Constructing Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Theory of Truth

Abstract

While there are several moments throughout his career when Ricoeur devotes attention to the problem of truth—for example, in *History and Truth*, his conception of manifestation in his biblical hermeneutics, and when discussing convictions and non-epistemological beliefs in *Oneself as Another*—a more unified theory is never formulated. This can be seen as a somewhat odd omission given the emphasis he places on a hermeneutical form of reasoning. What is a theory of reasoning without a theory of truth? The aim of this chapter is to construct a theory of truth from various texts that span Ricoeur's career. I begin by situating Ricoeur between Heidegger's notion of truth as disclosure and MacIntyre's view that truth is monolithic. I examine how fragility acts as the founding concept for a Ricoeurian theory of truth, which I describe as a kind of "holistic fallibilism." The core of his theory is ethically grounded as opposed to emphasizing ontological disclosure, consistency of beliefs with a metaphysical principle, or the analysis of the reasonableness of statements/propositions.

The whole of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy can be seen as an endeavor to develop an understanding of different orders of truth in relation to a broad conception of the good life—whether in terms of self-understanding, ethics, or politics. Symbolic meaning, narrative identity, non-epistemic belief, and mutuality are some of the significant ways in which Ricoeur seeks to understand truth according to dedicated fields of analysis while at the same time holding in view ontological questions of meaning. Hence, not semiotics, but semantics; not representation, but refiguration; not certainty, but confidence; not shared reasons, but mutual understanding. Integral to this ethical project is Ricoeur's distinction between convictional and epistemic belief, which can be said to form the core of his account of how meaning in existence is grounded in relations with others and is therefore non-reducible to scientific kinds of knowledge and verification. I address this topic elsewhere (Mei 2016). In this chapter, I want to accomplish something specific in relation to traditional philosophical expectations of what a theory of truth should comprise. What is referred to as a *formal analysis of truth* involves answering such questions as "what is truth?" and "what does it mean for a belief to be

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true?" It would therefore seem commonsensical that for Ricoeur, who gave so much emphasis to the uniqueness and advantages of the hermeneutical form of reasoning, such an analysis would be an important area of investigation. However, he does not say much on this topic.

This chapter is an attempt to provide such an analysis of truth, at least in attenuated form. (Hence, my use of the term "constructing" in the title should be read as a philosophical project underway.) It proposes to construct Ricoeur's theory of truth in terms of its ethical distinction against the backdrop of two of his contemporaries—Martin Heidegger and Alasdair MacIntyre—who offer more explicit accounts of truth and with whom Ricoeur has some affinities. As we will see, Ricoeur's distinctiveness emerges in how he balances history and ethics in view of truth. To mark this distinction, I will argue that both Heidegger and MacIntyre over-determine an aspect of truth—respectively, the truth of being as disclosure (*aletheia*) and truth as one and as the terminus of inquiry. In either case, the over-determination of truth fails to account adequately for our being-with others, which is central to Ricoeur's thought.

In the first section, I provide a sketch of Ricoeur's *conception* of truth, or how we can say he thinks truth in a broad sense. In the second and third sections, I attempt to elaborate this conception in terms of a *theory* of truth, or what is an analysis of truth employing analytical concepts. In particular I draw on the terms holism and fallibilism and attempt to interpret them in view of Ricoeur's concern for ethical being, or what can be seeing as grafting his philosophical anthropology on epistemological concepts that have been stripped of their relation to lived experience with others.[1]

Between Heidegger and MacIntyre, Ontology and Metaphysics

To say Ricoeur is situated between Heidegger and MacIntyre is a way of saying that he offers an account of truth that attempts to hold in balance the significance of ontological meaning as disclosure (the truth or meaning of being) and the metaphysical unity of truth (truth as one). He does so by emphasizing the role and importance of the historical complexity through which truth plays out in a condition of human plurality. For Ricoeur, truth may be a substantial concept according to which we attempt to think philosophically, but this project of thought is distinct from how we can actually live in view of truth. So while truth has a conceptual priority, Ricoeur nonetheless grounds it in his analysis of the human condition. This grounding is most prevalent in his constant reference to human fragility, which is not just the liableness to err but an existentiale of vulnerability that transforms the manner

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[1] I should note that I take some liberty in ascribing the term "hermeneutical" to Ricoeur's theory of truth. In drawing on earlier texts I am assuming that his discussion is consistent with his pre-hermeneutical thought (e.g., *History and Truth*), aspects of his biblical hermeneutics, and his ethical thought in *Oneself as Another*. This unified reading of Ricoeur may irritate the more historically-minded scholar, but it is a necessary interpretive gambit if one is going to attempt to elaborate a topic Ricoeur only infrequently discusses.

in which we should see how claims to knowing and understanding operate (Ricoeur 1986: 1; 1992: 22, 191–196). I will discuss fragility more thematically below. For the moment, I merely assume its general meaning. The upshot of this for Ricoeur is that the question of truth must be confronted and understood practically as it is experienced in the human condition of fragility. Furthermore, this condition is never overcome, especially not by a project aiming at certain, infallible knowledge. Rather, it must be affronted in a manner that yields the condition for attesting to one's own sense of meaning and the meaning of others. In the end, truth is interrelational.

a) Heidegger and truth as disclosure

Heidegger's discussion of truth as disclosure (*aletheia*), or unconcealment, gives priority to the manner in which entities make themselves accessible to human understanding and action. Although *Being and Time* is largely dedicated to showing how truth is in some sense dependent on human understanding, there is nonetheless a subtext in which human disclosure of a world is possible only because being itself gives itself. Consequently, this means that beings participate in this original force or power in the way they give us access to themsleves. This donative meaning is what makes disclosure an event that the human subject cannot surpass or attempt to control through *episteme*. Taken together, humans and beings comprise a relation in which an original ontological disclosure is open to further disclosure (Heidegger 1971; cf. Sheehan 2001).[2] So it can be said that all human action and interaction is derivative of being's original and constant act of giving itself.

