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How to read Ricoeur or Philosophy as Anthropology without an Absolute

Abstract: Two questions are, I think, central regarding Ricoeur's philosophy. First, is the philosophical approach freed of any religious motives? Second, how can one understand the undeniable dispersion of themes (subjects) and methods (methodologies) specific to his philosophy? Hence, I am advancing the answer that the inadequate relation between reason and faith or, in Ricoeur's terms, between critique and conviction can explain both the presence of religious motives and the heterogeneity of his work. Moreover, the tension instituted between critique and conviction compels Ricoeur to define himself as a philosopher without an absolute and his philosophy as a philosophical anthropology.

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, philosophy, anthropology, critique, conviction, absolute.

“...la mise entre parenthèse, consciente et résolue, des convictions qui me rattachent à la foi biblique. Je ne prétends pas qu'au niveau profond des *motivations* ces convictions soient restées sans effet sur l'intérêt que je porte à tel ou tel problème, voir même à l'ensemble de la problématique de soi” (Ricoeur 1990, 36)

One of the main theses of Ricoeur's philosophy is that the text is free in relation to its author. The text has its own intention, an intention that cannot be related to its author¹. In other words, the intention of the text (to stay as close as possible to Ricoeur – *the world produced by it*) is not similar to the intention of the author (*the world from which the text is produced*). This datum supposes, at least, three complementary facts: an honest reading will follow the intention of the text, not the intention of its author; once we managed to understand the text, nothing guarantees that we might understand its author; the intention of the author, once the text is produced, is of no importance. It may seem, then, paradoxical that in the following text I will try to circumscribe what the author, in this case Paul Ricoeur, has to say and not his texts. This reading² that we may call, for obvious reasons, which will soon become clear, the manner in which Ricoeur reads himself, seems to

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me necessary, due to two fundamental complications that his work opens. I have in mind, firstly, the presence of Christian themes in papers assumed as philosophical, and, secondly, the heterogeneity of his work.

The first issue: *the philosophical writings of Paul Ricoeur do not lack a certain ambiguity, an ambiguity produced by the presence of religious motives*. To be certain, it is about religious motives imbricated in philosophical arguments, motives that make the reading if not difficult at least imprecise. In some texts, one cannot demarcate with sufficient clarity the moment in which the philosophical argumentation ends in order to be replaced, as in a progressive movement, by some sort of Christian inscriptions. And if one understands that a sudden change of speculative register has taken place, one cannot delimitate the reasons for it. Paul Ricoeur does not use the Christian paradigm, as any other religious or cultural paradigm, to refute or attest a certain conceptual perspective. His writing betrays a certain religious confidence, more or less explicit, but present³.

The second issue: *the work of Paul Ricoeur is a heterogeneous construction*; one cannot find a fundamental paper, a paper which, a sort of *opera magna*, could circumscribe his entire work; one cannot find a single philosophical thematization on which his thought could be framed; one cannot find sudden conceptual changes, withdrawals or retractions of his philosophical ideas; one cannot find a first Ricoeur, and, of course, a second Ricoeur. Nevertheless, all the above statements can be questioned, but what cannot be questioned is a sort of visible discontinuity in the subjects treated: from the problem of will to philosophy of history; from psychoanalysis to metaphoric language; from the problem of time to the problem of the Bible; from the problem of the self to the problem of ideology; etc. Moreover, the philosophical paradigms used are heterogeneous as well: from phenomenology to hermeneutics; from psychoanalysis to structuralism; from the philosophy of language to analytical philosophy; etc. Thus, both paradigms and subjects produce a certain type of diversity, which is at least deconcentrated. In these “avalanche” of subjects and paradigms one cannot be, as an honest reader, but dazed. To put it differently: one cannot decide what the main subject that unites such heterogeneous concerns really is; one cannot decide what motivates these panoplies of methods; one cannot decide what the fundamental reason that motivates this unequivocal dispersion is. In one word, within the work of Paul Ricoeur one is, as honest reader, lost.

Thus, the presence of religious motives inside the philosophical discourse and the heterogeneity of his work are the primary reasons why I propose a reading of Ricoeur by himself. What I have in view are, firstly, the direct confessions of Ricoeur on the relation faith/reason, and, secondly, the way Ricoeur ties works that seem so heterogeneous. I will use two sets of texts: firstly, *Critique and Conviction* (Ricoeur, 1998) and *Intellectual Autobiography* (Ricoeur, 1995), and secondly, *De l'interprétation* (Ricoeur,

1986a) and *Phénoménologie et herméneutique* (Ricoeur, 1986b). The first group of texts, the interview book and the intellectual autobiography, both published in 1995, has the advantage of answering, in a direct and clear manner, the questions at hand: but at the same time, it has the disadvantage of being controlled, i.e. they claim to answer our problems *from the outside*. The second group of texts has the advantage of answering our group of questions *from within* (in fact, only the second problem) but paradoxically, as we are going to see, they complicate things even more by adding new layers of interpretation. In these equations I will have in view some remarks formulated in *Soi-même come une autre* (Ricoeur, 1990) and *Living up to Death* (Ricoeur, 2009) that have the strange particularity of being at the same time both inside and outside Ricoeur's work

In the margin of this reading I will try to demonstrate that the two issues are closely related: the heterogeneity of his work is a direct consequence of the presence of religious motives in his philosophical discourse.

