

## **Philosophical Counselling: Examining the Meaning of Life from a Ricœurian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we attempt to present a case that the philosophy of otherness proposed by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur is of great relevance in philosophical counselling. The objectives of the present study are: (1) to hermeneutically survey the question of the self in the writings of the French philosopher; (2) to show that although not explicitly stated, a thesis concerning the meaning of life can be articulated thereof; and consequently (3) to show the practical implications of such a reflexive thought through its application towards a good life. The process by which we approach these issues is to deduce the structure of the Ricœurian texts, namely through hermeneutical analysis and phenomenological description of his concepts, and at the same time to carefully prevent any hermeneutical abuses. The conclusion of the following research is that Paul Ricœur's philosophy of otherness is of value in philosophical counselling because it is a response to the vulnerabilities and sufferings that human beings face in their everyday lives. The aim of philosophical counselling being precisely to overcome or at least to try to overcome these difficulties in order to strive to achieve the good life. And finally, this paper is useful to philosophical counsellors because it illustrates how an author's philosophy can be applied in counselling sessions.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics, the meaning of life, the good life, Paul Ricœur, philosophical counselling

### **1. Introduction**

Philosophical counselling emerges towards the end of the 20th century as a reaction against what can be called academic philosophy (Achenbach 1984). Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the “practical” dimension of philosophy has ever been lacking (Iftode 2010). Moreover, in the last two decades, philosophical counselling has gained considerable traction within Romanian cultural space for several reasons (Hagiu and Bortos 2022). For example, whether as a practical philosophy and a

genuine promise for a “good life” (Iftode 2021). As a revival of the thesis supporting philosophy as a way of life (Iftode 2010). Through its specific interdisciplinary nature, as philosophical counselling is in close connection with dimensions related to communication and philosophy proper (Frunzã 2018). Or, through the necessity and importance of ethical counselling (Cozma 2021). And many others that we do not mention explicitly here, but which we will discuss as we progress. We have to note that some important differences do exist between philosophical counselling and other types of counselling, such as psychological, spiritual and others. Philosophical counselling also possesses some methods of its own, even if these methods are themselves mostly borrowed and adapted. One such method is that of the “individual use of philosophers” (Segal 1995). Which simply consists of adopting “principles of life” following the perusal of philosophical texts. In this direction we can ask ourselves, for instance: what could we learn from reading the books of a philosopher like Paul Ricœur? Are there sufficient resources in these writings to allow us to affirm their fundamental character relevant to everyday life?

In this study we intend to show that there are indeed sufficient resources in Ricœur's thoughts to justify a thesis on the meaning of life. We deduce that in accordance with the indicated method of counselling – “the individual use of philosophers” – the French thinker's philosophy is suitable as a method to be used in philosophical counselling. In short, although Ricœurian philosophy is vast and covers a variety of themes, we will deal below only with the questions concerning the meaning of life. Therefore, this is the thesis we propose to develop in the following. We will attempt to justify said thesis through the following objectives: (1) to survey from a hermeneutical point of view the issue of the self and, implicitly, of the philosophy of otherness, from the perspective of the French thinker's “little ethics” (Ricœur 1995); (2) then to justify a corollary of our main thesis, namely that the issue of the meaning of life and, more generally, the issue of meaning is implicit in Ricœur's thought; (3) and this is precisely why Paul Ricœur's philosophy is useful in philosophical counselling. For which the last section of this paper will be illuminating.

Naturally, philosophizing about things such as these requires some precautions. A method of approaching and preventing possible hermeneutical abuses, which often appear in the exegesis dedicated to Paul Ricœur (Hagiú 2020). Namely the hermeneutical analysis of Ricœur's writings, with particular attention to the structure of these texts. And the phenomenological description of some of his specific concepts. Which is to say that the hermeneutical effort required by such research is commensurate with these precautions.

## **2. The good life. The hermeneutics of the self and the philosophy of otherness**

As we have said before, Paul Ricœur's philosophical concerns covers a wide range of topics. For example, he explores areas such as phenomenology, linguistics, theology and religion, narrative theory, and many others. All with a focus on self-affirmation. Ricœur's hypothesis that the self cannot be known immediately demands that we find a way around it. In *Oneself as Another*, he returns to some of the issues discussed in the first part of his career and develops what might be called the "hermeneutics of the self". Of course, talking about the self also requires a discussion about otherness. Hence, the philosophy of otherness in Ricœurian thought reaches an important point in the chapters devoted to the "little ethics", where the "good life" alongside others is addressed. This argument for a "little ethics" can be traced back to the hermeneutic phenomenology of the capable human being, as Jean Grondin (2006) observes. And for Ricœur to be capable means first of all to be capable of enduring suffering (Ricœur 1986).

