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Toward an Ethics of Survival: Paul Ricœur on the Desire to Live and the Effort to Exist

Abstract: This paper argues that certain works by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur reveal hermeneutic attempts at explorations into the desire to remain alive beyond death. Drawing on one of his posthumous works, we will substantiate this claim considering the following three objectives: (1) a review of several somewhat obscure theses found in Ricœur's *Living Up to Death,* which reflect on the desire to persist, to live on through others after death; (2) an inquiry into whether this disposition toward "remaining" alive implicitly calls for what fellow French philosopher Jean Nabert described as the effort to exist, understood in a dual sense: first, as it unfolds in the everyday course of life (prior to the question's emergence), and then, as the desire takes shape; (3) an opportunity to examine the, briefly sketched, hypotheses of an ethics of survival which could emerge from such an endeavour. The articulation of these hermeneutic hypotheses serves both to complement and clarify some aspects of Ricœur's thought.

Keywords: the effort to exist, the desire to live, Paul Ricœur, ethics, hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

Beyond the philosophical intricacies of the (academic) world and the ubiquitous disputes among philosophers, there are within their writings certain things that may capture the attention of less specialized readers. These are matters that concern us all, collectively and individually – elemental aspects of life, questions that, at some point, trouble the ordinary person. It is therefore worthwhile to propose a discussion over certain ideas of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur, which at first glance may seem marginal to his broader body of work.

Under this assumption, this paper seeks to argue that in Paul Ricœur's later works we can find a kind of desire to remain alive beyond death, that is, following Jean Nabert, an effort to exist or to endure life. To this end, we aim to address the following objectives: (1) to review certain relatively obscure theses in Ricœur's thought, particularly as found in *Living*

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Up to Death, concerning the desire to remain alive and to live on through others after death; (2) to ask whether this disposition toward "remaining" alive necessarily calls for the effort to exist, as described by Nabert, in a dual sense: first, as it unfolds in the everyday course of life (prior to the question's emergence), and then, as the desire itself arises; (3) to examine the hypotheses of an ethics of survival which could emerge from our inquiry.

As Paul Ricœur's philosophy is often situated by his interpreters at the intersection of several philosophical domains, we will approach these objectives hermeneutically, frequently employing phenomenological descriptions (almost in a Husserlian sense) to bring to light the surplus of wisdom embedded in the texts covered.

2. The desire to live: "Living up to death"

The book referenced in the title of this section is unlike Ricœur's other works. It is a collection of fragments, the most substantial being "Up to Death: Mourning and Cheerfulness" and "Death." The remaining texts are merely sketches. Charles Reagan (2009) observed that there was no overarching thesis uniting the fragments, which underscores Ricœur's inner soul – searching when confronted with the death of his wife, Simone – a moment that became an opportunity for him to reflect on his own mortality. Thus, *Living Up to Death* stands out within Ricœur's writings as it is uniquely here that the philosopher's thought is most active and visibly at work. On the one hand, the author reflects through action; on the other, he grapples with a profoundly intimate matter: his own death (Abel 2009, viii).

The theses advanced by Ricœur, as far as we can discern, can be summarized as follows: 1) living up to death means one cannot experience one's own death, therefore a dying person should not be regarded as moribund; 2) even though everybody is alone in dying, nobody should die alone; 3) furthermore, the preparation for death is an affirmation of life; and 4) life experienced as a gift can be given up (de Lange 2014, 510). On the other hand, Olivier Abel observed that Ricœur sought to answer three key questions: 1) what representation can I give myself? (that is, to identify the figures of the imaginary), 2) what is their root? (an analysis of mourning and cheerfulness), and 3) am I still a Christian? (in other words, finding out in what way he is not a Christian philosopher) (Abel 2009, viii).

Interpreters of Ricœur's work have been seduced by the way in which he relates to life and death in the aforementioned writings, uncovering fragments written in 1996 that were later expanded in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Ricœur 2004). Likewise, the philosopher's death, marked by his effort to remain alive until his final moment, has been compared with that of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's (Sternad 2017). It has been argued

that both Ricœur and Patočka agreed on the belief that a phenomenology of life and life after death must begin with a thorough analysis of the intersubjective character of life (Sternad 2017, 537). Ricœur's death, as far as we can tell, could be included in a study such as the one by Costica Bradatan (2019), because the philosopher remained unwaveringly faithful to his own ideas until the very end.

