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# The Interrelation of Dialectic and Hermeneutics in Paul Ricoeur's Early Philosophy of the Self

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Paul Ricoeur is generally regarded as one of the most important representatives of hermeneutic philosophy, a discipline that is often set in opposition to dialectical philosophy. Nevertheless, Ricoeur never excluded dialectic from his thinking but often relied on it to deal with various problems. Richard Kearney counts altogether six different dialectics of central importance to Ricoeur's oeuvre: between phenomenology and hermeneutics, imagination and language, myth and tradition, ideology and utopia, evil and otherness and narrative and history.<sup>1</sup> While Ricoeur's hermeneutics and these different dialectics have been the subject of a vast number of publications, the general interrelation between dialectic and hermeneutics in his philosophy has not yet been sufficiently explored.

In this essay, I will present an interpretation of the interrelation of hermeneutics and dialectic in the context of Ricoeur's theory of the self, which he developed in the early 1960s. The potential for a productive connection between the two philosophical disciplines is rooted in their common purpose, i.e. the mediation with the Other. Each performs a different function within a theory of a self that is not constituted in pure identity with itself but whose constitution includes the mediation with the Other. In *L'Homme faillible*, Ricoeur develops a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness based on the notion of an *affirmation originnaire*. However, this dialectic – and this is a specific feature of Ricoeur's theory – is complemented by a hermeneutic mediation developed in *La Symbolique du mal*. I will argue that hermeneutics and dialectic stand in an interdependent relationship that combines a structural model of reflexive self-consciousness (dialectic) and a mediation of

consciousness with a transcendent Other by the capacity of imagination (hermeneutics).

Let me briefly outline the program I will unfold in this essay. First, I will discuss why the mediation with the Other is a necessary moment of reflexive self-consciousness for Ricœur by relating it to the phenomenological distinction of ecstatic and reflexive acts (1). Then, I will describe the fundamental structure of Ricœur's dialectical mediation with the Other, first negatively by comparing it to Hegel, then positively by comparing it to Johann Gottlieb Fichte. The central notion of the dialectical mediation is effort, which has important similarities with Fichte's notion of *Streben* (2). In a further step, I will describe the hermeneutic mediation with the Other based on Ricœur's hermeneutics of symbols. The central notion of the hermeneutic mediation is imagination (3). Finally, I will develop an interpretation of the interrelation between both the dialectical and hermeneutic mediations in Ricœur's theory of the self by interpreting effort and imagination according to the modal categories of reality (force) and possibility (capacity) in rationalist philosophy (4).

## The Self and the Other

Ricœur's theory of the self joins a tradition of decentering of the subject. This term contains both a negative and a positive definition. Negatively, it can be defined as a critique of concepts of subjectivity that claim an immediate transparency of consciousness to itself as well as an immediate identity of the subject-pole and the object-pole of reflection. Ricœur describes the act of pure reflection, against which he wants to distinguish his own concept of reflection, as the

act of returning to the self, by which a subject recovers, with intellectual clarity and moral responsibility, the unifying principle of the operations in which it disperses and forgets itself as a subject.<sup>2</sup>

However, we can also identify a positive meaning of the decentering of the subject since it refers to a concept of subjectivity that does not abstract from a genuine reference to the Other. Rather, the Other is seen as an essential moment in the constitution of the self, whose existential structure appears as a complex totality of ipseity and alterity. In *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricœur expresses the fundamental assumption of his philosophy of the self:

[...] that alterity is not added to ipseity from the outside in order to prevent its solipsistic tendency, but belongs to the core of the meaning and ontological constitution of ipseity.<sup>3</sup>

However, this does not sufficiently define Ricœur's concept of decentering because an important distinction within this concept has not yet been taken into account. Already in *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*, the decentering of the

subject takes place on two levels that need to be distinguished: on the level of existential ontology and on the level of reflexive philosophy.<sup>4</sup> The first level of decentering refers to the ecstatic interpretation of existence that Ricœur develops following Gabriel Marcel and Martin Heidegger. In the context of his destruction of metaphysics, Heidegger shows that, beginning with Descartes, the appearing being is set in an opposition to the subject and is reduced to a mere objectum (“Gegen-stand”). For the Cartesian subject, which affirms itself in the pure immanence of self-consciousness, the object of cognition is merely an external thing.<sup>5</sup> Ricœur adopts Heidegger’s critique and rejects the assumption that the ego-subject constitutes itself in pure, i.e. unmediated self-reference, in favor of the assumption of an ecstatic participation in being:

The self [...] must abandon a claim secretly hidden in all consciousness, abandon its desire for self-positing, to welcome a nourishing spontaneity as an inspiration that breaks the sterile circle the self forms with itself.<sup>6</sup>

The ecstatic constitution of consciousness or, as Jean Greisch writes, the simple presence of the world is the reason for the decentering of the subject at the level of existential ontology.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is the ecstatic character of existence that points towards a second, reflexive decentering of the subject, questioning the transparency of one’s own acts in reflection. In order to have a methodically secure ground, the task of an existential ontology indirectly points towards the question of the reflexive transparency of ecstatic acts, which for Ricœur is questioned precisely because of the ecstatic structure of consciousness. In Husserl’s phenomenology, intentional acts are to be distinguished from acts of reflection, which refer to the intentional, first-order acts.<sup>8</sup> Ricœur adopts this distinction with a double modification. First, he adopts the radicalization of the intentionality of consciousness into an ecstatic of existence, which was developed by phenomenologists like Heidegger and Sartre. Consequently, even self-consciousness must be mediated by the Other:

The concept of intentionality explicitly states that, if all meaning is for a consciousness, no consciousness is self-conscious before it is conscious of something towards which it transcends itself [...].<sup>9</sup>

Second, he abandons Husserl’s assumption that ecstatic acts are transparent in reflexive acts. Because the reflected act is necessarily intertwined with the Other by virtue of its ecstatic structure, it can never fully coincide with the reflective act, which remains immanent to consciousness. The notion of a gap between ecstatic consciousness and reflexive consciousness is a basic insight of Ricœur’s reflexive philosophy:

Reflexive philosophy merely extends the duality of acting consciousness and the objective function of understanding; it is no

longer the classical duality of acting and knowing; it is a more subtle splitting, within acting consciousness itself, between its pure power to posit and its elaboration through 'the mediation of psychological elements'.<sup>10</sup>

While classical theories of reflexive self-consciousness presuppose an immediate transparency of consciousness to itself, Ricœur understands this very fact as the major difference between his reflexive philosophy and the Cartesian cogito.<sup>11</sup> Pure reflection can only assure us of the mere certainty of existence, but it can by no means generate a knowledge of the self, understood as the transparency of one's own acts in reflection. Thus, the cogito of pure reflection is "at once the unmistakable certainty that I am and the open question of what I am".<sup>12</sup> Ricœur expresses this basic insight in a negative definition of reflection: "Reflection is not intuition."<sup>13</sup> Of course, Ricœur does not abandon the purpose of achieving transparency of the ecstatic acts in reflection. In contrast to theories of an immediate epistemic self-consciousness, however, his philosophy of reflection can be considered a theory of a mediated epistemic self-consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the early 1960s, Ricœur presents a theory of concrete reflection that allows for a mediated and approximate transparency of the ego. This theory combines a dialectic with a hermeneutics. In his anthropological study *L'Homme faillible*, he develops a model of reflection that forms a dialectical trinity of a primary affirmation, an existential negation, and effort/desire. With this dialectical model of reflection Ricœur prepares his transition to the hermeneutics of symbols, with which he realizes his project of an empirics of the will in *La Symbolique du mal*. The close connection between dialectic and hermeneutics is first indicated by the fact that both books are published as non-independent parts of the second volume of the *Philosophie de la Volonté*, which is entitled *Finitude et Culpabilité*. I will argue that both dialectic and hermeneutics perform a specific function with regard to the mediation of the self with the Other, and that it is only their interrelation that allows for a sufficient theory of a mediated, reflexive self-consciousness.

## The Dialectical Mediation of the Self with the Other

Since the time of speculative idealism, dialectic has presented itself as a specific way of mediating identity and difference. Heidegger, for example, assumes that the dialectical philosophy of speculative idealism prepared a way to no longer conceive of identity as a mere sameness ("als das bloÙe Einerlei"), but to understand it in its synthetic character, i.e. as mediation with the Other.<sup>15</sup> In the dichotomies left behind by Kant's critical philosophy, Ricœur sees a crucial motivation to proceed to a dialectical thinking that allows us to grasp the unity of opposites.<sup>16</sup> In the context of his philosophy of the self, dialectic offers a way for Ricœur to mediate the Other as a constitutive moment of the identity of the self. This mediation occurs within a model of

reflexive self-consciousness which is structured by the moments of primary affirmation, existential negation and effort/desire.

In this section, I will develop an interpretation of this dialectical mediation with the Other by comparing it to the two dialectical models of reflexive self-consciousness developed by Johann Gottlieb Fichte and G.W.F. Hegel. Some interpreters claim a close connection of Ricœur's model of reflection to Hegel's dialectic.<sup>17</sup> The reference to Fichte is made by Ricœur himself, albeit indirectly, for instance when he refers to Jean Nabert, from whom he adopted the triadic model of reflection, as the French successor of Fichte.<sup>18</sup> I will argue that a) interpretations that approach Ricœur via Hegel fail to account for the specific nature of dialectical mediation with the Other in Ricœur and thus must fail to adequately reconstruct the connection between dialectic and hermeneutics within Ricœur's theory of the self, while b) an adequate reconstruction of Ricœur's dialectic of self-consciousness can be elaborated by approaching it via Fichte. Both arguments are based on the following structural implications of Ricœur's dialectical model of reflection:

- a) an absolute primacy of the primary affirmation (pure identity)
- b) the irreducibility of alterity/negativity within reflexive self-consciousness
- c) a mere approximate, non-totalizing mediation in effort/desire

## 2.1 Why not Hegel?

For an interpretation of reflexive self-consciousness in Ricœur, Hegel at first glance seems to be a suitable reference, not only because he applies the mediating function of dialectic to a model of reflexive self-consciousness but also because this model has some similarities with Ricœur's model. First, similar to condition b) of Ricœur's model, Hegel rejects the assumption of an immediate identity of the subject-pole and the object-pole of reflection. Instead, the Other becomes a constitutive moment of reflexive self-consciousness that is

the reflection from the being of the sensual and perceived world and essentially the return out of the otherness.<sup>19</sup>

The ego must reflect itself in the Other in order to transcend the abstraction of a pure identity with itself. Second, the dialectical mediation with the Other is described in the concept of desire. Desire maintains a double reference: an ecstatic reference to the Other and a reflexive reference to the self's own identity.<sup>20</sup> In desiring the Other, the reflexive moment of desire is revealed in that self-consciousness desires not only the negation of the desired object but also the affirmation of its own identity. This is why Hegel says that self-consciousness has a double object.<sup>21</sup>