Hence, we will be discussing the revival of some of the French philosopher's earlier ideas expressed in *The Symbolism of Evil*, a book in which he mitigated human fallibility through confession. For it is only through confession that man becomes aware of his own faults. In brief:

"The experience of which the penitent makes confession is a blind experience, still embedded in the matrix of emotion, fear, anguish. It is this emotional note that gives rise to objectification in discourse; the confession expresses, pushes to the outside, the emotion which

without it would be shut up in itself, as an impression in the soul.”  
(Ricoeur 1969, 7)

The two concepts mentioned are therefore configured as symbols in what we might describe as the hermeneutics of confession. More precisely, they are symbolic expressions of suffering. And because they are such expressions, they are transfigured into the language of confession, which is meant to be the route to the problem of evil. Moreover, Vasile Cătălin Bobb (2015, 186) notes that, in fact, the language of confession entails a hermeneutics of experience that is fraught with absurdity, anguish and suffering.

Furthermore, against this suffering that occurs in everyday life, the French philosopher introduces into the philosophical meditation on what constitutes the self and the other, pursuing the good life (Ricoeur 1995). Pursuing the good life calls attention to the distinction between ethics and morality, for what is at stake are actions (Greisch 2015, 387). The beings that are the subject of the hermeneutics of the self, and thus the self, are acting and speaking beings. Which means that in the form of advices, recommendations, instructions, and so on, people succeed or fail in exercising morally right actions (Ricoeur 1995). An important observation to be made here is that the hermeneutics of the self, along the lines of Ricoeurian thought, places narrative theory at the intersection of action theory and moral theory. But in order to understand these aspects of moral theory, it is necessary to see how the French philosopher refers to it. Since the distinction mentioned above reserves a certain meaning for ethics and a certain meaning for morality; consequently, what Ricoeur does when he adopts these terms in his own discourse is a convention. For when he talks about attempting to seek out a fulfilled life, he adopts the term “ethics”, and when it comes to the universality of norms, the term “morality” (Ricoeur 1995). The Ricoeurian approach pays particular attention to both the Aristotelian position on ethics and the Kantian one. As Jean Grondin (2013, 86) observes, he dialectically adopts Aristotle's teleological perspective and Kant's deontological perspective and argues for the supremacy of ethics over morality, because the norms of morality, which have the character of universality, only make sense within the framework of an ethical objectivity. Hence, the Aristotelian

doctrine implies the Kantian one in the context of Ricoeurian dialectics (Grondin 2013, 86).

For Paul Ricoeur, the “moral problem” must be structured onto three levels, which are ethics, morality and practical wisdom, without however reducing ethics to the morality of duty. Which means that ethics requires a certain desire for fulfilment (Ricoeur 2017). And this desire for fulfilment, or desire for achievement, or desire to live well always involves an *other*. Moreover, for the French philosopher ethics is defined by three components: 1) aiming for the good life; 2) with and for others; and 3) within just institutions (Ricoeur 1991, 260). According to such a definition of ethics, and the distinction between ethics and morality, and also to the components of the moral problem, the French philosopher notes that self-esteem should take precedence before self-respect. Because the former arises within the norm, hence within morality (Ricoeur 1995). However, it follows that the claim of ethical research at the level of self-attestation is that both self-esteem and self-respect contribute to an increase in *ipseity*.

We have to wonder what does this good life consist of for the French thinker? What does it mean to aim for the good life? We answer that to aim for the good life means, grammatically speaking, what would fall under the mark of the optative. Which is not yet an imperative. For the French thinker, the good life requires a threefold care: care for oneself, care for others and care for institutions. Referring to the above, self-esteem is the reflexive moment of *praxis*. By appreciating our actions, we actually appreciate ourselves as their authors, or rather as something other than mere forces of nature or simple instruments (Ricoeur 1991, 260-261). Then, in order to clarify what it means to aim for the good life, that is, to move into the second stage of reflection on the good life, Ricoeur introduces the concept of “solicitude”. In addition, self-esteem and solicitude cannot be thought and lived one without the other. Which means that they are reciprocal, because the other can say “I” as I do. And likewise considers himself the author of his own actions for which he is responsible (Ricoeur 1991, 261).

