de la nouvelle histoire à de nouveaux objets d'étude tels que la sorcellerie ou la prostitution, les femmes..., se développe à un moment où en Afrique, on assiste au déclin de l'État-providence. De plus, le choc des P.A.S (programmes d'ajustement structurels), les « vents de l'est » et l'actuel développement du paradigme décolonial en sciences humaines et sociales orientent les multiples déconnexions quant aux grands ensembles conceptuels (État, école, Église). Néanmoins, l'histoire fragmentaire a ceci de stimulant qu'elle intègre l'inachèvement du discours de l'historien non pas comme une tare à éradiquer, mais comme le catalyseur d'une recherche documentaire et archivistique plus exigeante. Elle diffère ainsi de l'histoire nationaliste qui s'est voulue monumentale et totale, ignorant le plus souvent la diversité des luttes et des négociations avec les occupants. À ce titre, l'histoire fragmentaire contribue au travail de juste mémoire à l'endroit de communautés longtemps effacées de l'histoire. Parmi ces dernières, nombreuses ont été qualifiées de « sans écritures ». Or dans le développement précédent, Ricœur a assuré que l'histoire est écriture de la phase archivistique à la mise en forme textuelle⁴⁵. Comment, dès lors, spécifier les narrativités orales ou performatives ?

⁴³ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 364.

⁴⁴ Adam Schaff, *Histoire et vérité. Essai sur l'objectivité de la connaissance historique*, traduit du polonais par Anna Kaminska, Claire Brendel (Paris : Anthropos, 1971), 107-8.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 171.

Traditionnellement, faire de l'histoire c'est mettre en ordre minutieusement, étaler les chevauchements et les répétitions, rendre systématique, produire un temps de l'histoire⁴⁶. À partir de cette définition de Jacques Le Goff, il ne fait aucun doute que l'histoire appartient aux sociétés avec écriture, le reste des sociétés dites sans écriture est alors renvoyé à l'ethnologie ou à l'anthropologie. Maurice Godelier explique que l'ethnologie avait pour champ à la fois les sociétés non occidentales soumises à la domination européenne, les sociétés paysannes locales, et des groupes ethniques qui parsemaient ici et là les États-nations. L'histoire se concentrait sur « toutes les sociétés possédant une écriture, donc des archives et des documents écrits, sources premières auxquelles pouvaient s'ajouter, selon les époques et la civilisation, des monuments historiques couverts d'inscriptions, des monnaies titrées »⁴⁷. Il s'est donc opéré une équivalence entre histoire-culture-raison-progrès. Or, il existe une bibliothèque islamique qui a dès le départ contredit cet exclusivisme. En effet, des érudits musulmans africains ont produit d'énormes savoirs philosophiques et littéraires⁴⁸ qui demandent encore à être rendus disponibles.

Par ailleurs, l'archive orale a été réhabilitée à travers des campagnes de collecte et l'effectuation des bandothèques et bibliothèques sonores qui tendent à dépasser l'opposition binaire entre l'écrit et l'oral. Désormais, « on peut écouter la voix de nos doctes griots et de nos doctes doyens illettrés »⁴⁹. À l'écriture, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Boubou Hama et Djibril Tamsir Niane « opposent la parole qui proclame une éthique, une civilité, des valeurs et surtout des récits purement africains »⁵⁰. La représentation de cette histoire véhiculée par le griot est une mise en scène performative qui parcourt à sa manière toutes les étapes de la représentation historiographique. L'archive orale est une mise en forme qui se donne sous la forme d'un récit pédagogique, religieux ou profane, « la tradition orale intègre donc le domaine académique et universitaire mais aussi celui de l'imagination historique, littéraire, esthétique, performative »⁵¹. Pour Ade Ajayi, Kenneth Dike et Saburi Biobaku (historiens nigériens), les sources écrites ne sont pas un impératif dans la reconstruction historique. Si plusieurs historiens professionnels ont réduit le texte au document de façon seulement à en garder le contenu informatif, ces historiens, membres de l'école d'Ibadan, font des traces et des emblèmes de la mémoire orale, des figures propres à raconter l'histoire africaine. Réduire le texte au document, c'est aussi de l'avis de Zora Neale Hurston le priver de toute la coloration esthétique qui fait partie de la source d'information.

Pour Zora Neale Hurston et les historiens nigériens, la mémoire n'est pas un objet de l'historiographie. À elle seule, elle constitue une autre voie de l'historiographie. Seul, le discours oral ne peut pas être pris comme une archive, car il est performé. Pour le ranger dans la case du document, il faut le délester de son attitude performative. L'oralité produit un texte toujours mouvant, évolutif, réadapté. Dans la narration orale, les représentations symboliques ne sont pas un décor, elles font partie du texte. Le texte oral pour autant n'est pas figé (alors que l'archive écrite devrait l'être) et se constitue dans sa distance à d'autres textes oraux.

⁴⁶ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 20-21.

⁴⁷ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 21.

⁴⁸ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 19.

⁴⁹ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 80.

⁵⁰ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 81.

⁵¹ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 81.

On pourrait rattacher ces vues concernant la mémoire orale à celles de Yosef Yerushalmi qui pense que la mémoire personnelle ou collective se réfère à un passé vivant maintenu grâce à la transmission de génération en génération. La transmission est un essai de résistance de la mémoire à l'historiographie : « Le point critique consiste en ceci que la mémoire déclarative, la mémoire qui s'énonce, en se faisant récit, se charge d'interprétations immanentes au récit »⁵². La mémoire est porteuse d'un sens de l'histoire ; à cet effet, Yerushalmi affirme que l'historiographie n'est pas une entreprise de restauration de la mémoire, mais plutôt une nouvelle mémoire.

La question concernant la mémoire orale est celle de savoir si cette dernière est capable de combiner les exigences du *logos* de vérité avec celles du *logos* de fidélité (se souvenir). Avec l'écriture, le *logos* de vérité dispose d'un attirail sur lequel s'exerce directement le sens de la preuve formelle. Quant à l'oralité, la preuve de témoignage s'exerce efficacement sur une mémoire collective apte à asserter de la véracité de la parole exprimée publiquement, car elle constitue le sens commun. Toujours est-il que cette dernière doit être éprouvée par le sens critique lié aux juridictions de la parole⁵³, pour ne pas figer les communautés historiques dans leur malheur singulier ou, au contraire, dans leur violence instauratrice.

5. Conclusion

S'intéresser à l'écriture d'une histoire africaine, c'est interroger la pratique de l'histoire, de la collecte à l'analyse, de la critique des sources à la composition du récit. En Afrique, dès qu'il s'est agi d'écrire une histoire selon les canons universitaires, le dilemme a été celui de produire une histoire et de remettre le continent sur la carte, effectuer une plaidoirie pour la civilisation africaine. Dire l'Afrique selon sa légalité propre, en la replaçant au centre de sa propre histoire, a rendu difficile la disjonction du « travail empirique de l'historienne, de l'historien, et l'interprétation ritualisée du passé, c'est-à-dire l'écriture de l'histoire »⁵⁴. Pour nous, la séparation entre travail empirique et écriture de l'histoire n'est pas opérante, car l'histoire est en même temps interprétation et explication ; on ne comprend (saisir l'intentionnalité) une histoire que quand elle nous est bien expliquée. Cette explication qui épuise les raisons de l'action d'un sujet ne peut pas se calquer sur une causalité de type physique. Ceci n'ajourne pas le procès en objectivité qu'intente Mamadou Diouf aux premiers historiens africains. Seulement, même les plus professionnels des historiens partent toujours d'hypothèses que la recherche documentaire pourra confirmer ou infirmer. En tant que ressource pour la critique des idéologies, l'histoire, justement parce qu'elle est constitutive de l'identité humaine, ne peut s'exempter d'une certaine forme d'appartenance même dans ses formes les plus rigoureuses. Par ailleurs, une attention accrue aux travaux archéologiques sur l'Afrique permettra de circonscrire la parenthèse coloniale et de renouer avec des antiquités et pré-antiquités noires délestées (au maximum) du nécessaire, mais légèrement plombant, « nous aussi, nous avons une histoire ».

⁵² Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 518-9.

⁵³ Jean-Godefroy Bidima, *La palabre. Une juridiction de la parole* (Paris : Michalon, coll. « Le bien commun », 1997).

⁵⁴ Mamadou Diouf, *L'Afrique dans le temps du monde*, 23.

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Defeat – Conscientization – Action

African Contributions to a Hermeneutics of Suffering and Capability

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Abstract

This article explores connections between Paul Ricœur and African philosophers working in hermeneutics or with core issues of interpretation. It starts out from the view that hermeneutics is not merely an academic discipline, but forms part of a broader practice of conscientization, itself aimed at improving social interaction. Building on prior work on the political orientation of Ricœur's hermeneutics and on the emancipatory intent of African philosophical hermeneutics, the article seeks to better coordinate these directions of research. The paper consists of two parts. The first part is historical and provides an orientation to the initial reception of Ricœur's work by Africans and in Africa. The second part is systematic and reflects the guiding view of hermeneutics. The work of African philosophers and of Ricœur are coordinated around three related themes: (1) socio-political defeat as initial motivation, (2) the hermeneutic work of increased awareness or conscientization and (3) philosophical reflection on the action required in response to the demands of practical contexts.

Keywords: *African Hermeneutics, Political Philosophy, Conscientization, Transfunctionalization, Capabilities.*

Résumé

Cet article examine les liens entre Paul Ricœur et les philosophes africains travaillant dans l'herméneutique ou sur des questions fondamentales d'interprétation. Il part du principe que l'herméneutique n'est pas seulement une discipline universitaire, mais qu'elle s'inscrit dans une pratique plus large de la prise de conscience, visant elle-même à améliorer les interactions sociales. S'appuyant sur des travaux antérieurs consacrés à l'orientation politique de l'herméneutique ricœurienne et à l'intention émancipatrice de l'herméneutique philosophique africaine, cet article cherche à mieux coordonner ces deux axes de recherche. Il se compose de deux parties. La première partie est historique et fournit une orientation sur la réception initiale de l'œuvre ricœurienne par les Africains et en Afrique. La deuxième partie est systématique et reflète la vision directrice de l'herméneutique. Les travaux des philosophes africains et de Ricœur s'articulent autour de trois thèmes connexes : (1) la défaite sociopolitique comme motivation initiale, (2) le travail herméneutique de prise de conscience ou de conscientisation et (3) la réflexion philosophique sur l'action requise en réponse aux exigences des contextes pratiques.

Mots-clés : *herméneutique africaine, philosophie politique, prise de conscience, transfonctionnalisation, capacité d'agir.*

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1. Hermeneutics as conscientization and as practice

The aim of this article¹ is to expand the web of connections between Ricœur's philosophy and that of a selected strand of African philosophers, namely those who identify their philosophy as "hermeneutic" or whose reflection evidently applies to core issues of interpretation. Since I cannot detach this question from my own understanding of hermeneutics, let me state two points from the outset. While philosophical hermeneutics is an academic discipline with a venerable tradition in the arts of interpretation of several human and social sciences, I associate it more strongly with a widespread human initiative of working on one's own (and others') mode of being conscious of the world. In this sense, *hermeneutics is a mode of conscientization*.² Associated with this point, I consider hermeneutics (and philosophy generally), not only as a body of ideas and arguments, but also as a set of activities, and thereby coordinated and related to other people's actions in social life and history. In this sense, *hermeneutics is a social practice*. As a practice, philosophical hermeneutics holds the potential for instantiating the ability of hermeneuts to commit to socio-political tasks.³

A good part of what led me to these convictions was my work on Ricœur's thought, in particular his writings during the years when his questioning about hermeneutics emerged as entangled with political concerns. But my convictions were also shaped by studying hermeneutics in the work of several African philosophers, where the question of political liberation and continued post-independence emancipation is a major motivation. This raises the question of the relation between these two strands of thought, a question I have only partially dealt with in previous publications. In *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery* I have discussed African authors (not only hermeneuts) explicitly as part of the exegetical methodology: I assessed some of Ricœur's political claims and situated his general stance of the role of culture in emancipation, by comparing his view with those of some of his African contemporaries; I also demonstrated how some of the potential for intercultural philosophy in his work was identified and developed by African scholars. By contrast, in *Interpretation for Liberation: African Philosophical Hermeneutics*, I referred to European authors only as far as this was unavoidable, since I wanted to maximally foreground the

¹ This article forms part of my FWO research project "Ricœur: (de)colonization yesterday and today" (project number G030523N).

² This point is detailed in Ernst Wolff, "Conscientization without moralism, today", in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery. Decolonization, Modernity, Hermeneutics* (Berlin: De Gruyter [2021] 2025), 251-253.

³ This potential has to be qualified to avoid undue exaggeration. My objection is directed against the professional deformation that attributes to philosophy a more socially redemptive role than it has ever really played. Cf. Ernst Wolff, "Hermeneutics as commitment", in *Interpretation for Liberation. African Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2025), 243-288.

originality of the African authors. In this article, I aim to better coordinate these two strands of exploration.⁴

The potential material to be reviewed and the number of strategies for linking the two bodies of work are quite vast. I define the theme of this article with reference to my aforementioned understanding of hermeneutics as conscientization and as integrated in practical philosophy and in socio-political practice more generally. To prepare this discussion, I first want to give an impression of the existing interlacing of philosophy on the African continent with Ricœur's philosophical publications and his own reception of African philosophy. Against this background, I can present my own contribution, not as *the* way to link African philosophies and Ricœur, but as *one* way to do so. Likewise, I do not wish to reduce African hermeneutics to one problem (let alone essentialize what really is a body of diverse philosophical offerings and debates), but rather single out a prevalent theme that illustrates the significance of this strand of African philosophy. I will present this theme in three steps, captured by the article's title: defeat, conscientization and action.

2. Receptions and relatings

Paul Ricœur is a very European philosopher or, if we consider the extent to which he integrated Anglo-Saxon philosophy from mid-career, a Western philosopher. This does not mean that events outside of the West were of no interest to him – quite the contrary.⁵ However, with the exception of parts in his *Symbolism of Evil* where he deals with traditions from the Semitic world, there is little engagement with authors outside of the West in his main publications.

A historical approach to the task of relating Ricœur's thought to that of his African counterparts may therefore start out from the African side, notably in the receptions of Ricœur's thought. This history still remains to be written. For the time being, instead of an encyclopaedic overview, I present four coordinates by which to form an impression of the profile of his initial reception in different African contexts. Since Ricœur's writings were initially only available in French, one would expect his first reception to be in the former French or francophone colonies.⁶ There are indeed some traces of his work being received early by authors from the Maghreb (I refer to Morocco and Tunisia). Then I turn to sub-Saharan Africa, which is the region from which I discuss African philosophical hermeneutics further on in this article. Here the contrast between francophone countries (especially Zaïre/RDC) and anglophone countries (especially Nigeria and South Africa) will serve as pointers.

"Rives méditerranéennes", an association founded in 1959, invited Ricœur to give a presentation in Rabat, which took place in April 1960.⁷ His host, Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi, prepared

⁴ I reference my publications to help the reader follow up on certain points in more detail. However, I have tried to limit this so as not to overburden the text.

⁵ The first chapters of *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery* document this part of Ricœur's thought.

⁶ I say "former", simply because I have not been able to find any text from an African author referring to Ricœur during the colonial era.

⁷ According to the editorial introduction to Paul Ricœur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales", *Confluent*, January (1961): 46-56, here 46. A somewhat different rendering of the event is given by

a doctorate at the Sorbonne at the time Ricœur was professor there.⁸ Lahbabi presented his early philosophy as contributions to personalism and I find in them only scattered references to Ricœur. While I do not see any major influence of Ricœur's on Lahbabi, it is worth noting that Ricœur's paper in Rabat was his famous essay "Universal civilization and national cultures"; during the same period Lahbabi worked on very similar problems, as can be seen from the sub-title "twenty theses on national cultures and human civilization"⁹ to one of his books. It would be worthwhile to examine how this book corresponds to Ricœur and to other receptions of Ricœur's paper. However, there doesn't seem to have been any significant reception of Ricœur in Morocco.¹⁰

From Tunis, we have several testimonies to the early transfer of Ricœur's philosophy to Tunisia from the tribute volume *Présence de Paul Ricœur*¹¹ prepared by the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts. According to Abdelwahab Bouhdiba in 1950 his philosophy teacher at the Collège Sadiki recommended Ricœur's "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History".¹² Preparing the agrégation in philosophy, he attended Ricœur's lectures on symbols in 1958/59.¹³ Similarly, his compatriot Fatma Haddad Chamakh attended Ricœur's lectures from 1957 to 1961 and prepared a D.E.S. thesis and a "doctorat d'État" (habilitation) in 1959-1960 and from 1967 to

Jean Ferrari (former president of the *Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française*): "On two occasions in the 1960s, he [Ricœur] had come to Morocco at my request — I had intended, after attending his lectures during his first year at the Sorbonne, to prepare a thesis under his supervision — to give lectures on topics relating to culture and civilisation, under the auspices of the Association Rives méditerranéennes, chaired by the dean Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi. I recall his interest in the social problems of that country and his insistence on visiting the shanty towns [*bidonvilles*] of Rabat, which lay hidden behind high walls along the coast". Jean Ferrari, "L'engagement associatif de Paul Ricœur", in Moufida Goucha (ed.), *Hommage À Paul Ricœur (1913-2005)*, (Paris: UNESCO, 2006), 124-134, here 128, my translation.

⁸ Lahbabi was the first Moroccan professor of philosophy, appointed at the Mohammed V University in Rabat and the first Arabophone nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Lahbabi and Ricœur most likely met at least one other time, when they participated in one of the Castelli conferences, cf. Enrico Castelli (ed.), *L'analisi del linguaggio teologico. Il nome di Dio*. Atti del Convegno indetto dal Centro Internazionale di Studi Umanistici e dall'Istituto di Studi Filosofici, Roma 5-11 gennaio 1969, *Archivio di Filosofia*, no. 2-3, 1969.

⁹ Mohamed Aziz Lahbabi, *Du clos à l'ouvert: vingt propos sur les cultures nationales et la civilisation humaine* (Casablanca: Dar el Kitab, 1961). Note that part of this book was published in article form well before Ricœur's paper.

¹⁰ I thank Profs. Mohammed Hashas and Abdelhai Azarkan for e-mail responses to my questions relevant to this paragraph. The latter translated Ricœur's *A l'école de la phénoménologie* and *Du texte à l'action* into Arabic.

¹¹ Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts, *Présence de Paul Ricœur* (Tunis: Beït al-Hikma, 2003). The event on which this publication is based was organized by Mohamed Mahjoub, an organizer of several Ricœur conferences, author of several publications on Ricœur and the Arabic translator of *Being, Essence and Substance in Plato and Aristotle* and *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*. I thank Prof. Mahjoub for providing me with this information in correspondence.

¹² Abdelwahab Bouhdiba was a professor of sociology at the University of Tunis and president of the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts. He too prepared his agrégation in philosophy, in part at the Sorbonne during the time Ricœur was teaching there at the end of the 1950s. The article in question is: Paul Ricœur, "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History" [1949], *History and Truth*. Charles Kelbley (trans.) (Northwestern University Press, 1965), 223-233.

¹³ Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, "Souvenirs", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 5-10, here 8.

1977 under his supervision.¹⁴ Ahmad Hasnawi testifies to Ricœur's paper on linguistic theories and epistemology in 1967 at the Centre culturel Ibn Rashiq in Tunis.¹⁵ Let me also include a reference, from the same volume, to Georges Zenati (also Zainaty), a Palestinian-born Lebanese scholar who started his doctorate with Ricœur in 1960. He later translated several of Ricœur's books into Arabic.¹⁶ But before that, during the mid-1970s, he lectured philosophy at the Zairian philosophy faculty at Lubumbashi and may thus have played a role in Ricœur's reception there.¹⁷ This brings us close to sub-Saharan Africa, to which I turn henceforth.

When exactly Ricœur was first received in sub-Saharan African philosophy, I don't know. The first trace of reference to him I could find is a reference to Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols in a famous paper, "Conceptual Take-Off Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy", by the Belgian philosopher Franz Crahay, who taught in Zaïre.¹⁸ Jean Ladrière, Jacques Taminiaux and other Belgian philosophers who taught in the Congo/Zaïre, may also have encouraged students to read Ricœur in that region.¹⁹ There are indications that Ricœur's texts had been received at the philosophy faculty in Lubumbashi by the early 1970s by Kinyongo Jeki,²⁰ Tshiamalenga Ntumba,²¹ and Okolo Okonda.²² Besides, there is a proliferation of master's theses and articles on

¹⁴ Fatma Haddad Chamakh, "Témoignage d'une disciple", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 23-30, here 24. She does not describe herself as a Ricœurian philosopher and learned from him especially history of philosophy. Her thèse d'État, submitted at Paris X-Nanterre, was on *Philosophie systématique et système de philosophie politique chez Spinoza* (Tunis: University of Tunis, 1980).

¹⁵ Ahmad Hasnawi, "Hommage à Paul Ricœur", in *Présence de Paul Ricœur*, 55-58, here 55.

¹⁶ As far as I could establish: *Time and Narrative* volume 3, *Oneself as Another* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*. His doctorate, *La bipolarité de la liberté*, was completed at Paris X-Nanterre in 1972.

¹⁷ Some support for this supposition is found in Okolo Okonda's thanks to Zainaty, his former lecturer, in his thesis: *Tradition et destin. Essai sur la philosophie herméneutique de P. Ricœur, M. Heidegger, et H. G. Gadamer* (Lubumbashi: Université nationale du Zaïre, 1978-1979), II.

¹⁸ Franz Crahay, "Conceptual Take-Off Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy", *Diogenes*, no. 13/52 (1965): 55-78, here 66. Even before this date, readers of *Présence Africaine*, may have picked up Ricœur's name in the section announcing publications, the first occurrence of which was in the second edition, in 1948. The first mention of Ricœur in this journal is by the, then, assistant in philosophy at the University of Dakar, Alassane N'Daw, "Peut-on parler d'une Pensée Africaine?" *Présence Africaine*, no. 58 (1966): 32-46, here 40.

¹⁹ Cf. Herman Lodewyckx, who taught hermeneutics Major Seminary in Boma in 1980, drew my attention to this fact. See also Jean Ladrière, "Perspectives sur la philosophie africaine", *Revue africaine de théologie*, no. 5/9 (1981), 57-80, which is a contribution to African philosophy.

²⁰ See his overview: Jean Kinyongo Jeki, "Essai sur la fondation épistémologique d'une philosophie herméneutique en Afrique: le cas de la discursivité", *Présence Africaine*, no. 109/1 (1979), 11-28. His case for hermeneutics is unambiguous: "the hermeneutic model is better suited than any other to the idea of a specifically African philosophy" (19, my translation). Kinyongo credits Hountondji, who taught in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi (1970 to 1974) for having stimulated his colleagues there in reflecting on the nature of African philosophy and more specifically hermeneutics – cf. Kinyongo, "Essai sur la fondation", 12-13n7.

²¹ Tshiamalenga Ntumba, "Qu'est-ce que la 'Philosophie Africaine'?", *Recherches philosophiques africaines. La Philosophie Africaine. Actes de la 1ère Semaine Philosophique de Kinshasa* (Kinshasa: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1977), 33-46.

²² Setting aside his dissertation for a "licence" in philosophy (1974), see Okolo Okonda, "L'herméneutique chez Paul Ricœur: instances et méthode", in *Cahiers de philosophie africaine*, no. 6 (1974=1976), 33-60.

hermeneutics from that region in the 1970s.²³ Finally, there were also (non-Congolese) African students who had worked with Ricœur: Paulin Hountondji wrote a doctorate on Husserl and Marcien Towa – however, neither made much of Ricœur in their own work.²⁴ A part of Ricœur's reception in Africa was the result of students who, while not having been formally supervised by Ricœur, still had meaningful contact with him during the process of writing their thesis: as testified in the preface of their doctoral thesis by Theophilus Okere and Nkombe Oleko²⁵ – both of whom are important in the history of African philosophical hermeneutics. Other important academics wrote their theses on Ricœur, like Jean-Claude Bayakissa and Léon Matangila.²⁶

From the authors just mentioned, Okere is already somewhat of an “odd one out” in the sense that, as a Nigerian, he represents anglophone Africa. However, here one should not overlook the Belgian connection: Nkombe and Okere wrote their thesis in Leuven; a younger Nigerian

²³ This is based on Alfons Smet, *African Philosophical Bibliography / Bibliographie de la philosophie Africaine / Bibliografie van de afrikaanse wijsbegeerte*, <https://sites.uclouvain.be/sisp/sites/philaf/default.htm> (last updated in 2004).

Not all of the relevant entries in this bibliography have a strong filiation to European hermeneutics – if at all – see for instance Engelbert Mveng, “Introduction à l’herméneutique négro-africaine” [1973], *Le Critique africain et son peuple comme producteur de civilisation* (Yaoundé: Présence Africaine, 1977), 121-134. On Basil-Juléat Fouda, see Jacob Cléophas Defo Nzikou, “La fonction épistémologique de l’herméneutique dans la philosophie africaine. Le cas Basil-Juléat Fouda”, *Le tournant épistémologique de la philosophie africaine. Pratique de la recherche en contexte post-vérité* (forthcoming). And where studies are oriented to European hermeneutics, Gadamer is sometimes the relevant author.

²⁴ We have this information from Hountondji's own account in Paulin Hountondji, “My Experience with Paul Ricœur”, *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, no. 12/1 (2021), 50-59 and *L'idée de science dans les "Prolégomènes" et la première "Recherche logique" de Husserl* (Paris X - Nanterre, 1970).

In Towa's case, the thèse d'État was well underway under the supervision of Lucien Goldman, but when he died, Ricœur stepped in as supervisor to make submission possible. I received confirmation of this information from one of Towa's students, Charles Romain Mbélé. Towa's thesis was entitled, *Identité et transcendance. Examen d'un dilemme de la pensée africaine moderne* (Paris X – Nanterre, 1977) published by L'Harmattan in 2011. A comparative study Towa-Ricœur holds some promise, as can be seen from the issues about political trauma, general anthropology, and national cultures in this book. Towa is also the author of a paper “Idéologies et utopie”, presented at the Conférence internationale de philosophie de Khartoum, 30 October to 3 November 1977. However, despite the apparent proximity to Ricœur's lectures of the mid 1970s, this does not reflect any evident Ricœurian influence – for which reason it may also be worthwhile to examine the relation between Towa and Ricœur on these concepts.

²⁵ Theophilus Okere, *Can there be an African Philosophy? A Hermeneutical Investigation with Special Reference to Igbo Culture* (Leuven: Institut Supérieure de Philosophie, 1971) and Nkombe Oleko, *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques. L'intersubjectivité dans les "Proverbes Tetela"* (Kinshasa: Faculté de théologie catholique, [1975] 1979).

²⁶ Jean-Claude Bayakissa, professor emeritus of the Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, Republic of Congo; his thèse d'État is *Phénoménologie et herméneutique du temps chez Paul Ricœur* (University of Poitiers, 2003). I obtained this information from prof. Bayakissa at a conference in Kinshasa in 2023. Léon Matangila Musadila, philosopher and former dean of the faculty of human and social sciences at the University of Kinshasa, submitted a thesis *La catégorie de la faute: approche comparative entre la théorie mbala de la République démocratique du Congo et la conception de Paul Ricœur dans Finitude et culpabilité: Philosophie de la volonté 2* (Paris: University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1998) published by L'Harmattan in 2000.

philosopher, Raphael Okechukwu Madu, did so at Louvain-La-Neuve.²⁷ The Congolese scholar Jean Onaotsho Kawende, who did his doctorate in DRC, finished an important publication as visiting researcher in Louvain-La-Neuve.²⁸

In search of another orientation in anglophone Africa, one may wonder whether Ricœur wasn't received in South Africa where the Afrikaans section of the academic community used to be oriented to European philosophy. Indeed, Fanie de Beer completed a D.E.A. in philosophy with Ricœur around 1970 and he was working on Ricœurian themes at the University of Zululand at least from 1981.²⁹ Incidentally, De Beer is also one of the first to teach African philosophy at a South African university. In 1993 the University of Stellenbosch awarded Ricœur an honorary doctorate, but the exact profile of his reception up to that date still has to be reconstructed.³⁰ The first black South African to have had some knowledge of Ricœur, and perhaps the first to take an interest in philosophical hermeneutics, is Walter Ndaba.³¹

²⁷ Raphael Okechukwu Madu, *Hermeneutics. A Study of traditional African Symbols, Proverbs and Mythes on human Destiny in the Light of the hermeneutic Methodology of Paul Ricœur: the Igbo Case* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1990), and the monograph *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths. The Hermeneutics of Destiny* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1992).

Let it at least be mentioned that this Louvanian influence stretched into other non-European directions – consider the Pilipino Leovino Garcia, whose doctorate was *Between responsibility and hope: the meaning of man in Paul Ricœur's 'Philosophy of the Will' and social-political writings* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1981), recently published as *Ricœur's Early Ethical Philosophy: Explorations of Responsibility and Hope* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2025).

²⁸ Jean Onaotsho Kawende, *Appartenance et distanciation. De H.G. Gadamer et P. Ricœur à l'herméneutique africaine* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2016). This information was provided to me by Prof. Onaotsho Kawende.

²⁹ Carel Stephanus de Beer, *Hermeneutical philosophy in dialogue with psychoanalysis and structuralism: the renewal of the subject* (KwaDlangezwa: University of Zululand, 1981). The information about De Beer in this paragraph was received from him.

³⁰ I obtained the motivation document, *Motivering vir die toekenning van die graad Doktor in die Wysbegeerte (D. Phil.)*, *Honoris Causa, aan Paul Ricœur*, together with correspondence between the University of Stellenbosch and Ricœur from that university's library archive with the help of Ms. Marleen Hendriksz and Ms. Karlien Breedts. As can be derived from these documents and confirmed to me by Prof. Willie van der Merwe, who helped in drawing up the motivation, this award was prompted more by Ricœur's international academic standing than by his influence on South African philosophers; however, Van der Merwe also testifies to philosophers at the formerly Afrikaans universities studying Ricœur before this date. This contradicts the impression created by information generated by the *Sabinet* journal platform that, from the mid-1970s for twenty years the profile of Ricœur's Afrikaans speaking readers were predominantly theologians, with a few exceptions in literature, law and other sciences, and hardly any reception of Ricœur in South African philosophy during the twentieth century. Lincoln Michell's doctorate was submitted at an Afrikaans university, but was written in English: *The Recourse of Reflection to Symbols: An Evaluative Analysis of Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutical Philosophy* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1982). A thought-provoking case is Jean-Godefroy Bidima's appraisal of the article by Stellenbosch philosopher Anton van Niekerk, "Beyond the erklären-verstehen dichotomy", *South African-Journal of Philosophy* no. 8/3-4 (1989), 199-213, as a prime example of a South African philosophical appropriation of Ricœur, within the framework of an exposition of *La philosophie négro-africaine* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 35.

³¹ Walter Ndaba, "The Challenge of African Philosophy: A Reply to Mabogo More," *Alternation*, no. 6/1 (1999): 174-192. Ndaba wrote his MA thesis on Gadamer.