Furthermore, the human relation to disclosure is not one based on sight, despite what terms like disclosure and unconcealment may suggest. On the contrary, it is precisely the identification of reason with clear perception that Heidegger wants to call into question (Heidegger 1962: 57–58/*34*). Hence, he emphasizes the *logos* of phenomenology not as the sight of reason but as the letting be through interpretation. "To the things themselves" does not mean seeing more accurately or sufficiently but attuning to being so that it can be grasped according to its complexity and subtlety. It is sight, or the traditionally rendered *lumen naturale*, that presupposes a capacity of reason to sort out this complexity in order to understand what is. Against this historical prejudice, which of course Heidegger traces to Plato's notion of the Idea, stands the thesis that Dasein's disclosedness is predicated upon discourse (Heidegger 1962: 171–172/*133*)—or what is spoken. Indeed, what can be spoken is only so because Dasein has first listened to being. As Jacques Derrida reminds us, hearing not only opens Dasein to its ownmost potential-for-being, but it also constitutes the destructive

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[2] This comes out particularly in Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" when he identifies earth as primordial source, or *phusis*, and world as the human poietic activity set in strife against it. On this reading, the so-called *Kehre* in Heidegger's thought does not refer to a shift of his thought in a non-anthropological direction but a turning within his thought that discloses features that were earlier concealed.

retrieval of the metaphysical tradition. It hears what metaphysics only construes in terms of (visual) presence (Derrida 1993: 164, 173, 179–180). So the most original or authentic mode of relation is the act of listening. Heidegger writes,

> Hearing is constitutive for discourse [. . . .] Listening to . . . is Dasein's existential way of Being-open as Being-with for Others. Indeed, hearing constitutes the primary and authentic way in which Dasein is open for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. (Heidegger 1962: 206/*163*)

It is perhaps worth bearing in mind that although *Being and Time* is largely preoccupied with the human mode of being, and thus listening as it relates to one's own projects, Heidegger never departs from an essentially pre-Socratic conception of *logos* as a fundamental and intrinsic feature of being itself. Gadamer would later characterize this as the "universality of the hermeneutical problem" (Gadamer 1976: 3–17; cf. 1989: 474–491; cf. Beaufret 2006: 82; Ricoeur 1974: 464–465).

Ricoeur sits very closely to this Heideggerian account of truth in recognizing the primacy of disclosure and in giving priority to the role of listening. Consider the following passages:

> [D]iscourse is established close to human experience and it is therefore in experiences more fundamental than any ontotheological articulation that I will seek the traits of a truth capable of being spoken of in terms of manifestation rather than verification, as well as the traits of a self-awareness wherein the subject would free himself of the arrogance of consciousness. (Ricoeur 1977: 20)

And when agreeing with Heidegger that listening is existentially primary, Ricoeur notes the role of language:

> The logos signified not only the power which makes things manifest and gathers them together [. . . .] The power to gather things together by means of language does not originally belong to man as a speaking subject. (Ricoeur 1974: 464)

Both disclosure and listening illuminate a fundamental condition of human existence that Heidegger and Ricoeur believe to have been missed by the history of philosophy. But, of course, for each the reasons for and extent to which what is missed differ. Hence, Ricoeur states that Heidegger "gives us no way to show in what sense historical understanding, properly speaking, is derived from this primordial understanding" of ontology (Ricoeur 1974: 10).[3] In any event, the role of listening occupies

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[3] Purcell (2013: 146) reads Ricoeur's criticism quite strongly as expressing a logical failure in Heidegger's thought. Purcell thus sees the appeal to primordial ontology as having a logical obligation to discuss how this ontology "explains the posterior level" (146) of derivative practices. I do not see this type of accusation in Ricoeur's

an important role not only in terms of marking a rupture with traditional accounts of truth in terms of metaphors of seeing, but also in terms of how the human observer is placed in and before being. The metaphor of sight, as Derrida (1974 and 1983) observes, tends to be colonized by notions of human mastery and dominance. For the metaphysical tradition, to see is to see in its entirety, perhaps from an Archimedean point; if not, then, from a position least affected by agent-relative determinations. Listening, in contrast, is a mode of engagement predicated on sensitivity and receptivity to others.

This is readily apparent in Ricoeur's reflections on the Book of Job when he comments that Job's transformation comes only through the recognition of a fragility that no longer attempts to find protection or consolation but attends to what is prior to these reactions, an encounter with being by listening that results in "the love of creation [. . .] which depends on no external compensation" (Ricoeur 1974: 467). In its ethical role, listening can be said to have its privilege when Ricoeur discusses the role of conscience (Ricoeur 1992: 352). Not the sight of the face of the other, but its voice: "Here I stand!" (Ricoeur 1992: 336).[4] In short, one can say that for Ricoeur the primordial act of listening is fulfilled only when it becomes a listening to being with and for others. This extension of the act is in one sense Ricoeur's insistence on undertaking a necessary detour in order to recover ontology. Yet, it can also be taken more definitively to express a thesis on the relation to truth. This relation may be historical, as Heidegger insists, but what comprises this history of being is precisely the ethical relation to others.

