

Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy of the Will

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If Paul Ricoeur remains to be a philosopher who seeks the meaning of being human, then this philosophy of the will is properly understood within this 'search.' With the idea of the will, we presuppose that man is, first and foremost, an *ens volens*, that is, a willing being. We do not assume that Ricoeur simply defines or describes the nature of man as to answer the perennial questions, "What is man?" or "Why is man like this or that?" We could rather settle with a conviction that Ricoeur deals with the nature of man's nature. In this sense, the understanding of (or the attempt to understand) man as the one who wills shall naturally focus on his willing aspect. To ask, "How is it to be human?" is not to address his nature to will but to know the nature of his will. I shall try to confirm my claim by going through the perplexed Ricoeur's philosophy of the will.

Philosophy of the Will

The details of Ricoeur's philosophy of the will is supposed to be found in a three-volume work: first, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*; secondly, *Finitude and Culpability* which appears in two parts namely *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*; and *Poetics of the Will*.¹ Ricoeur "begins with a descriptive phenomenological style to present the essence of the phenomena of the will in *Volume One*, and continues on to a decryptive, hermeneutic- phenomenological style concerning the empirical facts of the will in *Volume Two*. Throughout these volumes he foreshadows the projected style and content of the elusive unwritten third volume, the *Poetics of the Will*."² We can say that Ricoeur focuses first on the *forms* (not the contents) of human action, that is, primarily describing or knowing the conditions or structures of the will before gaining insight into the constitution of the (one)

willing or actual existence of man. Ricoeur proceeds *into* the reality of human freedom (or human will) by way of a rigid approach of phenomenology stemming from Husserl and the profundity of existentialism referring to the likes of Marcel and Merleau-Ponty.³ In phenomenology, Ricoeur deals with the *acts of consciousness*; in existentialism, he analyzes the *acts of lived body*.

Voluntary and Involuntary

In the problem of human freedom in relation to nature, Ricoeur begins his inquiry by some kind of a rational, pure description of the voluntary and the involuntary aspects of human existence.⁴ This twofold notion of the voluntary and the involuntary connotes complementarity rather than duality. Indeed, they differ from each other but they are not totally different. Their distinction points to a dynamism that gives meaning to being human. The idea of reciprocity between voluntary and the involuntary comes into the picture to imply a harmony, not seamless though.⁵ As Garcia puts it, “This relation of reciprocity implies that the voluntary has no meaning of its own. It asserts that *only the relation* of the voluntary and the involuntary is intelligible.”⁶ In same vein, Pellauer asserts that “the very idea of the involuntary [...] is dependent upon its being considered in relation to voluntary action. Otherwise we end up trying to conceive of something beyond our experience that is unnamable. If we can in fact call it the involuntary, it is because we already presuppose our lived experience of what Ricoeur calls the voluntary.”⁷

Interestingly, the implications in the phenomena of the voluntary and the involuntary is such a bloody affair. It points to a real task to reflect on, to recognize, realize. To begin with, we shall deal with the affairs, or at least a glimpse, of the voluntary understood from the idea of the human action. Seen in the light of *deciding*, human action is a capacity to plan out things⁸ and to act upon the plan.⁹ As a human capability, deciding is *being decisive* implying both

thought and action in the process. So also, deciding does not happen out of the blue. We assume a factor that moves man to decide knowing quite well that man deliberately decides for a reason, that is, with some motives / motivations. Deciding therefore appears alongside motive. 'For a reason' entails something 'good'¹⁰ that motivates him to decide. This is the same reason which leads him to perform intentionally and un-intentionally. With the idea of *need* and *pleasure*, we understand how man 'thinks' and 'acts' within and without of himself. As embodied¹¹, man needs something for his body. And such a need is driven out of lack which can be fully satisfied¹² with a decisive choice. However, before this actual decision (or choice), there was still no choice. This is because man is impeded by hesitation.¹³ But as soon as man decides, the apprehension fades away and decisiveness¹⁴ enters into the picture.