Writing about the fragments in which Ricœur discusses palliative care (de Lange 2014), or the one describing his close relation with Derrida (Putt 2011) titled "Jacques Derrida," his commentators have only briefly touched on what seems to us to be the deeper philosophical significance of these theses. Ricœur places a special emphasis on others, asserting that it is through them that we can sustain our place in the world even when we are no longer here. This, of course, brings to light the profound instability of our lives: the constant interplay of being among others while simultaneously striving to be ourselves (Abel 2009, xii). Ricœur's central idea (2009, 42) is to love the other, the one who outlives us, and, at the same time, to *transfer* to them our love for life. Consequently, the ethical dimension of the discourse on death lies in the understanding that "detachment" from this side of death constitutes a "gain" or, put differently, a liberation that allows us to focus on the essentials of life.

In the aforementioned fragments, we find three meanings of death that Ricœur discusses, namely: 1) the encounter with the death of others; 2) the figures of the imaginary, or death as an event; and 3) death as a fictional character. Firstly, the encounter with death occurs when a loved one passes away. This event raises a multitude of questions, such as whether the deceased has vanished entirely or continues to exist somewhere "out there" (Ricœur 2009, 7). Naturally, these are questions posed by the still living, yet they serve to create a connection between the deceased and death. Moreover, the French philosopher investigates the ontological being of the dead (Ricœur 2009, 7). It is intriguing that we consistently refer to the deceased not merely as lifeless corpses, but in personal terms, when speaking of "my departed" or "our dead." This linguistic and conceptual framing highlights a relational perspective on death, suggesting that the dead occupy a unique and persistent place in our lives that extends beyond their physical absence.

So why do we ask ourselves these questions, and where does this concern for the dead come from? According to Ricœur (2009, 8), it is because we always seek to mourn for ourselves. Being still alive, our relationship with life remains unclear and altered by the anticipation and internalization of our uncertainties about those already deceased (Ricœur 2009, 8). In short, what Paul Ricœur is preoccupied here is the struggle against the image of tomorrow's dead; the dead that each of us will become for those who outlive us. The logic of this thought is straightforward: just as

we outlive our dead, so too will others outlive us. This reflection brings into focus the continuity of life through an intergenerational connection, where mourning for the dead reflects an existential mirroring of our own eventual mortality.

On the other hand, the second meaning of death in Ricœur's philosophy, namely *death as an event*, consists in the banality of dying, an occurrence that inevitability awaits each of us in the future. It is rather the anticipation of the event of death: the living who "see" their own death in the deaths of others. This is the reason Ricœur presupposes that it is easier to survive than to witness the event of death (Ricœur 2009, 13), as this immediate confrontation with death induces dread in the dying-to-be. However, if we relate to the death of loved ones, surviving them is an act of courage, because survival is intertwined with mourning. The images of the deaths of others serve as mirrors through which we internalize and reflect upon our own mortality. And this contemplation creates a kind of anticipatory agony, prefiguring the image of ourselves as the dead (to be) in the eyes of those who witness these events. Thinking in this way, how exactly can we resolve the dilemma of existence? While we are alive, "still" being alive is a source of joy, but being still alive is precisely what makes the fear of death possible, for the ongoing condition of life serves as a reminder of its finitude.

Lastly, what would it mean that death is a fictional character? For Ricœur this notion suggests that, under certain circumstances, in dreams or through literary imagery, the living "exterminate" humanity. Examples are readily available and by now almost banal: wars, epidemics, and other catastrophic events. This perspective equates death with evil, revisiting a theme Ricœur explored early in his youth and continued to reassess throughout his work (Ricœur 1969). Death, therefore, is rather a human failure, and however much we retreat into solitude, we only escape others in the act of death (Bradatan 2023, 175): only then would we want to look back, only then would we want to seek out the others who will outlive us. No one escapes death, which is why our efforts, both individual and collective, are towards surviving it. In its last moments, man becomes a total failure, and what Ricœur calls into question is our effort to resist becoming as failure. Yet, how much inner strength should man have to resist death? Where does the persistent desire to continue a precarious, death-bound existence come from? Could death serve as the measure of a life well-lived? That is to say, might life itself be a time for the creation of another time, echoing an earlier distinction by Ricœur between the time of life and the time of the work? Viewed through this lens, life becomes an opportunity to shape a continuation, an enduring narrative that extends beyond individual mortality.