The dialectical structure of Ricœur's model of reflexive self-consciousness, however, cannot be clarified by reference to a Hegelian dialectic, since the latter is not compatible with conditions a) and c) of Ricœur's model. The incompatibility with condition c) results from Hegel's speculative claim to achieve a total mediation of opposites in a dialectical unity. Ricœur, on the other hand, seeks only an approximate mediation that acknowledges the irreducibility of human finitude, and expresses his suspicion of Hegel's claim for a total mediation:

As mediations multiplied and lengthened, the ambition to totalize them in a Hegelian system seemed increasingly futile and suspect. It was not only the indirect and mediated aspect of reflection that imposed itself, but also its non-totalizable and ultimately fragmentary side.<sup>22</sup>

The incompatibility of a Hegelian dialectic with condition c) is also acknowledged by those authors who associate Ricœur more strongly with Hegel.<sup>23</sup> Gonçalo Marcelo, for instance, sees the essential difference to Hegel in the fact that Ricœur's "dialectic does not produce a synthesis, but endless passages from one pole to another."<sup>24</sup> This difference – strongly reminiscent of Hegel's own critique of Fichte's dialectic<sup>25</sup> – still allows us, in Marcelos opinion, to consider Ricœur's incomplete mediation as a deviation from the basic model of Hegelian dialectic. In contrast, I want to emphasize the fundamental difference between Ricœur and Hegel that arises when we additionally consider the incompatibility of Hegelian dialectic with condition a), i.e., the absolute primacy of primary affirmation. Ricœur expresses conditions a) and b) in his essay *Négativité et affirmation originaire*:

It is possible and necessary to recover a philosophy of the primacy of being and existence that deals seriously with the emergence of philosophies of negation.<sup>26</sup>

The challenge, then, is to find a structure of reflection that presupposes the primacy of the pure identity of the ego with itself without suspending negation/alterity as a constitutive moment of finite consciousness. Here it is worth considering Hegel's critique of Fichte, which is aimed at the latter's assumption of an absolute primacy of pure identity. Fichte derives his absolute and unconditioned principle in an abstracting reflection from the law of identity  $A=A$ . Hegel, however, does not regard the law of identity as a true law of thought, but merely as an abstraction from the opposition constitutive of concrete identity.<sup>27</sup> He therefore rejects an absolute primacy of a first principle and instead emphasizes the non-self-sufficiency of abstract identity as a mere moment of dialectic as such, but also of self-consciousness.<sup>28</sup> Since conditions a) and c) of Ricœur's dialectic are not compatible with Hegel, I argue that we should look for another approach to its interpretation.

## 2.2 Why Fichte?

Instead of approaching Ricœur's dialectic via Hegel, I would like to emphasize the advantages of interpreting Ricœur's dialectic via Fichte.<sup>29</sup> It is possible to demonstrate structural similarities with Fichte's dialectic that are helpful in reconstructing his own dialectic. This reference to Fichte allows us to identify the moments of primary affirmation, existential negation, and effort/desire as a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness that corresponds to the aforementioned conditions of the mediation of the ego with the Other. This assistance, in turn, is necessary to reconstruct the interrelation of dialectic and hermeneutics in Ricœur. I would like to list five central similarities between Fichte and Ricœur:

i) *Affirmation originaire* is quite an opaque concept in Ricœur's philosophy. He adopted it from Jean Nabert, where – as his main interpreter Paul Naulin admits – it raises considerable difficulties of interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Here, the reference to Fichte proves to be particularly fruitful, since it allows an interpretation of this concept through Fichte's concept of *Tathandlung*. Such an interpretation is developed by Vieillard-Baron: "The primary affirmation evokes, though not explicitly, [...] Fichte's Ego = Ego."<sup>31</sup> In Fichte, *Tathandlung* is an act in which the absolute ego is posited in pure identity with itself and therefore requires no reflexive mediation. I propose to interpret Ricœur's primary affirmation by analogy as an ideal act in which no difference between act and reflection has yet been established.

ii) This ideal act, however, needs to be supplemented by a second act, which is also constitutive for finite consciousness and which corresponds to condition b) mentioned above. Fichte defines the product of this second act formally as the negation of the ego posited in the first act, i.e. as non-ego.<sup>32</sup> This second act is a necessary moment of the constitution of the ego, because, as Fichte tells us, consciousness is possible only by reflection, which requires the distinction of a subject-pole and an object-pole of cognition.<sup>33</sup> Without negation of the pure identity posited in *Tathandlung*, there could be no consciousness, not even self-consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Ricœur defines the second act as a constitutive negation: "It is only by passing through this existential negation, which we have called perspective, character, vital sentiment, that the primary affirmation becomes human."<sup>35</sup>

In a progressive analysis, Ricœur tries to show how existential negation results in an opposition immanent to consciousness, which he refers to as the non-coincidence of the ego with itself. This opposition finds a parallel in the opposition between the absolute ego and the finite ego, developed by Fichte in §5 of his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*.

iii) In both Ricœur and Fichte, position and negation are necessary but not symmetrically structured moments in the constitution of finite consciousness, since *affirmation originaire* as well as *Tathandlung* have a primacy over negation, which accounts for condition a) of Ricœur's dialectic.