The armistice (unsustainable) between faith and reason or the word of God precedes the word of man

The reaction of Deleuze, a little bit excessive, on the fact that Ricoeur is writing a book with the title *what is philosophy?* – “Yes, but he is a Christian” (Dosse 2010, 471) – subsumes perfectly the problem I am going to confront⁴. Starting from the book *Philosophie de la volonté I. La volontaire et l'involontaire* to *Soi même comme une autre* the references to Christian paradigm, respectively the justification of those references, are a fact that cannot be eluted. How can one understand that, for instance, in the middle of phenomenological description of will the final reference is the sentence of Saint Paul – “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do” (Ricoeur 1998, 24). Likewise, how can we understand the justification of this reference: “the ascetism of my argumentation marks, I believe, all my philosophical work” (Ricoeur 1990, 36). In this double grid, two interpretations are possible: either Saint Paul explains fully how we produce the fault, understanding, in this manner, the relation between voluntary and involuntary, and his authority, received on the road of Damascus and extended by the multiple layers of tradition, cannot be questioned, or Saint Paul is a neutral cultural reference and, as all cultural references, can be dismissed/contested.

According to his own confessions, be that of *Intellectual Autobiography* or *Critique and Conviction*, Ricoeur argues that he functions in both registers can be called critique and conviction⁵. Obviously, critique and convention are synonyms (or surrogates) for reason and faith and reason and faith are the fundamental registers that express, in Ricoeur's eyes, the bipolarity or the “controlled schizophrenia” so characteristic to his thought (Ricoeur 1998, 2).

The two registers or levels – philosophical and religious – are strictly separated (Ricoeur 1998, 2; Ricoeur 1995, 13). Not to blend genders is the fundamental rule that Ricoeur imposes to himself, describing the relationship between faith and reason (or religion and philosophy) as a “truce” always renewed, as a “destructive war on both sides” which denies any possible “alliance” (Ricoeur 1995, 6). “I have been concerned – living a kind of double allegiance – not to confuse the two spheres, to acknowledge continuous negotiation within a well-established bipolarity” (Ricoeur 1998, 6). This “bipolarity” or “controlled schizophrenia” is the reason why Ricoeur does not introduce at the end of *Soi-même comme un autre* two articles: *Parole et écriture dans le discours biblique* and *Le sujet convoqué*. Why? “In order to remain faithful to the old act I had made that the nonphilosophical sources of my conviction would not be mixed together with the arguments of my philosophical discourse.” (Ricoeur, 1995, 50)

At this point – of nonphilosophical sources of his conviction and of the arguments of philosophical discourse – we have (we find), and we can understand this fact very easily, the entire tension of Paul Ricoeur’s thought. This relation between critique and conviction, essential for my entire endeavor, and may I say, essential in order to adequately understand Ricoeur’s philosophy, calls for additional explications.

These declarations, or confessions, bear two distinct registers. Firstly, the nonphilosophical sources of his conviction have no connection to his philosophical discourse and conviction stands, if we may say so, on his own as a distinct register of Ricoeur’s life. That is to say that his philosophical discourse is not, under any circumstance, influenced by conviction⁶. According to this confession we must understand that *philosophy* and *religion* or *reason* and *faith* or *critique* and *conviction* are strictly separated: we cannot find any slides, imbrications or intersections. The levels (plans, registers etc.) are strictly delimited so as not to produce any kind of confusion. But not without a shadow of mistrust can we look at this pact or absolute distinction, a shadow of mistrust motivated by the fact that, according to our example, Ricoeur grants his *non-philosophical sources of conviction* such a significant role that he eliminates, from such an important paper as *Soi-même come un autre*, two chapters. What does it mean, for a philosophical discourse to have nonphilosophical sources which motivate the elimination of whole parts from a philosophical paper? It seems that nonphilosophical sources effect the philosophical endeavor as clearly as possible, even through omission. Of course, it is not enough to assert that nonphilosophical sources of his conviction effect the philosophical discourse. What is important is the discourse as such.

But when the philosophical discourse as such seems un-understandable (Ricoeur 1988, 456) or, at least, the conclusions are somehow broken (Ricoeur 1974, 24), or when the philosophical argumentation slides towards

religious sentences (Ricoeur 1974, 347), a sort of mistrust, wonder or incertitude appears. And evidently, all these doubts demand the verification of the sources that motivates the conviction as such, which in its turn affects the philosophical discourse even if through omission. We can formulate all these suspicions by a double proposition transcribed interrogatively: are the texts produced by Ricoeur influenced by the nonphilosophical sources of his conviction? Or, from a different perspective, do the construction of his philosophical argumentation envisage, at least peripherally, the sources of his nonphilosophical conviction?

The heteronomy of the approach, the autonomy of the discourse

The answers given by Paul Ricoeur to these questions are ambiguous. Although the French philosopher insists vehemently on the distinction between faith and reason, he concedes to faith (conviction) a role that reason (critique) does not share. It is about a sort of anteriority of conviction in front of critique. An anteriority which can be formulated, abruptly, in the following manner: *before the word of man stands the word of God*. This conviction receives, inside the thought of Paul Ricoeur, a staggering importance. This is to say that, preemptory, conviction marks the philosophical approach. On this mark, on which I am going to come back later, I will insist enough, but now I want to prove the assertion, probably too strong and perhaps outrageous, that the word of God precedes the word of man in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and implicitly, even if we accept it or not, on his entire work.

A sole reference sums all the above assertions: “*the conviction that the word of God precedes the word of man* (my underlining).” (Ricoeur 1995, 5)

Obviously, a confession from the inner personal experience does not constitute an argument available within his philosophical writings, which are marked, as we already know, by the absolute separation of domains. But things are a bit more complicated, and the main complication is that even if his philosophical writing is, sometimes, perfectly neutral (relative to the faith/reason relation) the sphere from which this writing starts does not respect the suzerainty of domains. Bluntly put, faith, which will be called conviction, includes critique⁷.

