

Paul Ricoeur's Ethical Syntax

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I will not try to paint a systematic picture of Ricoeur's ethical thought. I will try, instead, to list a series of basic concepts through which Ricoeur has so remarkably contributed to moral philosophy.

These concepts are not just a list, a glossary, but are instead deeply interconnected and consistent. That is why, wanting to put a title to these short reflections, I would opt for: «Paul Ricoeur's ethical syntax».

1. Ethics and Morality

Ethics and morality are commonly used in an interchangeable way, and I am sure I will also do the same as I speak to you today.

Yet, Ricoeur thinks it is important to draw a distinction between the two.

For him ethics is «the project of an accomplished life» (*la visée d'une vie accomplie*). It is the attempt to answer the question: «How should I live?».

Ethics, therefore, belongs to a teleological conceptual framework.

Morality, on the contrary, means abiding by rules. It is an answer to the question: «What must I do?» We are here in the realm of deontology.

I will insert here a reference to another important French moral thinker, Vladimir Jankelevich, and to the fact that he also draws a distinction between ethics and morals. A distinction that is in part coincident with Ricoeur's, but also differs from it insofar as it stresses that ethics is essentially autonomous, gratuitous (whereas in Ricoeur the teleological essence of ethics points in the direction of utilitarianism and

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¹ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1990, p. 200.

consequentialism), inexplicable, «closer to love», whereas morals is heteronomous and «akin to law»². Jankelevich's ethics, in other words, looks a lot like a non-foundational categorical imperative. Not so in Ricoeur.

Ricoeur leaves no doubt about his own preference for ethics over morals – i.e. for Aristoteles over Kant. In a way, for praxis over principle. In this he turns out to be extremely «classical», focusing, as he does, on the originally Greek concept of the good life, rather than on categorical imperatives coming from outside, or from above.

Let me quote his definition of ethics: «The goal of a good life with and for others within just institutions» (in French: «*la visee de la "vie bonne" avec et pour autrui dans des institutions justes*»)³.

Here we find the three essential elements of Ricoeur's ethical approach: 1. the Aristotelian good life, 2. the essential relationship with the Other (the link between the Self and the Other), 3. the need for just institutions (on both these points, I will say something later).

2. The Human Person

Starting from the subject, one must note that Ricoeur does not use the word «individual», but rather, person. Person is a Christian concept: a concept that at the same time exalts the uniqueness of the human subject but also stresses relationship, interconnectedness. And of course we cannot avoid mentioning here the important intellectual link between Ricoeur, the journal «Esprit» and his founder Emmanuel Mounier.

3. Imputation and Causality

There is evidently no possible moral judgment if human action is inserted within a chain of causally determined events. If it is, so to speak, «naturalised».

Ricoeur, a philosopher deeply attracted by legal reasoning, has devoted a lot of attention to this issue, and has left us a very clear definition.

The concept here is imputation, or ascription: human action

² V. Jankelevich, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1981.

³ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même...*, cit., p. 202.

can be morally judged because it can be ascribed, attributed to the subject. From this to the concept of responsibility there is but one step, and Ricoeur also refers, as being important to clarify what he means, to the English term *accountability*.

Here Ricoeur, though himself a Protestant, implicitly sides with Catholic Erasmus against Luther in the famous debate on free will (*de libero arbitrio/de servo arbitrio*). And, with quoting Kant, he writes: «It is not that we attribute his action to man because he is free, but man is free because we ascribe his action to him» («*On n'impute pas a l'homme parce qu'il est libre, mais l'homme est libre parce que on lui impute*»)⁴.

4. Identity: Sameness and Selfhood

Probably the most important insight that I owe to Ricoeur is his reflection on identity.

Especially in our time, characterised by the fear of the homogenising effect of globalisation, identity is being used as an ideological call to rejection of both contact and change, as a call to a defensive and hostile preservation of one's cultural essence.

Ricoeur addresses this issue by distinguishing, within the concept of «same», two radically different meanings. In order to do it, he uses two Latin words: *Idem* and *Ipse*. *Idem* meaning unchanging through time, immutable. *Ipse* meaning a continuation of the Self, whatever the possible changes. In French, he opposes *memeté* (sameness) to *ipseité* (selfhood)⁵.

Confusing selfhood with sameness is probably the most dangerous distortion, the biggest challenge to ethics and coexistence. If every change is perceived as a menace to our identity, but if, at the same time, change is inevitable, the result is a true pathology of fear, of rejection, of violence. A violence that is all the more total, boundless, insofar as it is the product of the fear of cultural defeat, spiritual annihilation, personal humiliation.

