

## A Conversation with Paul Ricoeur

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**P**aul Ricoeur requires little introduction to contemporary philosophers. Together with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the name Paul Ricoeur has come to be virtually synonymous with philosophical or phenomenological hermeneutics over the past several decades. Ricoeur's voluminous contributions to hermeneutics as well as phenomenology and existentialism, literary theory, theology, and more recently to practical philosophy will undoubtedly remain important topics of discussion for many years to come. His more important books include *Fallible Man* (1965), *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), *The Rule of Metaphor* (1978), *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (1980), *Time and Narrative* (1984–88), *Oneself as Another* (1992), and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004).

Q: You have written much about the power of narrative to provide people with a sense of identity and cohesion. You have also written much about the fact that human existence is always in quest of narrative by way of providing us with a historical memory or future. Do you believe that narrative has a positive therapeutic potential?

RICOEUR: Well, Hannah Arendt claims that "all sorrows may be borne if you may put them into a story or tell a story about them." She uses Isak Dinesen's beautiful proverb as the epigraph to her great chapter "Action" in *The Human Condition*. Now this chapter is based on the remarkable theme of the "disclosure of the agent in speech and action" (§ 24), followed by its corollary, that it is in narrative that the disclosure of the "who" is fulfilled, thanks to its weaving of "the web of relationships" between agents and the circumstances of action. What is lost, at least for a moment (it is explored a little later in "the frailty of human affairs" §26), is the burden of these "sorrows" in the epigraph. Whence my question: what resources does the "story" have to make sorrows bearable?

It is in examining this question that I would like to enrich and reinforce the conclusions of your *On Stories*. I will do this by adding to the adjective "acting" that of "suffering," referring to the acting and suffering person. This topic is not absent in *On Stories*. Its three "case histories"—Joyce's Daedalus, Freud's Dora, and Spielberg's representation of Schindler compared with Lanzmann's Shoah—are about sorrows, whether they be the torments of hysteria or the unspeakable horror of the death camps. In this way sorrow is in each case the answer to the question which opens the book: "where do stories come from?" How-

ever, in none of these cases does the "story" make sorrow bearable: Molly's final soliloquy in *Ulysses* does not achieve this effect; similarly, Dora is not cured (perhaps because her "case" was used to verify a theory which would take shape more so in Freud's biography); and the sufferings of extermination exceed the resources of narrative, cinematic as much as literary. If sorrow is neither absent nor resolved in your journey through personal narratives, it goes no differently in the "national narratives," those founding Roman myths, those humiliating representations of the Irish by the British until recently, those relating to the distorted relationships of the Americans with their Others, the "border crossings" that prove to be the source of an alienation that makes neighbors into "strangers."

What then can I add to this ensemble of stories generated in some way or other by the innumerable figures of sorrow? I propose a reflection on the capacity "to bear"—to endure—that is generated by narrative. A void indeed remains to be filled in the vigorous concluding chapter of *On Stories* entitled "Narrative Matters." This chapter remains centered, like Arendt's chapter on "Action," on the relationship between the narrative and the acting person. You show yourself to be concerned by the postmodern criticism of traditional narratives, be they fiction or history (coinciding paradoxically, though for opposite reasons, with the negationist criticism of the Shoah.) At stake in the quarrel is the persistence of the very capacity to narrate in a time of fragmentation and the dispersion of human experience in its totality. In your response, you find support from that which seems to validate the persistence of the capacity to narrate, exemplified in the perennial nature of the categories of narrative theory drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics*; it is the link between narrative and action that is at the center of the theory, which is a matter of mythos, mimesis, or catharsis. The basic argument is that life itself is in search of narrative "because it strives to discover a pattern to cope with the experience of chaos and confusion." Cast in these terms, the argument leaves me enough leeway to join suffering to action. However, following Aristotle, what is said of life is re-centered on action in order to introduce the topic of mimesis, which is the mimesis of action, by virtue of the thesis taken from the anthropological part of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, according to which action "is always conducted in view of some end." It is thus permitted to affirm that "each human life is always already an implicit story."