Let me draw attention to this point more boldly. It is not just that Ricoeur's thought differs from Heidegger with regard to the way he sees ontology requiring an ethics (or a certain rendering of it). Rather, my suggestion is that Ricoeur sees truth as inextricably tied to ethical relations.[5] Its analysis cannot simply reside at the formal or symbolic level (i.e., as he mentions above in terms of verification), but must take into account statements, propositions, and utterances as they occur in a specific historical situation between someone who is speaking to someone else about something.

The ethical dimension is thus never far, for instance, from how Ricoeur envisages the tasks of translation and historical analysis. The truth for each task is one whose *telos* is situated in view of communicating with others. (As we will see, this differs from MacIntyre's notion of telos.) Translation is based on the model of linguistic hospitality while the historian aims at a "good subjectivity" responsible to the past and present (Ricoeur 2006: 23 and 1965: 30). Put more radically, one can say

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criticism. Rather, it seems to me Ricoeur cites Heidegger's failure or refusal to let ontology be translated, correlated, interpreted in the direction of specific practices and methods (cf. Ricoeur 2013: 70–71). Hence, Heidegger dissolves historical knowledge by his ontology. It is not that Heidegger failed to address a question of logical consistency, but that on his account this demand is a wrong one. Ricoeur (1986: 47–48) appears to offer a similar criticism of transcendental reflection.

[4] For a discussion of listening and conscience in relation to social conflict, see Mei (2016).

[5] I leave untreated how this ethical dimension relates to truth disclosed by the world of the text; cf. Ricoeur (1977).

that in the last analysis there is an identity between truth and ethics where for something to be true requires not just a logical articulation but an ethical one. Is this not implied when Ricoeur announces that "[c]ommunication is a structure of true knowledge" (Ricoeur 1965: 51)? And what is communication if not an event taking place with others and which has as its paragon a kind of community, a friendship. If this did not play an important role in Ricoeur's thought, he would not venture to say that there is "[n]o truth without friendship."[6]

Should the proposed identity between ethics and truth in Ricoeur's thought be any surprise? The ontological disclosure of truth leads to ethical concerns precisely because listening to being is itself never unmediated and is already an interpretation set alongside other interpretations by those who are also listening. This identity, nevertheless, is one that is only maintained through the detour of engaging with others such that ethics cannot be first philosophy in some unmediated sense. The call to be ethical does not come from outside oneself as an injunction *à la* Levinas, but in being-with others. That is to say, the call of being is never immediately one's own, but a voice that one hears only in a world, a place, a situation with others (Ricoeur 1992: 351). In discourse, in debate, in attempting to understand others, the ethical perspective must be recognized and won through attending to specific features and dimensions of what is at stake. So the identity between truth and ethics does not cancel other modes of discourse or other forms of regional analysis but presupposes their presence and their involvement. Logic, for example, does not become obsolete since it comprises part of the manner in which things can be said and heard. Different methods and approaches may be involved in an analysis of truth, but the intentional relation to truth—or as Heidegger would say, our comportment towards the disclosure of being—is ethical by virtue of having an intention towards something that may clarify, translate, unify, incite action, and so on. To reiterate, this does not mean ethics is first philosophy, but rather an inevitable context in which truth plays out.

Another way of understanding this ethical identity of truth is in the manner in which being can be said in many ways (Ricoeur 1992: 299). To speak truthfully about being requires negotiating those language games arising from different perspectives, orders, traditions, and disciplines. So the situation is already one that requires a duty of care in listening . . . "Starting from this fact of life, let us translate!" (Ricoeur 2006: 20).

In contrast, the emphasis on listening in Heidegger falls on how to listen appropriately, to be ever situated with this question, to see the question itself as the response to being. That being can be

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[6] I assume Ricoeur (2004: 336) is speaking favourably of Henri Marrou's philosophy of history. I describe friendship as a regulating ideal because the realization that one's own existence can only occur in "living together" is a reflexive one confronted by several obstacles, not least of which are the ways in which friendship reduces to utility and pleasure; Ricoeur (1992: 186–187). Compare Ricoeur's (2004: 384) intention to remain with the subject of the practice of the historian when thinking Heidegger's notion of historicity.

said in many ways requires returning to the origin of being, or being understood as origin. It is not that Heidegger's philosophy is un-ethical or a-ethical on this view. Rather, his conception of ethics, as arising from the questions of being and dwelling, drives towards a different notion of what it means to be ethical. Appropriateness to others presupposes an appropriateness to being.

Having said this, Heideggerians might allege that the ethical concern as Ricoeur articulates it is trivial. The argument, they might say, is one of recognizing what kind of ethics follows from ontology, and not presupposing what ethical being must look like. On this view, appropriate action is more accurately conceived as a kind of habitation (*ethos*) within being that can only come by way of listening to being itself. But this response only helps to mark what is at stake in a notion of truth. The stakes of a theory of truth come down to that on which our beliefs might have traction. According to my account of Heidegger, what is at stake is an appropriate relation to being, while for Ricoeur it is the prospective momentum by which truth draws one into more determinate and intimate relations with others.[7] I am not sure this is an either/or situation, but one that requires, on the Ricoeurian view, constant mediation, or on the Heideggerian one, the recognition that it cannot be overcome.

b) MacIntyre and truth as one

With MacIntyre one finds a commensurate concern for ethical being as a capacity to co-exist with others. To do so means contending within the complexity of historical understanding that MacIntyre represents in terms of traditions and rivalries. At stake in these conflicts are reasoned accounts of practices in view of a telos of comprehension. This telos may not be actualizable, but it nonetheless exists insofar as every act of reasoning recognizes as its aim a terminus in which reasoning would ideally be complete or sufficient (MacIntyre 2006: 56–58, 156). As with the previous sub-section, I want to focus on what Ricoeur shares with his counterpart in order to distinguish how he differs.

