



What is ‘Radical’ Evil?: A Reading of Ricoeur on Kant and Religion by [Douglas R. McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

Updated July 2019

## What is ‘Radical’ Evil?: A Reading of Ricoeur on Kant and Religion

### Introduction

What follows I can best describe as a “lover’s quarrel” anchored, for my part, in deep gratitude and respect. On the one hand, I will strenuously critique Ricoeur’s reading of Kant, particularly with respect to 1) the ontological status of “radical” evil, 2) the anchoring of morality in violence, 3) Ricoeur’s “deliberative,” hence, consequentialist ethic, and 4) his limiting of religion to *historical* religion. On the other hand, the “ontology” of his theory of metaphor as well as the centrality of the “productive imagination” in his theory of discourse are applauded vigorously and can be viewed as thoroughly in harmony with the “ground” of Kant’s ethical reflections, “autonomous freedom,” which will be proposed as a more comprehensive “ground” for morality, and a more adequate “ground” for understanding of religion.

### Reflections on the Symbol: A Quasi-Transcendental Assumption that “Gives Rise to Thought”

I begin my investigation of Ricoeur’s reading of Kant by examining the notion of “symbol.” I will seek to demonstrate that the pre-figuration, which is the symbolic for Ricoeur, functions in a quasi-transcendental sense that makes symbols *a posteriori* synthetic judgments and, therefore, hypothetical, not, as for Kant, *a priori* synthetic judgments that are categorical (I will speak to the difference between *a posteriori* and *a priori* synthetic judgment below).

Ricoeur’s theory of symbol appears to remain constant across his corpus. I will base my reading of the meaning and function of symbols on *The Symbolism of Evil* and his three volume *Time and Narrative*. My thesis is that Ricoeur defends a quasi-transcendental notion of the symbol that functions *as if* it were a Rationalist (i.e., Platonic) idea<sup>1</sup> but not quite because a symbol is a prefigured,<sup>2</sup> culturally relative artifact capable of stimulating reflection as

---

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur writes in *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, “The identity [idea] that results ... is ... no longer a logical identity but precisely ... a temporal totality.” Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur speaks of an arc of meaning that commences with “prefiguration” (mimesis<sub>1</sub>), over the author’s “configuration” (mimesis<sub>2</sub>), to the reader’s “refiguration” (mimesis<sub>3</sub>). See for example, Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 2:20 and 62. Significant, as I will suggest below, is the following formulation: “refiguration ... is in many ways a reprise

expressed by the famous aphorism, “The symbol gives rise to thought.”<sup>3</sup> To the extent that the symbol is a culturally relative artifact that shapes the thought of particular, historical community, one thinks readily of George Lindbeck’s “post-liberal” “cultural linguistic” model of theology in this respect,<sup>4</sup> which Ricoeur has anticipated, then, by decades.

The quasi-Rationalist moment of the symbol is given the label “primary symbol” in *The Symbolism of Evil*:

... consciousness of self seems to constitute itself at its lowest level by means of symbolism and to work out an abstract language only subsequently, by means of a spontaneous hermeneutics of its primary symbols ... [R]everision to the primary symbols permits us ... to consider myths and gnosis as secondary and tertiary symbols, the interpretation of which rests on the interpretation of ... primary symbols.<sup>5</sup>

Explicitly, symbols “... are like [!] the innate ideas of the old philosophy<sup>6</sup>” (Platonic Rationalism). However, symbols are a matter of “cultural contingency” that orients understanding and confirms “... the historical, geographical, cultural origin of the philosophical question itself.”<sup>7</sup>

We are born and live in a society where laws are in force, where norms have been stated, where imperatives have already been announced, which we respond to through obedience or disobedience. This means, that even before doing any philosophy, we have already understood what “you must ... you must not” (lie, kill) means. The philosopher’s task is ... to reflect on some of the exemplary norms, recognized by most people, and starting from there to move back toward the source of obligation.<sup>8</sup>

---

at the level of mimesis<sub>3</sub> of features of the world of action already understood at the level of mimesis<sub>1</sub>, across their narrative configuration (mimesis<sub>2</sub>)--or, in other words, across the ‘fictional’ and ‘thematic modes’ of Northrop Frye.” (Ibid., 164, n. 20)

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19, 349.

<sup>4</sup> See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 16–18, as well as, Douglas R. McGaughey, *Strangers and Pilgrims: On the Role of Aporiai in Theology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997), 172–94.

<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures*, Volume 2, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 36.

In short, rationality is interpretation “all the way down,” but symbols provide a culturally relative,<sup>9</sup> pre-given (“prefigured” in *Time and Narrative*) structuring and order<sup>10</sup> that allows for the creation of cultural identification and normativity. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur observes:

The word ‘symbol’ in [Clifford Geertz’ *The Interpretation of Cultures*] ... is taken [by Ricoeur himself] in ... a middle sense, halfway between its being identified with a simple notation (I have in mind Leibniz’s opposition between intuitive knowledge based on direct insight and symbolic knowledge by way of abbreviated signs, substituted for a long chain of logical operations) and its being identified with double-meaning expressions following the model of metaphor, or even hidden meanings, accessible only to esoteric knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

The nature and use of symbols here is analogous to Clifford Geertz’ distinction between symbols that are “models for” (e.g., DNA) and “models of” (e.g., patterns of behavior that govern understanding and behavior from a recipe to religious symbols) -- both of which are prefigured patterns but applied differently (“models for” by nature; “models of” by humanity for the creation of artifacts and expression of meaning). In addition, Ricoeur’s notion of symbol is analogous to Thomas Kuhn’s “exemplary past achievement” paradigms, which Kuhn contrasts with “sociological” paradigms in the “Postscript” to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I don’t believe it is a fancied or farfetched reading<sup>12</sup> to say that for Ricoeur, Geertz, and Kuhn symbols are prefigured constellations of meaning that are applied ever again/anew as the situations of their encounter change, and it is the symbol’s tenacity and plasticity that provide continuity (the “rationalist” moment) to the reflections involved.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur asks further: “Why are ... [symbols like the innate ideas of the old philosophy]? This is cultural contingency, introduced into discourse. Moreover, I do not know them all; my field of investigation is oriented, and because it is oriented it is limited. By what is it oriented? Not only by my own situation in the universe of symbols, but, paradoxically, by the historical, geographical, cultural origin of the philosophical question itself.” (Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19–20) See, as well, the final paragraph of the “Introduction,” Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 23–24,

<sup>10</sup> Succinctly, Ricoeur writes: “symbols precede hermeneutics ... and [present their] meaning in the opaque transparency of an enigma ...” Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 16. That the symbol is a “gift” (ibid., 349) is the confirmation that “[t]here is no philosophy without presuppositions” (ibid., 348).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1:57.

<sup>12</sup> See Ricoeur’s distinction between a “good” reading (“coherent and plenitude”) and a “bad” reading (“narrow and farfetched”) in Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History VI*, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 104.

