

Philosophical Précis

## Ricœur's Ethical Philosophy: Becoming Oneself as Another

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**Abstract:** This philosophical précis elucidates on key concepts surrounding Paul Ricoeur's "little ethics." The notes focus on the relationship between ethics, morality, and practical wisdom, on the one hand, and the self, the near Other, and the Third, on the other hand. These are the concepts that will allow us to understand Ricoeur's notion of the "capable human being."

**Keywords:** Ricoeur, capable human being, ethics, morality

### Philosophy as a "living struggle with texts"

I borrow the expression "loving struggle" from Paul Ricoeur's "*combat amoureux*" who borrowed it in turn from Karl Jaspers's "*liebende Kampf*."<sup>1</sup> When one struggles with a creative philosopher like Ricoeur, one becomes changed. In wrestling with a philosopher, one walks away with a philosophical limp. In creatively repeating what a philosopher says, one also becomes aware that she or he adds a different accent or flavor. It changes the taste, which is interesting because our word for experience, *karanasan* comes from the Sanskrit *rasa, lasa*, which also means taste. In Western or better still non-Asian philosophies, the stress is on the sense of sight; in Asian philosophy, the stress is on the sense of taste.

### Ricœur's "little ethics"

In 1986, Ricoeur delivered the Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh. These lectures explored the theme of the "Capable Human Being." A capable human being can speak, act, and narrate. These capacities formed the bases for the first six studies he wrote.

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<sup>1</sup> Hitler of course wrote a book "Mein Kampf" ("My Struggle") but that was a totally different struggle, not a "loving struggle."

But a person can also be responsible, make promises, remember and sometimes forget. These capabilities were not dealt with in the Gifford Lectures. From 1986 to 1990, Ricœur wrote three studies on them which he added to the six studies when he published *Soi-même comme un autre*<sup>2</sup> in 1990 (translated into English as *Oneself as Another*<sup>3</sup> in 1992). Ricœur ironically called the three studies his *little ethics* (*petite éthique, minima moralia*).<sup>4</sup> But it is this little ethics that constitutes Ricœur's major contribution to the field of ethics and politics.

Ricœur brings out "a new dimension" between ethics and morality, "often taken to be synonymous," but according to Ricœur "subject to the distinction" he is proposing which must not only be justified on the personal level but also on the institutional level, more specifically at the level of political institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The English word, *ethics* comes indeed from the Greek word *ethos* and the English word *morality* from the Latin word *mores* which in turn is the root of the words "moral" and "morals." Both words mean "customs," "manners." In Filipino, it is also *étika* (from the Spanish word *ética*) defined as "*pag-aaral tungkol sa mga moral na pagkilos, asal, at gawain ng tao*" (a study that deals with the moral actions and behavior of humans).<sup>6</sup> Notice how the *etikal* becomes synonymous with the word *moral*.

Ricœur, however, stresses that there is a very important distinction between the two terms. He defines ethics as "aiming for the 'good life,' with and for others, in just institutions."<sup>7</sup>

Following Ricœur, I propose to discuss the problem on two levels which intersect; the two axes: vertical & horizontal.

### **Vertical Axis: ethics, morality, practical wisdom**

On a first level, the deepest and broadest level, ethics aims at the good life, a true fulfilled life, wherein one experiences happiness, meaning. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> This "little ethics" is also found in the seventh chapter to the ninth chapter of *Soi-même comme un autre*.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricœur, "The Moral, the Ethical, and the Political," in Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver eds., *Paul Ricœur: The Task of Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 13. Ricœur's French text was published in 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Virgilio S. Almario ed., *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

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more understandable when one goes to the French word for it: *sens*, which means direction, as in *sens unique* means “one way”).<sup>8</sup>

Ethics is optative—something one opts for, prefers, chooses, and decides to do. It is also from here that we veer away from the view about ethics being linked with natural inclination since choices are definitive proofs of our human deliberation.

On a second middle level, the more limited term “moral” has to do with the norm, law, duty, obligation, prohibition, what is permitted or forbidden. The law introduces aspects of universality and obligation. Whereas ethics is optative, morality is imperative. Ricœur tells us not to shut ourselves in the moral.

