The problem of evil — crucible for the authenticity and modesty of philosophizing: In discussion with Paul Ricoeur

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In what sense is the problem of evil a crucible for the authenticity and modesty of philosophizing? This article proposes to answer this question through a critical analysis of Paul Ricoeur's thought on the symbolism of evil. Ricoeur's thought is examined in terms of two major issues. Firstly, what is so special about these symbols as symbols, which renders them so significant for philosophical reflection? Secondly, what exactly can a symbolism of evil in particular deliver with respect to a transformation of philosophical reflection in our times?

In watter sin is die probleem van die kwaad 'n vuurproef vir die egiheid en beskikbaarheid van filosofering? Hierdie artikel het ten doel om 'n antwoord op hierdie vraag te verskaf langs die weg van 'n kritiese ontleiding van Paul Ricoeur se gedagtes oor die simboliek van die kwaad. Ricoeur se gedagtes word ondersoek met verwysing na twee belangrike kwesties: Eerstens, wat is daar so besonrens aan hierdie simbole as simbole wat hulle so belangrik maak vir filosofiese refleksie? Tweedens, presies wat kan 'n simboliek van die kwaad in die besonder, bydra met betrekking tot 'n transformasie van filosofiese refleksie in ons tyd?

Translated by John Kraay.

As the title indicates, this article differs in intention and approach from customary meditations on the problem of evil, particularly those in the Anglo-American tradition. To be sure, in that tradition too, there is the awareness that the reality of evil transcends the dimensions of a philosophical problem; that embedded in it is a religious problem of such a nature that it 'calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care' (Plantenga 1974a:63 – 64). Nevertheless, the problem is habitually treated within the framework of so-called natural theology or else atheology, in direct connection with the question of theodicy. The real question there is a disputative one, viz., the question regarding the rational (un-)acceptability of theism, the belief in a God both omnipotent and totally benevolent. Discussion of this question is carried on by means of arguments and counter-arguments that often display great logical acumen. This is not to say that the discussion is merely academic in character; too much is at stake here for the contending parties. And, certainly, the issues which determine the treatment of the problem are not only or primarily matters of logic, of (in-)consistencies in demonstrations; a thorough treatment soon leads to classic metaphysical questions such as the question of 'the nature of necessity'.

Still, the problem can also be raised in another way. The title of this contribution is intended to give expression to this in the words 'crucible', 'authenticity', and 'modesty'. By words such words lies an extensive reconsideration of the nature and task of philosophy as manifested in our century in phenomenology and its development towards hermeneutic thought (Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer — to mention only some outstanding names). Such reconsideration may be characterized as two-pronged; on the one hand reflection would want to affirm the continued reference of philosophical thought to basic human experiences and to the existential questions connected with them (in opposition to alienation in either rarefied abstractivism or technical expertise); on the other hand this reconsideration would put philosophy itself to the test in terms of this reference and regarding the critical questions of its true possibilities, its scope and its significance.

Within this reorientation a fair amount of divergence has arisen and hesitations are readily apparent when these 'basic human experiences', 'existential questions', and their relevance for philosophical thinking are at issue. Nevertheless, one may point to an attentiveness, in principle held to be legitimate, to classic, possibly neglected, sources (as distinct from 'natural evidences', 'foundational concepts', 'basic propositions' and the like). This turn is certainly linked to a renewed awareness of the profundity of human historicity as well — I shall come

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back to this later. At any rate, in a movement like this it is no longer impossible that testimony such as that of the dramatic book of wisdom, Job, with its upsetting questions and the answer in the final Voice in the thunderstorm (an answer itself composed of counter-questions), find a philosophical bearing. It is true that the philosopher cannot, especially not here, enter into the personal life experience of other people; on the contrary, great hesitancy besits him. But once having heard the Voice and through human suffering and human guilt having become sensitive to unsuspected depth dimensions, the philosopher cannot remain silent altogether. Who knows but that re-formation of his philosophical thinking may be expected from it? In this way, too, it becomes possible to take up again an older philosophical struggle with evil, a struggle like that of Augustine.

Another way of bringing out the tenor of this reconsideration is by raising the distinction referred to at the beginning. Is the distinction between ‘philosophical enlightenment’ and ‘philosophical problem’ really as well defined as it seems? Is there not a concern at stake, especially in the question of evil, a ‘concern’ in which philosophical thinking and personal life experience touch each other in such a way that the philosophical ‘enlightenment’ becomes less self-evident and the ‘care’ more ‘problematic’?

In this encounter philosophy is tested as if by fire. But this also means that philosophy remains intimate with life and with the ‘life-spirit’ of an epoch. The socio-critical thought of people like Horstheimer and Adorno in Europe before and after World War II should undoubtedly be understood in the same way — as the encounter of philosophy and life. True, it is noteworthy that some socio-critical thinkers tend to enter psychiatric waters and come close to designating evil in society as ‘societies’ (in analogy to ‘neuroses’). But when Adorno, in a book bearing the subtitle Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben, declares: ‘There is nothing innocent any more . . . there is no beauty nor solace any more other than in the enduring look upon the horrible that with unabated awareness of the negativities holds on to the possibility of better . . .’ (Adorno 1973:21), then this sounds rather like despair. And this despair is not really overcome. At the end of the book Adorno (1973:333 ff) does mention a philosophy that would be more than ‘model-construction’ and ‘a piece of technology’, a philosophy that would be able to take on the confrontation with evil from a ‘standpoint of deliverance’. Indeed, this is the only possibility for a convincing philosophy today — but it does not have a chance, he thinks.

It is not my intention to discuss Adorno, but his words do serve as a kind of intense clarification of the words ‘trial by fire’. His words also indicate that it is not possible to speak of evil, or at least to persist in speaking of it, without in some way relating it to ‘deliverance’. But then it should perhaps be added that his term ‘standpoint’ appears unsuitable, and the expression ‘standort der Erleision’ comes down to a contradiction in terms. ‘Deliverance’ turns on a relation to a Divine Person who takes people on, takes them along, and takes them through.

