

Ricoeur and the Existentialist Threat to Revolutions

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ABSTRACT: Inspired by Gabriël Marcel and Karl Jaspers, Paul Ricoeur's *Philosophie de la Volonté* (1950/1960) develops a particular approach to existentialism emphasizing that freedom and nature are not opposites, but rather paradoxically connected by means of the notions of vocation and commitment. Ricoeur presents a kind of 'tragic optimism' in which the human being is characterized as a fallible creature that, nevertheless, succeeds in exchanging fear for hope, based on the original affirmation of his existence. This article explains how Ricoeur's position relates to the mainstream existentialist understanding of revolutions. I argue that Ricoeur uncovers an existentialist threat to revolutionary action in his reflections on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Humanisme et terreur* (1948) and Albert Camus's *L'homme révolté* (1951). This threat concerns the political danger of freedom without transcendence. If the existence for itself transcends any givenness, then it also transcends that which cannot be transcended or should not be transcended. Then freedom lacks the firmness of respect for human dignity as that which cannot be negated. That is why revolutionary action needs prophetic input — as a constant reminder of the primary affirmation of the absolute value of the human person — if it is to avoid nihilistic violence.

KEYWORDS: Ricoeur, existentialism, revolution, violence, prophet.

Existentialists famously taught that existence precedes essence (Sartre 1946). Implied is the idea that meaning does not direct commitment, rather commitment is what directs meaning. The political implications of this existentialist frame of thought are — at least to some extent — well-known. Especially if we look at the big French existentialists, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, their communist convictions have never been a secret. The inference from existentialism to communism is, however, by no means necessary. In principle, people can make an authentic choice for fascism just as well, as Sartre infamously argued (Sartre 1946: 53–54). Nevertheless there is a clear link between existentialism and revolution. The existentialist perspective breaks the fetters that tie us to society as it is. There's nothing necessary, nothing essential about the way society is, so there's nothing to keep us from choosing and pursuing something

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radically new. In this sense, the political dimension of existentialism is both very emancipatory and very dangerous. This article analyzes Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of existentialism and the existentialist revolutionary zeal. First, I will lay out Ricoeur's reception of existentialism and then I will explain how this influences his perspective on revolutions by means of his reviews of Merleau-Ponty's *Humanisme et terreur* (1947)¹ and Albert Camus's *L'homme révolté* (1951).² I argue that Ricoeur uncovers an existentialist threat to revolutionary action.

1. A Personalist Reception of Existentialism

Paul Ricoeur engaged with existentialism under the wings of Emmanuel Mounier, the founder of the personalist *Esprit* movement. Mounier tried to bring existentialism into dialogue with Christian faith, thereby developing his personalist philosophy into a kind of Christian existentialism (Mounier 1962a, 1962b). The young Paul Ricoeur followed the charismatic Mounier in this endeavour. The guiding principle for this intellectual exercise were to be found in the work of Gabriël Marcel and Karl Jaspers (Agís Villaverde 2012: 7–86; Dosse 2008: 118–130, Michel 2006: 21–72). These authors taught Ricoeur an existentialism able to enter into dialogue with Christian convictions, in contrast with Sartre or Heidegger, because they did not focus on existence as such, but on the relationship between freedom and transcendence and on commitment as a way to bridge both (Ricoeur 1947: 32–39). That way Ricoeur put forward a strong analogy between his Christian faith and existentialist thought, namely in their vision of human existence as a matter of vocation. Neither shows human life as an objective datum, but rather as a task to be fulfilled along the way (Ricoeur 1949c, 1951c).

