

Ideology, Utopia, and Phronetic Judgment in Paul Ricoeur

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Introduction

In 2005, then United States Senator from Illinois Barack Obama made the following remark to the members of the American Library Association:

at a time when truth and science are constantly being challenged by *political agendas* and *ideologies*; a time where so many refuse to teach evolution in our schools, where fake science is used to beat back attempts to curb global warming or fund life-saving research; libraries remind us that truth isn't about who yells the loudest, but who has the right information.²

In this otherwise agreeable remark, the sharp opposition drawn by Obama between truth and science, on the one hand, and political agendas and ideologies, on the other, is indicative of the way that ideology is often used in public discourse. Thus understood, notions such as truth, knowledge, science, and objectivity stand in strong

¹ This is a revised version of what began as a Research Master's thesis defended at KU Leuven's Institute of Philosophy in 2018. Accordingly, I am grateful for the support of my supervisor, Ernst Wolff, as well as for the friendship of Wouter Vijfhuizen, Onur Kökerer, and Gilles Smolders which helped to carry me to the finish line of that difficult year.

² Barack Obama, "Literacy and Education in a 21st-Century Economy," obamaspeeches.com, 25 June 2005, <http://obamaspeeches.com/024-Literacy-and-Education-in-a-21st-Century-Economy-Obama-Speech.htm>, emphasis mine.

opposition to all that expresses the interests, desires, and ends of particular political actors.

Although too much credence should not be given to the way that politicians use concepts, Obama's use of "ideology" here exemplifies a certain kind of "post-ideological" politics whereby the speaker assumes a place from which the ideological and the non-ideological can be distinguished that is not itself inscribed within the former.³ To accept this maneuver, however, is to accept the burden of explaining how it is possible to assume such a position—no easy task. Yet, if we reject this possibility entirely, it is difficult to imagine how we could do anything but endlessly perpetuate ideological interests. In what follows I will think through this dilemma from within the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.

To do so I will trace Ricoeur's reflections on ideology and utopia from his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (hereafter *Lectures*), first delivered in 1975, to his later writings on selfhood and the just from the 1990s. The thread that I will follow begins from the closing lines of Ricoeur's *Lectures*, wherein he suggests that "practical wisdom" (or *phronesis*)⁴ may provide an answer to the abovementioned dilemma by helping us to understand how this seemingly vicious circle may become a "spiral."⁵ Taking this suggestion as my point of departure, I reread Ricoeur's earlier solution to this problem back from the vantage point of his later writings, where his conception of *phronesis* is further developed. Although these later writings are not immediately concerned with ideology, Ricoeur's idea of "phronetic judgment" can still be understood within the earlier problematic. As I will argue, Ricoeur's concept of phronetic judgment helps to consolidate his earlier solution to the problem of ideology within his later, more systematic reflections on ethics, politics, and practical philosophy. Although Ricoeur's reflections on ideology and utopia have been subject to considerable scrutiny, commentators typically discuss them within the context of his writings from the same period.⁶ The longer view that I adopt here therefore not

³ Nestor Capdevila, for example, argues that the aporias of the journalistic and political usage of the concept of ideology reveal difficulties in its more technical, social scientific use. For this reason the former can teach us something about the latter ("Idéologie": usages ordinaires et usages savants," *Actuel Marx* 43, no. 1 [2008]: 50–61).

⁴ For consistency, I will use "phronesis" wherever possible in place of other translations such as "practical wisdom" or "prudence."

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 314.

⁶ For example, see Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); Johann Michel, "Le paradoxe de l'idéologie revisité par Paul Ricoeur," *Raisons politiques* 11, no. 3 (2003): 149–72; David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); María Avelina Cecilia Lafuente, "Social Imagination and History

only sheds light on questions of continuity in Ricoeur's political thought, but may also stimulate further interest in his contribution to ideology critique and contemporary critical theory more broadly.⁷

The Problem of Ideology

In *Lectures*, Ricoeur develops two essentially related lines of thought. First, following Karl Mannheim, Ricoeur attempts to situate the ideological and the utopian within a common framework—as two poles of the *social imaginary*, or what he calls here the “social and cultural imagination.”⁸ Second, he attempts to show how thinking ideology and utopia together can allow us to work through the problem posed by “Mannheim's paradox.” Although Ricoeur offers a compelling case for the first, in my view he has not yet worked out a satisfying answer to the second. I will discuss each of these lines of thought in turn.

The Constitutive Ideology of Political Life

Ricoeur's basic methodology in *Lectures* is that of a “genetic phenomenology” or “regressive analysis.”⁹ What his analysis brings to light is that the pathological

in Paul Ricoeur,” in *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research: Volume XC: Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos: Book Three*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 195–222; Darren Langdrige, “Ideology and Utopia: Social Psychology and the Social Imaginary of Paul Ricoeur,” *Theory & Psychology* 16, no. 5 (2006): 641–59; Lyman Tower Sargent, “Ideology and Utopia: Karl Mannheim and Paul Ricoeur,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 3 (2008): 263–73; Pierre-Olivier Monteil, *Ricoeur politique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013); John Arthos, *Hermeneutics after Ricoeur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Johann Michel, *Homo Interpretans: Towards a Transformation of Hermeneutics*, trans. David Pellauer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

⁷ John Arthos, for example, has recently argued that Ricoeur's political thought underwent a “significant shift of emphasis” in his later work (*Hermeneutics after Ricoeur*, 202), while Marc Crépon emphasizes its greater consistency (“‘Du paradox politique’: à la question des appartenances,” in *L'Herne: Ricoeur* [Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2004], 307).

⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 1.