As I said, we are concerned especially with the movement which has come out of Husserl’s phenomenology and which has developed into hermeneutic philosophy. It has dug for itself the widest channel in contemporary European thought. In this stream Paul Ricoeur (born 1913), Frenchman and Protestant Christian, is a distinctive figure. By now his reputation has spread far beyond the borders of France. More than other great thinkers in the phenomenological — hermeneutic movement, he is intensely attentive to the reality of evil, and his focus on evil has the tension of a crucial test; crucial, that is, for the verity of philosophizing. This critical concentration, however, remains continuously bound up with a broadly conceived and patiently executed undertaking aimed at a transformation of traditional philosophizing. In all this there is no detraction from the conceptuality, the methodical procedure and the synthetic tendency of philosophical thought. But Ricoeur does want to do away with a philosophy pre-occupied with the idée fixe of the one, unmoveable point of departure (which philosophy would itself set up). He champions a reminiscing philosophy, recollective of a meaning always already there, a fullness of meaning even (anti-fragmentary and anti-momentary) — Ricoeur himself would speak of a ‘plethora’, a ‘super-abundance’ of meaning. This is not, however, in the manner of a new sort of eternal philosophy, but as an actual, historically necessary and viable one. It is necessary on account of the forgetting of meaning; necessary and possible on account of the tensions which characterize our times.

Like other thinkers in the phenomenological — hermeneutic movement, Ricoeur is conscious of the criticism that a philosophy so launched will be hard put to avoid subjectivism coupled to a more or less introspective method, and that perspectival scope can be maintained only in the form of a speculative Weltanschaung. Ricoeur, among others, brings forward against this charge, the fact that for a philosophical quest like his there most assuredly is a primary and comprehensive datum: language. The reference is not to ‘datum’ in the sense of brute, primitive matter, not even in the sense of material or building blocks for our constructions. The datum of language is expressiveness. This power of expression we meet with most originally, Ricoeur holds, in the full and charged language of symbols. The language of symbols inexhaustibly appeals and interpellates. Paying heed to this, understanding and interpreting it, philosophical thinking becomes radically hermeneutic and forswears its — to speak with Adorno once more — constructivistic heritage. It is the language of the symbols of evil which is exceptionally well suited to effect this transformation. Such a transformation does not really mean a break with the philosophical tradition; what it does mean is a new dialogue. Let us turn to the task of gaining understanding in dialogue with Ricoeur.

In dialogue with Ricoeur

Ricoeur’s thinking regarding evil could be characterized succinctly with an expression of his own: his reflection circles around ‘the greatness and limitation of the ethical view of the world’. This characterization shows that next to the motives roughly sketched above (hermeneutic anti-constructivism; openness toward meaning; the element of trial) the motive of (anti-)ethicism plays a role as well. One could say that the breadth of scope of the conception, as sketched, brings out more keenly the limitedness of the ‘ethical’. It is not inconceivable, however, that this motive was present from the start as a legacy of Nietzsche and others.

However this may be, for communicative contact with the tradition, Ricoeur considers the ethical view to be a central issue. It dominates in both the orthodox Christian view and in the traditional humanistic one, in both Augustine and Kant. The most original evil, or the ground and root of all evil, is understood as and avowed to be an act of myself, of man; more accurately: as an act of freedom, of a free will that binds itself. At its core evil can, accordingly, be designated as guilt.

This vision has grandeur, certainly in comparison to the alternative idea of evil as a fate, as something that happens
to a man, and so Ricoeur does not intend to relinquish this view. Still, he is very much concerned to highlight, next to the grandeur, its limitations. The limitations of 'the ethical view of the world' relate to both the depth and the scope of evil. The greatest representatives of the traditional view, Augustine and Kant, were aware of this, and Ricoeur gives a fascinating account of how they encountered the riddle of a human freedom that not only binds itself, renders itself guilty, but also — in Ricoeur's words — always finds itself already bound.

'Always... already' — in a sense evil is 'older' than man; it precedes him as performer. Also, it is something he meets outside of himself, as a power; a power which is at its height in the great social institutions of politics and the church. Paul initially pierced through the ethical view of the world when he spoke of sin as a power that rules and imprisons; in later times men like Nietzsche, Marx and Freud have, albeit chiefly destructively, upset this vision of man and the world. In a brief formulation used by Ricoeur: we must learn anew that and how man is a victim no less than he is guilty.

Now for this a return to the primary symbols of evil is most instructive. An additional advantage is that philosophy in doing so will come into fruitful contact with the phenomenology of religion, with branches of the science of language and with a number of social sciences.

I shall try to picture the development of Ricoeur's thought in terms of two major questions. From time to time I shall enter as a discussion partner, not to interrupt Ricoeur, but because — Ricoeur agrees — every word is significant in view of the seriousness of the matter at hand and because 'evil' is a word that speaks to us all. The first question is: what is it about these symbols as symbols that renders them so significant for philosophical reflection? And the second question: what exactly can a 'symbolism of evil' deliver, particularly with respect to the transformation of philosophical reflection in our times?

The signifying power of myth

Among present-day philosophers and scientists, Ricoeur is certainly not alone in his special interest in the entire complex referred to as 'symbol' and — to use Karl Jaspers' term — 'Chiffren'. Decades ago, neo-Kantianism, represented by Ernst Cassirer, had already turned to it.6

For Ricoeur there is more at stake than an aspect or a dimension of life which merits recognition subsequent to its neglect in a mixed empirico-rationalistic tradition. To him symbolism is originary language, preceding, and remaining the background of, conceptual language. It is the primary, immediate expression of experience, and in the case of evil, the language of confession. In this sense 'the symbol gives (rise to thought' (donne à penser) — a favourite formulation of Ricoeur's (though, as will become clear, this formula does not mean that the symbol cannot be simultaneously a given for 'thought').