Having now given several points of orientation to the historical reception of Ricœur's work in Africa between the 1950s and 1970s, let us come back to Ricœur himself. Apart from his personal engagement with African philosophers through conference presentations, personal discussions or formal supervision, it is worth mentioning here Ricœur's participation in book projects of UNESCO. By writing the Introductions, he explicitly engaged African authors' contributions: Alexis Kagame, Abdelmajid Meziane, Honorat Aguessy, Boubou Hama, Ahmed Hasnaoui, alongside those of other non-European authors.³² The point is not to exaggerate this dimension of his work, but rather not to forget it entirely.

After this historical survey, let me give an impression of how the receptions of Ricœur's writings fit into broader tendencies of (sub-Saharan) African philosophy. Some of them are about Ricœur scholarship. However, much more often, the reception of his work is aimed at something different from, and outside of, his work: the life and times of African authors. In line with my declarations in the introduction above, I consider hermeneutics to start from everyday experiences of understanding and the culturally specific practices of interpretation aimed at enhancing that understanding. These may be documented in many different ways, in different disciplines, today.³³ It is fully understandable that an early generation of university graduates, then professors at post-independence universities, would find stimulation for thinking about the tense relation between severely damaged local forms of culture (remnants of which testified to life before colonization) and the treasure trove of western philosophy they gained access to. Hermeneutics as the study of any symbol, without prejudice about its modernity, made an enormous impact. In fact, while interpretations diverge, some scholars have seen in hermeneutics a significant role as approach to synthesize and stimulate new developments in African philosophy.³⁴ Up to the 1990s the reception of Ricœur in sub-Saharan Africa was almost exclusively a matter of hermeneutics of aspects of culture (symbolic, narrative, metaphoric, religious), very much in line with global reception of his work and most of his own self-presentations. Only more recently have scholars been more interested in Ricœur's practical philosophy.³⁵ However, if one follows what had been written about

³² Paul Ricœur, "Introduction", in *Cultures and Time* (Paris: UNESCO, 1976), 13–33 and "Introduction", in *Time and the Philosophies* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977), 13–30. These authors were not all sub-Saharan and not all philosophers and not specifically hermeneuts. My point is Ricœur's published engagement and that it was, from his side, philosophical. For more bibliographical detail see Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest. Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 178. I discussed Ricœur's contribution to these two volumes in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 208–219.

³³ A decisive reference remains for me Louis Liebenberg, *The Art of Tracking: The Origin of Science* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990).

³⁴ On the disputed place of hermeneutics in African philosophy, see Wolff, *Interpretation for liberation*, 25–41.

³⁵ In line with Abdelwahab Bouhdiba's personal account, above. Some examples of this trend are Vincent Davy Kacou oi Kacou's trilogy: *Penser l'Afrique avec Ricœur* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), *Paul Ricœur. Le cogito blessé et sa réception africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014) and *L'herméneutique du soi chez Paul Ricœur. Prolégomènes à une éthique de la reconstruction de l'Afrique* (Paris: Mon Petit Éditeur, 2014) and the theses: Léopold Kalubende, *De la visée éthique chez Paul Ricœur: Une vie bonne dans des institutions justes* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 1997), David-le-Duc Tiaha, *L'Altérité intime du soi. Sur la phénoménologie de l'agir et du pâtre de Paul Ricœur* (Paris:

hermeneutics by African authors, one quickly notices that it is understood as an element of a range of socially relevant responses to a socio-political crisis. Generally, African authors don't need to read books to find instruction about the significance of this fact; but many authors wagered that working in books may increase and enrich their conscious grasp of this fact and the practical demands that this poses on societies. Whence the prevalent association of hermeneutics with continued liberation.³⁶

These historical pointers suffice to guard the reader against expecting from the discussion below something like a first attempt to relate Ricœur and African philosophy. Rather, the material has become so abundant that I do better to focus on the question demarcated in the introduction and in this way to build out this correlation.

2. Philosophy and its practical orientation

The direction in which I want to build out this coordination between the hermeneutic strand of African philosophy broadly conceived and Ricœur's philosophy, is the *close association between hermeneutics, practical philosophy and socio-political practices*. While Ricœur is not always read in this way, I have elsewhere demonstrated the tight linkage between his socio-political concerns of the post-World War II years and the emergence of a series of questions which would gradually blossom as his four-fold contribution to hermeneutics: hermeneutics as reflection on the methodology of history, as the exploration of the meaningful constitution of action (or the dialectics of action and speech), the hermeneutics of symbols and as an ethic of intercultural exchange.³⁷ All of these questionings emerge in Ricœur's thought during the 1950s in correlation with his political concerns of that time and the development of each line could be traced – more or less clearly – throughout his later work.

It is therefore not by some foreign or anachronistic imposition that I focus on a "hermeneutics of the capable and suffering human" as platform for relating the hermeneutic strand of African philosophies with Ricœur's philosophy overall, but it springs from my understanding of a core impetus and motivation of both – a point which I maintain even when realizing that sometimes this line of reflection continues only in a subterranean way in Ricœur's writings. A last qualification about the notes that follow. In a very unbalanced way, I will relate a diverse selection of African authors with one French author, Paul Ricœur. Only the problem statement for the special edition of this journal can justify this procedure. Moreover, the authors I refer to wouldn't all explicitly claim to be hermeneuts, but the formulation of my question does not require this.

EHESS and ICP, 2012), Godefroid Nzila Yaav, *Les conflits sociopolitiques en République Démocratique du Congo: une analyse dans la perspective de Paul Ricœur* (Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté, 2023), Setsoafia Yawo-Nake, *L'éthique de Ricœur face aux circuits de la corruption. L'Église comme « communauté éthique » face à la corruption dans le contexte togolais* (Paris: Institut protestant de théologie, 2023) and most recently: Augustin Mbenga Isola, *La poétique de l'hospitalité dans la réflexion éthique d Paul Ricœur* (Kinshasa: Université Catholique du Congo, 2026). A valuable project would be a comparative study of all these works.

³⁶ And whence the title of my book on African hermeneutics: *Interpretation for liberation*.

³⁷ Cf. Wolff, *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, chapters 4 and 5.

This exploration of the practical orientation of philosophy is divided into three steps designated by –

- (1) the most significant marker of motivation and context, namely the experience of *defeat*,
- (2) the most general designation for the task of philosophy in response to the long-term effects of this experience, namely *conscientization* and
- (3) the correlation of philosophy to the practical responses to this situation, that is, to *action*.

I draw the three-fold structure from prevalent insights from African authors, knowing in advance that I will relate it to Ricœur's hermeneutics of human suffering and capabilities and his practical philosophy broadly conceived.³⁸

3.1. Defeat and self-affirmation

Understanding as an aspect of human existence and practices of interpretation that are shaped by tradition pre-date all European interventions in sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, the tertiary interpretative practice called "philosophy" – in the form of institutionalization in secondary and tertiary education, lecturing, writing research publications, and conference participation – is an inheritance of colonization and decolonization.³⁹ The difference of origin and modes of practice between all of the aforementioned rational activities creates a tension that defines the starting point for philosophical work in the independence era. It presents African philosophers with a constitutive dilemma as they try to negotiate the fragmentary aftermath of colonization (and slavery before that), while neocolonial practices are still part of the living present.

³⁸ Each approach to a comparison has its limitations. A fine coordination of European and African hermeneutics is Onaotsho Kawende, *Appartenance et distanciation*.

³⁹ For this reason, I will not pose the question here about the status of ethnophilosophy, Egyptian philosophy, Ethiopian philosophy or the cases of William Amo (a Ghanaian freed slave who worked for some time as a philosopher in Germany) or of Placide Tempels (a Belgian missionary whose book on *Bantu Philosophy* was a major impetus to the development of written African philosophy from the middle of the 20th century). For an encompassing view on the early history of African philosophy, see Peter Adamson and Chike Jeffers, *Africana Philosophy from Ancient Egypt to the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025). Nevertheless, let it be granted here that my claim is not simply self-evident, as opinions about the beginnings of African philosophy diverges among African authors. The position I take is close to that of Eboussi-Boulaga for whom the idea of "Western philosophy" is a pleonasm – Fabien Eboussi – Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy* (Trenton: Africa World, [1977] 2014), 97. This claim does not at all amount to denying rationality to precolonial Africa, but rather accords each specific form of rationality its due. I refuse to follow the idea (which seems to me still a legacy of Placide Tempels), according to which rejecting the purported irrationality of pre-colonial Africans has to pass by declaring their thinking to be "philosophical" – as if "philosophy" is the ultimate stamp of approval of all real thinking. My own view of philosophy is much more modest: I do not see why the intelligence of care or art or discussion or handiwork must be accredited as "philosophical" to salvage them from irrationality.

Ever since Theophilus Okere's pioneering proposal for African philosophy in the form of a hermeneutics,⁴⁰ the development of African philosophy (and hermeneutics in particular) is set against the background of a violently destabilized world:

It means the crisis of traditional religion in confrontation with both Christianity and secularism. It means Africa in metamorphoses—the dramatic change in material circumstances; the upsetting of traditional spiritual values; the moral ferment and ambivalence generated by this upset and the introduction of strange new values; the fact of belonging to the Third World, and the wrong side of the balance of power and wealth in a world dominated by power politics and greed; the crisis of self-respect resulting from the massive foreign invasion into Africa's intimacy, and Black Africa's self-understanding as victim in the context of world racism. All this, and more, would form the legitimate background of an African philosopher.⁴¹

Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga articulates this in even stronger terms by characterizing the initial context of reflection as one of "total defeat".⁴² In such a context, practicing philosophy, as life in general, is motivated by the sheer struggle for survival. This crisis, captured in his title *Muntu in Crisis*, refers to a kind of anchoring truth, and in that sense an "inaugural myth", the "myth of the crisis",⁴³ in other words the core narrative structure within which any grasp of reality and quest for identity has to be set. Accordingly, any philosophical enterprise detached from conscious working on this fact is devoid of meaning.⁴⁴

Okolo Okonda explicitly motivates the turn to hermeneutics in a similar way:

The interest in going to the past is sparked by the current situation: a hermeneutical situation that is at the same time a practical situation. For us it is a question of spiritual and material survival. We feel invaded by a culture that disposes of powerful means to expand and to dominate. We are also among those who are starving and suffering from material deprivation. This situation has been going on for a long time and is still going on.⁴⁵

The crisis that Okolo captures here in a nutshell, can be described further by examining its subjective, existential or psychological side and its objective social, political and economic side.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Evidently the African philosophies preceding Okere's 1971 doctoral thesis, *Can there be an African Philosophy?*, also demonstrate hermeneutic effort and in this sense may be typified as "hermeneutic" in the widest sense. Okere's text is the first I know to have elaborated this explicitly, but the term already plays a role in Basile-Juléat Fouda's thesis *La philosophie négro-africaine de l'existence* (Paris: L'Harmattan, [1967] 2013). I have commented on Okere from this Ricœurian perspective in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 227-229.

⁴¹ Theophilus Okere, *African Philosophy. A Historico-hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 121.

⁴² Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 10.

⁴³ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 116.

⁴⁴ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 9.

⁴⁵ Okolo Okonda, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement. Recherches d'herméneutique et de praxis africaines* (Kinshasa: Presses universitaires du Zaïre, 1986), 28, my translation.

⁴⁶ Cf. Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 40-41.

Yet, even if we grant that philosophy for African philosophers can and should then be situated in relation to this practical context, the question remains for now open which kind of philosophy that should be. Again, Eboussi-Boulaga articulates the problem in its severest implications when he argues that (European) philosophy “is an attribute of power”,⁴⁷ meaning that, in the way philosophy was transmitted to Africa, it was part of the means by which African modes of living have been violated. For this reason, the recourse to philosophy of any kind in response to the stated problem has nothing evident to it. Let it also be noted that this diagnostic starting point should not be seen as typical of the hermeneutic strand of African philosophy alone,⁴⁸ and the list of adherents to this view can be extended very far if we go outside of philosophy strictly demarcated.

A result of this dilemma is that African philosophy is doubly oriented to the past – to the violent past with its lingering effects in the present, and to a past of a cultural world that was a treasure of living and from which perhaps still something could be salvaged in response to the present predicament. A lot of early post-independence African philosophy is exactly devoted to this question: in the attempt to think through present day problems, how much should philosophers (a) strive to formulate or even recuperate a mode of thinking from before the traumatic historical break and how much should (b) be borrowed from Western philosophers? Those who are often critically called ethnophilosophers place the emphasis on strategy *a*, while others, many of whom had a formal philosophical education in Europe, follow strategy *b*. The ethnophilosophers can easily point the finger at their “professional philosophy” colleagues for simply taking over the dominator’s cultural goods and thereby implicitly consenting to its claims of superiority; the “professional philosophers” can just as easily point the finger at their ethnophilosophical colleagues for interiorizing a colonial anthropological image of a pristine pre-modern cultural essence to be exhibited for the dominator’s pleasure. This dilemma remains part of African philosophical practice to this day, with African hermeneuts typically situating themselves as a possible third position that seeks to combine the best of both options.

Still, whatever position philosophers take, they largely concur that the merits of philosophy are not solely determined by its scientific qualities, its erudition, the appropriateness of its concepts, or the coherence of its arguments, but it depends on the way it is *oriented to the practical situation* created by the trauma of destruction. In Okolo’s words: “Praxis triggers the hermeneutical process and gives it an orientation. Hermeneutics, in turn, offers praxis a cultural self-identification, required for the ideological struggle”.⁴⁹ What Okolo says here for hermeneutics would be affirmed by philosophers of many stripes: one of the core concerns of African philosophy is self-affirmation, in view of mobilizing towards full emancipation (as will be explained in §2.3, below). Correspondingly, the quality of a philosophy is to be measured by the quality of *self-affirmation* it helps to support and where self-affirmation has to be facilitated over the broad span of trauma suffered: social, economic, cultural, epistemological, political, etc. Or, to reformulate it negatively, insofar as philosophy neglects this task or continues feeding into the logic that made

⁴⁷ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 2.

⁴⁸ For instance, Marcien Towa, “Conclusion”, in *Identité et transcendance*, 337-346.

⁴⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 46.

initial defeat possible, it is to be considered harmful. That is the normative orientation of a philosophical project of which decolonization remains an enduring task.⁵⁰

Nobody thinks that philosophy is the only or even the most important means for self-affirmation. Philosophy is simply too specific a practice for such a broad social need. Indeed, attempts to realize self-affirmation can be traced to the colonial era in the form of minute acts of insubordination,⁵¹ cultural-religious resistance⁵² or political struggle.⁵³ Moreover, the philosophical inclination to retaliate to misrecognition through a strategy of self-justification, can lead to very ambiguous outcomes of extraversion or one-sided essentialization.⁵⁴ Adam Small insightfully controverts this temptation through the resolute refusal of justifying self-affirmation: “We are not there for Whites. We are there. We are. That will be the fact for us: that we ARE”.⁵⁵ But evidently self-affirmation requires some means to stimulate and maintain it. Fanon argued this point by pointing out the different ways in which national culture – where it is not simply destroyed –

⁵⁰ It is not for the sake of joining the most recent trends in social sciences that African philosophy has to adopt a term like “decolonial”. The decolonial thrust is inscribed in its fibre from the beginning, whether this word is used or not. A well-known essay in which the term figures centrally is Kwasi Wiredu, “Toward decolonizing African philosophy and religion”, *African Studies Quarterly*, no. 1/4 (1998): 17–46.

⁵¹ As Diagne discusses with translation in context of colonial administration – cf. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “Le truchement et le traducteur”, in *De langue à langue. L’Hospitalité de la traduction* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2022), 53–66.

⁵² E.g. Mongameli Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets among the Xhosa (1593–1856). A Study in Xhosa Cultural History* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004).

⁵³ Cf. Saïd Bouamama, *Figures de la révolution africaine. De Kenyatta à Sankara* (Paris: Découverte, 2014).

⁵⁴ See for example Leopold Senghor’s controversial essays, “What the black man contributes” [1939], in Robert Bernasconi and Sybil Cook (eds.), *Race and racism in continental philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 287–302 and “Negritude, as humanism of the twentieth century” [1967], in Roy Grinker, Stephen Lubkemann and Christopher Steiner (eds.), *Perspectives on Africa. A reader in culture, history and representation* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 477–484. Henry Odera Oruka opposes the excesses of this view on a most ironical tone: “What may be a superstition is paraded as ‘African religion’, and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as ‘African philosophy’, and again the white culture is expected to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as ‘African democracy’, and the white culture is again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as ‘development’, and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development — but of course ‘African development’.” (Oruka, “Mythologies as African Philosophy”, *East African Journal*, no. ix/10 (1972), 5–11, here 5).

⁵⁵ Adam Small, “Blackness versus Nihilism” [1971], in Mokgethi Motlhabi (ed.), *Essays on Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement, 1972), 10–16, here 15. Adam Small was the first “other than white” lecturer in philosophy at a South African university. Cf. also Ernst Wolff, “Adam Small’s Shade of Black Consciousness”, in Leonhard Praeg (ed.), *Philosophy on the Border: Decoloniality and the Shudder of the Origin* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2019), 112–147.

can play a significant role in unsettling a habitus of subservience, change the bodily style and gradually invigorate people to stand up and mobilize.⁵⁶

And if this point is accepted, we are steered back to the question of the role that academic practice and philosophy more specifically can play in self-affirmation. Eboussi-Boulaga draws out a wide range of strategies which start out from the institutional given of participating in Western philosophy. First, one can participate, but with irony and even laughter. Then, one can progressively introduce new concerns and new references, the person and context of the author, gradually developing a counter capacity from within philosophy.⁵⁷ What Eboussi-Boulaga calls the deviations (*écarts*) from the inherited or imposed practices, Okolo considered modes of re-takings (*reprises*). In either case, a capacity for “transfunctionalization” (a term from Eboussi-Boulaga) is demonstrated, by which inherited philosophy is steered away from its initial orientation to new purposes, central to which is people’s self-attestation on their own terms.

That such reworkings of inherited disciplines can have a real, cumulative effect, is documented in Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*. His survey of the history of several Africanist sciences reveals the roots thereof in a colonial matrix and then, from one scholarly generation to another, the “amplification” and other improvisations that indeed reflect what Eboussi and Okolo had in mind with their “deviations” and “re-takings”. Looking back on this scientific history, one is struck by the ambiguity of truth claims about Africa and Africans all along. More specifically, one is struck by the fact that present day scholarship reveals a demonstrable “epistemological filiation” with the matrix from which they developed, but in such a way that they range between continuity with outdated ideas and practices but also include inventions in view of self-affirmation. To give prominence to this shift, Mudimbe advocates an emphasis on the *practices* of sciences – much in line with Eboussi-Boulaga – where the truth-claims of scientists are dealt with only once these discourses have been considered as “signs of something else”.⁵⁸ A hermeneutics of the ambivalent possibilities of these signs, calls for *double critique*: a “positive” critique of the conditions that made certain discourses possible; and a “negative” critique of the socio-political consequences of people acting according to such epistemes.⁵⁹

With this outline in mind, let us turn to Ricœur. It is equally incorrect to make Ricœur into a thinker of total defeat or extreme suffering as it is to deny that this is present in his thinking and

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, “Reciprocal Bases of National Culture and the Fight for Freedom”, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 236-248. I have given an exposition of this text and compared it to Ricœur’s views on culture and decolonization in the same period in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 143-149.

⁵⁷ Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 120: “Attestation is brought about in two manners, [a] by the irruption of other codes, unexpected and incongruous, into the canonical code of philosophy, [b] by the connection and correlation to philosophy of quite different sets of experiences. The first process is metaphor, whereby the repressing meaning of desire makes eruption, the second is metonymy operating deflections signifying that philosophy does not meet the deriving need behind the appeal to it, and it must open up to the totality of the real.” (my numbering).

⁵⁸ Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix.

⁵⁹ Similarly, Tsenay Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy. Horizon and Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 119.

plays an important role in his practical philosophy. His early political thinking is born from concerns about violence, torture, political oppression, colonization, racism, poverty and other grotesque social harms; these are relayed in his later work by reflection on the stranger, injustice, fragility, incapability, misrecognition. His reflection about human suffering is motivated by the alleviation of suffering, the promotion of liberation and the improvement of justice. Yet, somehow, when we consider his entire oeuvre, these socio-political concerns seem to take a secondary place in relation to the themes of his big books, so the contemporary reader must do some work to highlight the connections between the different registers in Ricœur's thinking.

Elsewhere I have already shown that colonization and decolonization, and a wide range of issues related to them, played their role in shaping Ricœur's early philosophy. Here I would just like to underscore the compatibility of a concern for "total defeat" with Ricœur's practical philosophy and, more specifically, his hermeneutics of the acting and suffering human. If one takes Ricœur seriously when he presents *Oneself as Another* as a contribution to a "second philosophy"⁶⁰ or practical philosophy, then the grid of capabilities in that book can be used as a *diagnostic instrument* by which to give an account of suffering in many dimensions.⁶¹ But such a diagnostic use of the grid of capabilities requires that the attestation of capabilities is not reduced to making claims about people's capabilities, but is originally understood as the *practical affirmation* of what one is capable of. More precisely, through attestation people can affirm how capable they are, to which degree, how they are obstructed, by which means, and so on, in practice. And this should hold for each "self" – that is, individuals or collectives – in their relations with others who may support or undermine them, within institutions that are at best relatively just, but more often instruments of abuse.⁶²

What the African authors place centre-stage is the political project of attestation as self-affirmation in the face of enormous violence. Such self-affirmation is not foreign to Ricœur, not even the de-colonial aspect thereof is – as can be seen in "Universal Civilization and National Cultures".⁶³

Likewise, some of the African authors, by insisting on the practical embedding of philosophy in a broader political context, foreground the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion, directed at the complicity of academic practice with the powers that be. Moreover, by setting philosophy "into the medium of ethics",⁶⁴ they also insist that philosophy is being *done*, and in this sense belongs to the domain of capabilities – or incapacabilities – to be integrated into a practical philosophy as in *Oneself as Another*. Practical philosophy is both a philosophy about practice *and* a practice of questioning itself as to its own situation within a network of social practices – or about its failures to make a meaningful difference to social harms. It must exercise a double critique (as with Mudimbe, above), aimed both at society and at itself as integrated in social practices.

⁶⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*. Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 59.

⁶¹ Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, 256–257.

⁶² Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, chapters 3, 4, 5 – with the case studies of chapter 7 and 8.

⁶³ Paul Ricœur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" [1961], *History and Truth*, 271–284.

⁶⁴ Cf. Eboussi-Boulaga *Muntu in Crisis*, 185.

3.2. Conscientization

As became clear from the previous section, the experiences of defeat, when not resulting in genocide or total obliteration, generate the question of self-affirmation in contexts of sustained undermining. One should consider that a lot of such initiatives remain at the level of deploying “weapons of the weak”, which may not have much impact on social reality or the structures of oppression. However, here I want to consider the very specific form this question takes on when we consider the relative freedom enjoyed by those who are tasked to write and teach philosophy. I focus more on the work done by hermeneuts or what is of immediate relevance for interpretative approaches in philosophy and the social sciences. I do so, while maintaining my line of inquiry, in which the practical aspiration of philosophy is foregrounded. My thesis is that, from this perspective, hermeneutics could be ordered among the *human practices by which to augment and change people’s awareness of their practical surroundings*. This “awareness” was a recurrent point in Ricœur’s early thinking – the “*prise de conscience*”⁶⁵ serving ideally as a conduit from insufficient awareness about, or undergoing, circumstances to taking action. In a similar way, African hermeneuts or hermeneutically-oriented authors present their work as means to “conscientize” others, whether they use that word or not.⁶⁶

If philosophizing in an interpretative way is the *how* of conscientizing, where should we look for the *what*? African philosophers’ responses to this question fan out in a host of objects of study and methodologies. Suffice for present purposes to give a view of them.

A first series of responses focusses on *history* and the light it may shed on the present. Cheikh Anta Diop set the tone for this kind of work, by reframing the cultural production of the whole African continent with reference to Ancient Egypt, but he also strove to sensitize his readers to the contemporary issues of prime practical importance, in a way social analysts or political scientists would do.⁶⁷ Akin to this approach is Sofie Oluwolé’s attempt to recognize an ancient African tradition of thought – that of Orunmila – and to use it in a productive dialogue with the tradition issued from Socrates to stimulate reflection on contemporary issues.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ For example: Paul Ricœur, “The Question of the Colonies”, Ernst Wolff (trans.) *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, no. 12/1 (2021): 26–30, here 28, Ricœur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History” [1953], *History and Truth*, 21–40, here 32, “Vraie et fausse paix” [1955], *Autres Temps*, no. 76–77 (2003): 51–65, here 58, Ricœur, “The Political Paradox” [1957], *History and Truth*, 247–270, here 252, Ricœur, *Fallible Man*. Charles Kelbley (trans.) (New York: Fordham University Press, [1960] 1986), xlviii, Ricœur, “From Nation to Humanity: Task of Christians” [1965], Hoke Robinson (trans.), in *Political and Social Essays* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 134–159, here 137.

⁶⁶ I have developed this point in relation to Ricœur in *Reading Ricœur from the Periphery*, 251–252. My reflections about the dilemma regarding who conscientizes whom, and under which practical circumstances, apply here as well.

⁶⁷ This trajectory can be traced in the essays collected as Cheikh Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in African Culture & Development, 1946–1960*. Egbuna P. Modum (trans.) (London: Karnak House, 1996).

⁶⁸ Sophie Oluwolé, *Socrates and Orunmila: Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy* (Lagos, Nigeria: ARK Publishers, [2014] 2017). On Anta Diop and Oluwolé, see Wolff, *Interpretation for Liberation*, chapter 5.

This is already close to another set of approaches by which the *deposits of cultural heritage* are systematized and offered for philosophical reflection. This was the terrain of ethnophilosophers, but it has been occupied in different ways by several hermeneuts as their basis for reflection. Thus a lot of work has been done on proverbs and metaphors⁶⁹ or a broader series of linguistic heritage.⁷⁰ Correspondingly, oral culture receives a lot of attention.⁷¹ Some scholars identify the modern novel and literature as a mode of African philosophy in itself.⁷² Others adopt a more anthropological perspective on general aspects of traditional culture.⁷³ On the whole, Okere sees in traditional culture elements which, without being philosophical in themselves, lend themselves to philosophical reflection and merit being called “*philosophemes*”. This term is a keystone to a hermeneutic understanding of traditional culture: it grants ethnophilosophy the stimulating potential that cultural heritage may exercise on reflection, while avoiding reducing that heritage to a waiting-room status, as if it were in need of redemption by philosophy.

A different but still historically-oriented set of approaches focus more on the nexus of *transmission and improvisation* that could be traced over long periods of time, even through the most difficult times of recent history. This is the case with Taiwo’s history of modernity in Africa before colonization or Diagne’s reflection on “translation” as the perpetual transfer and reinterpretation of cultural goods into new cultural spheres.⁷⁴

A last set of objects for interpretative enquiry is *action and practices*. This holds, even while embodied action to some extent shares the characteristic of dancing, music or art, in that they don’t easily lend themselves to being transcribed into claims – a fact I try to capture in this article with the idea of *practical* attestation. As examples of such attention to action, one may think of how Eboussi-Boulaga made the philosophical practice of his contemporaries to an object of interpretation, as mentioned above.⁷⁵ We also saw that “praxis” guides Okolo’s hermeneutics.

⁶⁹ E.g. Nkombe, *Métaphore et métonymie dans les symboles parémiologiques* and a critical response to Nkombe by Okolo, “Le poète, le sage et le philosophe”, in *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 13-23.

⁷⁰ Madu, *African Symbols, Proverbs and Myths*.

⁷¹ Okolo Okonda and Ngangala Balade Tongamba. Introduction à l’histoire des idées dans le contexte de l’oralité. Théorie et méthode avec application sur l’Afrique traditionnelle (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-L’Harmattan, 2018) and David-Le-Duc Tiaha, “Décoloniser l’herméneutique”, in Collège international de philosophie, *Programme février-juillet 2026* (Paris, 2026), 16-18.

⁷² Cf. Henry Odera Orika, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), xxi, where written literature is presented as one of six trends in African philosophy. Stanley Uche Anozie, *Hans-Georg Gadamer and African Hermeneutic Philosophy* (Chisinau: Generis Publishing, 2020) attributes a central role to novelist Chinua Achebe as an African hermeneut. Finally, African hermeneuts also incorporate commentary on novels to their philosophical arguments – cf. Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement* (using Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le devoir de la violence*) and Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy* (using Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s novel, *L’Aventure ambiguë*).

⁷³ As was Okere’s initial orientation to Igbo culture in his thesis: Okere, *Can there Be an African Philosophy?*

⁷⁴ Olúfémi Táíwò, *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) and Diagne, *De langue à langue*.

⁷⁵ This is the theme of my interpretation of *Muntu in Crisis* in Ernst Wolff, “Working under cover. Eboussi-Boulaga and the practice of social critique”, *Philosophy in the Shadow of Racism. Critique, Interpretation and Practice* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026, forthcoming), chapter 2.

Tsenay Serequeberhan's contribution to African hermeneutics is centred in his focus on action (as will be commented on in §3.3, below). As concerned with action, hermeneutics and interpretative social scientific work in the African context tends to open very spontaneously to political reflection – in a way that cannot be said of all European hermeneutists.⁷⁶

This list is certainly not exhaustive.⁷⁷ The point is that African culture in the widest sense, past and present, is an important matter for reflection. All of these authors understand the phenomena they study as historical, but most strive to understand them as part of a living, changing reality. In fact, they often explicitly oppose a colonial cultural politics of “socio-cryonics”.⁷⁸ Yet, there is a tendency to value past cultural expressions more than present-day ones, with a strange effect of devaluing ambient culture today.

Studying this range of scholarly offerings, one notices the deployment of a *core set of concepts*, by which the authors explore the place and potential of this heritage in the context of today: tradition, transmission, culture, language, meaning, appropriation, authenticity, art, innovation, understanding, discourse, horizon, identity, interpretation, writing, orality, practice, etc. – always in proximity to more critical notions like ideology, power, colonization, exploitation, liberation, etc. These concepts each represent a philosophical problem and go a long way to demarcate the core concerns of African philosophical hermeneutics and African philosophy generally. Evidently, it would not be possible to survey the variations of approach and coordination even of the primary authors. Allow me just to render the overarching view of Okolo Okonda's hermeneutics as an example.

Above I already mentioned that for Okolo the critical state of contemporary living in African countries represents the context and impetus for philosophical reflection. The crisis is itself a “hermeneutic situation”.⁷⁹ To play its part in confronting this crisis as a practical problem, Okolo advocates a philosophy that is structured around three core concepts: tradition, hermeneutics and praxis. Setting praxis aside for the next section, let us look at the intertwinement of the two other concepts. Tradition is the whole of cultural deposits of a group of people and includes both material and spiritual aspects,⁸⁰ which belong to everybody and no one in particular. These deposits are to be dealt with as text-like phenomena which hermeneutics is tasked to “read” in the widest sense of understanding, interpreting and reappropriating or applying.⁸¹

How tradition and hermeneutics fit together, can be derived from three major propositions that structure Okolo's discussion:

⁷⁶ I draw two lessons from Francisco Díez Fischer's book on Gadamer, *La política cuestionada: Hans-Georg Gadamer y el arte de la pregunta* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2024): it confirms the rather a-political nature of Gadamer's own thinking, but one should not exclude its possible value for political philosophy.