Both Ricoeur and MacIntyre express a commitment to understanding human existence in relation to the metaphysical principle of unity—that this individual and fragmented life can be understood and lived in relation to a meaningful whole. Both therefore understand unity in quite a substantive sense, and given their religious affiliations and commitments, this would seem no surprise. As early as their Bampton Lectures on religion and atheism from 1966 (MacIntyre and Ricoeur 1969), significant nuances can be detected with regard to their respective conceptions of unity, that is, what ontologically and metaphysically consists in unity and how we should attempt to live ethically in accord with it. It may be that these differences can be explained more superficially in terms of MacIntyre's Catholicism and Ricoeur's Reformed Protestantism, but I think these kinds of

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[7] Another way of seeing this difference between Heidegger and Ricoeur is in the latter's development of the concept of attestation as a response to the former's concept of anticipation. See Jean Greisch (2001: 379–385).

explanations, no matter how historically accurate, miss a very important point. Neither philosopher is reducible to their religious convictions. Rather, both hold philosophical views they find plausible and compelling for *philosophical* reasons even if other reasons may be involved.

For MacIntyre, unity is a cosmological feature that endows everything occurring within the cosmos its distinction. Though not using the term unity, he does in fact describe the universe according to a pre-existing order. One of his key arguments with reference to a theory of truth and language is that truthful assertions are good not simply because they provide an accurate account of how things are—that is, true beliefs about a certain state of affairs. More importantly, argues MacIntyre, the good of truthful assertions enables one to think *how things are* in terms of *why things are*. In other words, the goal of inquiry is not simply to settle on a truthful account of how things are but to reach a terminus of understanding. This terminus is neither a conglomeration of truthful accounts, nor is it a goal simply because truthful assertions are utile for human existence. The "why" of inquiry strives towards achieving an understanding of "the place of the objects about which [the mind] judges in the overall order of things" (MacIntyre 2006: 207). Indeed, MacIntyre's appeal to the overall order of things is substantive and should be taken in a strong sense of there being a complete and final coherence to reality that the mind ever-ceaselessly attempts to grasp:

> It is then a metaphysical presupposition of this view of truth that there is an order of things and this order exists independently of the human mind, just as do the objects and sets of objects that find their place within it. (MacIntyre 2006: 206)

The cosmological implications of this metaphysical presupposition are perhaps most evident in his sympathetic portrayal of the ancient Greek conception of cosmic order and justice. He comments in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*:

> For the use of the word '*dike*' [. . .] presupposed that the universe had a single fundamental order, an order structuring both nature and society [. . . .] To be *dikaios* is to conduct one's actions and affairs in accordance with this order. (MacIntyre 1988: 14)

The metaphysical notion of order to which MacIntyre is philosophically committed involves an already established coherency with which the human mind seeks conformity, or what is the rational form of inquiry to which he often alludes. Consider, for example, his comment on first principles:

> Genuinely first principles, so I shall argue, can have a place only within a universe characterized in terms of certain determinate, fixed and unalterable ends, ends which provide a standard by reference to

which our individual purposes, desires, interests, and decisions can be evaluated as well or badly directed. (MacIntyre 2006: 146)

In other words, truth, as the goal of inquiry, is one:

To make any assertion whatsoever is to be committed to the judgment that that assertion is true—not true in this or that domain, not true for this or that group of human beings, but true. (MacIntyre 2009: 67)

Metaphysical unity determines how we should understand how truth is operative historically and socially.

MacIntyre is, of course, very much aware of the historical efforts of humankind to attempt to achieve this conformity and the ways in which such attempts have gone and can go terribly wrong, both philosophically and politically. He is by no means a champion of a monological notion of reason (cf. Barry 1995: 119–124).

Nonetheless, if MacIntyre has an aversion to overly simple notions of objectivity and truth, it is difficult to see how he does not, at some fundamental level, believe that rational inquiry should be measured by the eternal standards of order, whatever they may be, which constitute the universe as it is. This is because such a strong commitment to truth resolves into the argument that there cannot be competing truths; in the end the final terminus is one truth. And what we may regard as distinct or even singular domains of reality and human existence are inadequate ways of conceiving forms of inquiry. MacIntyre argues that distinct domains of inquiry "are not self-enclosed, so that truths in any one domain have no implications for what is true or false in any of the others" (MacIntyre 2009: 68). However, this seemingly totalistic and totalizing representation of inquiry, while no doubt diminishing the relative viewpoints of different peoples, also entails a demand that existing traditions and institutions submit their own precepts, practices, and beliefs to the test of historically developing knowledge. MacIntyre's conception of debate is forward-driven in the sense that he sees any claims to universality—whether they be moral claims or individual assertions of rights—presuppose a kind of test of universalization. Yet rather than the criteria for this test being known in advance, MacIntyre concedes that from our current historical standpoint we work our way towards the universal terminus by engaging with what appears historically as the most compelling reasons. Indeed, MacIntyre's conception of rival traditions requires historical transformation through the philosophical and moral imagination. The progression towards truth, whilst not a final declaration that eliminates or marginalizes historical predecessors, is an on-going self-reflection from within a particular tradition. MacIntyre, of course, retrieves historical sources to articulate what is problematic about modernity,

and this articulation provides, in view of his conceptions of truth and order, the resources by which we can progress beyond philosophical parochialism.