Ricoeur studied Karl Jaspers while in captivity in Germany, together with his fellow inmate Mikel Dufrenne. After the war this collective study resulted in the book *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Dufrenne & Ricoeur 1947). In the same period he also made a comparative study of the work of Jaspers and Marcel, the Christian existentialist who had been an important mentor for him in the years before the war (Ricoeur 1947). At the heart of Marcel's existentialism is the embrace of the existentialist focus on freedom and responsibility, but it is combined with a rejection of the mainstream existentialist dichotomy between freedom and nature (Marcel 1945). Gabriël Marcel inspired a particular approach to existentialism emphasizing that freedom and nature are not opposites, but rather paradoxically

1. Ricoeur 1992 [1948]; 2003 [1949].

2. Ricoeur 1992 [1956].

connected by means of the notions of vocation and commitment. The issue revolves around the idea of transcendence in human existence.

The concept of transcendence definitely has its place in mainstream existentialism. In *L'être et le néant* Sartre famously presented transcendence as core characteristic of human existence itself. *Être pour-soi*, being for itself, is characterized by facticity and transcendence. There transcendence refers to the idea that, beyond the brute fact of finding ourselves thrown into being, there is nothing solid to existence; we transcend anything that we can get hold of: "[T]he contingency of being-for-itself [. . .] cannot be in existence unless in and through a transcendence, it is the perpetually surpassed and perpetually recuperated recuperation of the being-for-itself by the being-in-itself on the the basis of primary nihilation." (Sartre 1943: 384)³ However, Marcel had a different view of transcendence, in such a way that he could distinguish himself from — what was considered to be — the nihilism in Sartre's philosophy of '*le Néant*'. Marcel looked for experiences of transcendence as something to hold on to in an existence that remains basically groundless. Whereas transcendence for Sartre is the freedom of human existence, for Marcel it is something our freedom as negation bumps up against, it is that which we cannot negate. Marcel found this transcendence in fidelity, hope and love. Paul Ricoeur emphasized the extent to which Marcel mirrors Karl Jaspers in this regard, Jaspers, who created the notion of boundary situations (*Grenzsituationen*) to describe the experiences in which a person can overcome nihilism. There as well, the focus is on experiences of transcendence as something to hold on to in an existence that remains basically groundless (Ricoeur 1947).

Based on this early existentialism of Marcel and Jaspers, first Emmanuel Mounier (1962a, 1962b) and afterwards Paul Ricoeur in his *Philosophie de la Volonté* (1950) further developed personalist existentialism as a kind of 'tragic optimism' in which the human being is characterized at all levels by a mediation between 'original affirmation', as Jean Nabert (1962 [1943]) called it, and existential difference. They portray the human being as a fallible creature that, nevertheless, succeeds in exchanging fear for hope, based on the original affirmation of his existence. In other words, the philosophical contemplation reveals that our actual existence and more precisely the manner in which we approach evil and suffering show that hope is more powerful than despair and joy more powerful than fear. Refuting the dichotomy of freedom and nature in mainstream French existentialism by means of a conception of situated and created freedom was key to this endeavour.

3. "[L]a contingence du pour-soi [. . .] ne peut être existée que dans et par une transcendance, elle est le ressaisissement perpétuellement dépassé et perpétuellement ressaisissant du pour-soi par l'en-soi sur fond de néantisation première." (Own translation).

Ricoeur addressed the issue of freedom and nature as the relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary in the first part of his *Philosophie de la volonté* (1950). He argued that the relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary manifests itself as a dramatic conflict. Ricoeur took a Marcelian approach in which the primary description needs to be followed by a secondary reflection, a deeper look at the more fragile, but also more essential connections. Like Marcel (1935), Ricoeur clarified that rather than analysing the human will as a problem, he meant to contextualize it as a mystery. This mystery was to be understood as a reconciliation, a rehabilitation of our self-awareness in relation to our bodies and the world, without devolving into a self-foundation made impossible. This secondary reflection reveals that the structures behind the voluntary and involuntary hold a paradox of freedom and nature. Such a paradoxical ontology is only possible after a deeper reconciliation, one that ultimately remains a question of an “*espérance*” with religious connotations (Ricoeur 1950: 7–23).