3. On the effort to exist: the influence of Jean Nabert

Jean Nabert's name is one that frequently appears in Paul Ricœur's works. This due to the reflexive tradition from which Ricœur draws in his philosophical theses (Ricœur 2007). French philosopher Philippe Capelle-Dumont (2011) has inventoried the ways in which Ricœur traces to some of his theses from Nabert; for example, he suggests that like Nabert, Ricœur is interested in the philosophy of finitude and, of course, most importantly, the two are philosophers of *mediation* when it comes to the hermeneutics of the self, since they both held that there can be no hermeneutics of the self without there being a hermeneutics of the work that the self produces and without the contribution of alterity.

For our purpose here, however, it is important to consider Nabert's (1943) idea of the desire to be, which also assumes the effort to exist. In Nabert's line of thought the desire to be is correlated with duty, within a well-defined ethical framework (Nabert 1943, 154). In short, as Jarosław Jakubowski observes (2022, 191) the effort to exist constitutes for Jean Nabert that which uniformizes the history of a life. In other words, for Nabert (1943, 88), the values of action and the values of ethics are linked to the effort that falls to the individual consciousness to return to its own truth, that is, to the truth of the whole. Moreover, duty should not be understood merely as a moment or a condition for the flowering of our effort to be; but duty together with effort should spontaneously give rise to a will (Nabert 1943, 143).

On the other hand, Ricœur talks about the capable man in a somewhat elusive manner on several occasions. In *Oneself as Another*, in order to characterize the capable man, the philosopher's vocabulary has "attestation" as its central concept; that is, he first notes that actions are ascribed to an agent. Thus, "'attestation" best describes the way of believing associated with statements such as *je crois que je peux* (Ricœur 2004, 140). Ricœur's hypothesis is that at this level of attestation there is a kind of semantic kinship between attestation and self-recognition, and that this includes the recognition of responsibility. In other words, by recognizing that "a self" performs an action, the latter is "attested" as a capacity of this self to do, but at the same time responsibility for what is performed is also demanded (Ricœur 2004, 140). To be capable of something is to confess this capacity and thus to assume responsibility for the consequences.

So to ascribe capacities to an agent is therefore to appeal to an *other*, in order to give certainty to the belief that "I can"; from which it follows that the whole issue is pushed into the social realm, which leads the French philosopher to accept that their mediation takes place at the level of personal identity (Ricœur 2013, 327). We add to the above an important

observation: among the capacities of an invidivid is the capacity to suffer – in other words, the vulnerability of the human being (Ricœur 2013, 327). In *Oneself as Another* the capable human being is the one "who acts and suffers" (Ricœur 2020, 18); and by capable human being he means the human being who is capable "of speaking, of acting, of making promises" (Ricœur 2020, 18). In virtue of all these things, the philosopher adopts as a philosophical maxim that the life of any human being is as important as our own (Ricœur 2020, 18).

Therefore, in everyday life, the capable man is confronted with action and is permanently subject to suffering; hence his effort to exist is constant, and the desire to live is manifested not only in the order of the social, but most probably also at the instinctive level. Man copes with life because there is this intrinsic desire to stay alive. On the other hand, the dying man, that is to say the man towards the end of its life, who still embodies Ricœur's idea of the capable human, tends to continue living. It is at this point that the question arises as to remaining alive after death. Remaining alive after death is the average mean of the effort to exist and the desire to live. The dying person lives in a time of conclusions and implications; they leave little things behind – a name, for example – or a work to those who will follow him or her. In this essential transfer from the dying to others, delicate matters come into play. We all know Plato's name (and hopefully also his work), just as we know the names of some of the executioners of history, but precisely because there is an ethical dimension to the aforementioned transfer, we remember Plato in a certain way and those executioners in another. Therefore, are there, at the level discussed by the French philosopher, some premises for an ethic of survival, as long as the self constantly feels the contribution of otherness?

4. The premises of an ethics of survival

With all the above considered, what would an ethics of survival consist of? Precisely in strengthening the relationship with the otherness of the other. This, in turn, requires the "other" to agree to preserve the memory of the deceased. Thus, a first premise of such an ethics is that of the "yes" that the other must grant – a fundamental act of recognition and acceptance. Let us insist on these a little further.

Paul Ricœur identifies two lines of thought regarding death: 1) perfect detachment and 2) trust in God's care. If the latter appears to be more of a theological perspective on death, the former is profoundly philosophical. What does this "detachment from oneself" mean? The answer is rather straightforward: the unrestricted deconstruction of the imaginary of survival (Ricœur 2009, 13). More concretely, this deconstruction involves two aspects: on the one hand, it signifies the

definitive fulfilment of the work of mourning; and on the other hand, it points to the ethical dimension of this detachment from the self carried through to its ultimate conclusion.

