PAUL RICOEUR

PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS, & POLITICS

Philosophy, Ethics, and Politics

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Paul Ricoeur

Edited by Catherine Goldenstein

Translated by Kathleen Blamey

polity

Originally published in French as *Philosophie, éthique et politique: Entretiens et dialogues. Textes prepares et présentés par Catherine Goldenstein. Préface de Michaël Fœssel* © Editions du Seuil, 2017

"L'Ethique, entre le mal et le pire." Un échange de vues entre le philosophe Paul Ricoeur et le Pr. Yves Pélicier, Psychiatre. Propos recueillis par Christian Ballouard et Sophie Duméry, in *Ethique médicale ou bioéthique?*, Christian Hervé (éd.), collection L'Ethique en mouvement, © Editions de l'Harmattan, 1997.

This English edition © Polity Press, 2020

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3450-0- hardback
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3451-7- paperback

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Ricœur, Paul, author. | Goldenstein, Catherine, editor. | Blamey, Kathleen, translator.
Title: Philosophy, ethics and politics / Paul Ricoeur ; edited by Catherine Goldenstein ; translated by Kathleen Blamey.
Other titles: Philosophie, éthique et politique. English
Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA, USA : Polity, 2020. | "Originally published in French as Philosophie, éthique et politique: Entretiens et dialogues. Textes prepares et présentés par Catherine Goldenstein. Préface de Michaël Fœssel Editions du Seuil, 2017." | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "One of leading philosophers of the twentieth century addresses some of the central questions of political philosophy and ethics"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020005433 (print) | LCCN 2020005434 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509534500 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509534517 (paperback) | ISBN 9781509534524 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Ricœur, Paul--Interviews. | Philosophers--France--Interviews. | Political science--Philosophy.
Classification: LCC B2430.R554 A513 2020 (print) | LCC B2430.R554 (ebook) | DDC 194--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005433
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005434

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Sabon LT Pro
by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NL
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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Preface: Paul Ricoeur, Political Educator

"You never know what is chance and what is fate." This admission of ignorance, appearing in the first of the interviews collected here (p. 5), was often repeated by Paul Ricoeur. Whether it was a matter of accounting for the internal coherence of his work, his intellectual commitments, or his political positions, Ricoeur never believed that biographical knowledge could attain the level of science. What might be daunting in the question of the unity of one's life for the person asking it can be mitigated by the concept of "narrative identity."[1] A narrative allows the contingency of events and the necessity attaching to the character or the historical conditions of the subject to be organized into a plot. Instead of relying on reason, he turns to imagination to link chance to fate. New narratives about the same series of events are always possible; not all of these, moreover, are recounted in the first person. In this way, the plurality of plots avoids confusing the bygone past with the inevitable.

The concern with avoiding a premature conclusion is found in most of the dialogues to be read in this volume. Of course, these are historically situated: taking place between 1981 and 2003, they correspond to what could be called Ricoeur's fully mature period, opening with *Time and Narrative* (volume one appeared in 1983) and concluding with *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (2000). From a biographical standpoint, this period corresponds with Ricoeur's return to the French intellectual stage. This is a "return" because in the 1950s and '60s Ricoeur played an important role in public debate, in particular in the journal *Esprit*. During this period, he established the rules for what he conceived to be the engagement of the philosopher with the *Polis*. As we shall see, this deontology of participation in public discourse will waver no more.

The 1970s, however, represent a step back with respect to the French intellectual stage. Here too, the shares of chance and fate are difficult to measure. Ricoeur abstains from intervening in a field dominated by Marxism and structuralism; he refrains from speaking in response to the incomprehension generated by his institutional role at Nanterre in 1969, but he also takes advantage of the opportunity to teach in the United States and the encounter with new philosophical approaches. Perhaps, in addition, he was attesting to a conviction he never ceased to hold: the opacity of the present for its contemporaries. Physically absent from the debates of the intelligentsia in France, he confronts them at a distance from the noise of the media. From Chicago, he studies Althusser's interpretation of Marx.[2]