The question on Ricoeur’s mind was what this all meant for human freedom. Freedom, he argued, is never free from the involuntary: “Daring and patience never cease to alternate in the very heart of willing. Freedom is not a pure act, it is, in each of its moments, activity and receptivity. It constitutes itself in receiving what it does not produce: values, capacities, and sheer nature.” (Ricoeur 1950: 454). Initiative and dependency of the will thus always come together in freedom. The relation between the voluntary and involuntary in other words is no dualism, but rather a paradox. Contrary to Sartre, Ricoeur argued that human freedom is not transcendence in the absolute sense (Ricoeur 1950: 453–56).

In the second part of the *Philosophie de la volonté* (1960), Ricoeur’s ambition was to understand freedom through insight into evil. He searched for the conditions of possibility for the human experience of misery, so that he could conceptualize the fallibility manifested in it (Ricoeur 1960: 21–34). As a concept, fallibility needed to express the disproportion between the finite and infinite qualities of a human being. He finds that human fallibility is based on disproportion, on the limited ability to converge with oneself. Ricoeur’s philosophical anthropology was, therefore, characterized by a fixed pattern, a dialectic of (1) original affirmation, (2) existential difference and (3) human mediation. This dialectic first of all signifies that the finitude is not primary, but instead the original affirmation is. This original affirmation manifests itself in the affirmation of concepts in knowledge, in the idea of happiness in acting and as eros in feeling.

The primary affirmation, however, needs to brave the existential negation. Ricoeur insisted that this negation should not be made absolute. Instead of Sartre’s radical distinction between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, he saw a dialectic. Anything other than that ignored the *conatus essendi*, the primary affirma-

tion. The negation simultaneously amounted to a distinction between I and the other, between I and myself, and what he calls “the sadness of the finite” (Ricoeur 1960: 154). Based on our perspective, there is a distinction between myself and the other in knowing. In acting, a distinction exists between me and myself, between one’s own person as a destination and one’s own contingency; the fact that I exist in spite of myself and that I might as well have not existed or have existed with a different character. Sorrow is the affective implication of that contingency and every other form of negation, suffering in particular. The third element in the dialectic is the human person itself, the human fragility that is born from the confrontation between primary affirmation and existential negation: “Being human is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite,” is how Ricoeur summarized it (Ricoeur 1960: 156).⁴ Human freedom is the freedom to commit oneself to humanity, which is not commitment in a void, but commitment on the basis of this primary affirmation, this attestation of hope that relates us to the infinite, to that which cannot be negated, the absolute value of respect for human dignity.⁵

2. Implications for Revolutionary Action: Ricoeur on Merleau–Ponty

Ricoeur confronts existentialism with tragic optimism. As we have seen, this does not imply an outright rejection of the entire existentialist framework, but Ricoeur does reject a strict dichotomy between freedom and nature, and therefore he follows Marcel and Jaspers in introducing a different conception of transcendence in comparison to Sartre. Important implications for our understanding of revolutionary action follow from this. This first becomes clear if we look at Ricoeur’s reviews of Merleau–Ponty’s infamous political essay *Humanisme et terreur* (1948).⁶

Humanisme et terreur was written as a reaction to the consternation caused by the renowned novel *Darkness at Noon* (1941), by Hungarian–British writer Arthur Koestler, and his explanatory essay *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945). The novel about a Bolshevik who is impeached for treason played a major role in the awakening over the true nature of Stalinism. Koestler explains that communism imposes a choice between the yogi — the symbol for a merely inner revolution and escape from reality — and the commissar — the symbol for a relentless activism that reduces people to mere instruments

4. “L’homme, c’est la Joie du Oui dans la tristesse du fini”.

5. For a complete analysis of Ricoeur’s *Philosophie de la volonté* as a reflection on personalist existentialism, see Deweer 2017, Chapter 2.