<sup>13</sup> There will be “universal” symbols when all of humanity shares the same symbol systems in the form of “concrete universals.” See *The Symbolism of Evil*, 22–23: “... a phenomenology oriented by the philosophical question of Greek origin cannot do justice to the great experiences of India and China. Here, not only the contingency but also the limits of our tradition become evident ... It will be said, not without reason, that those civilizations are of equal value with the Greek and Jewish civilizations. But [sic] the point of view from which this equality of value can be seen does not yet exist, and it will exist eventually only when a universal human

If I speak more precisely of symbolic mediation, it is to distinguish, among symbols of a cultural nature, the ones that underlie action and that constitute its first signification, before autonomous symbolic wholes dependent upon speaking or writing become detached from the practical level. In this sense we might speak of an implicit or immanent symbolism, in opposition to an explicit or autonomous one.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to underscore here that *symbols involve a temporal sequence* that stretches from “immanent meaning” only to arrive after a series of steps from description to a “prescriptive” rule as normative (conceptual identity):

... we pass without difficulty, with the term ‘symbolic mediation,’ from the idea of an immanent meaning to that of a rule, taken in the sense of a rule for description, then to that of a norm, which is equivalent to the idea of a rule taken in the prescriptive sense of this term.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, an always and already given, culturally relative symbol is the closest that we can come to a notion of “idea” according to the “old philosophy,” and, hence, both its “immanent meaning” and in its “prescriptive sense” are a matter of interpretation. We will see below that we are left here with profound skepticism if we leave out of consideration the “critical” or Copernican turn found in Kant’s Critical Idealism.

---

culture has brought all cultures together in a whole. In the meantime, neither the history of religions nor philosophy can be a concrete universal capable of embracing all human experience.”

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (I), 57. The “practical” level here refers to “the field of praxis” (see *ibid.*, 182), not to Kant’s notion of “practical reason” in contrast to “theoretical reason” and within the latter the distinction between “technical” and “pragmatic” imperatives.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (I), 58.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur proposes that “three dimensions of symbolism--cosmic, oneiric, and poetic<sup>16</sup>--are present in every authentic symbol.<sup>17</sup>” The cosmic nature of the symbol, Ricoeur tells us, is the consequence of a “hierophany.<sup>18</sup>” Here he explicitly invokes Mircea Eliade’s notion of hierophany<sup>19</sup> and concludes: “Every symbol is finally a hierophany, a manifestation of the bond between man and the sacred ...<sup>20</sup>” Ricoeur refers specifically to Eliade’s ontological grounding of hierophany,<sup>21</sup> by which Eliade links the ontological (Supreme Being), archetypes, and reality. Eliade writes:

... a rite ... will assist man to approach reality, to, as it were, wedge himself into Being, by setting himself free from merely automatic actions (without sense or meaning), from change, from the profane, from nothingness.

We shall see that, as the rite always consists in the repetition of an archetypal action performed *in illo tempore* (before ‘history’ began) by ancestors or by gods, man is trying, by means of the hierophany, to give ‘being’ to

---

<sup>16</sup> For my purposes, a discussion of Ricoeur’s invocation of Mircea Eliade’s notion of hierophany for establishing the “cosmic” nature of symbols is sufficient to illustrate the hermeneutical, a posteriori, and hypothetical nature of symbols for Ricoeur. However, his treatment of dreams as offering “the most stable” symbols of psychic depth (Freud/Jung) (Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 12–13) and the “poetic imagination” demonstrating “expressivity in its nascent state” of linguistic creativity only more strongly confirm the thesis.

One would want to contrast with Ricoeur’s Freudian/Jungian discussion of the oneiric Kant’s treatment of dreams in *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, in *Kant’s Vorlesungen von der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR* (XXIX) Especially, page 885: “The dream is another phenomenon of the imagination. It occurs entirely naturally. Because the imagination is constantly at work and in sleep the effects of understanding have ceased, only the imagination remains and is thereby given free rein. It gives us representations of things [in the dream] rather than understanding ... [The] productive imagination is especially manifest in a dream. The dream is a sequence of fabrications that are involuntary. When awake, we are in a shared world; in the dream, though, we are in our own world. – The dream’s creativity is similar to that of the waking world but with a difference: in the dream the productive imagination is involuntary, without order and intentionality. In the waking world, in contrast, I can link my fantasy in many ways in all kinds of directions according to an order, and I can always call myself back from my fantasy whenever I wish. In the waking world, fantasy is also involuntary but the creative idea is not so strong as in the dream because in the waking world sense impressions limit us whereas in the dream all of the senses are suspended and only the field [in contrast to territory, where order is possible, and domain where order is necessary] of the productive imagination is active. This is because the dream suspends entirely our consciousness of our circumstance. As a consequence, we have that peculiar experience that we can represent the past without knowledge that it is past. Here a subject of the reproductive imagination is opened up in which we swim in fancies without being conscious of our actual situation.” [McGaughey’s translation] See as well, *ibid.*, 927; Kant’s *Prolegomena To Any Future Metaphysics* AA IV: 290–291; and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* B 520–21.

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 11–12.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 356.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 11–12.

even his most ordinary and insignificant acts. By its repetition, the act coincides with its archetype, and time is abolished. We are witnessing, so to speak, the same act that was performed *in illo tempore*, at the dawn of the universe. Thus, by transforming all his physiological acts into ceremonies, primitive man strove ... to thrust himself out of time (and change) into eternity.<sup>22</sup>

Further, Eliade adds:

Indeed we can identify ... a collection of truths fitting coherently into a system or theory ... That collection of truths does not simply constitute a *Weltanschauung*, but a pragmatic ontology (I would even say soteriology) in the sense that with the help of these 'truths' man is trying to gain salvation by uniting himself with reality.<sup>23</sup>

These quotes from Eliade's text from which Ricoeur is drawing his notion of hierophany and the cosmic notion of symbols clearly suggest the ontological (and metaphysical) framework behind Ricoeur's engagement of symbols, and they illuminate the significance of Ricoeur's connection of the symbolic with the sacred and with the "innate ideas" of the "old philosophy." The symbol has become the "profane" vehicle for the hierophanic and kratophanic manifestation of the "sacred" (and salvation).

#### **On *a priori* and *a posteriori* synthetic judgment as well as the hypothetical and categorical:**

Just what is meant by *a priori* and *a posteriori* synthetic judgment? Famously in a co-authored essay by Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn, the Wiener Kreis (Vienna Circle) rejected the very notion of *a priori* synthetic judgment in favor of a positivist empiricism.<sup>24</sup> In so doing they failed to acknowledge a crucial distinction between synthesis as "*a posteriori*" and synthesis as "*a priori*" made by Kant. As a consequence, they took Kant's notion of *a priori* synthetic judgment to refer to synthesis as "*linking together*" rather than as "*adding to*" phenomena. *A posteriori* synthesis involves establishing something that is in common to a set of phenomena whereas *a priori synthesis* involves *adding something to the phenomena* not already there in the phenomena.

It is not difficult to agree with the Wiener Kreis that an *a priori synthesis* is metaphysical in the Rationalist sense because it would mean that, prior to the experience of the set of phenomena, one would be capable of establishing something that they have in common (e.g., a Platonic idea). However, *a priori* synthesis has nothing to do with Rationalism. The fact that we must *add something to the phenomena that is not in the phenomena* in order to understand them is purely descriptive without making an ontological claim either about the phenomena (the thing-in-itself) or concepts (what must be added to the phenomena) necessary for understanding.

---

<sup>22</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: World Publishing Company, Meridian, 1963), 31–32.

<sup>23</sup> Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> See Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn, "Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung -- der Wiener Kreis," in *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung, Sozialismus und Logischer Empirismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 89–95.

Our capacity for *a priori* synthetic judgment is most dramatically illustrated by the Copernican model of the solar system. There is nothing in our experience of the phenomena that even hints at, much less justifies, our judgment that the sun is standing still and the earth is rotating at some 1,000 miles/hour. Something entirely absent in the phenomena must be *added to* the phenomena if we are to “properly” understand. This is a “most dramatic” illustration of *a priori* synthetic judgment because it requires denial of the phenomena.

