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The Troublemaker as a Non-intentional Social Activist

A Critical Discussion of the Political Relevance of Paul Ricœur's Philosophical and Theological Thinking

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There is a tension in Ricœur's thinking between the undeniable presence of violence and his trust in a primordial goodness of existence. This tension is linked to Ricœur's understanding of the human being as ambiguous and fragile, torn between freedom and nature, as well as between the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of human action. By analysing articles from the first decades after the Second World War, and especially Ricœur's discussion of prophetic troublemaking through non-violence, voluntary poverty, and art, and comparing these to some of Ricœur's later writings, the essay critically discusses the role Ricœur assigns to non-intentional social activism.

The author argues that the non-intentional and intentional dimensions of human action need to be kept in a fruitful critical tension with each other, to prevent an understanding of human existence as primarily tragic and passive. The gap separating ideals from the experienced reality, may, in line with Ricœur's own intentions, be considered a space both for mourning of a lost innocence, and for hopeful visions guiding the struggle for a better and more just world.

Introduction

In an article from 1949 the French Philosopher Paul Ricœur writes: "Violence is always and everywhere", and in the 1990s he observes that the history of Europe has been violent and cruel (Ricœur 1965, 225; Ricœur 1996, 9). On a personal level, Ricœur had tragic experiences of wars on European

soil; his father was killed in the First World War, and he himself was a prisoner of war in Germany during the Second World War. In spite of these experiences, he has built his hermeneutical thinking on a wager, according to which good is more primordial than evil. Human existence is, consequently, characterized by a super-abundance of meaning. This trust in a primordial meaningfulness is reflected in his confidence in translation and communication across cultural borders—even though all translations remain provisional and contested.

There is, accordingly, a tension in Ricœur's thinking between the undeniable presence of violence and the trust in the primordial goodness of existence. Ricœur claims that human existence is marked by a fundamental fragility and fallibility. The subject is a *cogito blessé* or a *cogito brisée*: a wounded or even a broken subject, unable to mend itself. Our fragility is a consequence of our capacity to reflect on our own actions, and our ability to imagine that our life and the world around could be otherwise (Ricœur 1965, 118; Ricœur 1990, 34; Stewart 1972, 78).

As human beings we are fallible, but this does not mean that we are predestined

to commit evil things. Human existence is characterized by a fundamental disproportion between freedom and necessity. There is accordingly a gap between who we are and who we would like to be or who we think we are meant to be. “This gap between the possibility and the reality is reflected in a similar gap between the mere anthropological description of fallibility and an ethic” (Ricœur 1986a, 142). This gap is a perceived lack of goodness and moral perfection, a loss of innocence, and therefore it creates a need for repentance and a longing for redemption and grace. At the same time, it is the space for dreams, imagination, and change, as it signifies that this world could be otherwise. It is the space for both human capability and human fallibility.

What goes for the individual is applicable also to societies and states. There is, and needs to be, a gap between utopian visions of a just future, and the everyday reality marked by conflicts between competing interests in a democratic society (Ricœur 1965, 123–24). Ricœur is especially critical towards totalitarian attempts to monopolize truth and silence critical voices. Already in his early writings, he assigns a hopeful role to “the non-violent Man”, to the practitioners of “Franciscan poverty”, and to the artist: these are all potential troublemakers and prophets that challenge the totalitarian tendencies in the political, economic, religious and cultural spheres (Ricœur 1965, 126–27).

In this article, I want to contribute to the reception of Ricœur’s philosophical and theological production by investigating how he argues for hope in spite of the persisting violence in the world. I argue that an important key to his thinking can be found

in writings from the first decades after the Second World War. During these years, Ricœur was engaged in Christian socialism, and wrote many articles on social and political topics that are seldom discussed among Ricœur scholars—with some exceptions (for example Stewart 1972; Stewart and Bien 1974). Of particular interest for my endeavour is the role Ricœur assigns to non-intentional activism as a means to achieve social change, including justice and peace.

In order to understand this non-intentional activism and its, in my opinion, both interesting and problematic role in Ricœur’s thinking, it is necessary to situate it in his more overarching discussion of the tension between goodness and evil, as well as between peace and violence. This is the scope of the first part of my article. As explained above, Ricœur is convinced that human existence is characterized by a surplus of meaning and an overflowing grace, which makes communication possible and encourages an attitude of openness towards both the world and other human beings. The ambition to preserve this attitude of openness leads Ricœur to oppose all attempts at creating ideological, epistemological, or theological systems that claim to provide exhaustive explanations of society, history, or human existence.

