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Discovering an entangled freedom: Philosophical and theological perspectives on symbols and myths of evil

Abstract: With *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur embarked on a new trajectory, enquiring into constitutive elements of being human via the symbols contained in the defining narratives of a culture. Having redirected the phenomenological approach from consciousness towards the faculty of willing, he now adds “hermeneutics.” It discovers in myths indirect articulations of core parameters of human life that then become the object of reflection, for example, on human freedom. The influential interpretation undergone by the “Adamic Myth” in Augustine’s step to an inherited “original sin” is marked as a speculative rationalization. Yet enquiring about the origin of evil is part of a necessary philosophical clarification of the scope of human agency. Section one discusses the methodological turn to hermeneutics, section two the Genesis narrative of Adam, Eve and the serpent as a case study of the human person finding herself entangled in an ambiguous freedom. Section three compares three responses: a critical philosophical engagement with his treatment of Augustine (I. Bochet); a contrasting endorsement from a theology of freedom (Th. Pröpper) of Ricoeur’s uncovering the biological and juridical categories in his verdict; and an alternative found in Orthodox liturgy (C. Gschwandtner) to Ricoeur’s concern with fragile yet morally capable agency.

The Symbolism of Evil marks an important crossroad where the theory decision is made to take a new direction. It belongs to the trilogy on the will—which itself reorients phenomenological thinking from an analysis of consciousness to one of the motivations and articulations of the practical faculty. Yet *The Symbolism of Evil* not only completes the examination of the human constitution as marked by the “voluntary” and the “involuntary,” and by “fallibility.”¹ It also inaugurates a new approach, to be further elaborated in the subsequent works, which Ricoeur identifies as hermeneutics having “been able to graft itself onto phenomenology.”² What is the reason for moving to a “hermeneutics,” a concep-

¹ See Ricoeur, FN, *Philosophie de la Volonté*, *The Symbolism of Evil*, and *La Symbolique du Mal*.

² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 14.

tion that did not appear in the original analysis of the will,³ and that will next be brought to bear on a field of practice, psychoanalysis, which was not conceived in these terms by its founder?⁴ And how does the indirect route of inquiring into basic anthropological premises via the symbols contained in the literary works of a culture affect the understanding of philosophical and theological concepts? For a philosopher as epistemologically conscious and careful as Ricoeur, a change of method signifies a major shift. His precise and circumspect reconstructions of other, competing approaches, conducted with great respect for the possible truth of the perspectives they open up, corroborate that choosing a new method of access must be the result of a sustained reflection on what a school of thinking can and cannot deliver. The material his book turns to, the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean myths that marked the dawn of European thinking, are treated in two steps: beginning with the “first order symbols” of evil, “defilement,” “sin” and “guilt,” he then compares “myths” as “second order symbols” which take the shape of distinct narrations that are classified into four types. The experience of being entangled in factors that diminish the human outreach towards a fulfilling life is expressed in evocative accounts: the Babylonian story of creation as a fight between gods, the Hebrew Bible’s account of Adam’s Fall, the fate of tragic heroes in Greek myths, and the Orphic dualism of the exiled soul. The criterium by which Ricoeur judges these principal imaginary depictions of the standing of humans in the cosmos, the social world and towards themselves is to which practical self-understanding they lead. I will discuss key questions arising in his course of inquiry about human freedom in three sections: on the new hermeneutical method (1), the case study of the “Adamic Myth” (2), and the abiding controversies which his influential interpretation has sparked in biblical hermeneutics, Christian theology as well as in philosophy. Since Augustine’s new conception of an inherited “original sin” is rejected as a speculative rationalization of the story of Adam’s Fall, how has theology

3 Cf. Frey, “On the Servile Will.”

4 See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*. In “Finitude, culpabilité et souffrance” (see p. 63–88), Jean-Luc Amalric refers to philosophical precursors in the 1920s who included psychoanalysis under this attempt of understanding the utterances of other persons and eras, such as psychiatrist and existential philosopher Karl Jaspers. The subsumption of psychoanalysis to hermeneutics has not been left uncontested by authors defending Freud’s method. Pawel Dybel points out the opposite treatment of “symbol” in “Symbol and Symptom: Paul Ricoeur’s reading of Freud.” His concluding comparison of the anthropological models proposed, however, identifies Ricoeur’s analysis as based on a Christian view of the human person as sinful, in contrast to the psychoanalytic premise of innocence. This does not capture the key point of Ricoeur’s interpretation of the account of the Fall which is to show evil as merely factual by narrating it as a second, “historical” stage that stands in contrast to the foundational goodness.

judged the philosophical trajectory charted for understanding the origin, the active renewal, and the chance of resisting evil (3)?

1 A “revolution”⁵ in terms of method

What are the reasons for Ricœur to complement the conceptual means of phenomenology with a hermeneutics of mythological stories focused on the theme of evil? The year of its publication, 1960, fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, saw the appearance of another major programmatic work, *Truth and Method*, in which Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasized the prior belonging of the subject to a history of reception of classical texts. Ricœur’s new departure will include the role of ideology critique and, beyond the limits of reflection, the importance of ensuring the capacity for action, as he will specify in his subsequent debates both of Gadamer’s position and of its critique by Jürgen Habermas.⁶ The deficiency which Ricœur exposes in a philosophy that believes in a direct path from “thinking” to “being”—as one may see exemplified in Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum*—requires committing to a different route which appears like a “detour” to those used to taking the short cut. The reason for Ricœur is that there is no direct connection between a conceptual analysis of the human feature of “fallibility,” and wrongful action. While a structural “disproportionality” can be uncovered by a phenomenological inquiry within the methodological boundary of the “epoché,” which keeps this level distinct from concrete action, its tools of thinking here reach their limit.⁷ Actual deeds are in a different register which forces philosophy to reflect on the context in which it is set which is prior to reflection. It is a sore admission to make that theory is faced with events it can neither deduce from a structural analysis of human specificity nor explain in their reasons. In particular, the fact of evil decisions and deeds shows that there is a level of human action which remains “inscrutable,” constitutively opa-

5 The explication of Ricœur’s concept of evil by Jérôme Porée and Olivier Abel begins with the instructive question of how philosophy can approach this theme, not taking for granted this ability: “Comment un discours philosophique sur le mal est-il possible? A cette question, Ricœur répond [...] par la révolution de méthode qui le fait privilégier, à mi-chemin de la révolte muette et des rationalisations trompeuses, le niveau intermédiaire du mythe et du symbole. Témoignage multimillénaire de l’imagination déployée par le génie des peuples pour permettre à l’homme de faire face à sa condition, le symbole, en effet, ‘donne à penser’” (Porée and Abel, “Mal,” 78, with reference to Ricœur, *La Symbolique du Mal*, 479).