It would seem that MacIntyre's forward-driven philosophical outlook would sit uneasily with Ricoeur. Consider, for example, Ricoeur's criticisms of MacIntyre's one-dimensional account of narrative understanding, which omits discussion of those types of particularities that problematize the notion of a narrative unity of life: the difference between fictional author/narrator and the one who authors and narrates one's life; the distinct categorical difference between fiction and life with respect to beginnings and endings; and finally, the entanglement of other life histories and narratives in real life (Ricoeur 1992: 159–162). Nonetheless, one can see a similarity between the two philosophers. Ricoeur states,

> The unity of the world and the unity of man are too near and yet too distant: near as horizon which is never reached, distant as a figure seen through an infrangible pane of glass. (Ricoeur 1965: 195; cf. 176)

The view of unity as a horizon is perhaps indicative of the kind of terminus to which MacIntyre alludes. Moreover, the unbreakable glass separating us from reaching this terminus can be understood, on MacIntyre's view, as the historical process continually unfolding new modes of engagement and debate. There is also another respect that joins MacIntyre to Ricoeur, and this is the way Ricoeur sees the order inherent to the universe as the prerequisite for human understanding. Ricoeur thus sees the unity of the world correlative to the unity of humankind (Ricoeur 1965: 194–195).

This jointure between the overall coherence of the universe and human beings within the universe cannot be underestimated. As we saw with MacIntyre, it provides the metaphysical context in which truth extends beyond the private soul contemplating its internal reality. With respect to Ricoeur, this jointure provides the foundation upon which "the effort and desire to be" can be developed ethically, that is, the co-existence with others in the institutions we develop. Yet despite these similarities, there is no mistaking Ricoeur's unwavering intention to characterize fragility over against unity:

> [W]e are incapable of coinciding with "the flux of existence which lays the ground for all attitudes." First, this unique experience, which is my unique life, is never reflected in its lived simplicity; it is immediately perceived through the diverse cultural realizations which divide it. . . . Man's unity is too primordial to be understood; but above all, our cultural life is torn by the rivalling passions which have created it and to which religion adds its own: theological rage, pharisaic bad faith, ecclesiastical intolerance. (Ricoeur 1965: 195)

The problem of fragility is perhaps most clearly articulated in its ethical context, thirty five years later, when Ricoeur discusses the ability of the self to relate to others—the "shattered cogito" fragmented by the passions as well as its own lack of certainty (Ricoeur 1992: 22). The question for Ricoeur is not how to overcome uncertainty—that is, how to find a necessary and sufficient foundation or process of reasoning. Rather, it is to understand the passions and fallible reason positively and productively. In other words, the project of certain knowing is as misled as it is impossible since it would result in a no-longer human existence. So when Ricoeur comments,

> Anyone who wished to escape this contingency of historical encounters and stand apart from the game in the name of a non-situated 'objectivity' would at most know everything, but understand nothing (Ricoeur 1967: 24),

he is insisting on a difference between knowledge and understanding. If we are to follow his own caution expressed some thirteen years after the passage above (Ricoeur 1981), then we should be wary of maintaining the distinction between the two. In fact, the attempt to construct a theory of truth from Ricoeur's thought requires conceiving knowledge as no longer wed to the ideal of a non-situated objectivity as it is for traditional metaphysics and epistemology, but as a situated one—in history and with others.

In a similar spirit to his response to the metaphysical rendering of theodicy, Ricoeur's conception of truth can be said to divest itself of traditional representations. Truth may exist, it may be synonymous in some way with a metaphysical unity (Ricoeur 1965: 180), but this does not mean that it should be understood metaphysically. It is true that there is a distinctively Kantian dimension to this disposition with respect to the limits of human knowledge: "I cannot express, articulate, or enunciate this unity rationally, for there is no Logos within this unity" (Ricoeur 1965: 55). But unlike Kant, Ricoeur seeks to complicate the privileging of reason by thinking the relation to truth, not in terms of living in accordance with it, but from the ground up as it is situated within plurality.[8] Not to rise above this plurality in order to reason, but to reason through and in it. He comments, "Within the context of the concrete life of a civilization, the spirit of truth is to respect the complexity of the various orders of truth; it is the recognition of plurality" (Ricoeur 1965: 189; cf. 165). The task of thinking truth begins by conserving our encounter with plurality and not by synthesizing it, or what Johann Michal refers to as Ricoeur's "broken Hegelianism" (Michel 2015: 33–40). It is true that MacIntyre does not posit such a synthesis as the terminus of inquiry; however, the process of inquiry is itself governed by it in a strong metaphysical sense. The contrast with Ricoeur's concern for fragility helps to see the

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[8] More recent revisions of Kant fall prey to this as well. See Mei (2014: 253 n. 48).

consequences of this governance. Truth may not be realizable, but it gives to each unique group a sense of authority that, on Ricoeur's account, is potentially problematic, if not threatening. "The *One* is too distant a reward; it is an evil temptation" (Ricoeur 1965: 165). It inevitably culminates in the transformation of the wish for totality as a totalization. Perhaps this is why MacIntyre insists on the language of rivalry and Ricoeur on mediation.

