Normative Creativity in Paul Ricœur

Alain Loute
Université Catholique de Louvain

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I would like to show in what sense the theme of creativity is integral to Ricœur's ethical thought. I will attempt to defend the thesis that, according to him, creativity is not just one human capacity, but a capacity the usage of which is requisite: in order to "act with and for others in just institutions," actors *must* continually create and re–create collective norms. Firstly, I will examine what Ricœur calls his *petite éthique* in order to expound its injunction of normative creation. Secondly, I will show that, for Ricœur, if actors are called to engage in this kind of creativity, they can end up being deaf to this summons, due to their own fallibility. However, Ricœur's philosophy does not amount to a form of unhappy consciousness. Thus, in the final section, I will attempt to show that his anthropology of *l'homme capable* enables us to conceive how actors, moving beyond their fallibility, may *reveal* and *transform* their capacity to act in the world as a creative power.

KEYWORDS: Normativity, creativity, ethics, practical wisdom, excessive gesture.

The theme of human creativity is prominent in the work of Paul Ricœur: many of his works may be understood as attempts to investigate the human capacity for creation, by reworking the Kantian notion of *creative imagination*. His originality is to introduce creative imagination into the field of language. But in reworking creative imagination, we should not be deceived with respect to its power as a phenomenon of innovation. Phenomena of innovation, as represented by a metaphor or a narrative, do not boil down to a mere broadening of a word's polysemous space or an enriching of a narrative tradition. They can be an opportunity for a real redescription of our world which has the potential to transform us.

In this paper, I would like to show in what sense the theme of creativity is integral to Ricœur's ethical thought. My thesis is that, for him, creativity is not just one of many possible human capacities, but a capacity the usage of which is requisite. In other words, in order to be able to "act with and for others in just institutions," actors must continually create collective norms. But Ricœur does not restrict himself to merely expounding the injunction of the social creation of norms: he also attempts to determine the conditions a society has to meet in order to 'capacitate' itself for normative creativity.

Reflecting upon the conditions of 'auto–capacitation' for normative creativity is, in my opinion, of paramount importance. It avoids presupposing that actors have a proclivity for creating norms. Ricœur has indeed taught us that actors can 'do wrong:' they can refuse to comply with norms, or to respect norms in the spirit of a 'scrupulous conscience' which has lost sight of the injunction of normative creativity. Thus there is nothing spontaneous about the activity of the social creation of norms. I will attempt to show that Ricœur's anthropology of *l'homme capable* enables us to think about how actors, moving beyond their fallibility, may *reveal* and *transform* their capacity to act in the world as a creative power.

Firstly, I will explore what Ricœur refers to as his *petite éthique*, which attempts to determine, in terms of the actors' concrete engagement, *how* and *why* we must act. Here I will expound the injunction of normative creativity. Secondly, I will take into account the fallibility of the agent, as it can make them deaf to the call for creative action. I will conclude this paper by addressing the response to this fallibility constituted by the 'auto–capacitation' to normative creativity.

1. The *Petite Éthique* and the Injunction of Normative Creativity

1.1. *The Ethical Aim*

Condensed into three studies contained in *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur's *petite éthique* unfolds in three stages: the ethical aim, moral norms, and practical wisdom. When we come across the term 'ethical aim,' we should think of "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others in just institutions." (Ricœur 1992: 172) With the ethical aim, the starting point of Ricœur's *petite éthique* is not the modality of an 'ought to be,' but rather a 'desire to be.' The ethical aim is above all the wish for a good life, or we could say, a three–fold wish or concern for a good life: "souci de soi, souci de l'autre, souci de l'institution." (Ricœur 1991e: 257) From the outset, Ricœur links the ethical aim to the work of creative imagination. In fact, it is what allows us to reflect upon our lives, to gather together its disparate events and articulate our wish for a good life. The process of narrating one's life is the same act as the operation of configuring a text. When we configure a narrative, we subsume events, once mere singular occurrences, within a history taken as a whole. The process of narrating one's life is, in a similar way, an attempt to gather together the practices we carry out daily and their role in our 'life goals' within what Ricœur refers to — following MacIntyre — as 'the narrative unity of one life.' A process of mutual determination then takes place between this unity and the simpler practical unities displayed by our

practices and life goals:

> Between our aim of a 'good life' and our particular choices a sort of hermeneutical circle is traced by virtue of the back–and–forth motion between the idea of the 'good life' and the most important decisions of our existence (career, loves, leisure, etc.). This can be likened to a text in which the whole and the part are to be understood each in terms of the other. (Ricœur 1992: 179)

By becoming interpreters of our own lives, we are not satisfied with merely reproducing its successive episodes in imagination. We bestow meaning upon that which is heterogeneous and discordant within our immediate experience. The aim of a good life is, therefore, something that the emplotment of our life simultaneously *reveals* and *transforms*, *discovers* and *invents*.

