

PAUL RICŒUR, *THE CYCLE OF MYTHS* AT THE HEART OF THE REFLECTIVE PUBLIC SQUARE

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SUMMARY: 1. *The years at the Divinity School*. 2. *Ricœur and the Just University*. 3. *Justice from the Symbolism of Evil*. 4. *The relationship between man and the sacred*. 5. *Hermeneutics meets its limit*.

1. THE YEARS AT THE *DIVINITY SCHOOL*

PAUL RICŒUR arrived at the University of Chicago in 1967, receiving an honorary doctorate along with Raymond Aron and Claude Lévy-Strauss. The *Divinity School* chose him to succeed Paul Tillich on the John Nuveen Chair. He continued to teach until 1992, in a combination of philosophy and theology (but also epistemology, philosophy of history and philosophy of politics). From 1970 his choice to teach and live for long periods in Chicago (sharing a friendship with Mircea Eliade) went hand in hand with fifteen years of almost voluntary exile from French intellectual life.

In many occasions of autobiographical narrative and interviews, it is Ricœur himself who recalls his approach to what is termed, in the United States, “higher education.” Ricœur especially appreciated the intellectual freedom of the students in this system. At the *Divinity School*, this embraced both doctoral (Ph.D.) and ministry (M.Div.) students – a common curriculum and a common faculty for both those intent on a career in research and teaching, and those intent on a career in Christian religious leadership.¹

Concurrent with his arrival at the *Divinity School*, Ricœur laid the foundations for international recognition of his philosophical position and, above all, set up the major themes that would accompany him for the rest of his academic career: on the one hand, biblical hermeneutics and the symbolism of evil, which converge in the *Conflict of Interpretations*, and on the other hand, the encounter with analytics, the linguistic turn and the liberal tradition of political thought.

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¹ P. RICŒUR, *Critique and Conviction. Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Lau-nay*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998.

The painful experience of his time as doyen in Nanterre, during the difficult year of student protests, had darkened his relationship with the academic institution and its transformations. In his suitcase to Chicago, he had certainly carried the doubts, bitterness and the question of how the university institution could keep itself 'just'. The political language in the Divinity years is not the youthful language of the «Terre Nouvelle» struggle or even that of the committed French intellectual: it is the language of religious myths and narrative metaphors, consciousness of evil and guilt, structure and event, and, not least, it is the political language of imagination. In the following paragraphs I plan to outline some of these elements.

Beyond political relevance, in these darker times since his death (which occurred in 2005), the thinker's work remains valuable precisely on an ethical level: "with the return of pandemics, wars and terrorism, his reflections on vulnerability and evil are essential" said Olivier Mongin, who served as editor of the journal «Esprit».²

Those expecting an in-depth scholarly elaboration of this discourse on evil, narrative and justice may be disappointed, for I do not intend to do so here (and I can offer pointers to the extensive bibliography with which to explore the topic further). Instead, I intend to connect some of the elements of Chicagoan reflection that are the outcome of the ethical and political concerns of both the youthful period that is the focus of this «Acta Philosophica» publication or the mature period at Nanterre.

2. RICŒUR AND THE *JUST UNIVERSITY*

At the conclusion of the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricœur noted – true to form – that further work beckoned. His investigation of modern narrative's representation of temporality through the genres of history and fiction had raised a new set of questions under the category of 'narrative identity': 'who is speaking', 'who is acting?', 'who is recounting about herself?', 'who is the imputed moral subject?'. True to his invocation of the public square at the conclusion of *Time and Narrative*, these are for Ricœur foundational questions of ethics and of action. The matter of identity will inevitably involve postulations of the good and the obligatory. Narrative leads us to ethics.³

This is the widely recognized program of Ricœur's great work, *Oneself as Another*.⁴ The premise from which Ricœur addresses these questions is that

² *Philosophie: vivre mieux avec Paul Ricœur*, «La Croix L'Hebdo», 173, 10 Mars 2023, p. 30.

³ Ricœur's capstone contribution thus inverts the trajectory represented in the major statements of Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) and Stanley Hauerwas (*A Community of Character*), in which ethics takes recourse to narrative.

⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blaney, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.

while the answer to the questions listed above is taken axiomatically to be 'the self', any version of that answer – whether Descartes's or Nietzsche's – is in fact inadequate because to say 'the self' is *not* the same as to say 'I'. This is for Ricœur at root a matter of grammar: to say 'self' implies reflexivity, whereas to say 'I' is to posit an object. In linguistic practice the two terms present a dialectic that is prerequisite to answering any question that begins 'who?'.

This dialectic spawns, for Ricœur, two elaborations that inform his ensuing considerations of 'who?' questions regarding language, action, identity, and ethics: the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*, and the crowning articulation – the dialectic of self and other. Although it is the object of explicit consideration in *Oneself as Another*, justice is a perennial consideration in Ricœur's work. The human person is defined as an agent, *responsible* for his or her actions. However, for Ricœur, the agent is not transparent to himself, but mediated.

The rough-and-ready sorting of Ricœur's *oeuvre* into conjoint but distinct operations of phenomenology and hermeneutics is partially smoothed by this recognition: the usual (and helpful) formulation is that a transparent discussion of the phenomena of selfhood inevitably encounters this disjunction, and must turn to hermeneutics to identify and to explain the forms through which selfhood achieves perception.

This may be perfectly true, but what does it all have to do with 'the just university'? Why should we attend to these particular premises, however enduring, of Ricœur's work? How might the intellectual program of *Oneself as Another*, at least as here described, help us to think about the character of "the just university"?

Let me first acknowledge that, for many, the connection between the work of this great philosopher and the pragmatics of institutional justice are not intuitive. What follows will not make it so. As is the case with any complex institutions, 'justice' has many dimensions in the context of 'the university'. A brief and incomplete list would have to include: appropriate uses of endowments; fair wages and benefits for all employees, including staff and adjunct faculty; relations with the wider community in which the university situates itself. What makes Ricœur, and especially *Oneself as Another*, pertinent to 'the just university' is that it underscores what the essay posits to be the core claim to 'justice' that the university must pursue, and without which all the other absolutely crucial considerations listed above (and all those unlisted) will be without real meaning: the teaching of critical thought, or the weighing evidence and argument in the service of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

No university can be truly just without seeking achievement in this specific endeavor, and its measure as just must ultimately be taken with reference to its level of achievement in that regard. Ricœur is exemplary, I shall argue, of the powers and the limits of critical thinking.

In his terms, critical thought was encompassed by what he termed as a hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval. Suspicion consists in asking questions about our intellectual heritage, focused especially on what he characterized as *aporia*, or gaps in systems of thought. It was important to Ricoeur that this was pursued with probity and charity, giving due allowances both for the fallibilities of the reader, and also for the possibility that the perceived gaps were not necessarily in the system itself, but in a later rendition that in some way misconstrued it. But critical thought obliges us to ask about the truth of our inheritance, and to identify what in that inheritance was inconsistent to itself, or is belied by the circumstances in which we live. Ricoeur identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the great masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Retrieval – perhaps the less intuitive dimension of Ricoeur’s critical thought – consists in reformulating the heritage in a way that adopts what is found to be coherent and useful to address present circumstances. Many readers of Ricoeur have, in my view mistakenly, construed retrieval to consist in the recovery or reinstatement of the heritage, whether that be a matter of a specifically religious faith or of trust in a received intellectual or political tradition. Ricoeur thought rather that retrieval meant the creation of something new: something that participated at once in the heritage and in the present moment. Put differently, critical thought has for Ricoeur both historical and constructive dimensions. It cares very much about what has been thought and said, but its task is incomplete if it is satisfied with the elucidation of the past. Critical thought recognizes that the past is not the present, and that to think critically is to think not what the past thought, but what the present should think.

The degree to which Ricoeur’s work fully succeeds in this admittedly challenging task is an open question. What is clear to any reader of Ricoeur is that his writing is simply too restless – too relentlessly dialogical – to privilege either the elucidation of the past or the construal of the present. What Ricoeur offers is a model of thought in which suspicion and retrieval constantly interact – at times, almost maddeningly so. But Ricoeur was not deterred, because he was convinced that only this constant interaction could render the fullest justice to the complex, ongoing relation of knowledge to life. In this respect, I argue, Paul Ricoeur was himself a microcosm of the just university: he occupied a place of knowledge and was devoted not merely to its perpetuation, but to its increasing refinement and clarification with direct reference to enhancing life. In theory and in practice, this is his version of justice, and his articulation of what it might mean, at its core, for a university to be just.