⁹ Ricoeur also practices genetic phenomenology in other works, most notably in *Time and Narrative*. As he explains in Volume 1, the task of genetic phenomenology is “to discover in the phenomenon of the we-relation [*l'être-en-commun*] the origin of the connection between individuals and particular societies” (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 198). See also Paul Ricoeur, “Le ‘questionnement à rebours’ (Die Rückfrage) et la réduction des idéalités dans la *Krisis* de Husserl et *L'idéologie allemande* de Marx,” *Alter: Revue de phénoménologie* 5 (1997): 315–30.

functions of both ideology and utopia presuppose more neutral functions that need to be mutually clarified. Against a certain interpretation of Marx according to which ideology is contrasted with simple praxis, i.e., meaningless human behavior, Ricoeur argues that social reality should be understood as symbolically structured all the way down. By understanding the constitutive symbolism of social life, Ricoeur thinks that we can preserve the critical value of Marx's notion of ideology by showing how it is possible for reality to appear distorted in the first place.¹⁰ As Ricoeur frames this elsewhere: the pathological sense of ideology diagnosed by Marx and Engels can only be preserved if the starting point for an analysis of how social reality is symbolically represented begins not with the transition from some pre-symbolic stage of "real praxis," but from the passage of one symbolism to another.¹¹

In defending this claim, Ricoeur's analysis attempts to maneuver between two problematic oppositions that have emerged in the history of ideology theory. First, as we have just said, there is the opposition between ideology and praxis exemplified by the early Marx. Second, we have the opposition of the ideological and the scientific, exemplified by figures as different as Mannheim and Louis Althusser (and, implicitly, perhaps, Obama). Although we will return to the second opposition in more detail later, for Ricoeur both of these strategies make the same mistake: they both fail to appreciate the way the "social imagination" is *constitutive* of social reality rather than a superstructural illusion produced by a society's economic base.¹² By distinguishing between the "constitutive symbolism" of meaningful social action and the "representative symbolism" which, rooted in the former, finds expression in the social imagination, Ricoeur argues that new lines can be drawn in our understanding of ideology.

Ricoeur thus begins his regressive analysis of ideology with its surface level appearance—the pathological phenomenon of "false consciousness" described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*.¹³ This first level, which Ricoeur calls "ideology-distortion," is the basic *explanandum*, we might say, of Ricoeur's analysis. In a first approach, Ricoeur understands ideology-distortion as an interested representation of

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 8.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lectures*, vol. 3, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 188.

¹² Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 3.

¹³ Although Marx and Engels do not actually use the term "false consciousness" here, Ricoeur suggests that Mannheim probably borrowed it from György Lukács (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 164). Engels does however use the term in a 1883 letter to Franz Mehring ("Engels to Franz Mehring," trans. Donna Torr, Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm).

a society's symbolic structure within the social imagination which functions to justify the domination of that society's system of authority. We will unpack this definition as we proceed. The *explanans* of Ricoeur's analysis, then, is what he identifies as the integrative function of ideology, or "ideology-integration." This more basic function of ideology, for Ricoeur, "is an unsurpassable phenomenon of social existence, insofar as social reality always has a symbolic constitution and incorporates an interpretation, in images and representations, of the social bond itself."¹⁴ This depth layer of ideology accounts for the possibility of ideology-distortion in the sense that it is this integrative symbolic representation of the social bond that becomes distorted under certain conditions. Without this constitutive symbolism and the positive role that it plays in meaningfully organizing social relations, the idea that ideology has a distorting function would be incoherent, as there would be nothing for it to distort.

"How is it possible," Ricoeur then asks, "that ideology plays these two roles, the very primitive role of integration of a community and the role of distortion of thought by interests?"¹⁵ Ricoeur's answer to this question is the fact that in the political life of human beings, systems of authority are obliged to present themselves as legitimate. This notion is central because the function of ideology, whether integrative or distortive, hinges on the felicity of an authority's efforts to secure credibility in the eyes of its addressees. Following Max Weber, what Ricoeur emphasizes is the idea that—apart from the direct use of force or violence—subjects are never merely passive recipients of power.¹⁶ Indeed, legitimation is a meaningful process in which subjects are, to some extent, active participants; there is always some degree of consent and cooperation established between the ruling and the ruled. Ricoeur thus defines "legitimation" as the "meaningful procedures" through which a system of authority establishes this cooperation beyond the naked use of force.¹⁷

If we have followed Ricoeur's analysis thus far, under what circumstances can we say that this legitimation process has crossed over from integration to distortion? Although this question is difficult to answer in general—for reasons that we will discuss later—Ricoeur's short answer is that ideology-distortion is the result of a failure, the failure of a system of authority to attain *credibility* in the eyes of those whose consent it requires. It is here that Weber's motivational model proves more attractive

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 255.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 12.

¹⁶ For an analysis of several domains in which Ricoeur redeploys insights drawn from Weber's work, see Ernst Wolff, "The Place of Max Weber in Ricoeur's Philosophy: Power, Ideology, Explanation," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy—Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française* 28, no. 2 (2020): 70–93.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 154.

to Ricoeur than the causal model of Althusser. In contrast to Althusser's more functionalist vocabulary,¹⁸ Ricoeur's Weberian-inspired account emphasizes the *meaningful content* of the legitimation process. By adopting a motivational vocabulary, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to consider the specific social meanings that motivate individuals and groups to take political authority as legitimate (or not). Were we to rely solely on Althusser's causal language, these meanings would only be relevant to the extent that they serve different functions.¹⁹ For Ricoeur, by contrast, it is a mistake to exclude this data from the analysis, as an adequate theory of ideology must be able to interpret and evaluate the specific motivational content through which we take our relationship to authority to be legitimate or illegitimate, however tacit or coercive it may ultimately prove to be. This is central to Ricoeur's account because it is here—at the level of its meaningful content rather than its function alone—that ideology either succeeds or fails to attain credibility in the hearts and minds of its subjects. Yet, because the meaningful content of ideology is specific to concrete historical situations, there are limits to how far one can theorize what is credible without dealing with concrete examples.

Acknowledging this limit, what does it mean to say that an authority's claim to legitimacy is credible? In a first approach, credibility implies that there is some degree of overlap or coincidence between a claim to authority and the corresponding belief of the addressee. In this sense we can understand an authority's claim to legitimacy in rhetorical terms, as Ricoeur himself suggests, following Clifford Geertz.²⁰ It is when a system of authority's claim to legitimacy can no longer be *persuasively articulated* to its intended audience that a "credibility gap" emerges.²¹ As Ricoeur explains elsewhere, this gap finds its possibility in the "prospective direction" of historical life between the constitutive and representative levels of symbolism.²² It is thus when an authority's legitimizing representation of the social order diverges too strongly from the

¹⁸ It is worth pointing out that Ricoeur's reading of Louis Althusser is based exclusively on *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005) and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 85–126. For this reason, Ricoeur's criticism is perhaps unfair to the more complete picture of Althusser's position that has emerged since the posthumous publication of his many later writings. For Althusser's own response to the charge of "functionalism," see "Note on the ISAs," in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), 218–31.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 134.