The critical and constructive role he assigns, in some of his early writings, to the above-mentioned troublemakers, or creators of scandals, exemplified by non-violent activists, prophets, Franciscan brothers, and artists, can be interpreted as an element in this endeavour. In order to prevent these actors from giving rise to new ideological or political systems, he underscores that their achievements are most successful when

they do not consciously aim for a certain pre-defined goal. The aim of the second part of this article is to critically discuss this element in Ricœur's thinking that I have chosen to call a non-intentional social activism.

In the third part of my article, I argue that the active contribution of the non-compliant troublemaker in Ricœur's later thinking is reduced at the expense of a stronger emphasis of the role of the unjust victim. This tendency runs the risk of lessening the importance of human capability—against Ricœur's outspoken ambition. The troublemaker, faltering between activity and passivity, is a potential cure, not only against the temptation to create and defend closed systems, but also against the risk of losing the resistant and non-compliant dimension of the human response to injustices and violence. However, in order to function as such, there needs to be a fruitful interaction not only between activity and passivity in human action, but also between intentionality and non-intentionality.

The wager: communication is difficult, yet always possible

Ricœur underscores strongly the violent nature of human existence and the violent character of the history of the human race (Ricœur 1965, 225). In spite of this tendency, he rejects the Hobbesian idea that human existence in its natural state is as a war of all against all. With reference to Martin Luther, Ricœur writes that we as human beings are inclined towards evil, but destined to good (Ricœur 1965, 301). This anthropological ambiguity, which could be described as a gap between our calling and our actual way of living, is in Ricœur's thinking both a challenge to grap-

ple with, and a precious gift to preserve. He vigorously criticizes all attempts to heal this wound, as this would unavoidably lead to the establishment of a theological, philosophical, or political system that erases the space needed for surprise, imagination, and change (Ricœur 1965, 66; Ricœur 1986a, 142).

This vigorous critique of various kinds of system building is, according to my interpretation, one of the most central features of Ricœur's philosophical project, especially during the decades after the Second World War. His main point is that such system building tends to erase the ambiguity of human existence, by turning the search for truth into a defence of the own position: "The realized truth is precisely the initial lie" (Ricœur 1965, 176). He calls this passion for system building the clerical passion in theology and the totalitarian temptation in politics (Ricœur 1950, 435; Ricœur 1965, 166, 179).

A characteristic trait of Ricœur's thinking is his ambition to establish a mediating position between seemingly contradictory points of view. Regarding the search for truth, he strives to avoid the above-mentioned claims on absolute truth, as well as the opposite position, which he calls mysticism. This position would imply a denial of any possibility of reaching closer to truth through empirical observation, rational thinking, and critical discussion. How the legitimate search for understanding can be combined with a humble respect for the mysteries of human existence is one of the questions Ricœur grapples with in his early books on Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel (Ricœur 1948a, 31, 418–21; Ricœur 1965, 95; Kristensson Uggla, 1994, 80; Aspray 2019, 321–23).

The position Ricœur defends is to be “in” the truth, without claims to possess it. The search for truth is a common project that requires both an attentive and a critical dialogue between different perspectives, a “symphilosophieren”, or a “liebender Kampf” (Ricœur 1948a, 201–03). Ricœur calls for an attitude of openness: “The being of every question originally opens everyone to everyone else and grounds the historic and polemic truth of communication” (Ricœur 1965, 54).

Ricœur’s epistemological position rests on a wager, which he openly admits cannot be proven either rationally or empirically. This wager is based on a conviction that being is characterized by a surplus of meaning. Being wants to make itself understood. Truth is not primarily a correspondence between words and the empirical reality, but a manifestation through various kinds of signs and ciphers. Truth is based on our human capability to interpret these signs, but the final truth is always postponed, because previous interpretations are challenged as the historical context change. Ricœur compares this search for truth with an eschatological hope (Ricœur 1965, 55). This epistemological openness is closely connected to the anthropological gap between who we are and what we are called to be, because it keeps history open for change—for the better or for the worse. Ricœur also underscores that system-building, in the sense of a closed history or a predestined future, stands in obvious contrast to the Christian hope (Ricœur 1950, 435).

Later in his career, Ricœur is very careful to draw a sharp line between his philosophical project and his theological reflections. During the early decades, however,

there are spelled-out analogies in his texts between his theological and philosophical enterprises. In an article from 1946, he writes that one of the tasks of human rationality is to reveal the signs of the creation that God declared to be good. In relation to the claim raised by existentialist philosophers, that human existence is absurd, Ricœur defends the belief in a primordial good creation (Ricœur 1946, 390–91). Christine de Bauw therefore maintains that creation is in Ricœur’s thinking the most profound symbol for the relation between human beings and God (de Bauw 1986, 204–05).

