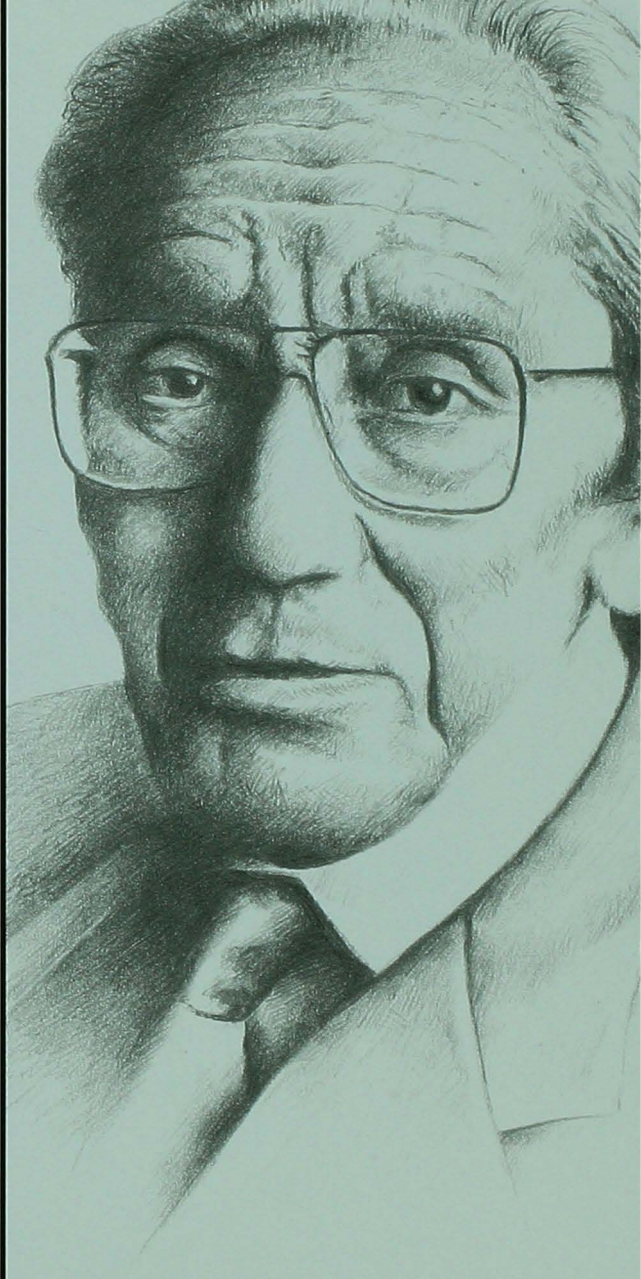


Paul
Ricoeur
*The
Hermeneutics
of Action*

Edited by
Richard
Kearney



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PAUL RICOEUR

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PAUL RICOEUR

The Hermeneutics of Action

EDITED BY

Richard Kearney



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Richard Kearney

Introduction

The shortest route from self to self is through the other. This dictum of Paul Ricoeur expresses his central conviction that the self is never enough, is never sufficient unto itself, but constantly seeks out signs and signals of meaning in the other.

Hence Ricoeur's resolute refusal of the idealist temptation – extending from Hegel to Husserl and Sartre – to reduce being to being-for-consciousness. Hence also his renunciation of the 'short route' to being, advanced by Heidegger, out of commitment to the 'long route' of multiple hermeneutic detours through the exteriorities of sense, instantiated in culture, society, politics, religion and the human sciences. This brave, and often arduous, option is further exemplified in Ricoeur's resolve to keep existential understanding (*Verstehen*) in dialogue with scientific explanation (*erklären*) – by way of deepening science and delimiting ontology. No approach to meaning can dispense with detour. Consciousness must pass through the unconscious (the semantics of desire); intuition through critical interpretation (hermeneutics of suspicion); reason through language (linguistics); and reflection through imagination (poetics).