²⁰ For example, see Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 257; *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 251, 317; *Philosophical Anthropology*, 194.

²¹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183.

²² Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 188–89.

constitutive symbolism of everyday social action that ideology passes from its integrative to its distortive function.²³ In such a case, it is in search of some kind of intelligibility that ideology steps in to “fill in the gap,” as it were.²⁴ In this way, we can understand why Ricoeur suggests we think of ideology as a kind of “surplus” or supplemental belief in the legitimacy of an authority.

What Ricoeur’s analysis ultimately shows us is that at its most basic level ideology plays a conservative role—conservative in the sense that it tries to hold together the meaningful fabric of a given society. For Ricoeur, all the pathologies associated with ideology proceed from this conservative function.²⁵ What ultimately defines the passage from ideology-integration to ideology-distortion is therefore when ideology tries to preserve oppressive and violent social relations for the sake of order.

Mannheim’s Paradox

With this sketch of Ricoeur’s basic analysis of ideology and how he distinguishes between the two functions of ideology, we can now turn to the second line of thought in *Lectures*, namely the problem that Mannheim’s paradox poses for any theory of ideology.

What Ricoeur finds novel about Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia*²⁶ is its attempt to think the concepts of ideology and utopia together within a common framework. In Mannheim’s study, however, he came up against a problem that Ricoeur himself must also confront. Put simply, the problem is this: if ideology refers to a false or distorted representation of the symbolic structure of society, and if this distortion affects all members of a social group, how can any theory of ideology claim to escape the very thing it aims to describe? In more epistemological terms: what sort of criteria can allow us to distinguish between ideological and non-ideological representations if the very criteria by which we could make this judgment are themselves ideological?

Mannheim’s own solution to this problem takes the form of what he calls a “relationism.”²⁷ As Ricoeur summarizes, Mannheim’s point “is that if we can create a

²³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 183. See also “Discussion” of “La Raison Pratique,” in *Rationality To-day / La rationalité aujourd’hui*, ed. Theodore F. Geraets (Ottawa, ONT: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 243, translation mine.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 318.

²⁶ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954).

²⁷ Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 70–71.

survey and exact description of all the forces in society, then we will be able to locate every ideology in its right place.”²⁸ Although Ricoeur is sympathetic to the honesty of this approach, he claims that Mannheim ultimately fails to resolve the paradox. If he can be said to resolve it all, it is only in an abstract, “pseudo-Hegelian” way that purports to have an absolute perspective on social reality.²⁹ The reason for this is that Mannheim’s concepts of ideology and utopia are *theoretical* rather than *practical*.³⁰ Ricoeur’s dissatisfaction with Mannheim stems from the fact that Mannheim poses and attempts to resolve the paradox scientifically, at the level of theoretical reason, as though ideology was only a problem in and for theory. For Ricoeur, by contrast, ideology and utopia constitute a “practical circle.”³¹ Ricoeur thus reproaches Mannheim for making something of a category mistake: like Althusser, Mannheim attempts to carve out a place from which the philosopher or the social scientist can overlook the whole field of ideology. In both cases, ideology is understood by means of its opposition with science—science here being understood as a method of accessing social reality in a pre-symbolic way such that the observer is not subject to any ideological motivation.

By rejecting the opposition between ideology and science, Ricoeur’s approach finds itself closer to that of the early Marx, in the sense that the concept of ideology retains its polemical edge.³² As Ricoeur explains, if we are to be able to perform any kind of critique, we must first “assume at least part of the discourse of ideology in order to speak of ideology.”³³ Thus, Ricoeur’s counterargument to both Mannheim and Althusser is that the “scientific” strategy of trying to step outside of ideology assumes that there is a position from which we can relate directly to our conditions of existence in a pre-symbolic way. Yet, for Ricoeur, the problem with this gesture is that these conditions simply:

must be represented in one way or another; they must have their imprint in the motivational field, in our system of images, and so in our representation of the world. The so-called real causes never appear as such in human existence but always under a symbolic mode. It is this symbolic mode which

²⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 165.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178.

³¹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178.

³² Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 179.

³³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 140.

is secondarily distorted. . . . If everything were distorted, that is the same as if nothing were distorted.³⁴

Assuming part of the discourse of ideology then, for Ricoeur, means that in order to resolve the paradox we have to work from *within* the “circle of ideology,” that is, from within the social imagination itself.

Utopian Lessons

We now turn briefly to the other side of the social imagination—utopia. Like ideology, Ricoeur’s regressive analysis reveals that utopia too admits of both positive and negative functions.³⁵ Ricoeur’s understanding of the pathological function of utopia is similar to its common meaning in political discourse. Here, utopia means something like a naïve fiction that allows people to imaginatively escape from the constraints of their material circumstances. As for its positive function, which is closely related, utopia is the use of that remarkable power of the imagination to put oneself beyond what is actual, to explore new possibilities that may not be materially possible. For Ricoeur, this imaginative power is essential for critique as it can help us discern differences between the conceivable and the actual. Utopia in this sense therefore has an important role to play in reflection, accomplishing what Ricoeur calls the “dissolution of obstacles.”³⁶ It is by reflecting on these utopian differences that the ideological lines of what is both necessary and contingent in political life momentarily slacken. Thus understood, utopia is an essential resource for any attempt to break free of the closed circle of ideology. At its best, utopia can allow us to imaginatively distance ourselves from the immediacy of ideology. Borrowing a metaphor from Mannheim, Ricoeur talks about the way that utopia can “shatter” the obviousness of a given order.³⁷ Methodologically speaking, it is therefore essential for Ricoeur that we preserve these imaginative resources rather than exclude them from our critical toolkit.

³⁴ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 145.