Ricœur claims that he merely searches for philosophical approximations to “the kerygma of hope”—an interpretation repeated for example by Mary Rose Barral (Ricœur 1974, 411; Barral 1985, 76). David E. Klemm underscores more strongly the inspiration Ricœur as a philosopher has received from the Christian tradition and suggests that there are important theological dimensions in Ricœur’s general hermeneutics (Klemm 1993, 257). Barnabas Aspray talks about a theological “backlash” on Ricœur’s philosophy concerning beliefs that cannot be proved, but argued for philosophically. One such central unifying element is the eschatological hope mentioned above, expressed as an epistemological humbleness, postponing every final truth. Aspray claims, however, that the doctrine of creation is even more fundamental for Ricœur than eschatology. He connects this explicitly to Ricœur’s confidence in communication: “It is only by belief in a common *created* nature that communication can become a genuine collaborative search for truth rather than an endless conflict” (Aspray 2019, 328–29).

To be in the truth, without any need or capacity to possess it, testifies according to Ricœur to the common base of humanity. The existential questions and the fragility of our existence unites us. Communication and translation, with the help of imagination and sympathy, is always possible, even though a complete understanding is never achieved and the risk of misunderstanding remains a constant threat. “There is no reason or probability that a linguistic system is untranslatable. The belief that the translation is feasible up to a certain point is the affirmation that the foreigner is a man, the belief, in short, that communication is possible” (Ricœur 1965, 282).

This fundamental trust in communicability may lead to two very different conclusions. One possible outcome, which Ricœur criticizes, is the construction of ideological, scientific or theological systems claiming to represent the final and total truth. “Communication would be truth if it were total” (Ricœur 1965, 53). All totalitarian systems need to be challenged, whether they are constructed in science, politics, economics, or theology. In the context of this article, it is interesting to note that Ricœur considers the creation of various totalitarian systems as an attempt to deny human ambiguity and fragility. When he talks about an eschatological hope, it is not a question of a final judgment through which the evil individuals are divided from the pious. Instead, he adopts from Christian eschatology the idea of a continuous postponement of all final truths. (Ricœur 1965, 123).

The second option, which Ricœur adheres to, is to take this conviction regarding communicability as the starting point for what he in his hermeneutics calls the

“first naïveté”. According to him, understanding starts from a receptive listening to the text and the claims that it contains. This primary understanding needs, however, to be critically and methodologically tested and explained. This attitude can be described as an openness for the possibility that truth will be manifested through texts, symbols, and acts. Openness towards others involves also a willingness to let your own perspective be challenged by the experiences and opinions of others. This common search for truth may require patience and trust in the advance of human knowledge through communication and conflict. Visions and utopias are never fulfilled, and should not be so, but they give meaning and direction to our common aspiration for a better and more just society (Ricœur 1948a, 309; Ricœur 1965, 123). This attitude of trust, also expressed by Ricœur as an eschatological hope, is closely linked to his claim that artistic creation, writing of texts, and social activism can have the strongest impact when the actor does not intentionally strive for a certain pre-defined goal.

The non-violent troublemakers

In addition to his fundamental trust in communication and openness as remedies for the totalitarian tendencies in politics and religion, Ricœur also assigns an important role to what he calls the creators of scandals, or, as I chose to call them, the troublemakers: non-violent men, representatives of Franciscan poverty, poets, and prophets (Ricœur 1965, 126–27). In the fields of politics, economy, and religion, these troublemakers challenge the systems and power structures by showing that the world could look differently, and by witnessing to

the possibility of change. There are obvious similarities between how the tasks of the non-violent man and the Christian are described by Ricœur. The Christian should be “a profaner of ideologies, a smasher of idolatrous pretensions to totality” (Stewart and Bien 1974, 7).

Ricœur underscores that certain kinds of violence are unavoidable. Every writer of history does violence to the past, because the historian has to decide what to include and what to omit. It is impossible to make room for every episode and every actor and story. Ricœur describes also the poet as an actor exercising power: human reality is never portrayed in literature in all its fullness. The poet interprets, imagines, and reshapes (Ricœur 1965, 127; Fridlund 2023, 290–91). Obviously, different kinds of violence need to be distinguished from each other: the violence of a historian or a poet should not be equated with war or genocides. The aim of Ricœur’s critic is, according to my interpretation, the temptation to suppress or exclude aspects and voices that do not fit into the norm or into the dominant narrative.