⁷⁷ I have not touched upon the hermeneutics of religion, ritual or art.

⁷⁸ Táíwò, “Introduction. Of Subjectivity and Sociocryonics”, in *How Colonialism Pre-empted Modernity in Africa*, 1-17. Similarly Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 46.

⁸⁰ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 56.

⁸¹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 37.

1. Every theory of reading presupposes a theory of text and vice versa.
2. Every reading is oriented towards some kind of appropriation or re-taking [*reprise*].
3. Every reading and every appropriation is determined by a worldview of the subject who reads and appropriates.⁸²

The net effect of these three propositions is to portray tradition equally as something to be *discovered* and to be *re-invented*.⁸³ It may be a heritage of the past, but it exists as cultural tradition only in the ways in which it is re-activated in the present.⁸⁴ Consequently, culture is seen as constantly moving, dynamic, unstable – but may also be artificially stabilized or destabilized – open to reshaping and mutual contradiction between opposing appropriations.⁸⁵ Without letting culture evaporate (the material aspect of culture makes this difficult) this is an anti-essentialist view of culture (and therefore opposed to ideas of cultural unanimity). It is a view on cultural life that takes the specific context and living circumstances of people seriously, while opening to the practical question of a different, better, future. There is nothing frivolous about these variations of interpretation, because in those re-takings of tradition the quality of life of people is at stake: re-taking culture has the ambiguous potential as self-affirmation of identity or smothering ideology.⁸⁶ In short, no element of culture is simply unambiguously given, but all are rather up for dispute. While Okolo reserves an important place to agency in appropriation, he is equally conscious of the fact that people live out of the cumulative effect of socially shaped appropriations, which he sometimes calls worldviews, which have enhancing or constraining effects on people's real-life conditions and thus their flexibility in re-taking.

As elements of tradition, cultural heritages of all kinds are “multidimensional”,⁸⁷ in that they can be interpreted in different “registers” (aesthetic, religious, metaphysical, juridical, political, etc.), in other words, according to their nature, but also according to the divergent practical demands of each context of action. That this leads to different readings is not a loss, but part of the reality of interpretation as embedded in different social practices. Thus, Okolo's insistence on the plurality of meanings again contradicts common sense or substantialist views of the meaning and significance of culture.⁸⁸ Moreover, this raises also the question about people's orientation to the heritage of other cultures: either under constraint or by free, creative appropriation. Philosophical hermeneutics is not tasked to arbitrate the final meaning, but to clarify the complexities and stakes involved in interpreting and may have to engage with sciences to help in this task.⁸⁹ Two sciences are of particular importance to Okolo: history – a hermeneutic science – and an economic science, development studies, which is an ambiguous partner in the practical

⁸² Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 33, 42 and 45 (my translation).

⁸³ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 26.

⁸⁴ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 92; Okolo explicitly draws this point from Mudimbe.

⁸⁵ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 53.

⁸⁶ This can slip even into hermeneutics. I have demonstrated, for instance, how Okere struggled with a more traditionalist view of culture and a contextual view of culture, which is closer to the one advocated by Okolo – cf. Wolff, *Interpretation for liberation*, 66–71.

⁸⁷ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 36.

⁸⁸ A similar point is developed in relation to the restitution of works of art by Diagne, *De langue à langue*.

⁸⁹ Okolo, *Pour une philosophie de la culture et du développement*, 78.

quest hermeneutics is tasked to serve. One of the means to clarify the ambiguity of development is to highlight the contradictory findings offered on the improvement of people's well-being in history and economics.

Looking back at all the objects of hermeneutic concern for African philosophers, we can again re-insert the *what* into the *how*. Whatever the dimension of historical or present trauma – economic, societal, symbolic, cultural, epistemological, political – the varieties of hermeneutics adopt a double critical task: unmasking the destructive and oppressive realities in all their dimensions and excavating the meaning and potential of all the domains studied (similar to Mudimbe's double critique in §3.1) Whatever is studied, the intention is not to remain within the bounds of an academic practice, but to prepare re-entry into the world, now better equipped. In this sense, philosophy is a work of "permanent self-education".⁹⁰ This happens through interpretative clarification, but also with experiments on what could be practiced elsewhere in social reality. Combined, these two undertakings present conscientization through philosophy as a self-education in practical self-attestation, where philosophical practices serve as a "miniature schematization of a protocol of action".⁹¹ What Eboussi-Boulaga says for philosophical practice should be transposable to practices in other domains of culture and society.⁹² And what he presents as a modest act of self-education has to serve a broader, collective pedagogy or conscientization as part of the training for action to be assumed.

Let us turn from this perspective on philosophical conscientizations in African thinking to Ricœur again. Undoubtedly, Ricœur's *Symbolism of Evil* gave substantial impetus to hermeneutics in a wide series of domains. His readers outside of France were quick to pick up on the stimulating implications of his argument for the idea that "symbols give rise to thought." Although not developed in detail, Ricœur from the beginning understood that this approach to hermeneutics had intercultural implications.⁹³ And this point is amplified when linked with the text on the value of non-European cultures for a decolonized geopolitics, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures".⁹⁴ In Africa, these implications were received in divergent ways, spanning from modest exegesis on texts, to more ambitious projects of interpretation of African cultural elements considered as symbols or symbol equivalents, and very ambitious projects of the development of hermeneutics as a distinct strand of African philosophy. This is evidently not to reduce African hermeneutics to a reception of Ricœur – first, because hermeneutics is originally rooted in human

⁹⁰ Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 184.

⁹¹ Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 149.

⁹² Cf. Eboussi-Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 9.

⁹³ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Emerson Buchanan (trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, [1960] 1969), 19-24 and his hermeneutics of symbols redeployed in his introductions to *Cultures and Time* and to *Time and the Philosophies*.

⁹⁴ Setting aside authors like Okere or Okolo whose work included substantial commentary on Ricœur, see for instance Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 19-21, Ndaba, "The Challenge of African Philosophy", 183, Tshiamalenga Ntumba, "Qu'est-ce que la 'Philosophie Africaine'?", 39, Monga Oliga Mbambi, "L'approche herméneutique de la philosophie Africaine", *Recherches Philosophiques Africaines (Mélanges de philosophie Africaine)*, no. 3 (1978), 71-83.

experience since times immemorial (as noted above) and, second, not all African hermeneuts used Ricœur as their prime European reference.⁹⁵

These authors testify to the value of the meta-practice of interpretation which is philosophical hermeneutics. As I have illustrated with the example of Okolo (and anticipated in §3.1) hermeneutics is understood to be in the service of self-affirming socio-political initiatives. Should one focus only on a book like *The Living Metaphor*, one may get the impression that this is different from Ricœur. However, whoever has read his earliest texts will know how important “prise de conscience” – the effort to increase one’s aware grasp of a practical context – was for him (as it was for some of his African contemporaries⁹⁶). For Ricœur, one may well be attentive to the surrounding world, but this often is a rather naïve or uninformed consciousness. In several ways, he points to the need to grasp the same reality afresh after a critical detour. Calling this new grasp “second naivety” is an unfortunate choice of words, if it is not simply an incorrect conclusion.⁹⁷ This becomes clear as soon as one considers the fact that this renewed grasp henceforth knows itself to be relativized in a conflict of interpretations and to be constituted by an amplified awareness of the stakes of assuming one’s position, an awareness which can be amplified still further by detours of distantiated explanation.⁹⁸ The aim of renewing one’s initial grasp is therefore neither to find peace despite challenges, nor to reach detached indifference, but to cultivate an “informed sympathy”,⁹⁹ which is another way of saying intensified, critically-tested commitment. Following such a procedure is already a good way on the road to understanding conscientization. And if this is accepted, then we have found a sense in which conscientization is a common concern for Ricœur and for the African hermeneuts.

⁹⁵ Very notably, Serequeberhan makes use of Heidegger and Gadamer.

⁹⁶ Cf. especially Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*, 47-49.

⁹⁷ Usually associated with Ricœur’s philosophy of religion, this figure of thought is older and used more widely in Ricœur’s writings. See for instance on guilt: “Guilt is a feeling: the feeling passes from naivety to maturity by passing through *distinctions*”, Paul Ricœur, “La culpabilité allemande” [1949], “La culpabilité allemande.” *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*. Paris: Seuil, 1991), 143-154, here 146. Or on the philosophy of history: “Reasoned analysis is a kind of methodical step between an uncultivated and an educated sympathy”, Ricœur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History”, 29. Or again in dialogue with philosophers from other cultures: “Is not the remedy, however, implicit in the ill? Was it not necessary that modernity would estrange us from our very roots in order that, transcending the rift created by critical scrutiny, we might once again draw near, in a second, post-critical ‘innocence’ [*naïveté*], both to what was farthest from us and to what was nearest to us? Equally estranged from things near and far, can we not find our way back to both thanks to the fact that the scientific revolution has created this equal distance between us and all traditional cultures?” Ricœur, “Introduction”, in *Cultures and Time*, 32.

⁹⁸ This view of a renewed awareness is in line with Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation*. Denis Savage (trans.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, [1965] 1970), 42 and 46.

⁹⁹ This may have been the reason why Ricœur considered philosophy as such to be congenial with efforts of political liberation, as he maintained in his discussion with Dussel. Developing this point explicitly, with means already present in his work, would have gone a long way to convince his interlocutor. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “Philosophy and Liberation”, in Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricœur, Rorty, Taylor and the Philosophy of Liberation*. Eduardo Mendieta (trans.) (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1996), 205-212 and Ernst Wolff, “Filosofia da libertação versus hermenêutica? O ‘debate’ Dussel-Ricœur e seu significado contemporâneo”, in Roberto Lauxen, Cristina Henrique da Costa, Andrés Bruzzone (eds.), *Paul Ricœur: Identidade e Hermenêutica Crítica* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2025), 61-88.

The more this understanding of hermeneutics as conscientization is accepted to be, the more difficult it becomes to reduce Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols, metaphors, narratives, or even social imaginary and human capabilities, to their "cultural" dimension and the more natural it becomes to enquire about their practical embedding. Additionally, taking seriously the insistence with which African hermeneuts grapple with this potential of hermeneutics can only invigorate the question about how to redeploy such tasks of hermeneutics to practical aims. I do not say that all philosophers have to become political philosophers. However, the practical orientation of African philosophy now becomes a constant reminder or questioning when we engage in studious detours: wherein resides our ultimate motivation for such enquiry? From this perspective, we can reconfigure Ricœur's life-work and ask what the potential of each part is, still in the spirit of the marvellous essay "Work and the Word":¹⁰⁰ whatever one may think of Ricœur's conclusions in this article, it remains rich in instruction about how to undertake hermeneutic detours *in view of practice*.

The next interesting domain of correspondence and difference between Ricœur and the African hermeneuts is their thematic focus. One notices how themes like proverbs and oral culture more generally have received attention hardly present in Ricœur's work. On the other hand, Ricœur's philosophy of history and historiography has received comparatively little attention by African scholars. Overall, there is much room left for reflection on traditionality, the creative work on traditions and the imposition of tradition – all of which may require a politics of "deviations" or "reprise".¹⁰¹ Here I have in mind the need for a full phenomenology of the powerful relations that make some people into authors and others readers; accords to some the space to invent and requires of others to repeat or mimic; that archives, studies and appropriates some cultural elements while relegating others to oblivion or to exoticist celebrations, and so forth.

To avoid succumbing to the temptation of thinking "Ricœur for Europe and African philosophy for Africans," it is worth recalling an old lesson of Ricœur's: "I have only one way of getting out of myself: it is to disorient myself in others"¹⁰² or again, "one does not know oneself, [...] one has to go by way of the detour of others, always valuing the detour of critique".¹⁰³ This is very well illustrated in African authors in that their concerted efforts to think about African identity (or identities) always have implications for their view on Europe; likewise, thinking about Europe has to have a knock-on effect on their understanding of themselves, increasingly so as the divergent peaceful and violent ties between the two continents intensifies. A glowing example of this relation of mutual implication is Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* which, while dealing with scholarship on everything African, can proceed only by means of theorizing Europe and, in a sense befitting

¹⁰⁰ Paul Ricœur, "Work and the Word" [1953], in *History and Truth*, 197–219.

¹⁰¹ In *Interpretation for Liberation*, I discussed the importance of retaking (*reprise*) for Okolo. In an early article he explicitly credits Ricœur for this term: Okonda, "L'herméneutique chez Paul Ricœur: instances et méthode", especially 44–49.

¹⁰² Paul Ricœur, "The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth" [1953], *History and Truth*, 41–56, here 51 (translation modified).

¹⁰³ Paul Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*. Kathleen Blamey (trans.) (New York: Columbia University Press, [1995] 1998), 33.

his own theory, contributes to the invention of Europe.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, in Eboussi-Boulaga's view, the work of transfunctionalizing philosophy, has effects on the way traditional culture (and not just Western philosophy) is reconceived and reappropriated.

Once this point is properly grasped, it becomes clear how much is at stake in the backward-looking side of African philosophy. The orientation contains a highly *ambiguous political potential*. Hountondji captured the negative potential in a famous passage:

At a time when the gap between oppressor and oppressed is widening throughout our continent and political differences are becoming more radical, the ethnophilosopher claims that we have always been, still are and always will be unanimous. On every side we see terror tightening its stranglehold on us [...]; every word spoken spells danger and exposes us to untold brutality and may even cost us our lives; insolent neocolonial state apparatuses parade in triumph, leaving a trail of intimidation, arbitrary arrest, torture and legal assassination and poisoning genuine thought at its source. And the official ideologue smiles, content, and declares: "Alleluia, our ancestors have thought!"¹⁰⁵

Yet, that doesn't mean that the creative reappropriation of cultural heritage is devoid of progressive potential. The real motivation of this reappropriation remains a progressive self-affirmation, the essence of which Fanon captures: "Some have been surprised by the passion invested by the colonised intellectuals in their defence of a national culture. But those who consider this passion exaggerated are strangely apt to forget that their own psyche, their ego, are conveniently safeguarded by a French or German culture which has proved itself and which nobody disputes".¹⁰⁶

Between these two potentials lies a whole world of more or less violent economic and political reworkings of the material of interpretation and the processes by which they are critiqued and re-appropriated. In fact, one should never forget that the prime instigation of "defamiliarization" or "distantiation" for African philosophers, is the radically violent interference with the familiar lifeworld, dealt with in §3.1 and to which I return below.

3.3. Action

Following my objective to examine intersections of African hermeneutics and Ricœur's thinking with attention to the practical orientation of philosophy, I have taken the lead from African authors who start out from a history of trauma (§3.1). Then, I have looked at a wide range of human matters that can serve as the mirror in which to reflect oneself¹⁰⁷ and to reconsider how to reengage in social life (§3.2). In this last step, I have temporarily underplayed the importance of action. For African hermeneuts, as for Ricœur, action is of course matter for interpretation and, as

¹⁰⁴ Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 171: "This critical reading of the Western experience is simultaneously a way of 'inventing' a foreign tradition in order to master its techniques and an ambiguous strategy for implementing alterity".

¹⁰⁵ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1976] 1983), 170.

¹⁰⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 209.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (trans.) (London: The Athlone Press, [1986] 1991), 32.

such, has its place in the previous section. By contrast, what I would like to focus on now is initiative, as that which the conscientization by hermeneutic work strives to reinvigorate, set off or inform. That hermeneutics may lead up to a reflection on initiative should not come as a surprise to anybody who has seen that the three volumes of Ricœur's *Time and Narrative* end on a meditation on initiative.¹⁰⁸ However, in this work, Ricœur does not develop in very concrete detail how individuals and groups set out from spaces of experience and project themselves in action to horizons of expectation. In comparison, *Oneself as Another* is more practical, as it is focused on capabilities as constitutive of human agents and opens to the dilemmas of prudential action in context.

Action appears in many different guises in African philosophy and hermeneutics in particular – from the smallest inception of protest (as we saw with Eboussi-Boulaga above) to long-term shifting academic tendencies (as we saw with Mudimbe and Diagne above).¹⁰⁹ But the idea is not to restrict initiative to what academics can do. Okolo, for instance, considers hermeneutics merely as a means to grasp the present crisis, while reserving the term “praxis” for human action in as far as it is aimed at responding properly to crisis. Such responses should be informed by a creative combination of elements from tradition and insights from science, but find their realization only in a wider social project he calls “development”.

But I find the most radical attempt to think about action in Tsenay Serequeberhan, whose whork I would like to use as example here. Serequeberhan's point of departure is the simple claim that human beings are understanding and interpreting beings because of their temporality and historicity, violence against which leads to their de-humanization.¹¹⁰ Neglecting this fact will have a domino effect that may reduce the complex, actional meanings of human existence. This deficiency plays itself out as a lack of hermeneutic sensitivity, instantiated in either an internalized or an extroverted Euro-normativity. These deficiencies are instantiated in philosophy (ethnophilosophy and “professional philosophy” respectively) and in politics (as Serequeberhan identifies with Senghor and Nkrumah respectively) and where the philosophical and political versions are not only mirroring each other, but are often “correlated”.¹¹¹ Space does not allow me to unpack this claim in the detail it deserves, but it helps to establish two major beacons of his thinking: first, disastrous politics can be diagnosed not only on political terms, but also on existential-hermeneutic terms; second, inversely, seeking to remedy the consequences of political disasters – colonization and its aftermath, but also those created by post-independence leaders – requires a proper understanding of human existence and what it entails. It is this political situation that requires and legitimates reflection on human temporality and historicity. If the starting position is that of dehumanization, then reflection on historicity is not only a means by which to theorize that dehumanization, but also an approach to searching what re-humanized humanity

¹⁰⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative 3. Narrated Time*. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1985] 1988), 208, 230-235, 257-259 and Ricœur, “Initiative”, *From Text to Action*, 208-222.

¹⁰⁹ But also in Okere, *African Philosophy*, 128: “This self-interpretation which is also a self-assertion, is no doubt the best way to restore self-confidence to a humiliated culture”.

¹¹⁰ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 20.

¹¹¹ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 32 (for the full discussion, cf. 31-54) and Wolff, *Interpretation for Liberation*, 89-95.

must be and the means to bring about rehumanization. In more concrete terms, human historicity is nothing else than *agency and the capability to exercise it in a humane way*. What makes a reflection on agency a contribution to African philosophy is the specific profile of the situatedness of those who have a “shared destiny”¹¹² because of the similar dehumanization they suffered and the corresponding requirements to remedy this situation.¹¹³

For Serequeberhan, the core reality and normative measure is thus the striving towards a rehumanized living within a given socio-political horizon. “Striving” means: not yet realized, in other words, recognizing the tension between what is actually given and what has to be realized ideally. For this reason, the horizon within which people with a shared destiny think and act is a composite of “autochthonous tradition and [a] history of politico-economic struggles interior to itself [in this case, Africa]”.¹¹⁴ The hermeneutic work, in writing and in political initiative consists of constantly examining this composite to identify which aspects allow for reclaiming agency and which aspects impede this. Or in a formula derived from Cabral, people understand their world of practice in as much as they “return to the source” of human existence, which is autonomous action.¹¹⁵

Accordingly, to philosophize is coextensive with the aspiration to act in freedom – either to promote or to frustrate this aspiration and, in a sense similar to what Eboussi-Boulaga argued for, philosophy has significance only insofar as it makes a positive contribution to this aspiration. Philosophy can do so by furthering the interpretation of the context of action. Such work of *stocktaking*¹¹⁶ would lay bare the violent constitution of the present practical context, with which those directly concerned are already familiar in practice. Philosophy would then also have to play its part in reflecting on the means, even radical means required to lead people back to the source of agency – reflection which is already part of people’s emancipatory undertakings. In this way the view of hermeneutics is opened between the extremes of *violence suffered* and the question of *counter-violence*. This fact accounts for the importance Serequeberhan attaches to authors like Fanon and Cabral, as hermeneuts. Moreover, integrating the modes of thinking of people who were intimately familiar with the difficult demands of emancipatory practice, demonstrates again the permeability of a hermeneutics of action and human agency to real-life politics.

While violence and counter violence represent the scope of actional conditions – let us say between vulnerable passivity and powerful initiative – Serequeberhan has some view of the general direction in which strategic action should steer. Somehow action should reckon with the possibilities of a fusion of horizons (Serequeberhan’s own borrowing from Gadamer) and a plural, planetary humanity. One could, of course, insist a hundred times over that the devil is in the detail or object that Serequeberhan remains too vague on what is meant by violence, counter violence, the analysis of post-colonial situations, etc. But each time this objection would itself confirm Serequeberhan’s insistence on the political stretch of hermeneutics and progressive collective action’s dependence on interpretations.

¹¹² Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 136n5.

¹¹³ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 37.

¹¹⁵ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 90, 102.

¹¹⁶ Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy*, 13.

If we want to envision coordinating Ricœur's philosophy with this practical inclination of hermeneutics, we have to take seriously a line of reflection that traverses it, from the question of raising awareness to the practical attestation of capabilities.¹¹⁷ Once this is done, it becomes natural to consider his hermeneutics as integrated into practical philosophy, and the doing of practical philosophy itself integrated into the range of practices of the acting and suffering human. In fact, it gives to thought that practices – therefore also the practice of doing philosophy – are fitted into the capability of narration,¹¹⁸ itself embedded in the normative conflicts of ethics, morality and prudence – conflicts which have their burning *urgency only as part of human existence* (and not merely as sets of ideas).

Serequeberhan's view of emancipation places the striving for rehumanization and the return to the source of agency at the centre; likewise, Ricœur's practical philosophy centres the desire for the good life and the legitimate political will of the people. Within this orientation, Ricœur's philosophy of action is an excellent instrument by which to map the variegated dimensions of human action, ranging between forms of embodied suffering and situated capabilities. Moreover, this orientation remains responsive to a primordial *normative commitment*, which echoes that of Serequeberhan: if our respect for human life is ultimately rooted in people's capacity to act,¹¹⁹ then it follows that Ricœur's hermeneutic anthropology entails a normative commitment that seeks to be realized in practice. Here hermeneutics' role is supportive in deciphering how the capacity to act can be generated and supported by life together in a society; or, to the contrary, assessing how living with others and within unjust institutions undermines this capacity. While it is true to see in the state people's ability to act a familiarity with their practical lifeworld, a familiarity without which there can be no attestation to capabilities or incapacities, it is equally true that distancing from that familiarity may augment one's understanding of the condition of one's capabilities. Such distancing can be imposed by violent circumstances, a fact about which Ricœur was very well aware.¹²⁰ But affirmations regarding the ability to act (who does what? when? to which degree? by which means? under which constraints? etc.) is only something done subsequently in studious reflection; primary remains the *practical attestation* – that which people are capable of as they aspire to the good life individually and collectively. Conscientization does not aim at theory, but at decisions in practice. And thus, we come back, by Ricœurian means,

¹¹⁷ Sometimes Ricœur acknowledges this practical or even actional stretch of his oeuvre as in the "Préface" he wrote for Maurizio Chiodi, *Il cammino della libertà. Fenomenologia, ermeneutica, ontologia della libertà nella ricerca filosofica di Paul Ricœur* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1990), ix-xix. However, in many of his other self-presentations, the political dimension of his thinking is rather neglected. To this tendency Ricœur's *Critique and Conviction* is rather an exception. Approaching initiative from an action theoretical perspective does not bypass the extreme difficulties and ambiguities that make up the political risks of action – cf. Ernst Wolff, "Utilitarianism as an Exercise of Suspicion?: A Challenge to Pragmatism and Hermeneutics" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* no. XIV/1 (2022).

¹¹⁸ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 152-161.

¹¹⁹ This is the implication of Ricœur's claim that it is people's capabilities to act that ultimately solicit our respect, see Paul Ricœur, "L'expérience psychologique de la liberté", *Le Semeur*, no. 46/6-7 (1947-1948): 444-451, here, 445, Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 181 and Paul Ricœur, *Lectures 1: Autour du politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 164.

¹²⁰ As, for instance, already in Ricœur, "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History".

to the constitutive feature of African hermeneutics and a host of proposals in practical philosophy from the African continent.

In fact, one may even ask what the significance is of Ricœur's incomplete return to practical philosophy in his later writings. My point is certainly not that there is a problem in focusing on the epistemology of history or religious language, etc. But his hermeneutic trajectory itself requires completion in a direction of a poetics of the will (or whichever name we want to give that practical philosophy), announced in his early writings, when Ricœur still affirmed: "I would therefore like to make a case for a philosophy in which political reflection is not an optional detour, but a preferred mode of expression—or rather, an essential part of the process."¹²¹ The African authors rightfully point to this. Moreover, they indicate several ways in which to make philosophy productive today, by focusing on histories and contemporary realities of the violent restriction of the capabilities to act. Their work provides material for describing the complex *prefigurations* of intersecting facilitations and constraints which constitute individual and group agency in all contexts; they could equally help in reflecting on the ways by which agents can "distanciate" themselves with explanatory or narrative *figurations* of that lived reality, and on how this conscientization could critically accompany the search for practical compromises between ethics and morality in practice in initiatives of socio-political *refiguration*.

Finally, this does not mean that philosophy has to set agendas and work out massive plans of action. We can simply concur with Ricœur that there is no science of what is to be done. However, this takes nothing away from the ways in which philosophy and other sciences can help in preparing action. Ricœur illustrates this function of "theory" for "practice", by repeatedly identifying a paradox between two equally strong theoretical claims, for which there is no solution in theory, but for which people acting in real life have to find compromises. In this sense, consciously assumed by Ricœur, philosophy remains incomplete and can be completed only in practice. Accordingly, a scholarly "stocktaking" both on the conceptual level and as interpretation of practical contexts demonstrates the philosophical ability to bring some clarification to action and sets limits to what philosophers can hope to achieve. Philosophy can hope to inform practically-wise decision-making without ever pretending to be a science of decisions.

4. Conclusion

Underlying this study of relations between Ricœur's philosophy and that of his African counterparts, mostly hermeneuts, is a series of shared anthropological assumptions. It would be a very valuable study to draw up the exact profile of this shared view, including the differences that may set limits to an over enthusiastic embrace of anthropological universalism. However, without some assumptions about core aspects of human existence, all comparisons, borrowings and corrections would be vain.

Furthermore, making this claim does not amount to pushing the cultural and socio-political differences between people aside. To the contrary, it gives one of the entries for an increased awareness of the differences within any specific history, tradition or cultural group.

¹²¹ Paul Ricœur, "Le philosophe et le politique devant la question de la liberté", in [editor not named] *La liberté et l'ordre social* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1969), 41-56, here 41.

It is true that the focus on aspects of culture may create the impression of a culturalism.¹²² I would argue that only bad hermeneutics would succumb to reducing the doings of people to cultural facts or to excluding politics and economics from culture. Moreover, throughout this article I have repeatedly pointed out how matters of culture, interpretation and even self-affirmation retain an ambiguous potential – a fact which again calls for more interpretation in view of renewed initiatives. The whole set-up of my argument is against some essentialization of cultures, in favour of a realistic view on social dynamics – again either because of internal movement or by external interventions. This interpretative realism – in which the paradox of politics, the internal conflicts in societies and the struggles for recognition have their place – does not require that we abdicate the desire for living in more just institutions.

This realism, which social history can document in the finest detail, may be reason for despair – for reasons evoked in §3.1. At the same time, the positive side of these ambiguities may contain some motivation to those of us who see in the gradual formation of “neocultures”¹²³ – in letters, arts, in social life and in politics – not merely a degeneration of heritage or the deposit of clashes of power, but also glimpses of other possibilities, which we may try to pursue in academia or in social life as miniature protocols of action, in the spirit of Eboussi-Boulaga. In this paper I paid tribute to several authors who have preceded me in this task and who have thereby “paid the deposit for a history which remains to be made.”¹²⁴ I hope hereby to add my own contribution.¹²⁵

¹²² Not only is culturalism a reductive interpretation, but by sidelining the economic and political dimensions of social reality it can be deployed to the advantage of authoritarian power. In this respect a balanced assessment of the relation between philosophical hermeneutics and the Zairian doctrine of authenticity would be a welcome study. Cf. Tshiamalenga Ntumba, “La vision ‘ntu’ de l’homme. Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique,” *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*, no. 7/14 (1973), 174-196 and Élie Phambu Ngoma Binda, “Pour une orientation authentique de la philosophie en Afrique: l’herméneutique,” *Zaire-Afrique*, no. 113 (1977), 143-158.

¹²³ Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 193.

¹²⁴ According to Ricœur’s expression: Ricœur, “Non-violent Man and His Presence to History”, 229.

¹²⁵ This article as a contribution to a construction of the “common”, as I argue for in Wolff, “Intercontinental philosophy: thinking in and for a plural world,” *Philosophy in the Shadow of Racism. Critique, Interpretation and Practice* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2026, forthcoming), chapter 6.

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Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy. Keys to reflect upon the case of Chile and its memory

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Abstract

This article argues that Ricœur's categories of memory, narrative, and recognition illuminate and critically problematize the unresolved ethical and political tensions of post-dictatorial Chile. Human fragility – an anthropological theme central to Ricœur's thought – underlies political life and reveals its inherent paradoxes. His ethical and political reflections provide a framework for examining the symbolic and narrative dimensions of Chile's ongoing crisis of social reconciliation, marked by disappeared detainees, persistent impunity, and enduring forms of denialism, despite the efforts undertaken since the restoration of democracy. Ricœur characterizes such phenomena as impeded or manipulated memory. The hermeneutic approach serves both as a methodological mode of inquiry and as a means of understanding the conflict itself. The analysis develops along three interconnected lines: the aporias and limits of memory, the narrative construction of collective experience and its distortions, and the challenges of mutual recognition in the presence of institutional, social, and political barriers. An examination of key Chilean sites and moments of memory tests the explanatory power and limits of Ricœur's hermeneutic categories when confronted with Chile's historical experience. The article also examines the narrative dimension through two intersecting registers – factual (reports and testimonies) and fictional (documentary film) – thereby recovering the history/fiction dialectic developed in *Time and Narrative III*. Finally, it engages critically with objections raised by leading scholars regarding personal and collective memory and their relation to mutual recognition, showing how the Chilean case challenges these categories. In doing so, it demonstrates how a non-European experience of democratic transition enriches Ricœurian debates on the phenomenology of memory developed in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

Keywords: *Memory, Narrative, Mutual Recognition, Fragility, Postdictatorial Chile, Hermeneutic.*

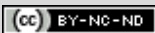
Résumé

Cet article soutient que les catégories de mémoire, de narration et de reconnaissance développées par Ricœur permettent d'éclairer et de remettre en question de manière critique les tensions éthiques et politiques non

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résolues du Chili post-dictatorial. La fragilité humaine – thème anthropologique central dans la pensée de Ricœur – sous-tend la vie politique et en révèle les paradoxes inhérents. Ses réflexions éthiques et politiques fournissent un cadre pour examiner les dimensions symboliques et narratives de la crise actuelle de la réconciliation sociale au Chili, marquée par les disparus, l'impunité persistante et des formes tenaces de négationnisme, malgré les efforts entrepris depuis le rétablissement de la démocratie. Ricœur caractérise de tels phénomènes comme une mémoire empêchée ou manipulée. L'approche herméneutique sert à la fois de mode d'enquête méthodologique et de moyen de comprendre le conflit lui-même. L'analyse se développe selon trois axes interdépendants : les apories et les limites de la mémoire, la construction narrative de l'expérience collective et ses distorsions, et les défis de la reconnaissance mutuelle face aux barrières institutionnelles, sociales et politiques. L'examen de sites et de moments clés de la mémoire chilienne permet de tester la puissance explicative et les limites des catégories herméneutiques de Ricœur face à l'expérience historique du Chili. L'article examine également la dimension narrative à travers deux registres qui s'entrecroisent – le factuel (rapports et témoignages) et le fictionnel (film documentaire) – reprenant ainsi la dialectique histoire/fiction développée dans *Temps et récit III*. Enfin, il aborde de manière critique les objections soulevées par d'éminents chercheurs concernant la mémoire individuelle et collective et leur rapport à la reconnaissance mutuelle, en montrant comment le cas chilien défie ces catégories. Ce fait montre comment une expérience non européenne de la transition démocratique enrichit le débat ricœurien autour de la phénoménologie de la mémoire, développée dans *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

Mots-clés : mémoire, récit, reconnaissance mutuelle, fragilité, Chili post-dictatorial, herméneutique.

Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy. Keys to reflect upon the case of Chile and its memory

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Introduction

For the purposes of this analysis, I propose to create a dialogue between two paths of wounded memory: private, intersubjective memory, with its ethical dimensions and individual psychic traces, and memory as a public event and instance, with its social and political repercussions. I argue that the Chilean case reveals, at both levels, the problems that impede a *happy memory* and *mutual recognition* – two key Ricoeurian concepts –, whenever conditions of institutional impunity persist. At the same time, the Chilean case is theoretically productive because it is broadly applicable to other countries in the region that have experienced dictatorships and have faced similar obstacles to social and political reconciliation, including Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, and Nicaragua, among others.¹

The analysis developed here requires a critical assessment of the relationship between the interpersonal dimension of memory and its narrative articulation, on the one hand, and the collective symbolic sphere, on the other – a relationship that lies at the heart of conflict in postdictatorial Chilean society. From this perspective, the process of carrying out the *work of memory*, together with the resistances it encounters under the phenomenological-hermeneutic framework developed by Ricœur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, particularly through the categories of *impeded* memory or *manipulated* memory, invites us to consider possible revisions in dialogue with authors who have offered important critical perspectives.² Such an approach makes it possible to address the difficulties that characterize Chilean conflicts not only in terms of the institutional conditions that shape them, but also in relation to the collective symbolic pathways that have themselves been obstructed.³ Accordingly, a philosophical-hermeneutic reflection on the crisis of recognition in Chilean society and on the dilemmas of memory facilitates fruitful interpretation

¹ Cf. Guillermo O'Donnell, *El Estado Burocrático Autoritario: Triunfos, derrotas y crisis*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial de Belgrano. 1982); Scott Mainwaring, Aníbal Pérez Liñán, *Democracies and dictatorships in Latin America. Emergence, survival, and fall* (Reino Unido: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

² Andrew Barash, Johan Michel, and Geoffrey Dierckxsen have some critical stance, while Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, Olivier Abel, and Pierre-Olivier Monteil consider Ricœur's contributions as a fundamental approach to the interpretations of collective memory.

³ Recent studies have revisited the question of memory in Chile. See, for example, Graciela Rubio, "Hegemonic Memory and Social Memory: Tensions and Pedagogical Challenges Surrounding Chile's Recent Past," *Revista Colombiana de Educación*, 71 (2016), 109–135; Vania Martínez, "Transgenerational Trauma and Postmemory among the Grandchildren of Victims of the Chilean Dictatorship," *Revista de Estudios Sociales, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia*, N° 84, (2023), 59–76.

and broadens the channels through which conflict may be mediated in the spirit of Ricœur's thought.

The hermeneutic inquiry proposed here offers a phenomenological account focused on exemplary events. To this end, it moves epistemologically across three interconnected planes: memory as the ethical core of action; the *narrative sense* that accompanies *memory* as the *poetic* dimension of analysis; and *mutual recognition* as both a real and symbolic instance, together with its political and institutional implications. The investigation thus traverses both the public sphere of events and the sphere of individual testimony in order to reveal their interweaving and, in so doing, advance toward an emancipatory hermeneutic understanding. The fundamental Ricœurian concepts identified above provide the basis for a reflection on concrete cases that reveal the latent symbolic texture of historical experience and its impact on the narrative understanding through which collective identities are formed.⁴ Through the examination of difficult experiences that call for truth and justice, the aim is to understand the obstacles that have hindered the construction of a political project capable of aspiring to the ethical formulation so dear to Ricœur: "the aim of the good life, with and for others, in just institutions".⁵

The present study takes human *fragility* as a fundamental hermeneutic key for understanding the social and political phenomena of Chile's recent past. Paradoxically, Ricœur's anthropological reflection on action derives its productive strength from the capacities of the capable human being. *Strength* and *fragility* thus form an inseparable dialectic within the ontological architecture of the human condition in Ricœur's philosophy. The challenge of this analysis is to test this model against capacities that have remained "impeded" in Chile's recent history, in light of the fragilization of memory, insufficient processes of justice, persistent denialism, and the absence of collective symbolic reparation in place of the privatization of suffering endured by the families of the disappeared detainees. These political and institutional realities express forms of human incapacity and reflect both a lack of mutual recognition and an impoverished, polarized narrative construction. Within this difficult landscape of social and political reconciliation, the article critically examines the desirability of aspiring – even as an incipient utopia – to a just or "happy" memory and to its narrative elaboration. A retrospective view of the Chilean experience confronts the social and political wounds that remain present in our history thirty-seven years after the restoration of democracy. Debates surrounding the last fifty years of Chilean history reveal a complexity that stems not only from the diversity of interpretations but also from the different epistemological perspectives through which recent political reality is understood.⁶ Philosophical reflection requires two forms of caution: attentiveness

⁴ The relationship between the narrative dimension of understanding and the historical dimension of narrative has been developed extensively by Ricœur in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), and in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

⁶ Cf. Heraldo Muñoz, *The Dictator's Shadow: A Political Memoir of Life under the Pinochet Regime* (Santiago: Random House, 2023); Steve J. Stern, *Remembering Pinochet's Chile: On the Eve of London 1998*, vol. I of *The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile* trilogy (Santiago: Ediciones UDP, 2009); Alberto Mayol, *The Collapse of the Model: The Crisis of the Market Economy in Contemporary Chile* (Santiago: LOM, 2012).

to the phenomenon's irreducible polysemy and awareness of the limits imposed by the historical dialectic between closeness and distance. We remain very close to a history that is still unfolding, one that continues to operate beneath the surface of the present and thereby limits the possibility of genuine distanciation.⁷

The article is organized around two principal axes followed by a conclusion. 1° Memory in the public sphere and its social and political impact as a hermeneutic event of recognition and divergence. 2° Narrative as the core of understanding and its possibilities for reconstructing identity. 3° Conclusion: Balance between the impediments to and possibilities of recognizing the other in Ricœur's phenomenological hermeneutics.

1. Memory in the public sphere and its social and political impact as a hermeneutic event of recognition and divergence

In *The Course of Recognition*, Ricœur demonstrates the connection between memory and forgetting, as well as between memory and recognition, while adding a reflexive component: self-recognition. This connection carries philosophical implications. To begin with, the act of recognizing oneself is, to a significant extent, an exercise of memory. Amnesia is a pathological form of forgetting that serves to demonstrate this irreducible alliance between identity and memory. Memory is therefore inseparable from self-recognition. Likewise, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur highlights the act of recollection⁸ as a voluntary enactment characterized by active searching (*zētēsis*), or what Aristotle calls *anamnēsis*, in contrast to memory understood as evocation (*mnēmē*), in which remembrance takes the form of an affection (*pathos*). This distinction allows us to enter the moral and political terrain of memory. Clarifying the truth of events thus opens the possibility of justice and makes it possible to reconstruct the social fabric within which identity is forged. This active search, or work of memory, seeks to overcome the forgetting of what has occurred and, in some measure, to repair the inevitable irreversibility of events. The moral dilemma is whether recollection ultimately achieves its primary purpose. In other words, whether it truly succeeds in overcoming the barriers imposed by forgetting, which make the task so difficult. As Ricœur writes: "The work of Anamnesis moves against the current of the river Lēthē. One searches for what one fears having forgotten temporarily or for good..."⁹ The question is whether there is a future for this search – that is, whether the effort involved can succeed or fail. As Ricœur further emphasizes: "Successful recollection is one of the figures of what we call 'happy' memory".¹⁰

As we shall see in the Chilean case – and this will constitute one of the central sources of conflict – this effort to search for memory against forgetting unfolds along two distinct dimensions.

⁷ As Ricœur observes, the principle of distanciation is inherent in that of belonging, Cf. Paul Ricœur, "Histoire et Herméneutique" (1976), en *Paul Ricœur. Penser la Mémoire*, edit. François Dosse and Catherine Goldenstien, (2013), 25.

⁸ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 18.

⁹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 27.

¹⁰ Ricœur offers a detailed analysis of the methodological question of memory and its power to represent the past in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, through a reexamination of Plato and Aristotle, cf. p. 33 and following pages. He also examines the issue of mourning, likewise, linked to memory, as a process of healing in cases of psychic wounds that acquire pathological psychological dimensions.

One concerns fidelity to the past as the recollection of what truly happened, the truth-bearing function of memory. The other concerns the ethical meaning that arises from the need for justice and reparation in order to honor memory in this struggle against forgetting. These two dimensions of the political work of memory do not always go hand in hand. In both cases, we encounter the factor of memory's fragility: the fragility of agents confronted with obstacles to remembering at the political and institutional levels, as well as forms of self-censorship or forgetting at the private and personal levels. Ricœur assigns a crucial place to forgetting – a certain forgetting that is not simply the opposite of memory understood as negation, but rather one that ontologically grounds memory's central role, even though it remains one of the less developed dimensions of his major work. Forgetting is an important issue, but it will not be addressed directly in this analysis.

Returning to the idea of memory's fragility, it is necessary to consider its hermeneutic implications. An analysis of the post-dictatorial Chilean experience explores its implicit hermeneutic significance to demonstrate the impossibility of a univocal account of the past at the ethical and political levels. It is necessary to recognize that the past is not remembered through a single story but through interpretations of events whose complexities have multiple dimensions. Through the analysis of specific examples, we explore the difficult role of memory in its deepest hermeneutic sense. What is at stake is our way of understanding the past, our way of interpreting lived experience, and the possibility of establishing basic bridges of agreement around moral principles that are nevertheless accepted by different groups who have either lived through or inherited that past.¹¹

Our focus is the political history of Chile during the period following the restoration of democracy in 1990. The issue remains so current that today, more than thirty-five years later, in fact, we have witnessed a renewed confrontation over human rights and over the still unresolved fate of thousands of disappeared detainees.¹² This remains an open social wound and a matter of profound disagreement within political debate.¹³

Remembering is part of the effort to resist forgetting. Yet remembering also presupposes a power on the part of the one who exercises this capacity. In his analysis of the paradoxes of recollection and evocation – opened by Plato and Aristotle – Ricœur emphasizes that the point of departure lies within ourselves and refers to a "capacity for searching".¹⁴ Memory, then, is not merely an arbitrary appearance, a pure passivity that deprives us of the resources necessary to "recover" the past as unavailable memory; memory is also an active capacity to remember

¹¹ Studies on this period are diverse, but the consensus among historians is divided between those who value the stabilization of democracy despite the political costs entailed by the transition, and those who concur with the assessment of the traumas associated with what has been termed "military power and social trauma," a notion employed by Ricœur; cf. Eduardo Pizarro Yong, *Chile and Latin America. The Role of the Armed Forces in Democratic Consolidation (1990–2000)* (Santiago: Planeta, 2003), 29.

¹² Likewise, the Chilean Senate approved (4 March 2026) the Alternative Sentence Compliance Bill, on humanitarian grounds. The measure applies to individuals convicted of various types of offenses, including those of a political-historical nature as well as those convicted of serious criminal offenses. This measure has once again reopened the debate and generated renewed controversy.

¹³ Cf. Edmundo Pérez Yoma, *Civilians and the Military: The Role of Defense in Democratic Consolidation (1994–2000)* (Santiago: Planeta, 2025), 216.

¹⁴ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 18.

(recollection).¹⁵ At this level, memory fulfills an irreducible ethical role: recognizing what happened, recounting the atrocities committed, and making mourning possible. Within this psychic sphere, there are individual resistances to confronting the past, but there are also political resistances to confronting responsibility. The possibility of genuine reconciliation, although difficult, is not impossible. Yet one of its fundamental conditions is remembering lived reality, acknowledging crimes, pursuing justice, and providing reparation for the victims.¹⁶ Some progress has been made in this regard through important initiatives that will be discussed below, although not all processes have been completed. Yes, we have moved forward and restored democratic stability; however, history has left subterranean traces that strike at the heart of trust itself, which is fractured by its own vulnerability.¹⁷

The task of history is to investigate those “traces” that provide access to the past through their vestiges – marks, inscriptions, documents, archives, monuments, and so forth. Indeed, as Ricœur reminds us, these are observable facts that can be explained through a model of “scientific” intelligibility.¹⁸ The problem is that lived experience contains a moral and affective dimension that presupposes the acceptance and narrative elaboration of facts, and this is a difficult process.

One might assume that the passage of time and historical distance serve as a way to help heal wounds – a *pharmakon* that may nevertheless prove to be double-edged. The scars of this “wounded memory” conceal reserves of bitterness and feelings of injustice that are transmitted across generations and emerge at unexpected moments. During periods of crisis and social discontent, often driven by different forms of inequality, these hidden wounds resurface through movements of social, political, or economic protest. The Chilean social uprising of 2019 was an important example of this phenomenon.¹⁹

The expressions of rebellion and the feelings of anger that have emerged in recent years within Chilean political life compel us to understand the depth of this malaise and to ask about its causes, so as to re-signify this past in the hope of reducing the suffering and projecting a new future. In this context, hermeneutic phenomenology re-emerges with renewed force as a “philosophical and methodological path” to rethink the local realities that afflict us and the broader global horizon, at a time when “humanity as a whole is undergoing a situation of crisis”.²⁰

¹⁵ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 26.

¹⁶ Graciela Rubio, *Memory, Politics, and Pedagogy: Paths toward Teaching Chile's Recent Past* (Santiago: LOM, 2013); Cath Collins, Katherine Hite, and Alfredo Joignant, *Memory Politics in Chile: From Pinochet to Bachelet* (Santiago: Ediciones UDP, 2013).

¹⁷ For critiques of Chile's neoliberal model and democratic transition, see Mayol, *Boric: The Labyrinth of the Doors* (2025).

¹⁸ Ricœur, “Histoire et Herméneutique”, 23.

¹⁹ Cf. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Human Rights Crisis in Chile, December 2019*; Carolina Aguilera and M. Badilla, “Human Rights Memorials in Turmoil: Antagonistic Memories in Contemporary Chile,” *Political Geography* 98 (2022).

²⁰ Luz Ascárate, *Imaginer selon Paul Ricœur. La phénoménologie à la rencontre de l'ontologie sociale* (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 149.

1.1. The relationship between narrative and memory

In the present inquiry, memory functions as the witness that supports the search for clarification and enables those reserves of experience that continue to operate beneath the surface to be brought into language. Their elucidation and narrative refiguration are achieved through the hermeneutic appropriation of the past into present life and projecting a "forward horizon".²¹ In this sense, the path toward understanding the past rests upon an essential hermeneutic principle: "...objectification is at once primitive, radical, and possible. It begins when life is no longer simply lived, but understands itself and makes itself understood to others through its connectedness. Through this connectedness, life can be spoken and described".²² In this passage, Ricœur refers to the historian's need to attain the objectification of the past. Yet life itself also comes to be "spoken" through its narrative unfolding, in which imagination plays a constitutive role. The world and life demand narration, and where narration is absent, it is due to a lack of imagination, argues Revault D'Allonnes. She adds: "Because language makes a world, all the meanings that emerge in experience find a word; their existence is indivisible".²³ In this way, she invokes Ricœur's thesis outlined in "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator", where he formulates a crucial proposition: so long as a life remains untold, it is nothing more than a biological phenomenon (*zōē*). Ricœur further adds that it remains a biological phenomenon "(...) insofar as it has not been interpreted. And in interpretation, fiction plays a considerable mediating role".²⁴ In this text, Ricœur explores the pre-narrative character of human experience, which continually seeks to be brought into language to render that experience intelligible (*bios*). This is the possibility we possess of making experience into a path of understanding. What is at stake is the passage from life to lived experience, and the mediating role of fiction is essential, because the plot of a life is woven from a mixture of acting and suffering, of acting and suffering human beings.²⁵

From the perspective of the past and the history of a community, this narrative capacity is translated into communication and makes possible an ethics of communication. To listen to a story is to become part of the history of the one who tells it; the one who reads it participates in the society from which it emerges. In short: "Whoever says participation also says sharing, exchange, communicability, or even a 'common measure' that renders reality transmissible".²⁶ Yet the critical point of this communicative process lies in the obstacles that threaten the very possibility of narration. As D'Allonnes emphasizes, these obstacles undermine the ability to tell either a personal

²¹ By the term *refiguration*, which will appear several times throughout this article, we refer to the third moment of Ricœur's theory of narrative, *mimesis III*, developed in *Time and Narrative* vol. 1 (1990), 70. The refiguration of temporal experience is the reader's appropriation of the work; through what is narrated, we are able to project our own capacities and to re-signify our world from the perspective of action.

²² Ricœur, "Histoire et Herméneutique", 25.

²³ Myriam Revault D'Allonnes, "La vie refigurée. Autour des *Disparus* de Daniel Mendelsohn", in François Dosse & Catherine Goldenstein, eds., *Paul Ricœur : penser la mémoire* (Paris : Seuil, 2013), 208. Our translation.

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, "La vie: un récit en quête de narrateur," *Écrits et conférences, vol. I: autour de la Psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 268.

²⁵ M. Revault D'Allonnes, 207.

²⁶ Revault D'Allonnes, 210.

or a collective story, as is evident in experiences of horror associated with extreme violence – Auschwitz being the paradigmatic example – where lived evil resists representation.²⁷

From this perspective, a politics of memory acquires its full significance, and it becomes worthwhile to revisit our history in order to identify the knots that have hindered communicability. In some cases, these obstacles arise from irreducible causes – that is, from individual impediments produced by the horror of limit-experiences, experiences that may exceed the capacity of witnesses to bring them into language. As Revault D’Allonnes writes: “(...) narrating life, narrating the world, its sufferings and its pains, presupposes that the gulf between lived experience and the language available to account for it is not impassable”.²⁸ In other cases, communication becomes fractured because it contains gaps or because it has not been made sufficiently public. In this respect, communication possesses an ethical function, and testimony does as well, since it allows dialogue between those who have lived the history and those who receive and acknowledge it. Trust plays a crucial role in this process. The willingness to believe, and not to refuse belief from the outset, presupposes the good faith of all parties, reinforced by the institutions that support them. Such a process depends upon the credibility of witnesses, which, as we shall see, enables their words to possess value and legitimacy. As Ricœur writes: “This fiduciary dimension, common to testimony and promise, extends far beyond the circumstances of its exercise. Through its habitual character, trust in testimony... strengthens the general institution of language, whose ordinary practice includes a tacit clause of sincerity and, one might say, of charity...”.²⁹ Yet a political system fractured by dictatorship can hardly serve as a repository of such trust. Indeed, it is precisely this willingness to believe that has been broken in the Chilean political experience. For this reason, it becomes essential to recover, through explicit public policies, that moral foundation of authentic belief in the word of the other.

As we shall examine in what follows, there are institutional examples that precisely lead towards this direction.

1.2. Institutional-testimonial level

We shall analyze the question of memory and its relationship to narrative configuration on the basis of what Ricœur calls in *Memory, History, Forgetting* “a phenomenology of remembering”, in order to distinguish between memory itself, which is singular and refers to a fundamental anthropological capacity, and memories, which are plural and constitute its enactment, more or less “happy” according to their degree of fidelity to the past.³⁰ In this respect, what we examine are the memories that accumulate around a history and the way in which their narrative configuration makes it possible to take a step toward the social and political recognition of events. In other words, we remember limit-experiences that, because of their moral and political weight, come to be regarded as historical events.

²⁷ Myriam Revault D’Allonnes, “La vie refigurée : les implications éthiques du récit”, in *Archives de Philosophie*, (Paris : Octobre-Décembre 2011, Tome 74, Cahier 4), 604.

²⁸ Revault D’Allonnes, “La vie refigurée. Autour des *Disparus* de Daniel Mendelsohn”, 208.

²⁹ Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. D. Pellauer (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 131.

³⁰ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 21.

There is likewise a relationship between remembering and knowing, because such events make it possible to relive and bring the past to light. "At this level," Ricœur observes, "remembering and knowing completely overlap," yet what gives these memories their distinctive character is their reference to facts rather than to theories, rules of conjugation, and the like. Thus, "the events with which documentary history is concerned assume the propositional form that grants them the status of facts. What is at stake, therefore, is the 'fact that...' things happened in one way rather than another".³¹ This reference to the past as something that truly occurred and occurred in a particular way is what makes it possible to grant lived experience a moral status and to orient the possible enactment of justice.

During the administration of President Patricio Aylwin (1990–1994), democracy was restored in Chile after seventeen years of military dictatorship. One symbolic gesture in this process was the creation of the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, whose work culminated in the Rettig Report.³² The Commission's purpose was to establish the truth regarding the human rights violations committed between 11 September 1973 and 11 March 1990 that resulted in the death or disappearance of victims. The Commission was composed of a group, including figures from different political alignments, both opponents and supporters of the military regime, in order to lend legitimacy to the process. Its task was to establish an official account of what had occurred and thereby lay the foundations for national reconciliation. It was entrusted with compiling a comprehensive record of events and gathering and documenting as much information as possible concerning the most serious human rights violations committed by agents of the State. To accomplish this task, it was necessary to identify the victims through the testimonies of individuals and families who had directly or indirectly suffered abuses – disappearances, torture, summary executions, kidnappings, and attacks – and who were in a position to testify. The Commission also recommended measures of moral and material reparation, proposed legal and institutional reforms, and assembled evidence that could assist judicial proceedings.

Although it did not exercise a strictly legal function, the Commission contributed significantly to establishing the truth in many cases, even though numerous others remained unresolved. Nevertheless, it represented a genuine attempt to do justice to the victims.³³ When President Aylwin publicly presented the Rettig Report, he acknowledged the Commission's efforts to reveal the truth. One statement from that moment remains engraved in Chile's symbolic memory: "The reconciliation of Chileans requires that the truth about what occurred be established and that justice be done insofar as possible".³⁴ This phrase produced a profound emotional impact because it captured both the limits of the Commission's work and the political fragility of the historical moment.

³¹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 24.

³² Created on April 25th, 1990, through Executive Order N° 355. Cf. Report of the Chilean National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (Santiago: La Corporación, 1996), 24 volumes, published in 3 vols.

³³ According to the figures reported in the Rettig Report, a total of 3.550 cases were examined. Based on subsequent historical updates and the review conducted by the National Reparation Corporation (1996), the official number of victims of disappearance and death stands at 3.216. If the survivors of political imprisonment and torture officially recognized in the years following the Rettig Report are also taken into account, the total number of victims of the regime rises to 40.000.

³⁴ A statement made at the National Stadium on March 12, 1990. The underlining is ours.

The history of Chile during those years is well known and, in many respects, quite singular. A peaceful transition took place from a brutal dictatorship to a democracy through a process of negotiated agreements that, as might be expected, imposed limits on democratic restoration. These agreements included political restrictions and guarantees of immunity for outgoing authorities, revealing the difficulty of the transition.³⁵ Yet what interests us here is the symbolic gesture of recovering memory that accompanied this democratic inauguration. The Rettig Report offered a detailed account of violations of individual rights by gathering the testimonies of victims. In this way, a public space was created in which those who had suffered could finally be heard. Their pain and suffering were acknowledged. This did not solve the problem, but it constituted an important sign of recognition of their dignity.

Individuals were able to recount what had happened to them within an official setting, free from threats. They were able to describe unforgivable abuses and bear witness to others who had been judged and executed without any form of due process. This constituted a decisive milestone in Chile's effort to restore the rule of law and democracy. Moreover, it enabled a symbolic act through which a group of individuals respected for their moral standing in society repaired, in part, the official silence surrounding the past by listening to accounts of what had occurred and recording them in a public report. This gesture of political objectification regarding the wrongs that had been committed was indispensable for establishing the truth and opening the possibility of reconciliation.

In Ricœur's terms, memory is a resource against forgetting. It is a source of justice and must be exercised through institutions that legitimize the rule of law, affirm the truth of what occurred, acknowledge injustices and perpetrators, and provide reparation for victims. The context in which the Rettig Report emerged – in the midst of a highly fragile political transition, under the constant threat of regression and the watchful presence of the military in the background – made it a defining moment in Chile's democratic transition.³⁶ Its reception, however, generated criticism from different directions. One could say that its results gave rise to a crossed hermeneutics between those who deeply valued this step toward truth and those who failed to obtain justice and therefore did not approve of this effort to uncover the truth.³⁷ At the same time, among supporters of Pinochet there were reactions of indifference or contempt, since many either did not wish to see or did not believe the abuses that had been committed. The most conflictive response came from those for whom the process remained insufficient because they hoped to learn the truth in every case and continued to demand justice. Nevertheless, the Rettig Report represented a crucial milestone

³⁵ It should not be forgotten that former President Salvador Allende, who was overthrown by the military dictatorship in 1973, came to power through a democratic election in 1970 and represented an unprecedented case: the election by popular vote of a socialist president in a Latin American country. In rhetorical terms, his left-wing political project emulated the Cuban revolutionary model. Cf. Daniel Mansuy, *Salvador Allende: La Izquierda Chilena y la Unidad Popular* (Santiago, Chile: Penguin Random House, 2023).

³⁶ Edmundo Pérez Yoma, *Civiles y Militares. El rol de la defensa en la consolidación democrática* (1994-2000), (Santiago: Planeta, 2025); Cath Collins - Katherine Hite - Alfredo Joignant, *Las políticas de la memoria en Chile: desde Pinochet a Bachelet*, (Santiago: Ediciones UDP, 2013).

³⁷ Cf. Zalaquett, "La reconstrucción de la unidad nacional y el legado de violaciones de los derechos humanos," (*Perspectivas*, Vol. 2, Nº 2, 1999).

in the public clarification of what had occurred. It was regarded as a symbolic act of democratic reparation and truth-telling and helped pave the way for the restoration of social coexistence.³⁸

This is a first example illustrating the political dilemmas of memory understood as an active registration of the past, or recollection, capable of serving as evidence of what occurred, though it is not always possible to achieve a complete or “happy” memory of events. Remembering is difficult because it must pass through the complexities of memory fractured by its own fragility. Ricœur refers to forgetting as the shadow that haunts memory and transforms it into an “unhappy” memory.³⁹ This unhappiness may arise for different reasons. At times, it results from the inability to remember; at others, from a deliberate will to erase, to maintain concealment, or to refuse remembrance to avoid suffering or punishment. In every case, however, memory as a human capacity remains exposed to failure and reveals the fragilities inherent in the human condition, for the paradigm of the “capable human being” contains both powers and incapacities. In the case of experiences marked by a terrible and painful past, the process of recollection becomes even more difficult and complicates the construction of identity. Consequently, the problem of memory’s fragility is joined by the need to reclaim identity. The fragility of memory is rooted in the fragility of identity itself, as a continual search spurred by the question: *Who am I?*

According to Ricœur: “As the first cause of the fragility of identity we must cite its difficult relation to time; this is a primary difficulty that, precisely, justifies recourse to memory as the temporal component of identity, in conjunction with the evaluation of the present and the projection of the future”.⁴⁰ In other words, understanding who I am presupposes the possibility of weaving together my history and remembering it. When memory is impeded, when memory is censored, the narrative constitution of identity is weakened. As we shall see later in Part II of this study, identity is forged narratively and is continuously refigured through stories and narratives interwoven with the stories of others. It is at this point that personal identity and collective identity intersect.

1.3. Memorial-documentary level

A second political milestone in the process of reparation was the creation of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, inaugurated in January 2010. Conceived by President Ricardo Lagos, it fulfilled his commitment to “Truth, Justice, and Reparation”, which provided the museum with its ethical foundation and documentary depth. This memorial is based on the findings of official reports such as the Rettig Report discussed above and also takes into account the results of the Valech Commission, established during Lagos’s administration (2000–2006), whose findings had a profound impact because of the harrowing testimonies it collected.⁴¹ In this report, the events

³⁸ Heraldo Muñoz, *La sombra del dictador. Una memoria política de la vida bajo el régimen de Pinochet* (Santiago: Random House, 2023).

³⁹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 30.

⁴⁰ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 81.

⁴¹ The Valech Report originated from the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture, established by President Ricardo Lagos in 2003, whose findings were released in 2004. Unlike the Rettig Report, which focused on deaths and disappearances, its purpose was to document systematically and on a large scale the torture and political imprisonment carried out by state agents during the seventeen years of military rule.

that occurred between 1973 and 1990 were systematically documented.⁴² The aim of creating the museum was to move beyond the economic compensation of victims and provide a form of symbolic reparation by the State. Its message of “Never Again” has endured as an exhortation not to repeat these events and to learn from the lessons of our history. Lagos intended to create an active documentation center rather than merely preserve the information gathered by the political commissions, since memory was to become a democratic resource in the service of “Never Again.” The museum was built according to rigorous documentary standards and presents a meticulous compilation of information and offers archival records, testimonies, audiovisual material, and newspaper clippings that reveal the details of events that took place in detention centers throughout the country. In some cases, testimonies come directly from survivors who recorded their voices and personal accounts. Visitors can also view letters and other documents donated to the museum, as well as small objects recovered from these detention centers.

This memorial advances more explicitly in the direction of truth and justice through the documentation of past events, the objectification and acknowledgment of the violations committed, the deprivation of fundamental human rights, and the inhumane experiences endured and inflicted upon individuals because of their political opposition to the regime. It also records the experiences of those detained for their involvement in clandestine armed resistance groups. Likewise, individuals were imprisoned because of their political affiliations or their participation in the government of the overthrown socialist president, among many other circumstances, such as the unjust detention of people who had no political involvement whatsoever.

The competing interpretations surrounding the Museum were far more polarized because it presented a record of reality that some people had refused to believe had occurred, forcing them to acknowledge what had happened. Others continued to deny the truth and sought instead to vindicate their own victims – those associated with the Pinochet regime – who are not represented in this memorial. The polarization generated by the creation of the Museum remains evident in political debates today and, as noted earlier, resurfaces forcefully during election periods. The museum has also been criticized by sectors of the political right for failing to provide a sufficient account of the political context preceding the 1973 coup that led to the collapse of democracy.