Ricoeur's hermeneutic detours arise ultimately out of a fidelity to an ontology which, in the final analysis, must always remain 'truncated' – provisional, tentative, a task rather than a *fait accompli*, a wager rather than a possession. This is why Ricoeur compares ontology to a promised land which can only be glimpsed before dying, but never occupied as such. The way of appropriation must always go through the way of disappropriation. There is no belonging except through distantiation. The self can only retrieve itself through the exodus of oneself-as-another. But this return of self (*moi*) to itself (*soi-même*) also carries with it an additional charge: a call to *action*. This final answerability of self to other is registered in Ricoeur's work

as both a poetic responsibility to the alterity of sense and an ethical responsibility to other sufferers and supplicants. Both forms of summons, poetical and ethical, extend along the asymptotic lines of an interminable horizon, that of an ontology of action.

In the heel of the hunt, it is probably true to say that the fundamental *désir à être* sketched in Ricoeur's phenomenology of will, finds its term in an *ontologie d'agir*, where the hermeneutic subject returns from text to action.

The current collection opens with three recent essays by Paul Ricoeur, each epitomizing his concern to apply hermeneutics to the practical field of justice, responsibility and politics. The subsequent essays in this *Festschrift* are drawn largely from a conference marking Ricoeur's 80th birthday held in Naples in May 1993. The review essays in the final section pay tribute by way of critical commentaries on a number of recent Ricoeur publications, most of which are not yet available in English. Finally, I would like to thank David Rasmussen for kindly inviting me to serve as guest editor of this issue, Debra Matteson for her expert editorial assistance, and of course the various contributors to this volume. The fact that these contributors hail from nine different countries (Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and the United States) is, I believe, a telling indicator of the international import and influence of Ricoeur's work.

University College Dublin, Ireland

Paul Ricoeur

Reflections on a new ethos for Europe

It is no extravagance to formulate the problem of the future of Europe in terms of imagination. The political organization of Europe poses the unprecedented problem of how to get beyond the form of the nation-state at the institutional level, without repeating its well-known structures at a higher level of 'supranationality'. Furthermore, the invention of new institutions cannot be fashioned after any of the existing federal states (Switzerland, Germany, the United States of America) which are holders of the same symbols of sovereignty (currency, army, diplomacy) as the less complex nation-states. The expression 'post-national state' meets these two requirements, insofar as it leaves open – precisely to the imagination – the question of knowing what new institutions can respond to a political situation which is itself without precedent.

I should like to say here how a reflection which focuses on the ethical and spiritual activities of individuals, intellectuals and cultivated persons, and also of intellectual communities, churches and other religious denominations, can contribute to this political imagination.

Indeed, it would be a mistake to believe that transfers of sovereignty in support of a political entity which is entirely unrealized can be successful at the formal level of political and juridical institutions without the will to implement these transfers deriving its initiative from changes of attitude in the ethos of individuals, groups and peoples.

The problem is familiar enough. Taken as a whole it is a matter of combining 'identity' and 'alterity' at numerous levels that will need to be distinguished. What we most desperately lack are models of

integration between these two poles. For the moment, I refer to these poles in highly abstract terms, not unlike the supercategories of Plato's *Dialogues*! However, in order to shatter this impression of disconcerting abstraction I propose to classify models for the integration of identity and alterity according to an increasing order of spiritual density.

I The model of translation

The first model which is presented for consideration is that of the translation of one language into another. This first model is perfectly appropriate for the situation of Europe which, from the linguistic point of view, displays an irreducible pluralism which it is infinitely desirable to protect. Of course, it is not the dream of giving another chance to Esperanto which threatens us most, nor even the triumph of one great cultural language as the sole instrument of communication; rather it is the danger of incommunicability through a protective withdrawal of each culture into its own linguistic tradition that threatens us. But Europe is and will remain ineluctably polyglot. It is here that the model of translation entails requirements and assurances which extend all the way to the heart of the ethical and spiritual life of both individuals and peoples.

In order to understand this model, a turning-back to the most fundamental conditions of the workings of language is required. It is necessary to begin with the fact that language (*le langage*) exists nowhere else than in languages (*des langues*). It realizes its universal potentialities only in systems differentiated on phonological, lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels, etc. And yet languages do not form closed systems which exclude communication. If that were the case there would be differences between linguistic groups similar to those which exist on the biological level between living species. If there is only one human race, it is because transferences of meaning are possible from one language to another; in short, because we can translate.