In order to accentuate the peculiarity of the symbol, Ricoeur introduces a contrast, viz., a contrast with technical signs, ubiquitous in our day. Technical signs have a specific clarity and unequivocality; they say only what they mean to say, and once their precise, unequivocal relation to the thing referred to is seen and learned, these signs can be operated and manipulated, if need be, on a world-wide scale. In contrast, symbolic signs are characterized by a certain obscurity or opacity. This is so because they carry two kinds of meaning: a first, literal, clear meaning which, by way of analogy, implies a second meaning. The second meaning is given only in the first and this results in an obscurity which is at the same time the depth or inexhaustiveness of the symbol. Other than in the case of technical signs we can grasp the symbol only by sharing from within, so to speak, the movement from the first, primary meaning to the second, more latent meaning.

Without going into the problem set of technical signs, symbols and signification in general, I should like to note a difficulty for the conclusion Ricoeur appears to draw from this contrast. We should not forget that the technical use of language, like the symbol, rests on a fundamental human possibility and hence is not neutral regarding issues of guilt or innocence. It seems therefore that a 'symbol' does not differ from a technical use so much on account of its obscurity, but rather because it is an arresting and charged contraction of multiple lines of meaning at once. In other words, the symbol is a kind of perspectival concentration which to the 'initiated', to he who has learned 'to experience reality in these perspectives, is perfectly 'perspicuous'. In this sense not only words are 'symbols': things can be symbols as well, for example, stones or (parts of) plants or animals (horn, for instance); think of bread and wine. In all these there are concentrations of meaning in a fixed 'point'. They are things to which value is ascribed or attached by a community of people as part of an orientated and meaningful journey through time, a journey which nevertheless, in its temporalinity, is divergent and fluctuating.

Another important point is the multiplicity and variability of symbols. These properties of symbols 'give rise to thought', particularly in a philosophical tradition who commits itself to the unity of an idea, of a schema, or a system, and they are to be found even in what Ricoeur calls 'primary symbols', those elementary figures of language which he distinguishes from 'mythical symbols'. The latter are articulated far more elaborately; they have a story dimension including persons, times and places. In the former, the primary symbols, we hear the direct language of avowal, but even here we are struck by multiplicity and changeability.

The point is important not only in Ricoeur, but also, for instance, in Jaspers. Jaspers (1962:158) goes so far as to say that everything in reality can become a cypher (Chiffren), can receive a transcendence toward the 'transcendent'.6 Ricoeur keeps things somewhat less kaleidoscopic by putting the 'primary symbols' of evil, at least, into a threesome: the symbol of the spot or stain (also called 'magic'); the symbol of deviation or sin (more 'ethical'), and that of the burden of guilt (more 'internalized'). I deal with these at greater length below.

The question that must now be posed is this: if a multiplicity and plurality form is apparent in, and if this evidently is an essential property of, symbols, then on what does this depend? How are we to understand it? In the case of Jaspers the important thing is that every human existent be kept open to as many facets of life as possible, in itself and in the encounter of 'communication' with other unique (human) existents. In Ricoeur there is a greater simplification and a somewhat more stringent order, in part determined by his 'preference for' or, as he also says, his 'wager' on one specific symbol, that of Adam in the story of Genesis with its unique world-historic significance. In a moment we shall see that he has more to say concerning the mutual relations among diverse symbols, and that he will even speak of a tension-filled dynamism. The plurality in variation, however, remains to his mind an indelible basic characteristic. Hence the question: how can this be understood as such and what is its value? In continuation of my remarks regarding 'symbolism' above,
I would suggest that here we must recognize a basic power, a dynamics of meaning of such strength and penetration that, on the one hand, it makes a particular symbol what it is: a wealth of meaning concentrated in (the shape of) a sign; and that, on the other hand, it calls forth a plurality and changeability of symbols.

Just now I hinted that Ricoeur believes he can point to a mutual relation among the symbols of evil, obtaining even at the primary level. He holds that as we move from the one symbol to the other (from stain to sin, from sin to guilt), both an increasing interiorization, and a decreasing richness, of symbolic content occurs. But this impoverishment is relative. A later symbol does break down a preceding one — we may even speak of revolutions here — but in the new symbol, something of the former's core returns in a new way. Thus there is simultaneously destruction and integration. To illustrate: the stain or spot is the most archaic symbol. It has a markedly magical connotation, but it also possesses an exceptional richness. Now the 'schema of exteriory', as Ricoeur calls it, of the evil that takes hold of a man, is irreparable. We can speak of a gain when the symbolism of 'sin' comes forward. Then the image of deviation dominates, deviation from the straight path with consequent missing of the destination. Evil, then, is no longer a 'something', but rather a broken relationship. Even so, the schema of exteriory returns, no longer on a magical but on an ethical level, in the symbol of captivity (Egypt, Babylon). Something similar occurs in the transition to the third symbol, guilt, when on the one hand evil becomes a matter of inner conscience, while on the other hand this conscience discovers its imprisonment in the slavery of the will itself.

What can we make of this? First of all, I think, we should say that Ricoeur's careful attention to diverse aspects of evil and his attempt to uncover coherence, merit the gratitude of anyone who, in whatever way, would take the depth and breadth of evil seriously. Nevertheless there is, I fear, just a bit too much construction in his exposition for me to rest entirely content with it. I must mention this because this construction, more precisely this constructive-dialectical scheme, turns out to be determinative of his subsequent line of thought as well.

Take the idea of destruction, the breaking down of one symbol by another. Can this be defended in the light of, for instance, the biblical psalm 51 (a psalm which surely belongs to what Ricoeur calls primary literature of confession)?

- Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions ... Against thee, thee only, have I sinned ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Hide thy face from my sins ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me ...

Here we find the same three 'primary symbols' next to each other; and they change into one another, back and forth. This is not to say that in the course of history no change has taken place. Ricoeur points to the disappearance of the cleansing ritual. Such rites have undoubtedly decreased in number, in conjunction, it seems to me, with the fact of cultural developments by which the rhythm of life gains greater variation and greater complexity with time. In view of the topic that occupies us here, this is to say that the bond — both in the experience of evil and in the purification of it — between man and definite, regularly recurring rites, with rules defined in great detail and prescribed gestures, in which the sensorial and the organic are marked — this direct bond is loosened. But perhaps such a bond is unnecessary as the variation and complexity of evil become clearer and the ritual comes to appear inadequate in view of them. Thus it is not so much that we are dealing with a 'higher' phase characterized by more 'interiorization' and less 'magic'. In the new, more open societal forms and the 'technical' complexity within them, evil reveals itself as enounced on a larger scale and with greater subtlety, and the acting human being is, if possible, even more impressed with the 'dirty hands' that he makes and gets. The earlier rituals now seem to fall short.

In point of fact, these rituals have not disappeared altogether. It is a bit surprising that in this connection Ricoeur makes no mention of a symbol that is still venerated throughout almost the whole of western Christianity: baptism. In this symbol 'outer' cannot be played off against 'inner', or vice versa. This last point — a basic anthropological issue — also holds when we consider human artifacts. Not a single thing we make, precisely because it is 'artifact', is entirely definite or unsuscetible of correction, but this does not detract from the fact that we often carry the burden of that which we have wrought or helped establish. We carry it, as a burden: the bond between 'inner' and 'outer' is as intimate as that.

In short: Ricoeur's striving to relativize an overly traditional, philosophical dichotomy of 'inner' and 'outer' by way of careful attention to language and to the significatory power of certain primitive or basic symbols, I consider salutary and instructive. The manner in which he goes about it — too schematically dialectical and too evolutionary — leaves me with some reservations.

The symbolism of evil and its transformative power I move to the second main question that gives direction to the discussion with Ricoeur: what exactly does the symbolism of evil tell us? What does this symbolism tell us, as philosophers? Above, I had to anticipate the answer a little, and it is useful to attend a little longer to the interpretation of the second 'primary symbol', the symbol of sin as deviation.

Undeniably Ricoeur's train of thought is biblically influenced, even if his key-word 'ethical' is less fortunate. It is indeed entirely to the point when Ricoeur speaks of the rupture of a relation. Sin is 'missing the mark', in and through the breaking of the relation with the Divine Partner. The facts of 'wandering' and 'pollution' and 'catastrophes' can, I think, best be understood as repercussions of this primary deviating. They remind man insistenty, even if in a shocking way, of the distance from God that sin opens up. This is why the consequences of sin are different from punishments meted out by an external authority who must needs do his duty — and can frequently do so without anger. In such repercussions it is Anger, above all, that is manifested; anger on the part of a deeply hurt Partner who invested so much love in so much creation which He put entirely at the disposal of man, and who now with incomparable sadness, is forced to be angry if He is not to become unbelievable as Creating Partner. Martin Buber (1984:198), the Jew, went to the heart of the matter when he said: 'Responsibility is the umbilical cord with creation.' And Paul trembles when, in Romans 1, he speaks of the full brunt of this Anger; he repeatedly uses the words 'delivering up' to describe a God who finally delivers people up to their own foolishness and passion, and in so doing reminds them of all they have foregone. Regarding that which this symbol 'gives rise to thought' I should stress, more emphatically than Ricoeur does and more in agreement
with Buber, that it leads us to a thoroughly dialogical philosophy — including all the drama that that entails.

In the same context Ricoeur directs our attention to the character of sin as an enslaving and imprisoning power and, speaking of guilt, he points to the entrapment of the free will in itself, in its own enchantment. Here, too, a biblical note is sounded. Yet, while agreeing with Ricoeur, I should want to emphasize more strongly the intimate relation of the sinner with his own act. This does not place us outside of the dialogical framework; the ‘umbilical cord’ is not cut. Sin is something one does, but in the act one is surrendering oneself.

Proverbs (5:22), the book of wisdom, arresting says: ‘The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is caught in the toils of his sin’. And was it not Jesus himself who said most pointedly: ‘Everyone who commits sin is (in the committing) a slave to sin’ (John 8:34)?

Here, conversely, liberation is not primarily a liberation from an alien power; properly speaking it is liberation from the self; a thoroughgoing re-orientation; the purification of a ‘freedom’ in which we can make ourselves into slaves and in which we, acting, enact our slavery.

Ricoeur holds that liberation and freedom are possible only in the turning away from the question of the beginning of evil and in the turning toward the end of it. In other words, in the turning toward the promise and the hope that belongs with it. This is a hope for a future which will reveal that evil is surpassed by grace (the ‘how much more . . .’ of Romans 5). This perspective immediately entails a victory over the moralisation which would halt at judgement. Even more: the appraisal of events and people becomes essentially benevolent. Such is, as Ricoeur says, the ultimate truth of the Enlighten-ment compared to that of the puritan.

To this striking — although in a time of Philosophies and Theologies of Hope not exceptional — final turn in Ricoeur’s exposition I shall come back. The hermeneutics of symbols here takes on, after the anthropological dimension, the aspect of a philosophy of history. It is instructive, however, to pause at one or two intermediate turns in Ricoeur’s varied train of thought.