Another sensitive moral issue is that, for some, symbolic reparation has not been accompanied by genuine justice in the form of judicial proceedings and convictions. This has generated frustration and criticism of the State for offering a museum rather than providing the full truth regarding the fate of the disappeared detainees.⁴³ From the standpoint of truth, however, it represents a significant step in the construction of historical memory. The creation of the Museum constitutes a success in institutionalizing the memory of these abuses and in moving beyond the

⁴² *Valech Report* (2004, 2011), Chile, National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (Santiago: The Commission, 2005).

⁴³ According to the National Search Plan established by President Gabriel Boric in 2023, a total of 1,469 victims of enforced disappearance have been identified. Of these, 1,092 correspond specifically to the category of *detenidos desaparecidos* (disappeared detainees), while the remaining 377 are political prisoners who were executed and whose bodies were never returned to their families. As of 2026, the whereabouts of more than 1,100 individuals who were detained or executed remain unknown. Cf. Michael J. Lazzara, *Civil Obedience: Complicity and Complacency in Chile since Pinochet* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

threshold of private experience by making public and transparent a record that reveals the brutality inflicted upon the victims.

From a moral perspective, it is an attempt to acknowledge and repair these wrongs on the path toward justice. Yet from a social and political perspective, a profound understanding of what occurred cannot ignore its hermeneutic dimension, which reveals the human difficulties involved in collectively reconstructing the truth. Such truth is not immune to competing interpretations – namely, distortions and misunderstandings ranging from the outright denial of the facts presented to the relativization of truth through parallel interpretations that seek to justify the events. The challenge is how to foster awareness of the importance of establishing a just memory in order to learn from the horrors of the past and agree that there are moral limits to what can be tolerated.⁴⁴ Without such rational and affective consensus, the pursuit of reconciliation and the forward construction of a shared history become exceedingly difficult. Memory is an indispensable step, and in this respect, these political initiatives concerning collective memory deserve recognition.

It is at this ethical-political level of memory that Ricœur introduces the concept of *obligated memory* (*mémoire obligée*)⁴⁵ and refers to the *duty of memory*. It is the dimension of justice that gives ethical and political content to the duty of memory. At the same time, it is the hermeneutics of otherness that reemerges in this appeal to justice: “The duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through remembrance, to another other than oneself”.⁴⁶ Although Ricœur offers in this section of *Memory, History, Forgetting* a critical assessment of the uses and abuses of memory as characteristic tendencies of the present age, he nonetheless affirms this important moral dimension of memory. He also introduces the notion of debt, understood not as guilt but as an obligation toward those who are no longer with us but once were – namely, the victims to whom we owe a duty of justice.⁴⁷

1.4. The reverse side: manipulated memory and the limits of Ricœurian solicitude

The preceding analyses have shown concrete forms through which conflicts relating to human rights in Chile have been channeled, and they have documented significant efforts within policies aimed at the reparation of memory. Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention certain problems that, in light of the Chilean case itself, resist the reconciliation of memory and reveal critical points regarding the issue from a Ricœurian perspective. His ethical proposal establishes the responsive capacity of the agent, a notion that grounds responsibility as a fundamental ethical condition. However, the problem concerns the possibility of transferring categories from the personal sphere to the collective one. By way of example, we may refer to some instances where this transition is not evident.

The first concerns pacts of silence, which cannot be established objectively and are not the subject of legal proceedings, since the available evidence derives from journalistic investigations and other sources that do not possess procedural evidentiary value. Nevertheless, through plausible testimony, they reveal deliberate agreements to remain silent about what occurred, or even the concealment or planned disappearance of evidence relating to crimes that were

⁴⁴ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Epilogue, II. The odyssey of the Spirit of forgiveness.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 86.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 89.

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Section 3, “Ethical-Political Level: Obligated Memory”, 86.

committed.⁴⁸ These examples constitute a critical point insofar as they expose mechanisms of power that make a happy memory impossible and instead express manipulated memory through the institutionalization and systematic silencing carried out by the State. In this case, there is an institutional form of forgetting and an inability on the part of affected families to recover information. The impossibility of clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the victims and incorporating them into personal and collective memory opens a symbolic void within memory itself, an oblivion imposed by the repressive mechanisms of the dictatorship.⁴⁹

The problem, then, is not how to undertake the process of re-signifying the traumas of blocked memory (*the work of memory, the work of mourning*, in Ricœurian terms), but rather how it is possible to heal wounds without the political support that would make it possible to advance the clarification of crimes and the pursuit of justice. How can loved ones be remembered if they disappeared and there is no evidence of what occurred, nor bodies to honor?⁵⁰ This is an issue that Ricœur addresses, albeit not directly, in his analysis of the abuses of memory or manipulated memory, as well as in his reflections on the possibilities and limits of ideological control over memory. As mentioned above, Ricœur proposes the category of *obligated memory* and develops his notion of the *duty of memory* “as an imperative of justice,” which could be applied to our analysis. Yet he himself recognizes the limits of a “simple phenomenology of memory” and clarifies that the issue concerns a moral problematic. It seems necessary to add that it also concerns a political one.⁵¹

In this regard, Johann Michel, from a socio-philosophical perspective, criticizes the limits of an analysis that begins at the individual level and proceeds by way of an analytical analogy to the collective sphere. In this sense, the personal framework of mnemonic capacities that an agent may activate is not the same as that which governs collective and institutional memory. At that level, one encounters questions of scale, conflicts of power, and logics of domination that depend upon state institutions. State policy in Chile regulated, selected, and either officialized or censored the past through public mechanisms (silence, concealment, commemorations, school textbooks, legal subterfuges, or the control exercised through state institutions, among others).⁵² Thus, stated schematically, Michel argues that Ricœur’s thesis concerning memory in *Memory, History, Forgetting* lacks the objective mediations proper to collective memory, since the individual level is

⁴⁸ Uribe (2021) criticizes the political agreements that shaped Chile’s transition, whereas Pérez Yoma reflects on the limits of the Mesa de Diálogo and the unresolved fate of many disappeared detainees. See especially Pérez Yoma, *Civiles y Militares*, 246.

⁴⁹ National Plan for the Search for Truth and Justice (Santiago, Chile: Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, 2023).

⁵⁰ Steve J. Stern, *Battling for Hearts and Minds: Memory Struggles in Pinochet’s Chile, 1973-1988*, Series: Latin America otherwise (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006); Alexander White, *Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile’s Transition to Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1999).

⁵¹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 86-90.

⁵² A. Wilde, *Irruptions of Memory: Expressive Politics in Chile’s Transition to Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1999); Michel Lazzara, *Civil Obedience: Complicity and Complacency in Chile since Pinochet*, (University of Wisconsin Press, 2018); Elizabeth Lira, “Algunas Reflexiones a Propósito de los 40 años del Golpe Militar en Chile y las Condiciones de la Reconciliation Política”, (*Psykhé*, Vol.22, Nº. Extra 2, 2013)

insufficient as a basis for establishing an analogy with the social sphere. In his view, the past must be governed and not merely remembered.⁵³

At the symbolic level, J. Andrew Barash advances a critique of Ricœur's approach to collective memory and affirms the existence of a fundamental symbolic dimension, one that emerges through group experiences of transmission that interweave personal life and collective memory. From this symbolic perspective, Barash argues that collective memory brings together, in the evocation of the past, both the singularity of the perspective associated with every significant collective experience and its symbolic embodiment, which confers meaning and communicability upon personal remembrance within the collective sphere. Collective memory thereby attains a durability that extends beyond the lives of those who directly remember the experience. This symbolic embodiment liberates memory from the sphere of personal consciousness and incorporates political and social practice into it, namely, language. Memory thus functions not only as a capacity within the individual cognitive sphere, but also as an act that configures meaning within the collective sphere.⁵⁴

Both critiques can be observed in the Chilean case and in its possibilities for symbolic construction. Although they do not negate the hermeneutic productivity of memory in Ricœur's work from the year 2000, they do make it possible to test certain interpretive keys in Ricœur's thought that concern the problem of identity in both its personal and collective dimensions.⁵⁵

2. Narrative as the core of understanding and its possibilities for the repair and reconstruction of identity

The bridge connecting the personal and collective poles is narrative, for it constitutes the symbolic fabric of social understanding, moving from the individual sphere to the broader domain of a plural society. From the perspective of the anthropology of capacities, Ricœur identifies three fundamental passions that underlie our search for self-affirmation: having, power, and worth.⁵⁶ The notion of worth reinforces Honneth's claim regarding the affirming and encouraging dimension of recognition, which plays a decisive role in the constitution of human beings as persons. The others constitute the indispensable counterpart through which we are confirmed in what we are. They care for us at the beginning of life and provide the welcome necessary for us to affirm ourselves as persons. Yet this possibility of self-affirmation may fail, since it requires a process of self-appropriation mediated by culture, works, labor, politics, and other forms of social belonging. In other words, the mediation of all those spheres in which the subject becomes rooted and comes to understand itself ultimately culminates in the narrative articulation of one's own

⁵³ Johann Michel, "La construction des objets de mémoire: une lecture critique de Paul Ricœur," *Archives de Philosophie*, Vol. 69, N°4, (2006).

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "The Place of Remembrance: Reflections on Paul Ricœur's Theory of Collective Memory", en *A passion for the possible: thinking with Paul Ricœur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 147-57.

⁵⁵ On the theme of individual and institutional forgiveness, see Geoffrey Dierckxsens, *The Politics of Forgiveness: Memory, Responsibility, and Justice* (2015).

⁵⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, translated by Charles A. Kelbley (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

history and makes attestation possible.⁵⁷ Identity is thus exposed to others and never ceases to be constructed.⁵⁸

As we saw in the previous section, the personal events that “assemble” this identity are individual, familial, and interpersonal experiences, all of them anchored within broader social and political realities. If we disentangle the relationship between these untransferable personal experiences and the social and political contexts that accompany them, we can perceive the profound connection between the vicissitudes of political life and their effects upon both. At the same time, we can appreciate how political crossroads shape personal interpretation itself.

The following analysis considers two levels: narrative in individual factual testimony (section e), and art together with its narrative potential (section f). This connection is developed by Ricœur in *Time and Narrative III* through the productive dialectic between history and narrative.

2.1. The Voice of Individual Testimony and Its Hermeneutics

The aim, following Ricœur’s hermeneutic model, is to echo one of the philosophical qualities mentioned at the outset of this study: his ability to maintain a link between the universal and the singular. As we know, this connection is a central ethical motif within Ricœur’s practical wisdom, realized in moral judgment in situation, where moral tact emerges from consideration of the singular case and constitutes its decisive ethical moment⁵⁹. As Revault d’Allonnes observes:

We may be moved by the encounter between this questioning of singular identity, of the perception of individual living and dead persons, and certain essential motifs in Paul Ricœur’s work. These motifs concern precisely the relationship between the universal and the singular, understood above all in particular situations shaped by limit-experiences, experiences that Ricœur’s reflection never hesitated to confront.⁶⁰

When we speak of narratives concerning disappeared detainees or political prisoners in Chile, when we hear the voices of those who testify, we are able to access their stories, make them part of our own history and of our society, and thus transmit them while preserving records that do justice to individuals beyond the emblematic, general, or representative accounts of history. Testimony also allows us to demonstrate the implications of public recognition for the possibility of reworking one’s own identity.

Following the military coup of 1973, mass arrests were carried out throughout the country. One of the principal detention sites was the National Stadium, an emblematic public space in Santiago, traditionally associated with sporting events, cultural gatherings, and political demonstrations. We are interested in examining the experience of one family whose father was arrested together with his twenty-one-year-old son, first taken to a police investigation

⁵⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 299.

⁵⁸ Revault D’allonnes, “La vie refigurée,” (2013), 206.

⁵⁹ Beatriz Contreras, *La sabiduría práctica en la ética de Paul Ricœur* (Madrid: Plaza y Valdés, 2011).

⁶⁰ Revault D’allonnes “La vie refigurée,” (2013), 199.

headquarters and later transferred to the National Stadium. The arrest took place in the presence of his wife and daughters.⁶¹

This story allows us to analyze the issue in two directions. On the one hand, it reveals the moral sphere of the event and its hermeneutic effects on memory. On the other, it illustrates the significance of narrative and recognition and their role in the moral and psycho-emotional repair of those affected. According to the account provided by the youngest daughter, only days after the military coup, her father had returned home after spending several days in hiding. He was arrested before they could make a final decision. A group of twenty-five armed soldiers arrived at the family home and violently interrupted them while they were having lunch. Her memory centers on that moment: the sudden intrusion into their home and the arrest of both her father and her older brother. She recalls that one of the soldiers also attempted to seize her sixteen-year-old sister. Their mother intervened, placing herself between the soldier and her daughter, and offered to go in her place if another person had to be taken, insisting that her daughter was still a minor. Her courage and determination ultimately persuaded the soldier to abandon the attempt.

The family was devastated. They endured intense anguish upon learning that both men had been detained and subjected to torture. After a few days, the brother was released, while the father was transferred to the National Stadium. Although family members were permitted to visit him and bring clothing, uncertainty remained overwhelming, since no one knew what would happen next. This story reflects the experience of many Chilean families who endured the violence of those first days and the uncertainty generated by not knowing what was happening throughout the country. Several detainees held at the National Stadium were executed, while others who survived were transferred to detention centers located across Chile. He was finally released after one year. The repercussions of these events marked the father's biography permanently. He never fully recovered either his emotional stability or his professional life.

To understand the hermeneutic significance of this testimony and its implications for memory, narrative, and recognition, it is necessary to continue the story. In 2025, the daughters visited the National Stadium and discovered that their father's name was not included on the memorial plaque commemorating former political detainees. When they inquired about the omission, they were informed that they could submit a formal request to have his name added to the register. During this process of verification, the daughters were interviewed, and during the reconstruction of events, however, discrepancies emerged concerning certain details. There was disagreement about the precise moment when the arrest took place. The older sister did not remember the episode in which a soldier attempted to arrest her, whereas the younger sister retained a vivid memory of that event. They also discovered pieces of information that they had never previously shared, despite having lived through the same experience.

These differences in recollection confirm not only the effects of time – which makes it increasingly difficult to recover past events with precision, particularly after fifty-two years – but also the hermeneutic character of all understanding and, certainly, of every exercise of memory. Although the event itself remains objective and historically datable, there is never simply one story.

⁶¹ I requested permission from one of the daughters to recount this story and, out of respect for the family's privacy, I have omitted all names. I would also like to express my gratitude for her generosity in sharing this history, for the trust she placed in me, and for her willingness to open a painful chapter of her life and allow me to become a witness to her testimony.

Rather, there are distinct ways of recounting the same history, each unique and personal, reflecting the interpretations individuals develop in response to experiences whose emotional and moral impact is singular and incommunicable.

The hermeneutic dimension of memory must therefore be approached with both moral and epistemological caution. This does not entail denying or relativizing events themselves, but rather recognizing the different traces they leave upon those who experience them. This testimony shows how the daughters endured an unforgivable act of violence. Although they share feelings of pain, injustice, and the affront to their father's and brother's dignity in the process of recovering this memory, they narrate their recollections with different emphases, and even with certain gaps or lapses of memory. This should not surprise us if we accept that all understanding is mediated and that we possess no transparent access either to ourselves or to our past. Memory is itself rendered fragile by history. Narrative remains subject to the passage of time, to the psycho-affective impact that each person experiences differently, and to the varying forms of forgetting that individuals may elaborate.

Narrative, which occupies a central place in this story, has also played – and continues to play – a healing role for the younger daughter, who has been able to work through this pain in PRAIS therapy.⁶² This program enabled her to meet others who had endured similar experiences during the post-dictatorial period, to share their stories, and to be heard. In this sense, narrative has been fundamental because it allows lived experience to be brought into language, transforming what remains inscribed in memory into an articulated account.

When a shared narrative emerges – one expressed through the political recognition of the moral significance of historical events and embodied in institutions, legislation, commemorations, and collective dialogue within schools, universities, local communities, and research centers – the process of refiguring personal identity is reinforced by social esteem and collective understanding. Such recognition establishes moral minimums that cannot simply be ignored.

Likewise, concerning social and political recognition in this story, it is expressed in the need to leave some record for future generations. In other words, beyond the restorative dimension of self-esteem and the restoration of the family name as a way of honoring her father, what the younger daughter expresses in this case is a desire for social recognition so that such events may not be repeated. That is, the possibility that a record of her father's detention at the National Stadium (his name and photograph) may be preserved – a process that is still underway⁶³ – serves two purposes. One is the reparation achieved through the vindication of his memory; the other is the importance of public recognition and its social and political implications. The symbolic significance of recording a person's name is important because it demonstrates that reparation is not merely a material matter. In other words, policies of material compensation for victims of

⁶² PRAIS (*Programa de Reparación y Atención Integral en Salud y Derechos Humanos*) is the Program for Comprehensive Health and Human Rights Care and Reparation, established in 1991, almost simultaneously with the Rettig Report.

⁶³ The paradox in Chile is that policies of social recognition remain subject to the will of the government in power. In other words, securing funding for memorial initiatives depends on political approval rather than on a state policy that should remain consistent over time

human rights violations – such as health and educational benefits⁶⁴ – are not sufficient. There is also a dimension of social esteem grounded in the recognition of persons. The moral and psychological harm inflicted upon this family affected the self-esteem of all its members. Such deep wounds cannot simply be repaired. Yet it is possible to open channels of recognition that vindicate those who suffered, preserve their memory, and express a commitment to justice through the acknowledgment of events and the honoring of victims.

Ricœur reminds us: “(...) it must not be forgotten that I am first thrown into situations that I have not chosen, that I am affected by things that I receive without creating them, and that I can assign myself the task of orienting myself within these situations and, from them, projecting my ownmost possibilities”.⁶⁵ This capacity for projection becomes impeded when contingency fractures the possibility of appropriating our experiences and transforming them into a meaningful destiny.

2.2. Art and its narrative potential

Artistic expression represents a powerful means of transforming suffering into creation through the bestowal of meaning upon action, configuring alternative significations that tell stories across different registers – literary, theatrical, cinematic, and others. Ricœur recognizes the imaginative dimension of narrative and attributes to it a capacity to broaden our understanding of ourselves; in particular, he assigns fiction a privileged role as a threshold of ethics.⁶⁶ Indeed, the amplifying function of fiction contrasts with the constraints inherent in ethics and history. In both cases, some limits cannot be transgressed. Ethics possesses a normative dimension and remains bound to its fundamental regulative principles of respect for human beings. History, for its part, must remain faithful to the past and reconstruct events through documentary evidence and a commitment to the truth of what occurred. Artistic language, however, can recreate action through experiences that are unprecedented or even unthinkable, thereby deepening our understanding of human life itself.

The following example illustrates this creative power of art and its role in the refiguration of life itself within the Chilean context described above. I shall focus on a documentary film, known for its poetic quality and cultural impact. The documentary film: *Nostalgia for the Light* (*La Nostalgia de la Luz*), directed by Patricio Guzmán. The film presents a poetic narrative structured around three interconnected planes – the cosmic, the archaeological, and the political – from a philosophical and aesthetic perspective. The philosophical thesis underlying the film is the paradox of time and its evanescence. Guzmán develops the idea of the relativity of the present – indeed, of its apparent nonexistence – through the perspective of astronomy. The light captured by telescopes has taken millions of years to reach Earth; what we observe today occurred in the distant past. Our present is already the past.

⁶⁴ In Chile, several laws were enacted beginning in 1991 to provide reparation for victims of enforced disappearance and political execution (Law 19.123, following the Rettig Commission), as well as for victims of political imprisonment and torture (Law 19.992, following the Valech Commission). Additional decrees established complementary non-monetary benefits, including free healthcare services for victims and their families through the PRAIS Program and various pension-related benefits.

⁶⁵ Ricœur, “Histoire et Herméneutique”, 17.

⁶⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 241.

The film portrays a powerful political resonance by giving voice to the Women of Calama, relatives of victims of the Caravan of Death. More than thirty years after the events, these women continue searching the Chilean desert for the remains of their disappeared relatives. Their testimonies are deeply moving, combining hope with frustration and fear. The film exposes a striking social and political paradox: Chile supports and invests in major scientific institutions in the north of the country⁶⁷ dedicated to investigating the distant past of the universe, yet has devoted comparatively limited efforts to locating those who disappeared only decades ago within its own territory.

This ethical and political paradox is articulated through the story of Valentina, a young astronomer whose parents were forcibly disappeared during the dictatorship. Raised by her grandparents, she embodies the intersection of the film's two central themes: the search for the origins of the universe through the study of the stars and the search for personal identity marked by absence – the void left by an unresolved past that deprived her of her loved ones. The hope suggested by the film's conclusion is that memory can ultimately be transformed into recognition and light.

From this perspective, the search for recognition is inseparably bound to memory. As Ricœur writes at the end of *Memory, History, Forgetting*: "I consider recognition to be the small miracle of memory. And as a miracle, it can also fail to occur. But when it does take place, in thumbing through a photo album, or in the unexpected encounter with a familiar person, or in the silent evocation of a being who is absent or gone forever, the cry escapes: "That is her! That is him!"⁶⁸.

3. Conclusion: The balance between obstacles and possibilities of recognizing the other in Ricœur's phenomenological hermeneutics

The examples examined throughout this study reveal the intertwined dilemmas of memory, narrative, and mutual recognition. They illustrate how the selected cases express a search for worth (*valoir*), an anthropological aspiration that is not without conflict in the development of the self. Worth represents a fundamental desire for recognition by others. Hegel was right to identify this need for external affirmation as a driving force behind agonistic relations between individuals. Ricœur, however, goes further by exploring models of recognition inspired by *agape* and gift-giving – forms of recognition capable of creating moments of peace and establishing modes of exchange that differ from the struggle for recognition.

The realities analyzed here compel us to reflect deeply on how paths toward social reconciliation and renewed encounter may be established. The examples presented concern a particular moment in Chilean history, a history marked by violence and repression that continues to generate political dilemmas and bears the painful traces of lived experience. They also reveal the

⁶⁷ The most famous example is the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array project, one of the largest astronomical initiatives in the world, consisting of sixty-six high-precision antennas located at an altitude of 5,000 meters on the Chajnantor Plateau near San Pedro de Atacama.

⁶⁸ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 495.

unfinished task of restoring a deeper dialogue capable of healing wounds and strengthening social cohesion.

Nevertheless, hope for such a renewed encounter may be placed in mutual recognition cultivated at social and cultural levels and anchored not only in politics, but also in art, education, and other forms of human activity. From a Ricœurian hermeneutic perspective, the logic of hospitality presupposes the development of mutual trust. Learning once again to believe that the other speaks truthfully is an essential – though difficult – step in the process of mutual recognition.

The question that remains is what forms of collective effort are required to reconstruct those zones of fragility within social, symbolic, and political narratives that continue to weaken democratic life and hinder the institutionalization of spaces of mutual recognition within society.

Indeed, the decision to write this article caused me, I must confess, a certain sense of vertigo, for it required confronting my own ghosts, silences, and deeply rooted fears. Distanciation is not easy to achieve. The philosophical aspiration to objectivity cannot be entirely separated from the internal unease that accompanies the recollection of a reality that, to a greater or lesser extent, marked our lives during adolescence and university years. The issue that still confronts us in contemporary Chile is whether it is possible to speak about the past without fear – without fear of social censorship and without fear of the subtler forms of self-censorship that often accompany it. There remain words that seem better left unspoken. It is still difficult to tell these stories to younger generations without worrying that they may be disturbed by them. We continue, in many respects, to navigate against the current of the River Lèthè. Ricœur's project is not to dissolve conflict but to channel it. The ability to do so remains both an individual and a collective challenge.

One feature of Ricœur's hermeneutic philosophy has served as a guiding thread throughout this analysis: the point of intersection between the universality of theoretical reflection and the singularity of lived experience. In this regard, it is worth returning to the notion of practical wisdom developed within his ethics of solicitude. Practical wisdom appeals to the tact of moral judgment as a resource for navigating difficult situations and moments of conflict, not only at the personal level but also in collective decision-making.

The challenge lies in finding a wise balance between the norm and the singular. Progress at the juridical level is indispensable. Law belongs to the sphere of universality, represented by institutions and legal frameworks, and constitutes a crucial stage in the channeling of conflict. Yet it is not sufficient. Political action may also emerge in smaller spaces and through singular initiatives: through pedagogy, through creative practices⁶⁹, through ethical-poetic forms of expression that invite imaginative exploration, and through singular experiences that cultivate the moral tact required to welcome, include, invite, and celebrate others rather than confront them.

This analysis has not addressed the question of forgetting. Ricœur himself recognized the immense difficulty of treating this subject in *Memory, History, Forgetting*.⁷⁰ Yet there may be a form

⁶⁹ Olivier Abel refers to Ricœur's analysis of the *socius* and the neighbor and asks whether a "politics of the neighbor" is conceivable, opening up a line of inquiry that seems particularly valuable for rethinking this issue. "La philosophie du proche" (*Clés. Paul Ricœur: interprétation et reconnaissance*, 33, 2008).

⁷⁰ We are aware of the critical debates that the publication of *Memory, History, Forgetting* generated in France regarding this issue.

of forgetting capable of teaching a different lesson – not one that denies memory, certainly, but one that helps us discover new ways of dialogue and recognition.

In Spanish, the word *discusión* often carries the negative connotation of a quarrel. In French, however, *discuter* primarily means to converse or debate. Perhaps this is what we have forgotten. We have become accustomed to a narrow understanding of the discussion in black-and-white terms, and to treat politics as a form of radical confrontation. In this sense, forgetting may possess an instructive dimension when understood as an impulse toward refiguration exercised through creative works. It invites us to place our trust once again in language as a human capacity, in this exemplary institution through which more hospitable forms of communication may emerge.

Ultimately, to regard the other as a “foreigner” place ourselves at the center and assigns us the role of “natives,” but in doing so it also inoculates us with resistance, fear, and rejection.⁷¹ A further turn of the screw introduces a second moment into our distant gaze toward the other, one in which, through the other's mirror, we come to see ourselves reflected. In that gaze, we perceive both what we are and what we are not, as well as the limits that define us. It is precisely in the risky encounter with someone different from ourselves that we come to value that difference; above all, however, we learn to view the “stranger” as a fellow human being. Human dissymmetry, as Arendt argues, makes us equal in our humanity while distinct in our personal identities. Memory is the foundation of identity, reminding us who we are, but narrative makes possible an imaginative variation that transforms us, and recognition establishes an interpersonal and collective space in which we may encounter others.

⁷¹ Vilém Flusser, “Exile and Creativity”, in *Vilém Flusser, Writings*, ed. Andreas Ströhl, trans. E. Eisel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 1984).

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Ricoeur à travers le monde : depuis le Brésil

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Abstract

This article shows the importance of Ricoeur's thought in Brazil, particularly his reflection on memory and forgetting in discussions on military dictatorship and slavery. It also highlights the various uses of the notion of "narrative identity" in the humanities in Brazil. However, the article insists on the need for a more in-depth examination than Ricoeur's on the question of social violence, particularly racialized violence, which permeates all social relations in this country.

Keywords: *Ricoeur, Brazil, Memory, Violence.*

Résumé

Cet article montre l'importance de la pensée de Ricoeur au Brésil, particulièrement sa réflexion sur la mémoire et l'oubli dans les discussions sur la dictature militaire et sur l'esclavage. Il souligne également les divers usages de la notion d'« identité narrative » dans les sciences humaines au Brésil. Il insiste cependant sur la nécessité d'un examen plus approfondi que celui de Ricoeur sur la question de la violence sociale, notamment racisée, qui imprègne toutes les relations sociales dans ce pays.

Mots-clés : *Ricoeur, Brésil, mémoire, violence.*

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Ricœur à travers le monde : depuis le Brésil

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Il m'est très difficile de répondre à la question que pose ce numéro de la revue *Études ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*. J'écris entre le Brésil, où je réside et ai enseigné la philosophie pendant plus de quarante ans, et la Suisse ou la France où je vais chaque année rendre visite à ma famille ainsi qu'à de nombreux amis. Je me sens passablement responsable d'avoir contribué à mieux faire connaître la philosophie de Ricœur au Brésil et me réjouis de l'intérêt qu'elle suscite et des nombreux réseaux de recherche sur sa pensée qui s'y sont formés.

En même temps, j'éprouve un certain malaise et crains que cette « réception » – un terme à interroger – ne répète une fois de plus une attitude non seulement de respect mais aussi d'admiration exagérée, voire de vénération qui frise la croyance religieuse comme si la pensée de Ricœur pouvait nous servir de boussole dans nos interrogations non seulement philosophiques, mais aussi éthiques et politiques. À mon avis, la philosophie de Ricœur (comme d'ailleurs celle de Platon, de Kant ou de Hegel !), ne peut que nous éclairer, nous interroger et nous déranger dans nos certitudes immédiates, mais ne nous livre ni chemin à suivre ni réponses. Et si parfois nous restons éblouis par l'érudition d'un auteur, notamment par celle de Ricœur, cela ne signifie pas qu'il offre des solutions mais plus simplement qu'il a eu le temps et le privilège de jouir d'une excellente formation. Que cette formation transmette, certes, une tradition riche et belle n'implique cependant pas que cette dernière offre toujours des réponses appropriées ni même pour ceux qui l'ont reçue de par leur naissance et leurs études ni pour ceux qui sont, justement, nés dans une autre langue ou sur un autre continent.

Ces difficultés n'ont pas à voir avec un manque d'esprit critique et analytique des collègues brésiliens mais bien plutôt avec une situation liée à la formation des intellectuels brésiliens. Les premières facultés universitaires furent consacrées à la formation juridique requise par l'administration, par la puissance coloniale, de cet immense territoire, ainsi qu'aux recherches médicales, rendues nécessaires par l'ignorance du milieu et du climat. Les facultés de « sciences humaines » naquirent beaucoup plus tard. La faculté de l'Université de São Paulo (USP) fut créée en 1934 grâce à l'initiative de l'entrepreneur Julio de Mesquita, certes, mais avec l'aide indispensable de la « mission française de l'USP » qui envoya des jeunes professeurs dans cette nouvelle faculté, comme Jean Maugué pour la philosophie sans parler de Claude Lévi-Strauss et de Roger Bastide pour la sociologie. Ainsi, comme le dit le titre blagueur du livre de Paulo Arantes, le département de philosophie de l'USP, jusqu'à aujourd'hui reconnu comme l'un des meilleurs, sinon le meilleur du Brésil, est « un département français d'outre-mer ». Et si les origines de l'enseignement de la philosophie au Brésil sont françaises, l'on peut sans peine comprendre la vénération que cette tradition continue à susciter, vénération qui se heurte aujourd'hui aux revendications d'une pensée philosophique qui s'émanciperait de ses sources exclusivement occidentales.