6. For an earlier publication of the analysis of Ricoeur’s response to *Humanisme et Terreur* in light of the development of Ricoeur’s own political philosophy, see Deweer 2016.

in service of the revolution. In other words, he criticizes communism for being a totalitarian system in which morality is by definition eclipsed by efficiency, as is demonstrated by the terror under Stalin. Merleau–Ponty wanted to adjust this bleak picture by clarifying the nature of political terror in the Soviet Union in light of the humanist undercurrent in Marxism.⁷ In *Humanisme et terreur*, Merleau–Ponty presents Marxism as a philosophy that goes beyond the division between the yogi and the commissar. He stresses that the Marxist philosophy of history concerns the realization of human values in such a way that morality and efficiency go hand in hand. However, given the insights of existentialism, he adds that history is contingent; that is, that the actual course of history depends upon individual decisions. If no decisions ever had to be made, then no violence would ever take place. The realization of the proletarian revolution depends upon actual decisions, their effect on the revolution — and hence on guilt and innocence — only becoming clear in hindsight:

We do not have a choice between purity and violence but between different kinds of violence. [. . .] Violence is the common origin of all regimes. Life, discussion, and political choice occur only against a background of violence. What matters and what we have to discuss is not violence but its sense or its future. (Merleau–Ponty 1948: 213)⁸

That is why Merleau–Ponty held onto Marxism, in spite of the terror. In his view, it was Stalinism, not Marxism that deserved criticism because under Stalin, it was not the emancipation of the proletariat, but the communist party itself that was exalted to the absolute. Stalinism replaced the proletariat with the party commissar and thereby obscured the actual goal of the revolution.

Paul Ricoeur wrote two critical reviews of Merleau–Ponty’s book, one for each of the political journals that he cherished over the course of his career: The first is in *Esprit* (1992 [1948]), the journal of the famous public intellectual Emmanuel Mounier and his personalist movement that went by the same name, and the other one is in *Le christianisme social* (2003 [1949]), the journal of the French protestant Left. In these reviews, Ricoeur expresses his sympathy for Merleau–Ponty’s criticism of Stalinism, while he also questions whether the problem is not deeper ingrained in Marxism itself. More specifically, Ricoeur questions whether Marxism is sufficiently

7. For further analysis of Merleau–Ponty’s philosophical commitment to Marxism, see Coole 2007, Kruks 1981, Revault d’Allonnes 2001, Welten 2004, Whiteside 1988.

8. “Nous n’avons pas le choix entre la pureté et la violence, mais entre différentes sortes de violence. [. . .] La violence est la situation de départ commune à tous les régimes. La vie, la discussion et le choix politique n’ont lieu que sur ce fond. Ce qui compte et dont il faut discuter, ce n’est pas la violence, c’est son sens ou son avenir”.

immune from the slippery slope towards the primacy of the commissar. He considers proletarian humanism itself to be the source of terror, since it is an attempt to constitute humanism without the transcendent, without a transhistorical morality. According to Ricoeur, Marx's mistake was to think that the socio-economic circumstances of the proletariat would suffice to produce compelling universal values, without any reference to the transcendent. Marx neglects the importance of a prophetic appeal to fraternity and justice. The pursuit of fraternity and justice is not guaranteed by the passage of history. Without any reference to transcendent values, says Ricoeur, the ability of indignation and the sense of duty to keep the means and ends in balance fails:

The pathology of Marxism is nowadays as important for our understanding of history as the pathology of liberal society. It allows us to detect a new kind of 'mystification', the one that hides itself in the very idea of the proletariat, whenever one takes the prophetic outlook away from it. A doctrine that disregards the transhistorical dimension of history, an immanentist doctrine of history, is threatened with self-destruction. It breaks its own power of indignation and demand and loses itself in the very detours that were supposed to take it to its goals through an effective history. (Ricoeur 1992 [1948]: 154)⁹