Ricœur’s understanding of violence is directly connected to his wager regarding a surplus of meaning in human existence. Violence attempts to kill this “surplus”, this overflow of meaning and undeserved grace (Ricœur 1965, 227). Non-violence represents in Ricœur’s thinking a defiant reaction to all attempts to pervert the search for truth and the struggle for justice into a defence of authority and the status quo. “The non-violent believes and hopes that freedom can penetrate the resistance of fate” (Ricœur 1965, 229).

Non-violence is the bad conscience of history; a defiant hope that the conscience

of the individual and of the nation will be awakened (Ricœur 1965, 228). Love, not revenge, is the most effective answer to violence. Non-violence is a “no” to the fatality of history, and a “yes” to freedom. The non-violent man exercises a prophetic role when he invests his capital in a history yet to be made (Stewart 1972, 65).

The ambiguity that characterizes the anthropology of Paul Ricœur is mirrored in his understanding of the state and its institutions. Empires have through history exercised violence, control, and retributions, but they have also advanced law, knowledge, culture, and the well-being of its citizens (Ricœur 1965, 121). The task of public institutions is to uphold public order and security, as well as to grant the citizens equal rights and opportunities. In order to do this, institutions are required to exercise power and control, even violence, but, as David Stewart notes, this exercise of power needs according to Ricœur to be placed under the judgement of the law (Ricœur 1965, 104–06; Stewart 1972, 60).

There is according to Ricœur something inherently evil in institutions—“evil” understood in a very broad sense—because their task is to treat citizens not as individuals, but as faceless “objects”. The ambition to treat all in a similar and just way may lead to insensitivity for the situation of a particular individual. The faceless bureaucracy runs the risk of making relations mechanic and sterile. Therefore, charity, or love of neighbor, is required as a critical counterpart to justice, because love makes relations personal (Ricœur 1965, 108).

In his writings from the 1950s, Ricœur talks about “two pedagogies of mankind, that of love, and that of justice” (Ricœur 1965, 238; Ricœur 1995b). The first is

characterized by reciprocity and non-resistance, the latter by punishment, authority and submission. Ricœur calls love and violence two spiritual regimes, and exemplifies the two paedagogies with “sacrifice” and “coercion”. The magistrate punishes by applying a violent paedogogy. This coercion is foreign to the rule of love, but compatible with it for example when it prohibits murder. Penal law does not contradict love, but does not fulfill it either. This excludes the argument that violent punishment can be an act of love, which sometimes has been used for defending corporal punishments both in family and in society (Ricœur 1965, 242; Ricœur 1948b, 97–98; Stewart 1972, 63).

According to my interpretation, Ricœur treats love as a kind of troublemaker in politics and public administration, as well as in the judiciary. Love represents the economy of the gift, which transgresses the realm of law. Ricœur returns to this idea of a mutual critical relation between love and justice in an often cited article originally published 1990 (Ricœur 1995a, 315). Love needs justice, both in a legal framework and in interpersonal relations. Otherwise, love runs the risk of turning naïve and toothless: if we do not oppose injustices, the well-being and the rights of other people will be violated (Ricœur 1995b, 324–25). In my conclusions, I will return to this claim, as I believe it to reveal a possible weakness in Ricœur’s concept of non-intentional activities: it may, against his own ambitions, lend itself to a legitimization of passivity in front of injustices.

On the international level, the use of violence is often legitimized by the need to prevent injustices and fight unjust rulers. History has told us that many of

the cruellest tyrannies and other totalitarian regimes were destroyed through war. Ricœur asks his readers: Would not this imply, that the violence of oppression makes a violent revolt legitimate and justified (Ricœur 1965, 226, 244)? He admits that there are liberating wars, and that war may sometimes be inevitable, but still Ricœur strongly argues that war cannot be justified. If killing is justifiable, the fragile reciprocal bond between love and justice is broken. Ricœur thereby rejects the concept of “progressive violence”, by which he refers to the idea that violence is a necessary and legitimate means to create a lasting peaceful order. According to Ricœur, progressive violence leads inevitably to more violence (Ricœur 1965, 231).

Ricœur is conscious of the need to emphasize that it is not possible to construct a society purely on the principles of non-violence. Non-violence represents the order of discontinuity and the order of gesture and witness. Ricœur also recognizes this kind of “anarchism” in the Gospels. Non-violence cannot be turned into a law or an ideology, yet the non-violent man ought to be the nucleus and the critical voice of all political movements. In the same manner, Ricœur rejects the possibility of building a coherent theology or an ethical system based on non-violence. Still, it is according to Ricœur crucial to let utopian visions of a different way of living, as for example the ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, continue to challenge both politics and the choices of individuals. A society without utopian visions is a dying society (Ricœur 1965, 223–24; 231–32; Fridlund 2023, 288–89).