While it is true that the "exploration of the will must begin eidetically because an understanding of the most profound possibilities of the voluntary subject emerges only out of a descriptive analysis of the involuntary," the philosophical quest must also continue to taking a "new phenomenology that would disclose a 'living being which from all time has, as the horizon of all its intentions, a world, the world,' and not merely 'an idealist subject locked within its systems of meanings.'"¹⁵

Fault

Moving to the question of the human condition, the discussion on evil is set forth into various phases beginning from *Fallible Man* wherein evil is still apparent until *Symbolism of Evil*¹⁶ where evil is already evident. And the phases carry on certain approaches in understanding the problem of evil, undergoing a *gradual* change from empirical to hermeneutical or a combination of both. Indeed, the problem of evil is one basic question of life that is embedded in the language of the people. As such, it is, for Pellauer, a "concrete mythics," that needs to be

understood from how the people talk about it.¹⁷ This means that it is something real and true and that speaks of the life of man since time immemorial. It is not therefore mythical in today's usage that is something fictional or untrue. This myth on evil was science for the people, although not that scientific in contemporary language.¹⁸ This means that myth is something true. But then, it uses a language that needs to be understood from a certain direction and angle. Man, more specifically, the fallible man is the locus of such interpretation on evil, particularly its possibility.

For Ricoeur, there is in man something *pathétique* that makes him inconsistent. This is not something or someone other than himself. This pertains to something in relation to his own self. In other words, man is by nature fallible. With this make-up, there is the possibility of evil. This is more than just the physical make-up that man is confronted here. This is about the strong tendency to go against himself. This tendency does not make but unmake him, hence, something that brings about his suffering, his disregard to life, hampering eventually his choice and right action.¹⁹

We deal here of an evil as a possibility by virtue of man's fallibility. This is to say that the emergence of evil can be made impossible by virtue of his capability. For instance, we can view and re-view things. Our viewing or perspective is not only true in thought but also in our deeds. An 'aha' experience can actually change our course, and rightly so, the direction of our life.²⁰ The evil *in* man can in turn be *out* of sight, not in terms of existence²¹ but as long as man is capable of overcoming it.²² By enabling himself, man gains his *self*²³ (again).

However, the possibility of evil or fault is not to be taken as a sequel towards the reality of evil.²⁴ The actual existence of evil is tried and tested under the symbolic auspices. With such a symbolical and mythical backing, the reality of evil is to be understood within the

bounds of linguistics.²⁵ Since symbolic language implies ambiguity or multi-layered meanings, analogy is to be employed.²⁶ With the symbolic lens, the existence of evil is not portrayed as an ugly, two-horned devil, with a tail. Evil exists in our consciousness in different forms: *cosmic*, *oneiric*, and *poetic*.²⁷ The examples are the symbolics of stain, sin and guilt.²⁸

Conclusion

Ricoeur's application of phenomenology to the existential human condition brings us to an understanding of human freedom in the light of an embodied human existence that is acting or willing or choosing freely, voluntarily, and responsibly. We could say that human freedom is an act that is "not just another predetermined occurrence in the sequence of natural events."²⁹ It is not therefore a concept or an abstract manipulated by the powers of the intellectuals. Human will is about man's action, his agency, his being a doer, the one willing, instead of being just the one thinking or loving.

Likewise, Ricoeur's recourse to existentialism sheds light to our faulted condition. In here, we could say of a negation³⁰ of man as a willing being: while man is capable of willing, he wills with recognition of his limitations. He always wills within the bounds of his finitude. Indeed, there is always this tension yet there is also this fusion. Nonetheless, it is possible for man to live in this contradiction as contradictions. Man is harmonic in contradictions.³¹ His will is always his ability, not dis-ability.

I think, Ricoeur's understanding of man would never be comprehensive had it not considered this seeming contradictions. Ricoeur starts with an eidetic interpretation of man. He gets at a picture (or an imagery) of the complex nature of man's possibilities, as to what he is capable of. After having an idea of (the whatness or howness of) man's agency, Ricoeur continues his philosophical quest through empirical approach on the actual existence of man in

its transcendental and fallible natures. In here, he reveals the faulted nature of man: his capacity to make evil possible, his freedom to make himself unfree, his capability to go against himself. Ricoeur advances his inquiry by not simply looking at the “dark” side of man but by emphasizing also his “bright” side. There is the transcendence that puts man above his wayward inclination. Man’s self-mastery enables him to go beyond the limits of his finitude. We can manifest the transcendence (and Transcendence) through our mortal bodies. Rightly so, before the Evil is the Transcendence that gives hope rather than despair to the condition that is man.

Although, man’s faulted nature is that which he cannot pull freely, not something to control, or to overcome *easily*³² because it is rooted in his condition, he can still unleash the ‘willing activity’ within his finite mode of being. His fate being a faulted being does not necessarily determine his destiny of becoming truly human precisely because he can make decisions for himself. We can take an idea from Nick Vujicic, an Australian inspiration speaker with no limbs and no worries. Besides, *to will is not* about what our humanity *can do* but what we *can be* in our human condition.