But what does it mean to be able to translate? This possibility, or rather this capacity, is not ascertained solely by the fact that we actually succeed in translating speech and texts from one language to another without totally prejudicial and, above all, entirely irreparable semantic loss. The possibility of translating is postulated more fundamentally as an a priori of communication. In this sense, I will speak of 'the principle of universal translatability'. Translation is *de facto*; translatability is *de jure*. It is this presupposition which has reinforced the courage and stimulated the ingenuity of the decipherers

of hieroglyphics and of other systems of signs, some of which still remain undisclosed. But let us look closely at the translation process itself. First, it presupposes bilingual translators, thus flesh and blood mediators; then it consists of the search for optimum commensurability between the distinctive resources of the receiving language and those of the original language. In this respect, the arrogant model of the 'remains of the Egyptians', which we find at one point in St Augustine, is not a worthy one. The model to be preferred is the more modest one proposed by von Humboldt, i.e. that of raising the distinctive spirit of his own language to the level of that of the foreign language, particularly when it is a matter of original productions which constitute a challenge for the receiving language. It is really a matter of living with the other in order to take that other to one's home as a guest.

We see immediately how translation constitutes a model which is suited to the specific problem that the construction of Europe poses. First, at the institutional level, it leads us to encourage the teaching of at least two living languages throughout the whole of Europe in order to secure an audience for each of the languages which is not in a dominant position at the level of communication. But, above all, at a truly spiritual level, it leads us to extend the spirit of translation to the relationship between the cultures themselves, that is to say, to the content of meaning conveyed by the translation. It is here that there is need of translators from culture to culture, of cultural bilingualists capable of attending to this process of transference to the mental universe of the other culture, having taken account of its customs, fundamental beliefs and deepest convictions; in short, of the totality of its significant features. In this sense we can speak of a *translation ethos* whose goal would be to repeat at the cultural and spiritual level the gesture of linguistic hospitality mentioned above.

II The model of the exchange of memories

I call the second model that of the exchange of memories. We see immediately how it links up with the preceding model: to translate a foreign culture into the categories peculiar to one's own presupposes, as we have said, a preliminary transference to the cultural milieu governed by the ethical and spiritual categories of the other. Now the first difference which calls for transference and hospitality is a difference of memory, precisely at the level of the customs, rules, norms, beliefs and convictions which constitute the identity of a

culture. But to speak of memory is not only to evoke a psycho-physiological faculty which has something to do with the preservation and recollection of traces of the past; it is to put forward the 'narrative' function through which this primary capacity of preservation and recollection is exercised at the public level of language. Even at the individual level, it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality. Two noteworthy phenomena concern us here.

The first is the 'narrative identity' of the characters of the story. At the same time that the recounted actions receive the temporal unity of a story from the plot, the characters of the story can also be said to be plotted out (*mise en intrigue*). They are recounted at the same time as the story itself. This first remark has many consequences of which the following is the most important: narrative identity is not that of an immutable substance or of a fixed structure, but rather the mobile identity issuing from the combination of the concordance of the story, taken as a structured totality, and the discordance imposed by the encountered events. Alternatively put, narrative identity takes part in the mobility of the story, in its dialectic of order and disorder. An important corollary is suggested here: it is possible to revise a recounted story which takes account of other events, or even which organizes the recounted events differently. Up to a point, it is possible to tell several stories based on the same events (however we may then give meaning to the expression: the same events). This is what happens when we endeavour to take account of other people's stories.

This last remark leads to the second phenomenon which needs to be emphasized here. If each of us receives a certain narrative identity from the stories which are told to him or her, or from those that we tell about ourselves, this identity is mingled with that of others in such a way as to engender second order stories which are themselves intersections between numerous stories. Thus, the story of my life is a segment of the story of your life; of the story of my parents, of my friends, of my enemies, and of countless strangers. We are literally 'entangled in stories', according to W. Schapp's beautiful title, *In Geschichten Verstrickt*.