Clashes between conflicting visions is therefore unavoidable in a functioning

democracy. Patrik Fridlund has noted that the public exchange of different opinions is according to Ricœur a characteristic trait of an open society (Fridlund 2023, 286). When this kind of public discussion is either forbidden or suppressed, other means need to be considered. The prophet is accordingly one of the troublemakers, or creators of scandals, that Ricœur relies on. A true prophet is, according to him, a friend of the poor and the marginalized. The prophetic task is not only a spiritual calling. The message transmitted by the prophets in the Old Testament, as well as by Jesus, has strong political consequences: freedom for the enslaved, food for the hungry, justice for the oppressed—and peace for those who are suffering because of war and other violent acts. The prophetic task may require the creation of scandals in order to challenge the listeners to repent and change their way of living (Ricœur 1948b, 98). Ricœur laments that the prophet in the churches all too often have turned into some kind of a yogi (understood as a typological character) that only is interested in changing the inner life of individuals. Ricœur criticizes the Christianity of his own time for losing the necessary link between the prophet and the poor, and as a consequence, the churches have lost their relevance in the modern society (Ricœur 1950, 51–52).

The non-violent action can never remain a “pure testimony”, because it unavoidably has political consequences. One of the possible outcomes of a refusal to support the authorities or to take part in the defence of the country may be the downfall of the state, or at least its current regime. Ricœur refers to the Kantian idea that the maxim of an action might become a universal law. What should a citizen do if the

current regime has become so corrupt or immoral that the state neither protects its citizens, nor grants them justice and safety? In this kind of situation, even a non-violent protest may according to Ricœur turn into a violent one, because the destroying of the old regime inevitable leads to the violent establishment of a new regime (Ricœur 1965, 244–45). The outcome of actions can never be determined beforehand, and therefore non-violence remains a wager and a risk.

Another non-violent troublemaker in Ricœur’s political thinking is the representative of Franciscan poverty. “Does not Franciscan poverty announce in an untimely way—certainly untimely with respect to any reasonable and ordered economy—the end of the curse which is attached to the private and selfish appropriation that generates callousness and solitude?” (Ricœur 1965, 126). The Franciscan brother is a good example of a non-violent activist. By simply refusing to follow the presumption that all individuals want to increase their income and enhance their social capital by consuming goods that are considered valuable and desirable, the voluntarily poor undermines the capitalist system and its universal claims.

There is still another important troublemaker to discuss: the artist. On the one hand, an artist expresses thoughts, experiences, and stories that persist in his or her social context. On the other hand, the artist challenges the predominant conceptions, ideologies, and beliefs. The artist is a creator of scandals. By questioning and doubting that what is taken for granted in a society, the artist is able to create something that is socially and politically valid (Ricœur 1965, 126–28).

When Ricœur discusses the social impact of art, he prioritizes the non-intentional aspect of artistic creation. “True art, in conformity with its proper motivation, is engaged when it has not deliberately willed it, when it has agreed not to know the principle of its integration within the total setting of a civilization” (Ricœur 1965, 174). The artist interprets the world and commits an ethical assessment of our existence especially when he or she does not moralize. Ricœur’s argumentation is probably a critical remark to the Marxist distinction between engaged and disengaged literature, but his point, reminiscent of views expressed by Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, is valid also for other similar ambitions to reduce the value of artistic creations to their ideological, religious, or moral functions (Ricœur 1965, 190).

One of the most important scandals an artist can cause is the shattering of the false or simplified favourable images that a nation or a regime has formed of itself. By doing this, an artist contributes to a creative reinterpretation of the identity and the collective memory of a nation. This reinterpretation requires, however, that the artist should not be directed by the authorities to carry through this reinterpretation in a particular way. In line with his predilection for non-intentional creativity, Ricœur claims that an artist is able to express the national culture most effectively when he or she does not intend to do so (Ricœur 1965, 280–81).

In the discussions regarding a just war and a just peace, violence and non-violence are often treated as optional and conflicting means to achieve a stable, safe, and equal society. Ricœur, however, approaches

non-violence from a slightly different angle. He wants to preserve the tension between justice and love, and between coercion and charity, as well as between violence and non-violence. The reciprocal relation between these poles makes them capable of criticizing and complementing each other. Ricœur is, however, not very explicit when it comes to the practical conclusions and applications of this model.

Ricœur by no means claims to have solved the puzzle regarding how and when the use of violence and coercion may be legitimate. The dialectic between progressive violence and prophetic non-violence that he argues for can only be observed and described from a certain distance. Ricœur admits, that for those living and acting in a certain historical and political situation, the main problem is not how to construct a theoretical synthesis, but how to make an informed choice: Should I obey the authorities, or should I protest—violently or non-violently (Ricœur 1965, 232–33)?