Indeed if Ricœur insists upon the ethical implications of narrative imagination, he does not completely identify ethics and narrativity. The reason for this is that imagination does not, in itself, undergo any censorship; it freely plays with its possibilities. If we do not want to limit ourselves to just imagining various good life plans, but also wish to *act* ethically, we need to impose an inner limit upon the work of the imagination, and posit some kind of engagement, similar to an act of promising:

> Between the imagination that says, 'I can try anything' and the voice that says, 'Everything is possible but not everything is beneficial (understanding here, to others and to yourself),' a muted discord is sounded. It's this discord that the act of promising transforms into a fragile concordance: 'I can try anything,' to be sure, but 'Here is where I stand!' (Ricœur 1992: 167–168)

By positing such an act of engagement in a good life plan, we make ourselves worthy of self–esteem. Ricœur makes use of this capacity to point out the reflexive aspect of the ethical aim. We learn to value ourselves by valuing our actions. To esteem oneself is a process of appropriating the ability to act in the world which the emplotment of our life reveals and transforms. But to esteem oneself is not simply, through interpreting the text of one's life, a process of interpreting oneself as the author of one's actions. In addition to the capacity to *take the initiative*, to esteem oneself is a process of recognizing oneself as "capable of evaluating one's actions, of formulating preferences linked to the meaning of the predicates 'good' and 'bad,' therefore of introducing a hierarchy of values whenever it is a matter of choosing between possible actions." (Ricœur 1993: 7, my translation)

I would like to take this opportunity to insist upon the fact that acting for a good life requires the use of a certain form of creativity. If, through the actor's engagement, a good life becomes a good immanent to practice, an internal teleology of action, it is at the same time a higher end that is

always greater than, that always exceeds, anything that an action allows us to achieve. Once again, the same is true for the good life as for a text the meaning of which we attempt to determine. The experience of re–reading makes us aware that configuring a text is an operation which we can always take up again. The same applies to determining conditions for the good life. By re–reading my life, I can pay attention to other practices and include them within new ideals. Moreover, my life is like a text that continues to be written, which implies the never–ending task of reading its new chapters and re–reading past events in my life in light of them. The ethical aim therefore demands that we continually re–determine what we define as a good life.

If we had no choice but to limit ourselves to this exposition of self–esteem, we would be forced to conclude that Ricœur's *petite éthique* is decidedly egological in character. Needless to say, Ricœur's defence of the idea that self–esteem is mediated by a continuous emplotment of one's life is quite distinct from and irreducible to those philosophies of the *cogito* whose starting point is the mere self–positing of the *ego*. Despite the detour of the narrative, does self–esteem run the risk of turning into a withdrawal into the self? Ricœur questions such a solipsistic vision of ethics. We just have to look at his definition of the ethical aim: "aiming at the 'good life' *with and for others in just institutions*." The relation to others and just institutions is *constitutive* of the ethical aim. For Ricœur, this twofold relationship, far from constituting an exogenous corrective to self–esteem, is what enables this capacity for self–realization. An actualization of the capacity for self–esteem is not possible without a relationship to others and to just institutions.

Let us take a look at the role that the other plays. Here Ricœur makes use of Lévinas in order to claim that there is "no self without another who summons it to responsibility." (Ricœur 1992: 187) In a sense, the other allows me, by his expectations, to keep my promises: "If another were not counting on me, would I be capable of keeping my word, of maintaining myself?" (Ricœur 1992: 341) Ricœur sees in the other's act of summoning me that which makes me responsible: the other's initiative has the effect of liberating a benevolent spontaneity towards the other, which Ricœur calls solicitude, without which the self could not respond to other's initiative. A dialectical relationship thereby establishes itself between the self and the other. On the one hand, the other makes the self responsible. It seems that, for Ricœur, if the other did not count on me, I could never keep my promise to act for a good life. On the other hand, if the self did not already esteem itself, then how could it esteem the other? We must therefore assert, at the same time, that while there is no self without another who summons it to responsibility, "only a self can have an other than self." (Ricœur 1992: 187) As with the concern for oneself, the concern for the other is inseparable from

the demand for creativity. The reason for this is that the other makes all of the representations of him or herself that I could form burst at the seams. By making use of the Lévinasian figure of the face of the other, Ricœur does not want to draw our attention to anything other than the irrepresentational character of the other. The other's capacity for self–esteem is a power that can never be exhausted by their actions. If imagination enables the self to let itself be affected by and to relate itself to the other, the excess of the figure of the other, as revealing its *insubstituability* and *irreplaceability*, forces the self to continually recreate the image it forms of the other.