The interviews collected in this volume thus belong to a period in which Ricoeur deems it possible to once again let his voice be heard in France. Chance solicitations play an important role, but there is no doubt that the reduction of ideological polarities in the course of the 1980s assisted in this return to favor. What is heard is not "moderation" or "ecumenism" with which the philosopher was so often reproached, but the method to which he submitted each of his interventions. One characteristic of Ricoeur's thought is, in fact, never separating the study of a problem (the will, interpretation, action, time, etc.) from questions of method. There is no hiatus between what philosophy does and the reflection on what it can do: describing the will is also questioning the limits of phenomenology with respect to the question of evil;[3] thinking about time is also delegating to narrative what reason alone cannot comprehend.[4]

What is true about the philosophy is also true about the philosopher who expresses himself publicly without claiming a higher order of knowledge. Ricoeur thematizes this method of intervention as early as 1965 in "Tâches de l'éducateur politique" ["Tasks of the Political Educator"], his most extensive text on the question of engagement.[5] Despite its Platonic undertones, the expression "political educator" refers to the pedagogical effort Ricoeur appreciated in Pierre Mendès-France and that he found again later in Michel Rocard (see their dialogue, Chapter 6). To the extent he exposes his thought to the risks inherent in social transformation, the philosopher himself is also expected to specify the areas of his intervention. In this text, Ricoeur distinguishes three levels of society: "tools" (modes of production and the global accumulation of technology), "institutions" (whose character is tied to national cultures), and "values" (which claim to be universal). The discourse of the political educator cannot be confined to the abstract level of values if it hopes to avoid the danger of succumbing to "the deadly illusion of a disengaged, disincarnated conception of the intellectual."[6]

Instead of legislating, the philosopher has to cross through the universe of tools and the sphere of institutions. The vocabulary will change, but the standards will be just as exacting in the interviews we read. To escape technocracy, the political educator will bring out what, in existing societies, already goes beyond the commensurable. These are the stakes of Ricoeur's reflection on the heterogeneity of social goods and the differences between "spheres of justice" (Michael Walzer). At the very moment the Soviet bureaucracy is disappearing, Ricoeur warns against the appearance, at the heart of triumphant capitalism, of other forms of administrated powers. The false homogeneity of "tools" can, in fact, give the illusion of a self-regulating society in which choices are made by no one and as a result call for no confrontation. At this level, the intellectual's responsibility is to reintroduce *conflict*. This key word in Ricoeur marks the philosopher's contribution to the critique of technology and economics. Behind the production of machines and the apparently anonymous logic of growth, we find decisions taken in a conflictual context which has been repressed. The primary task of the political educator is to open up a space once more for democratic confrontation, where the will seems to have capitulated to the rationality of instruments.[7]

The second level is that of "institutions"; it concerns the principles presiding over the choice of the preferable (equality, liberty, justice). Once it is established that human creativity is at work even in the domains of technology and economics, the problem of the criteria for action is posed. In the pages that follow, we see the attempts to apply to concrete cases the distinctions

Ricoeur has made in the field of action. In particular, the three levels of morality (the ethics of the good life, the deontology of norms, practical wisdom in situation) will help to shed light on the difficulties encountered in medicine (Chapter 11) or in international relations (Chapter 8). Here again, this pluralizing of viewpoints is a valuable contribution of the political educator. Ricoeur marks the limits of the procedural conceptions of the Rule of Law by examining the aporias generated by democracy. The moment of the institutions is fundamental because it organizes the confrontation without ever setting a definite end to it. Ricoeur's strategy continues to be the "long detour": the (modern) impossibility of a sharp decision among substantial conceptions of the good tends toward a culture of conflict. Without it, "le compromis" (genuine compromise) is inevitably lost to "la compromission" (compromising one's values or character) (Chapter 7).