In light of Koestler's terminology of the yogi and the commissar Ricoeur argues that Marxism implies that the primacy of the proletariat gradually lapses into the primacy of the commissar. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that this criticism should not be mistaken as a plea for the yogi. In other words, his case against the totalitarian inclination in Marxism is not a plea for an apolitical attitude. Even if we should not limit ourselves to the values of history, like Marx, we still have to be concerned with the effectiveness of our values *in* history. That is why Ricoeur makes an additional distinction between the category of the yogi and the category of the prophet. The yogi withdraws into himself and, hence, is rightly subject to the Marxist reproach of mystification. The prophet, on the contrary, wants to affect history. Hence, what Marxism lacks is the input of the prophet.¹⁰

9. "La pathologie du marxisme est aujourd'hui aussi importante pour la compréhension de l'histoire que la pathologie de la société libérale. Elle permet de repérer une nouvelle forme de "mystification", celle qui se cache dans l'idée même du prolétaire, quand on en évacue la visée prophétique. Une doctrine qui méconnaît la dimension transhistorique de l'histoire, une doctrine immanentiste de l'histoire, est menacé d'autodestruction; elle ronge sa propre puissance d'indignation et d'exigence et se perd dans les "détours" mêmes qui devaient la porter à ses fins à travers une histoire effective." (Own translation).

10. Ricoeur also framed this as a critical perspective on Christian faith. Although he acknowledges that Christianity does not imply one specific political program, he emphasizes that a Christian cannot withdraw from political life. He argues for a prophetic Christianity by which Christians intervene in society in order to keep the appeal of transcendent values alive, thereby contributing to a non-totalitarian socialism (Ricoeur 1948, 1992 [1948]: 153–156, 2003 [1949]: 37–50).

Merleau–Ponty emphasizes that Marxism is not discredited by occasional terror. Perhaps mistakes are made, that is what happens when people make decisions, but Merleau–Ponty stresses that any violence that is implied in the making of the revolution can only be judged in the future. Here it is not Marxism itself, but rather existentialism that comes to the fore. In the context of the absurdity of being we are to commit ourselves to the realization of who we choose to be as an individual and as a community. But then the meaning of what we do and therefore of what we are only becomes clear after the facts. Hence we can see why existentialism is so fruitful to communism. It provides the better defense for violent revolution. In the end, there is no authority to question your means if meaning is constituted somewhere beyond the horizon. Ricoeur's point is that the communist rejection of the transcendent made it vulnerable to totalitarianism as it obscured, rather than promoted, the path to freedom and equality. In other words, it is the absence of the prophet that perverts communism, but also existentialism for that matter. For classical Marxism the prophet was silenced in historical materialism, for the existentialist approach to Marxism the prophet is silenced by the reduction of transcendence to human negation.

That brings us to the merits and demerits of existentialism for political thought. Existentialism is important for its emphasis on the contingency of history and the role of individual choice. We are condemned to life and we are condemned to living together, but we are not condemned to life and society as it is. However, without any reference to transcendent values revolutionary action eventually lacks an ability of indignation and sense of duty. Existentialism makes us choose but it does not enable us to follow through, because, without the intervention of absolute principles to hold on to, we are doomed to wander astray, to lose ourselves in the means, because there is nothing to correct the course if the course is only judged at the final destination. Ricoeur further clarified this in his response to another classic in the existentialist political literature, Albert Camus's *L'homme révolté* (1951).

3. Implications for Revolutionary Action: Ricoeur on Camus

Ricoeur claims that Merleau–Ponty's argument for the humanist character of Marxist revolutionary action fails due to its inherent lack of appeal to transcendent values. Without prophetic input the revolution becomes indistinguishable from nihilist violence. Can the existentialist commitment to revolution be saved from nihilism? That is a key concern in the political thought of Albert Camus, and the essay *L'homme révolté* in particular (Bowker 2013, Carroll 2007, Corbic 2003, Guérin 2017). Camus wholeheartedly embraces the existentialist focus on the absurdity of life, but he adamantly rejects

nihilism. He does not see this as a contradiction precisely because of the role of revolt in human existence:

The topicality of the problem of the rebellion is only based on the fact that nowadays entire societies have tried to keep their distance from the sacred. Being human can definitely not be summarized in the insurrection. But the history of today forces us, because of its contestations, to say that the rebellion is one of the essential dimensions of humanity. It is our historical reality. Unless we want to flee from reality, we have to find our values in it. Can we find rules of conduct far away from the sacred and absolute values? That is the question posed by the rebellion. (Camus 1951: 35)¹¹

Camus presents the revolt as a core characteristic of the human condition. As human beings we do not confront absurdity by seeking refuge within ourselves, which would be the option of the yogi in Koestler's terminology. Confronting absurdity is presented by Camus as a kind of negation that immediately entails value affirmation. That is the revolt: "What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion." (Camus 1951: 25)¹² The revolt begins in the rejection of life as it is, but it supposedly implies a volitional affirmation of a universal value. In one's revolutionary action one does not only affirm one's own life, but one constitutes solidarity. "I rebel — therefore we exist," is Camus's original adaptation of Descartes's famous proposition (Camus 1951: 307).

Perhaps Camus is right about the initial phase of revolt, but what about the slippery slope towards the commissar and the complete instrumentalization of the self and the other? Is the rebel (*l'homme révolté*) eventually someone else than the commissar? It is in response to this question that Camus distinguishes the revolt from the revolution. Whereas the revolt is a negation in which the value of human life is affirmed, the revolution is a perversion of the revolt, in the sense that human lives are reduced to cogs in a machinery that is to produce some abstract goal. Camus rejected the legitimation of revolutionary violence on the basis of overarching philosophies of history and other grand schemes.

11. "L'actualité du problème de la révolte tient seulement au fait que des sociétés entières ont voulu prendre aujourd'hui leur distance par rapport au sacré. L'homme, certes, ne se résume pas à l'insurrection. Mais l'histoire d'aujourd'hui, par ses contestations, nous force à dire que la révolte est l'une des dimensions essentielles de l'homme. Elle est notre réalité historique. À moins de fuir la réalité, il nous faut trouver en elle nos valeurs. Peut-on, loin du sacré et de ses valeurs absolues, trouver la règle d'une conduite? Telle est la question posée par la révolte." (Own translation).

12. "Qu'est ce qu'un homme révolté? Un homme qui dit non. Mais s'il refuse, il ne renonce pas: c'est aussi un homme qui dit oui, dès son premier mouvement."

True generosity towards the future consists in giving everything to the present. As such, the rebellion proves that it is the movement of life itself and that we cannot dismiss it without renouncing life. [...] Rebellion is therefore love and fecundity or it is nothing. The revolution without honour, the revolution of the calculus that neglects life whenever necessary by preferring an abstract humanity over flesh and blood, simply replaces love for resentment. (Camus 1951: 376)¹³

This critical emphasis on the history that follows revolt is what broke the ties of friendship between Camus and Sartre and the other stubborn believers in communism among the French post war intelligentsia (Aronson 2004).

Paul Ricoeur wrote a very sympathetic review of *L'homme révolté* for the journal *Le christianisme social* (1992 [1956]). He acclaims the attempt to correct the existentialist naïveté concerning revolutionary violence and he commends Camus's distancing from historical materialism in analyzing the revolt from the metaphysical over the political to the economic instead of the Marxist reversal. However, Ricoeur doubts whether Camus eventually succeeds in his attempt to grasp the idea of measured revolt, i.e. revolt that does not lapse into murder. The argument goes that the *principle* of the revolt trumps the *history* of the revolt, and therefore that revolutionary wisdom is possible if one finds a way to keep that 'primary nobility' in mind (Camus 1951: 36). This wisdom implies the rejection of absolute philosophies of history and a constant vigilance with regard to the tensions between the nobility of the goal and the means employed: "Between God and history, between the yogi and the commissar, [the rebellion] opens a difficult path where the contradictions can co-exist and surpass themselves." (Camus 1951: 358)¹⁴