6 Cf., for example, Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 63–100.

7 Cf. Amalric, “Finitude, culpabilité et souffrance.”

que and profoundly scandalous. Opposing any philosophical solution that tries to enwrap the experience of evil in an encompassing system of thinking, it is the hermeneutical route that Ricœur regards as able to offer insights precluded by other approaches. I will first elucidate the elements that lead to identifying the realm of symbols and the cultural pre-understandings they are embedded in as the promising way forward (§1.1). As a later instance of a similar critique, of overarching theses from a philosophy of history, applied to some of the same texts in which their distinctiveness risks being levelled, I will turn to his comment on key concepts of sociologist Max Weber (§1.2).

1.1 The level of inquiry: Concrete, historical freedom, as expressed in emblematic narratives

The turn to hermeneutics happens in order to elucidate issues posed by ordinary life, as one manifestation of non-philosophy, that can only be accessed indirectly, through the mirror of narratives.

The achievement of the first volume, *Fallible Man*, was to show how truths about human capacity that can be reached by reflection are rooted in the dual constitution of human freedom, “the polarity within him of the finite and the infinite, and his activity of mediation or intermediation.” Because of a “disproportion” that is structural, something that is encountered and not made, “fallibility” comes with being human.⁸ Yet, fallibility as a structure of finite freedom is not itself actual evil; to capture it as a live possibility requires a new launch. As Daniel Frey summarizes, the difference to *Freedom and Nature*, which was “devoted to fundamental possibilities of the human being,” appears in that “the philosopher judges precisely that the fault is not a fundamental possibility: it represents an *accident* that is inaccessible to eidetic description” for which the fault counts as “*the absurd*.”⁹

Thus, between possibility and real action there is a gulf. Ricœur’s conclusion is that human reasoning cannot explain the origin of an act, it is something that remains mysterious. The material for a philosophical analysis of this theme must therefore be sought in the store of human expression that exists in literary documents and ritual practices which arise from basic experiences of world, self and agency. An analysis and comparison of “symbols” across cultures is used to

⁸ Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, xliv. *L’homme faillible*, the first volume of *Finitude et culpabilité* I, and the second volume, *The Symbolism of Evil*, were published in French in 1960.

⁹ Frey, “On the Servile Will,” 51, with reference to Ricœur, FN, 24. Frey concludes: “In order to attain the fault, a change of method will be necessary.”

make up for the fact that there is no immediate access to the agent's own motivations. The otherness of a work—epics, prayers, drama, poetry, choral compositions...—is needed to be able to reflect on the possible components of one's own actions. It is chastening for philosophical thinking with all its precision and variety of starting points, to admit that insights regarding the subjects' own motivation and intention come to them through works which reflect elementary experiences. Not merely sharpness of intellectual analysis, but "sympathy" and "imagination" are identified as requirements for this art of understanding to develop in a systematic and methodologically conscious way. The freedom humans find themselves in is discovered as not only finite, but also entangled, conditioned by multiple factors, and as a problematic task. Concrete, actualized freedom is therefore the level which Ricœur is exploring in the second, twin volume to *Fallible Man*.

Two quotes will illustrate the programmatic steps. The first indicates the need to include "being," real life, beyond a type of self-reflection which denies its own presuppositions in the symbolic imaginaries of a culture: Instead of trying to find "a disguised philosophy under the imaginative garments of the myth," he advocates a philosophy that starts from the symbols and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation. [...] the task of the philosopher guided by symbols would be to break out of the enchanted enclosure of consciousness of oneself, to end the prerogative of self-reflection.¹⁰

Secondly, beyond the need to examine knowing and willing as capacities, a more foundational level becomes the object of inquiry. It amounts to a "second Copernican turn," as Ricœur states on the penultimate page of *The Symbolism of Evil*, to recognize that myths explore human existential conflicts which are the material for subsequent thought:

All the symbols of guilt—deviation, wandering, captivity,—all the myths—chaos, blinding, mixture, fall,—speak of the situation of the being of man in the being of the world. The task, then, is, starting from the symbols, to elaborate existential concepts—that is to say, not only structures of reflection but structures of existence (SE, 356–357).

These symbols are culture-specific, and philosophy, the general consciousness of truth, cannot afford to bypass them: "beginning from this contingency and restrictedness of a culture that has hit upon these symbols rather than others, philosophy endeavors, through reflection and speculation, to disclose the rationality of its foundation" (SE, 357).

¹⁰ Ricœur, SE, Conclusion, 355–356. Further references in the text in quotations from the French original; the edition used is FC.

We have to “emigrate”¹¹ to the terrain of these symbols in their religious and cultural particularity in order to access the level of universality. By rehabilitating archaic stages as the original examples of working out human self-understandings, the hermeneutical philosopher wants philosophy to learn from the stocks of experience sedimented in these texts. They express how humans saw themselves in front of the universe, the Sacred, the greatest and highest framework they could envisage.