Ricoeur has given us a precious instrument to address this danger, one that should be systematically used also on a political level. Identity and change, in fact, are compatible. More: only through change can one maintain a viable, healthy, ethically compatible identity.

⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, Paris, Editions ESPRIT, 1995, p. 50.

⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même...*, cit., p. 140.

5. Selfhood and Otherness (*ipseité et alterité*)

Here Ricoeur touches upon the very essence of the ethical question: the relationship between the individualised subject, the person, and the Other.

Ipséité et alterité: selfhood and otherness.

Rejecting, both philosophically and morally, the individualist dogma, he denies the very possibility of the existence of the human subject apart from, abstracting from, the relationship with the Other. With total coincidence with another extremely important French thinker, Emmanuel Levinas, he stresses that the Other is constitutive of the Self. That there is no self without the Other, and that this, indeed is the defining trait, the specificity, of being human⁶.

Ricoeur's ethical approach gives us a remarkable view on how to overcome the alternative between the self and the other. I will quote him: «I cannot give value to myself without giving value to the other as myself». (In French: *Soi-même comme un autre*: which, incidentally, is the title of Ricoeur's fundamental book on ethics).

Going back to his definition of ethics, I will quote again the «with and for the other» («avec et pour autrui»). Again in a very «classical» mode, Ricoeur refers in this context to the Greek concept of *philia*, the bond of selfless friendship between humans. Friendship which can also be defined in terms of compassion and solidarity. He talks about «the shared admission of fragility»⁷ («l'aveu partagé de la fragilité»). Which reminded me of one of my favorite quotes from Albert Camus: «La longue solidarité des hommes aux prises avec leur destin».

6. «Le soi ne constitue son identité que dans une structure relationnelle qui fait prévaloir la dimension dialogique sur la dimension monologique» (P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, cit., p. 14).

7 *Ibidem*, p. 225.

8 On the relationship between Ricoeur and Levinas, see O. Abel, *Paul Ricoeur. La promesse et la règle*, Paris, Editions Michalon, 1996. Abel writes that Ricoeur is linked to Levinas by «une grande complicité» (p. 24).

6. Reciprocity and Justice

Analysing the concept of *philia*, Ricoeur, while recognising, as he writes, «a debt» to Levinas⁸, spells out something that differs from Levinas' reflection on ethics. Whereas for Levinas the recognition of the Other, after his «epiphany» is unconditional, one could say «irresistible», Ricoeur stresses the necessary reciprocity of the human relationship. Oneself as the Other, yes. But also the Other as Oneself on the basis of reciprocity. And for Ricoeur reciprocity borders with justice.

Reading Levinas, one is struck by the fact that his ethical precept could be summarised in the phrase: «The Other, right or wrong». This is not so in Ricoeur. Indeed, he writes: «*L'estime de soi sous le regime de la loi mais – j'ajoute aussi – l'estime de l'autre sous le respect de la loi*»⁹.

Justice is seen as a limit, a condition of the recognition of the Other, and it entails both reciprocity and impartiality.

7. An Ethical Triad

Ricoeur is indeed one of the most eminent *penseurs de l'alterité* , together with Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. But it is important to stress that he recognises that the human person's ethical world is structured on three levels.

The first one can be defined as the preservation of the self. It is what Spinoza, a thinker that is very dear to Ricoeur¹⁰, defines as *conatus essendi*, i.e. the urge of everything that exists to persist in its existence. To quote Spinoza's *Ethics*: «Every thing, as long as it depends from it, strives to persevere in its own being». To Ricoeur, this urge is not only natural, but it is the necessary premise of ethics (I will quote here Jankelevich: «There can be no love without being»). And Ricoeur explicitly distances himself with Kant's denunciation of *Selbstliebe*¹¹. Nor does Ricoeur accept Kant's definition of desire as pathology. I would observe here that it seems to me that the reference is again Spinoza and his rejection of dualism between reason and passion: for Ricoeur ethics itself is a realm both of reason and of passion.

The second level of the ethical is the recognition of the Other. Love, friendship, solidarity. The core, indeed, of an ethically sound cosmos.

But there is a third level. That of justice. Justice that sets general standards that are applicable also to «the Third», meaning the person with which we will never enter into contact, the person whose face we will never see. This level requires an effort towards objectivity and impartiality even beyond the striving for the preservation of the Self and the recognition of the Other.