But does not sorrow come to cast its shadow on the finalist version of human action that secures the primacy of action in the theory of narrative? Does it not place in doubt the assertion according to which it would be the life of each person that would "always already" be an implicit story? My suggestion here is that the arguments that follow the

definition of narrative as "mimesis of action" or "acting persons" would emerge reinforced by the addition of suffering to action, whether it be a matter of redefining mimesis as "re-creation," catharsis as "release," phronesis as "wisdom," and finally ethos as an "ethics" concerned with a persisting "self-identity," which perdures through a life of our memories, projects and presence in the world.

How would this widening of the referential base of narrative be carried out? It would need, I suggest, to recapture the theme of mourning by revealing its narrative component. To this end I will rely on the rapprochement, suggested in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, between (a) what Freud says in "Mourning and Melancholia" about the distinctive features of mourning compared to melancholia, and (b) his comments in "Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through" on the distinctive features of recollection when "working through" frees it from repetition. But, as you have done in *On Stories*, I will not make psychoanalysis the only resource for a reflection on the narrative component of mourning. Psychoanalysis operates under the restrictive conditions that comprise the rule of "telling all," the abandon of free association, the role of transference and counter-transference. I want to hold up the experience of analysis as a model and guide concerning the ways of facing tragedy and sorrow in the normal circumstances of life, let us say those of ordinary neurosis. It was these circumstances of tragedy which I took as my reference point in my essay "Evil, a Challenge to Philosophy and Theology" (1986).

I return to my attempt to learn a lesson from the rapprochement between "Mourning and Melancholia" and "Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through." The title of the first essay does not evoke narrative at all, but introduces the idea of the "work of mourning," onto which I will graft my theme of the work of narrative as applied to sorrow. The situations to which mourning reacts are indeed situations of sorrow: the loss of a loved one or of an abstraction set up in place of this person. As for the work of mourning it consists of this: "the test of reality showed that the loved object ceased existing and the entire libido is commanded to give up the bond which attached it to this object. It is against this that there is an understandable revolt." There follows Freud's description of the "large cost of time and cathectic energy" that this obedience of the libido to the orders of reality requires, in spite of the continued existence of the lost object in psychic intimacy. "The detailed realization of each order laid down by reality is the work of mourning." Is it not to a work of memory that the work of mourning can in its turn cathect? Is the feeling of mourning based on complaints that melancholy has transformed into accusations (*Ihre Klagen sind Anklagen*)? Is it not these complaints and accusations that narrative struggles to tell differently?

This suggestion finds support precisely in Freud's second essay. Here it is the tendency to act out (*passer à l'acte*) that Freud sees as a "substitute for memory," that occasions a transition towards narrative; the patient, says Freud, "does not reproduce the forgotten fact in the form of remembering but in the form of action; he repeats it, obviously without knowing that he repeats it." Freud explains the phenomenon in terms of the link between the compulsion to repeat and resistances. This is where the obstacle to remembering resides. It is then the "trans-laboration" or "working out" which makes recollection a work, the work of memory. Is this not, once again, a contact point for a narrative that should be called a labor of narrative? Does this work of narrative not lie in the transition between what I call in *Time and Narrative* the "configuration" constitutive of emplotment and the "refiguration" of life by the practice of narrative? The work of narrative would thus be the narrative form of "working through."