In another essay, the French philosopher remarks that through solicitude an axiological dimension is added to the self

whereby each person cannot be replaced in our affection and esteem (Ricœur 1995). As such, the “miracle” of reciprocity consists precisely in the fact that people are recognized as irreplaceable to each other. As it happens, for example, in friendships, where one appreciates the other as much as the self (Ricœur 1991, 261). Reciprocity does not, however, exclude inequality. Such as when we speak of the inequality of the apprentice in relation to his master. But, on the contrary, inequality is corrected through the recognition of the master's superiority. However, this can also happen the other way round, with inequality arising from the other's weakness or from the other's suffering. The task of restoring “equality” falls to compassion, since for Ricœur the esteem of the other as another self and 'my' self-esteem are fundamentally equivalent (Ricœur 1995).

Further on, in order to understand what the French philosopher means by the good life in just institutions, we consider it necessary to present his following hypotheses. Because the vision of the good life encompasses the sense of justice, it is clear that the other is a being distinct from one's own being. Therefore, the good life, or living well, is not limited to interpersonal relations, as we might infer from the above, but living well must be extended to the “life” of institutions as well. In addition, the idea of justice has features that are not contained within the concept of solicitude, as justice requires the idea of equality. It is clear to us then that, for Ricœur, the idea of an institution is equivalent to a social structure, a historical community, and cannot be reduced to interpersonal relations alone (Ricœur 1995). In other words, the institution is characterized by common mores rather than constraining rules. At this level of philosophical reflection, the place of solicitude is appropriated by the concept of equality. Which is a proportional equality. And which operates at the level of the good life within just institutions as follows: to each in proportion to his own contribution or to each according to what he deserves (Ricœur 1991).

We have discussed earlier in this paper about ethics and the good life and we have tried to suggest that it is at this level that the dialectic of the self and *the other than the self* is

thematized, whether we refer to the other as a person or the other as an institution. Also, important here is the Ricœurian thesis that self-esteem comes first in the relation with self-respect. Moving forward we will insist on several moral issues, since the good life must always be subject to moral obligations and norms. In short, the French philosopher thinks at this moral level of reflection through a kind of parallelism. In other words, if in his discourse on the pursuit of the good life he spoke of what it means to pursue the good life, in his discourse on morality he speaks, for example, of the pursuit of the good life and obligations. Likewise, regarding the good life together with others, solicitude will be discussed at the moral level of the discourse together with norms. Of course, the overview of the moral dimension should not be understood as a fragmentation or displacement of ethical discourse. On the contrary, the discourse on morality aims at enriching the discourse on ethics - assuming from the outset that ethics includes morality. By means of submissions to the moral norm, the French philosopher shows that self-respect, which is the correspondent of self-esteem in the ethical plane, acquires full significance because it is simultaneously for oneself and for another. Which means that it is fairly distributed and this justifies the proportional equality mentioned above (Ricœur 1995).

Accordingly, in *Oneself as Another*, a third ethical dimension of the self, that of practical wisdom, finds its place. The role of which is to clarify some issues that may arise. Ricœur considers that the morality of obligation produces conflicts. And to overcome these conflicts requires a certain kind of practical wisdom, which removes the seduction of moral situationism or arbitrariness. Therefore, the role of practical wisdom is to constantly remind us of the possibility of the good life with and for others in just institutions (Ricœur 1995). More precisely, as suggested above, the idea of the good life is opposed to the tragedy of action which includes suffering. The fundamental question in this context is: if action is sometimes tragic, is there any solution that may remove the ethical conflicts? The answer is practical wisdom. And so, the Ricœurian effort is to show the transition from the tragic *phronēin* to the practical *phronēsis* (Ricœur 1995). As such, the Ricœurian reflection presented

above provides an opportunity to open up to a meaningful life, and thus to the question of the meaning of life.

### **3. On the meaning of life from a Ricœurian perspective**

Hermeneutics appears in Paul Ricœur's thought in several stages. And perhaps the best argument for this is to read his writings in chronological order. Of course, for each such stage hermeneutics represents a new step towards what it will eventually become. This is, a hermeneutics which has become an ethics in which the life of the self is configured in conjunction with others. Thematised and subject to reflection. So the earlier questioning of the self is overloaded by the "life of the self". In other words, for the French philosopher, the self is not distinct from life and seems impossible to be thought of in its absence. It follows from this that to thematize the problem of the self and the philosophy of otherness is to question the meaning of life itself. Therefore let us clarify a few issues.

