

Existential and Phenomenological Conceptions of the Relationship Between Philosophy and Theology

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‘No One Can Serve Two Masters’: The Unity of Philosophy and Theology in Ricœur’s Early Thought

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Abstract: While the French philosopher Paul Ricœur is not usually thought of as an existentialist, during his early career he engaged deeply with existentialist thought, and published two articles on the relationship between existentialism and Christian faith. Ricœur’s attempts to relate philosophy and theology often led to great personal distress, which he occasionally referred to as “controlled schizophrenia,” in which he struggled to remain faithful to both philosophical and theological discourse without compromising one for the sake of the other. This essay first explores the influence of existentialist philosophy on Ricœur before surveying how Ricœur understood existentialism, and how in his view it transforms the relationship between philosophy and theology. It then shows how Ricœur is ultimately able to retain his “dual allegiance” to both discourses through active hope in how the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* testifies to their original and final unity.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur; Existentialism; Gabriel Marcel; Karl Jaspers; Creation; Freedom; History; Communication

1 Introduction

While scholarship has for a long time been obsessed with how the French Protestant philosopher Paul Ricœur relates philosophy and theology,¹ it is commonly overlooked that Ricœur’s first engagements with this question are from an existentialist point of view.² He published two articles—‘Renewal of the Problem of Christian Philosophy by the Philosophies of Existence’ (1948), and ‘Note on Existentialism and Christian Faith’ (1951)—both of which deal at length with the question of how philosophy and theology relate.³

Ricœur is not usually thought of as an existentialist. He never identified with existentialism, and he kept a critical distance from it even at the height of its popularity.⁴ But for almost thirty years—between

1 As Michael D’Angeli observes, “the boundaries between philosophy and religion have for decades been at the center of Ricœur scholarship” (D’Angeli, “The Double Privilege of Athens and Jerusalem”, 454). Among the large quantity of secondary literature on this question, see *inter alia*: Albano, *Freedom, Truth, and Hope*; Dornisch, *Faith and Philosophy in the Writings of Paul Ricœur*; Blundell, *Paul Ricœur between Theology and Philosophy*; Watkin, ‘Ricœur and the Autonomy of Philosophy’; Pambrun, ‘The Relationship between Theology and Philosophy’; Sohn, ‘Paul Tillich and Paul Ricœur on the Meaning of “Philosophical Theology”’; Venema, ‘The Source of Ricœur’s Double Allegiance’; Wells, ‘Theology and Christian Philosophy’.

2 Strictly speaking, they are not quite the first. At the age of 23, prior to the influence of existentialism, he published one article on the same question. See Ricœur, ‘Note Sur Les Rapports’.

3 Ricœur, ‘Renouvellement de la philosophie chrétienne’; Ricœur, ‘Note sur l’existentialisme et la foi chrétienne’. Neither of these articles have been translated into English.

4 See, for example, his critiques of Jaspers and Heidegger in *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence*, 326–93; of Sartre in *History and Truth*, 323–24; and of Marcel in *Marcel et Jaspers*, 78, 107–8, 175, 300.

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1934 and 1963—he was deeply influenced by Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) and Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), who at the time were typically placed alongside Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) as the four most prominent representatives of existentialism.⁵ Moreover, the question of how philosophy and theology relate was a matter of 'existential' importance for him in another sense, not merely an academic concern but something that he wrestled with personally, seeking to quell the haunting feeling of 'schizophrenia' that threatened to cleave his faith and his philosophy in two.

This essay will proceed as follows. We shall begin with a brief summary of how Marcel and Jaspers conceived the relationship between philosophy and theology. This will enable us to see Ricœur's thought as a development and refinement of these two great existentialist philosophers. We shall see that, although Ricœur learnt much from Jaspers about the crucial importance of communication for truth-seeking, Jaspers's insistence on the absolute incompatibility of philosophy and religion could only exacerbate Ricœur's sense of schizophrenia. And although Marcel's philosophical journey to faith was a great encouragement to Ricœur, it could serve as no template for him because he was in a different existential situation.

Next, we shall see how Ricœur carved his own unique path to relating philosophy and theology, one that was appropriate to his own circumstances and that could bring peace to his restless mind. We shall do this, first by examining how the three 'themes' of existentialism identified by Ricœur—history/embodiment, freedom, and communication—transform the relationship between philosophy and theology. This will reveal a deeper difficulty in relating the two discourses that leads us to the heart of Ricœur's existential distress: if he had to choose between being a philosopher and being a Christian, which would he choose? Which is his ultimate allegiance, or will he ever have to choose? Is the discord between the two discourses more fundamental than their unity? Can Ricœur "serve two masters" by both engaging in autonomous philosophical enquiry and being unswervingly faithful to the gospel message?

