

Marcelino Agís Villaverde, *Knowledge and Practical Reason: Paul Ricoeur's Way of Thinking* (Zürich-Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2012). 238 pages.

The importance of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical testimony is unquestionable; his contribution in the field of phenomenological hermeneutics may be seen as one of the milestones of continental philosophy.¹ Yet, the true philosophical value of Ricoeur's thought is not limited to his hermeneutic anthropology, but also covers his claims in the field of practical philosophy, most certainly on the topics of practical wisdom, ethics and philosophy of politics. These claims—which are inherently grounded in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought—are still influential in modern-day philosophical and ethical debates concerning a vast horizon of problems. In this perspective, the book, *Knowledge and Practical Reason: Paul Ricoeur's Way of Thinking*, by Marcelino Agís Villaverde may prove an extensive and profound analysis of Ricoeur's thought in terms of practical wisdom and moral philosophy.

Marcelino Agís Villaverde proposes a deep insight into Ricoeur's philosophy. Recognizing international hermeneutics scholars, Villaverde bases his reconstruction of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy on a chronological basis, proving in what ways Ricoeur's life impacted his philosophical interests. Villaverde stresses the fact that Ricoeur's life was one of a scholar: in both transferring philosophical knowledge, but also in confronting his own intuitions and theories with those of his fellow scholars and students, Ricoeur managed to remain an active academic professor for almost four decades, beginning his career at the University of Strasbourg, then at the Sorbonne, University of Nanterre, Catholic University of Leuven and finally Divinity School of University of Chicago. It is of importance to note that it was Paul Ricoeur—Dean of the Faculty of Human Science at the time of the student revolution of May 1968—who attempted to appease the student rebellion in order to establish an academic institution capable of facing the demographic and social changes of the late sixties. The defeat of Ricoeur's vision of the university, alongside the overwhelming sense of inherent deficiencies of democratic thinking, marked Paul Ricoeur's thinking for the rest of his life. As Ricoeur himself stated: "I would say that my failure in Nanterre was the failure of the impossible attempt of reconciling self-management and that inherent hierarchical structure of any type of institution. . . . But the complicated part of the democratic question consists, maybe, on being able to combine the vertical relationships of domination . . . and the horizontal relationships of what one has in common. My fundamental failure was

¹ See: *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, "Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ricoeur/>. see also, *The Stanford Encyclopedia*, "Paul Ricoeur," <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/ricoeur/>.

wanting to reconstruct the hierarchical relationship starting from the horizontal relationship. As for this, the episode of the dean will fructify in my later reflections on politics.”² The devastating experiences of the student revolution had, in fact, influenced Ricoeur’s thought in general, rooting it even more in anthropology and practical philosophy.

The link between Ricoeur’s philosophical interests and his life events may be also observed when trying to organize and systematize his thought. Marcelino Agís Villaverde assesses this point in showing that Ricoeur’s philosophy remains an amalgam of different topics and problems, all of which remain possible responses to several questions that Ricoeur faced. Thus, such aggregation of different works creates the “broken systematicity”

(43) of Ricoeur’s thought. Yet, as shown by Villaverde, it is possible to elaborate at least four general stages of Ricoeur’s philosophical project: parting from the stage of intellectual formation and influences (up to 1950), through the phenomenological (1950-60) and hermeneutic (1960-90) stages, until the final stage, when the main interest is set on the questions of practical philosophy.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology is probably his main contribution in the field of philosophy. Yet, it would be a great understatement to believe that Ricoeur limited his interests to the hermeneutic problems of “interpretation of the myth and the symbol” (110) or the question of the metaphor as a “central and paradigmatic element of the philosophical discourse, expression of its peculiar configuration and source of constant upgrade for our knowledge of the world and ourselves” (121). It is, in fact, the practical implication of hermeneutics and phenomenology that may be seen as the fundamental dimension of Ricoeur’s philosophy: “There are two closely related questions that animate all of Ricoeur’s work, and which he considers to be fundamental to philosophy: “Who am I?” and “How should I live?””³ These two questions represent in fact a more general overview of Ricoeur’s thought—the first being of anthropological and psychological importance, the second being Ricoeur’s attempt to face traditional difficulties and obstacles in practical philosophy and ethics.

The question of one’s identity is addressed profoundly by Marcelino Agís Villaverde in the seventh chapter of his work. Basing on Ricoeur’s book “Oneself as Another,”⁴ Villaverde presents how the transition from the hermeneutic to the practical stage of Ricoeur’s philosophy took place. As stated by Villaverde: “In the year 1990, Ricoeur publishes *Soi-même comme un autre*, a book that marks the transition between hermeneutics and practical philosophy. In this work he analyses topics such as narrative identity, personal identity and the problem of human action and its dimensions. His effort to pass from text to action had been present in different hermeneutic works, in which he had incorporated the perspective of Anglo-Saxon language philosophers” (55). The vital accomplishment of Ricoeur’s reflection on the problem of “Who am I?” is the division between two modes of one’s identity: one based on the Latin term *idem*, second on the Latin term

² Paul Ricoeur, *La critique et la conviction*. Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, (1995), 59.