Ricoeur’s practice of critical thought fostered dialogues between forms or systems of thought that, while asking the same or very similar questions, did so from different assumptions and via different methods. He is optimistic, in

the end, that “the good life with and for others” can and will translate to a reflective ‘public square’. As he states in 1995, the wish for the good life inevitably encounters violence and evil in all its forms.

This requires a practical wisdom that can mediate between the singularity of cases, the conflicts between duties, the complexity of life in society, in which one is almost always called upon to choose between “gray and gray, rather than black and white”, and in those situations of despair, as Ricœur calls them, in which the choice is not between good and bad, but between bad and worse.⁵ If we read carefully the chapter devoted to the comparison between France and the United States on the academic level in *Critique and Conviction* (clearly defined as not comparable, even on the front of the organization of university institutions),⁶ we realize this attitude of mediation also in judging the dynamics of the *American College*, relations and obligations to students and colleagues, and once again we realize how the public space of academic policies mirrors the wider public debate of the national political community.

3. JUSTICE FROM THE *SYMBOLISM OF EVIL*

We mentioned the dialogue between different forms of thought. Ricœur’s teaching of philosophy of religion at the University of Chicago paved the way for the critical investigation of the concepts of subjectivity and public justice that later manifested itself in *Onself as Another*.

This came about through a careful reading of the cycle of religious myths and the symbolism underlying religious language. I have dwelt elsewhere on the analysis of this cycle of myths, making a lengthy analysis of it in comparison with the cycle of American myths, but from those pages I would like to extrapolate the reflection on the symbolism of evil, which remains central to the later development of both Ricœur’s ethics and his philosophy of narrative.⁷

Paul Ricœur’s *The Symbolism of Evil* announces and enacts its author’s first full-fledged foray into a hermeneutics of culture.⁸ The text’s opening gambit

⁵ P. RICŒUR, Introduction to *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, Open Court, Chicago – LaSalle 1995; ID., *Réflexion faite. Autobiographie intellectuelle*, Esprit, Paris 1995.

⁶ P. RICŒUR, *Critique and Conviction*, cit.

⁷ R. ROSENGARTEN, *Ricœur’s Cycle of Myths and America’s E pluribus unum: Election and Inflection, or Notes on the One and the Many*, Special Issue on *Paul Ricœur: Retrospect and Prospect*, «Journal of Religion», 100 / 4 (2020), pp. 464-480.

⁸ P. RICŒUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by E. Buchanan, Beacon Press, Boston 1967. First published as P. RICŒUR, *Finitude et culpabilité*, vol. 2, *La symbolique du mal*, Éditions Mouton, Paris 1960. All quotations are from the Buchanan translation. Text references are to page numbers from this edition. This agenda is underestimated in readings of Ricœur that stress the role of *Symbolism* as the intellectual capstone of Ricœur’s initial attack on the pretensions of the *cogito*. An excellent articulation that integrates this view

– to “surprise the idea of fault in its transition” – spawns the formulation of a series of symbols (from defilement to sin to guilt) and, in turn, of corresponding myths (Greek, Hebrew, Christian, Orphic) that afford the reader what is arguably the first Ricœurian cultural architectonic. In what follows, my controlling interest is *Symbolism of Evil*’s endgame: Ricœur’s concluding formulation of “the cycle of myths” and his corresponding claim that the quartet of human/divine relations that issue through myth from symbol into thought describe an incipient (and crucial) interaction that includes both the privileging of one and in turn the obligatory, self-conscious inflection of the chosen one by the remaining three.