Ricoeur's point is that Camus eventually suffers from the same mistake as Merleau-Ponty. The affirmation of infinite value takes a back seat. The emphasis on revolt reveals the value as a negation, as a distancing from the existing situation. Ricoeur, per contra, argues that it is not the revolt that grounds the value, but rather the value affirmation that grounds the revolt. For, without this original affirmation that there is something beyond the absurd, every revolt would be self-destructive and excessive, which would make us slip back into nihilism:

Perhaps only a reflection on other kinds of revolt, like Job's revolt, or the revolt by the prophets of Israël, would allow us to base *all* rejection unequivocally on an original affirmation, as these revolts are not based on the emotion of the absurd, or

13. "La vraie générosité envers l'avenir consiste à tout donner au présent. La révolte prouve par là qu'elle est le mouvement même de la vie et qu'on ne peut la nier sans renoncer à vivre. [...] Elle est donc amour et fécondité, ou elle n'est rien. La révolution sans honneur, la révolution du calcul qui, préférant un homme abstrait à l'homme de chair, nie l'être autant de fois qu'il est nécessaire, met justement le ressentiment à la place de l'amour." (Own translation).

14. "Entre Dieu et l'histoire, entre le yogi et le commissaire, [la révolte] ouvre un chemin difficile où les contradictions peuvent se vivre et se dépasser." (Own translation).

at least not on a final absurdity, but on a second-to-last absurdity. Only this original affirmation could pull the revolt away from its internal process of destruction, of this self-intoxication that makes the revolt drift into the domain of resentment, despite the firm claim of Camus himself that he keeps the distinction. (1992 [1956]: 133)¹⁵

4. Identifying the Prophet

In his response to both Merleau-Ponty and Camus, Paul Ricoeur invokes the image of the prophet as a signifier for what is lacking in the existentialist approach to revolutionary action. It is a nice image to complement Koestler's distinction between the yogi and the commissar but it suffers from vagueness. If we need prophetic input, the obvious question is who or what the prophet is supposed to be. Therefore, a significant portion of Ricoeur's political philosophy can be read as a further reflection on that question¹⁶.

His source of inspiration is Emmanuel Mounier. The meaning of the idea of the prophet becomes more clear in the context of Mounier's personalist political education, as the latter had already expressed the idea that political responsibility is dependent on a balance between a political and a prophetic pole. The political pole stands for an inclination to settle and compromise, to get things done whatsoever, while the prophetic pole stands for courage and reflection. Figures from both poles are necessary insofar as it is very difficult to unify these two poles into a single personality. Society needs a mixture of persons who possess different qualities and which span the entire spectrum between the political and the prophetic. The general result of this interaction is a state of critical vigilance, wherein people are willing to take action, knowing that, while perfection is not attainable in this world, the dignity of the person and the values that support this dignity must be upheld (Mounier 1962b: 500–503).

Ricoeur further elaborated these ideas of Emmanuel Mounier. He distinguishes between three different priorities for such a political education program. First, he indicates that the individual must be made aware of the ethical implications of collective choices. Power must be controlled by citizens with an adequate awareness of the relationship between political means and ethical ends. Second, he argues that this plan of education has to be directed toward the realization of true democracy, even in the economic domain, insofar

15. "Peut-être qu'une réflexion sur d'autres formes de révolte, celle de Job, celle des prophètes d'Israël, qui ne s'articulent pas sur l'émotion de l'absurde, ou du moins sur un absurde dernier, mais sur un absurde avant-dernier, permettrait seule de fonder sans équivoque tous les refus sur une affirmation originelle; seule cette affirmation originelle pourrait arracher la révolte à son processus interne de destruction, à cette auto-intoxication qui la rejette du côté du ressentiment, malgré le ferme propos de Camus lui-même de l'en distinguer." (Own translation).

16. See also Deweer 2016.

as the shift from individual freedom of choice to collective choices can only be compensated by maximal participation. Third, this form of education is motivated by the notion that collective choices have to maintain a maximal degree of pluralism. Public choices have to offer a horizon as wide as possible for the development of the individual person, for it is only under such circumstances of pluralism that freedom and responsibility can be secured. These elements are the primary roles that Ricoeur attributes to the role of the prophet (Ricoeur 1958: 32–33; 1964: 340–346; 1991 [1965]: 250–257).