³⁵ For more a more extensive treatment of Ricoeur’s conception of utopia than I can offer here, see Vicky Iakovou, “To Think Utopia with and beyond Paul Ricoeur,” in *From Ricoeur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricoeur’s Thinking*, ed. Todd S. Mei and David Lewin (New York: Continuum, 2012), 113–35; George H. Taylor, “Delineating Ricoeur’s Concept of Utopia,” *Social Imaginaries* 3, no. 1 (2017): 41–60.

³⁶ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 296.

³⁷ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 300. For a discussion of this metaphor in the context of Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* and his unpublished *Lectures on Imagination*, see Taylor, “Delineating Ricoeur’s Concept of Utopia.”

As the social imagination is constitutive of our social existence, utopias are part and parcel of our interpretive self-understanding of what is and is not politically legitimate.

It is with this understanding of the utopian imagination that we reach Ricoeur's first solution to Mannheim's paradox. As Ricoeur explains: "There is no answer to Mannheim's paradox except to say that we must try to cure the illness of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology. . . and to try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element."³⁸ Ricoeur's suggestion is that the positive functions of ideology and utopia can serve as a corrective to their respective pathological functions. Utopia can draw our attention to the difference between what is conceivable and what is actual. This momentary glimpse of the line between the necessary and the contingent allows us to imaginatively modify the limits of our otherwise closed ideological horizon. When utopias become pathological, on the other hand, that is, when the conceivable forgets the actual, the gravitational pull of ideology-integration can be used to bring people together around matters of common concern.

Insightful as Ricoeur's analysis is here, I take it to be more promissory than definitive. Although that would be typical of Ricoeur, I mean this here in a stronger sense. I take this solution as especially tentative for textual reasons. Rather than end on this note, Ricoeur goes further, concluding *Lectures* with a series of remarks that point in the direction of future work, which, in hindsight, he would indeed undertake. In the final paragraph he mentions "a judgment of appropriateness," or a "concrete judgment of taste," and the "capacity to appreciate what is fitting in a given situation"—each of which revolve around the notion of "practical wisdom."³⁹ I will argue that by tracing these threads into Ricoeur's later work, the profile of a more systematic solution to the problem of ideology begins to emerge.

Ideology and Practical Reason

By invoking "practical wisdom" at the end of *Lectures*, Ricoeur signals his broadly Aristotelian approach to politics, and practical philosophy more generally. Thus, before turning to Ricoeur's later work, we first need to examine Ricoeur's conception of practical reason, how it differs from theoretical reason, and why the problem of ideology is of a "practical nature."⁴⁰

Consider the following passage from Ricoeur's "Science and Ideology":

³⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

³⁹ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 247.

All current quarrels over ideology begin from the implicit or explicit repudiation of Aristotle's contention concerning the rough and schematic character of argumentation in the sciences that he subsumed under the name of politics and that have been successively called moral sciences, *Geisteswissenschaften*, human sciences, social sciences, critical social sciences, and finally the critique of ideology developed by the Frankfurt school. The thing that strikes me in contemporary discussions is not only. . . what is said about ideology but the claim to say it from a nonideological place called science.⁴¹

Ricoeur draws attention here to the different levels of exactness that can be expected in the practical sphere of politics and in the sciences. Indeed, Ricoeur often quotes Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁴² where Aristotle explains that we should only look for the degree of exactness in each kind of investigation that the nature of the subject matter allows.⁴³ For Aristotle, theoretical reason is concerned with the pursuit of certain knowledge based upon necessary and self-evident first principles.⁴⁴ Practical reason, by contrast, is concerned with the sphere of human action in all its novelty, contingency, and uncertainty.⁴⁵ As Aristotle often summarizes the distinction: theoretical reason is concerned with that which is “not capable of being otherwise,” while practical reason concerns that which is. For this reason, the methods appropriate to practical matter are deliberation and argumentation—“for no one deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise”⁴⁶—whereas theoretical matters can be worked out by logical demonstration (*apodeixis*) alone.

While Ricoeur does not take on board all of Aristotle's metaphysical assumptions, he does want to preserve a certain difference between the practical sphere of politics and the theoretical sphere of science. Yet, this difference is not

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 255.

⁴² For example, Paul Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” in *Philosophy of History and Action: Papers Presented at the First Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter (December 1974)*, ed. Yirmiahu Yovel (Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1974), 5; *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 178; *From Text to Action*, 246.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2014), 1094b, 3.

⁴⁴ For Ricoeur's discussion of Aristotle's conception of *théoria* and the break between the practical and the theoretic, see Paul Ricoeur, *Being, Essence, and Substance in Plato and Aristotle*, trans. David Pellauer and John Starkey (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 241, 162–63.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the development of Ricoeur's conception of practical reason from the essay “Practical Reason” to *Oneself as Another*, see Laurent Jaffro, “La conception Ricoeurienne de la raison pratique,” *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 156–71.

⁴⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, trans. Kenny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1139a11–14; *On Rhetoric*, 2nd ed., trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1357a1–6, 41.

simply a question of the different methods appropriate to the natural and human sciences respectively. Rather, as he explains in “History and Hermeneutics,” Ricoeur wants to “dig deeper than the opposition between the ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’” as it is usually understood.⁴⁷ Instead, his philosophical hermeneutics begins by reflecting on the different “interests” that animate their respective objects and methods.⁴⁸

What Ricoeur finds of particular importance in Aristotle’s way of thinking about practical reason is the way that it preserves its connection to notions such as desire, interest, and preference (*prohairesis*). Recall the passage from Obama with which we began. Here, truth and science were opposed to “political agendas and ideologies.” The implication here was that some political assertions are motivated by desires and interests while others are neutrally guided by the right information, their own personal motivations being irrelevant. To make such a distinction, however, Obama must assume a theoretical or “scientific” vantage point in the style of Mannheim or Althusser. In doing so, Obama is inviting his audience to join him outside the sphere of ideological influence and rely solely upon preference-neutral knowledge to guide their actions. Yet, for both Aristotle and Ricoeur, maintaining such a distinction is antithetical to the role of interest or desire in practical reason. “Like that of Aristotle,” Ricoeur explains, “our analysis places no break between desire and reason.”⁴⁹ This is because the kind of truth that practical reason is concerned with involves an agreement with “correct” or “right” desire.⁵⁰ Ricoeur’s conception of practical reason thus remains distinctively Aristotelian in the sense that it unites thought and action around the notion of “practical truth.”⁵¹

When it comes to practical matters, then, our desires, interests, and preferences—in short, all that is mediated by the social imaginary—must not be excluded from the analysis if the problem of ideology is to be posed in the right way. Without recourse to knowledge of a pre-symbolic reality beyond all possible dispute, practical questions can only be judged by offering reasons for acting. When mobilized as a reason for adopting a particular course of action, even the most exact knowledge becomes subject to the “rough and schematic character of argumentation.” Indeed, to

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” 6.

