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FROM THE PROBLEM OF “EVIL” TO INTERPRETATION.
“HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY” AS A METHOD FOR
UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of hermeneutic phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy. A major thesis of this study is that Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology is never freed from religious insights. If in a text like “Hermeneutics and existence”, written in 1965, one finds, for the first time, “hermeneutic phenomenology” as an elaborated concept with a specific purpose and a specific area of problems to be solved, ten years later, in “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics” (1975), the aim, the problems and even the method change. This study will argue that hermeneutic phenomenology is deeply rooted into the problem of evil. In other words, hermeneutic phenomenology emerges in the early works of Ricoeur as a “tool” for the perpetual problem of evil, even if, later, hermeneutic phenomenology loses its binds with the problem it emerged from and it becomes a landmark for Ricoeurian thought. Moreover, the paper also argues that Ricoeur develops “hermeneutic phenomenology” in order to find a philosophical method for approaching the religious discourse.

Key Words: Religious Discourse, Evil, Self, Ontology, Interpretation, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Paul Ricoeur.

Introduction

The main thesis of the present study asserts a simple fact: Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics or, more properly, his hermeneutic phenomenology is never freed from religious (not to say theological) insights, despite the fact that Ricoeur advocates a different perspective.¹ Following Ricoeur's argumentation on the topic of "hermeneutic phenomenology", the study will point out all the elements in order to confirm its thesis. Thus, the first part of the text, *From the problem of evil to self-understanding*, will unfold the development of Ricoeur's first account of hermeneutics. Hence, it will point out that the core or the starting point of Ricoeur's hermeneutics is not a philosophical problem (the problem of evil). Consequently, the second part of the study, *From self-understanding to interpretation*, will emphasize how textual hermeneutics, named philosophical hermeneutics, still holds to a non-philosophical insight. Therefore, the third part of the present article will apply hermeneutic phenomenology to religious discourse. The intention is not to see if hermeneutic phenomenology functions as a valid method in interpreting religious discourse, but only to point out the development of such a method in Ricoeur's thought. In other words, in order to fully understand the hermeneutic problem in Ricoeur's philosophy, one cannot elude what it is called the religious dimension of his thought.

From the very beginning, it must be underlined that it is almost impossible to accurately determine the place (or time) where (when) "hermeneutics" first emerged in Ricoeur's work². Nevertheless, in *La symbolitique du mal* (1960), hermeneutics becomes the focal point. The question is what sort of hermeneutics is there: a hermeneutics understood as a methodology or a hermeneutics understood as philosophical hermeneutics³? Ricoeur, at this point, is not at all clear. Both directions are open to debate. There is a methodology, for in order to enter into the world of fault (Fr. *faute*) and transcendence "we need a new methodology"⁴, while, simultaneously, there is a philosophical hermeneutics because "this is how it opens the field of philosophical hermeneutics before me; it is a philosophy that starts from the symbols whose tasks is to promote, to craft, the sense by a creative interpretation"⁵. This ambivalence of hermeneutics can be better emphasized if appealing to another problematic concept, namely, hermeneutic phenomenology⁶.

If in the case of hermeneutics, a sort of general agreement is obtained among exegetes, it is not the case with the "ambiguous" expression⁷ - hermeneutic phenomenology. The difficulty of the matter is asserted not only by the many different ways of interpretation that exegetes have offered⁸, but also by Paul Ricoeur himself. The assiduity by which the

French philosopher tries to confine his own analysis, the methodological stages of his research, the switch of methods (from phenomenology to hermeneutics), the interfusion of methods (the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology) somehow settles the impossibility of accurately determining what "hermeneutic phenomenology" means. Perhaps, to a certain extent, it is precisely here at the level of the word "method" that one may find the entire constellation of problems. Two key texts will guide the entire endeavor of the study: *Existence et herméneutique* (1965) and *Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl* (1975).

Hermeneutics, as it is understood today, after Gadamer⁹, has no connection to the concept used in the middle 50s (or, even later, in the middle 60s). Without any doubt, Gadamer is the philosopher that can be "blamed" for the way hermeneutics is understood (i.e. philosophical hermeneutics) today. Philosophical hermeneutics, as a new way of conceiving philosophy as such, has everything to do with Gadamer¹⁰. It is not the aim of this paper to determinate the multiple ties that binds Ricoeur's hermeneutics to Gadamer's¹¹, but it is necessary to highlight that the emergence of *Truth and Method* (1960) will forever change the way in which Ricoeur conceives hermeneutics. It is enough to state that *Du la text la action* (1986) was an ongoing debate with Gadamer¹² while in *De l'interprétation* (1965) and *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969), where hermeneutics is omnipresent, Gadamer is absent¹³. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize, from the very beginning, that the early development of Ricoeur's hermeneutics has no relation to the hermeneutic project developed by Gadamer. This is a very simple fact but with considerable effects. Therefore, when approaching the early works of Ricoeur¹⁴, one has to understand that hermeneutics cannot be seen as an elaborate concept (or, more precisely, a subject matter) but more like a work in progress with the purpose of becoming a method (in the strict sense of a methodology). The fact that later Ricoeur's hermeneutics becomes more than a method (i.e. philosophical hermeneutics) has to do, among other things, with a known fact in the history of ideas – they evolve. The present paper addresses this specific evolution in the thought of Paul Ricoeur.