I want to conclude this section by stating succinctly what I believe to be Ricoeur's *conception* of truth. While retaining the notion of disclosure from Heidegger, Ricoeur nonetheless sees disclosure as something that cannot be isolated as the originary truth of being. Thus, Ricoeur's turn to ethics vis-a-vis a solicitude for the other is not simply a choice to pursue a different direction from the ontology proposed by Heidegger. When conceiving this turn within the general territory of an analysis of truth, it becomes a definitive statement about the nature of truth. Its historical disclosure cannot be disentangled from our ethical relations with others. With regard to MacIntyre's attempt to accommodate plurality according to the unity of truth, I argued that while Ricoeur endorses a conception of unity, in the end he would be unhappy with MacIntyre's notion of "truth as one," which inevitably distorts the relation to truth because it reinserts a metaphysical dominance under the sign of a terminus of inquiry. From Ricoeur's perspective, truth as one acts as a "fault" according to which "the wish of reason" for unity is a "first violence" (Ricoeur 1965: 165). Truth is not won by laying claim to a terminus, no matter how sufficient an account might be. Rather, it is won only in and through an attempt at mutually understanding others with whom one persists in the effort to be. This shift not only emphasizes the importance of the plurality of beliefs but it also attempts to prevent the mediation of conflicts of meaning and interpretation from reducing to relativism. Ricoeur's notion of fallibilism, as we will see, assumes truth is operative in how it guides discussion but requires to be worked out *in situ* according to specific criteria.

Ricoeur's Holistic Fallibilism

Let us now turn from a conception of truth to its theory, or what involves a discreet analysis of Ricoeur's concept that might yield an argument about what it means for a belief to be true. To recall from the last section, the consequence of this analysis is not just local to a theory of beliefs, propositions, and language. Rather, what is at stake in determining what it means for a belief to be true bears directly on how we might conceive human understanding as participating in the world and being-with others.

a) holism and fallibilism

Holism and fallibilism are terms typically employed in epistemology when discussing theories of truth and justification. A holistic conception of truth refers to the idea that no single belief makes sense on its own and that it must be viewed within its larger systematic structure. Holism therefore maintains that truth cannot be the property of individual beliefs but rather beliefs as they cohere within a system. For example, H. H. Joachim argues that "Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole" (Joachim 1999: 50, §26). The strength of holism I want to emphasize here, and which I will modify when discussing Ricoeur's holism, is the thesis that meaning is a phenomenon belonging to a general structure, or significant whole. Holism therefore conceives truth in some ideal, universal sense (i.e., Truth) that cannot be entirely realized by finite human knowledge (Joachim 1999: 52, §27). So when Willard Quine (1951: 39) concludes that "the unit of empirical significance is the whole of science," he is attesting to truth as embodied in the general system of scientific knowledge, yet only incompletely since scientific knowledge is ever-developing. Having said that, it is important to note that there is no agreement amongst holists about what general structure is the most complete or indeed what might constitute a hierarchy of individual structures within the general one.[9]

Fallibilism is the thesis that human knowledge is by its nature incomplete. So one may be able to provide justification for a belief, but this justification can never be absolute or final. Fallibilism can thus be seen as a counter-argument to rationalist claims to certainty, as for example in Descartes' reference to clear and distinct perception by which one has "true and certain knowledge" (Descartes 1996: 48). A stronger version of fallibilism argues that certain knowledge is impossible given the limitation of the human mind so that even a type of research programme that progresses historically by improving on aspects of a current body of knowledge will always represent a finite understanding. Paul Feyerabend argues, for example, that the natural sciences are by no means complete or unified, that scientific methodologies are themselves finitely determined and progress in science requires counter-inductive hypotheses (Feyerabend 1993: 9–23). The appeal of fallibilism is its de-centering of the human mind as the master of meaning and reality, something that fits well with the general poststructural suspicion of the Enlightenment representation of "Man the subject." What is less appealing is the inherent pessimism about human knowledge. How can fallible existence not reduce

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[9] There is also a holistic theory of justification accounting for the criteria according to which one can say one is justified in believing a proposition to be true. In speaking about Ricoeur's conception of truth, as we shall see, it is more accurate to describe him as a fallibilist since he does require the criteria of consistency and connection within a set of beliefs. Indeed, for him to do so would mean contradicting his view that discourse is polyvalent and situational. Holistic justification, in attempting to strive for overall consistency, has to fix the meaning of beliefs in order to maintain epistemic equilibrium. If one belief in the set has multiple meanings or is situation-dependent, its cohesion would breakdown.

to a futile one? Ricoeur's emphasis on fallibility shares some aspects with fallibilism, though it is modified according to his anthropology.

b) Ricoeur, holism, and fallibility

Let us therefore distinguish Ricoeur's theory of truth in relation to the typical meanings of holism and fallibilism. We have seen in the discussion of MacIntyre that Ricoeur acknowledges the role of unity as a metaphysical principle yet in a limited, or to borrow Michel's term, "broken" sense. Metaphysics occupies a role that is more consistent with an initial optative yearning rather than a first philosophy. Or as Ricoeur says, unity is "indispensable" for thought but "entirely 'formal'" (Ricoeur 1965: 192). Another way of describing its indispensability is to say that it is the presupposition of all thought that attempts to understand in order to live. Thus, holism in Ricoeur's thought can be seen as the recognition of an ordered universe that is necessarily presupposed by our understanding: "This totality, therefore, must be given in some way prior to philosophy" (Ricoeur 1986: 4). He speaks of various forms of discourse as attesting to and expressing this whole, especially in myth, and as enabling reflection because it takes the whole as something towards which discreet analyses must move. However, Ricoeur by no means sees unity as the aim that philosophical investigation must clarify and achieve. That is to say, per above, unity is entirely formal. It is formal because it prompts the occasion of philosophy (from our perspective of being in discordance with it) but not its ends. Its deliberate pursuit, Ricoeur comments, often results in closed systematic structures that often become totalizing: "All too quickly it has been said: It [unity] is there, it is Mind, it is Nature, it is History" (Ricoeur 1986: 48–49).