I will set the direct confessions made by Ricoeur from the plan of his personal experience in a footnote⁸. Let us mention here only the end of these confessions: “I have always moved back and forth between these two poles: a Biblical pole and a rational and critical pole, a duality that, finally, has *lasted through my entire life* (my underlining).” (Ricoeur 1998, 6) It is not a mistake to understand this confession *ad literam*. But the main issue is not that Ricoeur always moved back and forth between the two poles, but the measure at which Ricoeur granted the biblical pole anteriority to the critical pole. We do not have here an equal construction as if, situated in a

double scripturally (Biblical and critical), Paul Ricoeur decides to show the importance of both traditions inside his own lectures/writings. The biblical pole exceeds and includes the critical pole, and this does not happen exclusively within Paul Ricoeur's life but also within his work.

Obviously, says Paul Ricoeur, this anteriority is not built on a sort of religious experience which somehow precedes the critical endeavor. On the contrary,

I have vigorously resisted the word “experience” throughout my career, out of a distrust of immediacy, effusiveness, intuitionism: I always favored, on the contrary, the mediation of language and scripture; this is even where my two affiliations confront one another. I would say almost bluntly that it is not on the basis of the same texts that I do philosophy and that I feel my membership in a community in a Christian tradition. (Ricoeur 1998, 139-140)

The philosophical texts are, once again, strictly separated from the religious texts, the former pertaining to the author the latter pertaining to the community member. But there is a fundamental difference that marks the subordination in question, i.e. the attitude of reading – critical or adhering:

the critical attitude will be more on the philosophical side, the religious moment as such not being a critical moment; it is the moment of adhering to a word reputed to have come from farther and from higher than myself, and this occurs in a kerygmatic reading within a profession of faith. At this level, one finds, then, the idea of a dependence or a submission to an earlier word, whereas in the philosophical domain, even in a Platonic perspective, even if the world of ideas precedes us, it is nevertheless by a critical act that we appropriate the reminiscence that takes on the sense of a preexistence. (Ricoeur 1998, 144)

Thus, we have here two divergent attitudes facing different lectures: philosophical and religious. But, in order to repeat well-known facts here, the critical attitude functions exclusively within a philosophical field, the religious attitude (of participation, acceptance, adhesion) functions exclusively within biblical writings. But, in the precise case of our question, things are infinitely more complicated because *the anteriority of the founding word in front of critique is the way Paul Ricoeur thinks*. In other words, critique is possible inside this word that comes “from farther and from higher than myself”. Why? “Critique is still always linked to powers that I master, whereas this giving of meaning seems to me, precisely, to constitute me both as a receptive subject and as a critical subject. *The polarity of adherence and of critique is itself placed under the sign of this prior giving* (my underlining).” (Ricoeur 1998, 146).

In this new context how can we separate, strictly, the two fields if the fields as such are already set in a “prior giving” that “constitute me both as

a receptive subject and as a critical subject”? The option of separating them is meaningless if the option as such is already conditionate or settled in a “*priori* given” which respects the logic of “a *pregiven* word”. The net distinction between philosophical and religious loses any relevance. Moreover, the critical reflection can only recognize its own posterity in relation with a given which comes “from farther and from higher”. Nevertheless, we must mention here that this “given”, as a source of both self and sense, it is an always mediated⁹ “given”. But the persistence with which Ricoeur endlessly repeats the mediation by text (constructed on word/text/tradition) does not dissolve “adhering to a word” that comes “from farther and from higher” that “constitute me both as a receptive subject and as a critical subject”, source of the “sense” and the “self”.

Actually, this “given” is the reason why Paul Ricoeur proposes in *Soi-même come un autre* and in *Critique and Conviction*

a language of transition, or rather a sort of armistice, when I distinguished between philosophical argumentation, in the public space of discussion and the profound motivation of my philosophical engagement and of my personal and communitary existence. By motivation, I do not mean the psychological sense that signifies having motives, which after all serve as reasons, but what Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* calls “sources”, understanding by this something that I do not master. The word “source” also has its neo-Platonic connotations and belongs to the philosophical religious language that may sometimes seem to be close to the specific, confessional religious, connoting the idea of a living source. It is not surprising to find analogies in both orders that can become affinities, and I assume this, for I do not believe that I am the master of this game, or the master of meaning. (Ricoeur 1998, 150)

To distinguish between philosophical argumentation and the profound reasons of his philosophical commitment is, in fact, to distinguish between discourse and approach. Thus, the two regimes – discourse and approach – pertain to different fields: to the public discourse, specifically philosophical and to the profound motivations respectively. This issue, to distinguish between approach and discourse, seems central to me, in order to adequately understand the corpus of Ricoeur’s writing, due to a specific complication: if the discourse fully respects the demarcation specific to the gender that it pertains (in this case philosophical) and the approach pertains to another field which we can define only by saying that it belongs to “sources” that “we cannot control”, how can the discourse (and here is the complication) be free as long as the approach is heteronomous ?