Endnotes:

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* ed. John Wild et. al., (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1966), xi-xii. Hereafter *Ricoeur*. All these fall under Ricoeur’s Freedom and Nature project. Meanwhile, the third volume, the proposed poetics of the will, was not written and we never had any idea why Ricoeur focused instead on Freud and other topics in a big book, *Freud and Philosophy*. It could have been in this projected volume where we could also trace Ricoeur’s ability to dialogue with other disciplines in the human sciences i.e., psychoanalysis, criminology, penal theory, political philosophy. cf. David Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007), 26. Hereafter *Pellauer*.

² <http://www.scribd.com/doc/80295667/On-Paul-Ricoeur-s-Poetics-of-the-Will>. To restate Ihde’s elaboration on the division of the presentation of the philosophy of the will: Ricoeur’s philosophy of the will is generally divided into *structural* phenomenology and *hermeneutic* phenomenology. (I think this can also be called a *methodological* organization since it shows us the corresponding method for each division. Garcia refers it as a tripartite organization that forms a methodological ensemble designed to support a certain vision of being human. cf. Leovino Garcia, *Paul Ricoeur: Philosopher of Responsibility and Hope*, 57-58. Hereafter, *Garcia*.) The first broad division consists of *Freedom and Nature* until *Fallible Man*. In this division, the human will is dealt with in

its “structures” by taking refuge in rational philosophy, without the use of symbols and myths. In a wider sense, *fault* is already treated here yet the *Fault* is “bracketed out.” Meanwhile, *The Symbolism of Evil* is under the second division, elaborating man’s existence as being expressed concretely, in symbols and myths. *Fault*, in its full sense, is already considered here.

Specifically, the philosophy of the will is sub-divided into series of “readings” namely *Eidetic*, *Empirics*, and *Mythics*. *Freedom and Nature* falls under the *Eidetic* which concerns the abstract description of the will. This is away from the lifeworld of *Fault*. Since *Fault* is bracketed here, there is no “fault” or “evil” involved here, in the strict sense. In *Empirics* is *Fallible Man* wherein the removal of brackets is presented. The idea of fallible enters into the picture with “fault” or “evil” as possibilities. *Mythics* includes *Symbolism of Evil* which focuses on the facticity of actual expression in formulated language. It is in here that symbols appear so that an explicit hermeneutics is needed.

More specifically, the first two sub-divisions pertains to the structures of possible experience (or possibilities) while the third one, on the concrete expressions of man’s experiences of evil and suffering. cf. Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* ed. John Wild et. al., ed. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 20-22. Hereafter *Ihde*.

³ So, philosophizing the meaning of human existence is to attend to both the *meaning* and *existence* of what it takes to be human. This is done by being *phenomenological* and *hermeneutical* with the aim of “clarifying existence itself by use of concepts.” cf. Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1995), 75-76. Hereafter *Hahn*.

⁴ This is characteristic of *Freedom and Nature* on the meaning of human existence. Indeed, this first volume is an intentional analysis of man’s fundamental possibilities, bracketing out the two dimensions of man’s actual existence: transcendence and fault. cf. *Ricoeur*, xviii. This is a cue that human will can only be glimpsed from a phenomenological analysis which is known for its method of suspending or explicit and careful avoidance of presupposition(s), in this case, the symbol-loaded terms of transcendence and fault. As Pellauer says, the initial explication of Ricoeur’s philosophy of the will through the notions of the voluntary and the involuntary is “an attempt at pure description of the phenomena” that is indicative of his goal which is to understand more than to explain. He seeks the meaning of the phenomena, relating to the voluntary and the involuntary and their implications, for human self-understanding and responsible action. cf. *Pellauer*, 12-13. He adds, “Ricoeur’s phenomenological approach will try to isolate (this) phenomenon as much as possible in order to capture something like its essence.” *Ibid.*, 19. Although this contention is stated under the discussion of the voluntary phenomenon, we could get a hint of how Ricoeur treats the subject matter. The pattern that I see here is that the consideration of phenomena is done in a descriptive manner, followed by an historical one. In the former, phenomenology does much of its part while in the latter, existentialism takes on the historicity of the description.

⁵ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ricoeur/>. We may say that reciprocity means that we come to know something in relational terms, say, to understand the voluntary as not simply having its own identity but in relation to the involuntary. With this, they are not just binary pairs or polarities pointing to two irreconcilable extremes.

⁶ *Garcia*, 68.

⁷ *Pellauer*, 13.