Therefore, from this mere historical perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology must be regarded in two different ways, although connected. The first hermeneutic phenomenology that appears in *Existence et herméneutique* (1965) is not the same as the hermeneutic phenomenology found in *Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl* (1975). The thesis here is that the first "hermeneutic phenomenology" (from now on named HP1) is still tied to the problem of evil (in this sense, HP1 belongs to the triple project of *Philosophie de la volonté* and it is viewed by Ricoeur as methodology), while the second "hermeneutic phenomenology" (from now on HP2) belongs to what it is called, in a proper manner, according to Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics.

The 60s and the 70s are an intensive creative period, the constituent core of *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique* and of *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique* (2) and in fact of Ricoeur's hermeneutics. These decades may be viewed, on the one hand, as a close call to what later on Ricoeur would practice as hermeneutics and, on the other hand, as something distinct from what Ricoeur suggests hermeneutics might be. While tackling the two texts, *Existence et herméneutique* and *Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl*, the reader is in fact trapped in the middle of the issues that Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology raises. In the first text (HP1), hermeneutics is indistinctly tied onto ontology while the same (yet different) hermeneutics is in the second text (HP2) a constituent part of phenomenology and vice versa. In the two texts, viewed as „guiding ideas”, which are at the same time confusing related to Ricoeur's philosophy, hermeneutics signifies both distinct and opposing moments in Ricoeur's work.

A double ontology: from “evil” to self-understanding

The present study begins with the first text in order to highlight the interconnections between the problem of evil and the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology.

In order to provide at least one basic clarification, one has to consider the “stake” that lies behind the first problematic texts. According to Ricoeur's own words, the “stake” is to “give an acceptable sense to the notion of existence – a sense which would express the renewal of phenomenology through hermeneutics”¹⁵. Even so, one can question – why is it that existence needs to be redefined, over-comprehended, and renewed by grafting hermeneutics to phenomenology? The question is almost redundant, as it is in all the cases when one asks Ricoeur something, because, Ricoeur explains: „the desire for (an) ontology (...) animates our enterprise”¹⁶. Further, why is it that Ricoeur wishes to build a new ontology? Moreover, what is the meaning of a new ontology, namely a new ontology reported to an old one? Even more clearly, what kind of ontology that would surpass the old one does Ricoeur wish to propose? Obviously, Ricoeur recounts the type of ontology he talks about. It is a new ontology in relation to Heidegger's ontology, an ontology of a “long route”, indirect, allusive, with the need to consider all the aspects missed by Heidegger's ontology by being too bluntly installed in the core of (understanding) “comprehension”¹⁷. A thorough ontology that has to climb the multitude of paths that Heidegger missed by refusing to enter in the world “of semantics”¹⁸ or, in a more proper sense, in the world of “epistemology”¹⁹.

Moving forward, there are two main reasons why a new ontology, after Heidegger's, is required, according to Ricoeur: (1) “to give a new

organon to exegesis"²⁰ and, within this text, the fundamental reason is formulated as a question – (2) “it is not once again within language itself that we must seek the indication that understanding is a mode of being?”²¹. It is not too complicated to observe that the first reason is a response to Dilthey (the call for a methodology in human sciences), but it is quite complicated to fully understand the second reason. What can it mean to search within the language itself the suggestion that comprehension is a manner of being? Aren't we today entitled to say that Gadamer settled the problem of comprehension as language²²? Of course, but this is not the case here, as mentioned earlier, in connection with HP1. However, this is not the main cause that can puzzle our understanding in relation to the second reason where Ricoeur urges an ontology. More clearly, the question is what kind of language is most probable to give us access to (understanding) comprehension, even if this “comprehension” is not yet ontological? We should let Ricoeur speak: “If, then, a new problematic of existence is to be worked out, this must start from and be based on the semantic elucidation (*l'élucidation sémantique*) (...) this semantic will be organized around the central theme of meanings with multiple or multivocal senses or what we might call symbolic senses”²³. Thus, before even daring to grant us the possibility to reach the ontological level of understanding, we first have to elucidate symbolic expressions. We may ask ourselves ‘what is the reason for this?’. It is because “the understanding of multivocal or symbolic expression is a moment of self-understanding”²⁴. In other words, we cannot have direct access to understanding, as we can within the fundamental ontology of Heidegger, if we are not going to go along the path of symbolic expression. Here, symbolic expression offers the path towards understanding, but more importantly, it offers the path towards self-understanding. It is important to be fully aware of the double conceptualization mentioned so far: understanding and self-understanding. A double moment with two different purposes: exegesis and self-understanding. If one is going to regard only self-understanding, this is because “the subject that interprets himself while interpreting signs is no longer the cogito: rather, he is a being who discovers, by the exegesis of his own life, that he is placed in being before he places and possesses himself”²⁵.