And now for the final part of the definition of the ethical aim: "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others *in just institutions*." Once again, the framework of just institutions is presented by Ricœur as enabling the capacity for self–esteem to realize itself and not as a supplement merely adjoined to the aim of a good life but which could be removed. For Ricœur, the actions which constitute a good life unfold in a "public space of appearance" — a term he borrows from Arendt — which, far from being limited to interpersonal relationships, is inclusive of third parties and structured by institutions. This "milieu d'accomplissement du souhait de la vie bonne" (Ricœur 1993: 10) bestows duration and stability upon action for the good life. Ricœur characterizes this third dimension of the ethical aim by means of the notion of the 'meaning of justice.' Justice, understood here as constitutive of the ethical aim, defines the way in which institutions distribute advantages, disadvantages, roles, etc. At the level of the ethical aim, Ricœur does not see the idea of just distribution only as that which would give everyone their due share, but rather as that which makes society a cooperative endeavour, that which enables everyone to take part in society. The meaning of justice must therefore be seen as a concern to take part in a system of distribution which enables everyone to achieve the full development of their capacities. This meaning of justice shares with the other components of the ethical aim the feature of never being fully satisfied, "for justice more often is lacking and injustice prevails." (Ricœur 1992: 198) Rather than speaking about the meaning of justice, it would be more appropriate, as Ricœur admits, to talk about the meaning of the unjust, not because the concern for institutions can only express itself in the modality of grievance, but rather because people have "a clearer vision of what is missing in human relations than of the right way to organize them." (Ricœur 1992: 198) We can see from these remarks that the meaning of justice is inseparable from the demand for creativity, the rule of distribution needing to be continually revised in order to establish an equality which can pose a challenge to the permanence of inequality.

1.2. *Moral Norms*

I have just given a summary of the teleological moment of the *petite éthique* while at the same time insisting upon the injunction of creativity which flows through it. Ricœur connects the ethical aim with the moment of moral obligation, which we will now examine at some length. Ricœur's point of departure for the realization of the deontological moment of his *petite éthique* is Kant's moral philosophy. Here he finds elements of a morality of obligation which distinguishes itself from the ethics of a desire–to–be. Nevertheless, Ricœur underlines at the outset that the link between moral obligation and the ethical aim of a good life is not broken. The reason for this is that he conceives morality as the problematization and 'litmus test' of the good. For Ricœur, moral reflection must be seen as "a patient *examination* of the candidates for the title of good without qualification." (Ricœur 1992: 207)

Ricœur's starting point is the Kantian concept of good will: "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification [*ohne Einschränkung*] except *a good will*." (Kant 1964: 61, quoted by Ricœur 1992: 205) No good can, by itself, be taken as good without qualification; it can always be misused. Thus, we should not look for the good without qualification in the good aimed at by the will, but rather in the will itself. But the good will is not just any will at all. It is above all a will that does not let itself be determined by sensible inclinations, since an empirical goal cannot be taken as good without qualification. In order to 'override' inclinations, as Ricœur says, we must submit our maxims of action to a *rule of universalization*: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Kant 1964: 88; cf. Ricœur 1992: 207) By submitting our maxims of action to the rule of universalization, the will is no longer determined by sensible inclinations, but rather by the pure form of the law. This rule is a categorical imperative. If it takes on an imperative form, it is because, if the will is indeed the faculty of acting according to the representation of laws, it is also, by its finite constitution, determined by sensible inclinations: "A good will without qualification is for initial purposes a will constitutionally subject to limitations. For it, the good without qualification takes on the form of duty, of the imperative, of moral restraint." (Ricœur 1991e: 261, my translation)

The moment of moral obligation is not limited to this litmus test of a good life. It also intervenes at the level of intersubjective relations. With respect to moral obligation, a norm of reciprocity together with solicitude is the second moment of the ethical aim. If the demand of reciprocity must take the form of an imperative and not just a wish, it is because the action that aims to promote the good life with and for others — and in truth any

action — creates a radical asymmetry between the protagonists of the action. All action is interaction: the ability to act in the world is inseparable from a 'power over' others. In the use of this power over others, Ricœur sees the possibility for violence. He finds in the second Kantian imperative the formulation of the duty of reciprocity: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." (Kant 1964: 96)

The meaning of the just must, after all, be placed under the scrutiny of norms. If indeed this is the case, it is precisely because of the 'paradoxical' character of politics. On the one hand, Ricœur defines politics by the spatial image of a 'public space of appearance' which enables our practices to realize themselves in a horizon of public peace. In this sense, "the political is inscribed within the trajectory of the realization of the human as such; it is therefore not extrinsic to the humanity of man." (Ricœur 1991d: 164, my translation) On the other hand, Ricœur underlines that political power is an opportunity for the exercise of domination between rulers and the ruled and of a violence beyond compare. Because the political remains marked by violence, if we are to live together harmoniously, we have to submit ourselves to the scrutiny of the deontological principles of justice. It is through a reading of John Rawls's procedural conception of justice that Ricœur identifies the features of the normative demand as it arises at the institutional level. This deontological conception of justice arises as a criticism of the teleological approach of utilitarianism and its sacrificial logic.