From these two phenomena taken together – 1) narrative constitution of each personal identity, and 2) the entanglement of personal incidents in stories conveyed by some and heard by others and above all told by some about others – a model of memory-exchange emerges whose ethical import is easy to grasp. To communicate at the level where we have already conducted the work of translation, with its art of transference and its ethics of linguistic hospitality, calls for this further step: that of taking responsibility, in imagination and in

sympathy, for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern that other. This is what we learn to do in our dealings with fictional characters with whom we provisionally identify through reading. These mobile identifications contribute to the reconfiguration of our own past and that of the past of others, by an incessant restructuring of stories that we tell, some of them about others. But a more profound engagement is required by the transition from the level of fiction to that of historical reality. It is not of course a matter of actually reliving the events that happened to others; the inalienable character of life experiences renders this chimerical 'intropathy' impossible. More modestly, but also more energetically, it is a matter of exchanging memories at the narrative level where they are presented for comprehension. A new ethos is born of the understanding applied to the complex intertwining of new stories which structure and configure the crossroads between memories. It is a matter there of a genuine task, of a genuine labour, in which we could identify the *Anerkennung* of German Idealism, that is, 'recognition' considered in its narrative dimension.

The transposition to the level of the European problematic is evident. But the second lesson, that drawn from the entanglement of stories at the interpersonal level, reaches its objective only if the first – the narrative constitution of specific identity – has been well understood and completely accepted. The identity of a group, culture, people, or nation, is not that of an immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story. Now the contemporary implications of this principle of narrative identity have not yet been perceived. A rigid and arrogant conception of cultural identity prevents us from perceiving the corollaries of this principle mentioned above: the possibilities of revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past. What really prevents cultures from allowing themselves to be recounted differently is the influence exercised over the collective memory by what we term the 'founding events', the repeated commemoration and celebration of which tend to freeze the history of each cultural group into an identity which is not only immutable but also deliberately and systematically incommunicable. The European ethos which is sought does not of course require the abandonment of these important historical landmarks, but rather an effort of *plural reading*: one first example of which is the dispute among French historians about the meaning of the French Revolution; another is the dispute among German historians regarding the significance of the criminal episodes of the Second World War. *Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence

to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honoured by the diversity of stories which are made out of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise.

This ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other national cultures as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations.

In this exchange of memories it is a matter not only of subjecting the founding events of both cultures to a crossed reading, but of helping one another to set free that part of life and of renewal which is found captive in rigid, embalmed and dead traditions. In this regard, I deferred up to now any mention of 'tradition'. Indeed, it is only at the end of the twofold linguistic and narrative course just proposed that we can go beyond clichés and anathemas concerning tradition. It is necessary for us to have gone through the ethical requirements of translation – what I call linguistic hospitality – and through the requirements of the exchange of memories – narrative hospitality – in order to approach the phenomenon of tradition in its specifically dialectical dimension. Tradition means transmission, transmission of things said, of beliefs professed, of norms accepted, etc. Now such a transmission is a living one only if tradition continues to form a partnership with innovation. Tradition represents the aspect of debt which concerns the past and reminds us that nothing comes from nothing. A tradition remains living, however, only if it continues to be held in an unbroken process of reinterpretation. It is at this point that the reappraisal of narratives of the past and the plural reading of founding events come into effect.

What remains to be considered now is the second pole of the partnership of tradition and innovation. With regard to innovation, an important aspect of the rereading and the reappraisal of transmitted traditions consists in discerning past promises which have not been kept. Indeed, the past is not *only* what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted. The unfulfilled future of the past forms perhaps the richest part of a tradition. The liberation of this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives. It is principally the founding events of a historical community which should be submitted to this critical reading in order to release the burden of expectation that the subsequent course of its history carried and then betrayed. The past is a

cemetery of promises which have not been kept. It is a matter of bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ch. 37).