Pour dire vrai, je me débats entre une définition quasi socratique de la philosophie, cette étrange parole qui interroge, prend des distances, dérange et parfois exaspère, mais qui n'affirme aucune doctrine que nous devrions obligatoirement suivre – et un malaise que nous pouvons nommer, suivant les qualificatifs actuels, de *décolonial*. En effet, l'enseignement et la recherche en philosophie au Brésil, s'ils sont souvent de grande qualité pour leur lecture des textes philosophiques, la plupart d'entre eux écrits par des auteurs étrangers, sont presque toujours muets sur une réflexion qui esquisserait comme un mouvement de réaction, certes positive mais également impertinente, à cet apprentissage.

Quand deux enfants jouent à la balle, celui qui la *reçoit* la *relance*, avec ruse ou force pour que le jeu puisse continuer. Je voudrais plaider ici pour que nous osions aussi jouer entre partenaires de pensée qui soient égaux bien que différents. Donc, une réception, certes, mais également une réponse qui remet en cause, qui renvoie la balle à partir du camp que le joueur d'en face ne connaît pas. Ou un *dépaysement*, oui, mais auquel répond, comme par effet boomerang, la secousse de l'identité du premier partenaire, ébranlé par une réplique qu'il n'avait pas prévue. Les règles d'un tel jeu présupposent que les partenaires jouissent de positions égales, en particulier que ces règles soient accordées par tous les deux, qu'il n'y ait donc pas à l'origine et également au moment présent ni violence ni soumission – que la bonne volonté et la bienveillance, pour précieuses qu'elles soient, ne peuvent effacer même si elles le désirent.

Or, l'ouverture au monde de la philosophie de Ricœur, ouverture certaine et remarquable, me semble bien souvent ne pas prendre suffisamment en considération ce contexte de violence, notamment la violence coloniale et esclavagiste inscrite dans la constitution même de la société brésilienne.

L'herméneutique ricœurienne a l'immense mérite de confronter la réflexion philosophique à d'autres champs des sciences humaines que la philosophie plus classique ne mentionnait même pas. Davantage : cette herméneutique se laisse questionner par les autres sciences humaines. L'ouvrage de Ricœur sur Freud en est une preuve éclatante puisqu'il ébranle le solipsisme cartésien à partir d'une analyse de l'œuvre de Freud. Ce fut d'ailleurs l'un des premiers livres de Ricœur à être traduit au Brésil, par les soins de Hilton Japiassú¹ en 1977. De même, les trois volumes de *Temps et récit*, donc une interrogation sur la narration comme milieu et médiation de notre appréhension du temps, en particulier sur le « dire » du temps instauré par la littérature, firent l'objet de la première (sauf erreur) thèse en philosophie sur cet auteur avec le doctorat de Helio Salles Gentil² en 2001.

Ces deux exemples me paraissent indiquer à juste titre l'une des raisons du relatif succès de cette pensée, à savoir son ouverture herméneutique sur un autre ensemble de textes et de discours que ceux de la tradition philosophique en tant que telle. Dans un pays comme le Brésil où cette tradition est récente et où les chercheurs et professeurs s'appliquent le plus souvent à la traduction et au commentaire de textes écrits dans une langue étrangère, l'ouverture herméneutique de Ricœur sur d'autres domaines que ceux de l'histoire de la philosophie rencontre

¹ *Da Interpretação: ensaio sobre Freud*, tradução de H. Japiassu (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1977).

² Hélio Salles Gentil, *Para uma poética da Modernidade. Uma aproximação à arte do romance em « Temps et Récit » de Paul Ricoeur* (São Paulo : Loyola, 2004); thèse de doctorat soutenue en 2001 au Département de Philosophie de l'USP. Auparavant, en 1993, Sergio de Gouvêa Franco, a soutenu la thèse « Hermenêutica e Psicanálise na obra de Paul Ricoeur » à la Faculté d'Éducation de l'UNICAMP.

un terrain propice. Cette ouverture, en effet, permettrait – et permet – un questionnement philosophique vivant portant sur des pratiques et des domaines de langage spécifiques, indépendamment de la stricte obéissance aux règles du commentaire de la tradition philosophique « importée ». Peut-être pourrait-on ainsi expliquer également le succès de Michel Foucault au Brésil. La philosophie de Ricoeur, ancrée en une formation philosophique solide, en une érudition souvent remarquable, voire parfois lassante, permet de questionner divers domaines d’une réalité spécifique – qui existent indépendamment de la tradition philosophique classique. Les chercheurs peuvent oser inventer d’autres applications conceptuelles que celles auxquelles l’histoire classique de la philosophie nous a habitués. Je pense notamment à la richesse de la littérature brésilienne que les réflexions ricoeuriennes sur le récit peuvent mettre en valeur. Du même coup, la « réception » se double et se réalise par une transformation créatrice due à la spécificité du contexte d’accueil, elle ne s’épuise pas en un effort de répétition appliquée.

Je voudrais en particulier évoquer deux moments de la philosophie de Ricoeur qui, personnellement, me semblent essentiels pour nous aider à mieux comprendre les enjeux éthiques et politiques de la « réalité brésilienne », cette *realidade brasileira* sur laquelle se penchèrent et se penchent tant de penseurs brésiliens avec, bien souvent, un mélange d’espoir et de désespoir (et habitant depuis bientôt cinquante ans au Brésil, je m’inclus dans cette ambivalence).

En premier lieu, les précieuses observations du beau volume de Ricoeur intitulé *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Alors que ce livre, notamment sa troisième partie sur la « condition historique », dont *l’oubli* est l’une des facettes, et son épilogue sur « Le pardon difficile » causa dans le paysage français une vive polémique, comme si Ricoeur, philosophe chrétien, prêchait « la victoire de la vision chrétienne du sujet historique » contre l’insistance de la pensée juive sur la mémoire, en particulier sur la mémoire de la Shoah, selon les accusations d’Alain Badiou et de Rainer Rochlitz³, au Brésil personne n’accusa Ricoeur de minimiser la nécessité du travail de mémoire en particulier dans le contexte de l’Holocauste. Bien au contraire : Marcio Seligmann-Silva, chercheur et professeur connu pour son engagement vis-à-vis de la pensée juive et de la mémoire de la Shoah, loue, dans la présentation (en brésilien *l’orelha*) de la traduction brésilienne de l’ouvrage⁴, l’attention que Ricoeur aurait portée à la déchirure (*rachadura*) que cette mémoire traumatique aurait introduite dans la réflexion philosophique sur le thème de la mémoire nécessaire. Aucun commentateur brésilien n’a eu l’idée de dénoncer le christianisme de Ricoeur comme source de son intérêt pour la problématique du *pardon*, ce qui d’ailleurs serait d’autant plus ridicule qu’un penseur juif comme Jacques Derrida devait, à la même époque, publier un petit livre sur ce thème. Tout comme Derrida d’ailleurs, mais avec certes des différences, Ricoeur s’est inspiré de l’exemple historique de la « Commission Vérité et Réconciliation » en Afrique du Sud pour essayer de penser les politiques de mémoire et de réparation, politiques nécessaires à la fois pour rendre justice aux morts et aux disparus et, simultanément, pour rendre possible la reprise d’une vie en commun, cette nécessité dite par la belle notion africaine d’*Unbuntu*.

La comparaison entre cette politique de mémoire en Afrique du Sud et la politique de « dés-mémoire » du Brésil, avec la proclamation de la loi d’amnistie (1979) à la fin de la dictature brésilienne, fut l’objet de plusieurs thèses de doctorants brésiliens en Philosophie et en Droit. Dans ce contexte, les distinctions conceptuelles très fines de Ricoeur entre oubli, amnésie et amnistie

³ Voir à ce sujet l’article très détaillé de François Dosse, « Lieux, travail, devoir de mémoire chez Paul Ricoeur » (Paris : Cahier de l’Herne sur Paul Ricoeur, 2004), 256-70.

⁴ Aux éditions de l’Unicamp, 2007.

aidèrent à penser la politique mémorielle en vigueur au Brésil, notamment au sujet de l'esclavage et, également, de la dictature militaire. Distinctions qui nous aident également à mieux penser les revendications de la droite et de l'extrême droite actuelles qui réclament un pardon ou une amnistie pour l'ex-président Bolsonaro et ses partisans, hélas toujours nombreux. Dans ce contexte, je me permets une citation un peu longue :

Mais l'amnistie, en tant qu'oubli institutionnel, touche aux racines mêmes du politique et, à travers celui-ci, au rapport le plus profond et le plus dissimulé avec un passé frappé d'interdit. La proximité plus que phonétique, voire sémantique, entre amnistie et amnésie signale l'existence d'un pacte secret avec le déni de mémoire qui, on le verra plus tard, l'éloigne en vérité du pardon après en avoir proposé la simulation⁵.

En second lieu, je voudrais mentionner une autre distinction conceptuelle, celle entre identité-mêmeté et identité-ipséité, distinction élaborée dans divers articles et dans *Soi-même comme un autre* (Seuil, 1990), qui provoqua également beaucoup d'intérêt dans la réception brésilienne de Ricœur, non seulement en philosophie, mais aussi en théorie littéraire et en histoire :

Le cadre conceptuel que je propose de soumettre à l'épreuve de l'analyse repose sur la différence fondamentale que je fais entre deux concepts majeurs du concept d'identité : l'identité comme mêmeté (latin *idem*, anglais *same*, allemand *gleich*) et l'identité comme soi (latin *ipse*, anglais *self*, allemand *selbst*). L'ipséité, dirais-je, n'est pas la mêmeté. Ma thèse est que bien des difficultés qui obscurcissent la question de l'identité personnelle résultent du manque de distinction entre les deux usages du terme identité⁶.

Cette distinction fut extrêmement féconde pour les études littéraires et pour l'essor de l'histoire orale au Brésil. En effet, la question de l'identité, dite nationale, est au Brésil tellement traversée par une multitude de provenances ethniques et linguistiques différentes qu'il est impossible d'établir une identité comme un ensemble stable de qualifications essentielles, ce qui pourrait être une espèce de « mêmeté » mais qui se révèle la plupart du temps comme n'étant qu'un cliché touristique ou exotique. En revanche, l'identité-ipséité permet d'appréhender ce foisonnement d'identités diverses, que cela soit dans la richesse de la littérature ou dans les recherches de sociologie et d'histoire orale. S'il est un territoire où la profusion des récits, écrits ou oraux, abonde et se renouvelle sans cesse, c'est bien ce « pays continental » !

La lecture de Ricœur, et spécialement la lecture attentive non pas tant de ses conclusions, d'ailleurs passablement rares et toujours nuancées, mais plutôt des distinctions conceptuelles opérées dans plusieurs contextes polémiques, nous aide donc à mieux nous orienter dans la réflexion sur la mémoire ou sur la prise de parole. C'est certes beaucoup et cela est précieux.

Néanmoins, un malaise subsiste, voire s'accroît, à lire certains textes de Paul Ricœur et, tout spécialement, le texte que les éditeurs de ce numéro des *Études ricœuriennes* nous ont recommandé pour entrer en matière dans le thème « Ricoeur à travers le monde : réceptions et dialogues interculturels », à savoir l'article « Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales », paru en 1961 dans la Revue *Esprit* et repris dans la troisième édition du recueil intitulé *Histoire et vérité*,

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris : Seuil, 2000), 586.

⁶ Paul Ricœur, "L'identité narrative", Revue *Esprit*, Numéro 140, juillet 1988 (Paris), 295-304.

aux Editions du Seuil. Ce texte est d'autant plus surprenant que l'on aurait pu s'attendre à un approfondissement d'un autre texte plus ancien, un « tract anticolonial » selon l'expression d'Ernst Wolff⁷ dans sa présentation du court article de Ricoeur, « La question coloniale », publié à l'origine le 20 septembre 1947. Ce dernier article est traversé par la contradiction ressentie entre la révélation de l'horreur des crimes nazis à la fin de la Deuxième Guerre et la dénonciation des crimes perpétrés par les puissances coloniales dans les colonies, notamment par la France en Indochine ou en Algérie, comme si les Français continuaient dans un autre pays la politique de violence et de torture contre laquelle ils luttèrent sous le nazisme. Il est en particulier remarquable de lire sous la plume de Ricoeur que la violence originaire appartient au colonisateur alors que la violence du colonisé est seconde, fruit de sa revendication de liberté et donc, sinon agréée, du moins compréhensible. Cette position courageuse sera aussi celle que Ricoeur assumera pendant la guerre d'Algérie, aussi bien dans la revue *Esprit* que dans sa vie quotidienne avec ses amis des « Murs blancs », parfois nommé « Château rouge » par leurs voisins, comme le mentionne François Dosse dans sa belle biographie.

Une quinzaine d'années plus tard, en 1960, donc avant les accords d'Evian, cette critique de la violence coloniale semble être passée au second plan dans l'article intitulé « Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales », au profit d'une affirmation de la commune humanité de tous, aussi bien des membres des « nations hautement industrialisées » qu'aux « nations sortant du sous-développement », selon les termes de la première phrase de ce texte. Or, l'espoir d'une civilisation universelle repose, dans ces lignes, sur l'affirmation de la préséance de la civilisation occidentale, dans une défense de la rationalité scientifique et technique qui devrait guider la modernité vers un *progrès de l'humanité tout entière*.

Il est curieux de lire cette apologie tranquille, bien-sûr d'avant les secousses de mai 68, mais cependant après toute la réflexion douloureuse sur la Shoah, cette organisation rationnelle du massacre de tout un peuple, massacre commis par les membres d'un autre peuple à juste titre connu et reconnu pour sa haute culture. Ce lien entre la raison scientifique et technique et l'efficacité de l'anéantissement fut à l'origine du questionnement de notre rationalité, révélée dans son pouvoir de *domination* et d'*extermination*, questionnement inauguré par l'Ecole de Francfort et poursuivi jusqu'à aujourd'hui en philosophie et en anthropologie notamment.

Dans un texte postérieur, paru dans la Revue *Esprit* en 1966 et repris dans la troisième édition de l'ouvrage *Histoire et vérité*, intitulé « Prévision économique et choix éthique », Ricoeur nuance son propos de manière remarquable. Je souligne trois points qui questionnent sa vision peut-être trop optimiste de la rationalité scientifique et technique en vue d'une espérance universelle de progrès pour l'humanité. D'abord une critique de l'idée de bonheur comme « poursuite du bien-être » qui débouche sur le « mauvais infini » (Hegel) de la consommation effrénée, la « boulimie du consommateur » écrit Ricoeur. Ensuite, la prépondérance, due à l'admiration pour la technique, d'une « relation » qui place tous les êtres « dans l'ordre du

⁷ Dans le numéro 1 (volume 12) des *Etudes ricoeuriennes* de 2021 qui republia l'article de Ricoeur intitulé « La question coloniale » de 1947, paru dans le journal protestant *Réforme* du 20 septembre 1947. Cristina Viana Meireles a traduit et commenté ce texte dans son excellent article « Paul Ricoeur e a questão colonial : a recepção do outro entre a culpabilidade e a civilização universal », in *Hospitalidade hermenêutica na filosofia de Paul Ricoeur* (Porto Alegre : Editora Fundação Fenix; Editora da Universidade Federal do Piau, 2020).

maniable, dans l'ordre de l'ustensile », « un modèle d'existence où toute chose devient occasion de maîtrise », écrit Ricœur, reprenant ici la différence heideggérienne entre *zuhanden* et *vorhanden*. Il rejoint ici la critique de Max Horkheimer à la « raison instrumentale » (*instrumentelle Vernunft*). Et Ricœur de conclure qu'il s'agit, fondamentalement, d'« habiter ce monde sans le dominer », donc de se « soustraire à la fascination de la puissance »⁸.

À vrai dire, dans le texte précédent sur « Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales », Ricœur s'identifie profondément à sa tradition culturelle, enracinée dans la philosophie occidentale, de telle manière que la confrontation avec l'autre n'est ni un choc ni un conflit ni une incompréhension mais un « dépaysement ». Certes, ce concept est très beau et indique une ouverture et une curiosité exemplaires. Ce concept est difficilement traduisible en portugais, également en anglais ou en allemand. Indice que le locuteur (et le philosophe !) français vient d'un grand et noble pays que l'on peut certes quitter mais auquel on revient avec bonheur, après un beau voyage, comme le chantait déjà Joachim du Bellay ? Quand nous parlons d'exil, de bannissement, d'expulsion ou de diaspora, nous sommes moins sûrs de pouvoir revenir au pays que nous avons quitté – mais qui nous attendrait toujours de retour. Cette observation linguistique me paraît indiquer combien l'herméneutique s'ouvre certes à l'autre mais le fait à partir d'une position stable et tranquille, voire inébranlable. Cet ancrage dans une tradition millénaire reconnue et respectée, notamment en philosophie, permet ainsi à Ricœur, tout en reconnaissant, dans ce texte vraiment passablement daté, plusieurs cultures *nationales*, de plaider pour une civilisation *universelle* selon la grande tradition européenne et occidentale, donc de l'universalité de cette figure de raison, de ses techniques et de son parcours vers le progrès.

Je ne désire pas entrer ici dans le débat philosophique entre la possibilité ou l'impossibilité de l'universel, débat que Ricœur lui-même aborde, pour ainsi dire de biais, dans le chapitre du dernier tome de *Temps et récit* intitulé « Renoncer à Hegel ». Il m'importe davantage ici de souligner combien ce dialogue avec l'autre, qui peut être le collègue étranger bien-sûr, mais aussi l'autochtone, le réfugié ou le paria, ou encore le domestique ou l'éboueur, n'est pas un dialogue entre égaux et ne peut réellement le devenir ni par bienveillance ni par la proclamation de « Liberté, égalité, fraternité ». Mais seulement, pour le dire brutalement, par la reconnaissance de la violence qui préexiste à la relation, indépendamment ou non de la volonté des sujets. Violence coloniale, genrée, racisée, financière, guerrière, que sais-je, mais violence qui continue, qui perdure jusque dans les tentatives les plus sincères de dialogue équitable, parce que ce dialogue ne peut être que la préfiguration utopique d'une égalité possible, mais non son accomplissement, basé sur la bonne volonté réciproque. Et je voudrais risquer une hypothèse, à savoir que les réflexions postérieures de Ricœur, notamment après sa confrontation avec la pensée de Hannah Arendt, en particulier son intérêt croissant pour une réflexion sur le Juste et les institutions judiciaires, naîtraient peut-être du sentiment lancinant qu'une analyse du *pouvoir*, voire de la *puissance*, n'épuise pas le champ de la *violence*.

Je me permets de reprendre ici quelques remarques déjà énoncées dans un autre texte⁹ sur la question de l'identité chez Ricœur, remarques que l'expérience de vivre dans un pays où la moitié de la population est d'origine noire, suite au gigantesque commerce d'esclaves jusqu'à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle – l'esclavage fut aboli en 1888 mais rien ne fut fait pour intégrer la

⁸ Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et vérité*, 3ème édition (Paris : Seuil, 1955), respectivement pp. 310, 311, 314.

⁹ « As armadilhas da identidade » dans l'ouvrage collectif intitulé *Paul Ricœur: Identidade e hermenêutica crítica* (São Paulo : Ed. Alameda, 2025).

population noire dans un projet civilisationnel commun –, et continue à être exploitée, bien souvent décimée par la police. Dans un très beau livre¹⁰, la psychanalyste noire Neusa Santos Souza a énuméré de manière précise les difficultés auxquelles se heurte la construction d'une subjectivité autonome et reconnue chez la plupart de ses patients, qui n'ont ni généalogie ancienne sur laquelle s'appuyer ni, pour se construire au futur, un paradigme positif d'identification autre que celui de « l'élite blanche » qui les humilie.

Cette exclusion, qui a des racines historiques douloureuses et qui perdure dans toute l'organisation sociale et politique actuelle, interroge l'universalité du modèle kantien. En d'autres termes : ce beau modèle de l'*Aufklärung* présuppose que le sujet en question non seulement veuille sortir de sa minorité, mais aussi qu'il en ait la possibilité effective, réelle, sans se faire punir, enfermer, blesser, éliminer par les détenteurs du pouvoir.

Pour tenter de conclure : lire Ricoeur au Brésil ne signifierait pas abandonner la dimension émancipatrice de l'*Aufklärung* kantienne mais bien de montrer ses limitations historiques ; donc également de résister à toute tentation de réconciliation hâtive. Et également de s'ouvrir à d'autres courants de pensée que la philosophie. Au Brésil, je pense en particulier à la richesse des pensées autochtones, si précipitamment qualifiées de « sauvages », mais que l'anthropologie actuelle (Viveiros de Castro, Descola) nous invite davantage à reconnaître comme une mise en question de la *prétention d'universalité* de notre système de pensée, de notre conception de raison et de sujet.

Et de s'ouvrir également à une critique de la violence sociale qui structure jusqu'à nos privilèges de chercheurs en philosophie.

¹⁰ *Tornar-se negro. Ou as vicissitudes da identidade do negro brasileiro em ascensão social* [Devenir Noir. Ou les vicissitudes de l'identité du Noir brésilien en situation d'ascension sociale] (Rio de Janeiro : Ed. Zahar, 1983).

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Élargir l'imagination pour fluidifier l'action – Paul Ricœur et Ailton Krenak

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Abstract

This article is an attempt at an imaginary dialogue between the thought of Ailton Krenak and the philosophy of Paul Ricœur. Although these two thinkers belong to different cultural spheres and seem to operate at distinct discursive levels, a comparison between them is fruitful when based on an analysis of the role each assigns to imagination in action, for while the relationship between imagination and action is exhaustively theorized by Ricœur, it is also emphasized by Krenak. However, a comparative interpretation of the meaning of this idea in the works of each of these two thinkers – insofar as imagination is embodied in works and actions are situated in the contemporary world – will reveal a profound conflict between their respective imaginaries that seems to overshadow the hermeneutic resolution of the conflict. Understanding this phenomenon requires a theoretical argument that engages in a dialectical dialogue between certain major themes in Ricœurian philosophy – such as myth, evil, and metaphor – and certain Krenakian ideas – such as ancestry, capitalism, and worldview.

Keywords: Ailton Krenak, Paul Ricœur, productive imagination, Adamic myth, Capitalism.

Résumé

Cet article est un essai de dialogue imaginaire entre la pensée d'Ailton Krenak et la philosophie de Paul Ricœur. Bien que ces deux penseurs appartiennent à des sphères culturelles différentes et semblent opérer à des niveaux discursifs distincts, une comparaison entre eux est productive à partir d'une analyse de la place que chacun accorde à l'imagination dans l'action, car si le rapport entre imagination et action est exhaustivement théorisé par Ricœur, il est aussi revendiqué par Krenak. Cependant, l'interprétation comparative du sens de cette idée chez l'un et chez l'autre de ces deux penseurs, pour autant que l'imagination s'incarne dans des œuvres et que les actions s'inscrivent dans le monde contemporain, révélera un profond conflit des imaginaires qui semble surplomber l'arbitrage herméneutique du conflit. Comprendre ce phénomène implique une argumentation théorique qui dialectise certains grands thèmes de la philosophie ricœurienne comme le mythe, le mal ou la métaphore, et certaines idées krenakiennes comme l'ancestralité, le capitalisme ou la cosmovision.

Mots-clés : Ailton Krenak, Paul Ricœur, imagination productrice, mythe adamique, capitalisme

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1. Introduction

1.1. Imagination et action

Il s'agit ici pour moi de m'interroger sur la possibilité d'un dialogue – dont j'admets qu'il repose sur une comparaison insolite – entre la pensée d'Ailton Krenak et la philosophie de Paul Ricœur, lesquels ne se sont jamais connus, ne se sont probablement pas lus, et ne parlent pas l'un de l'autre dans leurs textes. Cet article appartient donc à un genre que l'on pourrait appeler celui de *l'essai de construction fictionnelle d'un dialogue*¹.

À quelles conditions une telle comparaison pourrait-elle présenter un certain intérêt ? Le point de départ est le suivant : pour Ricœur comme pour Krenak, *il n'existe pas d'action sans imagination*². Si, d'un côté, comme on le verra, Ricœur a su élaborer une véritable théorie générale de l'imagination poético-pratique, Krenak, d'un autre côté, ne cesse, dans ses écrits poético-politiques, de souligner le rôle central de l'imagination dans les différentes formes de résistance des peuples amérindiens. Au delà des usages que chacun peut faire de ce mot d'imagination, ce qui est visé ici c'est donc l'analyse comparative du rapport entre imagination et action, pour autant que ce rapport, exhaustivement théorisé par la philosophie de Ricœur, est aussi constamment revendiqué par Krenak.

De prime abord, on peut souligner, il est vrai, l'incompatibilité apparente entre ces deux modes de pensée que tout semble opposer. Ricœur aménage philosophiquement une place pour les dialogues les plus improbables et, dans le cadre du *logos* universaliste occidental, y engage ses concepts. Krenak est à l'inverse sans concession à l'égard de tout geste d'appropriation de son propre discours par la pensée européenne, c'est un penseur activiste qui, en cherchant à se faire reconnaître comme le plus périphérique possible, utilise cette condition comme une stratégie de résistance qui affecte tous les aspects de son argumentation. Celle-ci, essentiellement composée d'interventions orales, de conférences et de débats, ne se présente pas comme une pensée

¹ J'utilise l'adjectif « fictionnel » au sens où Ricœur parle de « fiction heuristique ». Dans le chapitre intitulé : « Paul Ricœur, *A Metáfora viva e o jogo duro da interdisciplinaridade* » tiré du livre *Paul Ricœur, Identidade e hermenêutica crítica* (São Paulo : Editora Alameda, 2025, 107 et sq), j'emploie également l'expression de « fictionnalisation des conflits » pour décrire la façon dont Ricœur oppose plusieurs théoriciens dans *La métaphore vive*.

² « Pas d'action sans imagination », on s'en souvient, c'est la formule précise qu'utilise Ricœur lorsqu'il analyse le lien entre fiction et pouvoir faire dans son article de 1976 intitulé « L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action » publié dans : Paul Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique 2* (213-236, p. 224).

systématique au sens académique du terme. Néanmoins, trois de ses textes publiés, composés eux-mêmes de plusieurs interventions différentes, sont aujourd'hui très connus au Brésil : *Idées pour repousser la fin du monde*, *La vie n'est pas utile* et *Futur ancestral*³.

Comme Ricœur l'explique dans un entretien accordé à Christian Delacampagne⁴ à propos de *La métaphore vive* et de *Temps et récit*, la grande affaire de ces livres a été le problème de la créativité de l'imagination humaine. Que ce soit avec la métaphore – dont la fonction prédicative donne à voir des aspects inaperçus de notre manière de vivre –, que ce soit avec le récit – dont la fonction d'agencement d'incidents, de caractères et de circonstances en un système unique de signification logique produit des modèles d'action –, ou que ce soit enfin avec l'imaginaire social – dont la fonction utopique permet de corriger le fonctionnement pathologique des idéologies sociales qui opèrent à des moments donnés de l'histoire humaine –, Ricœur montre que l'ensemble de ces œuvres de l'imagination contribuent à la formation d'une tradition ouverte, marquée par la production de nouvelles significations, aux antipodes de l'idée d'une transmission dogmatique d'une même et unique histoire. Il affirme que toute culture témoigne du dynamisme de l'imagination sans pouvoir être purement et simplement niée par une pensée critique qui s'afficherait dans sa radicalité ou dans son caractère absolument subversif. C'est pourquoi, malgré la distance entre le discours politisé de Krenak et la pensée plus abstraite de Ricœur, on pourrait penser, si on dépasse la première intuition concernant leur incompatibilité, que la philosophie ricœurienne serait en mesure d'accorder toute sa place à la culture krenak⁵. En effet, si on ajoute au caractère d'ouverture de la philosophie de Ricœur le fait qu'elle concède un statut de vérité aux significations mythiques indépendamment de la pensée critique, on dispose d'arguments sérieux pour aller dans ce sens⁶.

1.2. Le statut de l'herméneutique dans la philosophie ricœurienne

Cependant, une série de conséquences qu'entraîne l'orientation herméneutique de la philosophie de Ricœur invite à la prudence. Lorsque, renonçant à sa position d'interprète des symboles qui témoignent de son appartenance à une culture (*La symbolique du mal*), Ricœur s'intéressera à la différence entre fiction et récit historique (*Temps et récit 2*), un véritable

³ Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (São Paulo : Companhia da Letras, 2019) ; *A vida não é útil* (São Paulo : Companhia das Letras, 2020) ; *Futuro ancestral* (São Paulo : Companhia das Letras, 2020).

⁴ Christian Delacampagne, « Paul Ricœur, philosophe de la métaphore et du récit » in *Entretiens avec Le Monde I. Philosophes* (Paris : La Découverte - Le Monde, 1984) 174.

⁵ J'emploierai la graphie krenak, sans majuscule, lorsqu'il s'agira de l'adjectif qualificatif, et réserverai la majuscule lorsque je me référerai à la personne d'Ailton Krenak.

⁶ En ce sens, je rejoins en partie le positionnement de Ram Adhar Mall, lorsqu'il définit son concept de « philosophie interculturelle » en s'opposant à la fois à la « fiction » d'une complète commensurabilité des cultures et à la « fiction » inverse d'une totale incommensurabilité des cultures et lorsqu'il plaide en faveur d'une « herméneutique analogique » censée dépasser cette alternative ruineuse. Mais ma démarche entend montrer en même temps la limite d'une approche herméneutique de cette question de l'interculturalité. C'est pourquoi je tente d'explorer ici des voies théoriques et argumentatives, qui ne se limitent pas à un simple travail d'interprétation, de communication et de traduction. (Voir à ce sujet : Ram Adhar Mall, « The Concept of an Intercultural Philosophy », tr. Michael Kimmel, *Polylog : Forum for Intercultural Philosophy 1* (2000) ; Online : <http://them.polylog.org/1/fmr-en.htm>. ISSN 1616-2943.

décentrement philosophique est opéré, qui marque un changement de posture face au geste d'interprétation des œuvres de l'imagination.

En effet, dans *Temps et récit*, c'est à l'herméneute qu'il revient d'évaluer le discours historiographique critique qu'il oppose aux discours théorico-littéraires, et c'est ensuite encore à lui de rapprocher ces deux types de discours comme deux outils d'analyse qui, en se rapportant l'un à la réalité historique, l'autre à la fiction littéraire, manquent tous deux le véritable rapport entre réalité et fiction. Cette méthode permet de définir l'herméneute comme celui qui doit, dans l'ordre de la réalité historique, s'efforcer de localiser sous des objets construits les expériences d'appartenance qui relient l'histoire à la réalité. Autrement dit, là où l'historiographie construit ses objets structurels en occultant ce qui intéresse principalement l'herméneute, c'est-à-dire la façon dont les hommes souffrent et ce qu'ils font, celui-ci doit montrer qu'on ne peut pas occulter le phénomène « d'appartenance participante », c'est à dire le fait que donner sens à ses actions et aux événements qui en découlent c'est se sentir lié à une communauté ou à un groupe. Parallèlement, l'herméneute est aussi celui qui montre qu'on ne peut pas comprendre l'expérience humaine du temps, telle qu'on la trouve représentée dans les récits de fiction, sans se référer imaginativement à une expérience humaine réelle du temps.