The quick answer is that the heteronomy of the approach (endeavor) shatters the autonomy of the discourse. Such a perfectly logical, yet a bit hasty answer would completely disfigure the philosophical corpus of Ricoeur’s writings by placing them under the sign of crypto-theological writings,

against which Ricoeur rightly revolts¹⁰. Probably this is reason why Ricoeur, slightly exasperated, says:

It was very important to me to be recognized as a professor of philosophy, teaching philosophy in a public institution and speaking the common language, hence assuming the mental reservations that this entailed, even if it meant that I would periodically be accused of being a theologian in disguise who philosophizes, or a philosopher who makes the religious sphere think or be thought. I take on all the difficulties of this situation, including the suspicion that, in actual fact, I would never be able to maintain this duality in watertight compartments. (Ricoeur 1998, 150)

Not so much this confession, open to endless interpretations, seems to me to be appropriate, but Ricoeur's own view of his work: "I am, on one side, a philosopher, nothing more, even a philosopher *without an absolute*, concerned about, devoted to, immersed in philosophical anthropology, whose general theme can be placed under the heading of a fundamental anthropology (my underlining)." (Ricoeur 2009, 69)¹¹ Thus his philosophy is an anthropology without an absolute but with the observation that this view is given by the tension instituted between approach and discourse. A tension visible to any attentive lecturer of his work but interpreted by Ricoeur after. In other words, philosophy as an anthropology without ontology is a *post factum* and not *ante factum* interpretation. There is no reason, beside Ricoeur's own confession (that can be dismissed being a self-interpretation), to sustain the idea that Ricoeur's philosophy is an anthropology without ontology. It would be more adequate to understand that the approach and the discourse, due to the condition of their own registers (philosophical and religious), are in a permanent collision that produces an endless movement be that of the subjects or methods. Both the dispersion of subjects and the dispersion of methods, it seems to me, can be localized, or understood, precisely here: at the confrontation between approach and discourse (it is as if Ricoeur is searching for the perfect method and the perfect subject in order to reconcile that that cannot be reconciled). This is the reason why Ricoeur texts are always at the limit: at the limit founded by the collision between *the heteronomy of the approach the autonomy of the discourse* or the collision between critique and conviction.

Finally, what remains to be emphasized, and what explains the tension between approach and discourse, is this obvious fact, explained, I think, excessively, that Paul Ricoeur grants to the word of God a status that we can name ontological or grants the word of God precedence to the word of man. That is to say that "the accreditation of a word" that comes "above and beyond me" that "makes me a critical and receptive subject", source of the "self" and "sense" is the manner, in the sense of an interpretative framework, in which and by which Ricoeur thinks.

In other words, although his writing preserves the regime and the register of philosophical discourse, the plan from which this type of writing proceeds, propelled by a thought that coordinates its results, motivates its outcomes, stimulates research, does not pertain to the philosophical or critical plan, but to a plan aspirated by the conviction that, lastly, the word of God precedes the word of man. Paradoxically, this anteriority does not cancel the philosophical discourse; on the contrary, the philosophical discourse of Paul Ricoeur becomes, if not unique, at least singular inside the history of philosophy. But this singularity I will call it, at the edge of anthropology without ontology, a *missed ontology or ontology always postponed*¹². Explicitly, this “word from above” searches at the level of the philosophical discourse the just measure in order not to produce a “crypto-theology” but which strives always towards an ontology.

For now, it is enough to assert that this anteriority of the word of God in front of the word of man gives us the key in order to understand, firstly, the diversity of the topics (subject) and the diversity of the method used, and, secondly, his own interpretation – philosophy as an anthropology without ontology. Both issues will be discussed.

The heterogeneity of the work or each study is a response to a residual question

Not once but at successive times Ricoeur questions his own position in relation to the heterogeneity of his own work (Ricoeur 1971, xiii; Ricoeur 2007, 32-40). In his last writing regarding this issue (*Lectio Magistralis*, Barcelona, 2001), answering the request of University of Edinburgh to give a synthesis of his work Ricoeur is “astound” (and I am using here the word Ricoeur himself uses) “perhaps more than his lecturers” by the lack of unity of the themes (subjects) tackled¹³. At once, however, Ricoeur points out:

each book, in fact, was born out of a determined question: the will, the unconscious, the metaphor, the narrativity. To a certain extent, I believe in a certain fragmentation (dispersion) of the field of philosophical reflection according to a plurality of determined questions which requires a specific treatment each time given limited but precise conclusions. In this sense, I do not regret that I have devoted most of my work to the question or questions that delineate a finite space of the query, giving up, each time, to open the investigation on a universe of sense that, in turn, does not exercise its open function except in the face of the problems being treated.¹⁴

Somehow compelled and “against his own choice” (Ricoeur 2002, 80) Ricoeur advances a “key” in order to understand his own work. This “key” is named *Soi-même come une outre*. But what happens here is that Ricoeur

regroups “the philosophy of language, the philosophy of action, the theory of narrativity and moral philosophy” (Ricoeur 2002, 81) under the sign of “I can” as a “key” in order to understand the dispersion of the topics approached. But it does not explain why this key force so many doors. Much more reliable, it seems to me, is the confession that his work is a large corpus of precise questions that have or give a “universe of sense” once they are placed next to each other. Thus, like in a puzzle: each work answers a specific question; gathering the answers we have the overall picture; the overall picture is “the universe of sense” never directly targeted. But such a perspective, valid or not (in this context the validity of the perspective does not matter), does not answer the question “why”, or, in more appropriate words, what are the reasons why Ricoeur’s work is so heterogeneous ?

Therefore, in order to repeat here the question of Francois Azuvi and Marc de Launay, what are the “ties” or the “broken lines” between the *Philosophie de la volonté I* (1950) and *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990) regarding the long “detours” through “Freudian theory”, “linguistics”, “structuralism” and so on (Ricoeur 1998, 80). The second sentence by which Ricoeur answers this question and refuses the alternative between continuity / discontinuity puts things in order (Ricoeur 1998, 81). To refuse to see his own work as a continuous body of works does not mean implicitly to propose a discontinuous view of his own work. Neither continuity nor discontinuity. But this double negative alternative does not suspend the problem; on the contrary, it makes it even more acute. If we cannot discuss either continuity or discontinuity, why is this neutrality so necessary?