The semantic path or the symbolic expression is viewed by Ricoeur not only as a privileged path to understanding the self, but also as a significant place to search for the center of all hermeneutics. For Ricoeur, in this “semantic knot” (symbolic expression), “we can search for the center of all hermeneutics, general or particular, fundamental or special”²⁶ or, in other words, “symbolism and interpretation are correlative concepts”²⁷. The point of demonstration here is the core of HP1, where the fundamental concept is not understanding but self-understanding. “All hermeneutics is, explicit or implicit, self-understanding starting from the

detour of others' understanding"²⁸. Thus, if one can conceive a hermeneutic starting exclusively from HP1, "hermeneutics as organon for exegesis" fades in front of a "hermeneutic of self-understanding". The entire article is centered on the problem of self-understanding. Although later Ricoeur more clearly develops the basis for an organon of exegesis (to be referred to when discussing about HP2), here hermeneutics, or, more explicitly, hermeneutic phenomenology, has the problem of self-understanding as its goal. Therefore, it must be underlined that in *Existence and Hermeneutics*, "hermeneutic phenomenology" deals with the problem of the self (self-understanding) through the semantic knot given by symbolic expression. That is why Ricoeur advocates grafting hermeneutics to phenomenology: "by articulating this multivocal senses onto the conscience of the self, it transforms deeply the problem of the Cogito"²⁹. It is as if, within the blank conscience of the cogito, the human attaches a layer of multivocal senses (symbolic expressions) only to fully understand the cogito itself. This is how one can understand the conflict of interpretations; not a conflict within interpretation as such, but a conflict regarding the multiple ways of conceiving the subject (psychoanalysis, structuralism, phenomenology etc.). Grafting hermeneutics to phenomenology states that a new method (or, a new interpretation) might as well advance into the problems of the cogito. Here, hermeneutics is not viewed as a subject in itself but more like a method to be explored.

Summing up the statements presented so far, the study points to two focal ideas: (1) Ricoeur urges the building of a new ontology that would have to deal with self-understanding through the long route of semantics, and (2) the center of all hermeneutics is symbolic expression.

However, in fact, this is neither the first time Ricoeur desires to build an ontology, nor the first time he indicates that the center of all hermeneutics is symbolic expressions. There are two other texts that confront with the same difficulties, but with regard to the problem of evil: (1) *Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté*³⁰ and (2) *Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique* (2)³¹. It was in the first text, written in 1952, soon after the completion of *Philosophie de la volonté I*, that the necessity for an ontology firstly emerged: "We will try to pass from a constitutive and descriptive phenomenology to an ontology of the conscious: we will try to circumscribe a privileged experience which, on the level of the voluntary and the involuntary, can be relevant to my ontological situation"³². But what kind of privileged experience does Ricoeur refer to? "This experience can be an experience of deficiency (*déficience*), an experience of not-being (*de non- être*)"³³. For Ricoeur, at the level of *Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté*, ontology must answer to "ambition, cheapness, hate"³⁴, the core of the experience of deficiency. Confronting *Existence and Hermeneutics* with *Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté*, one can

observe that there are two different types of ontology: on the one hand, an ontology that has to answer the problem of self-understanding and, on the other hand, an ontology that has to answer the problem of deficiency. Actually, at a closer look, it would not be total misinterpretation if stating that here there are similar ontologies. Even more, it would not be too much if stating that the ontology required by self-understanding is similar to the ontology that the experience of deficiency requires. In other words, it is not difficult to see that HP1 develops Ricoeur's ideas from *Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté* where the main reason for an ontology is the problem of evil.

Advancing the search for the "the center of all hermeneutics" as symbolic expressions, one may find out that in *Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique* (2), written in 1962, soon after the completion of *Philosophie de la volonté II*: "we shall ultimately see, however, that the hermeneutic of evil is not an indifferent domain but a most significant domain, perhaps the very source of the hermeneutical problem itself"³⁵. For Ricoeur, "the hermeneutics of evil" is the privileged "semantic knot" where interpretation and symbolism become correlative concepts. It is not at all hard to grasp here the religious implication of such a definition. The problem of evil constitutes the main problem of any hermeneutical attempt.

Some tentative conclusions can be highlighted here: (1) the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology must be seen as a method to explore the problem of self-understanding; (2) the path to an ontology of understanding must first pass through self-understanding, which is always an experience of deficiency; (3) semantics as symbolic expressions is the privileged place where we can search for self-understanding; (4) this "semantic knot" offers the possibility to acknowledge that interpretation and symbolism are correlated concepts; (5) the symbolism of evil is the birth-place of any hermeneutics.

Nonetheless, that does not mean that this is the way one should conceive hermeneutic phenomenology. This is the first type of development of hermeneutic phenomenology. The second one will emphasize the complete turn of hermeneutic phenomenology.

From self-understanding to interpretation

The second text to be analyzed here (*Phénoménologie et herméneutique*) underlines that after ten years, the "stake" has turned into, on the one hand, the idea that "phenomenology remains the unsurpassable presupposition of hermeneutics; and, on the other hand, that phenomenology cannot carry out its program of constitution without constituting itself in the interpretation of the experience of the ego"³⁶.