Were the Copernican Turn to involve merely *a posteriori* synthetic judgment, we would not only have to experience the phenomena, but we would also have to be able to draw something out of the phenomena themselves that requires our judgment with respect to them. Perception teaches unequivocally that the sun is moving! The Copernican Turn requires that we deny our senses in favor of an understanding grounded in a mathematical model. As a consequence, the Copernican Revolution may have displaced humanity from the center of the physical universe, but, as Ernst Cassirer observed, it establishes humanity’s significance in a far higher sense: we are the center of the epistemological universe<sup>25</sup> precisely because we are the species that adds *a priori* synthetic elements to formulate judgments about phenomena.

The only options, given the denial of the empirical evidence, are that our *a priori* synthetic judgment either invokes a Rationalist Idealism of some kind to account for our judgment, over which we can be skeptical, or our *a priori* synthetic judgment involves a creative process on the part of the judger. This creative process could be taken to be exclusively a product of the individual, which we can doubt to the extent that it requires unprovable and undefinable universals, or it can be taken to be *a relationship* (hence, nothing empirical or Rationalist) in the phenomena that is only capable of discernment by consciousness. This latter option we cannot doubt without denying that we experience phenomena, and it involves a *necessity* that even skepticism confirms. It is necessary that we be capable of adding a *a priori* synthetic judgments to phenomena given that we experience phenomena in the way that we do. The strategy summarized here is what Kant calls “methodological skepticism.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, *without having to establish the ontological status of a priori* synthetic judgment, we can say that it is *necessary* (but not sufficient) for us to experience phenomena in the first place. In Kant’s formulation, *a priori* synthetic judgment is “metaphysical” because it “goes beyond” mere physical phenomena, but it is not “metaphysical” in the traditional, Rationalist sense. *A priori* synthetic judgment is *constitutive* (*necessary* for any degree of certitude) for theoretical understanding of phenomena, and it is *regulative* (assumptive) for three “meta-”notions that are necessary in order for us to experience phenomena, whatsoever: God, freedom, and the soul (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 390-396).

The claim of the present project, then, is that Ricoeur’s theory of symbol is *a posteriori* synthetic, not *a priori* synthetic. Rather than speak of symbols in terms of the *categorical*

---

<sup>25</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, reprint, 1944 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 15.

<sup>26</sup> For Kant’s discussion of “methodological skepticism,” see *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 451, B 513-514, B 535, and B 767.

origin of creative reflection, he views them as a *hypothetical* product of particular, cultural (hence, empirical) experience.

Just what do hypothetical and categorical mean? This distinction is perhaps most succinctly established by distinguishing between two kinds of imperatives. Some *necessities* (imperatives) are demanded by one's situation (*hypothetical* imperatives), and some *necessities* (imperatives) are self-imposed and, at least to a degree, independent of one's situation (*categorical* imperatives).

There are two kinds of hypothetical imperatives:<sup>27</sup> technical and pragmatic. The former are the consequence of one's decision to undertake a task in one's situation (e.g., to build a house in order to protect oneself from the climate where one wishes to live). The performance of the task requires that one acquire certain specific skills required to perform the task, and it requires that one necessarily follows a certain, proper sequence of steps to successfully accomplish the task (e.g., one doesn't start constructing a house by hanging the roof in the air). Pragmatic imperatives in Kant's scheme, in contrast, are driven by one's personal welfare in a particular situation, but the imperatives here only indirectly come from one's situation. For example, when it comes to a career choice, one surely should take into consideration one's talents, one's interests, and one's anticipated sense of satisfaction in the pursuit of the career. What is *necessary* (imperative), however, is that one fulfill the expectations of proper training by the "guild" before one hangs out one's shingle. One does not go to veterinary school if one wants to become a lawyer.

In fact, *categorical* imperatives come into play prior to our two kinds of hypothetical imperatives.<sup>28</sup> Someone has to decide to build a house, and someone has to decide to pursue a career. This decision-taking is the *ultimate*, necessary (but not sufficient) origin for both technical and pragmatic imperatives. We are the species that can pursue technical and pragmatic imperatives consciously, which means we can change nature otherwise than merely instinctually. We are capable of causing a sequence of events that physical nature on its own cannot accomplish. This capacity indicates that we possess a causal capacity that is not only "freedom-from" blind, physical causality (at least to a degree) but is also "freedom-for" creative projects of our own initiative. These two aspects of freedom allow Kant to speak of "autonomous" freedom as the ground of *categorical*, practical reason in contrast to theoretical reason's hypothetical necessities.<sup>29</sup>

The rules (laws) that govern autonomous freedom are self-legislated (not self-created), moral laws. Just as our *theoretical* reason requires us to approach nature *as if* it were a causal system governed by physical laws, which are imperceptible to us and not of our creation, so also, our *practical* reason requires us to approach our creativity *as if* it were a causal

---

<sup>27</sup> On the difference between technical and pragmatic imperatives, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV 416 ff.

<sup>28</sup> On categorical imperatives, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork* AA IV: 419 f.

<sup>29</sup>This notion of freedom is radically different from Hegel's restriction of freedom to autonomy within institutions that Axel Honneth calls "social freedom." See "III. Die soziale Freiheit und ihre Sittlichkeitslehre" in Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 81–118. For a discriminating description of alternative notions of freedom, see Douglas R. McGaughey, "Freedom! What's it good for?" at <https://criticalidealism.org>.

system governed by (moral) laws, which are imperceptible to us and not of our creation. The “*as ifs*” here represent the *a priori* synthetic nature of our judgments with respect to causal systems. They are *necessary* (but not sufficient) if we are to experience phenomena (the world/ourselves) as we do, but neither is capable of absolute proof/disproof.

Ricoeur’s theory of symbol is *hypothetical* and *a posteriori*, not *categorical* and *a priori*. If the “normative” is the product of a temporal/historical process anchored in the uniqueness of particular cultural experience, then the “normative” arises *out of* our experience of particular phenomena and is demanded only by our particular cultural context. In contrast, we find an *a priori*, *categorical* understanding of symbols in Ernst Cassirer’s “philosophy of symbolic forms.”

In chapter 2 of his *Essay on Man*, Cassirer affirms Johannes von Uexküll’s description of sentient beings as all sharing a stimulus/response (receptive/effective) structure. However, what distinguishes humanity from other species is its ability to insert symbols in the midst of the stimulus/response structure. These symbols can be prefigured (in the language of Critical Idealism, determinative judgments), but all were, necessarily, at some point created by humanity (in the language of Critical Idealism, reflective judgments).<sup>30</sup> Symbols have significance and power not because of *what we can do* with already existing symbols but because *we ourselves generate* (*a priori* synthesis) symbols as a consequence of our autonomous freedom.

Cassirer’s understanding of the symbol, then, is significantly different from Ricoeur’s. According to Cassirer, symbols themselves are part of humanity’s (to a degree even the individual’s own) creativity. According to Ricoeur (as well as Geertz and Kuhn), the symbol is already provided by one’s culture and is encountered only as an *a posteriori* synthetic judgment born out of the specific historical context (the “hypothetical”) that distinguishes the symbol systems of one culture from another. However, in *The Symbolism of Evil*, what the symbol (the hierophany, the kratophany) points to is a sacred, eternal dimension of Being that provides the archetypes underlying the “normativity” of the symbol. In short, whereas Eliade emphasizes a Rationalistic, metaphysical order of Being, Ricoeur emphasizes the temporal order of symbols that are the *a posteriori* vehicle for the manifestation of Being in a culturally specific situation. For Ricoeur, symbols are *a posteriori* and *hypothetical*. We will see that this involves a form of “historical critique” by means of which philosophy is privileged over religion, according to Ricoeur, in contrast to Kant’s notion of “transcendental critique” that equates “*pure*” (not “*historical*”) religion and philosophy.