Here Ricœur, in my opinion, provides a clue to what he actually means with non-intentional activities: the “informed choice” is not necessarily non-intentional in the sense of not being made consciously, but it is characterized by a humble openness regarding the consequences. Non-violence is an attempt to change history for the better, but the outcome remains an eschatological hope without guarantees.

From troublemakers to victims and witnesses

In this third section of my article, I aim to bring the elements from Ricœur’s early writings that I have highlighted above into dialogue with related topics in his later works. His critique of various attempts to

unify the truth into closed systems remains a central dimension of his thinking, but the role of the troublemaker seems to change. The shift is not dramatic, but I claim that it is of importance. That the shift is not very obvious may actually be one reason for the fact that this gliding in Ricœur's thinking has not gained much attention among Ricœur scholars.

To express it bluntly: Has the troublemaker disappeared from Ricœur's production? Has the prophet turned into a yogi, to use Ricœur's own typology? If so, what consequences does this have for the constructive tension between human fragility and capability, which Ricœur strives to maintain? Or, to put it in other words, has the human fragility and the related conception of a gap between what I am and what I might or should become, in Ricœur's later works more the function of a source for mourning, than a space for opportunities and change?

The troublemaker was characterized by both activity and passivity: on the one hand, elements of scandal and revolt, on the other, a willingness to endure injustices and suffer for a good cause. In his later writings, however, the Suffering Servant portrayed by Isaiah becomes the main point of reference.

From the 1970s onward until his retirement Ricœur spent part of each year in the USA, and at the same time his involvement in political movements related to the Protestant church in France decreased. He seems to have been cautious, not only to combine his philosophical and theological reflections, but also to take a stand on particular political or social questions. As a consequence, the social context that he addresses in his later writings is not very specific.

I have chosen to look at three different themes in Ricœur's production from the 1970s onwards: witnessing, prophetic calling, and reconciliation.

Witnessing: the hermeneutics of testimony

In an article originally published in 1972 Ricœur develops what he calls a hermeneutics of testimony. The text provides a description of the ontological assumptions behind his hermeneutics: reality manifests itself through signs, symbols, and narratives that call for interpretation. Ricœur underscores the quasi-empirical nature of testimony: it is the report or a story of an event, not the event or the perception itself. A testimony is called for when there is a conflict of interests between differing parties, and it requires both a person who testifies, and persons who receive this testimony and assess its trustworthiness. Ricœur compares this evaluation to a judgment in a trial, where the plausibility of various testimonies is assessed (Ricœur 1981, 123–24; Moyaert 2011, 292; Fridlund 2023, 288). Ricœur points out that it is not only the story of the witness that is evaluated, but also the witness as a person. The judge and the jury have to ask themselves: Is this person to be trusted?

Even though Ricœur chooses to call testimony both an action and a work, it remains primarily an expression of an inner state: a pure heart, a faith and, a devotion to a cause (Ricœur 1981, 130). The willingness to suffer is portrayed as the utmost consequence of testimony, which makes the witness above all a martyr. "The witness is the man who is identified with the just cause which the crowd and the great hate and who, for this just cause, risks his life" (Ricœur 1981, 129). The examples Ricœur

mentions are Socrates and Jesus.

Willingness to die for your cause does not, however, automatically signify that the cause is just or good. Suicide bombings and school shootings where innocent people are killed demonstrate this. It seems to me that the prominence Ricœur gives to the non-intentional impact of the witness makes it difficult for him to be more precise regarding the desired outcome of testimonies. Instead, he underscores that the testimony does not belong to the witness, which indicates that the witness is ideally a vehicle for the manifestation of truth, not an individual actor striving for a certain goal (Ricœur 1981, 131). The focus is not on particular actions of resistance or change, but on a patient hope that things will turn out well in the end.

The prophetic calling: the summoned subject

When Ricœur edited his Gifford lectures into the book called *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), he omitted two lectures that had a more pronounced theological content. In one of them, he discussed the role of the prophet (the other omitted lecture was on testimony), and the manuscript was later published as an article (Ricœur 1995b). It is interesting to compare this description of the prophet figure with his reflections on prophetic troublemakers in his early production.

Among the central characteristics of the prophetic calling in the Old Testament, Ricœur mentions that the prophet is called out from his social context when confronted with God. The prophet is isolated and decentralized, and then sent back to the community with a message to proclaim. “The call isolates, the commission binds. This communal aspect of commission

cannot be blocked out by the solitude of the call” (Ricœur 1995b, 266).