The first footnote of *Phénoménologie et herméneutique* can act as a caution to any misleading interpretation of Ricoeur's hermeneutic

phenomenology: "this essay keeps the balance of method changes involved by my own evolution, from an eidetic phenomenology, in *Le Volontaire et l'involontaire* (...), to *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (...) and *Le Conflit des interprétations*. (p.39.)". But this circumscription (from...to) is not entirely accurate. The methodological changes from phenomenology to hermeneutics are intricate and more complex³⁷. Not only that *De l'interprétation* and *Le conflit des interprétations* belong to another type of methodology (different from *Le Volontaire et l'Involontaire*), but even *Phénoménologie et herméneutique*, where the above-mentioned quote is extracted from, belongs to a different type of methodology. Namely, there are three different methodologies here: phenomenology, hermeneutics and, at strange as it may seem, again, hermeneutics. Passing from HP1 to HP2 can explain this interconnected and intricate methodological movement.

Indeed, within HP2, any connection to HP1 is almost lost. Within HP2, Ricoeur is indisputably involved in strictly hermeneutical debates: *Auslegung* (exegesis, explication, interpretation) is now the main topic. Gadamer is omnipresent, Heidegger as well, without losing from sights the founder of phenomenology, Husserl. Symbolic expressions, semantic knot or evil (the main topics of HP1) are nowhere to be found. Here, Ricoeur cannot conceive hermeneutics without Gadamer³⁸. Nevertheless, the question is would Ricoeur "forget" his own hermeneutics, or, more accurately, what are the connections, if there are any, between "the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology" and "hermeneutic phenomenology"? This is neither a debate on the fundamental phenomenological roots of any hermeneutics, nor one on the implicit hermeneutic features of any phenomenology³⁹. Nevertheless, this approach stops at this "anew" hermeneutic phenomenology (and its possibilities⁴⁰), particularly its task. If one manages to establish that the main task of HP1 is the necessity of an ontology (let us remember that the urge for a new ontology is given by self-understanding, not by understanding as such), the question remains whether one can find the same "desire for ontology" in HP2? Or, is Ricoeur committed, after ten years of study, to his project to give us a new ontology? The answer is, as bluntly as possible, no⁴¹. The main task within HP2 is to establish that "phenomenology cannot carry out its program of constitution without constituting itself in the interpretation of the experience of the ego". At this point, one can trace the movement from phenomenology to hermeneutics. Interpretation is an inner fact of phenomenology; not only does phenomenology require hermeneutics, but its own constitution involves hermeneutics. Even more, one can trace the passage from phenomenology to hermeneutics in Ricoeur's own evolution: from an eidetic of volition to an interpretation of the experience of the ego; here, ego and volition become similar concepts. Nevertheless, a triple implicit task, which is by far more important, can be identified: an ongoing debate

with Gadamer⁴², a critical position between the universality of hermeneutics and the criticism of ideologies⁴³, and, last but not least, the "world of the text"⁴⁴. Even if it is only a suggestion and Ricoeur does not emphasize it, one should not overlook it: "A radical way of placing the primacy of subjectivity in question is to see the theory of the text as the hermeneutical axis. Insofar as the meaning of a text is rendered autonomously with respect to the subjective intention of its author, the essential question is not to retrieve the lost intention behind the text, but to unfold, in front of the text, the 'world' it opens and discloses"⁴⁵.

Ricoeur submits the text as a way to surpass the dialogue⁴⁶ (not only that the text should better explain the inner constitution of hermeneutics, but the text can explain self-understanding), and the question is if Ricoeur alludes to his own hermeneutical practice? Does Ricoeur think beyond Gadamer⁴⁷? Of course, he does, but this fact is not as obvious as one would like it to be. In fact, the hermeneutical statement of his hermeneutical practice is more obvious in *Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?*, a text that was published as an homage on Gadamer's seventieth anniversary⁴⁸. There, Ricoeur suggested a new concept of interpretation⁴⁹ where explanation and understanding become similar⁵⁰. This is to say that the allusive ontological domination of understanding should not overpass the importance of explication. However, explanation becomes this important only when reported to the world of the text, a world, as Ricoeur repeats constantly, in which I might live⁵¹. Taking into account that *Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?* was written five years prior to *Phénoménologie et herméneutique*, it is not difficult to notice why *auslegung* becomes so important. Hermeneutic phenomenology, from HP2, grounds interpretation into the vast soil of hermeneutics and of phenomenology. The fact is that hermeneutic phenomenology in HP2 explores the concept of interpretation (an interpretation strictly related to the world opened by a text) in order to confine its own hermeneutic, even if this fact is not declared.

A general conclusion can be drawn at this moment. If in HP1, the prevalent position belongs to self-understanding, in HP2 interpretation dominates, but only to a certain extent – to a point where Ricoeur comes back to self-understanding. The cogito will find 'him-self' able to explain 'his-self' not through the world of semantics but through the world of texts. The text in *Herméneutique et Phénoménologie* takes the place of semantic from *Existence et herméneutique*. The grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology in *Existence et herméneutique* addresses to semantics in order to be able to understand self-understanding, or, in a more proper way, to understand a disrupted self, a "cogito blesse". Meanwhile, the hermeneutic phenomenology from *Herméneutique et Phénoménologie* addresses the text in order to understand the world of a text and in order to understand the self that understands itself in front of a text.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the central text for Ricoeur is the Bible. In three consecutive texts (*La tâche de l'herméneutique*, *La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation* and *Herméneutique philosophique et herméneutique biblique*), all written in 1970, Ricoeur subordinates any philosophical hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics⁵².