⁴⁸ Ricoeur, “History and Hermeneutics,” 3.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 191.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, vol. II, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1139a25–30. Hereafter, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 87. For a more recent interpretation of practical truth in Aristotle that dovetails with that of Ricoeur, see C. M. M. Olfert, *Aristotle on Practical Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Olfert, against the “objects view” of the difference between theoretical and practical reason, argues that the distinguishing feature of practical reason is the fact that it aims at practical truth.

act under the impression that what ought to be done can be determined by purely theoretical or scientific means would be to conflate the two kinds of reason in a particularly dangerous way.

Ricoeur is unequivocal in his emphasis on the importance of keeping these two spheres distinct, even calling their conflation the “most dangerous of all ideas.”⁵² In “Practical Reason,”⁵³ Ricoeur emphasizes this point with reference to Kant’s practical philosophy. By failing to “recognize the specificity of the domain of action” and “elevating the rule of universalization to the rank of a supreme principle,” Ricoeur charges Kant with leaving the door open for “the deadly idea. . . that there is a science of praxis.”⁵⁴ For Ricoeur, failing to keep these two spheres apart means overlooking the different degrees of certainty appropriate to the theoretical sphere and the sphere of application and practice.

In spite of these strong warnings, however, Ricoeur insists we should find something “liberating” in the idea that practice cannot be wholly guided by scientific methods, noting that there nonetheless remains a certain rationality to practice.⁵⁵ And we should find this idea liberating, he continues, because it allows us to deal rationally with the domain of action in a way that is both ontologically and epistemologically appropriate: for the domain of action is, ontologically, that of “changing things” and from an epistemological perspective that of the verisimilar, the likely, or the probable (*eikos*).⁵⁶ Given that practical reason is concerned with human action, the meanings of which are always subject to conflicts of interpretation, it can never achieve the high threshold of precision and accuracy required by the sciences.

With this sketch of Ricoeur’s conception of practical reason, we can now pick up where we left off at the end of *Lectures*. Reading beyond Ricoeur’s initial response to Mannheim’s paradox, he continues: “My more ultimate answer [to Mannheim’s paradox] is that we must let *ourselves* be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral.”⁵⁷ On my reading, this emphasis on the “self” is an important clue as to why the problem of ideology is fundamentally a matter of practical reason. Rather than pertaining to any abstract, theoretical conception of consciousness or subjectivity, at the level of action ideology is ultimately a problem for *selves* in determinate social relations. It is selves who act, and it is therefore selves who will either remain trapped

⁵² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

⁵³ This paper was first delivered in 1977 (Ricoeur, “La Raison Pratique”).

⁵⁴ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

⁵⁶ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 199.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312, emphasis mine.

in the circle of ideology or succeed in making it a spiral. Yet, what is it about Ricoeur's conception of the self that can help bring the problem of ideology to some practical resolution? As we will discuss in what follows, it is the self's capacity for judgment. It is in this sense that Ricoeur wants to avoid Mannheim's paradox by allowing the "correlation ideology-utopia to replace the impossible correlation ideology-science" in the hopes that a "solution to the problem of *judgment* may be found."⁵⁸

Phronesis: Wisdom in Judgment

All of the clues that we have discussed so far have led us to the concept of judgment. Although frequent reference to judgment can be found in many of Ricoeur's writings, it is not until *Oneself as Another*, *The Just*, and *Reflections on The Just* that a more systematic picture of the concept begins to emerge.⁵⁹ In these writings, Ricoeur understands judgment not simply as an individual act of cognition but as a social capacity, owing to the intersubjective and institutional constitution of selfhood. Indeed, as Gregory D. Hoskins has argued, it is this "capacity to judge. . . that subtends the various capacities that constitute the subject of Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology."⁶⁰ In a similar vein, Philippe Lacour argues that the logic of judgment in Ricoeur's work is "the key" to his thinking on practical reasoning as a whole.⁶¹

Building on these insights, I now want to begin to connect the clues from the end of *Lectures* with Ricoeur's later development of phronesis and its relation to judgment. To begin, I turn to Ricoeur's final words in *Lectures*:

[Mannheim] talks of a criterion of appropriateness. This criterion is rather difficult to apply but it may be our only alternative. . . . The *judgment of appropriateness* is the way to solve [Mannheim's] noncongruence problem. It is a *concrete judgment of taste*, an ability to appreciate what is *fitting in a given situation*.

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 173, emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur's earliest in-depth study of "judgment" is a 1958-59 course. See Paul Ricoeur, *Le Jugement Cours de M. Ricoeur* (Paris: Groupe de Philosophie, 1959). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); *Reflections on The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ Gregory D. Hoskins, "The Capacity to Judge and the Contours of a Theory of Political Judgment," in *Paul Ricoeur and the Task of Political Philosophy*, ed. Greg S. Johnson and Dan R. Stiver (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), 98.

⁶¹ Philippe Lacour, "Le jugement et sa logique dans la philosophie de Ricoeur (Deuxième partie)," *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 140.

Instead of a pseudo-Hegelian claim to have a total view, the question is one of *practical wisdom*, we have the security of judgment because we appreciate what can be done in a situation. We cannot get out of the circle of ideology and utopia, but *the judgment of appropriateness* may help us to understand how the circle can become a spiral.⁶²

There are two points here that I would like to take up. The first is Ricoeur's identification of the question as being one of "practical wisdom" or phronesis. The second concerns the related ideas of a "judgment of appropriateness," a "concrete judgment of taste," or "what is fitting in a given situation."