And Ricoeur leaves no doubt on the necessity of this «third ethical level» when he writes: «*Que dire de l'autre quand il est le*

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

¹⁰ «I have never written on Spinoza, although he has never stopped accompanying my reflections and my teaching» (*ibidem*, p. 365). Spinoza is one of the main points of reference in the dialogue between Ricoeur and Jean-Pierre Changeux: *La nature et la regle. Ce qui nous fait penser*, Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1998.

¹¹ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même...*, cit., p. 250.

*bourreau?*¹². In other words, if the Golden Rule is «love thy neighbor as yourself», it is clear that, since you cannot morally love yourself against justice, you cannot love your neighbor against justice, either.

8. Ethics and Institutions

The third element of Ricoeur's ethical triad leads directly to the discourse on institutions. Ricoeur is very clear on this, when he writes: «Human beings become human only in the presence of certain institutions»¹³.

No romantic exaltation of nature, here, but a clear adherence, once more, to a classical, Aristotelian, approach: Man as a *zoon politikon*.

Ricoeur, however, does not belong to those thinkers who push the whole ethical discourse onto the social level. His ethics, evidently, is not that of Machiavelli. On one hand his ethical triad is inherently aimed at maintaining a reciprocal tension, preventing any one level from prevailing over the others.

Pure self-preservation (Spinoza's *conatus essendi*) is of course incompatible with ethics, insofar as it claims exemption from all moral boundaries, denies reciprocity and thus inevitably leads to violence. But the same can be said about an unconditional recognition of the other against the needs of self-preservation or against the precept of justice.

Turning to politics, Ricoeur is extremely explicit on the need for a sort of «safety valve» in the relationship with institutions. I believe it is worth quoting him:

When the spirit of a people is perverted so as to nourish a murderous pattern of behavior it is in the moral conscience of a limited number of individuals that the spirit which has deserted institutions that have become criminal finds refuge¹⁴.

And he continues clarifying that his option in favor of democracy is founded on the fact that (again, with reference to Spinoza) it subjects *potentia* to *potestas*¹⁵, i.e. force to legitimacy, and also (here quoting Claude Lefort), since it is «a regime which accepts its own contradictions to the point of institutionalizing conflict»¹⁶.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 391.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 298.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 299.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 303.

9. Language and Narration

For Ricoeur, the linkage between selfhood and alterity is supplied by language, narration (*le récit*). Identity, for him, is «narrative identity». Narration is exchange of human experience, but also of judgment, thus it never belongs, even in its literary mode, only to the realm of esthetics, but also to that of ethics. Fiction, he writes, is «loaded» with ethical messages allowing human beings to define, communicate and compare their own moral compass¹⁷.

10. The Inevitability of Moral Conflict

I will conclude by quoting the unforgettable pages that Ricoeur has devoted to Greek tragedy as the most extraordinary «theater of moral conflict», and in particular to Sophocles's *Antigone*¹⁸.

The conventional interpretation of the tragedy pits Creon, the archetype of power and realpolitik, against Antigone, the quintessential moral heroin.

Ricoeur – faithful, I think, to the original ethos of the author – rejects this interpretation and presents the clash as one between two different ethical worlds. The first, centered on the rules and needs of the *polis*, the second inspired by the duties of religious piety and family.

And both of them, according to Ricoeur, are the bearers of narrow, radical and partial visions. He writes: «Antigone is as inhuman as Creon».

The tension between these two attitudes, on the other hand, cannot be overcome by any Hegelian «synthesis». It is permanent.

But Ricoeur does not throw up his hands. Does not slide into fatalism or relativism.

Again with reference to Greek philosophy, Ricoeur points at *phronesis*, the concrete wisdom that applies abstract rules to concrete cases. Equity, as a corrective tool to be used to adapt both legal and moral rules to concrete human needs and to the multiplicity of moral dilemmas.

To the self-contained and the reciprocally deaf monologues of Creon and Antigone, Ricoeur opposes *la dimension dialogique*¹⁹.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 193-198. See also: P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984.

¹⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même...*, cit., pp. 281-290.

¹⁹ In Ricoeur, as in Levinas, dialogue has a constitutive, and not only an ethical function: «*le soi ne constitue son identité que dans une structure relationnelle qui fait prevaloir la dimension dialogique sur la dimension monologique*» (P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, cit., p. 14).

Dialogue between individuals, but also dialogue – let me conclude here – between cultures and civilisations as the only tool we have to prevent conflict and to live morally healthy individual and collective lives.

This is why Ricoeur's ethical syntax, if we are wise enough to keep listening to his voice after he has left us, will remain with us in order to help us cope with the ethical challenges and contradictions of our time.