Hermeneutic phenomenology and religious discourse

The next reference, according to the theme in question, is an article from the French philosopher's late career, written in 1994 (*Language and experience in religious discourse*), which seems representative for this "phenomenological hermeneutic"⁵³. Setting aside the author's intention, i.e. what the text wishes to tell as meaning, it is more interesting to see hermeneutics as much as phenomenology at work, and more than that, to see the "grafting" of the first to the second. The difficulty lies in the fact that this text has at least three different layers of meaning: one where Ricoeur is influenced by the Husserlian perspective, another one influenced by Gadamer and a final one, that of his own hermeneutics, where both methods coagulate.

The text opens by bringing forth the complication arisen from a total phenomenology applied to the "religious phenomenon in its historical and geographical universality". This complication is not related to the topic of intentionality, as a trademark of phenomenology because intentionality in not understood in its originary womb, that of Husserl, as "irremediably tributary to representation, thus objectivation, thus the demand to master the subject regarding its experience", but rather as a possibility to transgress that marks the "separation of the subject from any authority of the meaning". In other words, the meaning is not produced by a subject in its intentional acts, as consequence of the relation with an object. The relation subject-object (establishment of meaning through intentionality) is broken by transgression as a specific attribute of certain "feelings and attitudes that may be called religious"⁵⁴. Since the point of interest here is not how the overcoming of the Husserlian phenomenology is made, in Ricoeur's vision, attitudes, as "the feeling of absolute dependency", "the feeling of complete trust with no exception, in spite of everything, in spite of suffering and evil", "the ultimate preoccupation" etc., comply with a phenomenological description, with the specification that there are "absolute feelings, absolute, that is untied to the relations through which the subject remains connected to the object that is considered religious, to the meaning of this supposed object"⁵⁵. Namely, the subject-object relation now becomes an exterior one, i.e. one where the meaning is no longer established in the relation, but one where the object is exterior, outside, above, an "Another through which the conscience is affected at the level of the feeling". The religious Object is separated, in the strong sense of the word, from any kind of intentional relation worn by the subject, as it

would have been understood within a purely phenomenological tradition. Whether this transgression is possible or not, it is of no concern to us. One may only establish that there is the possibility of a phenomenological analysis in the field of the religious phenomenon, one that through transgression would aim at beyond intentionality. "Even if intentionality would consider itself the prisoner of representation, then it should be considered that the feelings and attitudes evoked before mark the beyond intentionality."⁵⁶ Here, phenomenology functions, Ricoeur tells us, above the measure; "I therefore admit without any reserve that it is possible to have a phenomenology of the feelings and attitudes that may be qualified as religious."⁵⁷

However, if a phenomenology of religious feelings and attitudes is possible, why would it not be possible to have a phenomenological analysis of the religious phenomenon understood in a universal sense? Because, Ricoeur tells us, there is a deficiency that these feelings and attitudes bear. The impossibility on an exclusive phenomenological analysis lies in the fact that these feelings and attitudes do not have an immediate status, they are not directly, totally, immediately given, but through language⁵⁸. Language takes the religious feelings and attitudes out of silence. Yet, this operation is already made within a tradition, within a culture, within a history. This is the reason why phenomenology is condemned "to run the gauntlet of a hermeneutics, and, more specifically, of a textual and scriptural hermeneutics"⁵⁹ so that "we must give up making a phenomenology of the religious phenomenon taken in its indivisible unity and [...] we must refrain, in the beginning, from drawing the great hermeneutical lines of just one religion."⁶⁰ The impossibility of building a phenomenology of the religious phenomenon is related to the historical, temporal and geographical condition of a religious community, as result of the atomization of language, as archipelago of language. The only access to the religious phenomenon, in a well-determined historical, geographical, temporal and linguistic context, is hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is therefore called to work on a religious community with the aid of texts, prophecies, its founders. However, if so far the meaning for hermeneutics is almost technical – understanding and explicitation – as a method used to work within a religion (religious community), Ricoeur tangles the understanding of hermeneutics adding a new layer to it. Hermeneutics must go further and position itself at the level of the "hermeneutical circle" or, rather, at the level of the "hermeneutical circles inherent to the scriptural establishment of the Jewish and Christian faith"⁶¹. Being uninterested in overcoming the Husserlian phenomenology, one will also be uninterested in how these hermeneutical circles are established in the bosom of Judeo-Christianity; they will just be mentioned: a) the circle between the Word of God and the Holy Scriptures, b) the circle between scripture and ecclesial community, c) the existential circle, which encompasses the other two circles at the level of each