It is in widening this breach in the direction of the work of mourning with which all acting and suffering beings are someday or other confronted that I return to your closing statement in *On Stories* in order to amplify it and reinforce it. Yes, "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." But these narratives that are able to make sorrows bearable and to make us able to endure them constitute but one element of the work of mourning. Peter Homans, in *The Ability to Mourn*, shows that this work, which all of psychoanalysis seeks to explore, extends to the whole of our archaic and infantile beliefs, to our disappointments and disillusion, and in general to everything in our existence that bears the mark of loss. Loss is the overarching pattern into which sorrow fits. It is this that was implied in my 1986 essay on evil. It spoke initially about mourning to address speculative explanations in the form of theodicy and evoked a broken dialectic, perhaps close to what you are developing elsewhere, on your "God who may be." The essay continued by referring to work carried out in the field of action (evil is that which must be fought), and completed in the transformation of feeling: at this point I evoked the work of mourning put at the service of appeasing the complaint. It is here that the work of narrative constitutes an essential element of the work of mourning understood as the acceptance of the irreparable.

My conviction is that the final chapter of *On Stories*, "Narrative Matters," emerges reinforced by the addition of suffering to acting, of sorrow to praxis. It works better than ever thanks to this expanding of the ways "of making our lives into life-stories."

Q: One of my main arguments in both *On Stories* and *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* was that we live in a time of crisis—crisis of identity, crisis

of legitimation, crisis of authority. In the last year or so in American and Western society we have witnessed the collapse of a number of major national and international institutions—from the Catholic Church (due to abuse scandals) and Corporate Capitalism (Enron and Wall Street post 9/11) to the basic practice of the United Nations around the Iraq debacle. How do you think philosophy might best respond to this climate of crisis?

RICOEUR: A key problem today is authority. Authority is disappearing from our world. When Hannah Arendt asks "what is authority?" she immediately adds "what was authority?" But what has vanished? I would say it is the right to be ordered or obeyed without having to be legitimated, because the great problem of authority is legitimation. Especially after the 1970s, there was suspicion of anyone having authority. This crisis laid bare the very structure of authority which is the role of hierarchical relationship among egalitarian relations—or to put it in a spatial metaphor, a vertical relationship crossing a horizontal one. Living together as equals on the one hand and obeying orders on the other. Authority has to be legitimated. It is the capacity to give reasons in a situation which is now in crisis. Before too, of course, one had to give reasons, but in a sense authority worked by a kind of social inertia because it was learned. The antiquity of authority was considered enough because it had a long past in itself. Authority relied on memory.

Nowadays people need explanations for authority. In his book *On Justification*, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski argues that today everyone must be able to justify what she or he does, and that this necessity to be justified in each situation is new. In the past, the very fact that there was "authorized" authority meant that "it was so." But today authority is always in question. As we say in French: "Qui t'a fait roi?" We always look for another authority behind authority. So it is regressive. We ask where is the end point? Is there something indefinite in authority? Or a kind of ultimate point where something will be authorized by itself? It is the lack of this ultimate point of reference that defines our modern situation. To go beyond these generalities, I should distinguish between some typical situations, because authority does not work the same way according to different circles of allegiance. Following Luc Boltanski, we may distinguish between five or six different "worlds" or "cities." Concerning the grammar of grandeur, we could say that in a traditional society the model would be the King. But in a modern democratic society what is the paradigm of grandeur? We are not "great" in every respect. We are "great" according to certain rules of estimation. In a city of creativity or inspiration, for example among artists and writers, the paradigm of greatness is the recognition of creativity, and we

have many criteria for this. It must be something which has to do with the capacity to produce something new. But if you speak of the city of fame, if you speak of sports, a great cyclist for example, you are "great" according to quite different rules—e.g., recognized performance, because fame here is to be recognized in the opinion of others. You are not necessarily "great" in domestic relationships, because fame is something larger than the family. Still now, in our modern society, the model of the couple involves what the Greeks would have called the *oikos*, the home; the relationship between father, mother and child is one part of it, the relationship between the sexes another part. In medieval society, for the traditional aristocracy for example, we could say that the model of the home was prevalent. The French or British Court was both a house and the central power. The model of the home absorbed the political relationship. Then in the merchant bourgeois relationship, the capacity to exchange, and to invent new modes of exchange, became the prevalent model of the city. Today the Internet is the typical model of a world expansion of the relationship of merchants. Everything is merchandise.