For Fichte, *Tathandlung* is the absolute and strictly unconditioned principle of all human knowledge, whose content and form cannot be derived from any other principle. The second act is materially dependent on the first one, since only what has already been posited can be negated. Primary affirmation also has a primacy over negation in Ricœur. Against Sartre, he argues that negation cannot be conceived as the origin of consciousness. Rather, negation itself is merely “the flip side of a more primordial affirmation”.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the origin of negation must be found in a being “that is the beginning of the rest, without having a beginning of its own.”<sup>37</sup>

iv) The mediation is carried out by the effort (or desire) to overcome the difference immanent to consciousness. In Fichte, the mediation of the ego and the non-ego by limitation leads to the main antithesis of the practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, i.e. the opposition of the absolute and the finite ego. This opposition cannot be mediated by theoretical reason. Therefore, mediation can only take the form of a practical demand. Thus, it is the object of an infinite *Streben* (effort), which Fichte also qualifies as an effort of the ego to be strictly identical.<sup>38</sup> Ricœur, on the other hand, adopts from Nabert the assumption that the difference of ecstatic acts and reflective acts is to be mediated by effort, which is the basic concept of his model of reflexive self-consciousness: “Reflection is the effort to recapture the ego of the ego cogito in the mirror of its objects, works, and finally acts.”<sup>39</sup>

v) In order to mediate between positivity/identity and alterity/difference, effort must not only be defined as effort for pure identity, but also is defined by both Fichte and Ricœur as a tendency that maintains a constitutive relation to both identity and alterity. Fichte accounts for this requirement by identifying effort as an activity that is both finite and infinite. As a finite activity, effort aims at a real object and thus establishes the reference to the alterity of the non-ego. As an infinite activity, effort transcends the limit set by the object toward the ideal of a strictly identical ego.<sup>40</sup> For Ricœur and Nabert, effort also bears a “double relation”<sup>41</sup>: to the positivity of the primary affirmation as well as to the lack of being caused by negation. This double relation is reflected in the conceptual distinction between effort and desire: “Existence, we can say now, is desire and effort. We call it effort to emphasize its positive energy and dynamism; we call it desire to emphasize its lack and indigence.”<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, this distinction is only a conceptual one. For Ricœur, effort is itself desire, and desire is also effort. Only their unity can provide a ground for self-consciousness: “Effort and desire are the two facets of the Self’s position in the first truth: I am.”<sup>43</sup>

Due to this constitutive opposition within effort, a final mediation of identity and alterity is impossible. Rather, the reappropriation of the original identity can only be approximated. This corresponds to condition c) of the dialectical mediation of the self with the Other.

## The Hermeneutic Mediation with the Other

In a historical perspective, hermeneutics can also be understood as a method of the mediation with the Other. In Friedrich Schleiermacher, hermeneutics already performs a mediating function between individual acts of meaning and their necessary expression in the transindividual structure of language, which presents itself to the subject as the relative Other of its own acts.<sup>44</sup> In Arthur Schopenhauer, we can observe for the first time the attempt to relate the mediating function of hermeneutics to the ambiguity of ecstatic and reflexive consciousness.<sup>45</sup> Finally, it is Heidegger who explicitly relates the hermeneutic mediation to the question of the self. Thus, hermeneutics allows for the bridging of the gap between being and the understanding of *Dasein*.<sup>46</sup> Ricœur relies on these historical models and integrates a hermeneutic mediation into his concept of reflexive self-consciousness. Every hermeneutics, so he tells us, serves for the understanding of the self by the detour through the Other.<sup>47</sup>

The hermeneutic mediation with the Other must also be interpreted in light of the fundamental assumption of Ricœur's philosophy of reflection, namely the difference between ecstatic and reflexive acts. In this section, I will argue that this difference is hermeneutically mediated in a process which – adopting Don Ihde's distinction of a "'first' and 'second' order of indirectness for the understanding of experience"<sup>48</sup> – can be divided into two distinct processes of mediation: first, the Other, by which the ecstatic experience is structured, is transformed into a linguistic (symbolic) meaning. In a second step, the opaque meaning of the symbol is made transparent by interpretation. Both steps aim at transforming the ecstatic experience of a transcendent Other into a possible object of reflexive appropriation. It is for this reason that Ricœur claims that self-consciousness constitutes itself "in its depths through symbolism".<sup>49</sup>

### 3.1 The Mediation of the Other and Symbolic Meaning by Imagination

The first mediating step concerns the relation of a pre-symbolic, non-linguistic Other, to which living experience is ecstatically related, and its symbolic expression. An important difference to dialectical mediation is that in case of hermeneutics not only a difference immanent to consciousness is mediated, but the alterity of consciousness with a transcendent Other. In order to make this mediation comprehensible, it is first necessary to show what can be understood by a transcendent, pre-symbolic Other. In *La Symbolique du mal*, Ricœur develops a systematization of various emanations of the symbol that sheds light on the Other. As the first emanation Ricœur identifies cosmic symbols and characterizes them as manifestations of the sacred, which, as an intentional object of consciousness, structures experiences of one's own finitude. Another dependence of consciousness is revealed by the oneiric dimension of the symbol, which relates the origins of conscious meaning to

unconscious desire. Desire, unlike the sacred, is not an intentional object of our experience but an energetic disposition of existence. The Other, which is expressed in the poetic dimension of the symbol, is not sufficiently defined in *La Symbolique du mal*. Richard Kearney tentatively defines it as an “intentional projection of possible meanings,” indicating the projective character of the self in regard to its own possibilities.<sup>50</sup> The Other dealt with in these different emanations is obviously quite divergent. The ecstatic Other is defined as an intentional object, as an energetic disposition or as projections. Ricœur obviously has a wide concept of *ἔκστασις*. Thus, the Other can only be defined negatively as something that is transcendent to consciousness but structures conscious experience in different ways.