Christian. Thus, in the heart of the Ricoeurian hermeneutics, at the level of the existential circle, Ricoeur proposes a new layer, that where the biblical text "does not aim at an out-side, its sole outside being ourselves" which says that there is an access way between "the internal configuration of the text to its effect of re-figuring the self."⁶² The resonances that the polyphony of the biblical text produces answer the polyphony at the level of the individual ego. Thus, the polyphonic structure of the biblical text represented in a language⁶³ and a written form answer the needs, attitudes and feelings within the individual. If the first form may be hermeneutically deciphered, the second can only bear a phenomenological description. The ego in front of the biblical text. Ego (feelings, attitudes) – phenomenological description. The biblical text (language, history, culture) – hermeneutical analysis. To complicate matters even more, one must say that this phenomenological-hermeneutical matrix, so complex, is applied to the structure call/answer in the frame of the dialogue between the subject (individual) and the object (religious). Here, phenomenology as well as hermeneutics must work together to clearly circumscribe the "existential circle" where the "global understanding of others, of the self and of the world"⁶⁴ is faultless.

Grafting is now possible: the first layer of a beyond intentionality as object of the relation call/answer remains the universal figure; the second layer, the typology of this relation, manifests at the level of the dislocated language in a multitude of languages; the third layer, language is caught within a tradition, a history, a culture. The progression acts backwards from hermeneutics to phenomenology, but constantly repeating the call/answer scheme as gravitational axis of the entire argument. Placed in this phenomenological-hermeneutical whirlwind, a wide range of questions can be formulated: does one not find here a total Ricoeur, a full Ricoeur, a Ricoeur that practices his own hermeneutical phenomenology? The answer is invariably yes. At the same time, one may ask himself whether here there is a phenomenologist Ricoeur that exceeds Husserl, or a hermeneutist Ricoeur that exceeds Gadamer? The answer is, again, invariably yes. The entanglement, in this sense, absorbed by Ricoeur through Ricoeur, is enormous. The successive layers, a kind of palimpsest, are interwoven, inlaid, moving together towards a focal centre. Ricoeur manipulates the interchangeable elements in different fields, swiveling them under an exponential point. Thus, the centre of gravity in which the text Language and experience in religious discourse is built, lies in the scheme call/answer found at the level of religious conscience. Discarding the pretension of intending to grasp the meaning of Ricoeur's text, one may make progress in the limited interpretation that would exclusively replay the methodological problems, that is an interpretation that gives up, from the beginning, its search for the stake of the text. Such a precaution brackets any pretension for truth that the text could claim. The present study does not try to adequately understand what happens at

the level of religious conscience, but only the way in which Ricoeur builds his arguments based on the hermeneutic-phenomenological method.

At this moment, it is legitimate to ask whether this method can be found in all of his works. The impossibility to decide respects Ricoeur's hesitations. If Existence and hermeneutics is an effective practice of phenomenological hermeneutics, it is not understandable why Ricoeur returns once more in Phenomenology and hermeneutics, after ten years, to propose, under the name of "programmer and explorer", intercession. The idea here is that the intention to propose an ontology remains a failed act, to play a bit with Freudian terminology, overthrowing the initial intention in a secondary intention. In other words, its stake, the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology, is in fact a secondary stake. Of course, this "grafting", passing from phenomenology to hermeneutics, is completely operated, being easily able to determine the place and the role of each method. That is to say that his entire effort to define and redefine hermeneutics as hermeneutic phenomenology surrounds his religious insights. Thus, one must always pay particular attention to the inner relation of Ricoeur's philosophical thought to his (not to name it biblical⁶⁵) religious thought.

Notes:

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² Although the majority of exegetes admit that the first traces of Ricoeur's hermeneutics can be found in "*La symbolique du mal*", the topic is still under debate. Pierre Colin in *Herméneutique et philosophie réflexive*, investigates if "the word 'hermeneutics' appears in Ricoeur's work before 1959". Colin stresses out that hermeneutics is a way of reflexive philosophy and consecutively Ricoeur practiced hermeneutics through reflexive philosophy. See Pierre Colin in *Paul Ricoeur, Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, ed. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 15.

³ I want to highlight, briefly, the differences between hermeneutics as method and hermeneutics as philosophical hermeneutics: first, hermeneutics as method regards the techniques of interpretation (a clear set of rules) applied to texts, facts, history, and so on, and second, philosophical hermeneutics regards the problem of understanding as such. See Jean Greisch, *Herméneutique et grammatologie* (Paris: CNRS, 1977), 25.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome II. Finitude et culpabilité. La symbolitique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1988), 10. (my translation)

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophie de la volonté. Tome II", 486.

⁶ The first time when Ricoeur uses hermeneutic phenomenology is in the essay *Existence et herméneutique* (1965) in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), 7-28. He elaborates and refines hermeneutic

phenomenology in *Phénoménologie et herméneutique: en venant de Husserl* (1975) in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 39-73. If in *Existence et herméneutique* hermeneutic phenomenology appears like "the grafting of hermeneutics to phenomenology" (7), in *Phénoménologie et herméneutique* there is "hermeneutic phenomenology" as such (55).