So where does authority now reside? Today political relationships are part of our system, but only partial relationships in the sense that we are not always concerned with voting, giving our opinion in opinion poles or taking part in political meetings. But we remain citizens, the authority of the state still obtains. It concerns only part of our activity but at the same time it is the condition of all the other relationships of the modern nation-state—this is especially so in Europe. Here the problem of authority is brought to its extreme. Why? Because there is no end to the problem of legitimacy. What makes the authority of the governing power from Hobbes and Machiavelli to Hegel, for instance, is the recurring question: who or what possesses the right to corrupt others? Because the problem of authority becomes that of sovereignty—what is so supreme that there is nothing higher? Then we come back to the core problem: what makes for the legitimacy of hierarchical relationship in our democratic tradition of equality? This was the problem of de Tocqueville especially in his famous book *Democracy in America*. Because coming from Europe, where there was the presupposition of aristocratic superiority, he encountered a society in America where there was no theoretical supremacy, no superiority. Where, therefore, was the recognition of superiority to come from? That was Tocqueville's question. And then we have Rousseau, of course, speaking of the "labyrinth of politics."

Now today we have the additional question of international authority. We know how the nation state works, but the State is afraid of political authority; it has limits of its own, its space is closed. There are two central features of the nation state. On the one hand, we have the fact that the state has appropriated and absorbed the evils of revenge, as

Hegel and Max Weber say: it has the monopoly of violence; but it has the power of implementing its decisions, whereas international society today doesn't have this power. It relies only on the good will, especially of the great powers. But there already we have a silent progression of the international lobby, particularly after the great criminal trials of the middle of the twentieth century—Nuremberg, Tokyo, Buenos Aires—where the tyrants were judged by the victors. The winners of the great war were able to establish a tribunal which had a certain authority. I think this is a new phenomenon, the idea that criminal law could cover the entire globe. As in the Pinochet case, we see how for the first time all the other states have a right to say something about what happens within the boundaries of the Chilean state. Why? Because we recognize that nation state sovereignty is not absolute; it has rules of its own. The first rule of the sovereign state is to provide security for all its members. In tyrannies, the state has failed to provide this security, so therefore this failure gives a right to all the other states to intervene. You have now an international right of intervention in the affairs of particular nations. This involves a certain external limitation of sovereignty.

There was a time when after a certain period a crime was forgotten, but now even decades later you can be judged. This was only made possible after the victory of the democratic states over the Nazis on the one hand and the communist tyranny on the other. This is new and positive. We can judge people who were guilty many years ago because there is a world public opinion.

So how is world opinion linked to the question of authority? How does it work? We could say that there is a trial going on at the level of authority beyond the tribunals. The sentences of tribunals have to be recognized by public opinion. And it is in this process of recognition that something new happens. Before we did not have this global judgment, this support of international opinion. Maybe it existed within certain quarters in the eighteenth century, under the French intellectual domination of Europe—to a certain extent at the time of the Enlightenment for instance—but today we are witnessing a new world enlightenment.

If we turn, on the other hand, to the whole question of regionalism in the emerging federal project for a Europe of regions, we encounter the problem of the internal limitations of the nation state. Here we witness the growth of intermediary powers at subnational levels, so we witness two systems of limitation: the international limitation of the absoluteness of sovereignty and the regional limits to state sovereignty from within. We now have a very complex system and many options, going from a real plurality of sub-systems as in Federal States like Germany or the U.S., to the very subtle conjunction between regional governments and

national governments in a country like Spain, for example, between the Catalans and the Spanish state, or in Italy between several regional authorities. France is arguably the most resistant to this plurality of sub-states. Sorting out the various relations between international, national, and sub-national power is a good example of practical wisdom in the political field.

Or take finally the quarrels between one province and another in Canada: this cannot be decided from outside. It is a negotiation between powers and the peoples concerned. The big problem is whether they are consulted in a free and fair way.