He is confident that such understanding of texts from historically remote periods is possible, as a further quote outlines. Immediate self-knowledge regarding the starting point of evil is unattainable. Yet evidence to be examined is available in the avowal, in the performative act of confessing which can be found in texts of prayer:

My point of departure is in a *phenomenology of confession* or avowal. Here I understand by phenomenology the description of meanings implied in experience in general, whether that experience be one of things, of values, of persons, etc. A phenomenology of confession is therefore a description of meanings, and of signified intentions, present in a *certain activity of language*, namely, *confession*. Our task, in the framework of such a phenomenology, is to re-enact in ourselves the confession of evil, in order to uncover its aims. By sympathy and through imagination, the philosopher adopts the motivations and intentions of the confessing consciousness; he does not “feel” but “experiences” in a neutral manner, in the manner of “as if,” that which has been lived in the confessing consciousness.¹²

Thus, a reconstructive path becomes accessible that relies on prior evidence of narratives and performative texts like confessions. This long road to a theory of self cannot be shortened by claims to unmediated, direct insights into the self. Nor is it useful to substitute the study of expressions in their particularity by bold generalizations. This happens in Augustine’s doctrine of sin, which will be treated in §§2–3, but also in modern theories, such as in sociological classifications devised by Max Weber.

1.2 Critiquing ‘speculative’ macro-theses

We have seen that the new philosophical method wishes to explore the “presuppositions” of a contingent culture with its particular lens of conceiving reality and creating a coherent interpretation of the world. What is to be avoided with

¹¹ In SE, 27, *il nous faut nous dépayser* (FC, 230) is translated as “we have to transport ourselves.”

¹² Ricœur, “Guilt, Ethics, and Religion,” 426.

these historical documents, however, is an approach that begins with foundational writings and institutions but is drawn to overarching summaries. An example of this can be found in a sociology that puts forward grand-scale theories of cultures based on premises that need to be examined. It is seen as being in danger of overlooking counterevidence and using the historically accessible material sources as proofs of a prior thesis. While this critique was written three decades after *The Symbolism of Evil*, it elucidates a similar unwillingness to stay with the primary documents in their originality, rawness and resistance against attempted syntheses.

The method of beginning with the given texts, rather than approaching them with a hypothesis that does not sufficiently investigate other evidence is the backdrop to Ricoeur's objections to one of Max Weber's most famous theses, regarding the history of effects of the idea of predestination. Concerning his reading of Ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts as well as concepts in Christian theology, Ricoeur asks:

Was theodicy really the most important question attached to Jewish prophetism? Was the concern to find a guarantee and a reassurance against the risk of damnation the exclusive motivation behind Christianity, and more specifically behind Puritanism? What happens to salvation by grace, and a faith with no guarantee, in relation to the perhaps overemphasized theme of predestination?

The methodological question is, if "Weber ever encountered the problem of the equivocity in the interpretation of cultural phenomena on a grand scale." The hermeneutical philosopher asks

whether Weber did not systematically avoid the question of the univocity of his overall interpretation of the religious phenomenon, and [...] usurped the qualifications of the scientist's axiological neutrality to the benefit of a highly problematic overall interpretation, one that places the disenchantment of the world thesis at the same level as Hegel's cunning of reason.¹³

The analysis therefore turns out to be led by a philosophy of history. The premises and accentuations that give rise to this vision are not themselves identified, nor are the contemporary factors that contribute to a skeptical and almost dystopian view of the future. It is the gift of hermeneutics to discern mindsets of a past era that color modes of thinking and their conclusions, such as the after-

¹³ Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, 151–152.

math of Nietzsche's diagnosis of culture.¹⁴ While it is true that the individual human sciences, including sociology, depend on guiding ideas that structure their inquiries,¹⁵ it is part of the task to justify and refine one's method in view of the "plurivocity" of the material—something Ricœur does at different stages of his study of *The Symbolism of Evil*. It calls for squaring the circle between a necessary pre-conception or an "a priori [...] typology of myths" (cf. SE, 171–172) in order to identify what material is relevant, and the historical examination which might lead to extending the circle of the data to be included.¹⁶

The change of method inaugurated in the second volume of *Finitude and Cul-pability* in 1960 leads into more recent debates on the changed role of philosophy and its division of labor with the individual human sciences. These include distinct normative criteria, e.g., of "truth," of the interplay between systematic and empirical methods, and of philosophy's mediating function to the lifeworld. Questions of method are questions about the status of philosophy both with regard to the "life" that precedes it and to the disciplines examining it. The question of criteria for judging the adequacy of an interpretation is posed also by Christina Gschwandtner in her discussion of distinctions such as "symbol" and "myth" by which Ricœur has structured the field: "Another problem is to know how to distinguish between mystifying interpretations and valid interpretations of a myth [...] one that corresponds to the 'original meaning of the intention' of the symbol."¹⁷

To investigate how Ricœur's treatment relates to other interpretations, the model he recognizes as the most encompassing among the four types of second order symbols treated will be examined: the myth that is co-constitutive of culture as we know it in the West, namely that of Adam's Fall. How is the new method put to work on the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis and their history of effects in the theologies of Paul and Augustine?

14 In this Preface to Pierre Bouretz's study, *Les promesses du monde*, reprinted in *Reflections on the Just*, 149–155, Ricœur comments on his discussion of the effect of Nietzsche's philosophy on Weber's analyses.

15 Cf. Habermas, "Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter."

16 Such a combination of constructive-conceptual and historical-comparative enquiries can be found in F. Schleiermacher's account of the procedure used to propose a definition of the essence of Christianity in the Introduction to *The Christian Faith* (ETs of the second edition of 1830–1831, 52–60), which testifies to the highly developed methodological consciousness of the "father of modern hermeneutics."

17 Porée, "The Question of Evil," 12.

2 Case study: The Adamic myth

The exploration of the “first order” symbols of the stain, of sin and of guilt in Part I of *The Symbolism of Evil* concludes with the “servile,” unfree will. Entitled, “Recapitulation of the Symbolism of Evil in the Concept of the Servile Will,” it states that the experience captured in defilement, sin and guilt is that one’s free will is “unavailable” or “not at one’s own disposition”:

The concept toward which the whole series of the primary symbols of evil tends may be called the *servile will*. But that concept is not directly accessible; if one tries to give it an object, the object destroys itself, for it short-circuits the idea of will, which can only signify free choice, and so free will, always intact and young, always available (*disponible*)—and the idea of servitude, that is to say, the unavailability (*l’indisponibilité* [FC, 361]) of freedom unto itself (SE, 151).