The transcendent Other is transformed into a linguistic (symbolic) meaning by – and this is crucial for Ricœur – a human capacity. The capacity that enables the transposition of the Other into a linguistic meaning is imagination. From the beginning, Ricœur develops his theory of imagination in terms of its mediating function.<sup>51</sup> Especially in his later œuvre on textual hermeneutics, he elaborates a theory of the productive function of imagination, which he will refer to as semantic innovation. It allows living, ecstatic experience to emerge as linguistic meaning through the restructuring of semantic fields at the level of predication: “It is, I believe, at the moment when new meaning emerges from the ruins of literal predication that imagination offers its specific mediation.”<sup>52</sup>

However, the explanation of the functioning of imagination by means of predication, which became the focus of Ricœur’s philosophy of language after his exploration of discourse linguistics, cannot be applied without difficulty to the concept of the symbol. This is because predication occurs at the level of the sentence but symbols are defined by Ricœur as signs, i.e. linguistic units below the level of the sentence. Ricœur does not provide a sufficiently elaborated theory of imagination in the context of his hermeneutics of symbols. We can assume that in the intended but unpublished last volume of his *Philosophie de la volonté*, in which Ricœur planned to develop a poetics of the will, a deeper reflection on the functioning of imagination was supposed to follow. However, any reconstruction of imagination within Ricœur’s symbolic hermeneutics must remain speculative. This is an essential deficiency of Ricœur’s hermeneutic of symbols, since it is not sufficiently clear how the mediation of pre-symbolic alterity and symbolic meaning takes place.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, we can conclude that already for symbolic hermeneutics the mediation of the Other into a linguistic meaning by imagination is an essential thought, for it is only the transformation of the Other into linguistic meaning that allows an approximate elucidation of ecstatic acts in a reflexive way. Indeed, the alterity that is essential to ecstatic experience is reproduced at the level of symbolic expression. But alterity, which appears in an ontological perspective as something transcendent to the self, is transformed

by imagination into a structure of meaning that is rooted beyond the self but grounded in a capacity of the self, as Ricœur tells us in *De l'interprétation*: "There is no symbolism before the human speaker, even if the power of the symbol is rooted at a more basic level."<sup>54</sup>

This ambiguous status of symbolic meaning between the self and the Other is reproduced in Ricœur's thoughts on the freedom of imagination, which he emphasizes in his account of the poetic dimension of the symbol. Poetic imagination is creative and figurative in the formation of symbols.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, if we think of Ricœur's interpretation of unconscious representations in Freudian psychoanalysis, it becomes apparent that the activity of imagination is not completely free.<sup>56</sup> Since imagination transforms a non-linguistic Other into a linguistic meaning, the meaning of symbols is structured by the non-linguistic Other.

### 3.2 The Mediation of Opacity and Transparency by Interpretation

The second step of mediation deals with the transformation of the latent symbolic meaning into an approximate transparency by interpretation. Although the pre-symbolic Other is transformed into a linguistic meaning by imagination, this meaning is not yet transparent, but merely given in an opaque way as a latent symbolic meaning. The second step of hermeneutic mediation mediates between the latent and the manifest meaning of the symbol. The latent meaning is to be made approximately transparent by interpretation of the manifest meaning. This mediation is necessary because of the actual opacity of the symbol, which is grounded in the relation of symbolic meaning to the pre-symbolic alterity. The pre-symbolic Other, Ricœur writes, is to be expressed in language but can never be completely transformed into linguistic meaning.<sup>57</sup>

Ricœur illustrates this by example of Freud's concept of *Triebrepräsenzanz*. According to Ricœur, the psychoanalytic interpretation aims at deciphering an energetic disposition, which itself is not meaning but blind force. In the concept of *Triebrepräsenzanz*, a representation (*Vorstellungrepräsentanz*), i.e. a linguistic meaning, is combined with a merely quantitatively defined amount of psychic energy. The pure quantity of energy represented in affect, which does not pass into representation, is, according to Ricœur, "desire as desire."<sup>58</sup> Desire, for Ricœur, is a "non-symbolizable core"<sup>59</sup> of unconscious representations that cannot become fully transformed into linguistic meaning because of its non-linguistic, purely energetic essence. Psychoanalysis, however, aims precisely at the cognition of this non-symbolizable core, which can only gain meaning through the interpretation of its representations constituted by imagination. Ricœur describes the resulting problem: "If desire is the inexpressible, it is originally turned toward language; it wants to be uttered; it can become speech."<sup>60</sup>

With regard to the outlined decentering of the subject, this indicates that consciousness is not decentered towards a relative Other, i.e. towards another meaning, which in principle could be translated into a completely transparent meaning, but towards an Other transcendent to consciousness, whose alterity is irreducible. A complete transparency of symbolic meaning is impossible because of the opacity of the symbol, but also because of the cultural contingency of symbolic expression and the lack of exactness of the rules of interpretation.<sup>61</sup> Interpretation therefore remains an infinite approximation to the ideal of complete transparency of symbolic meaning.

### The Interrelation of Hermeneutics and Dialectic in Ricœur's Theory of the Self

Having described the dialectical and the hermeneutic mediation with the Other, the question of their interrelation can now be raised. To this end, I would first like to point out that the structural implications of the dialectical mediation are also reflected in the hermeneutic mediation with the Other:

- a) The primacy of the self is reflected in Ricœur's basic concern to appropriate the Other within the self by a capacity of the self.
- b) The irreducibility of negativity is reflected in the very fact that the latent meaning of the symbols is structured by an irreducible pre-symbolic alterity.
- c) The hermeneutic mediation with the Other is also only approximate. The definition of interpretation as an infinite task prevents total mediation.