Although structurally irreducible, the first two moments of Ricœur's *petite éthique* cannot be understood in isolation from one another. The ethical aim, to begin with it, *has* to pass through the scrutiny of norms. This is what enables actors seeking to live well to put their desires to the test and to assure themselves that they are not in error. Thus Ricœur says that the rule of universalization is "no more than a criterion of control, allowing an agent to test his or her good will in claiming to be 'objective' in the maxims of his or her action." (Ricœur 1991b: 199) Moral norms are also those which respond to the perpetration of violence made possible by all actions, including actions for the good life. They enable the actors to ensure that the quest for justice does not impel them to commit injustices.

All the same, even if moral obligation is indispensible, it is not sufficient in and of itself. If Ricœur does not conceive morality without the ethical aim, it is because the rule of universalization is a purely formal rule. Ricœur says the following about the content of the maxims of our actions: "We learn them by the practice of life, by ethical experience taken in all its dimensions." (Ricœur 1985: 45, my translation) Yet the question of the

content of our maxims is not the only reason for maintaining morality's
non–self–sufficient character; the question of motivation (Ricœur 2001: 59)
is another decisive reason. By themselves, norms cannot supply the actor
with motivation to recognize their normativity. What Ricœur rejects is "the
idea that reason by itself is practical, that is to say, governs as reason without
regard to desire." (Ricœur 1991b: 198) For him, the ethical aim motivates the
acceptance of moral obligation. We therefore encounter a complementarity
between the teleological and deontological perspectives: on the one hand,
the ethical aim must realize itself by passing through the scrutiny of norms;
but, on the other hand, the normativity of norms is not possible without
the presupposition of an ethical aim. This reciprocal relation between the
ethical aim and moral norms manifests itself chiefly when we are faced
with conflicts related to the application of norms. Thus, the third moment,
which Ricœur calls practical wisdom, comes into play.

1.3. *Practical Wisdom*

To avoid any misunderstanding, I will specify at the outset that Ricœur does
not see practical wisdom as an authority higher than ethics and morality.
In other words, his perspective is not another variant of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*.
Confronted with conflicts raised by moral obligation, practical wisdom
produces a 'moral judgment in situation' by using the ethical aim as its
basis. But there is no renunciation of morality in this recourse to the ethical
aim. 'Moral judgment in situation' is not a return to an isolated moment
of ethics; it consists in violating the moral rule as little as possible and in
respecting the ethical aim as much as possible.

When he gives examples, Ricœur invokes amongst other things political
conflicts. When applying the rules of justice, conflicts, hitherto concealed by
the formalism of the rules of justice, may appear at the level of the order of
priority which is to be established between various goods to be distributed.
This order — provisional and revisable, not scientifically decidable — can
only be established after a contextual discussion which can never be brought
to a final conclusion by any decisive argument. A second and more radical
conflict may involve the purposes of a 'good government.' Lastly, a further
conflict results from a crisis in democratic legitimatization. While the former
was concerned with the plurality of purposes of a good government, the
crisis of legitimatization affects the very possibility of bestowing meaning
upon the overall project of a society. The use of political wisdom operating
through a kind of "plural phronesis" (Ricœur 1990b: 304, my translation)
enables the resolution of each of these conflicts. It is the attempt to return
to the resources of *living together* which should have been forgotten and
covered up by the relations of domination between rulers and the ruled.

Within a debate, it adjudicates the order of priority amongst the goods that have to be distributed and determines the purposes of a good government. Similarly, for Ricœur, only public debate enables a resolution of the latter conflict, since it alone could bring forth new reasons for a harmonious co–existence.

Therefore practical wisdom enables us to dialectically re–articulate the relationship between moral normativity and the ethical aim. By returning to the ethical aim, not only does practical wisdom seek to resolve conflicts caused by moral formalism, but it also tries to bring forth a common motivation to recognize the normativity of norms, an 'overlapping consensus' — to adopt Rawls's expression — without which moral rules would not be effective. However, we should not reduce conflicts linked to the application of norms to a mere problem of motivation or the difficulty of taking adequate account of the context for the realization of a norm. I think that what we come across in all these conflicts is the infinite demand of the aim which those norms seek to realize. The use of 'moral judgment in situation,' by returning from the deontological to the teleological, tells us that "morality is held to constitute only a limited, although legitimate and even indispensable, actualization of the ethical aim." (Ricœur 1992: 170) By making explicit the disproportion existing between the mediation of the rule and its aim, practical wisdom reminds us of the demand for creativity imposed by the infinite task of realizing the ethical aim, a demand which the deontological perspective of morality can conceal.[1] It makes us aware that the reciprocal relation between the ethical aim and moral norms has to be continually revived with the aim of (re)creating norms which enable us to act in the best way possible with and for others in just institutions.