Faced with this contradictory status, Part II turns to a comparison of four ancient myths as “second order symbols” that tell the conflicts of human life in stories of the “Beginning and of the End.” For Ricœur, the account of Adam’s Fall proves to be the most encompassing because it includes motifs present in the Babylonian creation myth as well as a sense of the tragic from heroes of Greek mythology like Prometheus and Oedipus. Crucially, the Adamic myth is alone in expressing the principal insight of the role of human freedom in causing and proliferating evil. I will first discuss the diagnosis of the captive will in the Conclusion of the first part in the light of theological comments (§2.1), and then outline Ricœur’s reading of the story of the Fall (§2.2).

2.1 Freedom between the power to act and being “unavailable unto itself”

Part I, as we have seen, ends with an unsettling, paradoxical conclusion:

Guilt cannot, in fact, *express* itself except in the indirect language of ‘captivity’ and ‘infection,’ inherited from the two prior stages. Thus both symbols are transposed ‘inward’ to express a freedom that enslaves itself, affects itself, and infects itself by its own choice [...] to denote a dimension of freedom itself [...] we know that they are symbols when they reveal a situation that is centered in the relation of oneself to oneself. Why this recourse to the prior symbolism? Because the paradox of the captive free will—the paradox of the servile will—is insupportable for thought (SE, 152).

What does it mean that freedom is not available to itself, or, more unequivocally, that the will is “servile”? Does it indicate that humans are condemned to commit evil, that there is a necessity to sin? Yet how would this fit with his emphasis on the contingency of sin (2.1.1)? How does the will relate to the self, and on what terms is action presented (2.1.2)? In view of the answers given to these issues, it can then be assessed what significance the Adam account has for this insight (2.2).

2.1.1 Defining “ontological” in the distinction of sin from “subjective” guilt

In Part I, “sin” is distinguished from “guilt” as “ontological” versus “subjective”:

“Guilt designates the subjective moment in fault, as sin is its ontological moment [...] it is the reality of sin—its ontological dimension that must be contrasted with the subjectivity of the consciousness of guilt” (SE, 101 & 82). Does the term “ontological,” which seems to insinuate sin as inevitable, not undermine Ricœur’s whole enterprise to rescue sin from a naturalizing reading where it is part of the human condition, linking its origin instead to human freedom? This conclusion can be avoided if one reads “ontological” as referring to sin not as given with human nature, but more specifically to the awareness that sin has “always already” begun, that there is no stage where humans have not been touched by it and have not contributed to it. “Ontological” refers to the conditions that are prior to individual action which itself is not marked by a constraint to sin. This understanding of Ricœur’s definitions in his reconstruction of actual sin as an act of freedom is confirmed by the critique which the Protestant systematic theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg put forward in his theological anthropology against the argumentations in *Fallible Man* and in *The Symbolism of Evil*: For

Ricœur, this “non-coincidence of man with himself” [...] is not yet evil but initially only human fallibility, although he admits that this fallibility comes to light only through the fault that has already occurred [...] the symbol of the fall is irreplaceable because it makes it possible to combine the voluntary character of evil with its “quasi-nature,” which consists in the fact that evil is already there before we produce it.¹⁸

For Pannenberg, it is a problem to distinguish between “a real passage from the abstract essential structure of the human will to its concrete reality, as though

¹⁸ Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 104–105, n. 74 and 73, with reference to Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, 4.

such a passage were a real step and specific event in human reality.”¹⁹ While Ricoeur does not promote Adam as a historical figure and his sin as a “real step,” the distinction between fallibility and actual use of the human will in a sinful way is crucial for him. “Abstraction” does not mean that the primordial level referred to is superfluous for understanding actual human agency. He defends the possibility of innocence, while Pannenberg explains sin as inextricably bound up with a natural self-centeredness of humans from which to “abstract” is without real meaning. For Ricoeur, it is the “servile will” that is the appropriate concept in which the experiences conveyed by the symbols and myths of evil are gathered. But this is not the same as reducing sin to social contagion with evil, or to naturalizing it as inevitable. The point Ricoeur wants to make is that humans are aware of the fragility of the free will: it is not always available to be reliably directed towards the good. In his understanding, the term “servile will” does not deny but presupposes freedom as the condition of the possibility of choosing.²⁰

2.1.2 How does “will” relate to “self,” and on what terms is action presented?

Thus, concrete, historical human freedom is a freedom which does not avail of the good will as much as it could. The reason for this is the conflicted self-consciousness that arises from its structure, of being both unconditional in its outreach and conditioned, both infinite and finite. This makes the question of its self-relation inevitable, of how it will deal with this dual structure, existing, and desiring to live, yet running up against its own finiteness.²¹ The analyses of-

¹⁹ Cf. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 104–105.

²⁰ In “On the Servile Will,” 54, Frey points out the discrepancy between Luther’s and Ricoeur’s use of this concept. The latter “preserves the ontological level of the difference between being free and being guilty,” therefore refusing to essentialise sin and insisting on its contingent status. For some commentators, the employment of the term, “servile will,” by itself indicates that he inserts a concept from one tradition in Christianity into a philosophical argumentation. It is crucial, however, to examine the content of what he proposes under this Lutheran term. His ground-breaking critique of Augustinianism in relation to its non-biblical, era-dividing doctrine of sin warns against assuming an identical interpretation. The effect of his critique in the 1960s has been profound across the denominations and shared as the new point of departure as much among Roman Catholic as Protestant theologians.

²¹ Pannenberg’s levelling of the distinction between fallibility and actual sin is rejected by the Catholic systematic theologian Thomas Pröpper who sides with Kierkegaard and Ricoeur in *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, 161. He highlights two points in Ricoeur’s argumentation that are key for reconstructing the doctrine of sin from a theological approach based on freedom:

ferred in *The Symbolism of Evil* draw on an understanding of freedom that includes the sense of responsibility, of obligation. This marks a difference to the entry point taken to ethics in 1990, in *Oneself as Another* which begins with the striving for a flourishing life. Why does Ricoeur privilege the level of normative obligation that follows as the necessary second step in 1990 in his earlier exploration of evil? It explicates the temporal continuity of the self: in the present, the self looks back on an act in the past and interrogates itself whether it could also not have done it, acted otherwise, investigating its freedom in the past, before that act, which was not a necessity but an act it willed: the awareness that one could have done otherwise is closely linked to the awareness that one *should* have done otherwise. It is because I recognize my 'ought' that I recognize my 'could' (SE, 432–443).