The mandate of the Ricœurian cycle is that we must choose and we must also inflect. What emerges from *Symbolism of Evil* is the actual meaning of its coda “the symbol gives rise to thought”: the thought is in fact not the elucidation of a myth but this mutual process of election and inflection.⁹

As readers of Ricœur well know, the direction of his subsequent work describes a trajectory in which the discourses that construct and constitute culture (metaphor and narrative) issue in, first, an anguished phenomenology of memory and forgetting,¹⁰ and then, considerations of ethics, justice, and the self in public life.

I am aware that it functions in Ricœur’s oeuvre as a companion volume to *Fallible Man*, and in turn as part of an initial threepart project on the philosophy of the will with *Freedom and Nature*. So far as I can see, however, my approach is warranted because it focuses on a theory of culture that is inte-

into an intellectual arc of Ricœur’s life work can be found in R. KEARNEY, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva*, Ashgate, Burlington, VT 2004. See also the cumulative treatment in M. Revault d’Allones, F. Azouvi (eds.), *Cahiers de L’Herne: Ricœur I and II*, Éditions de l’Herne, Paris 2004, and in C. T. REAGAN, *Paul Ricœur: His Life and His Work*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996.

⁹ If those who read Ricœur underestimate the *Symbolism* as a fully articulated theory of cultural myth, intellectual historians of America have displayed scant appetite for the kind of theoretical paradigms it articulates, and have certainly not taken recourse to Ricœur’s thought to address its complexities. Among recent examples, see G. DORRIEN, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 2001; M. A. NOLL, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001; L. BUELL, *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2014; T. FESSENDEN, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2007. A work whose sensibility, while in no way explicitly Ricœurian, certainly displays intriguing parallels is E. SLAUTER, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2009.

¹⁰ This indexes Ricœur’s ambiguous relationship to Hegel: see R. Coyne’s useful elucidation, *The Wound of Hegelianism: Hermeneutics and Eschatology in Paul Ricœur*, «Journal of Religion», 96/1 (2016), pp. 53-76.

gral to, and achieves coherent articulation in *Symbolism* and, as such, does not itself – and this is of interest, albeit tangentially, for my agenda – rely on the modulations of subjectivity in, for example, Ricœur's discussion of specific mythological systems. Put differently, my focus is not on the autonomous subject that is the overarching concern of Ricœur's three volumes but on a theory of myth that, in my judgment, has all too often been overlooked, especially in terms of its status as, at once, a claim to truth and a responsibility to integrate (what I will term the process, necessarily complementary, of election followed by inflection).

Ricœur's broad aim in *Symbolism* is to develop a phenomenology of "confession", what he describes as the human movement from the experience of fallibility to the attribution of fault. It is this transition that must be surprised and then reenacted. It becomes clear over the course of the text that the surprise is necessary because the connection between what humans term 'evil' and its usual attributions – that is, the experience of suffering, the fact of death, the question of theodicy – is inadequate to evil's true signification as "supremely the experience of the sacred".¹¹

Ricœur understands this reenactment to be neither religious experience itself nor (yet) philosophy, even as the ultimate goal is to bring the elucidation of confession into philosophical discourse. Emblematic for Ricœur of the disjunction in evil's attributes is the need to guard against the imposition of the idea of original sin, which Ricœur regards as a rationalization at the end, not the beginning, of the phenomenon of confession. He aims to reenact nothing less than the experience of Adam that has been eclipsed both in Judaism (courtesy of Abraham and Noah) and in Christianity (ditto of Paul). By "the experience of Adam" Ricœur stipulates the initiating myth of Adam in the book of Genesis, but it will become clear that it is impossible fully to appreciate and understand the Adamic experience absent reference to parallel traditions in ancient Greece.

At this point hermeneutics becomes the necessary handmaiden of phenomenology. The experience of the sacred is expressed in myth, and myth is symbolic.¹² The relationship is symbiotic. A symbol is a kind of sign (in the universe of discourse) that has a double intentionality that resists reduction to either the allegorical or the logical. Symbols are the basis of myths in that symbols are spontaneously formed and have immediately significant analogi-

¹¹ P. RICŒUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, cit., p. 6; cfr. P. B. ELY, *Revisiting Paul Ricœur on the Symbolism of Evil: A Theological Retrieval*, «Ultimate Reality and Meaning», 24/1 (2001), pp. 40-64.