This model for prophetic calling is according to Ricœur applied also in the early church, but there the goal for the followers of Jesus was to be transformed into the image of Christ. Ricœur underscores the importance of the Suffering Servant as depicted by Isaiah, who serves both as a key for understanding the suffering of Jesus, and as a pattern for Christian discipleship. This choice of this role model has consequences for how the prophetic calling is understood. Ricœur himself concludes: “Suffering has taken the role of action” (Ricœur 1995b, 264).

As said before, there is in Ricœur’s production according to my interpretation a slight but significant shift in the understanding of the prophet. The ambiguous and obstinate troublemaker has been transformed into the victim of unjust suffering. The readiness to suffer for a just cause was certainly also part of the role of the troublemaker, but the activist elements are toned down in Ricœur’s later thinking. In this particular article, he develops the role of the prophet by discussing the figure of the “Inner Teacher” in Augustine’s theology, as well as the relation between testimony and conscience: “surely the most internalized expression of the responding self” (Ricœur 1995b, 271).

Reconciliation

In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and during the tragic wars in the Balkans, Ricœur wrote an article where he proposed three steps to reconciliation in Europe. The first step is a commitment to the possibility to translate and communicate across cultural, national, and religious borders. Even

though something always is lost in translation, we are still able to learn to understand each other better. To deny this, is to make reconciliation impossible. As in his early production, Ricœur claims that languages do not form closed systems. Communication is therefore a fundamental dimension of human existence: "If there is only one human race, it is because transferences of meaning are possible from one language to another; in short, because we can translate" (Ricœur 1996, 4).

The second step is an exchange of memories. By listening to the stories of others, we learn that very different stories can be told about the same events. We also learn that our narrative identities are intertwined: our group, and we ourselves, play a role in the story of others, and they in our stories. The same actors are assigned different roles in these stories: of friends or enemies, helpers or perpetrators, heroes or victims. As a consequence of this exchange of memories we hopefully understand that the stories we build our identity upon, as a nation, a denomination, or an ethnic group, may need to be changed. This is especially hard when it involves historical narratives that through the years have been recounted and repeated during nationalist festivities and manifestations (Ricœur 1996, 5–7).

The third step in Ricœur's model is forgiveness. To forgive is not to forget, but to remember differently by recounting the common history in a different way. It is impossible to change the past, but by modifying our stories about ourselves as individuals and communities it is possible to change how the past has impact on us today, as well as in the future. Ricœur underscores that forgiveness goes beyond the order of justice—it is always a gift, a surplus that

exceeds the order of reciprocity. He adds that all crimes cannot be forgiven, at least not at the moment. Forgiveness requires patience (Ricœur 1996, 9–11).

A successful reconciliation process, as described by Ricœur, presupposes that the participants are willing to recognize their own fragility as well as the fragility of their social community. This fragility is also a fragility of identity, as the narratives that this identity is built upon can be modified and retold. Additionally, all identities, personal as well as social, are porous, because they are intertwined with the narrative identities of others: friends, relatives, neighbours, and former enemies.

Without this humble and self-critical approach, an encounter open for change and forgiveness will never take place. There is, however, a weak point in Ricœur's understanding of reconciliation: it presupposes a situation where the involved parties are able to meet on an equal level, where they are able to confess their shortcomings and modify their stories. Such equal and safe conditions are, however, rarely achievable, because the power relations between the parties have usually been uneven both before and during the violent conflict, and continue to be so afterwards. To presuppose that oppressed minorities or victims of a genocide would have to confess their own shortcomings when confronted with their oppressors would be both cynical and naïve.

Another question raised by Ricœur's model for reconciliation is how the parties involved in the conflict can be persuaded to sit down and listen to each other's stories, and be ready to tell their own stories in another way in the future. The step from violent conflicts to a humble and attentive

listening to the stories of others seems to be too long. What are the incentives that could make this possible? The experiences from various truth and reconciliation processes around the world are not unanimously reassuring.

The negotiator in a reconciliation process may need the assistance of the troublemaker, who from the inside creates scandals by shattering the false images and challenging narratives by which the nationalist identity is constructed. “The artist, contrary to the tendency to be a conformist in his own milieu, rejoins his people only when that crust of appearances is shattered” (Ricoeur 1965, 281). The troublemaker has a prophetic mission to call the nation and especially its leaders to repent and turn around, by showing how ridiculous the claims to national uniqueness and greatness looks from a different perspective. We need to mourn the victims of various historical violent conflicts, but we may also be required to mourn the loss of our own foundational narratives. Only by achieving a more ambiguous and fragile understanding of our own nation or culture, are we able to identify similar traits in other cultures: “Human truth lies only in this process in which civilizations confront each other with what is most living and creative in them” (Ricoeur 1965, 283).