This is a remarkable conclusion to draw, from the level of obligation to the level of capability, demonstrating the decisive role of the experience of the moral calling to the self. From "ought" derives "can." This deontological position, as put forward by Kant and Fichte, is misunderstood if it is taken as a permission to dispense blame. It reveals, as Thomas Pröpper elucidates, that the consciousness of "freedom" includes two elements: freedom of action, but equally the sense of responsibility for one's action.²²

Looking back in remorse is a key occasion, a turn that is unlikely to happen as long as what the self desires, and what the self ought to do, coincide. In such cases, the ethics of striving for a flourishing life and the ethics of respecting the limit of the other to the self's desire to be are inseparable. It is when the two modes of ethics diverge that the insight in having been able to behave and choose otherwise can be reached.

Therefore, the consciousness of guilt is a gain in self-awareness, beyond the "ontological" status of sin. The future insight for theology will have to be that there cannot be sin without guilt; sin is personal, not collective, and the realiza-

first, "the possibility and beginning of sin is to be located in the relationship of the human person to herself, in the stance taken to the synthesis as which she exists; secondly, the qualitative difference between disposition to sin and fact of sin needs to be recognized, taking up the analogical distinctions of Kant, Kierkegaard and Ricoeur" (165). Kierkegaard's contrast in *The Sickness unto Death* between two aporetic responses is relevant here: "despairingly wanting to be oneself," and "despairingly not wanting to be oneself." In Kant's theory of human freedom, the question of the relationship to oneself is not yet examined in depth but appears in the duties towards oneself as a human being with dignity, and in the experience of moral failure which requires the sources of goodness to be made accessible again. This reopening is one of the places where the relevance of religion for autonomous morality is pointed out. Pröpper reconstructs Ricoeur's argument in *Symbolism of Evil* in his *Theologische Anthropologie*, 684–692.

22 Cf. Pröpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 688–689.

tion to have failed originates from the capability to be moral present in each human being. But this is a theological conclusion that can only be drawn after the stage of internalizing guilt has been reached and its criterium—personal authorship—has been established.

2.2 The significance of the Adamic myth for this discovery

From the four myths “of the Beginning and of the End” studied in Part II, Ricœur identifies the Adamic myth as “the anthropological myth *par excellence*” (SE, 232). It uncovers the origin of evil in human freedom, even before freedom attains the clarity of a concept. It puts evil into the rank of a secondary, subsequent occurrence that is not co-equal with the good: The

etioloical myth of Adam is the most extreme attempt to separate the origin of evil from the origin of the good; its intention is to set up a *radical* origin of evil distinct from the more *primordial* origin of the goodness of things [...] It makes man a *beginning* of evil in the bosom of a creation which has already had its absolute *beginning* in the creative act of God. (SE, 233, emphases in the original)

What is conveyed by the story is the “power of the creature to defect” and “unmake himself” (SE, 233–234). Unmake himself from what? From the status of being made in the image of God:

To posit the world as that *into which* sin entered, or innocence as that *from which* sin strayed, [...] is to attest that sin is not our original reality, does not constitute our first ontological status [...] beyond his becoming a sinner there is his being created. That is the radical intuition which the future editor of the second creation-story (Gen 1) will sanction by the word of the Lord God: ‘Let us make man in our image.’ (SE, 250–1, emphases in the original)

Seen from this designation, sin is a “deviation.” This secondary status of sin clear is made clear by the genre of the narrative which transposes what is simultaneously present in each person into a temporal sequence. As Daniel Frey explains, the “narrative is only able to represent as a succession what is ontologically simultaneous [...] the narrative medium [...] has no other way to figure the overlaying of goodness and wickedness than to narrate the passage from the one to the other. It thus leads to a belief in the *reality* of a passage which, for the modern reader, is only symbolic” and will undergo “demythologiza-

tion.”²³ But resulting from the shape of the narrative is a new self-understanding which Frey quotes in conclusion: It

furnishes anthropology with a key concept: the *contingency* of that radical evil [...] Thereby the myth proclaims the purely “historical” character of that radical evil; it prevents it from being regarded as primordial evil [...] innocence is still “older” [...] By the myth, anthropology is invited [...] to preserve, superimposed on one another, the goodness of created man and the wickedness of historical man. (SE, 251–252, emphasis original)

The insight of philosophical anthropology into an intricate connection between two factors, the abiding duality of original goodness and contingent evil-doing, is Ricœur’s reading of the Adamic myth. Which key points does he consider lost or obfuscated in the most influential interpretation it received at the end of the third and the start of the 4th century by Augustine after his turn from Manicheism to Platonism and then to the Christian faith?

3 Augustine’s doctrine of an inherited original sin: Ricœur’s critique and its debate

After portraying Ricœur’s key objections (§3.1), I shall discuss three reactions chosen from the last three of more than six decades of its reception: the first from a French specialist on Augustine, the second from German systematic theology, and the third one linking philosophy and liturgy in a North American setting (§3.2).

3.1 From narrative to rationalization

Despite contemporary and subsequent contestations by theologians, synods and Councils, Augustine’s interpretation had an incomparable history of effects in Latin theology and Western thought.²⁴ For Ricœur, it effectively turns exactly the myth that is most centered on the dual human capacity for good and evil ac-

²³ Frey, “On the Servile Will,” 59.

²⁴ In *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, Jürgen Habermas traces the effects of Augustine’s analysis of the human will to theological and philosophical authors as diverse as Duns Scotus, Luther, and Kant. I discuss the connection to Paul and to the later approaches in “*The Bold Arcs of Salvation History*.” *Faith and Reason in Jürgen Habermas’s Reconstruction of the Roots of European Thinking*, especially 115–123.

tion into a fate in which sin is no longer contingent but necessary. By dismissing the ongoing validity of the primordial goodness, it undermines the potential for moral action. While it is true that Augustine regards the church as composed of both sinners and saints, Ricœur is still correct in pointing out the role it gains when the abiding human capacity for reflecting on good actions and establishing supportive institutions is questioned to the degree of negating it.