⁷ Jean Greisch, in Paul Ricoeur. *L'itinérance du sens* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2001), questions the concept of "hermeneutic phenomenology" elaborated by Paul Ricoeur starting from the 60s (15). The entire book (more than 400 pages) is dedicated to this expression - hermeneutic phenomenology. Even if it is not the first book that aims to see how Paul Ricoeur elaborates such a complicated concept (we will later on deal with other exegesis on this topic) it must be said that the way in which Jean Greisch handles an expression like "hermeneutic phenomenology" (isn't here, says Greisch, in this expression something unsustainable?) over the entire work of Paul Ricoeur is different from all the other philosophers that have tried to manipulate such an expression. From now on, hermeneutic phenomenology will become a well established concept, a part of Paul Ricoeur's vocabulary. Greisch elaborated explanation regarding (I) the genealogy of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, (II) the inner coherence of his hermeneutics, and, by far the most spectacular part, and, in my opinion, the core of his entire book: (III) the legitimacy of naming "hermeneutic phenomenology" as "hermeneutic phenomenology" (18) recommends Greisch as one of the major exegetes of Ricoeur's philosophy.

⁸ From the vast literature on this topic, see for instance: Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood. Imagination, Narrative and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 11-37, John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics. A study in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jurgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 36-70, Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur. The Owl of Minerva* (England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 13-35, David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 17, Theodor Marius Van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning. Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1981), 8-15 and 74-110.

⁹ See Jean Grondin, *L'universalité de l'herméneutique* (Paris: PUF, 1993)

¹⁰ See Jean Grondin, *L'herméneutique* (Paris: PUF, 2006)

¹¹ See Daniel Fray *L'interprétation et la lecture chez Ricoeur et Gadamer* (Paris : PUF, 2008) and also Francois Dosse, *Paul Ricoeur. Les sens d'une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 394-406.

¹² See Ricoeur, "De la text à la action".

¹³ See that Gadamer is not once mentioned in the articles *De l'interprétation* (1965) and *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969)

¹⁴ See *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome I.* (1950), *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome II.* (1960), *De l'interprétation* (1965), *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969). Jean Grondin in *Introduction à Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1999) in a footnote considers that actually only from *Temps et Récit* (1986) Ricoeur is as close as he can be to Gadamer and to the hermeneutical tradition. Grondin, 122 note 2.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 7. English translation, *Existence and Hermeneutics* in *The conflict of interpretations*, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin, (London: Continuum, 2004), 3. From now on, where the English translation is used (*Existence and Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics and Hermeneutics of*

symbols and philosophical reflection II), I will give the English version first and the French original second.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 6, 10.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 6, 10.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 6, 10.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 6, 10.

²⁰ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 10, 14.

²¹ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 10, 14.

²² Jean Grondin, "Introduction a Hans-Georg Gadamer", 217.

²³ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 11, 15.

²⁴ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 11, 15.

²⁵ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 11, 15.

²⁶ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 12, 16.

²⁷ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 12, 16.

²⁸ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 16, 20.

²⁹ Ricoeur, "Existence et herméneutique", 17, 20.

³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté* in *A l'école de la phénoménologie* (Paris : Vrin, 2004), 65-92.

³¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique (2)* in *Le conflit des interprétations*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), 311-329.

³² Ricoeur, "Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté", 67 (my translation)

³³ Ricoeur, "Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté", 67.

³⁴ Ricoeur, "Méthode et tache d'un phénoménologie de la volonté", 86.

³⁵ Ricoeur, "Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique (2)", 314, 313.

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique," 55. English translation: Paul Ricoeur, *Phenomenology and Hermeneutics* in *From text to action*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 38.

³⁷ Here there are two different interpretations that try to explain the movement from phenomenology to hermeneutics. Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology. The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1971) identifies the *latent* hermeneutics practiced by Ricoeur in his first work *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome I* (1950). The central purpose of *Freedom and nature, the voluntary and involuntary*³⁷ eidetic description, cannot be supported, says Ihde, because "the voluntary actions converge and they are confined by involuntary actions. The involuntary part of this reciprocity (convergence) already advances the necessity of hermeneutics" (27). This is how one can find the *latent hermeneutics* of the work *Freedom and nature*" (29). Five years later, Patrick L. Bourgeois in *Extension of Ricoeur's hermeneutic* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975) suggests two different pursuits: first, he shows the phenomenology's implicit hermeneutics simply and effectively, then he indicates the hermeneutical *extensions* as developments resulting from phenomenology. Moreover, both phenomenology's implicit hermeneutics and the subsequent extensions of hermeneutics derived from phenomenology are practiced by Ricoeur, says Bourgeois, in a somewhat perfect indistinction. Bourgeois asserts that in fact a phenomenology of the will implies, in a total manner, an interpretative underlayer. To be more specific, the American philosopher tells us that the *dynamics* itself of the will that phenomenology

described involves hermeneutics. Namely, human *will* that acts requires a *speech*. The phenomenological limit, as pure act of will brings out a speech: "a new balance", as Bourgeois names it, in Ricoeur's pursuit, between "to say and to do". This new balance provides us with the so complex die of hermeneutical phenomenology. In this hermeneutical – phenomenological device, we can decrypt the *dynamic moment* where phenomenology already implies hermeneutics (130-133)

³⁸ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 25, 39.