III The model of forgiveness

What has just been said about the revival of promises of the past which have not been kept leads to a third opening: that of forgiveness. The considerations which follow are linked in a double sense to the preceding discussion. On the one hand, the role of the story in the constitution of narrative identity has indicated what we have called the revision of the past, a revision which is effected by recounting in a different way. Forgiveness is a specific form of the revision of the past and, through it, of the specific narrative identities. On the other hand, the entanglement of life stories gives occasion for a revision which is neither solitary nor introspective of its own past, but rather a mutual revision in which we are able to see the most valuable yield of the exchange of memories. Forgiveness is also a specific form of that mutual revision, the most precious result of which is the liberation of promises of the past which have not been kept.

The novelty of this third model is connected to a phenomenon – a complement of the founding events which a historical community glories in – namely, the wounds inflicted by what Mercea Eliade called the ‘terror of history’. What has been said above under the heading of the exchange of memories must no longer be investigated through the perspective of glorious deeds but rather through this new perspective of suffering. Suffering appears twice, then, in the tableau of our meditation: it appears in the first instance as endured suffering which transforms the agents of the story into victims; it appears a second time as suffering inflicted on others. This point is so important that it is necessary to reverse the order followed above when we passed from narrative identity to the entanglement of life stories. It is necessary this time to proceed from the suffering of others; imagining the suffering of others *before* re-examining one’s own.

A major feature of the history of Europe is the extraordinary weight of suffering which the majority of states, great or small, taken in pairs or in interposed alliances, have inflicted in the past. The history of Europe is cruel: wars of religion, wars of conquest, wars of extermination, subjugation of ethnic minorities, expulsion or reduction to slavery of religious minorities; the litany is without end. Europe is barely emerging from this nightmare. We know only too well what tendencies lead back to these horrors: the perverse recourse to a

narrative identity which is devoid of the important correctives already noted, namely the examination of one's own stories and the entanglement of our stories with the stories of others. To these important correctives we now add the following complement: that of understanding the suffering of others in the past and in the present. According to this new model, then, the exchange of memories required by our second model calls for the exchange of the memory of sufferings inflicted and sustained. This exchange demands more than the imagination and sympathy which were called for above. This 'extra' has something to do with forgiveness insofar as forgiveness consists in 'shattering the debt', according to the beautiful subtitle of the volume dedicated to the theme of forgiveness by Editions Autrement.

Forgiveness, in its full sense, certainly far exceeds political categories. It belongs to an order – the order of charity – which goes even beyond the order of morality. Forgiveness falls within the scope of an economy of the gift whose logic of superabundance exceeds the logic of reciprocity; we have already seen an application of this above (namely the exercise of recognition presupposed by the model of translation and by that of crossed narration). Insofar as it exceeds the order of morality, the economy of the gift belongs to what we would be able to term the 'poetics' of the moral life if we were to retain the twofold sense of the term 'poetics', that is, the sense of creativity at the level of the dynamics of acting and the sense of song and hymn at the level of verbal expression. It is thus to this spiritual economy, to this poetics of the moral life, that forgiveness essentially belongs. Its 'poetic' power consists in shattering the law of the irreversibility of time by changing the past, not as a record of all that has happened but in terms of its meaning for us today. It does this by lifting the burden of guilt which paralyses the relations between individuals who are acting out and suffering their own history. It does not abolish the debt insofar as we are and remain the inheritors of the past, but it lifts the pain of the debt.

We have said that these considerations do not have their primary employment in the political sphere whose principle is justice and reciprocity, and not charity and the gift. Could we not suggest, nevertheless, that the order of justice and reciprocity can be touched by that of charity and the gift – touched, that is to say, affected, and, if I may say, moved to pity? Have we not some examples of this in the sphere of penal justice, with the royal pardon, prescription and sentence reductions? And are there not further examples found in the social sphere in certain affective expressions of solidarity? But what would it be at the level of peoples and nations? I spoke above of an 'extra' called for by the exchange of memories of injury, and I

suggested that this 'extra' has something to do with forgiveness. It is necessary in reality that the peoples of Europe show compassion for each other, imagining – I repeat – the suffering of others just as they are about to call for vengeance for those injuries which have been inflicted upon them in the past. What is demanded here strongly resembles forgiveness.