Invoking Meister Eckhart, Ricœur suggests that the ultimate fulfilment of the work of mourning relies on letting go of one's self-attachment. In other words, self-attachment implies self-detachment, which involves renouncing the imaginary projections of one's self-identity after death (Ricœur 2009, 42). Here, Ricœur introduces the concept of the *same*, which refers, first, to the same of one's own life before death, and then to the same of the survivors who will follow, that is, to what is lost through death. Specifically, it concerns the same that I have been throughout my life and the same that remains, after my death, through others. In this sense, death signifies the end of life within the time I shared myself, while living, with those who will outlive me (Ricœur 2009, 42). Therefore, as Ricœur writes, survival, or what-remains, is oriented toward others, the survivors.

From this self-detachment emerges the ethical dimension of the issue of survival. Taken to its conclusion, self-detachment involves transferring one's love of life to the *other*. Therefore, as Ricœur writes: "To love the other, my survivor. This 'agape' component of renouncing one's own survival completes 'detachment' this side of death: it is not just loss, but a gain: liberation for the essential" (Ricœur 2009, 42). He also notes that the great Rhineland mystics displayed an openness towards the essential, the fundamental, attributed to their detachment from the inessential. Thus, it follows that a disposition toward the fundamental motivates the transfer or projection of our love of life onto others (Ricœur 2009, 42). This transfer inherently involves the I-Thou relationship, which is essentially characterized by reciprocity. The one who is dying is oriented toward the fundamental, yet the transfer of the love of life would be impossible if the one receiving this love were not similarly disposed. The transfer of love for life to the one who will outlive me is "grounded" in the detachment of both poles: the self and the other. For Ricœur, this transfer *verifies*, *attests*, and *puts to the test* this detachment within the dimension of generosity (Ricœur 2009, 42).

In this disposition toward the fundamental, interpreters of Ricœur have identified similarities with Spinoza's *conatus* as a desire to persist in existence, Freud's *libido*; Leibniz's *appetite*, Jean Nabert's articulation of *the desire to be and the effort to exist*; Arendt's *natality*, and even Bergson's *élan vital* (de Lange 2014, 514). All of these are directly connected to mourning, which here emerges as an extension of *Gelassenheit*, the state of serene letting-go proposed by Meister Eckhart (Joy 2011, 250). This suggests that mourning, in Ricœur's perspective, is not merely a process of loss and detachment but also a profound affirmation of life. This latter connection to *Gelassenheit* reveals the spiritual depth of mourning, transforming it into a

process of release and renewal, one that affirms life even in the face of its inevitable transience.

Hence, this first line of thought about death, which consists of a perfect detachment, entails the deconstruction of the imaginary of survival. As we have seen, mourning plays a dual role: it is directed both toward the passing of others and toward the inevitable passing of oneself. Moreover, when Ricœur distinguishes between the time of life – the length of time from one's birth to one's death, and the time of the work – how long a particular work endures, circulates, or, in other words, "lives" in the public consciousness, he asks what life means for the living. His response is: "It means dissociating the immortal from the mortal in his proper name by removing the work accomplished by him" (Ricœur 2009, 59-60). Accordingly, these two times overlap until the point where dissociation begins – the time of withdrawal, existentially understood as a retreat, and the time of disappearance (Ricœur 2009, 60). It is noticeable that this time of withdrawal can be readily correlated with mourning, for just as mourning prepares me for death and at the same time predisposes me to the fundamental and the possibility of transferring the love of life, the time of dissociation bridges the time of life and the time of the work. In the retreat from the personal into the realm of the enduring marks a transition from individual finitude to the extended existence of one's contributions in the cultural sphere. In doing so, this highlights Ricœur's vision of life persisting beyond death, not through metaphysical survival, but through a legacy that continues within others. Furthermore, these – mourning and the time of withdrawal, which extends beyond the time of life – have life itself as their reference point. Mourning is almost an ascetic attitude (Joy 2011, 250), as is the time of dissociation, during which the author, with their final efforts, finalizes their work. We can affirm, alongside Ricœur, that both the transfer of the love of life to others and "pushing" the work from the time of life into the time of the work share the same outcome: remaining alive after death.