On a third level is the level of practical wisdom which the Ancients called *phronesis* in Greek and *prudentia* in Latin. However, today, the English word “prudence” has become synonymous with hesitation, caution. On the contrary, *phronesis* has to do with the “courage to be”—the courage to face new, unique situations, demanding a concrete decision.<sup>9</sup>

Ricœur tells us that it is “by convention” that he reserves “ethics” for the aim of an accomplished life and the term “morality” for the articulation of this aim in norms “characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint (or obligation).”<sup>10</sup>

He also points out that it is easy to recognize in the distinction between aim and norm:

The opposition between two heritages—an Aristotelian heritage, where ethics is characterized by its teleological (telos/aim) perspective, and a Kantian heritage, where morality is defined by a categorical imperative that leads to the notion of duty—lies at the heart of the philosophical debate concerning the foundations of ethics.<sup>11</sup>

Without concerning himself whether he is following Aristotle or Kant, but still paying close attention to their founding texts, Ricœur then wagers a creative interplay between Aristotle and Kant. This wager results in Ricœur’s major contribution to ethics—a creative interplay between ethics, morality, and practical wisdom.

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<sup>8</sup> Editors’ note: *Sens* in French also pertains to sense, as in the five senses. It can also refer to common sense (*sens commun*) or the capacity to judge correctly without involving the passions (as in *bon sens*), or the ability to know (as in *avoir le sens des nuances*).

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).

<sup>10</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

On page 180 of *Oneself as Another*, the ethical perspective is defined as “aiming at the good life/ with and for others/ in just institutions.”

Ricœur then envisions an ethical philosophy stressing three important aspects in his ethics: 1) the primacy of ethics over morality, 2) the necessity for the ethical aim to pass through the sieve of the moral norm, and 3) the legitimacy of return by the norm to the ethical aim whenever the norm leads to practical difficulties.<sup>12</sup>

In Ricœur’s view, morality constitutes “only a limited, although legitimate and even indispensable, actualization of the ethical aim, and ethics would then encompass morality.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is important to note that Ricœur’s wager seeks a creative interplay between Aristotle and Kant. There will be no attempt to substitute Kant for Aristotle. Instead, between the two traditions, he shall establish “a relation at once of subordination and complementarity which the final recourse of morality to ethics will ultimately come to reinforce.”<sup>14</sup>

One then has to distinguish three “moments” in ethics: 1) the ethical aim of what one esteems as good, more Aristotelian and teleological, 2) the moral norm of what imposes itself as obligation, more Kantian and deontological, and the properly Ricœurian contribution of practical wisdom.

### **Horizontal axis: self, the near Other, *le tiers***

Why stress the important distinction between ethics and morality?

There are historical bases for it. Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Baruch Spinoza wrote a work entitled *Ethica*. Morality is more stressed by Immanuel Kant as evident in his vocabulary: norm, command, duty, obligation, prohibition.

This triadic definition that involves ethics, morality and practical wisdom “unites the self in its original capacity of esteem to the Other, made

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 170. At the beginning of his essay, David Pellauer draws attention to the “surprising and complex reflection on the theme of what in English we call “ethics.” He warns us to be “careful of our language ... because what Ricœur calls ethics is in some important ways just one moment in the larger scheme of his ethical reflections.” See David Pellauer, “At the Limit of Practical Wisdom: Moral Blindness,” in Richard A. Cohen and James L. Marsh eds., *Ricœur as Another: The Ethics of Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York, 2002), 187. Pellauer’s French version of his text was prepared for a Conference at the Université de Picardie-Jules Verne in Amiens, France in 1997 and published in *Documents: Rapports pour l’Éducation* (Paris: Centre national de documentation pédagogique, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-171.

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manifest by his face, and to the third party who is the bearer of rights on the juridical, social, and political plane.”<sup>15</sup>

The autonomous exercise of one's freedom and the right to self-legislation is rendered possible only in the moral awakening of our concern for others—for the Other-- “The autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbor and with justice for each individual.”<sup>16</sup>

As for the passage from ethics to morality, with its imperatives and prohibitions, this seemed to Ricœur “to be called for by ethics itself, as soon as the wish for a good life runs up against violence in all its forms.”<sup>17</sup>

The respect of the Other and even of the self, answers to the moral level of esteem of self and of the Other which accomplishes mutual friendship on the ethical level, in the same way as the principles of equitable justice answer to the wish of living together which establishes the common good:

It will then remain to show in what way the conflicts ... closely tied to the deontological moment lead us back from morality to ethics, but to an ethics enriched by the passage through the norm and exercising moral judgment in a given situation.<sup>18</sup>

Ricœur is referring here to those situations that he calls “situations of distress,” in which the choice is not between good and bad but between bad and worse, between gray and gray.