Given Ricoeur's affinity with Aristotle, it is perhaps best to begin there as both a starting point and a point of contrast with Ricoeur's use of "phronesis."⁶³ In Aristotle's ethical and political writings, phronesis is an intellectual virtue concerned with action that involves, like other virtues, deciding upon the mean between two vices in accordance with what is prescribed by correct reasoning.⁶⁴ Aristotle defines phronesis as "a state involving true reason, a practical one, concerned with what is good or bad for a human being."⁶⁵ This state (*hexis*) is rational in the sense that it aims at truth, which, in practical matters, concerns an "agreement with right desire."⁶⁶ For Aristotle, desire is ineliminable here because practical reason is essentially *prescriptive* and thus involves some vision of what ought to be realized through our actions.

Another important aspect of phronesis for Aristotle is the way it relates universals to particulars. Unlike theoretical knowledge, whose concern is "judgment about what is universal and necessary,"⁶⁷ phronesis is concerned more with what is particular, "for [phronesis] is concerned with conduct, and particulars are the sphere of conduct."⁶⁸ For example, consider the way a doctor must decide about the best course of treatment for a specific patient. Although the doctor has general knowledge about what sorts of remedies cure specific types of illnesses, determining what illness a patient has, and how best to treat that illness in specific circumstances involves a

⁶² Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 314, emphases mine.

⁶³ For Ricoeur's interpretation of Aristotle's notion of phronesis in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, see Paul Ricoeur, "À la gloire de la *phronesis*," in *La vérité pratique: Aristote, Éthique à nicomaque, Livre VI*, ed. Jean-Yves Châteaueau (Paris: Vrin, 1997), 13–22. A similar interpretation can be found in Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, 79–89. For a comparison of Ricoeur's understanding of phronesis with that of Gadamer, see Arthos's discussion of the "seven differences" in *Hermeneutics after Ricoeur*, 9–22.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1138b18–25.

⁶⁵ C. D. C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom: Nicomachean Ethics VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1140b4–5, 56.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a29–30.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1140b30.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1141b14–17.

greater understanding of the particularities of the case than it does knowledge of the generals. For Aristotle, this is why theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to be good at something. Accumulated experience of particulars is also needed.

The last aspect of Aristotelian phronesis that needs to be addressed is what he calls the *phronimos*, namely, those individuals who embody and exemplify the virtue of practical wisdom and serve as the reference point in our discernment of the mean.⁶⁹ This reference to *phronimos* plays an important role in discerning what is *phronetic* in a given situation. The reason for this is that, unlike theoretical reason, which can rely upon the foundational security of first principles in its operation, practical reason must take its point of departure from those opinions that are taken to be wise or reasonable.

With this sketch of Aristotelian phronesis, I now want to show how Ricoeur builds upon this concept in and beyond *Oneself as Another*. In order not to lose our thread, I will only touch upon those aspects of Ricoeur's "little ethics" that are most relevant to our discussion. Ricoeur's goal in the three studies that make up his little ethics is to defend three essentially related theses. Ricoeur's first thesis is that there is a primacy of ethical teleology over moral deontology; second, that it is necessary for the aim of ethics to "pass through the sieve" of moral norms; and, finally, that when the norms of morality, by virtue of their universality, lead to impasses in the attempt to actualize those norms in practice, recourse must be had back to ethics in the form of a particular kind of judgment that Ricoeur wants to "qualify as phronetic."⁷⁰ What I want to show is that when it comes to the problem of ideology, the idea of a *phronetic* judgment that we find in the later Ricoeur consolidates his earlier solution in a more developed way. In phronetic judgment, utopia finds its place as a component of the self's capacity to attest to a teleological vision. Emphasizing this affirmative aspect of phronetic judgment with respect to the problem of ideology may help to overcome Ricoeur's image, among some critical theorists, as someone engaged only in a "hermeneutics of suspicion."⁷¹ Let us now take a closer look at Ricoeur's understanding of phronesis.

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36 ff.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 170; *The Just*, xxii.

⁷¹ Rahel Jaeggi, for example, criticizes Ricoeur's "hermeneutics of suspicion" as a method of ideology critique for still being a hermeneutics, which she argues involves having to "reconstruct the perspective of those concerned. . . not in an external and objective way but as the agents experience them" ("Rethinking Ideology," in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, ed. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009], 80). Yet, by taking a longer view of Ricoeur's work, it is clear that hermeneutics plays only a partial role, alongside rhetoric and poetics, in dealing with ideology. I discuss this further below.

Summarizing his little ethics, Ricoeur states in *Critique and Conviction* that the problem to which phronesis served as an answer was that of making “new decisions in the face of difficult cases.”⁷² This problem arises upon recognizing the self’s finitude in relation to the situations that confront them.⁷³ In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur identifies three features of phronesis that can assist us in managing this finitude when forming judgments. These features are: (1) “respect for adverse positions”; (2) the search for the “just mean”; and (3) the counsel of the wise, or the *phronimos*.⁷⁴ Each of these three features captures something essential about the aim of phronesis, which is to enact a phronetic judgment, or to invent a novel form of conduct that navigates through adverse positions to locate what is just in that particular situation.

What Ricoeur wants from this concept in the political sphere can be clarified by means of an analogy with the legal sphere. In law, each case brought to trial revolves around a conflict of some sort that has occurred between the parties involved. One of the principal tasks of a judge is to hear out the opposing sides so that all the relevant points of view can be taken into consideration and put into productive conflict. In forming his or her judgment, the judge aims to determine the just mean between the parties with respect to legal precedent in essentially similar cases. In this example, the *phronimos* can be understood as analogous to the notion of legal precedent.

Yet, this is but an analogy. There are important differences between moral systems and legal systems. As Ricoeur points out: “The whole question is. . . whether a moral system, which does not have the support of the judicial institution, is capable of establishing its own coherence.”⁷⁵ What marks the essential difference here, Ricoeur continues, is that on the moral plane we are most often dealing with unexpressed “specificatory premises” that mark the intermingling of relations of domination and violence that are themselves institutionalized.⁷⁶ This difference is crucial for the way phronetic judgment attempts to navigate between the pathological effects of ideology and utopia within the social imaginary, which, in different ways, each have the potential to draw attention away from domination in the political sphere.