However, practical wisdom is not only that kind of wisdom which reminds us of the demand to create norms. The thesis I wish to defend is that practical wisdom is that particular kind of wisdom which can 'capacitate' us for this task. In order to demonstrate this thesis, it is necessary to account for the 'fallible' character of autonomous action for the good life. We will show that, to Ricœur's way of thinking, this action, due to its intrinsic fallibility, depends upon something other than itself in order to be realized. In support of this thesis, I will make use of Ricœur's reflections on what he refers to as the dialectic of the logic of excess and the logic of equivalence — also called the dialectic of love and justice. In its superabundance, a gesture of love incites us to think the totality which ethics aims at. For Ricœur, this gesture, if we appropriate it for ourselves, can 'capacitate' us for the infinite

---

1. I have tried to develop, in a more ample way, this interpretation of practical wisdom as a moment of the *petite éthique*, which, far from limiting itself to the contextual realization of norms, refers to this fundamental disproportion between the ethical aim and moral norms. Cf. Loute 2008: 266–276.

task of realizing the ethical aim. My point is that, for him, practical wisdom is that which pushes us towards the reception and appropriation of such excessive gestures.

2. The Fallibility of Human Action

Whether actors act by disobeying or respecting moral norms, they always risk doing wrong. On the one hand, wrongness is likely to corrupt the will and cause it to warp its order of priorities. It may induce the actor to prefer that which he should not prefer. On the other hand, any action, including actions subjected to a norm, continues to be a violent one. "Under its most measured and legitimate form, justice is already a manner of returning evil for evil." (Ricœur 1965b: 234) Thus the possibility of wrongness reveals the tragic character of autonomous actions for the good life: even as they seek to realize the ethical aim through moral norms, they can lead to injustices even greater than those which they claim to fight against.

This problematic of the intrinsic fallibility of human action enables us to address the interplay between the ethical aim and moral norms in a new light. Rather than mutually complementing one another, the ethical aim and the moral norm can neutralize each other. Even though the ethical aim *has to* pass through norms, the ethical aim can lead the actor to prefer not to comply with them. As for moral norm, it can conceal the infinite task represented by the realization of the ethical aim and turn the good will into an over–scrupulous conscience clouded by mere respect for law. It seems as if there is no other alternative, for the actor, than to fall into an 'unhappy consciousness.' Even if they do not actually make a mistake, they recognize in themselves the possibility of doing wrong. Moreover, the tragic character of action reveals to them the ambiguity of every action for the good life. The synthesis of morality and happiness is beyond the range of human action. If, despite everything, autonomous action for the good life is possible, this is due to the fact that the actor is given something which renders autonomous actions possible. The following sentence marvellously epitomizes Ricoeur's point: "L'homme *peut être*, parce qu'il lui est *donné d'être possible*." (Ricœur 1971: 69) Therefore, we have to consider what the creative equilibrium, required by the infinite demand of realizing the ethical aim, ultimately depends upon.

3. The 'Capacitation' to Normative Creativity: The Excessive Gesture

In order to account for this condition of equilibrium, we need to explore

in detail the dialectic of the ethical aim and moral norms with the aid of the dialectic of the logic of excess and the logic of equivalence. In Ricœur's work, this dialectic is formulated in a variety of ways. One of them is the dialectic of love and justice. What Ricœur above all emphasizes is the disproportion that exists between these two terms. On the one hand, justice falls within the logic of equivalence. Consequently, the purpose of distributive justice is to give everybody his own share by pursuing the objective of proportional equality. In a similar vein restorative justice seeks to make punishment proportionate to the offense. On the other hand, love is distinguished by the superabundance of its generosity: it is completely and utterly saturated by excess.

For Ricœur, when its dialectical relation to justice is established, "love demands more justice, not less justice."(Ricœur 1994: 26, my translation) Love commands justice to exceed its own limits, i.e. always to realize more and more of the ethical aim: "Love urges justice to broaden the circle of mutual recognition." (Ricœur 1994: 31) Ricœur therefore claims that the pressure of love forces us to interpret Rawls's principles of justice along the lines of the rules of a cooperative endeavour — mutual indebtedness — and not of a coordinated competition — mutual disinterest (Ricœur 1990a: 60). Not only that. Ricœur adds that love does not only act in extension, but also in intensity: love enjoins justice to recognize the singularity and non–substitutability of every person.