2 Background and influences: Jaspers and Marcel

One cannot underestimate the influence of the two existentialists, Jaspers and Marcel, on Ricœur's early thought. From 1934 onwards he developed a warm personal friendship with Marcel and participated in the famous 'Friday evenings' of philosophical discussion at his house. While confined to a Prisoner of War camp in World War II, Ricœur wrote often to Marcel, whom he addressed as "Cher Maître," implicitly labelling himself Marcel's disciple.⁶ Marcel had also introduced Ricœur to the writings of Karl Jaspers, and during the five years of his imprisonment, Jaspers's 900-page *Philosophie* was his constant literary companion. Together with a fellow Prisoner of War, Mikel Dufrenne, he carefully read and reflected on Jaspers's entire published corpus. This period of intense study bore fruit after the war with the publication of a co-authored work expounding, interpreting, and critically evaluating Jaspers's philosophy for a Francophone audience.⁷ This was followed by another publication in which Ricœur compares and contrasts the thought of Jaspers and Marcel.⁸ In short, before he began dialogue with Freud in the 1960s, these two philosophers were the most ever-present in Ricœur's thought and work. Let us briefly summarise how they construe the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Jaspers's relation to religion changed over the course of his career, and by the 1950s he had become more amicable towards his own Protestant background. But what Ricœur would have read in Jaspers's 1932 *magnum opus* was that, from the point of view of a "philosophy of existence," there is an unbridgeable chasm between philosophy and religion. For the early Jaspers the two were seen as radically and irreconcilably opposed without any possibility of harmony between the two. The true philosopher can never be religious,

⁵ It was probably Sartre who first canonised these four as the core of existentialism, in his famous *L'existentialisme Est Un Humanisme*. But the grouping became standard for Ricœur and many others, as can be seen, for example, in Jean Wahl's *Philosophies of Existence*, the subtitle of which is 'an introduction to the basic thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre'.

⁶ The Fonds Gabriel Marcel, where the letters from Paul Ricœur to Gabriel Marcel can be found, is at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

⁷ Dufrenne and Ricœur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence*.

⁸ Ricœur, *Marcel et Jaspers*.

nor can the true religious person be a philosopher. “The philosophical-religious tension is absolute,” Jaspers tells us; “the philosopher as such cannot without [...] a break become a religious person.”⁹

According to Jaspers, religion has two essential elements which make it irreconcilable with the philosophical spirit. The first is obedient submission to authority. In both doctrine and practice, “the believer is *obedient*. He submits, does not question, and receives an incomprehensible salvation. In thought he bows to theology; in action he bows to the orders of the church. His whole existence is to be submissive.”¹⁰ The second element in religion is dogmatic certainty that does not question. By contrast, for Jaspers, freedom and independence are essential to philosophy. If someone were to give up their independence by submitting to a religious creed, they would have ceased to be a philosopher. Likewise, nothing could be more foreign to philosophy than unquestioning certainty. Philosophy is always open-ended, always questioning, never conclusively arriving at any incontrovertible truth. Philosophy, says Jaspers, “does not become a closed system like dogmatic religion, which knows only adherents or heathens and heretics.”¹¹

Although Jaspers obviously sees himself as a philosopher, and therefore not religious, he tries to remain consistent with the inconclusive nature of philosophy as he has defined it, by passing no final judgment on the truth or falsehood of religious claims. Religion could be correct after all, but nobody can ever know this. Philosophy does not have a superior vantage point over religion, because “there is no standpoint from which both would be surveyable.”¹² “No comparative study,” he claims, “will ever reveal objectively where the truth lies.”¹³ One must simply choose whether to be philosophical or religious.

The conflict must be decided in each individual. Either he wants to obey and will waive his independence, or he wants freedom and will waive revelation and ritual. [...] Yet it does not mean that religion and philosophy are ever two coordinated possibilities to choose from, for I am not conscious of the decision until I have taken my stand on one side or the other.¹⁴

If Ricœur had relied on Jaspers to help him grasp the relationship between philosophy and theology, he would have been forced to choose between being *either* religious *or* a philosopher, without any possibility of holding the two together in his own person. Perhaps the ongoing influence of Jaspers is one of the major reasons he never ceased to speak of a “controlled schizophrenia” when referring to his struggle to remain both fully a philosopher and fully Christian.¹⁵

In Gabriel Marcel, however, Ricœur found an entirely different model for relating philosophy and theology, one that is perhaps more authentically existential in that it is inseparable from Marcel’s own life and person. Marcel had grown up vaguely agnostic and converted to the Catholic faith in his forties.¹⁶ What is significant, however, is that Marcel’s conversion was not ancillary to his philosophy, but an organic development of his philosophical explorations. His journey to faith is documented in his two books, *Metaphysical Journal* and *Being and Having*,¹⁷ both of which have the form of journal entries in which Marcel records his thoughts and reflections in chronological order according to the date on which he had them. Decades later, in a series of interviews with Marcel, Ricœur asks him to explain how he sees his philosophy and his faith to relate. In reply, Marcel has little to say that is not already evident.¹⁸ He offers no abstract theory of how to relate philosophy and theology: his entire philosophy is itself a unique and unrepeatable relationship between the two, a testimony to Christianity’s power to attract first the attention, and then the devotion, of a free and independent philosophical mind.

⁹ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, 1969, 1:295.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:297.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:300.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1:295.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:296.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:302.

¹⁵ Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*, 2. See also Reagan, *Paul Ricœur*, 132.