Ricoeur’s theory of symbol represents the *a posteriori* and *hypothetical*, hermeneutical, “empirical” (particularist) option in front of the text in contrast to Eliade’s metaphysically Rationalist, “nostalgia for Being” option behind the text/hierophany. As a “third way,” Critical Idealism views symbols as *a priori* and *categorical*.

### **The Problem of Evil**

Ricoeur approaches the problem of evil and morality through his theory of symbol and the finitude that it presupposes. There are three consequences: 1) there is an implicit passivity (if not victim status) involved with evil because we experience it, according to

---

<sup>30</sup> Kant claims that all determining judgments were once reflecting judgments. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 187.

Ricoeur, as a consequence of our fallibility and vulnerability; 2) the ground of morality is evil (violence); and 3) the focus on evil and morality is consequentialist. In contrast, I will propose that the Kantian perspective with respect to evil, the ground of morality, and self-determination have not been adequately understood: 1) evil has not been engaged “radically” enough because evil is the *necessary* (but not sufficient!) condition of possibility of the capacity of creative agency, not a product of passivity; 2) the ground of morality is autonomous freedom-for, not merely freedom-from; and 3) the focus on evil and morality is to be placed on the individual’s moral self-determination, not success or failure with respect to one’s actions. Finally, I will propose that Kantian moral theory does not leave the moral agent isolated with her/his private struggle with moral principles but presupposes a “moral culture” (in contrast to a mere “culture of skills”).

By tying his discussion of evil to cultural symbols, Ricoeur can remain agnostic about the Rationalist status of evil while, nonetheless, affirming the cultural assertion through its symbols that the nature of evil<sup>31</sup> is ontological, which, in turn, the individual experiences

---

<sup>31</sup> Klaus Konhardt describes the logic of the symbolic, yet “quasi-ontological,” nature of evil for Ricoeur as follows: “‘A person is the joy of yes in the sadness of the finite.’ The ‘frailty of mediation,’ the ‘fallibility’ that is so deeply embedded in the basic constitution of humanity is, according to Ricoeur, the condition of evil, even though evil exposes fallibility”. The parallel to Kant’s teaching of radical evil as ‘intelligible act’ is obvious when Ricoeur writes, ‘evil can proceed out of the ‘original weakness’, the ‘limitation of a being that is not in conformity with itself’, ‘only because it is placed in the world. This ‘last paradox’ of the proceeding and placement of evil is the manifestation of that named ‘disproportion’ ... in the sense that it makes a person capable of error’. [Note: Our finitude is what makes us capable of error rather than the condition of our creative freedom requiring a „live option“ of selection between „good“ and „evil“ principles.]

As much as the thought of ‘disproportion’ as condition of possibility (not as ground for explanation”) of evil reminds one of Kant’s formulation ..., it is in the end misleading. It [Ricoeur’s position] suggests a ... pre-historical original-condition of innocence, an original, proportion upstream from the factual Disproportion that of course, as is the case with all myths, can only be narrated and symbolically interpreted but, nonetheless, should give information with respect to a truth that precedes all reflection and all ethics ...” [McGaughey’s translation] Klaus Konhardt, “Die Unbegreiflichkeit der Freiheit. Überlegungen zu Kants Lehre vom Bösen,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 42, no. 3 (1988): 413.

Konhardt contrasts Ricoeur’s reading of radical evil with Kant’s reading: “That ethics for Ricoeur can commence only as the consequence ... of [an] allegedly more original truth is demonstrated by the fact that ethics always presupposes a person for whom ‘the synthesis of humanity in itself and whose own synthesis of finitude and infinitude has already failed. However, according to Ricoeur one can think of ‘evil as evil only from where it has fallen’. Ricoeur thinks of this platform, the condition of innocence, in the ‘modern’ fashion of faith in symbols’ and so, still today it can be combined with the Holy’.

Here a kind of quasi-ontological foundation of ethics [emphasis added] is obviously favored, whereby Ricoeur consciously breaks with Kant.” [McGaughey’s translation] Konhardt, “Die Unbegreiflichkeit der Freiheit. Überlegungen zu Kants Lehre vom Bösen,” 413–14.

Konhardt concludes: “The reconstruction of the teaching of radical evil marks capricious freedom as the location in which evil arises. This concept of freedom that is characterized by the intersection of finitude and infinitude can, of course, be developed but not comprehended given that such ‘comprehension’ would consist of a completely transparent status of the finite rational being as such. A ‘gap’ between the inclination to evil and the moral requirement of reason remains intact for such a being. However, this gap is not only not an aporia

because of her/his fallibility and vulnerability.<sup>32</sup> We are not perfect, and we suffer evil as well as inflict it. Our cultural symbols that emphasize the *ontological status of evil* are what “give rise to thought” about evil.

Ricoeur takes myth in the Eliaden sense of “*a narrative of origins*.”<sup>33</sup> There are “salvation myths” because there are myths of the origin of evil.<sup>34</sup> In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur spoke of “four great types of myth relative to the woeful state of our human condition:<sup>35</sup>” 1) *the theogonic myth* of divine conflict, 2) *the orphic myth* of the fall of the soul into matter, 3) *the tragic myth* in which misfortune arises from *hubris*, and 4) *the Adamic myth* in which evil is the consequence of a seductive fall from an originally good condition.<sup>36</sup> He concludes that “[e]very origin myth having to do with evil depicts this woeful condition as a loss.<sup>37</sup>” Hence, salvation is a reversal of the woeful condition of evil: “The coming Kingdom is to hope what immemorial Creation is to the memory of the most distant past, with eschatology serving as the transition between history and its end, just as legend served as a transition between history and its beginning.<sup>38</sup>”

From a Kantian perspective this is a pre-Copernican approach to evil that does not grasp the significance of Kant’s discussion of “radical” evil in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, “Part One – Concerning the indwelling of the evil principle alongside the good or of the radical evil in human nature.<sup>39</sup>” Ricoeur’s focus is on the phenomena of “evil” as a *hypothetical, a posteriori* human condition, and his reflection on evil is driven by the “empirical” (*a posteriori*) evidence of fault, fallibility, and vulnerability (i.e., “the human condition with its woes and misfortunes that we deplore through lamentation ...<sup>40</sup>”). As a consequence, evil is viewed as a *a posteriori problem* not an *a priori, necessary* (but not sufficient) *condition* of creative experience.

---

of the Kantian system of philosophy but rather refers to that proportion in the disproportion without which a rational self-determination of the individual would not be possible.” [McGaughey’s translation] Konhardt, “Die Unbegreiflichkeit der Freiheit. Überlegungen zu Kants Lehre vom Bösen,” 416.

<sup>32</sup> On the centrality of “finitude” and “fallibility” in Ricoeur’s understanding of evil, see Jean Greisch, “‘Freiheit im Licht der Hoffnung’: Zu Paul Ricoeurs Kantdeutung,” in *Kants Metaphysik und Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Norbert Fischer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag), 583–608.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 155.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> See Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 156

<sup>37</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 156.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> Kant wrote this text under threat of religious censorship. His formulations are strategically sufficient to satisfy the superficial reading by a bureaucratic censor while allowing him to engage in a rigorous critique of historical religion.

<sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 155.

The pre-Copernican status of the discussion is most pronounced by Ricoeur's identification of the *ground* of morality: violence: "Because there is violence, there is morality with its prescriptions and prohibitions, its being haunted by others."<sup>41</sup> Because we have the phenomenal experience of capricious and brutal violence, we must engage evil and cultivate a cultural, moral environment (institutions) that checkmates violence.