Before attempting an answer (an answer, in fact, anticipated in the previous subchapter), let us look at the landmarks that Ricoeur himself produces. We can distinguish two ways in which the French philosopher addresses this issue: (1) to follow the thematic route linking the works in question (“a residue” from an already published book becomes the center of the next book) or (2) to use a singular article that becomes, in Ricoeur’s eyes, the landmark dissolving the “impression of dispersion” (Ricoeur 1995, 34) his books leave. The first strategy is descriptive, the second problematizing. Let us follow both.

Question, answer, residue

In an interview given to Tamas Toth in 1991 Ricoeur places his works in three domains: volumes of articles, books per se, university conferences¹⁵. The volumes of articles, although technical, are not perfectly scientific because they are addressed to a broad audience and university conferences are “notes” left after more than forty years of teaching (Tóth 1999/2001, 2). Of course, for the sake of clarity, and given Tamas Toth's request to

subsume the “question”, the “answer”, and “the residue” that unite *Truth and History*, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and *Soi-même comme une autre*, Ricoeur leaves aside the first and third domain, insisting that we only pursue the large corpus of books that somehow make a common body. Thus, says Paul Ricoeur, what stands after *Philosophie de la volonté I*, a book that has the problem of the will in its center, is the problem of evil to be studied in *Symbolism of evil*. After that, we have the book on Freud which is in fact a return to the archaic and prospective symbolism of the *Symbolism of Evil*. But, exactly at this point, another question remains unanswered: the linguistic and symbolic nature of the symbols. *The rule of metaphor* answers this set of problems. What remains after the extensive analysis of the meaning of the metaphor is the problem of the creative force of imagination that can be understood within the narrative and thus, we have *Time and narrative*. *The rule of metaphor* and *Time and narrative* are in fact pair books, because if the first analyzes the linguistic invention among the poetic, the second analyzes the same “invention” within the narrative. Lastly, we have *Soi-même comme une autre* that answers the following question: what is the role of the “self” in all these? Else, such a question brings us back to Husserl, that is, to a philosophy of the subject, the place from which all the works started (this whole paragraph resumes the second page of the first interview of Tamas Toth).

The matter is clear: will, evil, symbol, metaphor, narrative, subject. Analysis of will leaves a residue: the problem of evil; the problem of evil leaves a residue: the problem of the symbol; the problem of the symbol leaves a residue: the problem of metaphor; the problem of metaphor leaves a residue: the problem of narrativity; narrativity leaves a residue, which in fact is the place from which everything starts: the subject. The subject is, therefore, the main question: under the form of voluntary and involuntary, of moral evil, of symbol, of metaphor and narrativity. Simply put, the philosophy of the subject is the fundamental knot of Ricoeur philosophy. What seems dispersed, discontinuous, heterogeneous is in fact bound, and the knot is, in order to repeat and emphasize as clearly as possible, the human subject. Things are undoubtedly as Ricoeur presents them, and although it is a self-interpretation, which is under the sign of equality in relation to any other interpretation produced by any of its exegetes, it is perfectly valid. Therefore, the dispersion in question, the heterogeneity of the work, is only the direct effect of a coordinated pulverization under the tripartite singes of “question”, “answer”, “residue” but with a compact problem in its center: the self. In other words, Ricoeur’s philosophy, the main body of his work, is a philosophical anthropology that aims successively at the will, the evil, the symbol, the metaphor, the narrative. However, by removing the “impression of dispersion” of the topics addressed under the sign of the subject, the following question cannot be

avoided: how should one understand the methodological dispersion, i.e. the broad sequences of “phenomenology”, “Freudian theory”, “linguistics”, “structuralism”, “hermeneutics”? More specifically, if the subject gathers the topics what is the pivot of the methodology? What are the reasons why the “self” is worn by such a broad methodological palette? In other words, by establishing that the self links the themes, what links the methodological dispersion that works on the self?

Reflexive philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics

Here we find the second answer, problematic, which Ricoeur offers in two different sequences in the form of two articles: *Phénoménologie et herméneutique* (1975) and *De l'interprétation* (1983). However, if it is easy to understand why I placed the intellectual autobiography and the book of interviews as a guide through which Ricoeur reads himself, some clarifications are needed with regard to the second group of texts. Intellectual autobiography and the interviews respectively, are *comments*, or, if we prefer, views from outside the work. They are carefully elaborated considering the broad field of exegetic critique and its own positioning in the field of philosophy. On the other hand, *De l'interprétation* and *Phénoménologie et herméneutique* respectively, are the work as such. Their aims exclusively concern the structure of his work. This difference of emphasis is significant. Appeared in different contexts and gathered in the volume *Du texte à l'action* both, marked by a ten-year distance, they answer the same problem: the heterogeneity of writings. The nature of these two texts is that they answer our problem by opening new problems. In other words, it adds new layers of interpretation. But before seeing what the new texts are proposing, let us see how they respond to the heterogeneity of the work.

Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl opens with a footnote that must be entirely cited: “This essay reviews the method change involved in my own evolution, from an eidetic phenomenology, to *Volontaire et l'Involontaire* (Paris, Aubier, 1950), to *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris, Ed Seuil, 1965) and the *Conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris, Ed., Seuil, 1969).”¹⁶

Two clarifications are required: first, the intricacy of his writing is, as in all Ricoeur texts, massive; the need for this clarification will promptly find its justification. Secondly, in fact, in the entire text, there is not even one word about “the method changes involved” in his own evolution. In this text it is about phenomenology and hermeneutics, about Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, about the hermeneutical critique of Husserlian idealism, about the phenomenological presuppositions of hermeneutics, about the hermeneutical presuppositions of phenomenology and, finally, about a “program” to be developed under the name of hermeneutic phenome-

nology. But, in no line (I do not know how to emphasize this aspect more clearly) of the article in question can we find “the balance of method changes involved in my own evolution.”

We can, of course, interpret: eidetic phenomenology as a method belongs to *Volontaire et l'Involontaire*, hermeneutics (post-Heideggerian and post-Gadamerian) belongs to *Essay on Freud* and *The conflict of interpretation*. But things are more complicated for two different reasons: one related to the general problem of Ricoeurian hermeneutics and one related to the implicit questioning that the text in question brings with it.

First, if we can admit the eidetic phenomenology as a methodological principle within the *Volontaire et l'Involontaire*, which is perfectly plausible as Ricoeur himself makes this statement on the first page of the volume (Ricoeur 1998, 7), things are complicated regarding *The essay on Freud* and the *Conflict of Interpretations*. Both volumes have, of course, included in their structure the hermeneutical mark, but it is a hermeneutic that recovers Heidegger, but not Gadamer, a profound Ricoeurian hermeneutic but profoundly different from the classical tradition of contemporary hermeneutics. Second, and closely following the structure of the text, the phenomenology in question is adjusted, within its idealistic theses, by hermeneutics, whereas hermeneutics is, in fact, in its fundamental intentions, phenomenological. Although the hermeneutics ruins the idealism specific to Husserlian phenomenology, the same hermeneutics is rooted in phenomenology, with the note that Husserl himself abilities explication (interpretation) as a fundamental principle of the intuition both descriptive (which for phenomenology is not a risk) and constitutive (which, obviously, becomes problematic). This twofold game between phenomenology and hermeneutics (the correlation of Husserlian idealism through hermeneutics, the phenomenological presuppositions of hermeneutics) produces the program of a hermeneutical phenomenology or, better said, produces a hermeneutical “graft” on phenomenology. But this *graft* of hermeneutics on phenomenology is already, within the Ricoeurian approach, a new conceptual layer requiring a new deciphering, but it does not explain the methodological dispersion (“phenomenology”, “Freudian theory” “linguistic”, “structuralism”, “hermeneutics”) so characteristic of his work. In fewer words, the hermeneutical phenomenology that Ricoeur proposes requires a new explanation: what are the reasons why Ricoeur constructs a hermeneutical phenomenology?¹⁷. In fact, hermeneutic phenomenology is a new methodology that can be enclosed to all the methodologies attempted up to that point (let us remember that it is about 1975), but although it explains its own necessity (“phenomenology remains the premise of hermeneutics, phenomenology cannot perform its own program without *constituting* itself in an *interpretation* of the *life* of the

ego”¹⁸) it does not explain, and we will have to repeat this once again, the dispersion in question.

Nonetheless, almost ten years later, in 1983, in an indirect manner, Ricoeur gives a new answer. In an article for the English-language audience that has “the particularity of going backwards the steps that led from my first research on Husserl to the writing of the works *La métaphore vive* and *Temps et récit*,”¹⁹ the French philosopher asserts: “I would like to characterize the philosophical tradition from which I claim through three traits: it is in the line of a *reflexive* philosophy; it remains dependent on Husserlian *phenomenology*; wants to be a *hermeneutical* variant of this phenomenology.”²⁰

This phrase, that sheds some light inside our questions – how can one explain the methodological dispersion? – has no meaning without the *question* that triggers it. In other words, these triple traditions cannot be understood only as the “place” from where Ricoeur claims himself, but, at the same time, as distinct possibilities to access a specific problem. Else the “radical question” these different methodologies deal with, to which this triple tradition, which transcends its status becoming distinct philosophical practice, is the “self-understanding” of the self as “a subject of knowledge operations, volition, evaluation”. Under the formula “I think”, “through which a subject resume in control, with intellectual clarity and moral responsibility, the unifying principle of the operations between which he disperses and forgets himself as a subject”²¹ is the “apparatus” that brings together reflexive philosophy, phenomenology and hermeneutics. The self or self-understanding, here being the same thing, brings together the three distinct traditions: reflexive philosophy, phenomenology and hermeneutics. In other words, reflexive philosophy, phenomenology and hermeneutics are the methodologies (or interpretative paradigms) with which and by which Ricoeur works upon a strictly determined subject: the self.

But then again, what are the reasons why Ricoeur needs to use this plurality of methodologies, or how is it that none of the mentioned methodologies (psychoanalysis, structuralism, philosophy of language, phenomenology, hermeneutics) fully or definitively answer the matter in question? Obviously, the self is here in question and it is easy to understand how such a subject seems, methodologically, limitless. But this dispersion can be viewed a little differently. To be as clear as possible, it is as if Ricoeur is looking for the perfect methodology to tackle one of the least perfect subjects and none of the methodologists approached seems to be right: they all derail or all miss something specific to man; and Ricoeur is constantly searching for “that something” (“that something” in the present interpretation is “an absolute” or ontology) which is required to be elucidated through a very diverse methodological palette.

