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ATTESTATION AND TESTIMONY:

Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of the Self and Jean Nabert's Hermeneutics of Testimony

This essay grew out of remarks made at a meeting of the *Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française* on 29 December 1990, in conjunction with the Eastern APA Meeting in Boston. Its purpose is the same as theirs: to promote interest in the most recent work of Paul Ricoeur and, secondarily, the much less well-known Jean Nabert, one of Ricoeur's teachers, whose last work appears to have influenced Ricoeur greatly.

Paul Ricoeur's most recent book is entitled *Soi-Même comme un Autre*.[1] In this book Ricoeur argues that the self, (being oneself, selfhood, ipseity), *implies* an *other* self, or someone else, in the strong sense in which one would say that selfhood "implies otherness" (as the otherness of a self) "to so intimate a degree that the one cannot be thought without the other, that one passes rather into the other, as one would say in Hegelian language" (14). That is what the title means to suggest, says Ricoeur.

What neither title nor book suggest, though, is a return to a positive ontology of Spirit. In Hegel, the mutual implication of self and other is visible in expressions such as "one with itself", "other than itself", "passing into the other", etc. Such is the logic of Spirit, in which self and other *reflect* each other. However, the mediation effected by *this* reflection is absolute and transcends its terms. History, as the *Stufengang* or stepwise progression of the logic of Spirit, transcends itself in the eternal present of absolute knowledge. Now, this is just what Ricoeur denies, not only in the chapter, "Renoncer à Hégel" in the third volume of *Temps et Récit*, but throughout his entire work, in which the denial of

[1] Henceforth abbreviated as *Soi*. All translations of this text are my own. An authorized translation into English is expected to be published this year.

absolute knowledge is a constant refrain.[2] As we might say, when history becomes susceptible of absolute knowledge, it ceases to be historical; when the Spirit, returning to itself, loses its connection with consciousness, it ceases to be reflection. Finally, when the mediation of reflection becomes ontological in its scope, it ceases to be mediate.

Giving up Hegel means giving up many things. It means giving up a positive ontology of Spirit. It means giving up the God of the philosophers, and giving up on making philosophy correspond in some way to a religion, as some texts in Hegel seem to wish to do. Given its history, philosophy can only *suffer* this giving-up, in the mediation of a reflection in which the self is returned to itself not as Spirit but as other than itself. And for Ricoeur the wound is deeper still. In this regard the warning against crypto-theology in the preface to *Soi* is abundantly clear; Godtalk may occur regarding texts in which God is talked about, but Ricoeur renounces, in the name of the autonomy of philosophy itself, any saying of what or who God is. The very question of God must "... remain held in suspense, in a manner which may be termed agnostic..." (36).

This same suspense is involved in the very construction of the hermeneutics of the self of *Soi*, a hermeneutics of the self as another. The hermeneutics of the self springs from a complex philosophical decision, involving not only the denial of absolute knowledge, but the denial of an act of positing or thetic act, the denial even of a first truth whereby the self establishes itself immediately. Of the three "philosophical intentions" whose strategic confluence first enables the hermeneutics of the self to distinguish itself from any philosophy of absolute knowledge or of absolute self-knowledge, the first described is this: "... to affirm the primacy of reflective mediation over the immediate positing of the subject, as this is expressed in first person singular: "I think" or "I am" (11). This check is directed to the ambitions of the "philosophies of the subject," but it could also be applied to philosophies of pure or transcendental reflection, and to ontologies of substance. Not only Descartes, Fichte, and Hegel but also Kant and Husserl, as

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[2] Here is a partial list of texts of Paul Ricoeur concerning this theme: "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Association*, p. 69; *The Conflict of Interpretations*, pp. 332, 416, 481; *Rule of Metaphor* p. 302; "Biblical Hermeneutics", in *Semeia*, p. 141; "Nommer Dieu", p. 496; *"The Hermeneutics of Testimony,"* pp. 93-95, 153; "Le Statut de *Vorstellung* dans la philosophie hégélienne de la religion," p. 204; *Etre, Essence, et Substance chez Platon et Aristote*, pp. 123, 137.