In the Kantian scheme, there is no understanding without an experience, first, of empirical phenomena, but empirical phenomena cannot *ground* understanding. The lesson of "methodological skepticism" is that doubt generated by phenomena requires the shift of focus from the phenomena to the *necessary* (but not sufficient) conditions for us to experience the questionable phenomena. Both *theoretical* (understanding of physical phenomena) and *practical* (morality) reason are *grounded* in transcendental conditions of possibility that are *necessary* not because we can empirically prove them but because we must *necessarily* assume them in order to experience phenomena as we do. For Critical Idealism there would be morality even if there was no empirical violence. Why?

The *ground* of morality is nothing external! We are moral beings because we are, at least to a degree, *autonomous* beings. Autonomy does not mean in this case independence from all external authority (e.g., freedom-from culture, society, religion). Autonomy does mean "freedom-from," but not with respect to culture, society, and religion. Humanity is "free-from" the blind, causal system of nature -- at least to a degree. However, in addition to autonomy meaning "freedom-from" natural causality, it also means "freedom-for." We can consciously (i.e., teleologically) do things that nature cannot do on its own, and, unlike other species, we don't merely change nature by instinct but, rather, by design. We are moral beings because we can not, and do not have to, be satisfied with "nature" as it is given in the senses, and, as a consequence, we alone are responsible for our own causal agency. For this reason, autonomy does not mean independence from external authority. Autonomy is taken in a literal, Greek sense of auto-nomos: "to give oneself the law." In short, our moral nature is *grounded* in internal, *autonomous freedom*, not external, capricious violence. Rather than nature blindly "giving us the law" to govern our actions, we, to a degree, are responsible for "giving ourselves the law" to govern our actions. However, we do not have control over the consequences of our actions.

Neither "violence," nor fragility, nor vulnerability, nor even "evil" ground morality. Humanity's status of "radical evil" is neither ontological nor merely symbolic. It is a

---

<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 35. See page 42, as well, where Ricoeur rejects Kant's "puritanical evaluation of desire" that anchors immorality in "desire" rather than violence: "... we set aside [Kant's puritanical evaluation of desire] by putting violence in the place of desire. Next there is his refusal of any diversity among and of a hierarchy of feelings which leads him to reduce love to 'pathological' desire. In this way, the ethics of the categorical imperative finds itself arbitrarily cut off from any legitimate search for satisfaction, for a sense of accomplishment, in a word for seeking a 'good life' in the Greek sense [Aristotle's eudaimonia] of this term." (*Ibid.*, 42.) Derrida appears to agree with Ricoeur's reading of Kant as "sacrificing" self-interest. See "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 52. We will see that Kant's ground of morality is not desire but autonomous freedom-for that completes freedom-from nature's blind determinism. Particular, self-interest (not desire) does not ground morality for Kant but stands in tension with universal, moral principles that are "right because they are right," not because they serve one's self-interest.

*necessary* (but not sufficient), transcendental, condition of possibility for us to be free-from nature's blind causality and for the exercising of our freedom-for creating things that nature cannot do on its own. Without this *necessary*, "radical" option between "good" and "evil" principles, we could only be mere animals governed by instinct or permanently good or permanently evil.<sup>42</sup> Our capacity for autonomous freedom is "good" in an amoral sense. It is "good" because without it we could not be human. However, this "goodness" of autonomous freedom itself is no ontological status that in turns means that we are morally good. Kant places autonomous freedom under the "*Anlage*" ("capacity" is a more accurate translation than "predisposition") in contrast to "*Hänge*" ("inclinations" is a more accurate translation than "disposition").<sup>43</sup> Rather than having placed "radical evil" at the foundation of morality, Kant identifies autonomous freedom as the *ground* of morality.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, in order for freedom to be exercised, it must *necessarily* be capable of distinguishing and choosing between "good" and "evil" principles. If there were only "good" principles or if there were only "evil" principles, there could be no freedom. Hence, practical reason requires both good and evil principles at its (radical) core. In other words, both good and evil are "radical." This is a radical goodness and a radical evil that are *necessary* for, but not determinative of, our freedom. Both radical goodness and radical evil, however, presuppose the amoral goodness of autonomous freedom.

This leads us to a third observation with respect to Ricoeur's moral theory. His moral theory is a "deliberative," hence, "consequentialist" theory. In the Aristotelian sense of "moral virtue" in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, moral principles are taken to be a "mean" between excess and deficiency with respect to those things in life of which we can have 'more or less'. Moral virtue in this sense requires experience so that they are *a posteriori*, clearly not *a priori*. Ricoeur writes:

Kant's inability to take ... contingency into account is a result of his method in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which transposes -- for no good reason, in my opinion -- the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* from the theoretical to the practical sphere. By doing this, duty is split off from desire and, still more grave, the moral aspect of the most basic conditions is cut off from the exercising of *praxis*. This is why I find more to think about in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* than in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, inasmuch as the former work is less governed and, if I can put it so,

---

<sup>42</sup> Kant points out that sensuousness alone is too little to account for evil in humanity because it would make evil a matter of animality alone. Reason alone is too much to account for evil in humanity because it would elevate evil to a diabolical principle equal to the other ideas of reason: God, freedom, and the soul. See Kant, *Religion* AA VI: 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Kant discusses the differences between "capacities" (*Anlage*) and "inclinations" (*Hänge*) in *Religion* AA VI: 26-32.

<sup>44</sup> Klaus Konhardt articulates this relationship between freedom and evil as follows: In "... Kant's practical philosophy one cannot speak of an insurmountable gap between a free will, under moral laws, on the one hand, and a teaching of radical evil, on the other hand ... Far more, the conception of radical evil in *Religion* is due to Kant's *insight* that human freedom if not the cause nonetheless is the condition of evil." [McGaughey's translation] Konhardt, "Die Unbegreiflichkeit der Freiheit. Überlegungen zu Kants Lehre vom Bösen," 400.

less crushed by the concern to draw a line separating a priori and a posteriori across practice.<sup>45</sup>

Because of his consequentialist emphasis on violence and the need for deliberation with respect to moral virtues,<sup>46</sup> the contrast with Kant could not be more clear:

... two corollaries ... accentuate the distance of the present attempt from Kant. By insisting on the contingent character of fundamental human goods, I have emphasized a double feature of the moral life for which Aristotle has done better justice than did Kant: on the one hand, the *fragility* of human *praxis* in regard to what the Ancients called fortune and the Moderns call chance; on the other, the vulnerability with regard to recurrent *violence* that makes human agents in turn victim or executioner ... This double contingency of the goods on which “good” praxis hangs means the rule of justice is indiscernible from the moral rule.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 43, n. 48.

<sup>46</sup> See Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 38, 41, and 43–44, especially page 41, where moral rules are concerned with prior discernment of “fundamental human goods” and grounded in “broad consensus on the plain of moral belief.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 43. There is not space here to engage explicitly Ricoeur’s privileging of the Golden Rule as the key to moral rules (*ibid.*, 36 f.), again explicitly rejecting Kant’s “critique” of the Golden Rule as erroneously grounded in self-interest (what Ricoeur calls “desire”). See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork* AA IV: 430\*. For Kant, morality is not grounded in an *external* rule (much less one grounded in self-interest) but in *internal*, autonomous freedom

The differences between Ricoeur and Kant with respect to self-interest (“desire”) are tremendously significant. Kant speaks of “self-interest” (not mere “desire”) and rejects “self-interest” not because he has anything against desires, much less because he believes that we can eliminate self-interest (We can’t! See the opening paragraph of Section II of the *Groundwork*!). Rather, self-interest is always *particular*, and a moral rule *ought* to be universal.