However, we must enter on to this path with the greatest caution guided by sober circumspection. Two pitfalls must be avoided. The first would be that of confusing forgiveness and forgetting. On the contrary, we can forgive only where there is no forgetting, where the humble have been released from a promise. 'Shattering the debt and forgetting' is the subtitle of the book mentioned earlier. Nothing would be more loathsome than that which Jankélévitch called the forgetful forgiveness, a product of shallowness and indifference. This is really why the work of forgiveness must be grafted on to the work of memory in the language of narration. The second pitfall would be to take forgiveness under its worst aspect. The first relation that we have to forgiving is not the exercise of an easily granted forgiveness – that which once again is reduced to forgetfulness – but the difficult practice of responding to a request for forgiveness. As to the victims of imprescriptible crimes – crimes that they consider to be unforgivable – there is no other advice than to wait for better times. These times will see the first cathartic effect of the drawing-up of wrongs suffered by the injured, who will see the offender attain full understanding of the crimes that he or she has committed. There is a time for the unforgivable and a time for forgiveness. Forgiveness requires enduring patience.

In this respect, the recourse to the model of forgiveness does not take us as far from the political sphere as we might think. The history of recent years offers us some wonderful examples of a kind of short circuit between the poetical and the political. We have all retained the image of Willy Brandt kneeling at Warsaw; we think also of Václav Havel writing to the President of the Federal Republic of Germany in order to seek forgiveness for the sufferings inflicted upon the Sudeten Germans after the Second World War; we remember too the forgiveness sought by the German authorities from the Jewish people and their scrupulous care in atoning to the survivors of the final solution in numerous ways. Finally, we think of Sadat's stunning visit to Jerusalem. But to the same degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum.

We proposed three models for the mediation of identity and

alterity. We stated that translation is the best way of demonstrating the universality of language (*le langage*) in the dispersal of languages (*les langues*). We added that crossed narration is the best way of sharing in the memory of others. We then concluded with the claim that forgiveness is the best way of shattering the debt, and thus of lifting impediments to the practice of justice and recognition. From beginning to end we have held to the blueprint of 'mediations'. In this sense, the proposed models may be seen as contributing to the crucial ongoing debate between the right to universality and the demand of historical difference.¹

[Translated by Eileen Brennan, Trinity College Dublin]

Notes

This essay is translated from the French, 'Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe', in *Imaginer l'Europe*, sous la direction de Peter Koslowski (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992), pp. 107–19. We would like to thank Paul Ricoeur, the editors and the publishers for permission to publish this translation.

- 1 Christian denominations also have a role to play in this threefold work of translation, crossed narration and mutual compassion insofar as they have received a legacy of evangelical words about forgiveness and loving one's enemies. In this sense, their manner of approaching the problems discussed here would begin with forgiveness as the dominant theme which is thereby placed above the two other themes (of the crossing of memories and of the translation from one cultural language to another). But the Christian communities also pay a price for being heard. This price is twofold: they must, on the one hand, thoroughly pursue the course of relinquishing power, power which is sometimes exercised directly, sometimes indirectly by the intervention of the secular arm, and sometimes, more subtly, by increasing their authority through the vertical dimension of domination – characteristic of the phenomenon of sovereignty found principally in the context of nation-states – at the expense of the horizontal relation of wishing to live together. To the extent that the Christian communities will, at some future point, clearly break with a certain 'theological politics' – where theology primarily justifies the dimension of domination in political relations – and to the extent that they will be

capable, in contrast, of giving a free rein to another 'theological politics' – where the ecclesia, asserting itself as a place of mutual aid with a view to salvation, would truly become a model of fraternity for all the other institutions – to that extent will the message of the gospel be likely to be heard by politics on the grand scale of Europe. This leads us to say – and it is the second price to pay by the Christian communities – that the primary context in which the model of forgiveness is designed to be put to the test is that of interdenominational exchanges. It is primarily with regard to each other that the Christian communities must exercise mutual forgiveness in order to 'shatter the debt' inherited from a long history of persecution, inquisition, repression, acts of violence which were perpetrated by some communities against others or by all of the communities against non-Christians and non-believers. The new evangelization of Europe is a project which carries this twofold price.