The first challenge that any exegete of Ricœur faces when it comes to the question regarding the meaning of life is that the French philosopher did not explicitly write on this topic. Marc de Launay (2020, 25) notes that there are only three texts in which the French thinker seems to have thematized the issue of meaning. The same commentator points out that the Ricœurian texts explore meaning from different perspectives, however nowhere does he speak concretely about the meaning of life. In short, Ricœur writes about what a "text" might mean, in other words, about understanding, interpreting and sourcing meaning or translating texts (de Launay 2020, 25). In other words, there are five levels of discourse in Ricœurian philosophy, as Philippe Lacour (2020, 87-91) notes, namely (1) the analytical description of the ordinary, (2) composition, (3) self-understanding, (4) the anthropology of fundamental capabilities, and (5) the metaphysical level. Furthermore, Henry Venema (2002, 413) notes that the problem of meaning is fragmented, and that the configuration of the self in the writings of the French philosopher consists in a polysemy resulting from these levels of discourse. Which in turn justifies the various methodical detours in order to attest it.



As we have attempted to show thus far, in his thought, Paul Ricœur's had the ambition to develop a philosophy of otherness, which is not complementary to a philosophy of ipseity. Instead the relationship between otherness and ipseity is dialectical. The self "intertwines" with the other. Moreover, each self has the task of internalizing the *praxis* of its own life (Jervolino 2000, 93). This task is a demanding one, since the French philosopher has sought to create a nuanced relationship between the self and otherness and also between the self and public life, taking into account faith and religion, culture and politics, and others as such (Doran 1973, 457). We can summarize by saying that this is Paul Ricœur's affirmation of life and, implicitly, of philosophy (Abel 2010).

Reflecting on the writings of the French philosopher, we see that the question of the meaning of life appears in an implicit way. It is at work, invoked without prior clarification. Suffice to consider that Ricœur's idea of criticizing the Cartesian *cogito* – of suggesting rather a narrative or hermeneutic *cogito* (Greisch 2000), of throwing the self "into life" and only then attempting to attest it – is in fact about "approximating a meaning". If we understand Ricœur's attempts correctly, he is betting on the distance of the self from itself. And those methodical detours are meant to reclaim or minimize this distance. Moreover, in everyday life, the self is always together with its other, but not only at this level, but at the ontological level of attestation. As Romanian philosopher Ștefan Afloroaei observes:

"[...] the ordinary flow of life binds in the first instance all manner of experienced facts and events, which most often escape subjective will. We easily allow ourselves to be drawn into this flow, to the point of a kind of sinking into the dense and elementary flux of ordinary life. The distance from the self – after all, from the primary flux of life – is no longer evident, it does not make perceptible that distinct presence of each of us in a community of life." (Afloroaei 2018, 203)

It follows, then, that the portrait of the man capable of acting and suffering, of striving for the good life "with and for the other", outlined by Paul Ricœur in his writings, is constantly accompanied by his other. And seems to be the man who prepares or finds himself faced with the question of the meaning of life, in the most common, banal and everyday way possible. However, this question is in many ways problematic. Although it

is certain that the source of this question is not the desire to clarify it, but simply an uneasiness or fear that takes hold of the senses and the life of the self (Afloroaei 2021, 49). The most terrible thing is that, more often than not, this anxiety overcomes the will to understand or the enthusiasm to clarify what troubles someone:

“It comes to the forefront on its own, it announces itself in full force and irrevocably. [...] It encloses within itself a negative certainty, the sense of the absence of any meaning. Is it not the same as when the certainty, again definitive, is given by the feeling of the total presence of meaning?” (Afloroaei 2021, 49)

We find ourselves, therefore, in a difficult position. The problem of the meaning of life arises not only from a sense of questioning, and by extension from an interrogative or reflexive activity concerning one's own life, but also from the perspective of a sense of life (Afloroaei 2021, 47). On the other hand, Jean Grondin (2003) has found that to feel that life is meaningless means simultaneously an expectation of filling it with meaning. When the question regarding the meaning of life arises, it is clear that this meaning is not self-evident. It is not obvious, but requires a comprehensive hermeneutical effort (Grondin 2003). Invoking all these questions concerning the meaning of life in the context of the Ricœurien texts puts us in the privileged position of being able to assert that in the writings of the French philosopher, the meaning of life appears as a leftover, or rather in the sense of “meaning as a leftover”. Although it can be argued that following Paul Ricœur's thought the reflexive sense of meaning exists, which is that kind of practical wisdom that synthesizes experience and reason as a form of natural simplicity (Grondin 2003). Since the French philosopher wrote only about the dimensions of the good life, we are in a position to argue in favour of the thesis of the meaning of life as the leftover of these philosophical reflections, taking into consideration here that:

“*the rest*, as a principle of things, is and is not part of the whole, that it constitutes a regime of the different real [...]” (Baumgarten 2021, 162)

Following such an observation, to reflect on this rest, thus to reflect on the thesis of the meaning of life as a leftover is to argue that this leftover does not fit into the models of classical ontology. That it defies the principles of reality and that it

represents a challenge for philosophical reflection (Baumgarten 2021, 162). It is therefore relevant to argue that the Ricœurian detour through the interpretation of symbols, myths, civilizations, religions, and so on, as well as some deviations through analytic philosophy in order to attest the self, again together with its other, and the assumption that only at the end of these forays is the self gained are sufficient arguments to argue that in Ricœurian writings the thesis of the meaning of life is at work and is closely related to his reflections on the good life.

Therefore, the self configured by Paul Ricœur is one who can answer the question “who?”. This self can, however, in the intersubjectivity of its world, question itself. Raise the question of meaning concerning its own life. But in relation to others and in relation to public life, that is, to institutions. And the outcome of this questioning consists in certain remnants of meaning that configure the meaning of life. Finally, if we were to conclude on this fact, we believe that Ricœur's suggestion to love the other, in other words, the one who “will outlive [us]” (Ricœur 2007), is enough.

#### **4. Conclusions and practical implications**

Paul Ricœur's philosophy of otherness is, as we have justified in the above sections of this study, the occasion for a fulfilled life, a good life. The question concerning the meaning of life is implicit throughout his philosophy. We have also established that the meaning of life, for the French thinker, manifests itself rather in the leftover of our reflections on life. Of course, it is not our interest in this study to formulate an explicit answer to the question of what the meaning of life is. In fact, Paul Letsch (2019) has recently summarized several such hypotheses. Often the meaning of our lives lived with and for the other is assumed by our actions. Which is why the Ricœurian perspective on the meaning of life is useful in philosophical counseling.

Since for the French thinker the purpose of the hermeneutics of the self turned ethics is to justify an increase in ipseity. It is clear that this increase in ipseity is an initial argument for why Ricœurian philosophy is an inspired proposal for use in philosophical counselling. Considering that most often the clients of a philosophical counsellor want to overcome the

discomfort (Marinoff 1999) they face in their everyday lives, the Ricœurian demands for a good life, for a life lived with a certain practical wisdom, are useful.

And then, because most often in everyday human life, even if not engaged with philosophy, the question of the meaning of life inevitably arises. This is after all one of those great questions that are addressed in philosophical counselling (Marinoff 2003). The Ricœurian answer, discreet in formulation, but explicit from a practical perspective, that it is the consequence of the desire to live well with others in just institutions, requires practical wisdom. The client who sees the need for practical wisdom turns to a philosophical counsellor precisely in order to establish certain guidelines for living a fulfilled life (Lahav 2001).

Another aspect through which the Ricœurian philosophy of otherness is useful in philosophical counselling, according to the method outlined above (Segal 1995), is that of trying to permanently reduce the distance of the self from itself. Counselling from a Ricœurian perspective is therefore first and foremost an attempt to understand the client's world and only then a configuration of the client's self. So that finally the need to live well can be justified. At the same time, the French philosopher's hermeneutic effort to outline the portrait of human capabilities susceptible to suffering, that is, of the vulnerable human being, and thus the understanding of human weakness, is another reason why it can be incorporated into a philosophical counselling programme. Just as the hermeneutics of confession, discreetly mentioned in the second section of this paper, brings to light the client's anguish and suffering in the form of the language of confession.

In conclusion, the above is sufficient to support the argument that the philosophy of otherness constituted by Paul Ricœur in his writings, in which the meaning of life is configured as the leftover of reflections on what a good life lived together with others in just institutions could be, and thus to ascertain the usefulness of these questions in philosophical counselling, in affirming that man's everyday life is nothing less than an attempt to overcome both vulnerability and suffering, the two dimensions of existence that justify any act of counselling the

self. With all this being said, the thesis advanced in this study is vindicated.

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