Kant’s first “universal-law” formulation of the categorical imperative has nothing to do with *a priori* determining/proving the universality of the principle upon which one is to act. We would never be able to act if we had to prove the universality of our principles. Rather, the “universal-law” formulation is a strategy to checkmate particular, self-interest. Kant says: “... the *principle* of every human will as *a will giving universal law through all its maxims* ... would be very *well suited* to be the categorical imperative by this: that just because of the idea of giving universal law *it is based on no interest* and therefore, among all possible imperatives, can alone be *unconditional*; or still better ..., if there is a categorical imperative (i.e., a law for every will of a rational being) it can only command that everything be done from the maxim of one’s will as a will that could at the same time have as its object itself as giving universal law; for only then is the practical principle, and the imperative that the will obeys, unconditional, since it can have no interest as its basis.” Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork* AA IV: 432.

In contrast, Kant's moral theory is not consequentialist but self-determining. Kant maintains that the will is independent of the faculty of desire<sup>48</sup> because we have control over our moral intention, not the consequences. To be sure, consequences are not ignored. Yet, their status is only something for which we can hope, not something over which we have control and is a concern of the "cosmological," regulative idea, of *pure* reason, not *practical* reason (morality).

It might appear that one could fault Kant for having reduced morality to the isolated individual, left alone to work out the ambiguities of moral dilemmas and without the aid of "just institutions," as Ricoeur emphasizes in *Oneself as Another*. As with all judgments based merely on appearances, this conclusion is erroneous. Not only does Kant connect the individual to all of humanity in an invisible "Kingdom of ends," but he also explicitly emphasizes the role of (moral) culture in encouraging creativity and the moral effort of all. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes between two kinds of culture: 1) a culture of skills and 2) a culture promoting the will.<sup>49</sup> The former, culture of skills, is the notion of culture with which we are most familiar. It is the culture that is a consequence of *techné* and what Rousseau called "second nature." The latter, culture that promotes the will is not to be confused with a culture in pursuit of mere self-interest and the exercising of power. Rather, it is an invisible culture that encourages the autonomous creativity of the individual by both reminding us of our extra-ordinary capacity to change nature and of our moral responsibility for the exercising of this unique efficient causality. Particularly, it is that community that stands by the individual (in fact or in principle) whenever s/he acts on the basis of a moral principle because it is right and not because it serves her/his self-interest. Succinctly, institutions cannot guarantee justice, and, just as in the case of the civic law, justice requires that the institution's community and the civic law's citizenry be committed to the moral law.

One could say that it is precisely Kant's culture that promotes the will that is, in turn, the key to Ricoeur's central aphorism from *Oneself as Another*: "*the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions...*"<sup>50</sup>

### **On Religion and Philosophy**

Our understanding of the relationship between religion and philosophy depends upon our understanding of the meaning of "critique." If *critical thinking* means to distinguish fiction from fact, then religion is always going to be subordinate to philosophy because religion is a "first order" experience and philosophy is "second order" reflection/critique. However, if *critical thinking* means the shift of focus from *content claims* to *necessary conditions of possibility*, then religion and philosophy are indistinguishable and "second order" reflection occurs *within the horizon of*, not as *an outsider looking into* religion.

It appears that Ricoeur viewed the relationship between religion and philosophy to be in the first sense of *critical thinking* whereas I claim that we have a more productive interchange between religion and philosophy if we view their relationship in the second sense -- that found in Critical Idealism. More importantly, though, I want to propose that Ricoeur's own project that ever again sought rapprochement between religion and philosophy

---

<sup>48</sup> See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 459.

<sup>49</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 431-432.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 239.

ultimately fails but that a turn to Critical Idealism is entirely compatible with, and can actually achieve, his intuited aim of rapprochement by focusing upon his central theme in “discourse,” the productive imagination.

What is “critique?” Ricoeur describes “critique” in *The Symbolism of Evil*:

All criticism ‘demythologizes’ insofar as it is criticism; that is to say, it always adds to the separation of the historical (according to the rules of the critical method) and the pseudo-historical. What criticism continually endeavors to exorcize is the *logos* of the *muthos* ... As an advance post of ‘modernity,’ criticism cannot help being a ‘demythologization’, that is an irreversible gain of truthfulness, of intellectual honesty, and therefore of objectivity.<sup>51</sup>

For Ricoeur critique is an activity of reason that he calls the “scientific vocation.”<sup>52</sup> When it comes to the “battles” between religious myths of origin and astronomy, geology ... biology ..., and anthropology, “[o]n all these fronts, reason remains the victor.”<sup>53</sup> “... [H]istoriography ... seeks proof in documents, that is, in the conserved traces of the narrated events. Documentary proof in this regard constitutes the ‘epistemological break’ that separates historiography from myth, legend, stories, epics, and finally every fictional narrative.”<sup>54</sup> To the extent that myth can maintain any validity, it is symbolic as a narrative of origins that makes “... room for an idea of a foundation in time qualitatively different from the time unfolded by historical knowledge.”<sup>55</sup>

Ricoeur’s notion of critique is located in human reason as a strategy that seeks to separate “history from fiction” (the “pseudo-historical”).<sup>56</sup> Even if we acknowledge the nuanced, ambiguous nature of the relationship between fiction and history in Section II of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, the critical function remains the same.

The meaning of critique here couldn’t be more different from Kant’s. Rather than a strategy of sovereign reason that seeks to separate truth from falsehood, for Kant critique is demanded by the very limits to reason. Critique is the method of “methodological skepticism” that turns from adjudicating the truth status of phenomena, which escapes us because we don’t have access to the *Ding an sich* that the adjudication would require, to ask what are the conditions necessary (but not sufficient) for us to experience phenomena in the first place.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352–53.

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 167.

<sup>54</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 168.

<sup>56</sup> See *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352. In “Fragment 0 (1)” of *Paul Ricoeur. Lebendig bis in den Tod – Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, Ricoeur writes: “I am not a Christian philosopher ... I am simply a philosopher, in fact a philosopher without an absolute, concerned with philosophical anthropology ... [T]his mobilization of philosophical competency does not limit freedom of thought and autonomy – I would even say it does not limit autarky, self-sufficiency – that belongs to philosophical research and the structuring of its discourse.” [McGaughey’s translation] (99, 101)

This is not a “historical,” but a “transcendental” critique that views the symbolic and the mythical not as providing the originating symbols that give rise to all subsequent thought but as expressions of a unique human, efficient causality: autonomous freedom that is both “freedom-from” the blind determinations of nature and “freedom-for” the pursuit of one’s own ends in light of self-legislated moral principles.