The interaction between non-intentional and intentional activism

The starting point for this article was the tension in Ricoeur’s production between the conception of a primary goodness of human existence and the evident cruelty of human history. This tension is mirrored in the gap between ideals and the reality regarding how we human beings act. One

of the aims of this article is to reflect on how this gap can be seen, not only as a reason to mourn the consequences of human fallibility, such as violence and suffering, but also as a space for dreams and visions of a better world and a more just society.

What resources do we get from Ricoeur when we are faced with pressing moral or political issues? The thesis proposed and developed in this article is that it is fruitful to include elements from his early writings, if we want to make Ricoeur’s thinking relevant in relation to challenges in today’s society. How should, for example, his option for non-violence be related to the question, whether it is right to provide Ukraine with weapons, to help its army defend the country and its independence against the Russian aggression? How can the ideal of Franciscan poverty challenge our current capitalist and consumerist world order that threatens the survival of our planet? Where are the artists that succeed in shattering the ethnocentrist cultural identities frequently developed in the rhetoric of populist nationalists?

It seems contradictory that while many commentators with good reasons have argued that there is a renewed interest in human capability in Ricoeur’s later production (Helenius 2019, 163–64), he at the same time seems to have lost something of the subversive and refigurative force of the troublemakers. A more profound assessment of this claim would have presupposed a closer analysis of Ricoeur’s latest publications, especially his book on recognition, *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004), but this task has to be left for further research. I will, however, provide some preliminary remarks. As Timo Helenius has noted (Helenius 2019, 165), Ricoeur’s discussion

on human capability tends to concentrate on the capability of falling. One of the reasons behind this is that human freedom according to Ricœur is dependent upon human finitude, upon being bound by nature, by biological processes, and by our cultural framework such as social institutions.

Human freedom can, accordingly, only be understood in relation to finitude and the capability to fall. This fall does not, however, happen by necessity—and therefore a human being can be held responsible. Finitude or fallenness is preceded by a primary affirmation and innocence. This primordial state is more original than our deviations from it, but it is only reachable through myths and art (Ricœur 1986, 143). The experience of human fragility is, according to Marianne Moyaert (Moyaert 2011, 280–81), connected to a longing for healing and wholeness. Ricœur's capable self is a being that can act, speak, tell, testify, promise and remember—and hope.

It is not possible to build a society solely upon the acts and visions of the troublemakers. The role of the troublemaker, Christian or non-Christian, is to resist totalitarian regimes and authoritarian ideologies, but also to prevent the alternatives provided by dissidents and revolutionaries from turning into new absolute systems. With the help of empathy and imagination, it is possible to project another world. According to Ricœur, we should never, however, claim to have reached that goal, or claim that we possess all the means for achieving it, because then we lapse into a defence of our Truth, and stop listening to the stories of others.

The non-violent man believes that it is possible to change history, even though we

never can control it fully. Consequently, Ricœur argues that the human capability to effect change is an aspect of hope. Ricœur is convincing in his critique of premature truths, but he remains vague regarding the content of the required hopeful visions. We do not know, of course, what will be the result of our actions, but I claim that eschatological hope should not be separated from action.

This brings me to the conclusions. The non-intentional character of creativity and social activism that Ricœur advocates has to be understood in connection with his ideas of both a given surplus of meaning and the need to postpone all final truths. Expressed in theological terms: a good creation and an eschatological hope. This non-intentional element is an expression of a humble conviction that no human being is able to control the consequences of his or her actions. I have argued that the troublemakers, or creators of scandals, have a central role to play in the shattering of false systems and narratives.

In order to fight injustices, prevent violence and defend those in need, the non-intentional dimension of human action is not, however, enough. There is an intentional as well as a non-intentional element in every human act.

This is hardly surprising for anyone familiar with Ricœur's thinking. Through his whole oeuvre, he has striven to relate freedom and nature, the voluntary and the involuntary, activity and passivity to each other. I have in this article tried to point out that Ricœur sometimes seems to forget this critical tension when he advocates non-intentional social activism.

Non-intentionality is linked to hope and openness, and it reminds us of the fact that

our actions, as well as our texts, can gain new meaning when they are interpreted in new contexts in the future (Fridlund 2023, 291). Even though we cannot control what will happen, we are able to create, share and transmit our aims and visions of a good life, with and for others in just institutions—to quote Ricœur’s own definition of ethics (Ricœur 1990, 202). The realization of what we hope for is a process to which we also actively can contribute. Thereby we are able to avoid the tragic interpretation that fallibility and passivity always in the end overrule our human capability. ■

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