Ricoeur's holism can therefore be construed in terms of a significant whole, as opposed to a general structure or system. The latter is indicative of a *closed* totality in which individuality and modification is merely a reiteration of some other aspect of the whole and thereby subsumed to it. Ricoeur's criticism of semiotics and Hegelian dialectic can be seen as resisting closed systems. Semiotics views the meaning of signs in terms of relations to other signs and thus does not allow for the predication of new meaning in discourse as with metaphor (Ricoeur 1978: 66–76). Hegel's characterization of reason and the actualization of Spirit involve a totalization of social and political being in relation to ideas of which we can no longer be certain. The closed nature of the Hegelian system is one in which its cunning presupposes those ideas which seem self-evident for actualization (Ricoeur 1988: 205).

Having said this, the term "significant whole" should be understood in two ways. First, per above it is formal in the sense of being signified in order to recognize it as enabling reflection. Ricoeur refers to this in general in terms of the role of signification as allowing for critical reflection (Ricoeur

1981: 117). Second, its formality emphasizes the human relation to it as incomplete. Thus enters fallibilism.

Ricoeur's notion of fallibility fills out the incompleteness of the metaphysical formal unity. By this I mean, the formal unity is incomplete because it disregards how the truth claims we make are bound up with a kind of being that is inextricably with others. So while fallibilism may be a thesis about the limitations of human knowing, it also provides a way of productively engaging with this limitation by placing the locus of truth *on agreement with others* (even if this may be impossible in many circumstances) as opposed to some objective standard or set of criteria (which are impossible to establish). This rendering of agreement does not necessarily involve the criticism that what one holds to be true may not correspond to the way the world really is.[10] This is because the belief in an objective world external to our perception is itself the product of a formal notion of unity. (Hence, why we see below the way scientific methodology can become imperialistic and distortive.) This external world may indeed exist in one sense, but to assert so from the human perspective is to introduce the human mode of understanding and interpretation as part of this external world. There is not just nature, but humans within nature, producing and reproducing according to their actions and systems of thought. To reiterate, the upshot of this view is that an analysis of truth falls on the interrelation between those beings making assertions about what is true. It prohibits a sense that reflection can be entirely coincident with this whole as in claims to absolute and certain knowledge. Our fallibility thus plays a crucial, active role in how truth is worked out, or what Ricoeur calls the task of approximation, and which together is captured for him by the symbol of the tower of Babel (Ricoeur 1986: 49 and 2004: 12, respectively).

Being-true: What It Means for a Belief to Be True

The stakes of Ricoeur's account of truth in view of the human condition are now becoming clear. Because Ricoeur revises Heidegger's disclosure thesis by including being-with others, disclosure is no longer purely ontological but a being-with others. It is in this sense other-dependent, and the *eventual* nature of truth (*Ereignis*) then becomes one that cannot be analyzed at the level of individual statements abstracted from this fundamental relation. One can say Ricoeur's holism is a significant whole comprised primarily by being-with others. What is distinctive about this turn is that unlike a narrow epistemological approach that seeks a corrective to fallible judgments, Ricoeur's approach examines the conditions in which we attempt to utter beliefs. It is precisely these conditions that determine how truth is instantiated in our statements about reality. In other words, traditional epistemological approaches assume that not only can the predicate "is true" apply to statements

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[10] Or what is a common criticism of coherentism; Almeder (1986: 213).

abstracted from historical and existential conditions, but moreover, that a judgment about its applicability can be determined by criteria valid for any of these conditions (truth is one). To be sure, Ricoeur's notion of attestation figures centrally in how meaning assumes a specific assertional form as an expression of confidence (belief-in) in one's capacity to act. I address this the role of attestation elsewhere (Mei 2016), and in this section I want to examine the manner in which attestation is involved in what it means for a belief to be true.

From what I have said above, claims to truth are indexed in a double sense. First, to the situational event in which a speaker attests in a belief. Second, to the personal and collective experience shaped by a historical culture. This second sense involves not only the experience of the speaker but the culture and historical forum the speaker faces. The two are not always the same. To describe this type of indexing of beliefs, Ricoeur refers to the notion of "being-true" (Ricoeur 1992: 299), which is meant to capture the complexity and plurivocity of the ontological and historical dimensions of existence. The ontological involves the manner in which, following Aristotle, being can be said in many ways. The historical, as indicated above, describes the specific cultural heritage in which being is said. Ricoeur is not just recognizing cultural pluralism but attempting to work out how pluralism can be held accountable to truth without reducing to one account of it.

What does it then mean for a belief to be true?[11]

For something to be true on Ricoeur's account means that the <u>person</u> uttering the belief has some <u>stake</u> in the belief and how it <u>applies</u> to a situation in which the utterer may <u>act</u>. The locus of this "definition" is in the application of a belief by the utterer. Or, the truth of a belief is relative to its application to a situation by the person uttering the belief. I want to elaborate this in terms of four features: agency, commitment, application, and capability.