philosophers of the "constituting consciousness, master of its own game" (*Temps et récit*, vol. 3, 382-383), are affected by this sweeping interdict. Even Nietzsche, portrayed by Ricoeur as the thinker of an anti-Cogito, the source of a "gesture of deconstruction" applied to the self, is found subject to a rhythm of exaltation and humiliation regarding the position of the self in the history of philosophy, in which the self is given either more or less than its due. "The hermeneutics of the self is equally far from an apology for the *Cogito* and from its destitution" (*Soi*, 15). We mentioned the ontology of substance: the search for a substantial "I", or for the support of the permanence in time of "I" seems natural to us still and is also difficult to give up. But this approach really only reduces the self to a version of the Same, as in the dialectic of the metacategories of the Same and the Other, which Ricoeur made use of in *Temps et Récit* (vol. 3, 203 ff).The second strategic intention of *Soi* is to show that the dialectic of the Same and the Other is not the same as that of the Self and the Other (or as an other), and that finally even such venerable bastions as the immediacy of consciousness and the Platonic preference for knowledge over belief must come into question (*Soi*, 12-13, 33-35). Eventually, in accordance with a third strategy, Ricoeur will look with some favor upon an ontology of the act, not of pure act or thetic act, but of *energeia* and *dunamis*. The Aristotelian ontology is however received only as *aporetic*, fitting title for the kind of partial ontology which is possible on the basis of a hermeneutics of the self, which must attempt to reconcile the power to act with the power to suffer....

Placing belief higher than knowledge is jarring. But it is clear that in the order of degree of truth, the *dépouillement* regarding first or absolute truths brings this about. The mode of truth appropriate to the gemeneutics of the self is that of *attestation*. "Attestation opposes itself, fundamentally, to the notion of *épistémé*, science, taken in the sense of an ultimate or self-founding knowledge... It is true that attestation at first appears as a kind of belief" (*Soi*, 33).

> But this is not a belief in the sense of a *doxa*... Doxic belief is written according to the grammar of 'I believe-*that*', but attestation belongs to the grammar of believing-*in*. On this wise, attestation stands in close relation to testimony, as etymology reminds us, insofar as it is *in* the word of the witness that one believes (*Soi*, 33).

Attestation is what is left after metaphysics has descended from heights from which it was too easy to fall. It lacks an ontological guarantee, and so is permanently vulnerable to the kind of suspicion of asser-

tions regarding the self which for Ricoeur characterizes the philosophies of the anti-*Cogito*. But attestation for Ricoeur, "... is fundamentally attestation of the self.... attestation can be defined as *the assurance of being oneself acting and suffering.*" As such it is said to be capable of producing "a confidence stronger than any suspicion" (*Soi*, 35). The suspension of the ontological guarantee lets appear the possibility of the truthfulness or faithfulness of an attestation to the self from the other self.

This is, in a preliminary view, the highest level of the dialectic of the Self and the Other which is attained in *Soi*. It is the level at which the hermeneutics of the self encounters the philosophies which resemble it the most, that is to say those of Levinas and Nabert. The dialogue with Levinas occupies a place in the tenth and final study in *Soi* (345 ff), a text which takes up the question of the ontology appropriate to the hermeneutics of the self, in marked continuity with the preface which we have been reading from. But here a difficulty arises, the one which colors, so to speak, my preliminary view of *Soi*. The dialogue with Nabert, placed very close to that with Levinas in an essay preparatory to *Soi*, is suppressed in the tenth study[3].

Retracing our steps above, we find at least one possible reason for this suppression, something which indicates that Nabert's philosophy is to some extent subject to one of the interdictions or suspensions described by us above. Ricoeur has writtent much about Nabert's ethics as set forth in all his works, most notably in *Elements for an Ethic* (a work which is closely linked to Ricoeur's *Symbolism of Evil*). In a later period he shifted his attention more toward the posthumous *Désir de Dieu*, which he helped see published. A key article by Ricoeur in his *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* entitled "The Hermeneutics of Testimony" (119 ff) attests to this shift. But does the Godtalk in *Désir de Dieu* amount to the "*nomination effective de Dieu*" which would place it outside of philosophy?

My hypothesis is that *Désir de Dieu* does not fall under the interdiction, but rather labors toward a *dépouillement* of the idea of God which does stand in a certain continuity with *Soi*; further, that just as the dissolution of ontological guarantees concerning the self as "I" or the

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[3] The only visible scar of this operation is footnote 3 to *Soi* (392).