Paul Ricoeur

Fragility and responsibility

This article will discuss the *fragility*, rather than the *tragedy*, related to the public exercise of human action, despite an important relationship between the two phenomena. This relationship consists in the fact that both the fragile and the tragic arise from a conflict among human beings of quality who must confront each other's grandeur. Moreover, both the fragile and the tragic reveal a sort of obstination in finitude, an imperviousness to the other on the part of the grandeur which action confronts. Nevertheless, the major difference between the fragile and the tragic resides in their different relation to responsibility. The tragic evokes a situation where a human awakens painfully to the consciousness of a destiny or fatality which weighs on his or her life, nature, or very condition. The conflict's dimension of 'fatality' or 'destiny' consists in its irremediability and in the fact that the 'collision,' to use Hegel's term in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, results in the mutual destruction of the protagonists. On the contrary, the fragile does not compromise the fatality by virtue of which the protagonists head for ruin through their very efforts to ward off disaster. Fragility calls for action by virtue of an intrinsic relation, which I shall now demonstrate, with the idea of responsibility. Yet, perhaps one should not forget this unsettling relationship with the tragic whenever the best-intentioned human interventions tend to aggravate the evils they claim to cure.

The intrinsic relationship between fragility and responsibility can be demonstrated from the idea of responsibility itself. I shall say with Hans Jonas in *Principe Responsabilité* that responsibility has the fragile as its specific vis-a-vis, that is to say, both what is perishable through natural weakness and what is threatened under the blows of historical violence.¹ The philosopher calls it a 'principle' because it is expressed from the very first instance as an imperative which nothing precedes. Yet we discover this principle enshrouded in a feeling by

which we are affected at the level of a fundamental mood. We feel – under the multiple figures which will be evoked below – required or enjoined by the fragile to do something, to help, but, even better, to foster growth, to allow for accomplishment and flourishing.

The strength of this sentiment initially consists in making us experience a situation which is, but should not be. The imperative is embodied in what we perceive as deplorable, unbearable, inadmissible, unjustifiable. Consider the birth of a child – its mere existence obliges. We are rendered responsible by the fragile. Yet what does ‘rendered responsible’ mean? When the fragile is not something but someone – an individual, groups, communities, even humanity – this someone appears to us as entrusted to our care, placed in our custody. Let us be careful, however. The image of custody, or the burden which one takes upon oneself, should not render us inattentive to the other component emphasized by the expression ‘entrusted to our care’ – the fragile as ‘someone’ who relies on us, expects our assistance and care, and trusts that we shall fulfil our obligations. This bond of trust is fundamental. As intimately related to the request, the injunction, or the imperative, it is important that we encounter trust before suspicion. The result, accordingly, is that in the feeling of responsibility we *feel* that we are *rendered* responsible for, and by, someone.

Let us pause here to measure the gap between an analysis of responsibility introduced by its relation to fragility and a more traditional analysis according to which responsibility consists in the ability to designate oneself as the author of one’s own acts. This definition certainly is not abolished. If, after the event, we could not recapitulate the course of our acts in a brief recollection and gather them around the pole which we say is *us* – authors of these acts – neither could anyone rely on us, nor expect that we keep our promises. But notice the incompleteness of this notion of responsibility occurring in the aftermath of action: it is turned towards the past rather than the future. This incompleteness remains even when we are *willing to repair the damages caused by our actions* (definition of responsibility according to civil law), or when we *assume the penal consequences of punishable actions* (definition of responsibility according to the penal code). The assumed consequences certainly constitute a slice of future with regard to the acts themselves. Yet the consequences have already happened when the judgment is passed. Thus it is always towards *retrospection* that we are drawn. The appeal coming from fragility differs greatly in this respect. The question becomes: what shall we do with this fragile being, what shall we do for her or him? We are directed towards the future of a being in need of help to survive and to grow. This future can be very remote from our present, as in the cases