According to Ricœur's argument, love could 'capacitate' us to respond to the demand of creativity required by the infinite task of realizing the ethical aim. In his work, he often emphasizes the role played by numerous 'excessive' actions in terms of social change. For this reason he invokes the extreme or unconditional commitment of Martin Luther King, advocate of non–violence, or Willy Brandt, who begged for forgiveness by kneeling in Warsaw at the foot of the monument for holocaust victims. (Cf. Ricœur 2005: 245)[2] These actions have had the effect of helping society evolve towards a greater realization of the ethical aim. The excessive action's contribution is twofold. On the one hand, by figuring a totality which can only remain a mere possibility,[3] something exceeding all we can achieve in practical terms, the excessive action plays the role of an *idée limite*. For it enables us to struggle against the pretension of being able to completely realize the ethical aim. On the other hand, the excessive action restores a sense of hope

---

2. On the question of forgiveness, cf. also Loute 2011.

3. For Ricœur, these excessive acts render present the totality aimed at by the ethical aim in a manner similar to the presentation of the Ideas of reason by Kantian reflective judgment. We may take for instance what Ricœur says about the advocate of non–violence: "He is not on the fringe of time, he is rather 'untimely,' unpresent, like an anticipated presence, possible and offered, of another epoch which a long and painful political 'mediation' should render historical." (Ricœur 1965a, 229)

in our ability to collectively march forward in the course of history towards a greater realization of freedom.

However, it is necessary to realize that progress towards a greater realization of the ethical aim cannot be the result of excessive actions. In order for social creation to occur, excessive actions have to be understood and articulated within institutional actions. Otherwise, while taking up the example of advocates of non–violence, Ricoeur writes:

> The mystical non–violent runs the risk of heading toward a hopeless catastrophism, as if the reign of disaster and persecution were the last chance for history, as if it were necessary to reconcile our life with a reign in which moral acts would have no effect, hidden from all, without historical import. (Ricœur 1965a: 232)

Taken by itself, excessive action, not enduring any compromise, runs the risk of simply diverting us from the world of action. In the same way, excessive actions that do not enter the dialectical relationship with the logic of equivalence of justice pose another problem. These actions transgress the moral order in order to press justice to go beyond itself. So there is a great risk that they may re–channel the supra–moral towards the immoral. To take the exception as the rule does not simply lead to injustice:

> What criminal law and in general what rule of justice could be derived from a maxim of action which would establish non–equivalence as a general rule? [. . .] If supra–morality is not to turn into a–morality, or even immorality — for example, cowardice —, it must first pass through the principle of morality. (Ricœur 1990a: 56, my translation)

Only if it stands in a reciprocal relationship with the logic of equivalence could an excessive action motivate us to collectively create the mediations that would enable us always to realize more and more of the purpose of a good life with and for others in just institutions.

Now, we have to clarify the concrete work of this reciprocal relationship. First of all, excessive actions affect us at the level of our imagination and not at the level of our will. Ricœur writes: "For the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one's mind and choosing." (Ricœur 1991a, 101) Excessive action is like a poetic discourse which gives us possibilities to think about. By telling the story of an excessive action, we can make apparent the deviant usage of norms which it enacts. Hence, we might imagine new norms by means of this divergence. Therefore imagination allows for the articulation of excessive action and moral norms. However, in order for new norms to be created it is not enough for the actor to imagine those possibilities that the excessive action presents us with; actors must appropriate these possibilities for themselves and undertake actions according to the operative order of

the logic of equivalence. What this excess gives us to think about by means of imagination, is taken up by responsible action, which tries to give it a generalizable form through practical orientations, programs, and plans.

4. Can We 'Capacitate' Ourselves for Normative Creativity?

In the conclusion to this paper, I will discuss whether Ricœur's works can help us in thinking how we must act in order to render the dialectic between the logic of excess and logic of equivalence effective. Does Ricœur allow us to identify the tasks that a society should undertake in order to render the activity of the social creation of norms possible, or must actors wait until they are given an excess to think about? The difficulty is that excessive actions such as non–violence cannot be planned. Such actions are singular and exceptional acts which "cannot become an institution." (Ricœur 2005: 245) The paradox we are confronted with is that excessive action is not an action man creates, but one which 'acts through him' rather than being produced by him. As a matter of fact, it even seems inappropriate to speak of an excessive 'action.' It belongs more to the language game of the event, than that of action. According to Ricœur, it is derived from the register of 'gesture.' (Ricœur 1965a: 232) If excessive gestures cannot be planned, could we attempt to promote their emergence by accepting them and institutionalizing the conflict? Does Ricœur claim that the logic of excess manifests itself in the use of practical wisdom?