The second line of thought, as mentioned above, explores the implications of having trust in God. According to Ricœur, this trust in God encompasses the meaning, intelligibility, and justification of existence, conceived in a way distinct from imaginary projections (Ricœur 2009, 43). In essence, Ricœur is captivated by an idea borrowed from the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead: the *memory* of God. Specifically, he writes: "God will remember me. Risk of making it a hypocritical form of imaginary projection, of 'consolation' as a concession to the imaginary – in short, as an imperfect detachment" (Ricœur 2009, 43). The meaning of a fleeting existence is conceptualized within this framework as a "trace" in the memory of God. Practically speaking, every existence *makes a difference* in God. The memory discussed here can be associated with a form of

"forgiveness," understood as a rediscovered sense of rapprochement. In other words, at stake here is God's *care* for me. As long as my existence leaves a trace in the memory of God, He must care for me. If this is the case, nothing that ever constituted my existence will be lost (Ricœur 2009, 46).

In attempting to reconcile these two perspectives – on the one hand, detachment, pushed to the point of renouncing the imaginary of survival; and on the other, trust in God's care – Ricœur comes to see in the Christic example the very paradox of survival. In his words: "It is precisely in this core that the detachment from oneself, in obedience to the mission, and the relation to the others get conjoined. Die for the benefit of. This connection, which has been theorized about in a dubious sacrificial theology in terms of a substituted victim, is at the heart of the Song of the Suffering Servant as dying for. To give [is?] life. The gift transfers [transforms?] the detachment for the benefit of the other" (Ricœur 2009, 53). It follows, therefore, that Ricœur's perspective on death highlights the fact that these corollary notions – dying as a kind of rebirth (through others) and living against death – brings him closer to Arendt's perspective and further away from Heidegger's, as Richard Kearney notes (2011, 224). We can observe in the last writings of the French philosopher his desire to remain alive, to live through others – a persistent to exist, even as his own life approached its end. A final act that underscores his enduring affirmation of life, a stance that blends within it the ethical and relational dimensions of survival with a profound acknowledgment of human finitude.

Here are Catherine Goldenstein's (2009, 95) words on Ricœur's final efforts to exist: "Starting in September his sense of getting closer to death grew. 'People see me as looking better than I feel' was something he said often then. Then, 'I know it is coming, I am in the process of disappearing' – and a few days before his death: 'I have entered a unique time...'" Thus, these are the words of a man standing at the threshold of death, intent on living fully up to the end and resist death, not in the sense of denying its inevitability but by stripping it of its triumph, ensuring that his life would continue in others, through others, and for others. While it might be tempting to see Ricœur's ideas, supported by his own example, as indicative of a form of religious belief, this is not the case. The "new life" envisioned by the French philosopher is "achieved" through the projection of one's love of life onto others. A profoundly human process that is in fact independent of any particular religion or creed. As such, it cannot be confined to any community of faith (Kearney 2011, 225). The transfer of the love of life from one self to others presupposes an ethical framework without which it could not take place. This entire process of remaining among the living, therefore, constitutes an ethics of survival, rooted in

intersubjectivity and sustained by the mutual openness and responsibility between individuals.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The desire to live, or, more precisely, to remain alive through others, justifies the wondrous fact of being alive. For Ricœur, everything happens within this world. Indeed, toward the end of an early work, Ricœur (1966, 475) quoted Rilke's words: "Hiersein ist herrlich" (Being here is wonderful), emphasizing that to be in this life is indeed something of a wonder. Even at that stage, the French philosopher highlighted the uniqueness of this world. While it may not be the best of all possible worlds, it is uniquely significant for each individual, with its goodness not having, in itself, degrees. Our world is inherently good and contains the fundamental life-affirming "yes" of being (Ricœur 1966, 475).

Furthermore, Ricœur's philosophical endeavour points toward an *ethics of survival*, as we have demonstrated. The concept of mourning, which speaks of a disposition toward the fundamental, enables the transfer of the love of life to others. This projection carries profound ethical implications because it is grounded in the intersubjective nature of life. Such a transfer of the love of life can only take place if the recipient is "open." In other words, it cannot occur without the explicit desire of the other. It is precisely this "openness" of the other that produces the possibility for one to remain alive through them.

Thus, we conclude that this ethics of survival both generates and is in turn generated by the desire to be and the effort to exist. It represents, so to speak, the itinerary of our finite life toward living (on) after death through others. Ultimately, Paul Ricœur's attempt to resist death demonstrates nothing less than his refusal to be crushed by the problem of death. Instead, he sought to give its proper place to the theme of birth (Ricœur 1998, 93–94), entrusting those still alive with the responsibility of inheriting his desire to be and his effort to exist.

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