⁸ In the words of Pellauer: “decision conceived as thought.” *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ “decision as judgement” *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Presupposing that man does what he sees to be good and that *is* good insofar as he is concerned. So, this good-according-to-him is not necessarily moral good; it may be bad for others but good for the one making a decision. From here, we are led to the notion of *values* or the ethical dimension as part of the whole dynamics or attempt to achieve a project: “A project that needs to be put to test of whether it can be or is carried out.” cf. *Pellauer*, 14.

¹¹ This motivation behind the decision is not just a happening of man that constitutes the cognitive voluntary human activities but also involves the bodily involuntary tendencies / behaviors.

¹² Or become pleasurable / pleasant despite the presence of lack.

¹³ As such, many factors are involved so that man has to go through a process of painstakingly attending both to that which he is conscious of and unconscious: his finitude, his value-orientation, behavior, emotions, habits, character, life itself, among others. cf. *Pellauer*, 18; 21-22; 23. It then takes a lot of effort to decide, a certain degree of patience for that matter. Interpreting Pellauer’s idea, effort is our “capacity to do” and the “what it has to do with us”; “it also involves patience before what we cannot change.” Anyhow, the difficulty to decide pays off since it opens a ‘mysterious’ world for us to acknowledge and marvel cf. *Pellauer*, 20; 22.

¹⁴ For instance, coming up a resolution towards a definite plan of action. But on how far it can go? We can only consent to (borrowing words from Pellauer) our finite, embodied human existence in a world we did not make. cf. *Pellauer*, 23.

¹⁵ Philip C. Dimare, *Ricoeur, Paul: Philosophical Theologian* in www.csus.edu/indiv/d/dimarep/content/paul_ricoeur.pdf, 1-2. Hereafter *Dimare*. We notice here a shift of approach on the part of Ricoeur in his attempt to decipher the nature of human will. After all, he is not stating point-blank in order to be innovative in his search for the meaning of human existence. Instead, he takes off at a starting-point in the form of a phenomenological method, one in particular the transcendental phenomenology of Husserlian origin, and takes off to higher philosophical heights of his theory of the will through the same phenomenological strain but with a slant of existentialism taking inspiration, especially from Marcel. The continuity from transcendental phenomenology to existential phenomenology provides us a hint of Ricoeur's philosophical enterprise that sees its task "to elaborate existential concepts, 'not only structures of reflection but structures of existence.'" cf. *Pellauer*, 41.

¹⁶ Pellauer prefers to have this titled *Symbolics of Evil. Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹ We remember here of the biblical story of the Fall of Man. When God said to man namely Adam and Eve to not to go near the tree of life and to eat its fruit, we have already a hint of man's weakness (before we say man's wickedness) that could lead him to fall.

²⁰ By analogy, Adam and Eve were sent out of Paradise because of their action.

²¹ This is akin to Pellauer's *character* which means the finite perspective. cf. *Pellauer*, 30.

²² A *happiness* referring to something infinite in terms of meaning. *Ibid.*

²³ And hence become a person from just simply a *structural* man. This is how Ricoeur, following the Kantian tradition, sees it when doing a synthesis between character and happiness. *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ Taking the example of the biblical story on the Fall of Man, the serpent representing the reality of evil, was already there before man fell from his "purity or innocence."

²⁵ The scientific study of human language. Linguistics can be broadly broken into three categories or subfields of study: language form, language meaning, and language in context. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linguistics>. Moreso, since symbols are part of language, this is not alien to philosophical thought. cf. *Pellauer*, 41.

²⁶ Ricoeur asserts in inadequacy of formal logic for symbolic language. The treatment here is not allegorical which presupposed an interpretation of the symbolic meaning. *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 36. We realize that mentioning the "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault" during the Penitential Act at the beginning of the Mass or of the Prayer of Forgiveness is a constant reminder of the real-ity of evil.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰ Negation as both positive and negative, as something we hope to overcome. cf. *Pellauer*, 23.

³¹ I think, the methodological implications can be traced from Pellauer. There was a transition in Ricoeur's methodology and working hypothesis with the idea of fault (or evil or suffering). From rational methods, the new method is more empirical in dealing with the existence of evil – something that is in fact irrational. So also, Ricoeur proceeds from describing "the essential structures characterizing the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary to the actual existence of evil." cf. *Pellauer*, 25. He is not only focusing on the finitude of man to explain how such an evil appears. His philosophy posits the transcendence, despite man's finite mode of being, to present man's capacity for the infinite.

³² Emphasis mine to assert the contention in endnote #30 but we qualify it by stressing its real difficulty to overcome.