¹⁶ Marcel writes about his conversion and other life events in his autobiography, *Awakenings*.

¹⁷ See Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*; Marcel, *Being and Having*.

¹⁸ “What has to be seen is how I came to Christianity. You know I was raised without any religion and that, nevertheless, from the moment I began to think philosophically for myself, it seemed I was irresistibly drawn to think favorably of Christianity” (Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom*).

Although both Marcel and Jaspers left an indelible mark on the young Ricœur, he could not follow in the footsteps of either when thinking through how to relate philosophy and theology. Unlike Jaspers, he was a committed Christian as well as wishing to be considered a philosopher. Unlike Marcel, he had been raised in the Christian faith. It was impossible for philosophy to lead him to faith: he encountered philosophy rather as a challenge to the faith he already had. Therefore, in spite of the strong influence of both these thinkers, he was compelled to think beyond them and work out a way of relating philosophy and theology that could apply to his own situation. In what follows we shall see how he wrestles with their legacy, building on some of their insights—especially where they offer a means of critiquing the two atheist existentialists, Heidegger and Sartre—and in other places departing from them and carving out his own distinctive position.

3 What is existentialism?

What is 'existentialism' in Ricœur's view? Let us briefly consider this question before looking at how, for him, it 'renews' the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Ricœur is clear from the outset there is no such thing as 'existentialism' in the abstract: there are instead many 'existentialisms'.¹⁹ What they have in common is the way they have reacted against the excesses of nineteenth century philosophies, which are considered to have been overly concerned with abstract ideas, universal validity, physical objects and objectivity, and rational certainties. However much the existentialists disagree among each other, they share a common 'problematic'—the 'concrete human condition'—which distinguishes them from 'non-existential' philosophies.²⁰ Therefore, if a 'family resemblance' can be discerned among existentialist thinkers, this lies less in agreed theories or solutions, and more in their shared interest in what it means to be human and consequent focus on key elements of human experience (which Ricœur calls *motifs*): freedom, embodiment, death, being-in-the-world, being-with-others.²¹

Within this broad problematic, Ricœur discerns three broad existentialist 'themes': freedom, history/embodiment, and communication.²² Each of these serves to balance the others in a healthy tension: the determinism of history is balanced by the indeterminacy of free choice, and the individualism of freedom is balanced by the togetherness of communication. Not only does each of these themes contribute a unique angle to the relationship between philosophy and theology, they prepare us to consider a fourth question: how Ricœur conceives the relationship 'as such' from an existential point of view.

4 History: Why there is no neutral philosophy

In Ricœur's view, one of the most important features of existentialist thought is the renunciation of any claim to a philosophical viewpoint that is 'neutral' with respect to the personal situation of the philosopher. This, he claims, creates an artificial separation between philosophical ideas and the philosopher's life and constructs a sort of "*homo philosophicus*," a philosopher-as-professional, "cut[ting] the umbilical cord that joins the existent to their body, to their historical moment, to others, to the interior master of their freedom."²³ Existentialism renews the bond between my philosophy and my history, my body, my personality, my life choices, giving up the pretence that these have no effect on the philosophical project.

The historical situatedness of all thought is why there is no such thing as pure 'existentialism' abstracted from the life of a particular thinker. Even the existentialists' shared *motifs* change meaning depending on the philosopher's personal commitments and values. Ricœur illustrates this point with the example of death. While death, he says, "looms over a life based on possession, greed, pleasure, and the fear of losing

¹⁹ Ricœur, 'Renouveau de la philosophie chrétienne', 51.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Ibid., 49, 52.

²² "We see the articulation of three themes: I am *by myself* – free; I am *in the world* – incarnate; I am *with the other*" (Ricœur, 'Note sur l'existentialisme et la foi chrétienne', 312).

²³ Ricœur, 'Renouveau de la philosophie chrétienne', 47.

everything,” its meaning is different for someone for whom it “is announced at the end of a life forgetful of itself and full of service to others.”²⁴

The effect of a thinker’s historical situation on their thought reveals an important dimension of the relationship between philosophy and theology. It is a mistake, Ricœur tells us, to try and construe this relationship in ahistorical terms, delineating a timeless essence of each discipline, in order to lay down *a priori* rules about how the relationship works. Such an approach “is contrary to the *historical* character of philosophy and theology,” the fact that throughout history their relations “are reinvented again and again by the renewal of philosophy and theology, or more precisely by the very existence of living and thinking philosophers and theologians.”²⁵ Therefore, an existentialist perspective on philosophy/theology will be attentive to the features of the relationship between the two discourses that are due to the contemporary situation, and not eternally valid.