Cette orientation de la pensée ricœurienne fait apparaître l'imagination comme la faculté fondamentale qui, par sa capacité narrative, donne une épaisseur existentielle aux objets, autrement isolés de la vie humaine réelle par l'analyse historiographique ou théorico-littéraire, et laisse voir une zone de réalité déterminée par le sentiment d'appartenance. Toutefois, cette argumentation fait également apparaître la parole de l'herméneute comme celle d'un penseur qui sait non seulement désocculter l'existence, mais qui entend aussi négocier la place des autres épistémologies et arbitrer les éventuels conflits qui les opposent.

En ce sens, une attention particulière doit être portée au fait que deux niveaux de discours sont impliqués par la démarche argumentative de Ricœur : il y a d'abord le fait de dégager le schème existentiel humain du récit, c'est à dire la compétence narrative de l'homme, et il y a ensuite le fait de fonder l'arbitrage de l'herméneute qui en déduit, au dessus des disciplines concurrentes, la véritable structure du rapport entre la réalité et la fiction.

Sans une connaissance de cette double orientation de la pensée ricœurienne, on tomberait dans le piège qui consisterait, soit à faire du discours de Krenak une œuvre d'imagination intéressante doublée d'un modèle d'action parmi d'autres, soit à faire de la philosophie de Ricœur une herméneutique susceptible d'accueillir toute vision créative du monde à l'exclusion de toute théorie généralisante sur cette même créativité du monde. Ces deux attitudes, bien entendu, reviennent finalement au même.

À la lumière de ce détour par une brève analyse de la signification de l'herméneutique dans le dispositif argumentatif de Ricœur, il apparaît donc que la comparaison entre Ricœur et Krenak, sous l'angle de leurs conceptions respectives des relations entre imagination et action, s'avère plus complexe qu'il n'y paraît, puisqu'il s'agit de savoir si la philosophie de Ricœur peut comprendre, sans la dominer, la dimension praxique théorisée par la pensée de Krenak.

1.3. Le rapport ambigu de l'herméneute au mythe

Mon hypothèse est qu'un élément, et non des moindres, de la pensée de Krenak, à savoir le mythe, ne trouve pas de place dans le cadre de la philosophie ricœurienne. Chez Ricœur, en effet, quoique la compétence narrative devienne un schème fondamental de l'imagination humaine

et un concept majeur pour l'herméneute, le mythe, dont la principale caractéristique est qu'il se situe à mi-chemin de la réalité et de la fiction, se trouve définitivement neutralisé dans son pouvoir d'interprétation existentielle du monde se faisant sous nos yeux. Car malgré sa configuration narrative, et donc malgré le fait qu'on peut supposer que le mythe constitue une médiation intéressante entre l'existence réelle et la fictionnalisation de l'existence, à partir de *Temps et récit* en tout cas⁷, le partage entre véracité et fictionnalité rend son statut spécifique hautement problématique. On est invité alors à le ranger sous la rubrique des œuvres accomplies du passé⁸, ce qui permet par ailleurs de mieux le passer au crible de la dialectique inachevable de l'idéologie et de l'utopie au même titre que toutes les autres œuvres de la culture.

Si ce geste semble particulièrement efficace lorsqu'il s'agit de limiter les velléités totalisantes des philosophies occidentales ou des valeurs conservatrices, idéologiques et religieuses de la société, il pose cependant de nombreux problèmes en ce qui concerne la reconnaissance de la légitimité critique du discours d'appartenance provenant d'une autre culture.

Ainsi, c'est d'abord à partir du statut du mythe dans cette seconde phase de la pensée ricœurienne que l'on peut modéliser un conflit théorique entre Ricœur et Krenak. D'une part, en effet, que ce soit dans *La vie n'est pas utile*, où il s'agit de critiquer le capitalisme à la lumière du mythe de l'ancestralité, ou que ce soit dans *Idées pour ajourner la fin du monde*, où Krenak évoque la catastrophe du Barrage du Fundão comme un événement qui nous met dans « la vraie situation d'un monde qui est fini »⁹, pour Krenak, le mythe constitue dans tous les cas l'unique façon de donner un fondement ontologique au nécessaire esprit critique de l'humanité contemporaine. On pourrait donc dire qu'au lieu d'être un objet à interpréter, le mythe est pour lui un outil vivant d'interprétation de la réalité. C'est précisément sur cet outil que repose toute la stratégie politique de Krenak : selon lui, le mythe, en permettant de ne pas séparer ce que l'on dit de ce que l'on fait, contient en lui-même les éléments critiques nécessaires à l'action. À propos de son projet de *florestania*, il affirme par exemple qu'il s'agit de penser une dynamique ontologique des affects¹⁰ pour créer ce qui n'est pas encore un droit, c'est-à-dire pour créer un monde nouveau. Son langage poético-politique inclut en même temps la contestation des concepts conventionnels et les moyens d'action contre eux – par exemple, celui d'*alliance des différences*. Pour le dire brièvement, le moteur de l'action, justement parce que celle-ci se trouvera légitimée uniquement au moyen d'une épreuve directe de la réalité matérielle, est paradoxalement mythique, puisque le mythe se confronte à la réalité et ne s'en éloigne jamais.

⁷ À l'époque de *La symbolique du mal*, Ricœur insiste bien sur la fonction de détection ontologique des mythes, mais il est frappant de constater que, dans la confrontation entre récit de fiction et récit historiographique qui est au centre de *Temps et récit*, il ne semble pas y avoir de place véritable pour le mythe. Curieusement, la problématique de l'histoire et de la construction du récit historique ne revient pas directement sur la question pourtant centrale du rapport entre mythe et histoire.

⁸ Exactement au sens où Hegel parle de l'art comme d'une chose du passé : « En sa destination suprême du moins, l'art est pour nous quelque chose du passé. Il a perdu pour nous sa vérité et sa vie. Il nous invite à une réflexion philosophique qui ne prétend point lui assurer de renouveau mais reconnaître son essence en toute rigueur ». GWF Hegel, *Esthétique*, trad. Jankélévitch (Paris : Aubier 1944), « Introduction », 29-30.

⁹ Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo. Do sonho e da Terra*, 42.

¹⁰ Il s'agit de faire que toutes les choses s'affectent ensemble : Cf. Ailton Krenak, *Futur ancestral. Alliances affectives*, 42.

Or, bien que ce noyau mythique existe aussi chez Ricœur, ce dernier ne lui assigne pas une fonction directement politique. Non seulement l'action n'y est pas d'abord pensée comme une dynamique collective, contrairement à ce qu'elle est pour Krenak, mais de plus la croyance à ce que l'on fait, soutenue par la connaissance subjective que l'on a du monde est précisément ce qui empêche que l'échec ou la réussite objective d'une action se mesure à l'échelle de l'épreuve matérielle. Ainsi, l'épreuve matérielle de l'action de même que sa limite concrète ne donnent jamais tort ou raison au mythe qui porte à agir.

C'est donc un fait, pour Ricœur, s'agissant de l'imagination de l'action, même si l'herméneute doit reconnaître que « ce sont les schèmes – au sens kantien – qui engendrent les catégories »¹¹, il s'agit de garder, on l'a dit, la maîtrise des règles critiques qui permettent de déterminer la nature et le degré d'autorité de chaque niveau de discours quand ils se réfèrent à la réalité en vue de préparer à l'action concrète. En ce sens, aux créations littéraires ou mythiques, aux récits de fiction et aux métaphores poétiques, mais aussi aux discours théoriques, le philosophe confère une autonomie de signification partielle en tant qu'ils peuvent motiver l'action et ainsi devenir des objets pour l'herméneute, mais il ne leur confère pas, par ailleurs, une puissance d'agir directement efficace dans le monde. Tout se passe alors comme si l'herméneutique de Ricœur faisait apparaître au-dessus du dynamisme de l'imagination la nécessité d'une pensée abstraite qui est comme la figure inversée de l'insuffisance effective de l'imagination. Pour lui, s'il est certes impossible, d'un côté, de déterminer dans son contenu concret une créativité qui doit par définition rester évasive puisqu'elle est l'expression de l'innovation sémantique et praxique, d'un autre côté cela ne signifie pourtant pas que le philosophe cesse de légiférer conceptuellement sur les niveaux de discours censés garantir cette ouverture non conceptuelle des récits et de l'action.

À la lumière de ce décentrement décisif de la seconde phase de la philosophie de Ricœur, l'herméneute n'est plus seulement celui qui philosophe de l'intérieur de sa culture, mais il est aussi celui qui, fondé à théoriser sur les puissances imaginatives, ne se laisse plus déborder par les pouvoirs de vérité du mythe. Or, la distanciation critique à l'égard des mythes, dont il reconnaît cependant l'action sous la forme de la tradition, le conduit à séparer radicalement tout mythe de la critique transformatrice. S'il y a donc bien, comme c'est le cas du mythe, des éléments non critiques dans toute culture, ces éléments sont hors de portée dès lors qu'ils ne sont pas encadrés par une dialectique critique médiatisée par l'imagination. Toute culture qui ne met pas en place un dispositif critique fondé sur la dialectique de l'imagination est littéralement incriticable dans ses principes, la contrepartie étant qu'elle ne transforme pas non plus la réalité. C'est pourquoi parallèlement, pour pouvoir dialoguer avec d'autres cultures, il faut être l'homme d'une culture qui revoit critiquement ses propres mythes – c'est-à-dire un occidental –, puisqu'il est le seul qui, sachant reprendre ses propres mythes, et mobilisant un concept d'imagination à la hauteur des enjeux de l'histoire, saura donner en imagination aux mythes des cultures étrangères la fonction que ceux-ci exercent dans la sienne. Pour tout dire, cet homme qui voit le mythe comme un récit achevé et réduit à l'état de croyance ne peut donc pas reconnaître aux mythes étrangers une action véritablement transformatrice. Puisque nous parlons ici de Ricœur, si pour lui l'imagination, dans sa fonction heuristique, entreprend de créer des œuvres qui nient et dépassent, toujours de façon réglée et jamais absolument, des visions antérieures du monde devenues trop réductrices ou obsolètes, c'est au prix d'une identification entre l'idée abstraite de culture et le contenu culturel occidental. Dès lors, le philosophe herméneute valide formellement cette procédure en affirmant

¹¹ Christian Delacampagne, « Paul Ricœur, philosophe de la métaphore et du récit », 171.

qu'il s'agit bien là de la façon dont la créativité humaine exerce son pouvoir de transformation de la réalité.

Enfin, on peut dire que la principale conséquence de cette logique est que pour entrer dans une dynamique critique, toute culture doit en principe se soumettre aux règles d'interprétation de l'action compatibles avec la manifestation d'une imagination fictionnelle, puisque ce processus dialectique interne à la culture occidentale est considéré comme l'unique façon d'interpréter, en le transformant, le monde historique contemporain. Or, si l'on devait demeurer dans ce cadre de pensée, pour que les krenak deviennent un peuple capable de changer le monde, ils devraient accepter l'idée qu'il leur faut d'abord s'adresser critiqueusement à leur propre mythe, pour prendre une distance critique à son égard. On voit alors mal comment il pourrait y avoir une autre conception de l'action véritablement créatrice que celle qui se coule dans ce type de schème de l'historicité des transformations.

1.4. Vers une conception du mythe vivant

Aussi bien, ma réflexion s'orientera vers une autre possibilité : si le discours de Krenak peut bien en un sens être lu dans la perspective de l'anthropologie ontologique¹², je tenterai de montrer que sa grande force provient de ce qu'il ne se contente pas d'esquisser une opposition du mythe de sa culture à la violence du *logos* occidental, mais qu'en rapportant cette violence au mythe qui la fonde il entreprend une dialectique plus subtile entre la valeur de créativité et d'innovation de son mythe non historique et la puissance de destruction du mythe occidental.

En ce sens, l'originalité de Krenak, c'est qu'il choisit de parler la langue des blancs et cherche à se constituer comme le sujet de son propre discours, en le postulant comme critique et mythique à la fois. Par ce moyen, le mythe krenak se politise et devient ainsi, aux yeux des Occidentaux, une utopie de la résistance à l'idéologie de l'abstraction conceptuelle de la pensée occidentale. Cela ne signifie pas pour autant que Krenak refuse de prendre la parole parmi les Occidentaux. Krenak n'est donc pas un objet d'étude anthropologique, il est un sujet politique.

À chaque pas de cette comparaison insolite entre Ricœur et Krenak, nous pourrions rencontrer alors une question spéculative portant sur le pensable et l'impensable. Si l'ouverture aux schèmes créatifs d'un autrui lointain se paie au prix de la négation de l'autonomie critique de l'autre, dans la mesure où seule une pensée qui se soumet à la condition nécessaire de l'historicité est considérée comme « critique », tout l'enjeu est de savoir si finalement l'imagination créatrice krenak peut triompher du discours abstrait en proposant ses propres règles concernant le rapport critique entre imagination et action, et en rapportant le schème de l'historicité à son mythe

¹² À travers ce terme « d'anthropologie ontologique », j'entends me référer au tournant ontologique initié en anthropologie par Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern et Eduardo Viveiros de Castro et qui trouve également son prolongement chez Philippe Descola et Tim Ingold. L'une des orientations fondamentales de cette « anthropologie ontologique » consiste précisément à penser les différences culturelles, non en tant que différences de visions du monde mais en tant que différences de « mondes » ou « d'être au monde ». On notera à ce titre que c'est précisément dans ce nouveau cadre théorique que Philippe Descola a initié un dialogue avec Ailton Krenak. Voir par exemple à ce sujet la conférence d'Ailton Krenak au Collège de France le 29 avril 2025 : « Pour une florestania : habiter la terre à l'anthropocène », Cf. <https://youtu.be/GHViWnWMOKk?si=u-6DQKeiUwrS9yTC>

occidental, afin de penser d'une autre façon la réalité du monde comme un devenir se faisant sous nos yeux.

C'est pourquoi je dois avouer ici ma propre utopie, à savoir que j'ai la conviction qu'en prenant Ricœur au mot, le contenu concret d'une interprétation existentielle réellement ancrée dans le monde peut véritablement déborder les règles d'abstraction que la pensée conceptuelle voudrait lui imposer, et se mettre à l'affecter durablement¹³.

En effet, Ricœur a lui-même voulu concéder au récit adamique le statut de mythe vivant, et ce geste semble nous autoriser à dialectiser un conflit autour de l'interprétation du dialogue des cultures dans le cadre du monde contemporain. Face à cela, dans un premier temps, cet article tentera de montrer comment l'usage d'une pensée du mythe vif permet à Krenak de mettre en place un discours d'action nourri par une imagination critique à l'égard de l'Occident et du capitalisme. Ce discours est d'autant plus juste qu'il prend appui sur le mythe occidental pour développer une thèse à propos du conflit des imaginaires, amenant celui-ci à surplomber la perspective d'un arbitrage herméneutique. Dans un second temps, si l'on accorde, à partir de Krenak, que la critique du monde contemporain ainsi que sa transformation par l'action ne peuvent se passer d'une analyse du rapport entre mythe vif et histoire réelle, il restera à interroger à la lumière de la pensée de Krenak la réduction du mythe au langage métaphorique effectuée par Ricœur dans le cadre de sa théorie de l'imagination productrice et de la créativité poétique.

2. Imagination et capitalisme

2.1. Le mythe de l'ancestralité

Reprenons le point de départ de cette comparaison. Pour Ricœur comme pour Krenak l'imagination est un concept décisif pour penser la transformation du monde. Mais si l'on emploie la terminologie ricœurienne, pour l'un comme pour l'autre, l'action efficace s'enracine dans un fonds symbolique toujours déjà là, à partir duquel une imagination productrice devient le moteur d'un dynamisme créatif. En adoptant un point de vue ricœurien sur ce dynamisme imaginatif, on n'a pas de difficulté à penser que plus on accordera d'autonomie sans autosuffisance à la signification des symboles d'une culture, plus on aura de chances de trouver des points communs entre les cultures.

Il en va tout autrement chez Krenak. Dans le discours de ce dernier, il est certes constamment question d'imaginer les moyens de concrétisation matérielle, par des actions, de l'identité collective krenak, et l'action transformatrice s'appuie, à n'en pas douter, sur les éléments signifiants de la culture krenak - les symboles, les mythes, les récits, les valeurs, les croyances etc. Mais l'imagination krenak opère dans un monde fabriqué par une histoire non-krenak. Or, ce point est absolument décisif. Car la lisibilité des propositions de Krenak dépend d'une dialectique entre le fonds mythique krenak et l'expérience historique contemporaine qui n'est pas krenak, et doit être comprise, de son point de vue, comme une hétérogénéité principielle. Ainsi, une attention

¹³ Lorsque je parle ici de « prendre Ricœur au mot », je pense en particulier à la conclusion de *La Symbolique du mal*, lorsque le philosophe tente de mesurer l'impact transformateur, voire subversif, que peut avoir sur le discours philosophique l'idée d'une philosophie alimentée par les symboles – c'est-à-dire, en d'autres termes, l'idée d'une philosophie qui parie sur la possibilité d'une pensée « à partir des symboles ».

particulière au contenu des mythes krenak spécifiques, ce que Krenak appelle son ancestralité, ne doit pas détourner le regard d'un projet politique affecté par l'histoire de l'Occident. C'est d'ailleurs sans doute la raison pour laquelle l'un de ses principaux écrits s'intitule *Le futur ancestral*.

De quoi s'agit-il ? Il s'agit de penser la continuité entre l'ancestralité et la contemporanéité au moyen d'une explicitation complète des mythes fondateurs tels qu'ils peuvent être totalement assumés en tant que croyance, mais aussi en tant que projet critique d'action politique. En d'autres termes, le mythe des krenak, si l'on en croit leur porte-parole, n'obscurcit pas la connaissance critique de l'histoire concrète, et Krenak n'a aucun doute sur la violence historique réelle et sur les sujets qui la font¹⁴. Il tient pour idéologique et illusoire le fait de faire dépendre l'intelligibilité des actions d'une rupture entre le récit commun et l'initiative individuelle, et situe d'emblée le travail de l'imagination sur un plan collectif, celui d'une commune cosmovision agissante. Dans un très beau texte, *Salut aux fleuves*¹⁵, Krenak transcrit une conférence symptomatiquement intitulée *Politiques cosmiques*. Lire de près la cosmovision qui s'y trouve exposée, nous donne à entendre que, chez lui, le sens du mythe n'est jamais indépendant de la signification critique et politique que revêt le fait de se revendiquer d'un mythe propre, en l'occurrence d'un mythe krenak.

2.2. Remythiser l'Occident

C'est pourquoi l'idée de cosmovision krenak ne se réduit pas à la définition du mythe telle qu'on la trouve par exemple chez Mircea Eliade. Comme on sait, ce dernier oppose les sociétés mythiques à celles qui ne le seraient pas. Dans *Le Traité d'histoire des religions* mais aussi dans *Aspects du mythe* et *Images et symboles*¹⁶, Eliade situe la crise du *mythos* – c'est-à-dire son remplacement progressif par le *logos* – en Inde et dans la Grèce ancienne. Il interprète l'histoire occidentale comme un devenir *logos* du *mythos*, c'est à dire comme un processus de rationalisation historique. Pour lui, le mythe vivant est devenu un phénomène essentiellement primitif ou archaïque, qu'il définit comme le récit sacré d'un événement ayant eu lieu dans les temps primordiaux, et dont la vérité hors du temps consiste à révéler un modèle exemplaire pour une communauté qui le revit et le répète par ses rites. Dans les cultures qui maintiennent une relation vivante avec leur mythe, la séparation entre le vrai et le faux, y compris le fictionnel, passe par la division du sacré et du profane, car sont faux tous les récits qui ne sont pas primordiaux, puisque selon Eliade la pensée mythique ne reconnaît pas la catégorie de véracité historique.

On voit pourquoi Krenak ne pourrait valider que très difficilement cette conception du monde. En effet, il lui faut en même temps reconnaître la véracité historique de l'événement de la colonisation et la valeur de vérité d'une cosmovision qui, en fondant collectivement la culture krenak, justifie à ses yeux la critique de la violence de l'histoire colonisatrice.

Par ailleurs, c'est sans doute dans le cadre d'un débat avec Eliade autour de la définition du mythe et de l'histoire comme deux catégories qui s'excluent mutuellement que Ricœur propose

¹⁴ La prise en compte de la violence réelle – et pas seulement discursive – dans l'histoire est ce qui distingue la pensée décoloniale de la pensée postcoloniale.

¹⁵ « Saudações aos rios » in *Futuro ancestral*, 8-15.

¹⁶ En ce qui concerne ce dernier ouvrage, Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles* (Paris : Tel Gallimard, 1980) : voir en particulier « L'Avant propos », p. 13-36.

une autre interprétation de la culture occidentale pour laquelle il mobilise le mythe adamique¹⁷. Selon lui, la tradition judéo-chrétienne, bien qu'elle s'interprète comme une histoire, ne peut pas considérer sa religion comme un *mythos* désacralisé. Même s'il a incorporé des éléments mythiques provenant de diverses sources étrangères, le judéo-christianisme, dont la tradition est aussi rattachée à la dimension prophétique, est une religion du non-savoir, à la différence des sociétés mythiques qui considèrent leur récit primordial comme le savoir. Si le Prophète parle à la place de Dieu, de l'intérieur de son historicité, cet aspect du vécu historique d'origine religieuse judaïque résonne dans la façon dont pour Ricœur le mythe adamique contient une vérité précise sur le mal, à savoir, qu'il est le phénomène incompréhensible rationnellement qui entre pourtant dans le monde de l'histoire par la main de l'homme.

Nous pouvons alors nous saisir de la façon qu'a Ricœur de proposer une autre forme de conceptualisation du rapport entre mythe et histoire pour mieux comprendre l'intérêt du discours de Krenak. Cet intérêt consiste dans le fait que, même si l'ancestralité krenak est un savoir à la manière d'un mythe primordial, elle est aussi un système de pensée capable d'interpréter sa propre expérience du mal en tant qu'elle doit désormais intégrer un phénomène historiquement objectif. Le mythe est vivant et il parle de la réalité, c'est en cela qu'il éprouve sa puissance mythique. Pour Krenak, identifier le mal à l'Occident, cela veut dire confirmer la vérité primordiale de son récit mythique propre, mais tout en la confortant, il s'agit aussi d'interpréter le mal qui advient dans l'histoire, et non *in illo tempore*. Or, cette interprétation du mal – et c'est en ce sens que la pensée de Krenak acquiert sa dimension critique –, rapporte le mal tel qu'il est commis dans l'histoire non à l'histoire elle-même, mais à son propre mythe de l'origine du mal. Il ne s'agit donc pas seulement d'une violence historique critiquable dans une langue du *logos*, par exemple en termes d'explication historique rationnelle ou de critique idéologique. On peut dire alors que le mythe krenak est actif, puisque sans lui on ne pourrait pas rapporter la violence de l'histoire à son mythe (occidental), et on manquerait la dimension critique. Autrement dit, l'opposition entre le Bien et le Mal serait un échec de la prise de parole krenak si l'on pouvait se contenter d'opposer deux identités entrées en conflit dans l'histoire, en faisant comme si le conflit pouvait se réduire à un rapport de force explicable rationnellement et compréhensible herméneutiquement.

À mes yeux, cette articulation du mythe et de la réalité historique rejoint une thèse fondamentale, celle de la continuité effective entre mythe et histoire¹⁸ en tant que seule issue pour comprendre la contemporanéité de l'histoire se faisant devant nous et avec nous. Et bien que Ricœur s'oppose à la définition dichotomique du mythe et de l'histoire telle que la propose Eliade, il me semble que la thèse de la continuité du mythe et de l'histoire contredit pourtant l'orientation générale de sa philosophie.

C'est pourquoi il me paraît opportun de revisiter *La symbolique du mal*, en me penchant plus particulièrement sur l'analyse que Ricœur consacre au mythe adamique. Le philosophe y montre en effet que ce mythe – qu'il reconnaît comme fondateur de la culture à laquelle il appartient – se distingue de tous les autres par le fait qu'il inclut dans sa structure de signification le schème de la rupture entre mythe et histoire. Selon lui, c'est ce schème qui conduit

¹⁷ Je développe cette question dans un article paru au Brésil à propos du poète João Cabral de Melo Neto. Cf. Cristina Henrique da Costa, *Texto poético*, « Estragos do real » (Vol. 14, n° 25, 2018, 334-364, 350-352, voir en particulier la note 14).

¹⁸ Voir aussi à ce sujet : René Girard, *De la violence à la divinité. Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris : Grasset et Fasquelle, 2007).

paradoxalement l'homme de culture occidentale à penser son existence humaine comme historicité, en inaugurant une certaine croyance en l'histoire fondée sur une autre croyance, elle-même mythique, en la nécessité de la rupture de l'homme d'avec sa situation originelle.

Alors que Krenak n'a probablement pas connaissance de cette analyse conceptuelle ricœurienne, il est étonnant de constater que l'interprétation du mythe adamique comme paradoxe de la croyance en une rupture définitive qui se double d'une croyance en la réparation impossible - moteur même du sentiment d'appartenance qui fait de l'homme occidental un existant historique, constitue le point névralgique du discours krenakien, en tant qu'il revendique son statut à la fois mythique et critique. Pour Krenak, en effet, la violence réelle de l'histoire moderne, parce qu'elle contient une dimension symbolique et n'est pas seulement un fait brut et matériel, ne peut pas être interprétée de façon abstraite. Il faut donc prendre en compte le mythe occidental, et montrer qu'une croyance en un symbole qui inclut lui-même dans sa signification sa propre rupture avec l'histoire réelle tout en se pliant au schème historique est bien l'origine de la violence. Ne pas le reconnaître, c'est se méprendre sur ce que sont les responsabilités réelles de l'Occident.

Si, donc, la conception d'Eliade, pour qui la violence de l'histoire viendrait du fait qu'elle est le fruit du phénomène occidental de démythisation, se montre insuffisante pour rendre compte d'un discours comme celui de Krenak, c'est sans doute parce que, pour ce dernier, comprendre la violence signifie revenir au mythe occidental qui l'exprime. Mais à la différence d'une vision évhémériste du contenu du mythe susceptible de déboucher sur une recherche analytique des *vrais agents* cachés derrière les figures d'Adam et Ève, du serpent, etc., et à la différence d'une approche par l'historiographie critique des idéologies du mythe qui conduirait nécessairement à une réduction du contenu de vérité du mythe à une idéologie, Krenak aborde le problème du mythe occidental dans un esprit d'émancipation à l'égard des racines religieuses de la violence de l'histoire. Pour ce faire, comme le montrent ses écrits, la meilleure stratégie est de mettre à distance la démythisation qui le menace en tant qu'elle est un dispositif discursif interne à la pensée occidentale, et d'élaborer une critique de l'action du mythe qui soit de taille à lutter contre la destruction symbolique de l'ancestralité krenak opérée dans une histoire réelle. Bref, l'interprétation de l'expérience du mal, Krenak le comprend vite, ne peut pas s'appuyer uniquement sur une critique des idéologies de l'homme occidental.

Selon lui, l'idéologie de la souffrance obligatoire porte tout l'édifice de l'esprit colonisateur et elle se perpétue dans l'histoire réelle du colonialisme. Krenak demande : « D'où nous vient cette mentalité blanche selon laquelle la souffrance nous enseigne quelque chose ? Je ne veux rien apprendre au prix de la souffrance »¹⁹. C'est donc bien dans les faits que l'idéologie du mythe adamique est un prétexte à la réalisation de l'action mauvaise, mais c'est aussi dans les faits que le mythe réalise son pouvoir ontologique en acceptant dans l'après coup de tirer du mal accompli des leçons pour l'action à venir. Et c'est bien alors la thèse du caractère nécessaire de la souffrance qui perpétue la souffrance.

L'ancestralité krenak, dans la logique d'une continuité entre mythe et histoire, doit donc élaborer à son tour son récit de l'origine du mal. Elle doit le faire en quelque sorte à la lumière d'une vérité historique venue bouleverser son existence antérieure en y installant un nouvel événement fondateur.

¹⁹ « Do sonho e da terra », in Ailton Krenak, *Futur ancestral*, 65.

L'extermination d'une culture par une autre semble alors mieux pensée si l'on se saisit d'une dialectique de démythisation et de remythisation. Ainsi, Krenak ne paraît pas convaincu que l'idéologie, même odieuse, soit assez puissante à elle seule pour produire une action efficace dans l'histoire. Celle-ci devient non seulement une action contre son peuple, mais aussi contre son mythe. Du même coup, l'extermination des peuples originaires n'est pas une violence de plus dans l'histoire : en annihilant une vision du monde et non seulement des personnes, elle impose son propre mythe du mal.

Vu sous l'aspect de cette tension non résolue entre des mythes, on ne peut pas dire que le mythe krenak pourrait se trouver dans la position de l'utopie correctrice des effets pathologiques de l'imaginaire idéologique occidental, mais on ne peut pas dire non plus qu'une utopie occidentale quelconque, si elle ne tient pas compte de la cosmovision krenak, serait autre chose qu'une idéologie déguisée. Du même coup, cette façon de convoquer les mythes sur la scène de l'histoire réelle enraye la machine dialectique de l'idéologie et de l'utopie faite pour penser la dynamique critique seulement à l'intérieur d'une même culture.

Krenak veut donc faire ce que les Occidentaux semblent ne pas savoir faire : il veut parler dans l'autre langue, mais comme il s'agit de celle de ses colonisateurs, il ne peut pas dire que son mythe est vrai alors que le leur est faux. L'expulsion des peuples originaires du paradis et leur perte d'innocence est le langage avec lequel on peut parler avec les blancs pour leur signifier le lien entre leur vision du monde et l'événement historique. Or, c'est à une vision que l'on doit opposer une autre vision, et on n'oppose pas à un mythe vivant une argumentation humaniste rationalisée.

Ainsi, si pour Ricœur comme pour Krenak le mal entre bien dans le monde par la main des êtres humains, ce n'est ni parce qu'un mythe originaire krenak le dirait aussi, ni parce que Krenak en serait rationnellement convaincu, mais parce qu'il comprend que ceux qui croient au mythe adamique sont capables de l'accomplir. Ceux qui, selon l'apôtre Paul, font le mal sans le savoir sont surtout ceux qui ne savent pas que telle est leur vision du monde. Les blancs produisent le mal dans l'histoire parce qu'ils croient à leur mythe de production du mal dans l'histoire.

Il nous semble dès lors que c'est précisément ici que peut se mettre en place la signification universelle de l'ancestralité de Krenak. Selon lui, les blancs ont perdu leur ancestralité. Traduisons : c'est de l'attachement à leur mythe que provient une déperdition du sens de l'action des blancs, car ils ont perdu la capacité de formuler une critique percutante de l'histoire réelle que leur mythe ne permet pas d'infléchir. Pourquoi ? Notamment parce que toute critique est en même temps troublée par une croyance dans la fatalité de l'historicité de l'existence humaine en tant qu'elle serait la seule issue pour penser une action, toujours de réparation, contre la violence dans l'histoire. Les blancs se sont chassés eux-mêmes du paradis et se sont mis à penser que tout le monde en faisait autant. Inversement, les Krenak sont réellement aux premières loges pour analyser cette fatalité de façon critique et distanciée. Car les croyances n'engagent que ceux qui les ont, et on n'est pas obligé de croire au mythe de la rupture entre le mythe et l'histoire.