To begin with, something about myths. As we know, Ricoeur distinguishes these from ‘primary symbols’. I cannot go into his theory of myth now, let alone the concept of myth in general, no matter how current an issue it is. Most important for the present topic is that Ricoeur here again stresses the multiplicity of stories, then says that in the world of myth there is even more strife than in that of the primary symbols, and that this war is kept alive by a fundamental contrast. This last point especially is important. In virtually all non-biblical myths the origin of evil is ascribed to a catastrophe or to a pre-human conflict. The biblical story, on the contrary, is the one strictly anthropological myth: it was Adam, man, who fell, and it is he who stands accused. Even so, the contrast does not exclude integration or synthesis. For next to the moment of the fall there is the moment of temptation, from the outside, notably in the figure of the snake. Evil is ‘older’ than man. In a typically dialectical formulation Ricoeur (1974:295) says: Thus the Adamic myth simultaneously destroys and confirms the tragic myth.

If philosophy has a hermeneutic side to it or if, in Ricoeur’s expression, the ‘symbol gives [rise to thought]’, then a meticulous listening to that symbolism is a primordial necessity. For this reason I take the liberty of giving a ‘listener’s report’ of my own with respect to the myths of evil.

To begin with, I agree with authors in whose judgement a myth of evil is not to be found in the bible. The story of Genesis 3 is part of the Torah and may be read as its beginning.

A second remark concerns the word ‘fall’. This is not exactly a biblical word for the core of evil; it is, rather, a gnostic word for it. The core of evil is the breaking of a relation with the Creator-Partner who had shown the way and who could travel this way with man. This is why the devil is primarily pictured as a deceiver.

For all that, I think the word ‘fall’ retains something useful. A Dutch philosopher of religion has indicated this as follows: ‘Evil is not being but a direction, a dynamism which works as fall, as gravity’ (Heerling 1974:116). It is therefore an ominous sign that the phrase ‘fall into sin’ is going out of fashion: a sign of devaluation, of too low a placement of man. The word would be retained if we had learned to tremble before the dizzying range of human possibilities, both for grandeur and insignificance. Descartes and Pascal have witnessed to this in their own way when they spoke of man as ‘intermediate between God and nothingness’ (milieu entre Dieu et la néant).

In the third place it seems desirable to elaborate on the brief remark above concerning Genesis 3 as Torah. Buber (1964, esp. p.12–21), the Jew with the sensitive ear for text and tone, points to the unity of the story as a whole. Its basic key is sad irony. The self-delusion of wanting-to-be-like-God is accentuated. First there is the twisting of the Divine Word by the snake; then there is the turmoil of wishful thinking on the part of the woman; after that there is a shying away from the self and from each other in shame. In all this the way and the direction are lost. This highlighting of the sadly ironic tonality goes beyond a dialectical thesis such as Ricoeur’s ‘the Adamic myth simultaneously destroys and confirms the tragic myth’.

Concerning the figure of the snake, many an interpretation overlooks the fact that he belongs to the race of animals. In the Genesis story this means that the snake belongs to those creatures over which man was to rule and which he was to name. Furthermore, the word which in some translations is rendered as ‘subtle’ need not have a sinister meaning; often it means ‘acute’ or ‘wise’. Keeping in mind the superiority man had over the animals (in ruling and naming them), the figure of the speaking snake is striking: a talking animal, an intelligent animal even, uttering such ominous and distorted pronouncements. That is something quite out of the ordinary! It ought to raise questions that lead us to a strange power which takes on more definite shape later in the collection of Israel’s books. That, indeed, ‘gives rise to thought’, but in a sense somewhat different from the meaning intended by Ricoeur. Evil already there, ‘older’ than man, does not disappear altogether, but what does disappear is the special weight accorded to it by Ricoeur, and the dialectic that is, in part, constituted by it. It yields to something else: that strange, dark power (‘Satan’) must begin with or depend on the animal, the non-human, on that which is subservient to man. Herein ‘Satan’ betrays that he, in spite of the frightening possibilities he is allowed and which he exploits to the full, his original position is below that of man.

This reading of the story is certainly not far-fetched. The next chapter states that Cain, prior to the murder of Abel, is told by way of warning and urging: ‘Sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it!’ The Adversary remains, no matter what, the former servant, as compared to man as son (cf. Gen. 5:1,2). Once again this infuses the drama with a deep and intensely sad irony. In the light of later words directed to the children of Abraham this
irony becomes even more marked. All of it is extremely sad and serious — but also 'banal' (Hannah Arendt, cf. 1963).

I used the term 'listener's report' to characterize the remarks just made. But the question may still arise: what does this have to do with philosophy? My answer would be that every philosophy of religion works with concepts that have a surplus of symbolic value arising out of the experience which precedes philosophy and which permanently carries it. From time to time there is need to re-turn to this surplus and its typical nuances, in order to reduce the risk of conceptual reductionism.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur too moves from 'symbol' to 'concept'. The most important concept he confronts is that of 'original sin' (rendered as 'inherited sin' in German and Dutch). The concept is most important, but most vexing too, and we may add, one of the most controversial. Ricoeur's line of argument is two-fold: on the one hand he is out to unmask the concept as a pseudo-concept, on the other hand he would recover its authentically religious meaning, viz., as 'rational symbol'. In a brilliant and arresting way Ricoeur sketches (and does justice to) the formation of the concept in the struggle of faith with the pressure of gnosticism. Gnosticism rises out of existential anxiety, but pretends to be able to conquer it in knowing, in a rational 'seeing through' evil. It is a knowing that is, as Ricoeur says, one-sidedly oriented to the 'schema of exteriority', to the detriment of human responsibility. In this context, Augustine and Kant, who struggled with this temptation, are extensively discussed by Ricoeur.

However understandable the concept may be in view of the conditions of its birth, it is no less untenable as to its content. Ricoeur even uses words like 'worthless', and 'a scandal' to describe it. The quasi-juridical and the quasi-biological, and especially the curious mixing of these, make the concept into a non(sense)-concept. But this does not prevent Ricoeur from declaring emphatically that on another level, that of rational symbolism, it has an irreplaceable 'metaphysical' function. For it gives expression to evil as not only my act but as a kind of 'quasi-nature' as well. Thus Ricoeur again seeks to transcend the 'limitations of the ethical view of the world'.