This twofold effort of conceptual clarification (on the level of technologies and on the level of institutions) is already part of the intellectual's engagement. The intellectual's vocation is not to express an opinion on "values," as if his discourse were free of all historical responsibility. The 1965 article stresses this point, borrowing from Max Weber the distinction between the "ethics of responsibility" and "the ethics of conviction." The intellectual's engagement is not only a function of his freedom, it also stems from the fact of being always already caught up in a history in which the individual does not control all the parameters. His responsibility consists in exploring the "paradoxes of the political" rather than relying on certainties dictated by conscience.[8] Is this to say that political education is limited to an appeal to realism justified by the necessities of power? Not at all. The political educator accomplishes his task only by recalling "the constant pressure that the ethics of conviction exercises on the ethics of responsibility."[9] The name of this pressure is "utopia": this word is frequently pronounced in the interviews collected in this volume.[10]

As much as the social and institutional analysis proceeds through a variation of possibilities based on what already exists, to the same extent utopia allows a radically new possibility to appear. Its dimension is an exile outside of established political and economic orders. Ricoeur long advocated in favor of the concrete utopias at work, for example, in certain religious communities.

These communities practice forms of association in the world that escape the logic of technological domination.[11] Later, he will define utopia as a product of the social imagination that is opposed to ideology: ideology integrates action into a pre-existing social symbolism, while utopia claims a "nowhere," in contrast with which ideologies appear in their contingency.[12] As the collective expression of a constituting imaginary, utopia serves a subversive function. Responding to its call, a consciousness situated in a world of equipment and institutions becomes a consciousness of "nowhere."

The political educator, in this way, divides this task between exploring a here and designating an elsewhere. To be sure, "we still perceive some islands of rationality, but we no longer have the means to situate them within an archipelago of unique and all-encompassing meanings" (p. 17). Just as there no longer exists a grand narrative to recapitulate the past, in the same way there is no longer any utopia capable of projecting the desired future. According to Ricoeur, what remains is human social creativity, which marks the source common to the institutional frameworks that are already present and the horizons that extend beyond them. The philosopher's engagement lies in the promise to revive this source at the very moment it appears to dry up under the weight of the constraints of "the real."

Michaël Foessel

1. I'm Waiting for the Renaissance[1]

JOËL ROMAN AND ÉTIENNE TASSIN: *Your first published book, in collaboration with Mikel Dufrenne,*[2] *is a study devoted to Jaspers. How did you become interested in Jaspers?*

PAUL RICOEUR: Before the war, Gabriel Marcel had published the first studies in French on Jaspers, in particular a long article on limit-situations, which really struck me because I was then just starting to focus on the problem of culpability. Later, when we were prisoners of war, Mikel Dufrenne and I were fortunate to have access to the entirety of Jasper's works in publication at that time. Our attachment to Jaspers was tied to our refusal to repeat the mistake of our predecessors, the veterans of the previous war, who had harshly rejected everything that came from Germany. We thought that the true Germans were in books, and this was a way of rejecting the Germans who were guarding us. The true Germany was us and not them. In publishing this book, in a sense we erased the history of our captivity.

After the war, when Jaspers published works such as *The Great Philosophers*[3] or *Von der Wahrheit*,[4] we no longer followed his work. I have to recognize that what occurred at that time was a substitution, in part, of Heidegger for Jaspers, which I now tend to question: in many respects, there were ethical and political criteria inherent in Jaspers' thought – that is, constitutive of it – that made even clearer the ethical elision that increasingly appears to me to characterize Heidegger's thought. Retrospectively, Jaspers leaves me with regret and unease, for I sometimes have the feeling of abandoning him along the way, not having continued this post-war encounter.

Did you meet him personally?

Yes, on two occasions. Just after the war, in Heidelberg, then in Basel. By then he had broken with Germany: while he had endured Nazi Germany, he had not endured democratic Germany, which at that time had not repented. He had dreamt of a sort of collective conversion, a collective avowal of responsibility. I met him in Switzerland just after publishing our book: I wouldn't say he didn't like it, but he found it too systematic, overly marked perhaps by its French and didactic spirit, whereas he saw himself more in the image of a mighty torrent sweeping away its banks, which we had channeled.

Over the same years, you encountered Husserl's phenomenology?