⁷² Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 92.

⁷³ Concerning my use of the notion of “finitude” here, I am inclined to agree with Sebastian Purcell, who argues that there is a fundamental difference between the meaning of “finitude” in Ricoeur and Heidegger, for example. On Purcell’s reading, by “finitude” Ricoeur means something like a “lack of self-coincidence” rather than the global horizon of all human reality (“Hermeneutics and Truth: From *Alētheia* to Attestation,” *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 4, no. 1 [2013]: 149).

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 273.

⁷⁵ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 278.

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 279–80.

We now turn to the second clue I identified at the end of *Lectures*, namely, the “judgment of appropriateness,” the “concrete judgment of taste,” or that which is “fitting in a given situation.” As I read them, these ideas are serving as a placeholder for what Ricoeur will later develop in terms of the “the *equitable*”—phronesis actualized in judgment.⁷⁷ Here, we can see how Ricoeur again makes use of Aristotle, specifically Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between equity and (legal) justice.⁷⁸ The problem for Aristotle is this: since all law is universal and conduct is particular, a difficulty arises in attempting to subsume conduct under a law without in some sense violating the law’s universality.⁷⁹ Importantly, this is not a theoretical problem for Aristotle, but a practical problem in the sense that it is constitutive of interpreting and applying the law. For Aristotle, the equitable is thus “a correction of the law where it is defective owing to its universality.”⁸⁰

Turning back to Ricoeur, it is now possible to see how his notion of phronesis is concerned with the same kind of difficulty, albeit beyond the confines of the law in the broader realm of what Ricoeur calls “political language.”⁸¹ The difficulty is that phronetic judgment has to rewrite its own rules, as it were, in a way that is more faithful to those rules than another. In similar fashion, on its journey back to ethics, having passed through the “sieve” of morality, the ethical aim must be tentatively actualized in a way that will, to some extent, always violate certain norms and the original aims of the action’s initiator. Consider, for example, cases of civil disobedience wherein individuals deliberately violate the law in order to live up to some higher sense of justice than the legal. In such cases, those involved must judge which course of action will best correct existing forms of injustice that fly below the radar of the law’s rigid universality.

What this example captures about phronetic judgment is the inventive moment that it necessarily involves, a moment of novelty that can never be fully accounted for in terms of what is traditional, precedential, or conventional. As a preliminary definition, we might say that *phronesis is the virtue of judging what is equitable in situations where injustice will have to be done to one set of values for the sake of another*. In phronetic judgment, the two vices to be avoided are, on the one hand, the rigid universality of

⁷⁷ “It remains to give a name to the just on the plane of practical reason, the one where judgment occurs in a situation. I propose that the just then is no longer either the good or the legal, but the *equitable*” (Ricoeur, *The Just*, xxiv).

⁷⁸ For example, Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 261.

⁷⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b10–14.

⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b26–27.

⁸¹ Paul Ricoeur, “The Fragility of Political Language,” trans. David Pellauer, *Philosophy Today* 31, no. 1 (1987): 35–44.

deontological norms, which can often reinforce domination masked by ideology and, on the other, the capricious particularity of ethical aims, which have yet to pass the test of deontology.

With this sketch of Ricoeur's basic understanding of phronesis and its relation to judgment, it is now possible to address the issue to which my discussion has been leading up: What does the problem of Mannheim's paradox look like now from the perspective of Ricoeur's more developed concept of phronesis, "wisdom in judgment"?

Spiraling the Circle

In this final section I describe the tripartite core of Ricoeur's conception of phronetic judgment and explain how it can serve to spiral the practical circle of ideology and utopia.

In the Preface to *The Just*, Ricoeur explains his qualification of the problem of judgment as "phronetic":

The whole problem, which I will risk qualifying with the adjective *phronetic*, lies in exploring the *middle* zone where the judgment is formed, halfway between proof, defined by the constraints of logic, and sophism, motivated by the desire to seduce or the temptation to intimidate. This middle zone can be designated by many names, depending on the strategy used: *rhetoric*, to the extent that rhetoric, following Aristotle's definition, consists in giving a "rejoinder" to dialectic, itself understood as a doctrine of probable reasoning; *hermeneutic*, to the extent that this joins application to understanding or explanation; *poetic*, to the extent that the invention of an appropriate solution to the unique situation stems from what, since Kant, we have called the productive imagination. . . .

Today I would say that the reflective judgment of Kant's third *Critique* brings together the three aspects distinguished by these three disciplines: probability, subsumption (or application), innovation.⁸²

This passage brings together a number of themes that run throughout Ricoeur's work. As I read it, by qualifying the problem of judgment as phronetic Ricoeur is attempting to bring together those aspects of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and poetics that allow

⁸² Ricoeur, *The Just*, xxii.

judgment to navigate between an indifferent universalism and a capricious particularism. These aspects are: (1) the art of interpretation characteristic of hermeneutics; (2) the imaginative invention characteristic of poetics; and (3) the probable argumentation characteristic of rhetoric. As I will argue, each of these three aspects play an essential role in the phronetic effort to spiral the circle.

(1) To begin, phronetic judgment is hermeneutic in that ideological distortion must first be identified and interpreted before it can be overcome. If Ricoeur's basic understanding of the social imaginary is correct, there should be both ideological and utopian layers of meaning to every action. To connect this to our earlier discussion about constitutive symbolism, Ricoeur understands action as meaningful "to the extent that it meets conditions of acceptability established within a community of language and of values."⁸³ These conditions of acceptability, as Ricoeur will say later in the same essay, are "symbolic codes [that] confer a certain *readability* upon action."⁸⁴ Ideologies and utopias form an important part of these symbolic codes and bestow actions with a distinctively political meaning. Yet, in order to thematize and objectify these ideological and utopian layers of meaning, an effort must first be made to distance oneself from our more original relation of belonging. It is here that Ricoeur locates the essential, even if limited, role of more scientific forms of explanation in ideology critique when he points to the "necessity of a detour through the explanation of causes."⁸⁵ By pursuing the dialectic of explanation and understanding characteristic of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, it is possible to break open the closed circle of ideology by thematizing operative motivational frameworks that participate in the perpetuation and legitimation of systems of domination.