> It is primarily by using moral judgment in situation, whenever one must take sides in conflicts of duties, or in conflicts between respect for the rule and solicitude for singular persons, or in difficult cases where the choice is not one between good and bad but between bad and worse, that love comes to plead on behalf of compassion and generosity in favor of a justice which would have freely placed the meaning of a mutual indebtedness above the confrontation between disinterested interests. (Ricœur 1994: 29, my translation)

Therefore, we might hope that, by assuring the conditions for the use of 'political judgment in situation,' we could enable the emergence of excess, which could lead to a transformation of the established norms.

Reading Ricœur's work, we can envisage a second way of tackling the problem. At the same time as seeking to promote the emergence of excessive gestures, could we try to make society more responsive to the possibilities we are given to think about? If the excessive gesture affects us first of all at the level of our imagination, it seems that strengthening this capacity for collective imagination is a way of making society more attuned to these possibilities. In that case, we would be confronted with the task of

making sure that the tradition remains *living*. A past characterized by the weight of the heritage that it imposes upon us can only constrain creativity. So that sedimentation does not stand in the way of innovation, we need to *forget*: "One must know how to be unhistorical — that is, how to forget — when the historical past becomes an unbearable burden." (Ricœur 1991c: 222) We must, by contrast, fight against forgetting when it takes on the form of imposed amnesia. For collective creation is equally hindered when a society demolishes part of its 'space of experience' in order to flee into a pure utopia. According to Ricœur, a creative re–reading of past experiences enables us to revive unfulfilled potentialities within them.

These propositions have the merit of seeking to render the actor's 'capacitation' possible. However, the fact remains that they are problematic. First and foremost, we must recognize that a conflictual public space does not guarantee, in and of itself, the emergence of an excessive logic. Rather than being a vehicle for social creativity, conflict may even constrain it, leaving society tangled up in endless and sterile debates. Propositions whose purpose is to make individuals more responsive to excessive gestures seem equally inadequate. The reason for this is that, even though individuals may be more responsive to the possibilities figured by the excessive gesture, still it is not clear that they will, for that reason, transform their action. First of all one can wonder whether they will recognize the logic of superabundance at work in the excessive gesture. Do they run the risk of mistaking the gesture of love as an idiot's gesture? Even if they identify the excessive gesture for what it is, nothing states that a refiguration will ensue from their action. In order to be able to transform the world of action, imagining the 'world of the text' does not suffice for creative imagination. It rather demands that readers themselves summon the will to *appropriate* the text.[4] But what guarantees that actors will desire to appropriate the possibilities the excessive gesture gives to us as incentive to thought?

Yet, the greatest difficulty with all these propositions concerns the 'social' character of creativity which the excessive gesture enjoins us to. Is Ricœur really capable of thinking 'social' creativity? Of course, Ricœur has written a lot on the topic of social imagination. According to Ricœur, our social existence is inseparable from the existence of a social imaginary. In his work on action (Ricœur 1986) he has shown that every action is always symbolically mediated and that these mediations are not to be sought in the minds of actors; rather they belong to the cultural domain. It remains problematic that there is no sustained reflection on the specific question of

---

4. Here we come across the problematic, developed in *Time and Narrative*, of the passage from *mimesis* II — the stage of the configuration of the narrative — to *mimesis* III — the stage of the refiguration of life by the narrative.

the collective appropriation of social possibilities.[5] Ricœur still treats this type of appropriation according to the model of a reader appropriating the world of the text. Yet, in order for a community to appropriate for itself a narrative identity, it seems that we need a form of collective learning which refigures the configurations objectified by texts and traditions.

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that Ricœur's ethical thought is inseparable from the question of human creativity. The purposiveness of a good life — that is, simultaneously the internal teleology of action and an end that always exceeds all that an action can achieve — demands that we continually re–create, by means of practical wisdom, the norms through which the action for a good life realizes itself. However, we are not satisfied with raising the injunction of the social creation of norms which guides the articulation of the different moments of the *petite éthique*. I have tried to demonstrate that Ricœur's works may show a way in which actors can act in order to render the dialectical relation of the excessive logic and the logic of equivalence effective, as a means to 'capacitate' themselves for normative creativity. I have discussed two ways of tackling the problem. The first one consists in promoting the emergence of excessive logic by guaranteeing the use of practical wisdom at the social level. The second one consists in making society more responsive to the possibilities offered by excessive gestures. Both ways of tackling the problem, however, are insufficient. They leave open the question of the relation between the impulse of creativity kindled by the excessive individual gesture and its appropriation at the level of the construction of social cohesion.