“Practical wisdom consists in inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude, by betraying the rule to the smallest extent possible.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Ethics and the Capable Human Being**

Ricœur's studies on ethics are linked to the theme of the Capable Human Being. After dealing with fallible, frail, faulted human being in the three books that comprise the early *Philosophy of the Will—Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), *Fallible Man* (1965) and *The Symbolism*

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in L.E. Hahn ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Chicago La Salle: Open Court, 1995), 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> Ricœur states: “The autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbor and with justice for each individual.” Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ricœur, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 203.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

of *Evil* (1967), he embarked on the question of the subject who speaks, acts, narrates itself and holds itself responsible. This properly ethical capability to hold oneself responsible indicates a subject capable and acting but at the same time passive, suffering, and vulnerable. One is responsible for our own fragility.

According to Ricœur, it is even one of the formulas of the Golden Rule not to treat the Other in a way to leave him or her without a counter-power against oneself. The reflective equilibrium of Ricœur's double approach consists in reminding us these two aspects of our being human—responsible and vulnerable. Their delicate articulation is experienced for instance in friendship. Ricœur writes:

Let us attempt, in conclusion, to take an overview of the entire range of attitudes deployed between the two extremes of the summons to responsibility, where the initiative comes from the Other, and of the [self's] sympathy for the suffering other, where the initiative comes from the loving self, friendship appearing as a midpoint where the self and the Other share equally the same wish to live together. While equality is presupposed in friendship, in the case of the strict command of the other, equality is reestablished only through the recognition by the self of the superiority of the other's authority; in the case of sympathy that comes from the self and extends to the other, equality is reestablished only through the shared admission of fragility, and finally, of mortality."<sup>20</sup>

Why is the theme of practical wisdom introduced by the tragic? This indicates that ethics is caught in situations of conflict and sometimes unsolvable dilemmas.

Sometimes, we are confronted "with a difficult choice, the choice between 'two ethics of distress': the one assumes murder in order to assure the physical survival of the State, in order to preserve the magistrate; the other affirms treason to bear witness."<sup>21</sup>

The link of politics to the ethics of living well or aiming at the good life would be proven if we are able to show that the human being is

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricœur, "State and Violence," *History and Truth*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 246.

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fundamentally defined by powers or capacities that will reach their complete actualization in the social-political realm.

For Ricœur, a reflection on the Capable Human Being—a first stage in a Philosophical Anthropology or a Philosophy of the Human Person—constitutes the anthropological preface required by political philosophy.

A brief examination of the elements of personal identity will help to understand to understand this. This content will be the answers to questions implying the personal pronoun “Who.”

“Who is speaking?” is the most basic question.

Who is acting or who has done this or that action?

Who is telling or narrating the story?

Who is responsible for this damage?

The answers to these questions point to a source that ends in a subject to whom actions good and bad can be imputed, someone capable of pointing to herself or himself as the author of her or his statements can give an answer to the question.

There is still the need to designate the one who does something for certain reasons as being the agent to whom the action can be ascribed and on this basis, morally and legally imputed

We enter a new stage in the constitution of the Capable Human Being with the narrative dimension of identity. The notion of narrative identity constitutes the indispensable link between the identity of a speaking subject and the identity of an ethical-legal subject. The principal reason is that the narrative identity takes into account the *temporal* dimension of existence.

In brief, only a subject capable of evaluating his actions, related to the good or bad, can hold himself in esteem or self-respect. We have to show that it is only in society, only in just institutions that a Capable Human Being becomes an acting, existing, historical subject.

The truly critical point is the moment when the relation to others, as it multiplies, to the mediation of the institution. It is not with the pair I-near Other that we should stop. We must advance to the distant others, the third parties or each and everyone.

This brings us to our capacity to own our action: a capacity to impute responsibility on myself for acts in which I recognize myself as the true author.

### **Ethics and Reciprocity**

The situations that call for ethics are *asymmetrical*.

There is a limit in putting oneself in the place of the other. The problem is to join with the other in his or her place but not to substitute

oneself for him or her. There is a level where reciprocity is required. This is in esteem and respect and not the capacity to be or to act.

But what remains human, the last glimmer of the human is the capacity to enter into the relation “giving and receiving”.

Defending to the end this capacity of exchange in giving and receiving is the practice of your own humanity. From this viewpoint, we need to help the seriously ill patient to continue to be a giver and not simply a receiver. When you give the seriously economic poor, you encourage them not to be only a receiver but to be a creative giver, not in terms of money, not to you, but to others like them.

A human being can only survive if he is able to give.

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