I had already caught wind of it before the war, and at Gabriel Marcel's, curiously enough. Then I read the *Logical Investigations*.[5] It was one of the faithful attendees of Gabriel Marcel's "Fridays," Maxime Chastaing, who directed me to Husserl. Finally, imprisoned in Germany, I had the chance to have a copy of Husserl's *Ideen*,[6] the first volume of which I translated. I still have the copy from those years of captivity, which I managed to bring back with me despite many obstacles. The translation was written in the margins since we had no paper. In translating Husserl, I had to make a number of choices in translating terms, choices I would not make in the same way today. For example, I did not dare to translate *Seiende* by "étant" (entity) but by "*ce qui est*" (that which is). Be that as it may, for me this book has remained absolutely fundamental.

In *From Text to Action* there is an article titled "From Phenomenology to Hermeneutics," in which I explain that the passage by way of phenomenology is not canceled by a development that more fully takes into account the plurality of interpretations, although in Husserl we find the idea that there are univocal essences about which a coherent discourse can be formulated.

Did you come to hermeneutics later?

I first came to it by way of a problem arising out of my work on the symbolism of evil, which followed a classical phenomenological study on the voluntary and the involuntary. In the latter, I proposed to do for the field of practice what Merleau-Ponty had done for perception. I am returning now, moreover, to the same questions from the angle of the theory of action. In working on the voluntary and the involuntary, I was relying on clearly readable structures: it is possible to express in intelligible terms the nature of a project, a motive, a capacity for action, an emotion, a habit, and so on. These are, in a sense, the chapters of a phenomenological psychology. But there remained an opaque area, that of bad will and evil. It seemed to me then that I had to change methods, that is, to interpret myths, not just biblical myths but also the myths of tragedy, of orphism, of gnosis. By this symbolic detour, I entered into the hermeneutical problem. Certain problems did not have the clarity, the transparency, I thought I discerned in what Merleau-Ponty termed the "membranes" of voluntary acts. Out of this arose two questions: 1. What can we say about the subject who can know himself or herself only by way of myths? What is the opacity of the self to itself that results in having to pass through the interpretation of grand cultural narratives to arrive at self-understanding? 2. Inversely, what is the status of the interpretive operation that serves as the mediation between the self and itself in this reflexive act? Here, I took the route by way of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. This hermeneutical trajectory seemed to me to repeat the neo-Kantian trajectory of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. I also crossed paths with Nietzsche, who interested me for his critique of transparency and of the self-mastery of rationality. All of these investigations were guided by the question: what can we say about the subject through these various revolutions? How can we move from a position that remains relatively Cartesian in Husserl, in the name of a sort of immediacy to oneself, to the recognition of a growing opacity witnessed in the detour by way of myths?

The second shock, alongside that of the hermeneutical tradition, was the shock of psychoanalysis, and for similar reasons. Having worked on culpability through the lens of the great myths, I wondered if there was not another, very different, reading, leading back to the side of the unconscious and not to the side of the great textual tradition. This was the occasion for my work on Freud,[7] strongly motivated by the failure of a philosophy of the *cogito*. A twofold failure, on the battlefront of the reading of myths and on the battlefront of the deciphering of the unconscious. In this way, I was led back to my earlier problem, the plurality of hermeneutics and their conflicts.

What has become of this conflict of interpretations? I was entering into a dialectical game, either giving credit to a text, or instead mistrusting it. This dialectic of suspicion/trust played a very important role for me. Systematic mistrust had its Nietzschean and Freudian roots – Marxist too, but, curiously, I was never deeply disturbed by Marx. I did not see in him the power of disruption I found in Nietzsche or Freud. I was interested in Marx for other reasons: for the problem of ideology as a deceptive form of knowledge. My most recent book dealing with the relations between "ideology and utopia,"[8] expresses quite well the crux of my relation to Marx, which is a rather tranquil relation, whereas I have always found Nietzsche more invigorating.

Finally, there was the "linguistic turn" leading you to take a closer interest in what is commonly termed "Anglo-Saxon philosophy."