Given these parallels, it seems likely that hermeneutics and dialectic are somehow related. I suggest that they perform different but interdependent functions in mediating the self with the Other in reflexive self-consciousness. In this case, however, the problem is to identify these functions. I think Ricœur gives us a hint of how to interpret the interrelation of hermeneutics and dialectic, precisely in the passage from *L'Homme faillible* to *La Symbolique du mal*. *L'Homme faillible*, in which Ricœur develops the dialectical model of reflection, is meant to be an intermediate step towards *La Symbolique du mal*, where he develops the hermeneutics of symbols. This is because in *L'Homme faillible* Ricœur wants to reveal fallibility only as the possibility of evil, while in *La Symbolique du mal* he wants to explain the reality of evil. We find this hint in the very first sentence of *La Symbolique du mal*: "How do we pass from the possibility of human evil to its reality, from fallibility to fault?"<sup>62</sup>

Fallibility and fault are thus put into relation by means of the modal categories 'possibility' and 'reality'. However, if we remind ourselves of the central terms of both the mediations with the Other – effort as the central term of the dialectical mediation, imagination as the central term of the

hermeneutic mediation – an interpretation seems possible according to rationalist authors who have interpreted force (effort) and capacity (imagination) as modal categories.

Ricœur does not conceal the fact that his concept of effort is rooted in Spinoza's notion of conatus. In the rationalist philosophies of Spinoza, Leibniz and Wolff conatus is thought as a certain kind of force which is attributed to a substance. Force is generally understood as the reason for the realization of change/action of a substance. Conatus is further specified in that it is a force that is insufficient to complete an action or change because of an external resistance. Thus, Kant writes in his *Lectures on Metaphysics* that conatus is a mere effort ("Bestrebung"), because it is resisted<sup>63</sup> – a determination that is reflected in Fichte's conception of effort as a finite activity, since there was no effort without resistance.<sup>64</sup> The reality of a change/action, however, implies its possibility, which is ontologically conceptualized as the substance's capacity to change/act. This is how we read it, for example, in Christian Wolff: "By capacity, a change is merely possible; by force, it becomes real."<sup>65</sup>

By referring to rationalist ontology, we might be tempted to interpret Ricœur's notions of imagination (capacity) and effort (force) as modal categories that refer to the possibility and reality of concrete self-consciousness, i.e. a self-consciousness that mediates the self with the Other. In this interpretation, imagination, the central term of hermeneutic mediation, could be considered as the possibility of the mediation of the self with the Other, whose (incomplete) realization would only be effected by effort, the central term of dialectical mediation.

However, some problems arise if we were to simply transpose the rationalist concepts onto Ricœur. For example, Ricœur's use of these concepts must not be interpreted in a substance-ontological way. It is clear to him that existence must not be disclosed in terms of a "metaphysics of substance" but in terms of living acts.<sup>66</sup> Even if we concede that this displacement of substance ontology in favor of act ontology is already developed by Fichte, who no longer defines the subject in terms of substance, we still need to clarify the actual meaning of categories like 'possibility' and 'reality' as detached from the notion of substance. Moreover, if we consider how Ricœur actually applies these modal categories in the two volumes of *Finitude et Culpabilité*, another problem arises regarding this interpretation. Compared to Wolff, Ricœur seems to apply the modal categories in reverse. The dialectical model and effort as its central concept are treated as possibility, hermeneutic mediation and the capacity of imagination as reality.

In order to solve these problems, we should consider Ricœur's references to rationalist philosophy to be less a strict demonstration but rather a free, creative appropriation that has an illustrative purpose with regard to an adequate interpretation of concrete self-consciousness. In this reading, the dialectical notion of effort merely makes possible concrete self-consciousness

by mediating the difference immanent to consciousness, i.e., the gap between ecstatic and reflexive acts, within a model of reflexive self-consciousness. The dialectical trinity thus describes a structural model of finite self-consciousness. However, in order to make ecstatic experience as such a possible object of reflexive cognition, Ricœur has to transcend the structural model of dialectic. It is only through the hermeneutic mediation of imagination that an actual mediation with a transcendent Other takes place. Vice versa, the hermeneutic mediation with the transcendent Other can only be integrated into a theory of reflexive self-consciousness by referring to a dialectical model of reflexive self-consciousness. Thus, the interrelation between dialectic and hermeneutics in Ricœur's philosophy of reflection is to be specified as follows: the hermeneutic mediation of self-consciousness becomes possible only by dialectical mediation, but the dialectically grounded possibility of concrete self-consciousness becomes real only by the hermeneutic mediation of the transcendent Other.

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- <sup>1</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricœur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington: Ashgate 2004), 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, "De l'interprétation," in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 29: "[...] acte de retour sur soi par lequel un sujet ressaisit, dans la clarté intellectuelle et la responsabilité morale, le principe unificateur des opérations entre lesquelles il se disperse et s'oublie comme sujet."
- <sup>3</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1990), 367: "[...] que l'altérité ne s'ajoute pas du dehors à l'ipséité, comme pour en prévenir la dérive solipsiste, mais qu'elle appartienne à la teneur des sens et à la constitution ontologique de l'ipséité."
- <sup>4</sup> Jean-Marc Tétaz, "Eine Philosophie des Selbst, aber keine Reflexionsphilosophie. Hermeneutik als Theorie der konkreten Subjektivität," in *Hermeneutik des Selbst - Im Zeichen des Anderen. Zur Philosophie Paul Ricœurs*, ed. Burkhard Liebsch, (Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 1999), 138-141.; the distinction of an ontological and a reflexive focus of Ricœur's philosophy is also drawn by Theodoor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning. Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 1981), 69-71.
- <sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in: Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, ed. by F.-W. v. Herrmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann 2003), 106-113.
- <sup>6</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (Paris: Aubier 1950), 17: "[L]e moi [...] doit renoncer à une prétention secrètement cachée en toute conscience, abandonner son vœu d'autoposition, pour accueillir une spontanéité nourricière et comme une inspiration qui rompt le cercle stérile que le soi forme avec lui-même."
- <sup>7</sup> Jean Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit* (Berlin: LIT Verlag 2009), 53
- <sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch. Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag 2009), 77.
- <sup>9</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, "Phénoménologie et herméneutique," in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 63: "[L]a thèse de