The design of the present contribution as a discussion calls for a comment on this point. I have no trouble granting Ricoeur that the concept of 'original sin' has been man-handled in strange and objectionable ways. But I also think that, in the wake of legalism and biologism, it is not so much a 'metaphysical' rehabilitation in terms of 'quasi-nature' that is called for, but rather a deeper reflection on the notion of 'inheriting'. Only a few suggestions can be presented here.

It seems to me that first of all we must rid ourselves of the tenacious association by which 'inheritance' is straightforwardly connected to 'property' and 'blood-relation', i.e., with whatever a man has and with the family into which he is born. These things are certainly not unimportant — I shall come back to them in a moment — but they should not be over-riding considerations. They only receive their due once we have discovered who, at bottom, man is. And that is not a biological-physical or meta-physical question but historical in the deepest sense of the word. Keywords for this deepest sense are 'mission' and 'transmission'. A man lives with a mission that befits him, and in transmission. Above, I made mention of man as 'son', especially in contrast to 'servant'. But 'son' is immediately connected with 'being heir', just as the expression 'children of man' implies that being a child is not merely a phase, but characterizes man profoundly and throughout his life in that he depends on ancestors and is a 'descendant'. A Christian would have to add that the central and recapitulating figure is He who is called 'the Son of man', the 'First-born of creation'. Older generations derived meaning from the preparation for His birth; the fruits following upon the sacrifice of this First-born have shaped the lives of later generations: 'Here am I, and the children God has given me' (Hebrews 2:13); 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself' (John 12:32).

Adam is the type, the preview of He who was to come (Romans 5:14). Ricoeur also refers to this Pauline statement but, rather than contrasting 'type' with 'historical', as Ricoeur does, I should want to say that this word 'type' is an indication of the depth of the historical. Type is the preview of a destination.

Let us return to original (inherited) sin. Adam, the 'legator', hands down also evil, not as a fate or by way of reproduction, but nevertheless is an irrevocable legacy. However, every recipient of the inheritance is personally accountable for it. Cain, the heir, is seriously warned and given a chance. A kind of 'reinforcement' becomes apparent as well: 'Cain killed him' is appreciably more terrible than 'She took of its fruit and ate... and he ate'. Is not this another expressive, though distorted and inverted, picture of what could have been, through the history of legacies, a growth in holiness through the forming of (good) habits? Ricoeur correctly points in this connection to the profound term Augustine uses from time to time: habitus. It is profound because, on account of the built-in mission of man it is proper to him to appropriate things, and thus to gain 'property'. In other words, it is natural to the constitution of man's being to gain a 'having', a habitus through the generations.

Now this occurring takes place primordially via families and next of kin. This is instructive. Evil (like the good) takes root and enunciates itself in daily dealings, in the more intimate relationships, in marriage, family, blood-relations, friendship, and, somewhat differently but not to be neglected, with the next-door neighbours. But evil erupts, multiformal and violently, in the typically cultural-historical relationships of 'organizations'.

Finally, in our discussion with Ricoeur history deserves some special attention, particularly as to its destiny and fulfillment. Ricoeur's thought culminates there, as has already been mentioned above. This takes place in a confrontation with Hegel, and it could hardly be otherwise. After all, Hegel draws out evil far more poignantly than, for example, Leibniz does; it is taken up into the Absolute itself, and the account of it is given a great deal of substance (struggle, brokenness, conflict, and the like). In Hegel the position of evil is strengthened in that, (expressed in terms of modal logic) the necessity of evil overrides the modes of possibility and existence. In the final analysis Ricoeur rejects Hegel because notwithstanding the seriousness with which Hegel takes the reality of evil, he ends by placing it 'logically' in a philosophy with the pretension of absoluteness. To Ricoeur, absolute knowing is impossible, precisely on account of the problem of evil. The symbols of evil from which we read off the floundering of our existence at the same time mean the shipwreck of those systems of thought which would swallow up the symbols in an absolute knowledge (Ricoeur 1974:332). This, indeed, is Ricoeur's ultimate point and his motivating force towards 'transformation'.

One could ask just how thoroughgoing this transformation can be, how radical the resistance against the absolutism of knowledge really is. To be sure, the Logos no longer counts
as the final stronghold for the world and its history; nor does it provide the topping stone which completes the edifice of knowledge once and for all. This Logos itself is too much subject to dynamism and conflict. But it is still held to be just sufficiently powerful to fix the main lines of historical relations. 'The symbol gives rise to thought' — present tense; but it does so in a 'space' which is present as much as it always was, in the space of an 'always . . . already' present thinking. The ability to reflect is no longer one that is held to be able to draw upon its own resources; it must draw upon the expressive power of the symbols. But reflection need not let itself be dictated to in any decisive way — not by any symbol or origin-al Word; it retains the prerogative of the 'critical'. Because of the independent position of critical reflection, intermediate between symbol and free creation, there is also the possibility of a 'back and forth' (va-et-vient) between the old, venerable symbols and hope-giving progress, between 'archaeology' and 'eschatology'.

Hope-giving progression — the final accent is, undoubtedly, on this. It is the hope that ultimately is 'regulative' (in the Kantian sense) of reflection, and which gives reflection its eschatological texture. Indeed, the believer can only say 'amen' to the claim 'in hope we are saved'. All of us, together, are so deeply immersed in and overwhelmed by evil that the only perspective left to us is not one of insight or 'seeing through', but of looking-out-to, looking forward, and not merely to one's own personal salvation, say, at the moment of death. Dying is too painful for that; it is the last 'wager' of evil. And apart from being painful it often is too shocking and too abrupt for anyone to localize salvation there. Furthermore, I die with the recognition that, even if I have come to the end of my sins, evil is around me and goes on after me, undiminished in scope and unabated in power. I myself, at the very end, leave a legacy of evil and am unable to put it right. No, if there is hope and if there is looking-forward, then it must be to a new earth where righteousness dwells, among a renewed humanity. Ricoeur is right in emphasizing these broader connections when the power of evil and the reality of restoration are under consideration.