¹² P. RICŒUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, cit., p. 5; Myth is "a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing ritual grounds for the actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world".

cal meaning; myths are symbols in the form of narratives in time and space that are not coordinated with history and geography “according to the critical method”.¹³

The reenactment of necessity focuses on the language of confession that is the living experience of fault in language. In necessarily brief compass here, the symbolism of fault expresses a tripartite phenomenal character (blindness, equivocation, scandal) that finds tripartite symbolic expression (defilement, sin, guilt). Ricœur describes a graduating, even an encompassing, signification, so that we might describe the symbolic expression of fault as moving *from* defilement (stain as unaccountable visitation, causing dread) *to* sin (abandonment as a function of the dynamic of infinite divine demand and finite code of conduct) *to* guilt (self-imputation of fault as inevitable yet responsible failure). Here is Ricœur’s attempt to answer the need for surprise: this delineated movement is meant both to index and to afford the antidote to the ‘slippage’ of fault into fallibility.

Before turning to Ricœur’s account of myth, it is crucial to note that his discussion of symbol recurrently ranges well beyond the story of Adam. The most continuous, extensive references are to the Hebrew Bible, including Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, but most prominently Job and also “the rich palette of the knowledge of sin”¹⁴ that Ricœur adduces particularly in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Hosea.

The second major allusive set is Greek literature, with a primary emphasis on the tragedies (among which Sophocles’s *Oedipus* and *Antigone* enjoy pride of place) and some allusions to Plato (in particular, *Gorgias*). With the symbol of guilt, the dimension of symbol as inflected comes into full relief: the writings of Paul become prominent, and Ricœur argues for a synthesis in which what he now terms the third ‘form’ of fault has three aspects: penal rationalization (Greek), ethical awareness (Hebrew), and legal wretchedness (Pauline).

The key here is that guilt’s aspects foreshadow *Symbolism of Evil*’s culminating argument: that within a culture we must speak not of myth but of myths, and that the work of culture is precisely the work not just of articulation but of inflection. The awareness of defilement and sin that is the hallmark of guilt is the result of three mythic traditions in a common engagement. Foreshadowed but not made explicit at this point is the status of particular myths in this process.

This is what understandably most confuses readers of *Symbolism* about Ricœur’s culminating rearticulation of the symbolism of evil as the servile will: the cultural move from fallibility to fault is manifestly teleological in ways that, for all Ricœur’s averred discounting of the Pauline, appears proto-Christian.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND THE SACRED

Ricœur has up to this point shown us how symbols may be understood to inform and inflect each other, but he has not shown us what might be understood to inform the telos of inflection. Now his argument turns to myth as the symbolic articulation of the relation of the human to the sacred. With the symbol of guilt we have, Ricœur argues, a representation that moves beyond the purview of the symbol precisely because the symbol alone cannot give a full phenomenological account of the human experience of evil. This account requires, and myth enables, a reconciliation of essence and existence in two respects. It offers a characterization of humankind as a whole, and of history as ideal (it enables categories such as 'Man' and 'Existence'); and it captures via narration the movement of experience (the dynamic witnessed in the movement from fallibility to fault in defilement/sin/guilt). What myth is not proves important to Ricœur's articulation: not allegory, not etiology, neither history nor explanation. Instead it is an 'opening up', a 'disclosure', "a second degree function of the primary symbols we have been exploring".¹⁵

Ricœur here takes exception to phenomenologists of myth (Eliade, van der Leeuw, Leenhardt) who privilege a consciousness behind the narrative as the proper object of investigation.¹⁶

Ricœur proposes to do the opposite, that is, to study myth as an expression in language, as the symbol taking the form of narration. This entails for Ricœur a crucial claim about the limit of myth. Myth intuitively takes the form of a cosmic hole that is named but not given; it necessarily lends contingent form to the sacred, and in doing so acknowledges that it is less than fully congruent with the totality of reality. Finiteness of experience results in symbolic plenitude: no one mythic act encompasses symbolically the totality, so there are multiple mythic acts. In an important sense, myth is strategic: the plenitude qua plenitude would be everywhere, so we need to symbolize to say anything meaningful about it. There are two consequences of this limiting claim. One is that myth is narrative because it is primordial drama.