Ricoeur deepened his intuitions regarding the importance of prophetic input under the influence of another personalist philosopher from the *Esprit* circle, Paul–Ludwig Landsberg. Instead of the political myths of fascism and communism, Landsberg proposed a conception of truth, not as a definite and unchanging system, but as a matter of permanent criticism and doubt. Instead of mythologizing the present and the past as a foundation for our vision of the future, he acknowledged, very much like Merleau–Ponty, that choices and risks are an inevitable part of anticipating the future. The alternative to myths, then, are plans which are based on expansive knowledge of the present, the past and the possibilities for the future. The viability of any political system is its ability to combine values with realistic planning (Landsberg 1952: 49–68).

In that regard, Landsberg made use of certain conceptions from his compatriot, sociologist Max Weber. Weber distinguishes between two kinds of political ethics. On one hand, he speaks of an ‘ethics of conviction’ (*Gesinnungsethik*) that prioritizes the execution of ideal principles. On the other hand, he speaks of an ‘ethics of responsibility’ (*Verantwortungsethik*) that focuses on the real consequences of political action (Weber 1992 [1919]). Landsberg emphasizes the fact that the tension between both politico–ethical perspectives, the tension between purity and commitment, is not a question of political leaders alone. In a democracy, every citizen faces this dilemma and the borderline between responsibility and culpability is a faint one. Political commitment in Landsberg’s personalism requires one eye on values and the other on historical reality. Our incapacity to realize values in a pure, consistent manner cannot paralyze us, but must yield a continuously critical reflex. A sound tension between *Gesinnungsethik* and *Verantwortungsethik* is a necessary element of personalist citizenship. There is no alternative to this tension in the pursuit of our political vocation (Landsberg 1952: 100–107).

Just like Landsberg, Ricoeur emphasizes that the distinction between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction is not as absolute as Weber had presented it.¹⁷ On the contrary, political ethics has to maintain a

17. For an analysis of the distinction between Ricoeur and Weber in this regard, see Wolff 2011: 229–232.

dialectical relation between both poles. A pure ethics of responsibility would end in Machiavellianism, while a pure ethics of conviction would lead to oppressive moralism or clericalism. Hence, Ricoeur's vision of political education was focused on the development of consciousness and the management of the tension between these two ethical poles. Only on the basis of this tension is virtuous political action possible; a political action that is based on practical wisdom and which combines an awareness of human fragility with a permanent striving toward ethical ideals. The dialectic of an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility, hence, expresses the particular demand for the prophet. It combines a focus on achieving real political results with a strong and consistent adherence to transcendent values. Nevertheless, Ricoeur recognizes that an ethics of conviction should never directly influence political action if it is to avoid moralism. The dialectics of an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility comes down to a permanent pressure of moral ideals on authority, without enforcing any particular policy (Ricoeur 1964: 313–314; 1991 [1965]: 253–255).

5. Conclusion

Ricoeur uncovers an existentialist threat to revolutionary action in his reflections on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Camus, especially if we bear in mind that the latter two were already among the more nuanced voices in French existentialism in comparison with Sartre's stubborn moral blindness for communist terror (Welten 2006). He highlights the dangers of existentialist political theory. Basically, this concerns the political danger of freedom without transcendence. If freedom is transcendence, like Sartre saw it, then freedom lacks transcendence, like Ricoeur (and Marcel before him) used the term. If the existence for itself transcends any givenness, then it also transcends that which cannot be transcended or should not be transcended. Then freedom lacks the firmness of transcendent values, the firmness of respect for human dignity as that which cannot be negated. That is the firmness of the railing that keeps us from going off track. Without it, there's nothing to stop us from committing political evil. That is why revolutionary action needs prophetic input, as a constant reminder of the absolute value of the human person.

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