To the extent that Ricoeur views religion as a salvation myth that is a response to the woeful, human condition of “suffering and death, hate and murder, the painful character of work and birth,<sup>57</sup>” the “hope” that is religion is a “foolish hope.” Quoting Paul in I Corinthians 1:27-29, Ricoeur writes of the Logos of the Cross as folly: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that one might boast in the presence of God.<sup>58</sup>” Combined with the *kenosis* of Philippians 2:5-11, the folly is twice: “Twice *nothing*, the nothingness of the Kenosis after the nothingness of foolishness, is designated as the point of passage toward the “power” in 1 Corinthians and “exaltation” in Philippians.<sup>59</sup>” Here is where hope enters for Ricoeur:

If therefore the time between foolishness and kenosis, on the one hand, and power and exaltation, on the other, cannot be known through a rational account, and even cannot be recounted, inscribed in some grand narrative, it must be the object of a hope that respects the mystery.<sup>60</sup>

Ricoeur’s meditations on salvation here end with

If we ... ask what Christians may still specifically have to say, I would answer it is about the hope that, in a way we do not fully understand, the partial histories of victims, histories riddled with defeats, that collaborates with the coming Kingdom of God. Surely, itself a foolish hope ...<sup>61</sup>

Yet, in the end, the spirit of Ricoeur’s historical critique seems to triumph over this foolish hope. In a posthumous collection of writings published as *Lebendig bis in den Tod (Living unto Death)*, Ricoeur affirms the superiority of critical reflection (philosophy) over myth. He distinguishes objective immortality over subjective immortality<sup>62</sup> with the former prohibiting one from complaining endlessly that one died in vain but affirming endlessly that one’s life was not futile.<sup>63</sup> This seems to be a victory of history over the foolish hope of salvation beyond history.

---

<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 155.

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 170.

<sup>62</sup> See Oliver Abel’s „Preface“ to Paul Ricoeur, *Lebendig bis in den Tod. Fragmente aus dem Nachlass* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2007), xxvi.

<sup>63</sup> See Ricoeur, *Lebendig bis in den Tod*, xxxi.

Kant's definition of religion as "What we can *hope* for<sup>64</sup>" is radically different from Ricoeur's understanding of religion. Rather than articulate hope in terms of a salvation myth, Kant's transcendental turn emphasizes our hope in the transformative capacity of creative freedom, which, can only be "hoped for" because it is incapable of proof or disproof. Already in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 586), Kant emphasized that there is no proof of the efficient causality of creative freedom, and he repeats that acknowledgment in the *Critique of Practical Reason* when he observes that we are incapable of providing a proof or a disproof of God, immortality, or freedom.<sup>65</sup> Yet, of these latter three "ideas of reason," which are "regulative ideas" (i.e., necessary assumptions) because they are incapable of proof/disproof in the senses, Kant calls autonomous freedom the one "fact of reason."<sup>66</sup> These three regulative ideas, when combined, are what Kant means by religion:

... the reason for the failure of the attempt to prove God and immortality by a merely theoretical route lies in the fact that by this route (that of concepts of nature) no cognition of the supersensible is possible at all. The reason that it succeeds in the moral route (that of the concept of freedom), by contrast, lies in the fact that in this case the supersensible that is the ground (freedom), by means of a determinate law of causality arising in it, not only provides matter for the cognition of the other supersensible things (the moral and final purpose and the conditions of its realizability), but also demonstrates the fact of its reality in actions, although for that very reason it cannot yield a basis for any proof except one that is valid from a practical point of view (which is also the only one that religion needs).

It remains quite remarkable in this that among the three pure ideas of reason, God, freedom, and immortality, that of freedom is the only concept of the supersensible that proves its objective reality (by means of the causality that is thought in it) in nature, through its effect which is possible in the latter, and thereby makes possible the connection of all three to each other in a religion; and that we thus have in ourselves a principle that is capable of determining the idea of the supersensible in us and by that means also the idea of the supersensible outside us into one cognition, although one that is possible only in a practical respect, of which merely speculative philosophy (which can also provide a merely negative concept of freedom) had to despair: hence the concept of freedom (as the foundational concept [*Grundbegriff*] for all unconditionally practical laws) can extend reason beyond those boundaries within which every (theoretical) concept of nature had to remain restricted without hope.<sup>67</sup>

What, then, constitutes the *hope* that is religion? It is not the "foolish hope" of salvation, but our hope " " ... that the capacity of creative freedom, which is not of our creation,

---

<sup>64</sup> See Kant's four famous questions at *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 833.

<sup>65</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* AA V: 142.

<sup>66</sup> See *Critique of Practical Reason* AA V: 31, 55-57, and 105.

<sup>67</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 474.

will make possible a radical transformation of our moral disposition in order for us to improve in our moral efforts--something that we can never prove (or disprove):<sup>68</sup>

*Assurance of this cannot of course be attained by the human being naturally, neither via immediate consciousness nor via the evidence of the life he has hitherto led, for the depths of his own heart (the subjective first ground of his maxims [i.e., autonomous freedom]) are to him inscrutable. Yet he must be able to hope that, by the exertion of his own power, he will attain to the road that leads in that direction.*<sup>69</sup> (Partial emphasis added)

Although Kant also says that no religion can be conceived without faith in the after-life,<sup>70</sup> the claim is not that there necessarily is an afterlife (something along with grace and miracles that is incapable of proof or disproof) but that any religion that would deny the after-life would be claiming to know something that we cannot know and that, more importantly, whatever content such an afterlife would involve would have to encourage our moral effort in this life. Otherwise, we would be more concerned about what is in our interest for the next life than with doing the right thing because it is right (doing precisely what is well-pleasing to God) even though it may be contrary to our interests. If there is an afterlife, the only role it can play in terms of pure religion is to be a confirmation of our *worthiness* of it through our moral effort in this life.<sup>71</sup> “Worthiness,” however, is not an attainment that places a demand of one’s “right to salvation in the next life,” but it consists in concentrating our efforts at moral improvement in this life.

The modal meaning of worthiness here is *subjective*, not objective. Objectively, worthiness means that one has *earned* the meaning/satisfaction. Were that to be the case, then one would do the right thing, again, out of self-interest (i.e., in order to earn the satisfaction and/or recognition from a deity that comes from doing it). Since Kant places worthiness

---

<sup>68</sup> Douglas R. McGaughey, “Historical and Pure Religion: A Response to Stephen Palmquist,” *Journal of Religion* 93, no. 2 (April 2013): 171. According to Ricoeur’s understanding of Kant’s notion of religion: “... religion, according to Kant ... possesses no theme other than the *regeneration* of freedom, that is restoring to freedom the control over it of the good principle. In addition, this consideration of the capacity – lost and to be recovered – of freedom brings back to the forefront the problem of good and evil ... In other words, the question of good and evil returns with the question of ‘the subjective ground of the use of freedom.’” (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 216-217.) On the contrary, for Kant it is impossible to lose freedom, and the ground of morality is not the loss of freedom or a victory of evil over good: “Every evil action must be so considered ... as if the human being had fallen into it directly from the state of innocence. For whatever his previous behavior may have been, whatever the natural causes influencing him, whether they are inside or outside them, his action is yet free and not determined through any of these causes; hence the action can and must always be judged as an original exercised of his power of choice. He should have refrained from it, whatever his temporal circumstances and entanglements; for through no cause in the world can he cease to be a free agent. (partial emphasis added) (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* AA VI: 41)

<sup>69</sup> Kant, *Religion* AA VI: 51.

<sup>70</sup> Kant, *Religion* AA VI: 126.

<sup>71</sup> See *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, 774–77; *Critique of Practical Reason* XX V : 129-132; Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (Leipzig: Bei Carl Friedrich Franz, 1817), 130, 133, as well as *Religion* AA VI : 66-67.

precisely in the context of eclipsing self-interest as the *ground* for one's action (not eliminating self-interest), worthiness is a subjective experience. Worthiness is *not* a form of "works righteousness" but merely descriptive of the following steps: One knows that one *ought* to do the right thing because it is right and *can* (not must) do the right thing. If one does the right thing merely because it is right, one is not (consciously) motivated by any self-interest. Should it turn out that one, thereby, experiences satisfaction (or any additional benefit from a deity), one is worthy of it because one knows that one has made the appropriate decision *not* because one is seeking or must seek to earn some objective satisfaction.