The combat it represents – in which the sacred is invoked, contested, re-invoked – is most amenable to the repetition and iteration of the narrative form. The second is that as such, myth modifies the idea of 'fault', in that 'fault' becomes part of a much larger, total 'meaning', and "total meaning itself involves distress, struggle, and victory".¹⁷ It follows – a crucial point –

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

¹⁶ For an instructive parallel critique of Eliade, from very different governing assumptions, see B. LINCOLN, *In Praise of the Chaotic*, in *Id.*, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2012, pp. 109–120.

¹⁷ P. RICŒUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, cit., p. 168.

that the delineated myths will not correlate in any one-to-one sense to the symbols: there is not, for Ricœur, a myth of defilement, or of sin, or of guilt. At the same time, it seems clear that the symbol of guilt, in both its encapsulation of defilement and sin and its prompting of the turn to myth, has a greater causal role than its fellow symbols.

This limiting claim and its consequences mean that Ricœur will offer not a classification but a dynamics of myths of the beginning and end of evil: the drama of creation, or myth of chaos; the myth of the fall; the tragic myth; and the myth of the exiled soul. The ambiguity of the symbol of guilt in relation to the claims for myth will mean that the articulated dynamic will turn out to require the insertion, on the part of Ricœur himself, of a teleological interpretive moment.

Ricœur's lengthy exegesis of the myths results, in *Symbolism of Evil's* concluding chapter, in an argument for "the cycle of myths" by which he means that as each myth "rises to speculation" it invites comparison, and even prioritization. The gesture to thought that is innate to myth leads us to ask what orients our understanding to the myths. The question, Ricœur avers, introduces what is of necessity an apologetic moment into the process. We must explicitly choose a central myth. Not to do so risks the reification of comparison (à la Eliade). Ricœur also implies that comparison misleads to the degree that, by virtue of engaging in comparison, such a choice, however provisional, has de facto been made. It seems clear that, for Ricœur, the true dynamics of myth – their inflection of each other – implies the election of a preeminent or controlling myth.

What would be the criteria for such a choice? Ricœur answers this question exemplarily, by stipulating the Adamic myth as preeminent. He gives four reasons, two that reflect criteria of election and two that reflect criteria of inflection. The first (theological) reason is that the Christian believer is not in fact directly concerned with evil but rather with sin as retrospective; this accords most closely with the account of the divine/human interaction in the Adamic myth. The second (philosophical in a quasi-Pascalian mode) reason is that we must wager on what we discern in the myths. The third (inflective) reason is that the Adamic myth allows for the inclusion of all the other myths, whose essential claims to truth become affirmed to varying degrees in the Adamic myth. The fourth (also synthetic) reason is that the Adamic myth is most cognizant of the ways in which the myths claim to be true and demand appropriation; placing the Adamic myth at the center most fully honors this and disallows any static relation among the other three myths. It is worth rehearsing in some detail Ricœur's exemplification of election and inflection.

Ricœur writes that the Adamic myth is anti-tragic yet has tragic aspects: the serpent is already there and already evil, and Adam is accentuating an iniquity that is already there yet put there. We see the tension of the finite with infin-

ity, and infinity without the infinite. We also discover guilt here in the human failure to realize wholeness. Finally, the Adamic myth is a spectacle that goes beyond thought; it makes visible the demonic side of experience.

Through this we can see a movement, as in tragedy, from anthropology to theology where God is an ethical being and history is an arena of justice in which the human experience has a penal character. We feel pity for Adam and Eve; we witness fear and trembling before God. Seen in this complementarity, Ricœur contends, the tragedy seen in the Adamic myth indexes human suffering. The myth is seen to argue that only the one who confesses to be the author of evil discovers evil's 'already there' dimension on the one hand, and God's incomprehensibility on the other.