This question, despite its importance, is not adequately dealt with by Ricœur. He seems to presuppose that the excessive gesture, due to its 'exemplarity' and 'communicability,'[6] will result in a kind of mimetic contagion that will cause individuals, one by one, to refigure their action. He seems to believe that the excessive gesture cannot *not* distinguish itself socially by its excessive force, its superabundance. In my view, we might gain something by further problematizing this already problematical thesis. Excessive ges-

---

5. I discussed in detail the question of the collective appropriation of social possibilities in Loute 2010.

6. "In what way can one say that, in the realm of extreme moral choices, we find exemplarity and communicability? For example, one would have to explore here the beauty of the grandeur of the soul: there is, it seems to me, a beauty specific to the acts that we admire ethically. I am thinking particularly of the testimony given by exemplary lives, simple lives, but that attest by a sort of short–circuit to the absolute, to the fundamental, without there being any need for them to pass through the interminable degrees of our laborious ascensions; see the beauty of certain devoted, or as we say, consecrated, faces. [. . .] And from the solitude of the sublime act we are led directly to its communicability by a prereflective and immediate grasp of its relation of agreement with the situation. [. . .] In apprehending this relation of agreement between the moral act and the situation, there is an effect of being drawn to follow, which is really the equivalent of the communicability of the work of art." (Ricœur 1998: 182–183)

tures act upon society "by virtue of their secret alchemy." (Ricœur 2004: 477) "They unleash an irradiating wave that, secretly and indirectly, contributes to the advance of history toward states of peace." (Ricœur 2005: 245) Yet this is not enough for us. We should also reflect upon the conditions of the social performance of the excessive gesture. On the one hand, we may agree with Ricœur that excessive gestures can initiate a movement of social creation, but on the other hand he teaches us that there are "witnesses who never encounter an audience capable of listening to them or hearing what they have to say." (Ricœur 2004: 166) The 'solitude of the sublime act' is not unrelated to the tragic solitude of "'historical witnesses' whose extraordinary experience stymies the capacity for average, ordinary understanding." (Ricœur 2004: 166)[7]

alainloute@gmail.com

Translated by Joseph Carew

Bibliographical References

Kant, I., 1964, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, New York, Harper & Row.

Loute, A., 2008, *La création sociale des normes. De la socio–économie des conventions à la philosophie de l'action de Paul Ricœur*, Hildesheim, Zürich, New York, Olms.

——, 2010, *Philosophie sociale et reconnaissance mutuelle chez Paul Ricoeur*, in R. Gély, L. Van Eynde (eds.), *Affectivité, imaginaire, création sociale*, Bruxelles, Facultés universitaires Saint–Louis, pp. 125–147.

——, 2011, *Le pardon peut–il être collectif pour Paul Ricœur?*, in J. Verheyden, T. L. Hettema, P. Vandecasteele (eds.), *Paul Ricoeur: Poetics and Religion*, Leuven, Paris, Peeters, pp. 405–419.

Ricœur, P., 1965a, *Non–Violent Man and His Presence to History*, in *History and Truth*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, pp. 223–233.

——, 1965b, *State and Violence*, in *History and Truth*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, pp. 234–246.

——, 1971, *La foi insoupçonnée*, "Recherches et Débats," 71, pp. 64–75.

——, 1985, *Avant la loi morale: l'éthique*, in *Encyclopaedia Universalis. Supplément II: Les enjeux*, Paris, Encyclopaedia Universalis, pp. 42–45.

——, 1986, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, New York, Columbia University Press.

——, 1990a, *L'amour et la justice*, Tübingen, Mohr.

7. I would like to thank Shelley Campbell for having revised this essay.

——, 1990b, *Soi–même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil.

——, 1991a, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics*, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, pp. 89–101.

——, 1991b, *Practical Reason*, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, pp. 188–207.

——, 1991c, *Initiative*, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, pp. 208–222.

——, 1991d, *Langage, politique et rhétorique*, in *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*, Paris, Seuil, pp. 161–175.

——, 1991e, *Éthique et morale*, in *Lectures 1. Autour du politique*, Paris, Seuil, pp. 256–267.

——, 1992, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press.

——, 1993, *Morale, éthique et politique*, "Pouvoirs," 65, pp. 5–17.

——, 1994, *Théonomie et/ou Autonomie*, "Archivio di filosofia," 1–3, pp. 19–36.

——, 1998, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, New York, Columbia University Press.

——, 2001, *De la morale à l'éthique et aux éthiques*, in *Le juste 2*, Paris, Éditions Esprit, pp. 55–68.

——, 2004, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press.

——, 2005, *The Course of Recognition*, Cambridge (MA), London, Harvard University Press.