Authority involves the crucial question of legislation—and this arises at critical moments in the life of a state, usually after a civil war or constitutional crisis. In France we had seven or eight procedures of amnesty, after the Commune in 1871, after the First World War, after the war of Algeria. Sometimes this can involve a big lie—"nothing happened." But it can also be a way of saying we are not at war, a way of preserving peace. I would say it is a matter of official forgetfulness, institutional forgetfulness, "un oubli institutionnel." Americans use the word "pardon." When Ford gave a pardon to Nixon, it was a remnant of a regal right, the right of grace, but in Europe it has disappeared. In France only the President of the Republic is allowed to give such a "pardon," we call it "grâce." It's a remnant of the right of the King. But it has already been criticized by Kant in his theory of rights, where he says that "le droit de grâce" is a privilege of the King; if he uses it for the benefit of culprits it would be a great injustice. Why? Because then victims would be deprived of the right to be recognized and the law would be despised.

A purely utilitarian practice of amnesty would be a way of saying the war did not happen, that the war between citizens did not occur; it would be a way of effacing "le tort," the harm done. Such amnesty would be a denial of harms. We are not allowed to speak about it. The first model of this is to be found in the Greek city in 403 BCE. There was a decree in Athens: you will not speak about the evils—*ta kaka*. There was an oath: I shall not speak, notice, or even remember. It was a censorship of memory. It was a "big lie," because the harm done and the suffering was not recognized; there was an injustice because there was a lack of recognition. It was a harm done to truth. It is interesting to see in a Greek tragedy how it is the poetry which preserves the memory of suffering. In all the great tragedies, we have the problem of the harm of the powerful and the memories of great families and so on. We could say that politics starts with the prose of peace pitted against the poetry of war. There is a kind of truthfulness in the preservation by poetry of the

memory of harm and suffering, while in denial in the prose of political life.

At one level, then, this forgetfulness, this amnesty of crimes of the past is not a good thing. It seems better to remember. There is the work of mourning. Amnesty and forgetfulness may prevent mourning. They can prevent a second suffering of harm done, but also the suffering of mourning which is a working through, a creative process. I make an allusion here again to the important essay by Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" where he speaks of the necessity of preserving mourning from being swallowed up by melancholia. When we prevent mourning we succumb to melancholia. As we see in Europe, after the French Revolution, when there was a law of forgetfulness with the end of the Napoleonic wars, after which we had the spleen of the Romantic generation.

So it is not harmless to implement amnesty. What I am saying is at the best "un moindre mal," the lesser of two evils. Two great sufferings are prevented, hate and revenge, at the expense of the suffering of memory, and the liberating power of this suffering. But we should not underestimate mourning. It is a way of giving people the right to start anew, by remembering in such a way that we may overcome obsessive or compulsive repetition. It is a matter of the right balance between memory and forgetting.

Narrative has a crucial role here. I speak, especially now, of narrative at the public level, because collective memory and collective identity are based on stories concerning the founding events; and because founding events have civil dates whereby memory is both created and preserved by telling stories. As a result, history has the function of adjudicating commemorations in a kind of public ritual.

Does this found authority? All kinds of authority are ways of telling the story and repeating and therefore preserving what I call the social inertia of the past by providing a kind of effectiveness of the past. In spite of all the changes in one's society, this is a matter of preserving the invisible roots of community by telling stories.

Q: A central theme explored in *The God Who May Be* is that of "possibility." While I was dealing there primarily with eschatological and ontological notions of the possible, ranging from Cusanus to Heidegger and Derrida, I am aware that you have dealt with this theme in a number of your writings and that you expressed to me recently the wish to write a last book—if you have the time and energy—entitled *L'homme capable*. What sorts of things would you likely explore in such a book?