And yet, something is missing still, and I fear that the independence of the intermediate position of 'critical reflection', of 'present thinking', is involved here. Although Ricoeur certainly speaks of forgiveness, he does not show sufficiently that hope and looking forward take root there. Put differently, more in Ricoeur's own philosophical terminology and schematism: the va-et-vient between 'archaeology' and 'eschatology' could be altered into a more on-going movement, precisely in virtue of the continuous presence of forgiveness, the 'now of grace', as the biblical expression has it. It is this 'now', this presence (today) which, to start with, deepens my ties to my past enormously. Evil is deeper, tougher, and more lasting in me than I myself could surmise; without remission I haven't a hope. But it is at the same time a 'now' that delivers me from the burden of that past: 'the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.' I may go on as a man whose name is cleared. With this, (with the prospect even of a new name) the future is genuinely opened up. Meanwhile there is the conflict that only now has truly begun, at a level of such depth that we should say: we hardly know the good any longer other than engaged in conflict with evil. But in this the battle becomes worthwhile; even suffering can be borne as discipline, as purification of past and present sins for the sake of the future. 'God is treating you as sons' (Hebrews 12:7).

All of this holds because remission of sin is a declaration of freedom on the part of that other Logos who was the true voice of creation, but who came to speak fully when He came to his own, as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of this world. The speech of this declaration has extraordinary power. However attentive Ricoeur, together with other contemporary thinkers, is to the value and power of the word, here in the case of remission he seems to underestimate it. We can have an inkling of this power by considering the situation of one who is imprisoned for years as a suspect and an accused, whose life seems a failure under this burden and under the burden of a reputation ruined. He, who feels only bottomless despair is then allowed to hear the final verdict: acquitted! — the liberating word indeed. Its power can penetrate the life of such a man only if he, too, learns to forgive. Forgiveness is a constantly repeated present, purifying the past of one's fellow-man and looking forward, keeping hope alive: seventy times sevenfold! Without confidence in these forces social 'reconstruction' will not get off the ground.

One further point deserves mention regarding the va-et-vient. However much this movement may teach us, the beginning of reflection remains unclear. I would not argue for 'the creation' or 'the first man' as the starting-point of, or the postulate for thought, but I do want to suggest that the world began with man, and that even now I am accountable for it. We did not begin with ourselves; the beginning was made with us, and it was good, even very good, a delight to the eye and to the soul. Having said this, I may add — nearing Ricoeur again — that it was only a beginning, designed for more, for fulfilment. Indeed, when Paul speaks of Adam (the beginning), it is never without reference to Christ (the fulfilment). In this way, too, the Jews are to be understood in the Old Testament as a whole, with their minimal attention to Adam and their maximal attention to the Messiah (priest or king).

If I do not take into account that the beginning of man also started our world, then there is the very real threat, which Ricoeur acutely and repeatedly points out, of a certain ego-centricism or anthropocentrism in the apprehension of evil. This is present in the 'ethical view of the world', for instance, with its offshoots of legalism, moralism, and fanaticism, offshoots that, in point of fact, usually grow into fatalism of one sort or another. In view of this there is good reason to say that in some way evil precedes man. But it remains something of great obscurity of which I comprehend, from the paucity of the evidence, only this: when it came (comes) to the moment when I was (am) to attach myself, once and for all, to Him. Who began with me, there was and is the temptation from outside, worse, from below (the animal or servant). And I was and am sufficiently pervers and foolish to deliver myself up to the subervient. In an 'indirect' sort of way, this once again reminds me of the impossibility of being self-sufficient. It also reveals the more clearly and harshly, the contrast between my destination and that which I have become.

To undermine anthropocentrism further, remember that the Lord seeks man out and engages in battle with the servant. The stake in this is man. In this sense he is indeed central. In this battle man, as actor, was fully engaged when he went so far as to crucify this Lord, only to hear the shocking news that for Him this was the only way to take evil seriously and to take it upon Himself. What He has to offer in this contest turns out to be, as is made clear in Paul's words in Romans 5 (Ricoeur's favourite passage), a great deal more than the 'reign of sin' could tempt us with. But this is altogether different from toying with the thought that ultimately history is meaningful to some extent 'thanks to' evil — a thought
which brings Ricoeur into the area of ‘theodicy’. The significance of this victory for creation as a whole may be understood from the sequel to the letter to the Romans; I am thinking of the incomparable eighth chapter.

One last question: would not such a conviction and such a vision of victory tend to have a dissipating effect on the power of unrighteousness and so on the need to do away with it?

Horkheimer, mentioned briefly in the Introduction, is one of the few thinkers who seek to recognize in the full the awful reality of evil and suffering. Speaking of the longing for total justice he says (1975:69) that in the history of the world this can never come to be; for, even if a better society were to replace the present social disorder, the suffering of former times cannot be atoned for. As a last word I must respond: ultimately he is wrong. Biblical revelation concerning history is so comprehensive that the evil and suffering of times past are completely recognized. All the bloodshed on this earth continues to cry out and it will be avenged. A philosophy of history which lacks reference to a last judgement remains inadequate.