This outcome is reached by turning the narrative of the Fall into a rationalizing speculation. It begins with the mistranslation of a line in Paul's Letter to the Romans (Rom 5:12) by Ambrosiaster that gave Augustine's position its linguistic foundation.²⁵ By translating the Greek conjunction "*eph ho*," "because," into a relative pronoun, "*in quo*" (in whom), the statement is changed: "because all sinned" becomes a reference to the "one man," meaning Adam, "in whom all have sinned" (*in quo omnes peccaverunt*). This enabled Augustine to draw the conclusion that Adam's sin is imputable to every member of the human race. This view is buttressed by combining the juridical explanation with a biological one, two distinct orders of reasoning which do not follow from each other. By intersecting them, an unavoidable condition is constructed: each new human being generated is marked from his or her birth by a biologically inherited "original sin" for which he or she is also held to be culpable. The juridical logic characteristic of Latin thinking wins out over the biblical view, ignoring, for example, the breakthrough in Second Isaiah, towards a genuinely individual rather than a collective notion of sin, which generates hope in each person's scope for action (cf. SE, 105). This speculative deed of venturing an "explanation" at a world historical scale telescopes biblical motifs that should be kept distinct and investigated individually for the angle each of them offers on the fact of human wrongdoing. Ignoring the variety of images and descriptions, the iron logic of this doctrine creates a legacy of problems that subsequent generations of theologians were forced to deal with, unpicking the cords twisted into a noose around human freedom. In the accounts of earlier and contemporary patristic colleagues, humans had still been deemed as endowed with a freedom that made them capable of responding to God. Ricœur mentions authors like Irenaeus and Tertullian. It is also true that the consequences especially of Augustine's divisive eschatological vision were only received in attenuated form by subsequent eras. Ricœur offers an outspoken summary of the devastating effects of the new doctrine of sin that was to mark theological anthropology in the West:

25 The New International Version translates Romans 5:12 as follows: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

original sin, being a rationalization of the second degree, is only a false column. The harm that has been done to souls, during the centuries of Christianity, first by the literal interpretation of the story of Adam, and then by the confusion of this myth, treated as history, with later speculations, principally Augustinian, about original sin, will never be adequately told. (SE, 239)²⁶

3.2 Three responses to Ricœur's critique

3.2.1 An analysis from an editor of Augustine: Isabelle Bochet

Published in 2004, and including also *Memory, History, Forgetting* into her examination of the significance of Augustine for Ricœur, the comment of fellow philosopher and editor Bochet offers to-the-point analyses from *History and Truth* onwards of what has been influential for Ricœur—such as Augustine's pioneering reflections on time—what has been neglected and what has changed. With an index of works of both authors, her erudition and helpful portrayals of each phase, this short book offers the insights of an expert. She reconstructs the points of critique, relativizing some of them by supplying further arguments from the patristic author and indicates her own position by defending him especially against critiques from a Kantian perspective. In her treatment of *The Symbolism of Evil* and other articles of this period published in the French originals of *History and Truth* (= HV) and *The Conflict of Interpretations* (= CI), she identifies the following points of debate.

In Augustine's vision of history, Ricœur finds the "pessimism of the *massa perdita*" as objectionable as the return of the "old idea of retribution."²⁷ This negative vision hardly takes on board the "collective dimension of salvation" and barely testifies to "the *superabundance* of grace by which God responds to the *abundance of evil*" (Bochet, *Augustin*, 14). One place where the difference in their concepts of grace becomes clear is his negative view of its "almost exclusively individualistic understanding" (Bochet, *Augustin*, 15), which is "assuredly private and interior" (Bochet, *Augustin*, 14).

This focus on the individual person is, secondly, reflected in the concept of original sin, which arises from "mixing two different universes of discourse, of

²⁶ As Gilbert Vincent has summarized, the doctrine "accentuates abusively a biological anchorage of evil. It pretends that since the fault transmits itself through heredity, the remedy has to be conceived as an interruption of this transmission" (Vincent, *La Religion de Ricœur*, 75, with reference to CI, 265).

²⁷ Bochet, *Augustin*, 13–27. Further page numbers in the text.

ethics or law, and biology, resulting in an idea that is intellectually inconsistent” (cf. Bochet, *Augustin*, 27, with reference to CI, 302).

Judged in its form, it is a “quasi-gnostic concept” which is to be “shattered as false knowledge so that its intention as an insubstitutable rational symbol of evil as already existing can be regained” (Bochet, *Augustin*, 28, with reference to CI, 301).

Thirdly, the reason for the whole argumentation is identified and rejected: theodicy as the enterprise of justifying God. Augustine’s attempt to “rationalize divine reprobation” by “eliminating the mystery” through the idea of original sin “allows him to affirm that ‘perdition is rightful’” and to justify God (Bochet, *Augustin*, 28). The bridging function of this doctrine will be returned to when treating the second commentator, Pröpper, for whom the question of theodicy is not illegitimate, as it seems to be for Ricœur at this stage. The judgment quoted by Bochet (*Augustin*, 28) makes the theodicy question appear inappropriate in view of God’s sovereignty: “Paul Ricœur dénonce ‘l’éternelle théodicée et son projet fou de justifier Dieu,—alors que c’est lui qui nous justifie’ (CI, 277).

The fourth deficiency is the failure to relate the figure of Adam to its counterpart or “anti-type” (Bochet, *Augustin*, 27). Adam has acquired his unparalleled relevance in Christianity only retroactively through St Paul’s designation of Christ as the “second Adam”: “it was Christology that consolidated Adamology” (SE, 236). It changes the perspective completely from the negativity of the Fall to the eschatological promise of the new creation that has begun with Jesus Christ: “this ‘how much more’ gives to the movement from the first to the second Adam its tension and its temporal impulsion; it excludes the possibility that the ‘gift’ should be a simple restoration of the order that prevailed before the ‘fault’; the gift is the establishment of a new creation” (SE, 272).