Through this, suffering comes to be seen as the tragic vision's alter ego: the wrath of God has survived the Logos and the kerygma and remains, perdures, in the fact of the suffering of those who are innocent. The Adamic myth also resonates with the theogonic myths, we see it in subsequent history, for example, in Heraclitus as well as in fourteenth century German mystics and nineteenth-century German idealism. Here the witness is chiefly to ontotheology in which evil is an original element of being, resulting in tragedies of being that reference the categories of invincibility for the human and unthinkability for the divine. The 'wicked God' is made part of the dialectic of being.

Finally, the Adamic myth resonates with the exiled soul in the sense that we see through it that Exile is the curse of the Fall. On this, Orphic captivity and the exile of soul from body parallels the biblical idea of exodus as an odyssey of the soul. The effects of this in the subsequent tradition are at least twofold: Adam as symbol of the human lessens as greater emphasis comes to be placed on his innocence; and exile becomes seductive as in Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Here, too the idea of the body as a symbol of defilement comes into play (otherwise the body would constitute an alibi for evil). In this respect, the body is not the origin of evil but the place of the soul's captivity.

5. HERMENEUTICS MEETS ITS LIMIT

In a coda to this section, Ricœur remarks that the cycle is not entirely satisfactory: hermeneutics has met its limit. We need at this point to turn to systematic philosophy to reach fully beyond personal appropriation to unify the myths. We can offer an initial formulation of what this would be in the assertion "the symbol gives rise to thought". This demarcates an interim, a necessary interim, between the mode of confession of sins and pure reflection on fallibility. This must be more than a juxtaposition of the symbol's gift of meaning and the philosopher's search for understanding. It is, then, no mere "faith seeking understanding".

We discover both the powers and the limits of imaginative discourse at this moment. The symbols and resulting myths help philosophy with the problem of beginning, there is no Archimedean point. Philosophy too has presuppositions, and the symbols/myths perform the crucial role of allowing us to acknowledge this, indeed to engage it and to claim a place from which to think. This indexes the crucial character of modernity, its dialectic of forgetfulness and restoration: we recognize that everything has been said, but said enigmatically.

To begin again in thought, in a mode that combines criticism and appropriation – to interpret in order to hear – is to seek to achieve a second naivete, a postcritical equivalent of a precritical hierophany. We do this via a hermeneutical circle in which we understand to believe and believe to understand.

Crucial here is the recognition that demythologizing (the movement of criticism) is not demythicizing: we remain people of myth, but myths mean for us not in their geographical or historical referents, but as myths. The limit of what we might term mere cultural analysis is that our interest is in more than understanding “the symbols of symbols” (per, e.g., Eliade).

This is comparison, and it has its value, but that is not a philosophical value. Instead we are interested in how the myths make claims vis-à-vis each other. The comparativist and the exegete live within the hermeneutical circle; the philosopher steps out because she both sees the myth as a wager and in turn recognizes the myth’s command that we wager in response, that we follow the indication of the symbol toward thought.

If my rendition of Ricœur’s cycle of myths renders Ricœur less than his reputedly irenic self, that is intentional: there is a very strong claim here for the idea that all roads in the human sciences lead to philosophy, and in turn that all truly engaged cultural study must not only acknowledge but engage the truth claims of its objects of inquiry. Put in the terms of *The Symbolism of Evil*, we might say that the study of myth must be at once elective and synthetic, and indeed that the one approach is implied by, indeed needs, the other. Roughly translated for a later day, we might say that Ricœur is saying something like the following: no history of religions without theology, and no theology without history of religions.¹⁸

ABSTRACT · Paul Ricœur taught Philosophical Theology for many years at the *Divinity School* of the University of Chicago. In this article we would like to recall some of his contributions that matured during those years: in the first part we will focus on his ideas of *justice* in the university, as a form of ethical community and as a re-

¹⁸ Hence from its inception, Ricœur’s notion of hermeneutics as involving a process of suspicion and retrieval is, in the end, a philosophical process in which retrieval is not merely restorative (e.g., of ‘faith’), but produces a perspective that acknowledges at once the power of the myth, and its limitations.

sponsible political institution; in the second part we will propose his reinterpretation of justice through a careful reading of the *cycle of religious myths* and the *symbolism* underlying religious language.

KEYWORDS · Paul Ricœur, Biblical Hermeneutics, Theological Ethics, Justice, Symbolism.