Concluding remarks

‘The symbol gives rise to thought’. For a worthwhile philosophy of religion this is a basic statement, almost with the status of an axiom. Other branches of philosophy, too, will not be able to do entirely without openness toward great symbols, or toward their dramatic content and power. Greek philosophy in its flower (Plato, Aristotle) was unable to suppress the tragedies. It was indeed troubled by them. Since Francis Bacon, modern thought seems strongly inclined to link ‘theatre’, if not with ‘killed’, at least with lower and less pure forms of knowledge (‘imagination’). Even Hegel, who once again raised ‘art’, with ‘dramatic poetry’ at its apex, to the level of ‘absolute spirit’, finally accords it a rank short of the ‘philosophical concept’. In our century, at last, we meet with tenacious attempts to make the originality and fruitfulness of ‘myth’ and ‘symbol’ a part of philosophical thinking.

Once a man has accepted Ricoeur’s basic statement and ‘wagers’ on biblical symbolism, he will have to let its originality impress itself upon him, both in its expressive power and its many-sidedness. This is entailed in what the symbol ‘gives’. Permanent receptivity to and regular feeding on the ‘source’ renders him resourceful in thought. In biblical symbolism, the greatest concentration of value is in the words ‘creation’, ‘sin’ and ‘redemption’, not as ‘loci’ in a dogmatics, but as core-moments in a drama.

In this article it was the second of these which especially ‘gave rise to thought’, although in repeated cross-fertilization with significance from the other two. If we look back now, in what way can we notice the impression left by both the power of saying and its multifority? In two ways, it seems to me.

It is a primordial factor in effecting and strengthening the awareness of limits, of philosophical self-critique — a respected guest since Kant — which is immediately linked to true-to-lifeness, authenticity. The title meant to indicate this.

But the power and multifority of the symbol can penetrate the work of philosophical thinking itself. This has, I believe, become evident above. I would like to point, in a brief summary, to the following themes and major notions:

(i) The intimate relation of inner-out, with regard to (wrong-)doing and repercussions.

(ii) Relation as basic datum, specifically as relation between persons. In light of this, (re-)interpretation of

(a) freedom — as thoroughly relational
(b) history as ‘drama’, taking place particularly between ‘servitude’ and ‘sonship’ (being-heir).

(iii) The basic trait of historicity in anthropology; added to this: typology as indication of the ‘depth’ of history.

(iv) The conception of historical time: the now (of grace) as liberating bond of past and future.

Notes


2. Habermas, for instance, displays this tendency.

3. In my argument below I make use mostly of Ricoeur, 1969, particularly p. 268—348, 393—431. Other works by Ricoeur have been consulted as well, especially Ricoeur, 1960. In order to avoid a multiplication of notes I have discarded continuous, more accurate notation.


5. Indeed, this ‘learning’, this exercise, is a precondition, taken completely seriously and institutionalized in the Jewish ‘Bet- ha-Midrash’ (house of learning). Also essential there is the ‘dialogical’ nature of this learning and of the insight thus gained.


7. Ricoeur (1960:102; cf. p. 71) himself cites this psalm, but only its fifth and sixth verses, what he reads in it is the ‘movement of internalization from sin to personal guilt’.

8. Furthermore, a psalm like the 32nd makes us pause to reflect on the relation — to be sure, not a simplistically conceived causal one — between certain illnesses (or aspects of them) and the pushing away of guilt (cf. verses 1—4).

9. Although, in line with western perfectionist thought, Ricoeur connects this Anger too much with an ‘infinite requirement of perfection’.


11. Concerning this motive — especially with regard to Francis Bacon’s ‘natura non nisi pascendo vicitur’ as clarion-call to the idea of ‘mastery through subjection’ — confer particularly Rudolf Boehm, 1974.


13. Clearly, myth is not history, but a statement of their precise mutual relations is less easy. A central issue seems to me this one: ‘myth’ a secondary phenomenon with respect to a tradition which is already present and at work, and probably is still quite simple, but nevertheless historical, an originate tradition which itself originates in origimate events which are experienced in so incisive a way that they, within the tradition, became impulses to symbolic-dramatic formation with exemplary value and power? Or would one prefer to think of myths as ‘creative’ origimate imaginations (at best nebulously referring to ‘origimate events’) that precede an historical originative tradition, at least as to its significance and worth?

14. Thus, for instance, Heiring, 1974:37 ff.

15. Here I borrow something from C. Vonk, 1960, p.112 ff. In the Netherlands this author is not well known, but he is of surprising originality at times.

16. I am thinking especially of the debate with the Jews (John 8), mentioned above; but also the first chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews.

17. This move on the part of Ricoeur involves a great deal, too much to mention here. Be it noted only that Ricoeur himself marks two dangers with respect to this move, that have historically taken the form of — on the one hand — allegorizing and — on the other hand — the pseudo-rational reflection of gnosticism. Both, however, have at least a foothold in a certain ambiguity within the symbol as such: to
the extent that a symbol is a language of the image, chances are that either the 'language' is played off against the 'image' (allegory), or the symbols 'become fossilized on the level of imagination' and do not sufficiently 'come to speech' (agnosis).

This last phrasing introduces yet another ambiguity in 'symbol' — one that seems to run through the others in a nebulous way — viz., 'symbol' as at bottom constant ('indestructible', 'fond révélat' of the word that 'dwells' in the midst of man), and as something that itself does not so much 'give' (præsens), but is datum, a task for something that 'really' is present, namely, 'thinking'. The symbol can only come 'to speech' fully within the language of the latter (although even then the symbol is the primary datum). A central issue lurks here which should really be clarified in a philosophy of time — up to now, however, Ricoeur has not developed one.

18. For this expression I am indebted to one of my teachers, J.P.A. Meekes (cf. also note 17, above).

19. Cf. my remark above on the 'eruption' of evil in cultural-historical relationships. In the more public sphere one can, in addition to specific political ties, surely think of the diabolical nature of much publicity-mongering as well, and of the slander and systematic destruction of people via the 'media' — with their corresponding sounding-board of a 'public' which, if only because of boredom, is attuned to this kind of 'news'. And all of this most often — depths of deception! — under invocation of 'freedom'.


Bibliography