RICOEUR: As I get older I have been increasingly interested in exploring certain metaphysics of potency and act. In *Oneself as Another*, I broach

this in my analysis of the capacity to speak, narrate, and act. This phenomenology of the "I can," in turn, brings me to Aristotle's attempt in the *Metaphysics* E 2 to outline meta-categories of potentiality and actuality in line with his commitment to a plurality of meanings of being. So in this respect I no longer subscribe to the typically anti-metaphysical Protestant lineage of Karl Barth (though it is true that in early works like *The Symbolism of Evil* I was still somewhat under this influence). But if I am on the side of metaphysics here it is, admittedly, in the somewhat minority camp of those who prefer the categories of possibility and actuality to that of "substance." If the mainstream and official tradition of Western metaphysics has been substantialist this does not preclude other metaphysical paths, such as those leading from Aristotle's *dunamis* to Spinoza's *conatus* and Schelling's and Leibniz's notions of potentiality (*puissance*). Here we find a dynamic notion of being as potency and action (Spinoza reformulates substance as a *substantia actuosa*) which contrasts sharply with the old substantialist models of scholasticism or the mechanistic models of Descartes. This is a matter of dynamism versus mechanism, the idea of a dynamic in being that grows towards consciousness, reflection, community. Here I think it is important to think ontology in close rapport with ethics. And that is why in *Thinking Biblically* I endeavor to unravel some of the ontological and eschatological implications of the "I am who am" episode in Exodus 3:14. We encounter in this passage a notion of being which is alien to the Greek usage; and so its translation into Greek language and thought signals an alteration of the existing meaning of being to include new notions of being-with, being-faithful, being-in-accompaniment with one's community or people (which is precisely what Yahweh promises Moses when he says "I am he who will be with you"). Now Aristotle had never considered this signification of being when he wrote the *Metaphysics*. But that didn't and doesn't prevent the enlargement of Greek ontology to accommodate and respond to such "other" meanings: a better solution, it seems to me, than setting up an unbridgeable antagonism between Hellenic and Hebraic meanings of being and then having to choose one or the other. What I am exploring in *Thinking Biblically* is a sort of philosophical theology or theological philosophy—not an easy task in a contemporary intellectual culture which still wants people to say whether they are "philosophers" or "theologians" and is uncomfortable with overlaps. This recent return to religious thinking is intimately linked with my growing interest in the whole field of action and praxis which increasingly drew me away from the abstract universalism of Kant towards a more Aristotelian ethics of the "good life" (*bien vivre*). And of course I would not deny for a moment here the important Heideggerian analysis of "care" and the whole post-Heideggerian retrieval of Greek thinking. Not

that I have ever found my ontological feet in any final or absolute sense. It is no accident that the title of the last chapter of *Oneself as Another* is in the form of an interrogation rather than an assertion—"Towards which Ontology?" Here I try to explore possibilities of an ethical ontology beyond the Heideggerian model of ontology without ethics and the Lévinasian model of ethics without ontology. By trying to think ethics in terms of action (*praxis/pragma*) and action in terms of being as potency and act, I am seeking ways beyond the either/or of Heidegger/Lévinas. The ultimate purpose of hermeneutic reflection and attestation, as I see it, is to try to retrace the line of intentional capacity and action behind mere objects (which we tend to focus on exclusively in our natural attitude) so that we may recover the hidden truth of our operative acts, of being capable, of being *un homme capable*. So if hermeneutics is right, in the wake of Kant and Gadamer, to stress the finitude and limits of consciousness, it is also wise to remind ourselves of the tacit potencies and acts of our lived existence. My bottom line is a phenomenology of being able.

Q: It is remarkable that you should begin your philosophical career by reflecting on the nature of *l'homme faillible* (fallible man) and conclude by shifting the focus to *l'homme capable*. One might have expected it the other way around! But could you tease out a little more what you mean by this idea of a phenomenology of "I am able" (*une phénoménologie du je peux*)? As you know, in my own work on the possible, from *Poétique du Possible* (1984) to *The God who May Be* (2001), I have been trying to develop a post-Heideggerian hermeneutics of possibility inspired in part by Heidegger's reversal of the old metaphysical priority of act (*energeia*) over potency (*dunamis*). I wonder if our respective paths are not converging more and more on this question.