Clearly, we couldn't have a greater contrast with respect to the nature of religion than that between Ricoeur and Kant. According to Ricoeur, religion is understood to be a culturally relative, *historical* phenomenon grounded in the hierophany of a myth of origins unique to a particular tradition. *Historical* religion divides humanity. According to Kant, religion is *pure* religion grounded in capacities shared by all human beings as the always and already present gift of autonomous freedom that makes any and all creativity and moral transformation/improvement possible. *Pure* religion unites humanity.

However, Ricoeur and Kant share their emphasis on autonomous freedom, which for Ricoeur is at the core of "discourse" as the productive imagination informing "re-figuration." If we start here, we can escape the crippling limits of *historical* religion and open discourse to the promises and hope of *pure* religion.

### **On the Productive Imagination and the Transcendental Ego**

There is a reading of Kant's productive imagination (for example, by Martin Heidegger<sup>72</sup> and Ronald Judy<sup>73</sup>) that he viewed it not only as a conundrum but also and more significantly in horror that *the ground of understanding is irrational*. Heidegger even proposes that Kant was so distressed by the possibility that the imagination, as the "unknown, common root" of empirical intuition and the categories of the understanding, that he stepped back from the precipice and removed it from the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>74</sup> However, not only does the productive imagination continue in its role as the "unknown, common root" in the second edition, but also Ernst Cassirer correctly points out in his review of *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* the ridiculousness of the claim that Kant was subject to any such psychological trauma.<sup>75</sup> The reading by Heidegger and Judy, in fact, ignores the significance of the limits of reason to Kant's entire project. Kant places "faith"

---

<sup>72</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, James S. Churchill (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968).

<sup>73</sup> See Ronald Judy, "Kant and the Negro," *Surfaces* 1, no. 8 (1991): 55: "... Kant strives to give the Understanding the upper hand in its relationship with Imagination ... Nonetheless he is frustrated in this effort by the diligence of his own argument." See, as well: "Not only does the problem of Imagination's indeterminacy seem hopelessly irresolvable, but it becomes intractable, firmly situating itself at the base of theoretical cognition. Even this it does not do in any exact and clear cut way that might be *totally* comprehensible to Understanding."

<sup>74</sup> See Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 173-174.

<sup>75</sup> See Ernst Cassirer, "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kant-Interpretation," *Kant-Studien* 36 (1931): 1-26.

(*Fürwahrhalten*: B 850-851) at the core of both theoretical (understanding of the external world) and practical (moral) reason, and there is no more clear acknowledgment of this than the following from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

Here ... we see philosophy put in fact in a precarious position, which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or on earth from which it depends, or on which it is based. Here philosophy is to manifest its purity as sustainer of its own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it, all of which -- though they may always be better than nothing at all -- can still never yield basic principles that reason dictates and that must have their source entirely and completely a priori and, at the same time, must have their commanding authority from this: that they expect nothing from the inclination of human beings but everything from the supremacy of the law and the respect owed to it or, failing this, condemn the human being to contempt for himself and inner abhorrence.<sup>76</sup>

As we have seen, even the ground of practical reason, autonomous freedom, is incapable of proof or disproof since it is a form of efficient causality (see Section III of the *Groundwork*). Furthermore, the “soul” itself is inaccessible either to direct experience or proof (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 156-157). The soul, in point of fact, is a “regulative idea” of pure reason (i.e., a necessary presupposition) in order for us to be able to experience phenomena as we do. The soul is a necessary assumption because we experience a world of appearances. Furthermore, “objective” experience of the world of appearances and of ourselves requires that we assume that both domains are governed by laws (physical and moral laws). Rather than fearing irrationality as a consequence of identifying reason’s limits, Kant finds two universal orders (he calls them domains<sup>77</sup>) within the limits of reason.

In Ricoeur’s reading, the conundrum of the soul is not associated with the terror of irrationality but with a paradox between the “phenomenological” and the “transcendental”:<sup>78</sup> with transcendental time excluding “any inner sense that would reintroduce an ontology of the soul” yet paradoxically linked with phenomenological time that is “articulated only by borrowing from objective time” in which “we know ourselves as an object -- and not as we are ... [by means of] determinations that we produce ... ‘[T]he determinations of inner sense have ... to be arranged as appearances in time in precisely the same manner in which we arrange those of outer sense in space’ ([Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*] B 156).<sup>79</sup>” I would summarize this as a strategy that privileges external, hypothetical, narrative construction (the productive imagination) over the far deeper, internal categorical creativity on the part of the soul. The result, once again, is that Ricoeur anchors the ethical dimension of construction in external consequences (both personal narrative and social institutional constructions) whereas Kant anchors the moral dimension of construction in *categorical*, autonomous freedom that is the condition of possibility for Ricoeur’s notion of “productive imagination.”

---

<sup>76</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 25-26.

<sup>77</sup> See *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 174-176.

<sup>78</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 56.

<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 55.

## WORKS CITED

Kant's works are cited according to the Akademie Ausgabe (AA) [Academy Edition] of the Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaft [Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences]. The exception is the Critique of Pure Reason, which is cited according to the pagination of its two editions: the 1781 First Edition (A) and the 1787 Second Edition (B). An example: Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* AA V: 431-432 refers to the Academy Edition Volume V: page #s 431-432. Translations into English of Kant's works often have the AA pagination in the columns. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Kant's works come from the Cambridge University Press (CUP) edition.

- Bergson, Henri. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Translated by R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton, assisted by W. Horsfall Carter. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1956.
- Cassirer, Ernst. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*. 1944. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.
- . "Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kant-Interpretation." *Kant-Studien* 36 (1931): 1–26.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Religion: Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. Translated by Rosemary Sheed. New York: World Publishing Company, Meridian, 1963.
- Greisch, Jean. "'Freiheit im Licht der Hoffnung': Zu Paul Ricoeurs Kantdeutung." In *Kants Metaphysik und Religionsphilosophie*, edited by Norbert Fischer, 583–608. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. James S. Churchill. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968.
- Judy, Ronald. "Kant and the Negro." *Surfaces* I, no. 8 (1991): 4–70.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited by Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St Martin's Press, 1929.
- . *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 165-486.
- . *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 385-463.
- . *Critique of Practical Reason* AA V: 51-164.
- . *Metaphysics of Morals* AA VI: 205-493.
- . *Metaphysik Mrongovius*, in *Kant's Vorlesungen von der Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR* XXIX: 745-1040.

- . *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* AA IV: 255-383.
- . *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* AA VI: 1-202.
- . *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*. Leipzig: Bei Carl Friedrich Franz, 1817.
- Konhardt, Klaus. "Die Unbegreiflichkeit der Freiheit. Überlegungen zu Kants Lehre vom Bösen." *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 42, no. 3 (1988): 397–416.
- Lindbeck, George A. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.
- McGaughey, Douglas R. "Freedom! What's it good for?" at <http://www.criticalidealism.org>
- . "Historical and Pure Religion: A Response to Stephen Palmquist." *Journal of Religion* 93, no. 2 (April 2013): 151-176.
- . *Strangers and Pilgrims: On the Role of aporiai in Theology*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997.
- Neurath, Otto, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn. "Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung -- der Wiener Kreis." In *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung, Sozialismus und Logischer Empirismus*, 81–101. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics: Writings and Lectures, Volume 2*. Trans. David Pellauer. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013.
- . *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. Translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- . *Lebendig bis in den Tod. Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 2007.
- . Paul. "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics." *New Literary History* VI, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 95–110.
- . *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 2. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- . *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 3. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.