Il est temps de dire que nous nous situons ici dans un conflit des imaginaires qui a pour caractéristique d'être une occultation de la nature imaginaire du conflit et donc également, si nous suivons en partie Ricœur, de ses conséquences réelles et matérielles dans le monde.

2.3. Cosmovision versus historicité

Allons un peu plus loin : ce que veut Krenak, c'est se référer à un système de signification hors du champ du mythe adamique sans être conduit à faire une exception pour les Occidentaux

rationalisés, lesquels ne seraient au fond ni individuellement ni collectivement responsables de leur mythe. En ce sens, il ne s'agit pas pour lui d'établir une différence primordiale entre les peuples qui ont un mythe et ceux qui n'ont qu'une histoire, il s'agit au contraire d'inclure les Occidentaux parmi les peuples qui ont un mythe, en allant chercher très loin le contenu de vérité de ce mythe pour le soumettre à la critique. Ce contenu de vérité, on peut aussi aller le chercher chez Ricœur. On l'a dit, c'est le fait (mythique) de l'existence nécessairement historique des hommes.

À ceci près que, dans la philosophie ricœurienne, parce que le philosophe se situe à l'intérieur d'une culture de l'historicité, la possibilité d'agir dans l'histoire représente cet arrachement au moins partiel du fond symbolique, un arrachement sans lequel il n'y a pas de transformation du monde et encore moins d'ouverture aux autres. C'est pourquoi on baigne dans le tragique de l'histoire.

Mais la question posée par Krenak est : que veut dire transformer le monde ? Autrement dit, que signifie transformer un monde qui a déjà été transformé par une catastrophe réelle ? Krenak n'entend pas définir la transformation comme ce qui n'a pas d'autre choix que de prolonger le caractère indépassable de l'historicité. Transformer le monde par l'action, ce n'est pas pour lui prolonger l'existence historique, c'est même tout le contraire. Les fleuves lui suggèrent une autre conception du temps : « s'il y a un futur à envisager, ce futur est ancestral, parce qu'il était déjà là »²⁰.

Et comme il le dit encore dans cette évocation poético-philosophique :

Les jeunes gens pagayaient en rythme, chacun touchait la surface de l'eau très calmement, avec harmonie : ils s'exerçaient à leur enfance, ce que leur peuple, les Yudja, appelle s'approcher de l'antiquité. L'un d'eux, plus âgé, verbalisa l'expérience en ces termes : « Nos parents disent que nous approchons de ce qui était dans l'ancien temps ». J'ai trouvé très beau que ces jeunes gens désirent quelque chose que leurs ancêtres leur avaient appris, et d'autant plus beau qu'ils le valorisaient au présent. Ces garçons que je revois dans mon souvenir ne courent pas derrière une idée prospective du temps, ni ne cherchent ce qui est ailleurs, mais ils désirent ce qui va se produire exactement ici, en ce lieu ancestral qui est leur territoire, dans les fleuves²¹.

Ainsi, dans l'existence sensée d'une cosmovision krenak, il n'y a pas, bien sûr, de discontinuité entre la Terre, les minéraux, les végétaux, les animaux et les krenak, mais surtout il n'y a aucune raison de distinguer vivre et agir. Or, à partir du moment où l'histoire réelle concrétise la destruction du monde, transforme le Tietê²² en égout, force les fleuves à charrier les détritiques d'une civilisation abusive que le chef Seattle qualifie de vomis, l'action dans l'histoire réelle, laquelle est une mort, se définit pour les krenak comme une résistance cosmovisionnaire contre le mal d'histoire.

Cette résistance est forcément double. D'abord, on se porte candidat à l'universalité si on est capable d'embrasser la totalité des êtres, y compris le monde des blancs et leur mythe du mal.

²⁰ « Saudação aos rios » in Ailton Krenak, *Futuro ancestral*, 8.

²¹ Ailton Krenak, *Futuro ancestral*, 4.

²² Fleuve très pollué qui traverse la ville de São Paulo.

C'est pourquoi la tristesse de Krenak vient de ce que sa cosmovision doit prendre en charge l'existence blanche qui s'en absente. Ensuite, c'est sur le plan cosmique de la cosmovision krenak qu'on comprend le conflit cosmovisionnaire, et qu'il devient possible de remettre en selle la cosmovision des blancs.

2.4. Le capitalisme comme mal

Or, cette cosmovision occidentale, c'est le capitalisme. Malheureusement, une fois assumée la totalité des êtres, la distance de Krenak par rapport au mythe adamique étranger s'assombrit douloureusement. Les krenak, dotés d'une cosmovision qui les relie à l'ensemble de tous les êtres de la terre et unis par l'ancestralité de la vie dans toutes ses manifestations passées, présentes et futures ne parviennent à se penser comme victimes de la violence qu'en imaginant le corps du cosmos total. Il leur est impossible de se dérober face à la cosmicité du mythe des Occidentaux, tel que le capitalisme l'incarne et le met en œuvre. Dans la mesure où, dans l'ensemble de ses figures historiques : la colonisation, le mercantilisme, l'esclavage, l'hégémonie nationale brésilienne, la financiarisation internationale, les guerres, et la destruction de la planète, le capitalisme élève la différence entre les cultures au niveau de la négation cosmique des différences, il est un système ontologiquement synonyme de mal. Il est la traduction cosmique de ce que le mythe adamique annonce au plan de la structure historique de la pensée occidentale. Il contient le mythe du caractère inéluctable de la souffrance et de la réparation, toujours ajournée, dans le cours de l'histoire.

Puisqu'il a fallu passer par l'explicitation du mythe occidental, puis par sa traduction cosmique, pour élever le conflit des cultures au plan des imaginaires collectifs, il n'y aura alors pas d'autre solution que de reconnaître la puissance imaginative mise au service de la destruction systématique du monde par le capitalisme occidental. En d'autres termes, c'est ce système qui signale dans la modernité la productivité paradoxale de l'imagination du mal. Paradoxale veut dire ici : une puissance d'imaginer qui s'inverse en une destruction du monde. Comme dans la monoculture de la canne à sucre des poèmes de João Cabral²³, le capitalisme stérilise et appauvrit le sol sur lequel il pousse. Et comme le soutient Georges Bataille, on pourrait dire alors que c'est quand l'énergie de la destruction rejoint sa force de création que l'on commence à pouvoir comprendre ce qu'est le mal.

Une fois identifié le cœur du discours de Krenak, il nous semble qu'on peut dès lors en tirer certaines conclusions. Pour Krenak, la destruction capitaliste du monde est d'autant plus désespérante que, n'étant pas assumée collectivement, c'est à dire comme l'action cosmique qu'elle est, elle ne peut non plus être assumée par aucun membre de la collectivité. « Il y en a qui se sentent confortables quand ils se contournent en faisant du yoga, quand ils rament sur le chemin de Saint-Jacques ou quand ils roulent sur l'Himalaya, en pensant qu'ils s'élèvent. En fait, il n'y a là qu'une friction avec le paysage, ça ne sauve personne du point mort »²⁴, ironise Krenak.

Si le capitalisme est bien une force cosmique du mal, il est aussi paradoxalement la principale force de stérilisation de l'imagination du bien. Dans *Idées pour ajourner la fin du monde*, Krenak affirme : « Lorsque nous avons voulu créer une réserve de biosphère dans une région du

²³ João Cabral de Melo Neto, « Alto do Trapuá » in *Obra completa* (Rio de Janeiro : Editora Nova Aguilar, 1994, 160-162).

²⁴ Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo*, 55.

Brésil, il a fallu expliquer pourquoi il était important que la planète ne soit pas dévorée par l'industrie minière. L' OEA, l'UNESCO, l'ONU, La Banque Mondiale, sont dans un club qui limite la capacité d'invention, de création, d'existence et de liberté »²⁵.

Du mythe adamique qui soutient la croyance de l'homme blanc en une action réparatrice dans l'histoire à la violence réelle qui fonde la croyance krenak selon laquelle il faut sortir de l'histoire, puis de cette nouvelle croyance à l'élévation de l'expérience du mal au plan cosmique résulte ainsi une pensée de la fin du monde qui n'est que l'amère reconnaissance de l'efficacité symbolique de la culture des blancs. L'Apocalypse est bien là. Nous avons affaire à une force de transformation du monde telle qu'elle en produit la fin. Pour Krenak, la catastrophe de la rupture du barrage du Fundão à Mariana nous a placés dans la condition réelle de cette fin, avec la destruction de toute une région par le déversement de 45 millions de mètres cubes de déchets toxiques. Allant plus loin que F. Jameson ou Conceição Evaristo (« il est plus facile d'en finir avec le monde que d'en finir avec le capitalisme »), Krenak se risque ainsi à affirmer : « Le monde est déjà fini ».

Rendons hommage à ce dispositif discursif de démythisation et de remythisation dont il faut reconnaître la force imaginaire: il faut croire en la fin du monde si l'on veut comprendre l'efficacité cosmique réelle du capitalisme.

2.5. L'action transformatrice

Au terme de cette analyse, on est alors en mesure de reformuler la question posée précédemment en lui donnant désormais une véritable signification ontologique: qu'est-ce qu'une action transformatrice *dans* un monde capitaliste ? Là où Ricœur penserait à la figure de la victime comme un scandale qui atteint une personne, une communauté ou une culture particulière, Krenak clame que l'extermination de sa culture est une apocalypse continuée, puisque le tragique de l'action occidentale contamine tout le cosmos. En revanche, pour un krenak, une connexion imaginative avec la totalité de la Terre Mère dont nous sommes des microcosmes est la seule chose dont nous devons nous souvenir car, à ce stade, « les fleuves et les montagnes commencent à être très offensés ». Qu'est donc qu'une action transformatrice ? La perte d'ancestralité de l'homme occidental oblige historiquement les Krenak à l'incarner universellement, puisqu'ils résistent.

Au fond, la tradition occidentale croit-elle vraiment en sa puissance de destruction cosmique ? Chez Ricœur, en tout cas, comme le montre la progression générale du propos de *La symbolique du mal*, l'homme répond au défi du mal par un processus de plus en plus profond de subjectivation du mal (et par conséquent de décosmisation). Dans le chapitre V de l'ouvrage, intitulé « Le cycle des mythes », Ricœur ne considère pas les mythes de type cosmique (qu'il s'agisse du mythe tragique ou du mythe de création) comme des croyances vivantes, mais il les traite au contraire comme de croyances révolues en quelque sorte fossilisées dans des textes anciens. Ainsi, bien que Ricœur se contente d'explorer dans ce livre une aire culturelle finalement assez limitée (à l'Asie mineure, à la Grèce et aux influences du mythe orphique oriental sur la philosophie grecque), sa méthode de lecture n'offre pas de prise pour une saisie du contenu moderne, c'est-à-dire vivant, du mythe cosmique. On peut toutefois remarquer qu'interpréter un fond mythique passé n'est pas du tout la même chose que vivre un mythe. Par conséquent, dans le cas de Ricœur, on ne voit pas quel autre type de mythe, en dehors du mythe adamique, pourrait

²⁵ Ailton Krenak, *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo*, 55.

servir de modèle à une action au présent dont les conditions symboliques rendraient possible une transformation du monde contemporain²⁶.

Au terme de ce développement, il reste à mes yeux une question qui donne le ton de la deuxième partie de cet article. S'il nous est possible d'envisager deux conceptions fort différentes de l'action transformatrice, portées par deux imaginaires distincts, dans quelle mesure, et jusqu'à quel point ces conclusions seraient-elles susceptibles d'affecter une théorie de la créativité ?

3. La « florestania » et les limites de la métaphore

Si, comme on l'a vu, dans le cas de Krenak, la vérité du réel est conditionnée par le travail d'un imaginaire à la fois ancestral et apocalyptique, ne faut-il pas y voir malgré tout la possibilité d'un nouveau retournement ricœurien, puisque la théorie de la fiction de Ricœur nous invite justement à considérer la réalité à partir d'une référence métaphorique de second degré conquise par le travail de l'imagination ?

3.1. Hors de la référence métaphorique ?

Dans son célèbre article de 1976 intitulé « L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action. Pour une théorie générale de l'imagination », publié ensuite dans *Du texte à l'action*²⁷, Ricœur expose de la manière la plus synthétique possible sa théorie de l'imagination. Il revisite sa théorie de la métaphore et du récit, sa théorie phénoménologique de l'action individuelle, sa théorie de l'imaginaire social et sa dialectique de l'idéologie et de l'utopie. Avec l'ensemble de ces théories Ricœur entend produire une théorie générale de l'imagination à partir d'une nouvelle élaboration du phénomène. Si, dit-il, on pense l'imagination à partir du langage et non de la perception, on débouche sur une théorie de l'imagination productrice (par opposition à une imagination reproductrice) en tant qu'innovation sémantique. La métaphore comme le récit acquièrent alors un pouvoir de configuration du réel que Ricœur nomme *fiction heuristique*. Au passage, le problème qui l'avait précédemment beaucoup occupé, à savoir celui des relations entre le langage et le mal n'est plus évoqué, pas même à propos des formes pathologiques de l'idéologie et de l'utopie qu'il préfère qualifier de conscience fausse plutôt que de créativité maléfique²⁸.

Comme il a été dit dans la première partie de cet article, la construction d'un imaginaire krenak mobilise les langages du mythe et du symbole. Or, toute la question est de savoir si cet

²⁶ Il est vrai que, dans le chapitre qu'il consacre à Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of cultures*) dans *L'idéologie et l'utopie*, Ricœur s'interroge sur la possibilité de « parler d'idéologies à propos des cultures qui ne sont pas celles de la modernité, des cultures qui ne sont pas entrées dans ce processus que Mannheim décrit comme l'effondrement d'un accord universel, à supposer qu'il ait jamais existé ». (Cf. Paul Ricœur, *L'idéologie et l'utopie* [Paris : Seuil, 1997], 341-342). S'il semble qu'il ouvre ici la voie à une approche différenciée de ce type de culture, il reste toutefois que Ricœur n'aborde pas la question de savoir quel pourrait être le sens d'une confrontation réelle entre cette modernité occidentale et le mythe vivant émanant d'une autre culture.

²⁷ Paul Ricœur, « L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action. Pour une théorie générale de l'imagination » in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris : Seuil, 1986, 213-236).

²⁸ Dans cette théorie de l'imagination, Ricœur ne se réfère plus à la théorie du symbole qu'il avait lui-même développée dans *La symbolique du mal*, *De l'interprétation* et *Le conflit des interprétations*. Il s'en déclare insatisfait dans *La critique et la conviction*.

imaginaire krenak pourrait être interprété dans le cadre renouvelé de la théorie ricœurienne de l'innovation sémantique. Dans la mesure où l'imaginaire de Krenak se déploie à partir d'un mythe krenak de l'ancestralité et de la fin capitaliste du monde -, il nous semble en effet qu'une interprétation ricœurienne de cet imaginaire (à l'aune de l'article de 1976 auquel nous venons de nos référer) conduirait nécessairement à le soumettre à la dialectique critique de l'idéologie et de l'utopie.

Or, en lieu et place d'une utopie pouvant servir d'idéal d'émancipation pour le genre humain, le discours de Krenak dénonce le caractère idéologique de toute utopie humaniste et déclare pour sa part que son peuple ne peut pas s'interpréter comme « humain ». Dans cette perspective, il se désolidarise également de toute pensée de l'espérance provenant du fonds culturel occidental. En revanche, la logique qui rend pensable le discours de dénonciation des idéologies blanches par Krenak est bien encore une dialectique de l'imagination, mais c'est une dialectique de l'ancestralité et de l'apocalypse, et comme elle annonce la fin d'un agir dont l'historicité serait la condition d'interprétation, il convient peut-être de la définir plutôt comme une dynamique de l'ancestralité et de l'apocalypse.

Si on refuse d'accorder à ce discours sa logique propre, en acceptant de revisiter les catégories praxiques à l'aide d'une nouvelle théorisation du mythe vif, et si on tient à conserver un point de vue ricœurien sur la lisibilité de ce discours, on aura tendance à voir la parole de Krenak comme une entreprise poétique. Mais ce sera alors sur la base d'une définition du poétique par opposition au langage conventionnel, réaliste, scientifique ou philosophique. Dans le même ordre d'idées, on pourra aussi chercher à mettre en avant l'innovation sémantique du récit, du *mythos* du peuple krenak.

Il me semble toutefois qu'on manquerait l'originalité du discours de Krenak : ce dernier, en effet, n'identifie pas la créativité à la redescription métaphorique du réel, mais s'appuie au contraire sur la vérité ontologique de la réalité première de l'ancestralité. Ainsi, quand bien même on voudrait comprendre le discours de Krenak comme une œuvre poétique, la question du statut de la littéralité en tant que compétence productive à l'origine de la description même du monde réel serait posée.

Cette question, Krenak la pose à sa façon. Lorsque, dans *La vie n'est pas utile*, il évoque sa manière « d'ancestraliser » son discours politique, il se plaint d'une forme de mécompréhension quant au statut de son discours : « Les autres disent: ils sont si poétiques, quelle belle image! Or ce n'est pas de la poésie, c'est notre vie. Nous sommes collés au corps de la terre (...) »²⁹.

Ricœur pour sa part, dans sa théorie de la métaphore, n'a certes cessé de combattre une vision pauvre et fossilisée de la métaphore et un usage abstrait et vide du langage poétique, au nom de la véhémence ontologique de la métaphore vive. Mais son concept de prédication impertinente suppose à titre de condition de possibilité un cadre préalable: celui d'un usage conventionnel du langage qu'il s'agit précisément de renouveler. Pour Ricœur, le métaphorique s'oppose donc au littéral, précisément au sens où la littéralité dans le discours n'est que l'indice de conventionnalité sur fond duquel la métaphore effectue son travail créatif.

Dès lors, Ricœur insiste beaucoup dans *La métaphore vive* sur un certain travail de la ressemblance: « Le rôle de l'imagination dans la métaphore, écrit-il, apparaît lorsque non contente

²⁹ Ailton Krenak, *A vida não é útil*, 60.

de souligner l'incongruence de la prédication nouvelle et l'écart de sens au plan des mots, nous concentrons notre attention sur l'apparition de la nouvelle congruence à partir des ruines de l'ancienne congruence qui s'est dissoute sous les coups de l'impertinence sémantique »³⁰. Ainsi, le pouvoir de rétablissement d'un ordre à l'intérieur d'un contexte sémantique stable relie donc le destin de la métaphore à l'idée de contexte sémantique supposé compris, puisqu'à l'élément sémantique perturbateur succède une certaine maîtrise sémantique qui suppose l'existence d'une isotopie³¹. Comme pour l'idée de tradition, la créativité métaphorique combat une tendance conservatrice du langage conventionnel en la rectifiant par une nouvelle orientation, mais ne peut le faire que dans un contexte herméneutique qui la relie historiquement à une culture particulière. Cette culture est celle qui comprend l'idée même de la prédication métaphorique en tant que mise en rapport d'un sujet nominal et non pronominal – et d'un prédicat nominal et non d'un prédicat verbal. En ce sens, la théorie de la métaphore, qui a la structure du *ceci est et n'est pas cela* ne semble pas en mesure de penser le dynamisme d'une prédication de type symbolique, par laquelle une chose comprise littéralement peut faire quelque chose et son contraire. C'est à ce type de prédication que pense au contraire Bachelard lorsqu'il définit par exemple le feu comme l'élément qui crée et détruit. Ici, le littéral ne s'oppose plus au métaphorique, mais possède bien une existence matérielle claire et cependant contradictoire. En d'autres termes, la théorie de la métaphore vive permet bien d'expliquer la saisie du devenir *dans* un monde, mais non pas la saisie du monde *comme* devenir.

De même, lorsque, à propos de la vérité du réel, Krenak dit : « nous sommes collés au corps de la terre », il revendique par là une certaine légitimité du langage littéral à porter la véhémence ontologique d'un devenir cosmique. Il ne faut d'ailleurs pas négliger que Krenak a en tête le pouvoir idéologique de métaphorisation du capitalisme. Il rejoint en ce sens Jameson selon qui, dans le cadre de notre post-modernité, tout discours sur le réel est un discours sur ce qui *est et n'est pas ceci ou cela*. L'une des dimensions fondamentales du discours créatif de la résistance contre le capitalisme post-moderne pourrait donc bien viser elle aussi un accès à la littéralité du monde matériel.

Enfin, cette part de vérité du littéral dans la constitution d'un univers symbolique peut nous conduire à nous demander si le rapport entre imagination et action chez Krenak se laisse réduire par une théorie de l'innovation sémantique fictionnelle comme celle de Ricœur.

3.2. Vers une autre théorie de l'imagination?

Remarquons tout d'abord que chez Krenak la tristesse de la créativité est un signe de la sincérité de son imaginaire apocalyptique. S'il nous invite à « ouvrir nos parachutes multicolores » c'est pour tomber plus lentement dans l'abîme. Au delà d'un affect qui témoigne de la façon dont

³⁰ Paul Ricœur, « Imagination et métaphore » in *Psychologie médicale* 14 (1982, 1883-1887, 1885).

³¹ André Breton affirmait déjà que pour qu'une image véritablement créative soit révolutionnaire, il faut qu'on ne puisse jamais rétablir une congruence des termes qui la composent, il faut que tous les termes de la prédication conservent leur signification littérale. Si prédication impertinente il y a, c'est au moyen d'une affirmation réciproque de littéralité par chaque terme, afin que s'opère la véritable transgression poétique, c'est-à-dire la transgression critique qui résiste toujours contre les phénomènes non poétiques de rétablissement d'une stabilité sémantique rassurante. « Sur le pont... etc. »

un krenak doit prendre en charge une catastrophe qu'il n'a pas produite, cette tristesse est celle de celui qui absorbe le réel par l'imagination sans pouvoir établir de finalité rationnelle quant au fait même d'imaginer. Une telle activité poétique sans autre finalité qu'elle-même, Bachelard la thématise également, lorsque par exemple dans *La terre ou les rêveries de la volonté* il montre qu'une rêverie de la résistance est contraire à une intention rationnelle du faire, et fonde par là-même toute activité créative de la volonté. Lorsque Krenak nous suggère de « raconter toujours une nouvelle histoire », c'est pour mieux ajourner la fin du monde ; de même, s'il insiste sur la nécessité de rêver, c'est parce qu'il faut à tout prix s'évader de la cosmovision des blancs. Rêver, raconter ou fluctuer sont ici des activités imaginatives exercées pour ainsi dire à même le monde concret auquel on désire résister par un travail de la rêverie ou dans lequel on rêve de se fondre par un prolongement du corps dans ses marques. Bref, là est le noyau de toute activité imaginative qui peut prendre la forme d'une résistance. Ce qui est ici suggéré, c'est que, comme le montre Bachelard, l'action fondée en imagination ne passe pas nécessairement par un moment de rupture sémantique entre une réalité passée et un réel redécrit.

Tout l'enjeu est ici alors de savoir si Ricœur et Bachelard se situent au même niveau de discours et peuvent devenir concurrents pour une lecture de la signification de l'imagination et de l'action pour Krenak. Dans cette perspective, la question qui se pose est de savoir s'il possible de penser philosophiquement l'efficacité de cette activité imaginante pensée par Bachelard. Selon ce dernier, en effet, donner abstraitement une finalité externe à l'imagination poétique reviendrait à transgresser la loi de l'imagination elle-même et à s'égarer par excès de préjugé rationaliste. Pour Bachelard, l'activité imaginante sait ce qu'elle fait, et le philosophe n'accède à ce savoir qu'au moyen d'une lecture homologique. Le refus bachelardien de justifier rationnellement le phénomène de l'imagination conduit donc le philosophe à définir l'action transformatrice sur le modèle d'une continuité du poétique et non sur celui d'une rupture décrétée philosophiquement. Ainsi, le rêveur est immergé dans un réel matériel immédiatement poétisable et l'imagination poétique, étincelle créatrice qui se frotte à l'existence matérielle, fait signe vers une expérience symbolique commune que seule justifie la condition matérielle de l'homme. C'est bien pourquoi il n'est pas possible de donner à l'imagination poétique une finalité extérieure, puisque, par définition, lui en donner une, ce serait l'arracher à sa véritable signification ontologique et manquer paradoxalement selon Bachelard le but de la philosophie. En ce sens, la conception bachelardienne de l'imagination repose sur une vision de la matière comme l'élément toujours déjà poétisable qui assure sans cesse le prolongement de l'humain dans la nature et de celle-ci dans l'humain, de telle sorte que l'activité poétique est le noyau fondamental de l'habitation du monde avant même que l'homme l'investisse par des significations sacrées situées dans une culture donnée.

C'est à ce niveau, à mes yeux, et non à partir d'une phénoménologie du rêveur solitaire, qu'il devient possible, et même souhaitable, de politiser la théorie de l'imagination productrice de Bachelard. Selon moi, cette manière de poser le problème de l'imagination poétique en tant que phénomène radical de culture, en-deçà même du sacré et non pas à côté du sacré, permet sans doute de mieux comprendre la question que Krenak adresse au monde Occidental : à savoir, celle de la continuité entre le poétique et la politique de l'ancestralité. Si on lit bien Krenak, défendre un certain sacré fondé poétiquement est aujourd'hui la seule façon de revendiquer une certaine universalité tout en résistant au capitalisme.

C'est pourquoi la rêverie aquatique de Krenak autour du fleuve Watu – ce corps qui a la puissance de la surface, mais qui plonge dans la terre si on l'agresse, qui se couvre de boue alors qu'on ne devrait pas pouvoir le salir – est portée par un sentiment de co-appartenance poétique

qui en fait une revendication politique. Pour Krenak, le problème de la finalité rationnelle, sentie comme oppressive, se pose alors à juste titre: « Le monde a été transformé en une usine à consommer l'innocence où tu dois justifier pourquoi tu têtes »³².

Il en va tout autrement de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination. La distinction conceptuelle pensée par Ricœur entre ces deux moments que sont le discours et l'action, même si on peut parler ici d'une analogie de l'agir, et même si, pour Ricœur, dire est une forme d'action, n'empêche pas l'action d'impliquer comme l'un de ses moments une prise de distance à l'égard d'un réel figé à partir duquel on crée de la nouveauté par une opération de fictionalisation de la réalité. Dans le cadre d'une théorie de la fiction comme celle de Ricœur, si on peut bien construire une référence de second degré ou fictionnaliser l'existence concrète à l'aide d'une compétence narrative qui crée des modèles nouveaux, on passe aussi sous silence les moyens de concrétisation de l'action, en considérant ceux-ci comme des questions empiriques soumises à délibération dès lors que ces moyens deviennent matériels.

Inversement, la continuité revendiquée par Krenak est celle de l'homme en état d'immersion cosmique dans le devenir. De ce devenir, l'homme n'est pas le maître. Dès lors, l'appartenance krenak n'est plus qu'une ramification de l'action naturelle qui va du village krenak sur la rive gauche du fleuve Watu - le grand-père -, à la montagne Taku Krac, et de là s'étend vers les caiçaras, quilombolas, aborigènes et tout un ensemble de gens qui s'accrochent littéralement à la terre, puis finit par remonter jusqu'à l'ancestralité de la Terre mère qui nous allaite et sans laquelle rien n'a aucun sens.

4. Conclusion

Dans le discours de Krenak, il y a, bien sûr, beaucoup de métaphores, mais elles sont là surtout pour parler de l'action inefficace contre le capitalocène. Il dit, par exemple: « C'est comme si on voulait grimper l'Himalaya en prenant avec nous notre maison, notre frigidaire, notre chien, le perroquet et le vélo. Avec un tel bagage on ne va jamais y arriver »³³. Mais reste que pour lui le retour au littéral est ce qui prépare le mieux à l'action: « Comment se fait-il que tu sois prévenu que tu fais un trou sur le toit du monde, et tout ce que tu trouves à faire c'est de changer de frigo ? »³⁴

Disons donc pour conclure que ce que Krenak appelle « *florestania* » incarne bien la continuité entre toutes ces dimensions du poétique. Née en Amazonie, dans la foulée d'un mouvement commun aux indigènes et aux tараudeurs en caoutchouc³⁵, la *florestania* est l'idée d'une création de monde – à partir d'*Alliances affectives*³⁶. Pour Krenak, il s'agit de penser comment la lutte pour un droit inexistant s'interdit d'être politisée, au sens où la politique renvoie étymologiquement à la *polis* et, en tant que produit conceptuel grec, ne peut donc répondre que de ce qui se trouve dans le cercle d'une urbanité pour ainsi dire déjà urbaine. En révolte contre l'institutionnalisation du préjugé à l'encontre des peuples de la forêt, un discours « d'alliance »

³² « Du rêve et de la terre » in Ailton Krenak, *Futuro ancestral*, 65.

³³ Ailton Krenak, *A vida não é útil*, 23-24.

³⁴ Ailton Krenak, *A vida não é útil*, 33.

³⁵ L'Alliance des peuples de la forêt créée en 1980.

³⁶ « Alliances affectives » in Ailton Krenak, *Futuro ancestral*, 37-45.

invente alors le mot et la chose : la *florestania* devient ainsi nécessairement poétique au sens où discours et action ne se distinguent plus. Il faut reforester nos esprits, reforester l'imaginaire, allier les différences pour créer un plurivers, réaliser une confluence³⁷ etc. La réalisation technique d'une *florestania*, soutenue par une forte affectivité, n'est donc pas motivée par une intention pragmatique.

À mes yeux, telle est peut-être la raison qui explique le fait que, lors d'une conférence proférée au Collège de France³⁸ en 2025 devant un parterre d'étudiants et d'universitaires, Krenak n'ait pas su ou pas souhaité répondre pragmatiquement, c'est à dire rationnellement, à la question que lui posait Philippe Descola : « Que proposez-vous de faire ? ». Il me semble qu'il faut y voir un silence signifiant, rythmique, porté par l'extension du dynamisme de l'imagination poétique à tous les plans de l'existence. Il ne s'agit plus alors de voir la ville comme une forêt, mais de créer de la *florescência*.

Toute la différence entre la théorie de la métaphore de Ricœur et l'activisme de Krenak ne réside donc pas tant dans la reconnaissance, dans un discours de l'après coup, d'une nouveauté, mais dans le fait que cette nouveauté n'est vraiment théorisable comme nouvelle chez Krenak que si, en amont, on l'interprète d'abord comme un refus radical de la discontinuité entre le dire et le faire.

L'idée ne nous est accessible que lorsque la prédication métaphorique commence à subir les effets du poétique sans pouvoir les contrôler philosophiquement. Après que l'Occident a vu les krenak comme une figure du même et après que les krenak ont vu l'Occident comme une figure de l'autre, peut-être est-il temps que l'Occident, se voyant comme il devient, comprenne ce que signifierait pour lui de dépasser la fictionnalisation de l'existence pour se voir devenant krenak.

³⁷ Dans ce texte, Krenak s'explique sur la différence entre confluence et convergence.

³⁸ <https://youtu.be/0r75TSGxQBo?si=VbMJ6noHMjOJ3Vc9>

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