³ *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, “Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1990).

ipse. Idem, translated as sameness, is “the permanency of a man’s fingerprints, or his genetic formula; which is manifested in the psychological level under the form of character,” while *ipse* may be understood in terms of “The promise. I would persevere, even if I have changed, it is a loved and maintained identity that is promulgated in spite of the changes.”⁵ While reconstructing the dualistic Ricoeurian concept of identity, Villaverde emphasises the fact that, according to Ricoeur himself, “The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is not any other than the difference between a substantial of formal identity and narrative identity.”⁶ It is important to note that this distinction is not only a formal one; in fact, it enables the explanation how an acting agent is capable of understanding his own life in terms of narration (*ipse*) may be at the same time a subject of moral imputation: “The subject is able to live in-person the otherness of his being, being both the narrator and reader of his own life. The individual is located outside of himself in an exercise of responsible splitting, to narrate the contributions of his own life” (147-148). The accentuation put on the narrative dimension of one’s identity leads inevitably to concluding, with Villaverde, that “the narrative mediation provides us with evidence that all of one’s knowledge of self is just an interpretation of self. This is carried out via the appropriation that we as readers carry away from a fictional character and also through the continuous enrichment that reading provides” (153). Understanding one’s identity in terms of hermeneutics marks the growing interest Paul Ricoeur showed towards problems of practical philosophy.

This link between the philosophy of interpretation and the practical wisdom is not limited to just one notion or topic. Villaverde proves that throughout the temporal development of Ricoeur’s thought, the practical stage of the French philosopher’s thought was the inevitable consequence of his intellectual growth. The notion of practical wisdom, developed by Paul Ricoeur in his “Petite Éthique” while elaborating the notion of justice, leads to noticing how hermeneutic contributes to moral philosophy. The practical wisdom of Aristotle serves Ricoeur as an ever-valid model for explaining what an “ethical intention” is. As recapitulated by Villaverde: “We call “ethical intention,” the intention of a ‘good life’ with and for others in just institutions. . . . In accordance with the Aristotelian model of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), the wise man (*phronimos*) manages his life to achieve his full realisation. To achieve this ‘good life,’ or fulfilment, “the man with a wise judgement determines the rule and the case at the same time, apprehending the situation in its full singularity” (158). The evocation of the Aristotelian moral theory is not incidental, as proven by Villaverde. While knowing that the Greek philosopher of Stageira identified practical wisdom with the capability to participate in moral discourse,⁷ the close link between ethics and hermeneutics is becoming even more visible. Villaverde does not ignore this important notion: “The parallelism between wisdom, as considered from the ethics point of view, and interpretation, as seen from the hermeneutic plan, prompts Ricoeur to specify its common points. . . . In

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Le Juste* (Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1995), 138.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 355.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011), 1140a.

hermeneutics terminology, to deliberate implies both an interpretation of the action and of the self that reflects when facing a concrete action” (158-159).

This important conclusion is further elaborated by Villaverde: It is possible to enumerate several bonds between ethical deliberation and a hermeneutic point of view. Firstly, it is possible to assume that the deliberative actions one has to perform in order to discover how to attain his life’s aim—fulfilment—may have a form of a circle; preferably one that is comparable with the hermeneutic circle. The similarity is described by Villaverde in the form of a parallelism: the hermeneutic circle consists of the constant movement from interpretations of the parts to interpretations of everything and onwards to the interpretations of parts. The ethical deliberation circle would thus take the following form: One’s moral deliberation parts from reflecting upon particular decisions of the agent in question (part), fluently passing onto questions of the objective of the good life (everything) and further reasoning on particular aims and decisions (170-171).

Another bond may be found while comparing the ambiguity of moral judgements and that of interpretations of a given text. These ambiguities consist—respectively—of the existence of different, mutually exclusive and subjective views of what is a ‘good life’ and of the subsistence of competing interpretations of a text. In fact, these ambiguities are inherent to both moral justifications and textual interpretation and (what proves valour of Ricoeur’s thought) cannot be omitted nor solved via an objective empirical science. As stated by Villaverde: “An empiric science does not exist that will settle firm judgement a correct interpretation in a homonymic way. This necessarily generates a conflict that must be assumed as part of the freedom with which the subject is destined to *act* in one case, and to *interpret* in the another” (159-160).