l'intentionnalité pose explicitement que, si tout sens est pour une conscience, nulle conscience n'est conscience de soi avant d'être conscience de quelque chose vers quoi elle se dépasse [...].”

- <sup>10</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “L’acte et le signe selon Jean Nabert,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 297: “La philosophie réflexive n’a donc fait que reporter plus loin la dualité de la conscience opérante et de la fonction objective de l’entendement; ce n’est plus la dualité classique de l’agir et du connaître; c’est un dédoublement plus subtil, au sein même de la conscience agissante, entre son pouvoir pur de se poser et sa production laborieuse par ‘la médiation d’éléments psychologiques’.”
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Heidegger et la question du sujet,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 314.
- <sup>12</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “La question du sujet: le défi de la sémiologie,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 330: “[...] à la fois la certitude indubitable que je suis et une question ouverte quant à ce que je suis.”
- <sup>13</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *De l’interprétation* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1965), 51: “[...] réflexion n’est pas intuition.” - The term “negative definition” is borrowed from Pierre Colin, “Herméneutique et philosophie réflexive,” in *Paul Ricœur: Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, eds. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf 1991), 28-29.
- <sup>14</sup> The distinction of an immediate and a mediated epistemic self-consciousness is developed by Ernst Tugendhat, *Self-consciousness and self-determination* (Cambridge/London: MIT Press 1986).
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2008), 11-12.
- <sup>16</sup> Paul Ricœur, “What is Dialectical?,” in *Freedom and Morality*, eds. Richard Brandt and John Bricker (Lawrence: University of Kansas 1976), 182-183.
- <sup>17</sup> Alexis Itao, “Paul Ricœur’s Hermeneutics of Symbols: A Critical Dialectic of Suspicion and Faith,” *Kritike - An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4,2 (2010), 1-17; Stephen Dunning, “History and Phenomenology: Dialectical Structure in Ricœur’s The Symbolism of Evil,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 76,3 (1983), 343-363; Gonçalo Marcelo, “From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur’s Dialectic,” *Revista Filosófica De Coimbra* 38 (2010), 359-360; David Rasmussen, *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology. A Constructive Interpretation of the Thought of Paul Ricœur* (Den Haag: Nijhoff 1971), 75; Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit*, 86.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Ricœur, *De l’interprétation*, 52.
- <sup>19</sup> Own translation. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 138: “[...] die Reflexion aus dem Sein der sinnlichen und wahrgenommenen Welt und wesentlich die Rückkehr aus dem *Anderssein*.”
- <sup>20</sup> The distinction of an intentional (or ecstatic) and a reflexive moment of desire is made by Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire - Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press 1987), 25.
- <sup>21</sup> Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 139.
- <sup>22</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Éditions Esprit 1995), 40: “En même temps que les médiations se multipliaient et s’allongeaient, l’ambition de les totaliser dans un système hégélien m’apparaissait de plus en plus vaine et suspecte. Ce

n'était pas seulement le côté indirect et médiat de la réflexion, mais son côté non totalisable et finalement fragmentaire, qui s'imposait."

- <sup>23</sup> Greisch, *Fehlbarkeit und Fähigkeit*, 86; see also Marcelo, "From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur's Dialectic," 359.
- <sup>24</sup> Marcelo, "From Conflict to Conciliation and Back Again: Some Notes on Ricœur's Dialectic," 354.
- <sup>25</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 72.
- <sup>26</sup> Own translation. Paul Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," in Paul Ricœur, *Histoire et Vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1955), 336: "[I]l est possible et nécessaire de récupérer une philosophie du primat de l'être et de l'exister qui tienne compte de façon sérieuse de ce surgissement des philosophies de la négation."
- <sup>27</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse. Erster Teil. Die Wissenschaft der Logik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1986), 237.
- <sup>28</sup> Hegel, "Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie," 57.
- <sup>29</sup> I developed a more detailed comparison between the philosophies of Fichte, Nabert and Ricœur in Michael Steinmetz, *Subjekt und Psychoanalyse - Die Freud-Interpretationen Paul Ricœurs und Jacques Lacans* (Baden-Baden: Ergon 2023), 32-53.
- <sup>30</sup> Paul Naulin, *Le problème de Dieu dans la Philosophie de Jean Nabert (1881-1960)* (Clermont-Ferrand: Association de Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Clermont-France 1980), 42.
- <sup>31</sup> Own translation. Cf. Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, "Bergson et Nabert, lecteurs de Fichte," *Fichte-Studien*, 13 (1997), 103: "L'affirmation originaire évoque, sans le nommer, [...] le Moi = Moi de Fichte."
- <sup>32</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, J.-G. Fichte Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 1,2, ed. Reinhard Lauth (Stuttgart/Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1965), 266.
- <sup>33</sup> Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 403: "[...] weil Bewußtseyn nur durch Reflexion, und Reflexion nur durch Bestimmung möglich ist."
- <sup>34</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*, J.-G. Fichte Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vol. 1.4, ed. Reinhard Lauth (Stuttgart/Bad-Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog 1970), 214.
- <sup>35</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *L'Homme faillible, Finitude et Culpabilité 1* (Paris: Éditions Points), 188: "[L]'affirmation originaire ne devient homme qu'en traversant cette négation existentielle que nous avons appelée perspective, caractère, sentiment vital."
- <sup>36</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," 350-351: "[...] l'envers d'une affirmation plus originaire."
- <sup>37</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, "Négativité et affirmation originaire," 357: "[...] qui fait commencer le reste sans avoir soi-même de commencement."
- <sup>38</sup> Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 400: "[...] das Streben des Ich, schlechthin identisch zu seyn."