We can understand, at this moment, a little easier why Ricoeur gathers all his philosophy under the sign of anthropology. But what kind of anthro-

pology is that that speaks about a plurality of topics – will, evil, symbol, metaphor, narrative, – under a plurality of methods – phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, structuralism, philosophy of language and hermeneutic phenomenology?

Consequences

Let us gather all previous assertions under one phrase: the unsustainable armistice between critique and conviction is given by the precedence of God's word before the word of man. This precedence produces a specific tension between the approach and the discourse (the approach being conditioned and the discourse being free) which in turn produces a continuous shift within different topics (themes) as well as within different methodologies. Both armistice the thematic dispersion and the methodological dispersion can be understood under a sole concept: the question of self. Nonetheless, the extent to which the question of self assembles the entire Ricoeurian philosophy, however valuable it may be from an analytical or pragmatic point of view – here we have the center of Ricoeur's philosophy! –, it misses, I think, the central stake of his thinking. Finding a unifying principle that can be called "the question of self" is, from the outset, a winning solution. But it seems to me that such a gain is a little bit too easy. The human subject or "philosophical anthropology" as a background embedded in the first layer of a palimpsest, on which Ricoeur writes in different registers with different methodologies, is, undoubtedly, the predominant subject of his speculations. However, a question remains: what is the unifying principle of this disconcerting plurality? The answer is, I think, precisely this ontology (or, in Ricoeur's own words, "an absolute") that is always postponed or missing.

Notes

¹ We can explain this intentionality without an author in a simple manner: against Schleiermacher, but together with Gadamer, Ricoeur thinks that the "stake" of hermeneutics is not to understand the author better than himself, quite the opposite, what one has to understand from a text is the "thing" of the text, "thing" that exceeds, entirely, the intention of the author. It is true that the "thing" of the text as understood by Ricoeur differs from Gadamer, but, here, this difference is not important.

² In *Book II from Freud and Philosophy. An essay on interpretation* is a subchapter entitled *How to read Freud* (Ricoeur 1970). Of course, the value of Ricoeur's assertion is indicative. Ricoeur explains how he reads Freud and how we as readers of Ricoeur should read Freud. Fact is that in this short introduction, that sums only six pages, Ricoeur gives his entire interpretation on Freud making this short subchapter the center of the book. Let me state from the very beginning that the intention of the present article is, undoubtedly, much more modest. To propose such a strong title – *How to read Ricoeur* – must be read only as an attempt (answering to a sum of questions and puzzles that I had when I first read Ricoeur) to clarify my own misunderstandings.

³ Christina M Gschwandtner gives, in an interesting article (*Paul Ricoeur and the Relationship Between Philosophy and Religion in Contemporary French Phenomenology*). 2012. *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies*. Vol 3. No 2. 7-25), a helpful account on the matter at hand.

⁴ Let us see here some of the answers regarding the relation between Christianity and philosophy gathered by Francois Dosse: Michel Haar asserts: “as Nietzsche says: some blur their waters in order to look deeper. But Ricoeur never mixed his own phenomenological waters with theology” (Dosse 2008, 556); Francoise Dastur states: “I could be interested in Ricoeur the exegete of biblical writings as of Ricoeur the philosopher because I know there is no trespassing” (Dosse 2008, 556); Dosse states: “Ricoeur did not choose the simple solution in blending the two domains (religious and philosophical, my note) or recuperating one from another or a sort of hierarchy between what Ricoeur considers to be the two houses of the same ellipse, but never to be mingled.” (Dosse 2008, 554); Jan-Luc Marion says “the philosopher cannot speak but from the outside of the biblical text because he is not compelled to say if the text is true or not, this is given only to the theologian. All this being said, the philosopher can take a biblical text as he can take a poem or a piece from Sofocle in order to better understand human experience. (...). On his part the theologian states that the biblical corpus tells the truth. Here relies the entire difference between the two domains.” (Dosse 2008, 563)

⁵ Is not useless to mention here that the distance imposed between critique and conviction is dissolved from the very beginning, precisely, at page two: “I shall say that critique is no longer on one side and conviction on the other; in each of the fields that are traversed or touched upon I shall attempt to show that there is, to different degrees, a subtle blending of conviction and critique” (Ricoeur 1998, 2)

⁶ Perhaps it is not useless to insist upon the fact that Ricoeur speaks about the arguments of philosophical discourse not about the discourse per se. Undoubtedly the arguments are free of any religious implications but not the discourse as such.

⁷ This antecedence of conviction in front of critique explains how Ricoeur situates himself inside Christianity: “it is chance transformed into destiny by a continuous choice” (Ricoeur 1998, 145). See also Paul Ricoeur. 1994. “Phénoménologie de la religion”. *Lectures 3*. Paris: Seuil, where Ricoeur after explaining the impossibility of a phenomenology of religion names this situation as a “existential circle”. “This is the existential circle: a chance transformed into destiny by a continuous choice. The wager of the believer is that this circle may not be vicious but alive.” (« Tel est le cercle existentiel: un hasard transformé en destin à travers un choix continu. Le pari du croyant est que ce cercle puisse n'être point vicieux, mais bien portant et vivifiant ») (Ricoeur 1994, 271). It is not without significance that a sentence that summarizes a whole “pure” conceptual demonstration is taken over by Ricoeur to define his own existential situation.