³⁹ To give here only one example (for Ricoeur, the most important phenomenological presupposition of hermeneutics) it is enough if we take into consideration the double affinity of phenomenology and hermeneutics to pre-predicative expressions. The primordial experience for hermeneutics is that of *art* and *play*, and it is a mute experience. The same tie that binds hermeneutics to pre-predicative expressions is to be found at the level of phenomenology. See Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 42, 60.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 55

⁴¹ Françoise Dastur in her essay *De la phénoménologie transcendante à la phénoménologie herméneutique*, in Paul Ricoeur, *Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, ed. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 37-50., tries to find the main reasons for which Ricoeur suggested the phenomenological hermeneutics. Here is her primary argument: the catch behind this laborious and „militant” pursuit is the issue of the self. Such a concept is required (hermeneutic phenomenology), out of the multitude of difficulties, by two major difficulties: on the one hand, the impossibility of reflection to accede to the so wanted "total transparency of the self" and on the other hand, to give or to build „an identity between being and thinking (self)". These are the shortcomings that put to work (or require) such a phenomenological hermeneutics: the lack of *self's total transparency*, and the lack of *an identity between being and thinking*. This is why a "long route", "a militant ontology" assume the roles that would at least give us hope, if not even success in accessing such wistfulness. Reflection, phenomenology and hermeneutics, in the given context, may be interpreted as ways, routes, paths, through which Ricoeur's thinking tries, searches for, explores possible access to the self. Nevertheless, one must point out the final remark of Dastur's essay regarding the possibility of phenomenology in becoming *ontological* hermeneutics: "What kind of hermeneutics should it become? A reflexive hermeneutics (...) for whom the explication as world - explication coincides infinitely with self-explication? (...) or rather, an explicative hermeneutics (une herméneutique explicite) not of a subject but of the actual existence that searches the fundament for all regional hermeneutics and without which they remain devoid of any ontological anchor? (49-50). For obvious reasons, here is the French citation: "Un herméneutique réfléchissante (...) pour lequel l'explication du monde coïncide à l'infini avec l'explication de soi? Ou au contraire une herméneutique explicite de ce qui n'est plus un sujet mais une existence de fait qui sert de fondement à toutes les herméneutiques régionales et sans l'élucidation de laquelle celles-ci demeurent dépourvues de tout ancrage ontologique ? " (49-50).

⁴² Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 32, 51.

⁴³ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 33, 50.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 35, 52.

- ⁴⁵ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 35, 52.
- ⁴⁶ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 28, 48.
- ⁴⁷ Ricoeur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 25, 39.
- ⁴⁸ See D. Vansina, *Paul Ricoeur. Primary and secondary systematic bibliography (1935 - 1984)* (Leuven: Editions Peetere Leuven, 1985), 72.
- ⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Qu'est-ce qu'un texte ?* in *Du texte à l'action*, 151.
- ⁵⁰ Ricoeur, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte ?", 142.
- ⁵¹ Ricoeur, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte ?", 156.
- ⁵² See Ricoeur, "Du texte à l'action", 75-133, especially, 119.
- ⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, *Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios*, in Jean-Louis Chretien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricoeur, *Fenomenologie și teologie*, translated by Nicolae Ionel (Iași: Polirom, 1996), 13-36.
- ⁵⁴ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 13.
- ⁵⁵ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 14.
- ⁵⁶ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 16.
- ⁵⁷ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 15.
- ⁵⁸ It is worth mentioning here, although nothing more will be developed on this topic, the article of Chantell van Heerden. She states that religious ideas informs and forms our way on perceiving reality, or, more exactly, the way we think about nonreligious ideas. See Chantell van Heerden, "How religion might inform our conceptualization of reality. A cognitive linguistic investigation", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, vol.5, no.4 (December 2009): 2.
- ⁵⁹ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 17.
- ⁶⁰ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 18.
- ⁶¹ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 19.
- ⁶² Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 26. For a theological and anthropological interpretation of the presence of evil in contemporary world see Cristina Gavriluță and Romeo Asiminei, "The problem of evil and responsibility in Elie Wiesel's view. New perspectives on the Holocaust", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol.7, No.4, (2011): 75-82.
- ⁶³ In a way, Ricoeur addresses the well-known idea of the "inner verb" as one can find it in Augustine. See for instance the interpretation of Anton Adămuț regarding the problem of thinking and language in Augustine's work. Anton Adămuț, "Lighting and Knowledge in Saint Augustine", *European Journal of Science and Theology*, vol. 5 no.4 (December 2009): 29-32.
- ⁶⁴ Ricoeur, "Experiență și limbaj în discursul religios", 23.
- ⁶⁵ See for example the excellent article of George Bondor, "Paul Ricoeur and the biblical hermeneutics", *Journal for the Study of Religion and Ideologies*, vol. 9, Issue 27 (Winter 2010): 203-218. The thesis of George Bondor is that biblical hermeneutics is a central part, due to its ontological and existential implications, of Ricoeur's hermeneutic project. Not only do we totally agree with the author, but, even more, following George Bondor insights, we can assert, beyond him, that "narration", as the central concept of *Temps et Récit*, can be better understood if seeing in it a more "biblical" concept than a philosophical one. See George Bondor, *Paul Ricoeur and the biblical hermeneutics*, 207.

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