Same left standing in its wake a hermeneutics of the self, to which an aporeitic ontology of the acting and suffering self corresponds, so also the renunciation of onto-theological guarantees concerning God leaves room for a reflection on *the divine*. This reflection is mediated by testimony, a contingent testimony to the absolute character of contingent acts which themselves testify that in some particular instance, evil or the unjustifiable has been overcome, and an original liberty or freedom of the self has been restored.

Assuming for a moment that this hypothesis can be defended, a second follows: that Nabert, like Levinas, is closest to the Ricoeur of the tenth study of *Soi* when he succeeds in articulating a part of the dialectic of the Self and the Other, of ipseity or selfhood and otherness, without reducing the attestation of the self to a reidentification of *idem*, the Same.

Nabert's procedure is anything but dogmatic, as Ricoeur notes in his preface to *Désir de Dieu*:

> ... it is important to dissociate entirely the determination of the divine from any subject of inherence, from any being to which divine predicates would be attached. This dissociation is carried so far that the very idea of God or of a 'desire for God' seems marked by a definite agnosticism (10).

However, just as the avowal of evil is in some sense the point of highest density for mythic-symbolic language (cf. the *Symbolism of Evil*), so in Nabert the experience of evil, of the *unjustifiable*, whether as victim or as witness to suffering, is the point of highest concentration of the reflection upon acts which appear to testify to the divine. As Ricoeur put it in the essay on "The Hermeneutics of Testimony":

> The unjustifiable forces a giving up of every *cupido sciendi* which leads reflection in the direction of theodicy. This ultimate divestment (*dépouillement*) disposes reflection to receive the meaning of events or perfectly contingent acts which would attest that the unjustifiable is overcome here and now. This attestation could not be reduced to the illustration of those norms that the unjustifiable has placed in confusion: the avowal of evil waits for our regeneration... (121).

The desire for justification which arises when reflection is confronted with the unjustifiable cannot be satisfied by the maintenance of moral norms apart from the actual occurrence of the unjustifiable, no

more than what is unjustifiable in our own selves ceases to sting reflection as a result of a period of obedience to norms. As Nabert says in *Désir de Dieu*, in the chapter on "Finitude and Evil":

> The *ratio cognoscendi* of this desire for justification is the recognition of the unjustifiable and of evil, and the *ratio essendi* of this recognition is in the desire for justification itself. I am unaware at first of the deeper reason which leads me to recognize the unjustifiable... But that which is unjustifiable in our being, that is, that which withdraws from the transparence [of self to itself] and from [the] creation of the self by the self, is also that which allows me and incites me to recognize the unjustifiable and evil outside me (71).

Bearing all the foregoing in mind, it is a bit paradoxical to find that one of the passages in *Désir de Dieu* which shows strong affinities with the hermeneutics of *Soi* comes in reference to the experience of the absence of God:

> The experience of the absence of God coincides with those acts through which relations are constituted which are immanent to an aspiration capable of resisting any disappointment; in and by themselves, these relations are a deepening of the consciousness of the self; they become part of the fullness of that consciousness when consciousness discovers that its relation to itself contains a relation to the other... . Isn't the experience of absence one of the forms which the absolute demand characteristic of religious conscience takes, when it refers to a presence of the other which would fulfill our desire to escape completely from solitude? Beneath the experience of presence... is a structure of consciousness which cannot be, absolutely, for itself except through a relation to the other, set free from the limitation which are obstacles to the mutual transparence of consciousnesses... which does not and cannot become for itself except by means of the other (115).

Perhaps the strongest arguments in favor of a certain continuity between the hemeneutices of the self and the hermeneutics of testimony are found in an essay by Ricoeur entitled, "Emmanuel Levinas on Testimony," which appeared just before *Soi*. The comparison which Ricoeur makes in this essay between the idea of testimony as it occurs in Heidegger, Nabert, and Levinas runs paralllel to some of the analyses in t he tenth study of Soi, except for the absence of all but one reference to Nabert. In this essay, Ricoeur notes that for Nabert, the absolute actions which would testify to the divine are "as contingent as the wounds inflicted by evil" (25). In Nabert's words (from the *Essay on Evil*), these

actions, "... without having been desired by the self (*le moi*) with an eye toward its own justification, give nonetheless to the self some assurance of its effective regeneration" (124)[4]. The self which testifies is not absolutely other than itself, but neither is it merely the *same*. The self has been *affected* by acts which have their source outside reflection. These acts are, according to Ricoeur in "Emmanuel Levinas, Penseur du Témoignage" "... real events which no reflection can draw out of its own depths":