⁸ “Reading the Bible was central to this milieu. My grandmother read it regularly, a practice I inherited and have continued, during my youth and after. This reading was not undertaken in a literal-minded spirit but instead followed a conception I would call pneumatological: it indeed inspired everyday life; the Psalms, the writings of Wisdom and the Beatitudes occupied a more important place than dogma. Not being an intellectual milieu, it was quite undogmatic and gave preference to the private practice of reading, of prayer, and the examination of conscience. I have always moved back and forth between these two poles: a Biblical pole and a rational and critical pole, a duality that, finally, has lasted through my entire life. (...) I have been concerned – living a kind of double allegiance – not to confuse the two spheres, to acknowledge continuous negotiation within a well-established bipolarity. The philosophy class was a hard test in this regard, all the more so as at the same time the influence of Karl Barth was beginning to influence French Protestantism, directing it towards a radical and, one would have to admit, antiphilosophical return to the Biblical

text. In my undergraduate years I was passionately drawn to Bergson, in particular to the Bergson of *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*: I was caught then between a religious philosophy of the Bergsonian type and Barthian radicalism. At that time, I experienced an inner conflict which was exacerbated to the point of threatening to rupture the double allegiance to which, ultimately, I remained faithful.” (Ricoeur 1998, 6). It is not important here that the young Ricoeur was crushed by an inner conflict given by the confrontation of reason and faith, but the extent to which this conflict is present in his writings, or, more appropriately, the extent to which his nonphilosophical sources are present in his thinking, or, finally, saying the same in other words, the extent to which the two areas are strictly separate. It is certain that not only is the conflict perpetuating, but that the boundary between the two domains, on which Ricoeur insists so much, loses its visibility.

⁹ “What seems to me to be constitutive of the religious is, therefore, the fact of *crediting a word*, in accordance with a certain code and within the limits of a certain canon. I would willingly propose, in order to develop this point, the idea of a series of hermeneutical « circles »: I know this word because it is written, this writing because it is received and read; and this reading is accepted by a community, which, as a result, accepts to be deciphered by its founding texts; and it is this community that reads them. So, in a certain manner, to be a religious subject is to agree to enter or to have already entered into this vast circuit involving a *founding word*, mediating texts, and traditions of interpretation (my emphasis).” (Ricoeur 1998,145)

¹⁰ “If I defend my philosophical writings against the crypto-theology accusation, I guard myself, with equal vigilance, to designate a crypto-philosophical function of biblical faith”. (Ricoeur 1990, 37)

¹¹ I am not sure how can we read *Living up to Death*. Is it within or outside his work?

¹² In *History and Truth* there is a text, written in 1955, in which a line taken from Spinoza subsumes entirely the approach of the French philosopher: “The more we understand individual objects, the more we understand God” (Ricoeur 1965, 6). This proposition has no meaning if it is not related with another proposition written by Ricoeur: “the felling that all philosophies are ultimately within the same truth of being. This felling I call « hope » ...” (Ricoeur 1965, 6).

¹³ “La question était d’autant plus embarrassante que j’étais frappé, beaucoup plus peut-être que mes lecteurs, par la diversité des thèmes abordés.” (Ricoeur 2002, 80)

¹⁴ “Chaque livre, en effet, était né d’une question déterminée: la volonté, l’inconscient, la métaphore, le récit. D’une certaine façon je crois à un certain éparpillement du champ de la réflexion philosophique en fonction d’une pluralité de questions déterminées, appelant chaque fois un traitement distinct en vue de conclusions limitées mais précises. En ce sens, je ne regrette pas d’avoir consacré la plus grande partie de mon œuvre à cerner la question ou les questions qui délimitent un espace fini d’interrogation, quitte à ouvrir chaque fois l’investigation sur un horizon de sens qui, en retour, n’exerce sa fonction d’ouverture que dans les marges du problème traité.” (Ricoeur 2002, 80-81)

¹⁵ *History and Truth* (1956), *The conflict of Interpretation* (1968) and *From text to action* (1989) holds to the first register. *Freedom and nature* (1950), *Fallible Man* respectively *The symbolism of evil* (1960), *Freud and Philosophy: an essay on interpretation* (1965), *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), *Time and Narrative* (1986, 1987,1988) *Oneself as Another* (1990) to the second. *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1981), to the third. (Tóth 1999/2001, 17-74).

¹⁶ “Cet essai fait le point des changements de méthode implique par ma propre évolution, depuis une phénoménologie eidétique dans *Volontaire et l’Involontaire* (Paris, Aubier, 1950), jusqu’à *De l’interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris, Ed Seuil, 1965) et *Conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique* (Paris, Ed., Seuil, 1969)” (Ricoeur 1986b, 44)

¹⁷ It is not my intention here to developed on “hermeneutical phenomenology” but only to show that a new methodology appears.

¹⁸ “... la phénoménologie reste l’indépassable présupposition de l’herméneutique ; d’autre part, que la phénoménologie ne peut exécuter son programme de *constitution* sans se constituer en une *interprétation* de la vie de l’*égo*” (Ricoeur 1986b, 61)

¹⁹ “...cet essai a la particularité de parcourir en sens inverse les étapes qui ont conduit de mes premiers travaux sur Husserl a la rédaction de *La Métaphore vive* et de *Temps et Récit*” (Ricoeur 1986a, 9-10)

²⁰ “... j’aimerais caractériser la tradition philosophique dont je me réclame par trois traits: elle est dans la ligne d’une philosophie *réflexive*; elle demeure dans la mouvance de la *phénoménologie* husserlienne; elle veut être une variante *herméneutique* de cette phénoménologie.” (Ricoeur 1986a, 29)

²¹ “La réflexion est cet acte de retour a soi par lequel un sujet ressaisit, dans la clarté intellectuelle et la responsabilité morale, le principe unificateur des opérations entre lesquelles il se disperse et s’oublie comme sujet.” (Ricoeur 1986a, 29)

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