Bochet points out that Augustine does refer to the cross of Christ (*Augustin*, 27). Yet the argument seems to me to be that the radiance of the future which Ricœur captures in the term “superabundance” has been made to disappear and the arc of the movement between the first humans and the renewal by Christ has been cut short. It only allows for a grim outcome of the history of God’s creation by overemphasizing God’s justice over God’s compassion.

Ricœur’s counterproposal to the complete loss of standing which human agency undergoes is, as Bochet clearly recognizes, contained in his statement: “Kant [...] understood something that the post-Augustinian theologian rarely understands’: that is, the role of just institutions as means of divine redemption” (*Augustin*, 15, with reference to HV, 125). What Bochet notes here is the “surprising lacuna” of a missing “deeper analysis of the *City of God*” (*Augustin*, 15). All depends, of course, on how its contrast or relationship to the earthly city is defined. But it is instructive to see the principal points of divergence exemplified

with such well-chosen quotes. They help realize how early, three decades before *Oneself as Another*, the orientation towards “just institutions” which the 1990 book specifies as the initiating wish underlying ethics, namely, “to live well, with and for others, in just institutions” (OA, 172), is already present and guiding Ricœur’s vision.

3.2.2 An evaluation by Thomas Pröpper from the perspective of dogmatics and its hermeneutics

As the title of the Chair he held in the Catholic Theological Faculty at the University of Münster indicates, approaching “dogmatics” from its “hermeneutics” signals that the anthropological relevance of revelation is taken as the starting point. It is in keeping with this understanding of the task of dogmatic theology that Pröpper incorporates Ricœur’s interpretation of evil as contingent and his critique of Augustine’s notion of sin into his theology of divine and human freedom. His reception can therefore stand for the long-standing and deep impact Ricœur’s reading has had across Continental European and Anglophone theological and biblical studies. I will focus on two points that put Ricœur’s critical philosophical observations into the larger framework of the sequence of theological positions in the history of Christian thinking. The radical individualization of “grace” that Ricœur objected to is thus clarified in its foundations:

While Augustine accords freedom of choosing also to the sinner, he distinguishes it from *voluntas* [...] As a decisive commitment to the highest good it would be true freedom (corresponding to its status as created), yet due to its actual dividedness which can grow into a conscious turning away from God, it reveals its sinfulness: a wrongheadedness (*Verkehrtheit*) of the will which arises from freedom and is at the same time the expression of its powerlessness, the consequence of original sin.

The reconstruction shows that defining the human person by an inescapable use of her freedom just for sinning transports a model of competition between divine and human freedom:

If God’s salvific action is to reach the human person, it thus must affect above all his or her will. Resistance is overcome by the *bonum aeternum* that arises internally: God inserts God’s love so deeply into the heart of the sinner—as the most internal part of her interiority—that it moves her unavoidably (*unweigerlich*) towards God. Deepening the understanding of sin and grace which Augustine accomplished, however, also created problems that became the fate of the Western doctrine of grace and freedom. By accentuating internal grace, not only the neglect of its external mediation but also the reification of “created grace” were facilitated. In addition, by absolutizing the primacy of grace which did not

leave any space for freedom in relation to grace, it appeared to replace the previous, surmounted synergism in salvation with a theological determinism. This in turn fixated subsequent definitions of the relationship between divine and human freedom largely to the aporias of a model of competition.²⁸

Secondly, the methodological point is made that it is not sufficient to point out the untenable result of Augustine's innovation, his concept of inherited original sin: It effectively restricts the only freedom of action that was ever accessible to Adam so that "history was over before it had really begun."²⁹ Instead of treating it on its own, it must be placed into the context of his overall project which reveals its necessary status as a bridge between two truths the patristic author holds onto: one, his life-long concern with the reality of evil which gave him a first home in Manicheism, and second, the absolute need to defend the justice of God. The rationale that allows to maintain both of these convictions is to make damnation a justifiable response of God: the culpability of each human, even before birth, is required to save the belief that God is just.³⁰ The price of this speculative rationalization, as Ricœur names it, who equally identifies its function for the problem of theodicy, is that the credibility of the Christian message of salvation is jeopardized. To restore its significance for humans in their struggles, the concept of grace must be taken out of its adversarial position to autonomous agency. Grace both presupposes and enhances freedom; its counterpart, as Präpper develops, is not sin. It is the fragility of human freedom in its double constitution between infinity and finitude. Here Ricœur's assessment of Kant's recognition of the unique standing of religion shows the way: "Hardly ever, in Ricœur's judgement, was it perceived more acutely that the reconciliation of freedom and nature, the synthesis of morality and happiness could only be hoped for and that it required a transcendent author."³¹

²⁸ Präpper, "Freiheit. Ausprägungen ihres Bewusstseins," *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, 103–128, here 110. Against Ricœur's point that Augustine lacks the tools for thinking sin as a *position* taken, Bochet underlines the "positivity of evil which in its root, consists in preferring oneself to God" (*Augustin*, 21). This seems to me to take over the reconstruction of the relationship between God and humans in terms of competition.

²⁹ Präpper, *Theologische Anthropologie*, 1023.

³⁰ Cf. Präpper's reconstruction of Augustine's argumentation in *Theologische Anthropologie*, 1016–1025.

³¹ Präpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft*, 69–70, with reference to Ricœur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," especially 411–424.

3.2.3 A review from Christina Gschwandtner combining philosophy and Orthodox liturgy

The final position to be examined is the most recent, dating from the current decade. It correctly points out that the reception of Augustine was limited to the West. It sees Eastern Orthodox theology and liturgy as providing a tradition that counters some of the deficiencies Ricœur detects in Augustine's doctrine of sin. Like Bochet, Gschwandtner is critical of the concept of the "servile will" which she identifies as the "apex" of his analysis.³² Decisive, however, is, how it is interpreted; as we have seen, in his chapter in the same collection of 2020, Daniel Frey finds that in Ricœur's interpretation, its understanding is turned into the opposite of its use by Luther in that the human possibility of goodness is defended.