The linguistic turn for me was made inside of hermeneutics, because to reflect on myths is to remain within language. As I was frequently employing the notions of symbol and symbolism in my works on the symbolism of evil and on Freud, I realized that my own use of the word "symbol" lacked a linguistic foundation. I had to go back and start again from Saussure and, especially, from Benveniste: from the latter, I retained the notion of the irreducibility of discourse to the word, and so of the linguistics of the sentence to the linguistics of the sign. Concurrently, I was encountering analytical philosophy in its dual forms: the analysis of ordinary language, and the philosophy of well-constructed languages, logical languages. I always found solid support in the tradition of Austin, Strawson, etc., who started with what people say, with the idea that ordinary language contains an unbelievable wealth of meaning. This connection between phenomenology, linguistics, and analytical philosophy, in its least logicist aspect, gave me the resources of hybridization to which I owe so much.

Analytical philosophy continues to fascinate me by its level of argumentation. This is what forces our respect: the choice of arguments, counterexamples, rejoinders. At times the object of analysis is slighter than the instrument of analysis: this is what we in France often perceive, we who have difficulty opening ourselves to this argumentative rigor. The flipside of this attitude is the professionalization of philosophical activity. I myself am somewhat of a victim of this effect: no longer writing for the general public, but writing for the greatest specialist in one's discipline, the one you have to convince.

How is it that you have split your time between the United States and France? Is it the result of chance, or were there possibilities of work in the United States that attracted you?

You never know what is chance and what is fate. I have often been struck by the fact that the anecdotal becomes the necessary after the fact. When I returned from Germany after my captivity, looking for somewhere to regain my health, I taught for three years in Chambon-sur-Lignon in a small Protestant secondary school in the mountains, where pacifist American Quakers had come to the aid of French teachers and educators who had participated in non-violent resistance in aiding the Jews. The first time I visited the United States it was to a Quaker college. The Quakers were the first American link during the period of reconstruction within the small province of French Protestantism. Then I taught in New York until 1970, when I was appointed as a visiting professor to the Divinity School and the Philosophy Department of the University of Chicago. I have since divided my time, in the proportion of two thirds/one third, between France and the United States. I continue to teach there.

You have had university responsibilities in France. What are your thoughts in comparing the two university systems?

The comparison makes obvious first of all the poverty of the French system: it is just simply cruel. To be sure, in Chicago I taught in a very selective framework, with students in doctoral programs: one could have no more than twenty-five students at once, direct no more than five dissertations, etc. This is just in no way comparable to what I experienced at the Sorbonne, which, moreover, I had already left to go to Nanterre, before taking early retirement.

I had not been happy in that system for pedagogical reasons: it is a system that gives little credit to students, that does not afford them the means to do research. An American student has no more than twenty hours of class, while a French student often has a lot more, up to thirty-five hours in some disciplines. A student's work consists in taking in the courses and regurgitating them; there is no engagement with the texts, with the library. This question really disturbs me: how is it possible that societies so similar in other ways, advanced industrial societies, can have produced such different systems of education? This is indisputably where the imprint of history is the strongest, to such an extent that our systems are practically incommunicable, even in Europe. Systems of education are the most difficult to reform. It is a paradox that a system of education is supposed to be the most forward looking, since by definition we are dealing with people who will be operational ten or twenty years later. Yet we have a tendency to teach as we were taught; there is something very regressive in the role of a teacher. In systems in which innovation is more highly prized, as in the American system, one is led to reflect more on one's practice and to be creative, inventive. You can have a short seminar, a seminar where you never speak, a seminar where two or three people speak: anything is permitted, as long as the students show up.

You have been very active in the International Institute of Philosophy, and have served as its president. What role does this kind of institution play?

It is by invitation only: there are nine French philosophers, five English philosophers, nine Americans, etc., one hundred and ten or twenty members in all. Each year, the Institute holds a meeting on a rather technical subject; this year the theme will be: "signifying and understanding." There is a clear Anglo-American slant, but also a strong Continental counterpart: Gadamer and Habermas for Germany, and, on the French side, Granger, who is rather close to the Anglo-American tradition, but also Aubenque and Levinas. This is a milieu of very high-level discussion, but also