Finally, it is important to note—along with Villaverde—that one of the major achievements of hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur is the above-mentioned observation that “an objective, unique, and universally valid interpretation does not exist” (159). The hermeneutic conclusion does not, however, limit itself to the plan of reflection upon text. An important note is made by Villaverde: “There is only a horizon of constructed senses within the limits of the subject that it interprets, the parallelism with ethical deliberation that the agent must confront with particular situations accordingly, becomes evident again” (159). The final break with the universalistic, metaphysical vision of ethics as a science aiming to discover objective norms and values is thus a merit of Ricoeurian practical hermeneutics.

The emphasis on practical wisdom is—for Paul Ricoeur—due to its mediating capability. In his study on justice⁸ he distinguishes three levels of evaluating moral judgements: (1) Teleological (possibility of assuming something as an aim or requisite of a ‘good life’); (2) Deontological (plan of norms and rules, which takes into account the fact that “action is carried out in an interactive manner” [163]; (3) Practical wisdom, in which Ricoeurian *phronesis* works as an intermediary plan, where the ‘good life’ and moral

⁸ Ricoeur, *Le Juste*.

obligations are being confronted and merged: “Practical wisdom allows the transition between teleological and deontological moments. In this third level, the moral conscience is impelled to make singular decisions in a climate of uncertainty and of serious conflict” (163).

Ricoeur’s rehabilitation of practical wisdom may also be observed when approaching his concept of guilt and forgiveness. For Ricoeur, guilt is not inherent to human condition due to its limitations; it is more of an existential gap between who one is and who he wishes to be. If the overlap between facts and norms is too big, a sense of guilt—dissatisfaction and unhappiness—arises. This conscience of possibility of evil being done freely (i.e., by exercising one’s free will) still leads Ricoeur to assuming that “blame is the “existential presupposition of forgiveness” (179). In this perspective, Marcelino Agís Villaverde adds an important and enriching remark towards understanding Ricoeurian phenomena of guilt, confession and forgiveness. The Spanish philosopher presents how the dimensions of ethical and moral discourse, the quest for justice and the dialectic of guilt and forgiveness surpass one another. As for the moral-ethical plan, the teleological level consists of a desire for a good life, the deontological level speaks of how obligations are being formed and finally—on the level of practical wisdom—it is shown how a given situation should be judged. The plan of justice is characterised as follows: The teleological plan is aimed at researching what is the ‘good’ in relation with others and the deontological plan concentrates on identifying what is legal. The transition of those moments, found on the level of practical wisdom, is the conception of what is just in a given society. Finally, the plan addresses the conceptualisation of the dialectic of blame and forgiveness: The teleological level parts from a lack of respect towards another, which may be observed in the act of confession, which for Ricoeur is “a language act by which a subject takes on itself, and assumes the accusation.”⁹ The deontological level speaks of anticipated consequences of transgressing certain rules, thus providing insight into possible sanctions (either moral, political or legal). Finally, the level of practical wisdom introduces the notion of “height of forgiveness.” It is thus shown how forgiveness stands in opposition towards both the moral-ethical and legal-just judgements. For it is, as shows Ricoeur, an exceptional possibility of evading punishment and presenting forgetfulness. As recounted by Villaverde, “The height of forgiveness would be naturally faced with the consideration of blame from a legal point of view. In this plan, true justice would be the atonement of sadness, while forgiveness would be equal to the measures of grace (amnesty, commutation of sadness, pardon) that are extraordinary and therefore methodologically unfair with regard to the normal process of legal and even moral procedures” (181). It is at this point that Ricoeur’s rehabilitation of practical wisdom may be seen as flourishing; Villaverde shows with great precision how the Ricoeurian concept of practical wisdom, especially concerning its contribution towards the deliberative dimension of modern-day ethics alongside with the embrace of common sense forgiveness, enriches practical philosophy.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2000), 597.

The book of Marcelino Agís Villaverde is undoubtedly one of the major works on Ricoeur's philosophy, reconstructing with great care the practical dimension of Paul Ricoeur's thought. Villaverde's effort to prove how phenomenological hermeneutics contributes towards developing a more intersubjectively acceptable concept of ethics is achieved without any doubt. Practical wisdom—as one of the major components of modern ethics—is often abandoned. Yet, it would be of grave consequence not to neglect the true valour of common sense and practical wisdom as parts of ethical and moral deliberation. It was well known that Ricoeurian philosophy in its practical dimension was an accomplishment beyond compare. What Marcelino Agís Villaverde accomplished in his book is showing that it is not only parting ways with scientific foundations for ethics that may be presented as merit of Ricoeur's philosophy. It is its inherently practical orientation— often unseen or not underlined sufficiently— that makes Paul Ricoeur one of the most influential twentieth century philosophers. The book, *Knowledge and Practical Reason: Paul Ricoeur's Way of Thinking* by Marcelino Agís Villaverde, will certainly correct those misapprehensions.

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