Agency. Let us note that the focus turns from what the belief should do (correspond, cohere, achieve an end or operational value) to what the person uttering the belief is considering in terms of an action. On Ricoeur's account, the foregrounding of the role of the person is consistent with expanding the philosophical analysis of statements beyond the philosophy of language. This is because in typical analyses of statements, the subject (human) is understood to be transparent, with the status of the statement or belief as that which is truly opaque. Ricoeur's turn towards the opacity of the utterer is not just one of complicating the philosophy of language with a further obstacle but of switching the direction of analysis altogether. This is evident when the argument in *Oneself as Another*

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[11] I therefore do not attempt to account for how we can determine beliefs to be true, which involves a theory of justification. Rather, I will explain what it means for a belief to be true according to Ricoeur's theory. The difference in tasks can be seen in how the correspondence theory of truth holds that for a belief to be true a statement must correspond to a state of affairs. Yet, to talk about how one determines whether a statement does indeed correspond involves a distinct process of justification. See note 14 below.

moves from the complication of the "I" who utters to a more substantial thesis about the speaking subject who is constituted by a personal, narrative identity (Cf. Ricoeur 1992: 44–45 and 113–114). Why this shift? Because without personal identity, which involves a narrative grasp of one's life, the utterance examined by the philosophy of language has no existential application. It does not actually relate to a real situation. Hence, the subject who speaks is really the agent who intends to act in relation to a situation. Thus, statements are both locutionary and illocutionary insofar as the latter aims to achieve some end by virtue of saying it. Simply put, statements involve practices (On Searle and Austin, see Ricoeur 1992: 154–155 and 1981: 168, 199 and 205).

Commitment. For the utterer to have some stake in the truth of the belief is to say that he or she has some commitment. Generally speaking, beliefs involve a *commitment* because statements are interlocutionary and illocutionary. With respect to interlocution, the "I" of statement is, on Ricoeur's account, "bipolar" since

> it implies simultaneously an 'I': that speaks and a 'you' to whom the former addresses itself. "I affirm that" equals "I declare to you that"; "I promise that" equals "I promise you that." (Ricoeur 1992: 43–44).

Another way of thinking of the substantial nature of interlocution is in terms of attestation, where to speak to another person is to attest to what you believe, and therefore will do, in relation to him or her. In addition to interlocution, the illocutionary force of beliefs, in which one does by and through saying, therefore assumes a degree of commitment in which one designates oneself as an agent undertaking what is deemed necessary or appropriate. It is true that not all beliefs will require action of an ethical nature. But the supposition here is that the fact that a belief is uttered is because the agent intends the utterance to affirm what he or she may do. On this view, what then can be said about typical statements of analysis—e.g. "The cat is on the mat"? Such beliefs are trivial but not irrelevant, and they are so because the degree of commitment to the belief has trivial aims or implications.

Application. Truth (i.e., "is true") is not a predicate describing the belief but a way of describing the application of the belief by the utterer. Hence, if beliefs involve some kind of commitment about how to act and why, their truth resides in the relation joining utterer to the situation and to those to whom he or she is speaking. Application is therefore a mode of truth, or the being-true, of a belief as it is enacted. To make a promise to someone involves an action of keeping the promise at some moment or throughout some duration. The enacting of the promise can be said to be an application of what one believes to be true in its respective context and not necessarily in any other.

Capability. It is clear from the committed and illocutionary nature of beliefs that they enable an agent to act. Beliefs therefore have an attestational quality that lends to the agent a sense of capacity, or power, to do. Ricoeur refers to this as "an ontology of act and of power" in which power expresses "the power-to-act of an agent to whom an action is ascribed or imputed" (Ricoeur 1992: 303).[12] Acting presupposes a form of self-reflexivity in which the end of the action is brought to the attention of the agent. Beliefs, in this sense, allow one to attest to what is relevant to do in a situation in relation to others as well as see oneself as responsible, or imputable, for these beliefs.[13]

Conclusion

In attempting to construct a theory of truth from Ricoeur's philosophy, I have drawn on what I see to be two decisive features consistent throughout his career, or what I have termed the holisitic and fallibilistic elements of his thought. The holism consists of a formal unity that is made complete only when accounting for our fallibilistic relation with others. Hence, the analysis of truth should not privilege an abstracted representation of beliefs that omits the specific situational and historical context in which the belief is uttered by a person in view of an action in relation to others. At the cost of over-determining the ethical thought of Ricoeur, I concluded that this means being-with others becomes the overall context in which the truth of a belief can be grasped. Truth is in some sense an event of the relation with others. The merit of Ricoeur's theory of truth is that it broadens the space in which we recognize beliefs occurring. It may complicate the analysis of beliefs because it introduces more variables, yet its richness lies in recognizing the more extensive manner in which statements about things involve much more intimate conditions when we make claims to truth. Accordingly, propositions and judgments expressed in linguistic form no longer serve as the privileged means of analysis as it does for much epistemology. An analysis of truth, it can be said, remains more in the event of the interrelation of speaking subjects as opposed to applying criteria in order to determine the reasonableness of their statements. To be sure, I have not attempted to discuss the details by which a process of validating beliefs in a Ricoeurian fashion might operate. But let me note in closing that such a process would involve reconceiving how justification draws on historically and ethically formed convictions about what it means to be with others. In this sense, it is not enough merely to

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[12] He also mentions the power-in-common of historical communities.

[13] Perhaps a distinction needs to be raised between what I have offered as Ricoeur's theory of truth and pragmatic accounts since both focus on how an agent achieves an end by way of beliefs. I omit discussion of this due to the scope of this chapter. However, generally it can be remarked that Ricoeur places greater weight on the ethical nature of ends and beliefs and as well the substantive (as opposed to pragmatic) nature of discourse.

pay lip service to the historical and ethical contexts since the veracity of beliefs presupposes these contexts.[14]

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[14] I deal with this analysis in terms of the justification of convictions (Mei 2014; 2016). My sincere thanks to the editors for their suggestions and comments in view of making this chapter more cohesive. I would also like to thank Maureen Junker-Kenny and Pamela Sue Anderson for their comments on a version of this chapter which was presented on November 19, 2013 at the Ricoeur Centenary Congress (1913-2013) hosted by the Fonds Ricoeur in Paris, France.

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