Another important implication of the historical situatedness of every philosopher is that a Christian philosophy is no more or less valid than an atheist philosophy: neither has a superior standpoint because neither can claim presuppositionless neutrality and lay the burden of proof on the other. This way of levelling the playing field cuts both ways. The fact that Christian philosophy is not *more* valid rules out the possibility of apologetics, any attempt to prove the tenets of faith on the basis of a supposedly objectively neutral reason. Such apologetics is dishonest because it conceals the fact that the apologist has pre-decided in favour of Christianity: their arguments “are themselves taken up in the movement of the whole which is oriented by a total intention and already situated in relation to the Christian faith.”²⁶ No, atheist philosophies which posit the meaninglessness of life cannot be refuted: the “possibility of total and final absurdity cannot be expelled by a rational apologetics.”²⁷ But conversely, the fact that Christian philosophy is not *less* valid means that apologetics is not necessary as a defensive weapon: to bring Christian presuppositions to one’s philosophy is no less philosophical than to bring atheist presuppositions. We must simply be honest about our confessional starting point without trying to hide it behind a veneer of inauthentic arguments.

If history and embodiment were the sole feature of existentialist philosophy, then it might appear fatalistic, as if our philosophy were pre-decided for us by our point in history and our personality. It might also appear unchangeable, as if no rational dialogue were possible between philosophers that could lead to a transformation of perspective. That is why the emphasis on historical situatedness is only the first of the three themes Ricœur discerns at the heart of existentialism. The other two, *freedom* and *communication*, change the picture dramatically.

5 Freedom: The Gospel promise as invitation

Although in one way free choice stands in tension with historicity—as the opposite pole of our unchosen situation—in another way freedom arises naturally out of historicity. Only when we recognise that no philosophy has a rationally secure foundation do we begin to grasp that our worldview is constituted in part by our free choices. My worldview is not forced upon me by the undeniability of timeless rational arguments. In the face of numerous possibilities, and in the absence of compelling certainty, I must *choose* what to believe. I cannot even be rationally certain that I am free, which is why existentialism does not *argue* with philosophies that deny freedom. “One does not prove freedom,” says Ricœur, “one *awakens* to freedom. And this birth is marked with a certain anguish, at the moment where security abandons me.”²⁸

Existentialism, for Ricœur, brings freedom to the heart of the relationship between philosophy and theology. Once we realise that we cannot be neutral with regard to religious questions, it becomes clear that *all* standpoints with regard to religion entail an element of choice and therefore of risk. There is no risk-free option. This also cuts both ways. Positively, it means that it is the very nature of faith to be a free choice, and therefore need not

²⁴ Ibid., 49–50.

²⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁶ Ricœur, ‘Note sur l’existentialisme et la foi chrétienne’, 313.

²⁷ Ibid., 311.

²⁸ Ibid., 308. Italics original.

feel the burden to rationally prove itself. But negatively, it means that 'absurdist' philosophies that posit the meaninglessness of life can never be totally refuted. "It is important," Ricœur enjoins, "that this possibility of total and final absurdity cannot be expelled by a reasonable apologetics."²⁹ The Christian gospel is a message of hope, not certainty. If it were possible to prove that life is not absurd, this would nullify the need for hope.

The existentialist emphasis on freedom reveals the nature of the gospel as *a promise which I am free to believe or disbelieve*. "In relation to the human condition," Ricœur writes, "the order of faith is the order of the promise, pledged by the great events of Revelation, the Covenants, the Cross and the Resurrection."³⁰ A promise cannot be proven logically or it would not need to be made. Therefore the question of God's existence, for example, is no longer seen as a logic puzzle leading to a rationally proven solution (either God exists or God does not exist), but as a free choice to trust the promise offered by the gospel. Similarly, the historical evidence for the resurrection can lead to no scientifically certain conclusion: one is always free to believe or disbelieve.

Christian freedom, argues Ricœur, is not a radical untethered freedom of the Sartrean kind, an arbitrary wager that creates its own values in the very act of its choice. From a Christian perspective, freedom is not self-created, and not all free choices are equally valid. We can use our freedom in good or bad ways with reference to unchosen values. The gospel is a summons, an invitation to become most fully ourselves through joyful obedience to our Creator, and humble consent to our created nature which we did not freely choose. Freedom, for the Christian, is freedom to *respond*, to say 'yes' to the invitation. Using Hosea 2:16-23, Ricœur shows how for the Christian, freedom is "a bound freedom, bound like a wife to her husband. [...] Bound by its participation in the being of God."³¹

But the unchosen values that free choice is weighed against, and to which theology draws our attention, have a backlash effect on philosophy.³² One does not need to be religious to see the value-laden element of all free choices: this element can be seen from within philosophy itself. *Contra* Sartre, Ricœur argues that freedom is always connected to values it did not choose: "the acts most worthy of the name of freedom are acts that are motivated, bound by a secret obedience."³³ For Ricœur this value-guided element is what gives freedom its distinctively human flavour, rather than a 'pure' freedom stripped of all possibility of guidance by higher principles.

Ricœur then observes that this 'backlash' of theology on philosophy reveals a surprising new twist to their relationship. We already knew that philosophy can challenge theology to think in new ways about the objects of faith, but in the case of freedom and values, we now learn that faith can also stimulate philosophy, challenging it to think through areas it might not otherwise have considered:

Sometimes faith is provoked and put into question by the claims of the philosopher who affirms that man is the work of man and the future of man; sometimes the philosopher is alerted and awakened to his own objects and his own task—for example to do a philosophy of values—by a meditation on the Scriptures.³⁴

6 Communication: Why existentialism is still rational

The existentialist emphases on history and freedom are both critiques of an overly rationalistic philosophy that dominated in the nineteenth century, a philosophy whose focus was on universal truth and universal validity. By contrast, existentialism gives priority to the *uniqueness* and particularity of the individual's situation and choice. Ricœur writes that all four existentialist philosophers (Marcel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre) "lead each of us to the place in ourselves where we are *unique* in our way of deciding, suffering, loving, believing—to the place where universal schemas and theories that are 'valid for all' come to an end."³⁵ But this critique

²⁹ Ibid., 311.