(2) Yet, hermeneutics is only one moment of phronetic judgment: a broken circle does not yet make a spiral. What is learned from interpretation must still be brought back into the sphere of action by *someone*. It is therefore falls on individuals, acting in concert, to innovate equitable solutions where laws and institutions fail. Let us briefly return to the final paragraphs of Ricoeur's *Lectures*, where he emphasizes the personal character of his response and the necessary element of risk that this involves:

My more ultimate answer [to Mannheim's paradox] is that we must let *ourselves* be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral. We cannot eliminate from a social ethics the element of *risk*. We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is

⁸³ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 189.

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 195.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 292.

therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this. Anyone who claims to proceed in a value-free way will find nothing.⁸⁶

Within the now-broken circle, the agents of phronetic judgment will ultimately have to risk *themselves* on a determinate vision of the good life. This element of risk is unavoidable because the referent of the judgment is only a *desired* future. Yet, it is important to recall that innovation for Ricoeur does not mean creation *ex nihilo*.⁸⁷ Rather, as Ricoeur explains in *The Rule of Metaphor*, innovation “is a way of responding in a creative fashion to a question presented by things.”⁸⁸ At the political level, the poetic aspect of phronetic judgment aims at a “conversion of the *imaginary*.”⁸⁹ More precisely, it aims to modify the social imaginary in an equitable way. In doing so, it attempts to stir up “the sedimented universe of conventional ideas,” which, if successful, will become future “premises of rhetorical argumentation.”⁹⁰ It is here that a new meaning is produced, and the circle first broken by hermeneutic distancing is set into motion.

(3) If the poetic moment of phronetic judgment involves the production of a new meaning, the last question that remains to be addressed concerns the truth status of this innovation. What kind of “truth” can phronetic judgment aspire to? In *Reflections on The Just*, Ricoeur dedicates a section of his essay “Justice and Truth” to this question. Here, Ricoeur describes this kind of truth in the same terms of “fit” that we encountered in *Lectures*:

What kind of truth is at issue here? It is a truth that fits. . . . Can we speak then of objectivity? No, not in the constative sense of this term. It is a question rather of the certitude that in this situation this is the best decision, what has to be done. It is not a matter of constraint; the force of this conviction has nothing to do with a factual determination. It is the sense *hic et nunc* of what obviously fits, of what ought to be done.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 312.

⁸⁷ Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis, “Dialogue on History and the Social Imaginary,” trans. Scott Davidson, in *Ricoeur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, ed. Suzi Adams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 5.

⁸⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 146.

⁸⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics,” in *From Metaphysics to Rhetoric*, ed. Michel Meyer (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 2012), 143.

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, “Rhetoric-Poetics-Hermeneutics,” 143.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, *Reflections on The Just*, 70.

This notion of fit brings us to the third and final aspect of phronetic judgment—rhetoric. Phronetic judgment is rhetorical in the sense that it must be found persuasive by others, namely, those who will suffer the resulting course of action. Since it aims at the realization of what is equitable in singular situations—that is, something novel—the “truth” of phronetic judgment is not merely “constative”; it does not aim to describe things *as they are*. In other words, because phronesis is not constrained by factual determinations alone, it must be recognized *as phronetic* by those involved.

Here, Ricoeur finds inspiration in Kant’s notion of reflective judgment. As in Kant, the kind of universality sought by phronetic judgment is that of “communicability.”⁹² Paradoxically, communicability attempts to institute a universality that is not pre-given. The truth of phronetic judgment thus remains bound to its ability to be persuasively communicated to others.⁹³ It is important to recall, however, that political argumentation is bound by a “logic of the probable,” where arguments are never final. Even when successful, the outcome of phronesis may always be challenged and will have to be defended in the court of public opinion. And when it fails, it will need to start again, and look for new ways of arguing that activate the social imaginary and disrupt ideological distortion. As Aristotle recognized long ago, herein lies the importance of rhetoric: it is not enough to merely see what is true and just, these values must also be actualized in speech, lest they be defeated by their opposites.⁹⁴

Conclusion

By taking a longer view on Ricoeur’s thinking about ideology, I have argued the concept of phronetic judgment consolidates certain aspects of his earlier reflections on ideology, utopia, and the social imagination within his later reflections on ethics, politics, and practical philosophy more generally. Reading Ricoeur in this way reveals a surprising continuity in his political thought that may help to bring together the

⁹² Ricoeur, *The Just*, 97–98.

⁹³ For an account of Ricoeur’s theory of truth that moves in the same direction as my argument here, see Todd S. Mei, “Constructing Ricoeur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricoeur: Between Text and Phenomenon*, ed. Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 197–215. Mei discusses in more detail the role of communicability and agreement in Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory of truth, which he describes as a “holistic fallibilism.”

⁹⁴ Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 1355a21–24, 35.

different stages of his corpus.⁹⁵ Moreover, doing so may also stimulate further interest from critical theorists who might not otherwise see the immediate relevance of Ricoeur's later works to ideology critique.

However, there are also political implications to our reading. Above all, Ricoeur exposes the idleness of trying to detach politics from our desires and preferences. This serves as a much-needed corrective to the idea that politics can be conducted on the basis of facts and data alone. The problem with this prevalent line of thought is that it surrenders a central site of political struggle—the social imaginary. To overcome ideological distortion, new visions for the future are needed. The point, therefore, is not to deny the social imaginary, but to find our place within it and risk ourselves on something new. Phronetic judgment is Ricoeur's model for doing so. While inescapably fallible, this process finds support in the very selves who initiate it. This means that we must take responsibility not only for our decisions but also the consequences of their actualization. Ricoeur's insistence upon the fragility of politics thus serves as a warning akin to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: our capacity to innovate is both a gift and a curse, and we must not abandon our creations even when they fail to resemble the good intentions that imagined them into existence.

⁹⁵ George H. Taylor, "Why Ideology and Utopia Today?" in *Ideology and Utopia and in the Twenty-First Century: The Surplus of Meaning in Ricoeur's Dialectical Concept*, ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Dan R. Stiver (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), 228.