> .... [the notion of] testimony even splits in two, outside reflection. First, there is the testimony which is offered by real acts of devotion even unto death; following this, there is a testimony rendered to these [acts]... . Of the first testimony, it must be said that it has not been willed as such, but that it waits to be understood as testimony... Someone gives a sign of the absolute, without knowing or intending to; some other interprets this as a sign" (27)

The hypothesis of a certain continuity between testimony as in Nabert and attestation as in Ricoeur is lent some credence by Ricoeur himself at this point, inasmuch as "second testimony" is said to be equivalent to the non-doxic belief or attestation which is the main theme of *Soi*, a belief which, in Nabert's words, in *Désir de Dieu*, "... is not understood as the adhesion which accompanies a judgment, of whatever sort ... [but] forms a unity with the act by which we affirm and recognize the absolute character of testimony" (288). The further hypothesis of continuity between Ricoeur's analysis of *Désir de Dieu* and the tenth study of *Soi* rests upon the question, posed by Ricoeur at the end of the earlier essay, of whether the hermeneutics of testimony might make possible a reworking of "the problematic of *Gewissen*, of moral conscience, of injunction... " This last term is repeated on the very last pages of Soi. There Ricoeur argues that *being-enjoined* or called upon to attest or testify is not only a mode of otherness, but also a *structure of ipseity, of selfhood*. Ricoeur had noted that in *Being and Time*, the *Gewissen*, the call or voice of the moral conscience, comes from me and yet from beyond me (*aus mir und doch über mich*) ("Emmanuel Levinas, penseur du témoignage," 19). But along these lines, something essential to the notion of (ethical or moral) injunction is lost, since the voice of conscience does not come from someone *else*; the being-in-debt of *Dasein* is not owed to someone else. The inner voice which enjoins or

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[4] Cited in P. Ricoeur, "Emmanuel Levinas, Penseur du témoignage," p. 25.

obliges us is too much with the self, and attestation loses, in Ricoeur's view, its ethical gravity separated from the injunction of the other. On another hand, though, Ricoeur raises an objection against an injunction *from* the other which would not also be an attestation of the self, but an irruption of the absolute exteriority of the other, not as such capable of being received by the self (*Soi*, 409). Is this another figure of the rhythm of exaltation and humiliation regarding the position of the self in the history of philosophy? Does Nabert's hermeneutics of the divine, which articulates the exteriority of testimony upon the interiority of reflection, escape the violence of this rhythm and give the self its due? Though the hypothesis is tempting, and though this preliminary study tries to make a case for reading *Désir de Dieu* in a certain continuity with the hermeneutics of the self, there are a number of reasons to go slowly. First, there is the aleatory condition of the posthumous work. Second, Ricoeur cites Nabert and Levinas for "the systematic practice of *excessiveness* in philosophical argumentation" (*Soi*, 388-389). In Nabert's case, it may not be possible to disentangle the hermeneutics of testimony from a kind of metaphysics of reflection as related to the thought of the Unconditioned, which runs concurrently through *Désir de Dieu*.

This metaphysics of reflection, (for want of a better term), is pehaps referred to obliquely in the penultimate lines of *Soi-Même comme un Autre*, and these lines perhaps recall lines from Ricoeur's preface to *Désir de Dieu*:

> The whole difficulty resides not in the impossibility of separating, but in the possibility of distinguishing the thought of the unconditioned and the individual conscience. The idea of a reflection upon itself of thought, which 'becomes' consciousness of self... this idea contains a major difficulty, that of non-dual distinction, an identical distinction one might say, the origin of which is unmistakably Fichtean. There is no doubt that it is this distinction... which permits us to maintain the idea of God and the desire for God, as if maintaining an empty space for the understanding, at the beginning of an itinerary which... 'advances toward God instead of beginning with Him'[5] (11).

This 'empty place' is mentioned, at least, in *Soi*. The autonomy of philosophy is also, it may be, its humility: within the limits of attestation of the self, philosophy cannot say whether the Other who enjoins me is another self like me, or me ancestors, who contribute more

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[5] This last quote is from J. Nabert, "le Divin et Dieu", p.329.

to my self than I can account for, or God, living or absent, or an empty place. While the textual parallels are certainly sufficient to warrant exploration, we ought not to forget thgat it is at just this point that "le discours philosophique s'arrête" (*Soi*, 409).

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