³⁰ Ibid., 314.

³¹ Ibid., 309.

³² This is an example of the backlash effect of theology on philosophy that Emmanuel Falque speaks about in his book, *Crossing the Rubicon*.

³³ Ricœur, 'Note sur l'existentialisme et la foi chrétienne', 310.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 308.

of universal reason does not mean, in Ricoeur's view, that existentialism is fundamentally *irrational*. His third existentialist theme—communication—restores a positive view of reason and language to existentialist thought, providing a universal foundation for human beings to share what they have in common.

The theme of communication is strongest in Jaspers among the existentialists, and here we see Jaspers's influence on Ricoeur most clearly. Jaspers makes communication part of the essence of what it is to be human. "I am only by interacting with other[s]," he writes: "an isolated human being exists only as a boundary concept, not in fact."³⁶ Moreover, communication is the only way to attain to truth. Other people see the world differently to me, and yet we belong to the same world: "truth is what is not true for me alone."³⁷ Negatively, this presupposes that nobody has the whole truth nor can anybody attain the truth merely by internal *a priori* reflection. But positively, communication also presupposes that the truth is accessible, that each of us has access to different parts of the truth, and that we need each other to get a fuller picture of the truth.

Ricoeur takes up Jaspers's insistence that communication is the heart of philosophy, to the point where truth and knowledge themselves are inseparable from it:

Communication rules out any pretension to encompass or reduce the other to a part of my total discourse. Truth, as Jaspers says, is nothing else than 'philosophizing-in-common'. I can understand someone only if I, myself am someone and if I engage in debate.³⁸

Jaspers's emphasis on communication saves existentialism, in Ricoeur's view, from a number of imbalances it might otherwise be guilty of. First, it restores the existentialist subject from a radical individual isolation, in which I would be alone in my unique situation and the unique choices that lie before me:

On the road that ascends from my situation toward the truth, there is only one way of moving beyond myself, and this is *communication*. I have only one means of emerging from myself: I must be able to live within another. Communication is a structure of true knowledge.³⁹

Furthermore, communication saves existentialism from the accusation of being anti-rational, in Ricoeur's view. It is in communication that reason shines forth in the existentialist philosophies and gives them the right to be called philosophy. This is crucial for Ricoeur because for him reason is the common core of all philosophy and what binds all philosophies throughout history together—philosophy is no longer philosophy when it abandons reason. All philosophy, including existentialist philosophy, is "a work of reason."⁴⁰ We find reason in existentialist thinkers called by other names: "Heidegger's existentials, Jaspers's illumination, Marcel's 'secondary reflection'"—these are all diverse terms for reason, and an opportunity "for reflection on the historical continuity of reason throughout the history of philosophy."⁴¹

By identifying philosophy in all ages with reason, Ricoeur establishes a fixed point in regard to the relationship between philosophy and theology, construed as the classical relationship between faith and reason. This reveals a positive mutually-reinforcing relationship between the two in Ricoeur's understanding. Without faith, reason becomes arrogant and totalising, leaving no place for mystery (Ricoeur calls this the "level of understanding"—meaning the level at which one only believes what one can understand). But without reason, faith degenerates into irrationalism and madness: "faith is what prevents reason from falling back to the level of understanding, and reason is what prevents the folly of the cross from becoming the folly of the asylum."⁴² Faith and reason need each other in order to remain true to themselves—another indication of the vital importance of communication and dialogue.

³⁶ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, 1969, 2:52.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 67.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁰ This citation and the following are taken from a draft of a letter Ricoeur wrote to another contributor to the edited volume in which his own 1948 essay appeared. The contributor, Jacques Bois, had in his essay accused existentialism of being irrational, and Ricoeur's letter appears to be motivated by the wish to defend existentialism from this accusation. Source: Archives Ricoeur / Fonds Ricoeur, Inventaire 1, dossier 'Philosophie Chrétienne', feuillet 20044.

⁴¹ Archives Ricoeur / Fonds Ricoeur, Inventaire 1, dossier 'Philosophie Chrétienne', feuillet 20044.

⁴² Archives Ricoeur / Fonds Ricoeur, Inventaire 1, dossier 'Philosophie Chrétienne', feuillet 20044.