- <sup>39</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 51: “[L]a réflexion est l’effort pour ressaisir l’Ego de l’Ego Cogito dans le miroir de ses objets, de ses œuvres et finalement de ses actes.”
- <sup>40</sup> Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 402f.
- <sup>41</sup> Jean Nabert, *Éléments pour une éthique* (Paris: Aubier 1971), 20.
- <sup>42</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “Existence et herméneutique,” in *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2013), 45-46: “L’existence, nous pouvons maintenant le dire, est désir et effort. Nous l’appelons effort, pour en souligner l’énergie positive et le dynamisme, nous appelons désir, pour en désigner le manque et l’indigence.”
- <sup>43</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 53: “Effort et désir sont les deux faces de la position du Soi dans la première vérité: *je suis*.”
- <sup>44</sup> Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. by M. Frank (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1977), 77-80.
- <sup>45</sup> Cf. Daniel Schubbe, *Philosophie des Zwischen - Hermeneutik und Aporetik bei Schopenhauer* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2010); for a comparison of Schopenhauer’s and Ricœur’s hermeneutics cf. Michael Steinmetz, “Schopenhauer als Protophänomenologe des Willens? - Schopenhauer und Paul Ricœur zur Willensfreiheit,” in *Facettenreiche Existenz - Schopenhauers Philosophie als Knotenpunkt der Disziplinen*, eds. Michael Steinmetz and Dominik Zink (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2023), 151-179.
- <sup>46</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer 2006), 15: “Das Dasein ist zwar ontisch nicht nur nahe oder gar das nächste - wir sind es sogar je selbst. Trotzdem oder gerade deshalb ist es ontologisch das Fernste.”
- <sup>47</sup> Ricœur, “Existence et herméneutique”, 40.
- <sup>48</sup> Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1971), 96-98.
- <sup>49</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, *La Symbolique du mal, Finitude et Culpabilité 2* (Paris: Éditions Points), 211: “[...] dans sa profondeur par le moyen du symbolisme.”
- <sup>50</sup> Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining - Modern to Post-modern* (New York: Fordham University Press 1998), 148.
- <sup>51</sup> Mary Schaldenbrand, “Metaphoric Imagination: Kinship through Conflict,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of Paul Ricœur*, ed. Charles E. Reagan (Athens: Ohio University Press 1979), 58f.
- <sup>52</sup> Own translation. Cf. Paul Ricœur, “L’imagination dans le discours et dans l’action,” in *Du texte à l’action. Essais d’herméneutique II*, ed. Paul Ricœur (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 1986), 243: “C’est, selon moi, dans le moment d’émergence d’une nouvelle signification hors des ruines de la prédication littérale que l’imagination offre sa médiation spécifique.”
- <sup>53</sup> Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*, 96.
- <sup>54</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 25: “Il n’y a pas de symbolique avant l’homme qui parle, même si la puissance du symbole est enracinée plus bas [...].”
- <sup>55</sup> Jean-Luc Amalric, *Paul Ricœur, l’imagination vive - Une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l’imagination* (Paris: Hermann Éditeurs 2013), 331.
- <sup>56</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press 1976), 58.

- <sup>57</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Parole et symbole,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 49 (1975), 156.
- <sup>58</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 439: “[...] le désir comme désir.”
- <sup>59</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 439: “[...] fond non symbolisable.”
- <sup>60</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *De l'interprétation*, 441: “[S]i le désir est l'innommable, il est originellement tourné vers le langage; il veut être dit; il est en puissance de parole.”
- <sup>61</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Herméneutique et réflexion,” *Archivio di filosofia*, 32 (1962), 20-21.
- <sup>62</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *La Symbolique du mal*, 205: “Comment passer de la possibilité du mal humain à sa réalité, de la faillibilité à la faute?”
- <sup>63</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesung-Metaphysik/Volckmann*, Kant's gesammelte Schriften XXVIII,1 (Berlin: de Gruyter 1968), 434: „Der Conatus Bestrebung [...] bedeutet also eigentlich die Unzulänglichkeit einer todten Kraft, da diese aber nur durch den Widerstand todt ist, so ist etwas in Bestrebung bloß weil ihm widerstanden wird.“
- <sup>64</sup> Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre (1794)*, 404: “Im Begriffe des Strebens selbst aber liegt schon die Endlichkeit, denn dasjenige, dem nicht *widerstrebt* wird, ist kein Streben.”
- <sup>65</sup> Own translation. Cf. Christian Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik*, Gesammelte Werke 1,2 (Hildesheim: Olms 1983), §117: “Durch das Vermögen ist eine Veränderung bloß möglich; durch die Kraft wird sie wirklich.”
- <sup>66</sup> Own translation. Cf. Ricœur, *Négativité et affirmation originaire*, 360: “[...] métaphysique de l'essence.”