In need of a clarification of its exact meaning, it seems to me, is also the judgement that core Christian themes have received a narrow individual interpretation: "Maybe most problematic is [...] the high value he places on individual notions of redemption" (Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 100). Yet exactly in the case of salvation, it is an objection, not an endorsement by Ricœur, that it has been unduly individualized by Augustine, in contrast to its biblical understanding in both Testaments. That individualizing interpretations can be misleading, is thus something on which Gschwandtner and the French philosopher agree. A principal disagreement, however, seems to exist in the terms in which liturgy is cast. The Fordham philosopher's accurate summaries of some of the key points of *The Symbolism of Evil* receive their profile from the promise she discovers in the alternative communitarian culture of ritual celebration across different Orthodox churches. Yet in view of the precise analyses of the factors that make human selfhood such a fragile enterprise, one wonders if the aporias explored in such depth by Ricœur can be overcome by the malleability of understandings of Adam and Jesus Christ in the Eastern liturgical practice that she points to (cf. Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 98).

One philosopher who would very much agree with her emphasis on rituals is Jürgen Habermas. Yet the effect he expects of them, a renewal of motivation and unity, is not a constant experience in a religious tradition, and even if it were, it would have to be measured against its foundational message. In a critical theological evaluation, the accepted rites of a period may turn out to be exclusive, one-sided, and obscuring the core of a tradition's view of God. The place of rit-

³² Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 98. Bochet sees it as evidence of his "Lutheran formation" (*Augustin*, 12). Further page numbers for Gschwandtner's chapter in the text.

uals and their understanding have been matters of contestation from the role of the Temple to sacrifices in Judaism, and from the sacrament of baptism (especially in the context of attributing original sin to newborns) to confession and the Eucharist in Christianity.

Far more detailed conversations would be required to address Gschwandtner's specific objections. One is about the seemingly disparaging view of "ritual" as a stage to be superseded in the assumed progression to the third, highest stage of the symbol, personal guilt, after exterior defilement and sin (Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 97). In contrast, Gschwandtner endorses a communal experience of sinfulness and plural understandings of "Adam" opened up in Orthodox liturgies. But are these celebrations not very far removed from the "ritual" Ricœur regards as the most elementary form of symbol? In the eras of the myths, he treats in the second volume of 1960, would it not have included human sacrifice? Also, for rituals in keeping with "ethical monotheism," however, even among the insiders participating in them, explicating their meaning will reveal profound differences. Schisms between churches and the question of distinguishing between heterodoxy and heresy within a church show that the transformations evident in the history of dogma cannot be subordinated to a seemingly unifying or unchanging ritual.

The line of questioning regarding the standing of individual reflection is taken up again in relation to "participation" in a communal faith practice. The line quoted above about an overly individual understanding of redemption begins: "Maybe most problematic is Ricœur's strong emphasis on individual consciousness of guilt" (Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 100). But this doubt about the legitimacy of highlighting the role of individual judgment and conscience invites counterquestions. How surprising is it that the agent's moral self-reflection cannot be replaced by being allowed "to participate in something higher, larger, and more meaningful than themselves" (Gschwandtner, "Wagering," 100) for the analyst of evil, fifteen years after the end of the Second World War? Fragile as it remains, the evidence of the ethical for each individual is what he invests with the greatest credibility. A similar position will be taken to subsequent turns in philosophy to linguistics, intersubjectivity and sociological approaches to history: without the anchoring role of the individual subject, they will be identified as remaining one-sided. Within hermeneutics, "fusion," such as Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" is resisted and the invariable counterpart, "distanciation," is elaborated in its positive, co-constitutive role for interpretation.

He endorses the biblical self-understanding of being created in the image of God: "The *imago Dei*—there we have both our being-created and our innocence; for the 'goodness' of the creation is no other than its status as 'creature.' All creation is good, and the goodness that belongs to man is his being the image of

God [...] his innocence” (SE, 250). At the same time, the sequence of symbols marks the transition to greater self-reflectiveness regarding one’s own part in the history of evil. This calls for the commitment to fight evil, the origin of which cannot be rationalized and remains inscrutable.

This point which liturgies underline by ending with sending the participants back into their ordinary lives returns us to the question of the change of method inaugurated by the second volume of *Finitude and Culpability*. The intention behind it was to overcome the gap between a structural analysis of features of human possibility, and action. In his comparison of the different paths of Gadamer and Ricœur towards hermeneutics, Jean Grondin observes how the theme of *The Symbolism of Evil* is a practical one for Ricœur:

It is not by chance that the theme of evil reveals itself as one of the outstanding constants in Ricœur’s work whereas it tends to be absent in Gadamer’s philosophy. Even if evil remains incomprehensible in its ultimate foundation and thus inaccessible from a theoretical standpoint, it can be fought against through the subject’s practical initiative which is certainly limited, but nevertheless real: “Evil is a category of action and not of theory; evil is what one fights against when one has renounced to explaining it.”

Grondin’s conclusion may sum up the achievement of the differentiated analyses made possible by Ricœur’s new method: this “inalienable (*unveräußerliche*) spontaneity [...] can be expressed in a—very simple—sentence that Gadamer doubtlessly would never have written: ‘I can change something.’”³³

Abbreviations

- CI | Ricœur, Paul (1974): *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Don Ihde (Ed.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- FC | Ricœur, Paul (2009): *Philosophie de la volonté 2. Finitude et culpabilité*. Paris: Editions Points.
- FN | Ricœur, Paul (1966): *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Erazim Kohák (Trans). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- HV | Ricœur, Paul (1965): *History and Truth*. Charles A. Kelbley (Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- OA | Ricœur, Paul (1992): *Oneself as Another*. Kathleen Blamey (Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- SE | Ricœur, Paul (2009): *The Symbolism of Evil*. Emerson Buchanan (Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.

³³ Grondin, “Von Gadamer zu Ricœur,” 72, with reference to Ricœur, “Le scandale du mal” (1989), in Ricœur, *Anthologie*, 281.

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