7 A “controlled schizophrenia” and the philosophy-theology divide

Something remains unsaid concerning these three existentialist ‘themes’ Ricœur has elaborated, something that relates to the classical philosophical problem of the “one and the many” (which Ricœur once told a prospective student was one of only two problems that summarise the whole of philosophy).⁴³ In regard to history, does the historical situatedness of each philosophy destroy any commonality that might unify the nature of philosophy across time? Are we doomed to a fragmented and broken philosophical project, without possible continuity through history, where each new generation rejects the old and redefines philosophy for themselves? In short, what guarantees any unity across the multiplicity of philosophies throughout history? In regard to freedom, do my choices bear no relation to objective values I did not choose? Can I make better or worse choices? What guarantees any mutual fulfilment or solidarity between our free choices (subjectivity) and unchosen values (objectivity)? In regard to communication, how can I be sure communication will be possible between two subjects if there is nothing they have in common? What guarantees a common fraternity by which we help one another on the road to truth, instead of an endless competition due to an irreconcilable conflict of aims and viewpoints? In all three cases, what assurance do I have that there is an underlying unity that holds together the meaningfulness of the multiplicity of philosophies, types of being, and freedoms? What gives the one priority over the many?

But fourthly and most fundamentally, these questions lead us to the root of Ricœur’s own personal ‘existential’ struggle to relate philosophy and theology for himself, which also concerns the problem of the one and the many. Is there a unity deeper than philosophy and theology that holds the two in harmony, or are they destined to eternal conflict as Jaspers thought? Jesus said that it is impossible to serve two masters.⁴⁴ Eventually a conflict of interests will arise, and your ultimate allegiance to one or the other will be revealed. The truth of this statement was clear to Ricœur at an existential level, in that it reveals the deep connection between his academic writings and his private convictions. A cursory glance at any of his autobiographical notes shows that what he called the “inner conflict” between his Christian faith and his philosophy caused him no small amount of anguish at various periods of his life.⁴⁵ Can he only participate in both discourses by means of a “controlled schizophrenia” and internal division, or is there an underlying unity out of which both emerge, that enables him to be faithful to both without compromising his allegiance to either?

If we pay careful attention to Ricœur’s writings, we see a clear answer to this question emerging—one that leads, not to any provable certainty about the unity of philosophy and theology, but to a pervasive *hope* concerning both their original and their final unity even if in the present day we must wrestle with the reality of their fragmentation. This hope is the driving force behind Ricœur’s whole *œuvre*, motivating him patiently to seek points of contact, not only between philosophy and theology, but between opposing viewpoints of all kinds.

The relationship between philosophy and theology ‘as such’ is the fundamental concern on which solutions to the other three existentialist themes are based. Therefore we shall turn first to the unity of philosophy and theology in a reality that envelops them, before showing how this casts fresh light on the underlying unity of history, of freedom, and of communication.

For Ricœur, philosophy and theology are self-regulating discourses, which means that each, when practiced properly, is aware of its own limits and does not need the other to dictate for it where the boundaries lie. Therefore, each testifies independently to the “organic unity which holds them together,” and has its own internal reasons for doing so.⁴⁶

First of all, from the side of philosophy, Ricœur maintains that the quest for truth is sustained by a hope in the unity of truth, without which philosophy would cease. “One cannot profess multiplicity,” Ricœur

⁴³ “Listen, little one, philosophy is very simple. There are two problems: the one and the many, and the self and the other” (Dosse, *Paul Ricœur*, 254).

⁴⁴ See Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, 5. See also Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*; Reagan, *Paul Ricœur*; Ricœur, *Living up to Death*.

⁴⁶ Ricœur, ‘Renouveau de la philosophie chrétienne’, 53.

insists, “without denying oneself. There is some reason why the spirit inevitably searches within objects for the unity which it sees, knows, wishes, and believes in. In any case, plurality cannot be the absence of relations.”⁴⁷ It is impossible, Ricœur emphasises, not to have a certain level of unity to one’s thought, whether implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious. “Truth cannot be multiple,” Ricœur says, “without repudiating itself. The True and the One are two interchangeable notions.”⁴⁸ The search for unity is an unavoidable part of the search for truth, because “the question of truth culminates in the problem of the total unity of truths.”⁴⁹ But he does not pretend that this unity is a given fact, as if one could be rationally certain of it. As we said above, the philosophies of despair that posit fragmentation and division cannot be finally refuted. But Ricœur claims that to give up on the unity of truth puts an end to philosophising, because philosophy is only kept alive through hope: “the philosophical impact of hope has an important bearing on reflection.”⁵⁰ For Ricœur, it is hope in the ultimate unity of truth that sustains the philosophical project: “the *Unity of Truth* is the relation between the duty of thought and a kind of ontological hope.”⁵¹ Hope is not a guarantee in any apodictic sense; it does not prove the unity of being. On the contrary, if the unity of being could be “objectively guaranteed,” there would be no need for hope.