RICOEUR: I believe that the ontology and analogy of action which I am trying to think through plays itself out on the basis of a differentiated phenomenology of "I can speak," "I can act," "I can narrate" and "I can designate myself as imputable" (*imputabilité*). What all these instances of "I am able to ..." articulate is the basic capacity of a human being to act and suffer. I am interested here in an anthropology of potency and impotency (*puissance et impuissance*). And in one sense what I find intriguing about Spinoza's notion of *conatus* is that it refuses the alternative between act and potency, between *energeia* and *dunamis*. For Spinoza each concrete thing or event is always a *mélange* of act and possibility. And I would be closer here to Spinoza or Heidegger than to Aristotle, for what is the meaning of an "architect in potency," to take Aristotle's example, if it is not already an architect who is thinking architecturally,

making plans, preparing to realize a building project, and so on. I would hold to the idea of a profound continuity between *dunamis* and *energeia*, since *energeia* is the *ergon* and this, as we know from the *Ethics*, can be translated as the task. Whether being an architect, doctor, musician, etc. is exercised or not, it remains an *ergon*. So that possibility as "capacity" to realize a task is by no means the same thing as possibility as an abstract or logical "virtuality." Think of the sprinter poised on the starting block. There are different modalities of the possible—the possible that is not yet possible, the possible that is on the way to being realized, the possible that is already a certitude, etc.

Q: Unlike Aristotle, then, who argues that we can only know possibility through actuality, you would say that "attestation" is already a way of knowing possibility (*puissance*).

RICOEUR: Yes, I would say that, and I think this has important ethical consequences. I would insist, for example, that certain people who are deprived of their rights or means to exercise their capacities—e.g., the imprisoned or the mentally ill—nonetheless are worthy of respect because they still possess these capacities as possibilities. Likewise, if I say that I can speak a certain foreign language I do not have to be actually speaking it to have this capacity or skill. Or indeed when it comes to language generally, it is true that I can speak and use all sorts of different words and constructions, even if I am not actually doing so and will arguably never be in a position to speak all of a language. And here it might be useful to rethink the Aristotelian notion of *dunamis* and Spinoza's notion of *conatus* in rapport with Leibniz's notion of appetites—possibility as a dynamic tendency or inclination. These philosophers, including Heidegger and yourself too of course, offer great resources for a new thinking about the possible. But my own interest in these questions is ultimately inseparable from the moral question: how do we relate a phenomenology of "being able" to the ethical events of "imputability" and "attestation"? I might even concede here a point made recently by my young colleagues, Dominico Jervolino and Fabrizio Turoldo, that my thought is not so removed from certain religious and biblical issues as my standard policy of "conceptual asceticism" might have been prepared to admit in the past. I am not sure about the absolute irreconcilability between the God of the Bible and the God of Being (understood with Jean Nabert as "primary affirmation" or with Spinoza as "*substantia actuosa*"). The tendency of modern French thought to eclipse the Middle Ages has prevented us from acknowledging certain very rich attempts to think God and being in terms of each other. I no longer consider such conceptual asceticism tenable.

Q: Would you say that there is a difference between your early and late thinking?

RICOEUR: Is there a difference between the beginning and the end? It's true that I have changed in the last fifty years. I have read lots of new books and the whole philosophical climate has altered in all kinds of important ways. I began in an era of existentialism, I traversed structuralism and now I find myself before a "post-I-know-not-what," deconstruction etc. A long life like mine has meant passing through a great variety of philosophical landscapes and negotiating with my contemporaries—sometimes friends, sometime adversaries. Each time it is different according to the specific nature and singularity of the encounter. And yet perhaps history will link these different situations in some way?

### Note

1. This interview took place in Paris in 2001 and 2003. It originally appeared in Richard Kearney's *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Ashgate, 2004).