Secondly, from the side of theology there are two reasons to have faith in the ultimate unity of reality. The first comes from eschatology, the Christian hope in the final reconciliation of all things. For Ricœur, hope maintains the “*eschatological character of unity*.”⁵²

What, then, is the unity of truth for the Christian? It is an eschatological representation, the representation of the ‘last day’. The ‘recapitulation of all things in Christ’, in the words of the Epistle to the Colossians, signifies both that unity will be ‘manifested at the last day’ and that unity is not to be found in history.⁵³

Eschatological unity, however, would not be sufficient armament against despair if it left us with a total disconnect, in the present, between our mind’s demand for unity and our inability to achieve it before the end of history. Like philosophy, theology would cease if there was no reason to hope for a *partial, provisional* unity in the present, an imperfect correspondence between our minds and reality which we sustain as a “*working hypothesis*,”⁵⁴ a never-ending task or quest. For Ricœur, our hope is that “the unity of the charity of Christ is *already* the hidden meaning of the multiple. [...] It is therefore in hope that all things are one, that all truths are in the unique Truth.”⁵⁵

What is the basis for hoping for a ‘provisional present’ unity? It comes from another Christian doctrine, more fundamental than eschatology for Ricœur: the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* according to which everything that exists is united by its status as *created* and bearing the stamp of the harmony and goodness of its Creator, the unity-in-diversity of the Trinity.

8 Unity through hope: Creation

To say that the doctrine of creation is a fundamental unifying force in Ricœur’s thought is not to say that, after all, he is a theologian and not a philosopher, employing dogmatic categories to bring closure to philosophical enquiry. Creation is another example of the ‘backlash’ of theology on philosophy, in which an idea that has a theological origin yields insights that can be argued for (not, of course, proven) philosophically. Ricœur’s own language for this is to call creation a ‘poetic symbol’, that is, a non-philosophical idea that ‘gives rise

⁴⁷ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 192.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 54. Italics original.

⁵² Ibid., 185. Italics original.

⁵³ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 185. Italics original.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 196.

to (philosophical) thought'.⁵⁶ In order to see how the doctrine of creation functions in Ricœur's thought, we must turn to the three existentialist 'themes' he discerned, to see how the threat of fragmentation is averted by means of his philosophy of hope in the original unity of creation.

First of all, Ricœur argues that the disparate nature of philosophies throughout history, and the historical contingency of each and every philosophy, ought not lead to despair over the possibility of finding universal and eternal truth. He counsels us not to see the history of philosophy as "a series of varying solutions to unchanging problems," as if everyone were giving a different answer to the same question, implicitly seeing themselves as right and everybody else as misguided.⁵⁷ For Ricœur, all philosophies through history are united through their common quest: "if there is a *philosophia perennis*, it is not because one philosophical system has the privilege of timelessness, but because the concern to rationally understand—even the irrational—is the permanent concern of all philosophy."⁵⁸ Ricœur thus invites us to see an unchanging core of philosophy, not in its answers, but in its task and goals; and although nobody may consider their own answers to be final or the fullness of truth, we may hope to have part of the truth, to be "*within* the bounds of truth."⁵⁹ This hope is based in the doctrine of creation that gives an original unity to being, which it is the task of the philosopher to discover. It is "the unity of *creation*," Ricœur says, that "bring[s] together all the forms of being beyond all fragmenting knowledge."⁶⁰

Secondly, only by means of the doctrine of creation can *freedom* be seen as a fulfilment of objective values that one did not freely choose, rather than (Ricœur is probably thinking of Sartre) a deep conflict between the objective world and a miserable subjectivity that does not fit into it. It is only if our freedom itself is *part of* creation that it finds itself in harmony with the things it did not choose.

It is not by accident that the philosophies which have been both the most attentive to the organic link between freedom and values and also the most careful to protect their reflection on values from anaemic abstractions, are those who were made sensitive by Christianity to the uncreated aspect of our freedom, who learnt from the Scriptures the dependence of the creature on the Creator.⁶¹

That is why our freedom is fulfilled, not in a miserable defiance against our unchosen nature and our unchosen situation, but in an acquiescent response of 'yes' that Ricœur names *consent*. "By consent," he explains in a letter to Marcel, "I return to the *mysterious unity of creation*; I reinstate the union of soul and body. [...] The mysterious unity of being is primary."⁶²

Thirdly, it is only by belief in a common *created* nature that communication can become a genuine collaborative search for truth rather than an endless conflict. Here again Sartre is Ricœur's opponent and Marcel is his inspiration. Sartre's famous description (in *Being and Nothingness*) of our inevitable guilt under the gaze of the other is, Ricœur says, "inseparable from a general project of a world without God. If human beings are absolutely discontinuous centres of existence that no creation reconnects, the mutual gaze can only be a conflict."⁶³ Other people are an unavoidable source of guilt in Sartre's philosophy because he has no sense of a fraternity between human beings that comes from the Christian doctrine that we are children of God. Because we are "not created as sons of the same father [...] the presence of the other

⁵⁶ For more on how creation functions philosophically in Ricœur, and the origins of this idea in Kant's third *Critique*, see chapter 4 of my doctoral thesis, 'Finitude and Transcendence: A Study in Paul Ricœur's Early Philosophy'.

⁵⁷ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 44.

⁵⁸ Ricœur, 'Renouveau de la philosophie chrétienne', 55.

⁵⁹ Ricœur, *History and Truth*, 54. Italics original. This might be considered to contradict Ricœur's earlier claim that there is no unchanging ahistorical core to either discipline. A generous reading would defend Ricœur by saying that denies the possibility of an exhaustive definition of philosophy and theology that remains valid for all time, but a core definition based on an unchanging question might still be perennial.

⁶⁰ Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature*, 425.

⁶¹ Ricœur, 'Note sur l'existentialisme et la foi chrétienne', 310.

⁶² Ricœur, 'Paul Ricœur to Gabriel Marcel, Le Chambon s/Lignon'. Letter written November 25, 1945. The Fonds Gabriel Marcel, where these letters from Paul Ricœur to Gabriel Marcel can be found, is at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

⁶³ Ricœur, 'Note sur l'existentialisme et la foi chrétienne', 312.

is the beginning of my fall in the world, and thus of my guilt.”⁶⁴ By contrast, “Marcel [...] senses at the very root of the plurality of existences a common origin, a common paternal creation,” and that is why “he holds communication between these existences as an opportunity and not only as a curse.”⁶⁵

9 Conclusion

If we read Ricœur’s writings of the 1940s and early 1950s, we see that his conception of the relationship between philosophy and theology was ‘existential’ in two senses: it was deeply engaged with existentialist philosophy and seeking to illuminate how philosophy and theology relate from an existentialist perspective; but more vitally, to rightly conceive the relationship between philosophy and theology was a matter of personal ‘existential’ importance for him, causing him great distress at times, yet culminating in a beautiful harmony enabled by a profound hope in the original and final unity of the two discourses. Ricœur’s philosophy knows its own limits and thus gives ample permission for his faith to spread its wings, just as his faith also knows its own limits and does not impinge on the autonomous freedom of enquiry, which, for Ricœur, was essential to authentic philosophising. He was a thinker of harmony, not discord. Such harmony begins in his own thought with a philosophy and a faith that know their own place and respective roles in relation to each other, because they both originate from a unity that encompasses them. In a beautiful summary at the conclusion of his 1948 essay, he writes:

There is not *first* a pure philosophy which owes nothing to faith and prepares for theology, and *subsequently* a theology which is added to philosophy, without being able to be corrected by it. It appears rather, from the perspective of a Christian philosophy of existence, that the two protagonists of the dialogue *simultaneously* and *mutually* beget each other, and proceed together from the indivisible gushing forth of the themes of Christian existence.⁶⁶

That is why Ricœur’s occasional references to the relationship between his faith and his philosophy as “controlled schizophrenia” should not be taken too seriously as indicating a real rupture in his thinking.⁶⁷ While it may have felt at times like schizophrenia for Ricœur, this is only a sign of the pressure he felt to keep strictly to the disciplinary boundaries, not a real admission that his philosophy and his faith contradict each other or have no contact at all. A true schizophrenia would only apply if Ricœur’s philosophy was *incompatible* with his religious commitments, such that the two led to different conclusions about reality, which is manifestly not the case. Ricœur’s biographer, when speaking of “the way in which he reconciles his Protestant religious convictions and his rational philosophical rigour,” rightly judges that “if he evokes in this regard a certain schizophrenia, this quip comes rather from his sense of humour than a split personality.”⁶⁸ In fact, when Ricœur is in a more serious mood, he is clear that schizophrenia is far from a good description of his thought or a good ideal for any thought. When questioned in 1993 about the religious articles in *History and Truth*, he tells his interviewer “I would be schizophrenic if I had divided completely in two.”⁶⁹ Similarly, in a 1965 television broadcast, he tells Georges Canguilhem that the multiplicity of philosophies is no refutation of truth in philosophy, because “we have the conviction or the hope that through these finite works of the human mind, this produces the encounter with the same being, without which we would be schizophrenic.”⁷⁰

In sum, if Ricœur was able to remain faithful both to Christianity and to the freedom of philosophical enquiry, this is not because he is an exception to Jesus’ *dictum* that nobody can serve two masters. It is rather that for him there was an underlying unity of origin behind the seeming plurality of the discourses.

⁶⁴ Archives Ricœur / Fonds Ricœur, Inv. 1, dossier 27, ‘Anthropology and Religion in the Philosophy of Existence’, Lectures at Union Theological Seminary (1958), f. 4098-b.

⁶⁵ Ricœur, ‘Note sur l’existentialisme et la foi chrétienne’, 312.

⁶⁶ Ricœur, ‘Renouveau de la philosophie chrétienne’, 67.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Ricœur, *Critique and Conviction*, 2; Reagan, *Paul Ricœur*, 132.

⁶⁸ Dosse, *Paul Ricœur*, 16.

⁶⁹ Raynova and Ricœur, ‘All That Gives Us to Think: Conversations with Paul Ricœur’, 673.

⁷⁰ Flechet, *Philosophie et Vérité*, 24:03-24:18.

As Henry Isaac Venema puts it, for Ricœur, behind both philosophy and theology “there is an analogical unity of discourse with regard to the Essential. Hence Ricœur’s ‘dual allegiance’ is a reflection of the multiplicity of reference to the Essential within the lived space of selfhood.”⁷¹ Ricœur was faithful to Truth (the allegiance of philosophy) and to Jesus (the allegiance of theology) at the same time because for him Jesus is the Truth in a total identification without distinction.

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⁷¹ Venema, ‘The Source of Ricœur’s Double Allegiance’, 64.