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Roy Martinez

Laval théologique et philosophique, vol. 48, n° 2, 1992, p. 239-248.

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Ethics and Interethnic Violence: Ricoeur on Nonviolence

Roy MARTINEZ

RÉSUMÉ. — Cet essai part de l'ouvrage de Paul Ricoeur sur Histoire et vérité, et plus précisément des chapitres intitulés «l'homme non-violent et sa présence à l'histoire» et «État et violence». Je me propose d'engager une réflexion sur les implications éthiques de la violence interethnique à partir de ma lecture de Ricoeur. Si ces deux chapitres sont comparés l'un à l'autre, il apparaît clairement non seulement que Ricoeur associe la violence à l'histoire, mais encore qu'il en arrive presque à définir l'histoire en termes de violence. Bien entendu Ricoeur nous laisse dans l'ambiguïté. Car pour lui il ne s'agit pas tant d'opposer la violence à la violence, mais de résister à la violence par la non-violence.

SUMMARY. — This essay takes its point of departure from Ricoeur's *History and Truth*, more specifically, from the chapters entitled "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History" and "State and Violence". My aim is to reflect on the ethical implications of interethnic violence based on my reading of Ricoeur. If these two pieces are read jointly, it becomes unmistakably clear that Ricoeur not only associates history with violence, but virtually defines history in terms of violence. Ricoeur, of course, situates us in ambiguity. For him, the challenge lies not so much in confronting violence with violence as to resist violence with non-violence.

This essay takes its point of departure from Ricoeur's *History and Truth*, more specifically, from the chapters entitled "Non-violent Man and His Presence to History" and "State and Violence". My aim is to reflect, "in an exploratory manner", on the ethical implications of interethnic violence based on my reading of Ricoeur. If these two pieces are read jointly, it becomes unmistakably clear that Ricoeur not only associates history with violence, but virtually defines history in terms of violence:

To see that violence is always and everywhere, one has but to take notice of how empires rise and fall, how personal prestige is established, how religions tear one

another to pieces, how the privileges of property and power are perpetuated and interchanged, ... how the cultural delights of the elite depend upon the massive workings and sufferings of the disinherited.¹

Referring to the hard-knocks world which characterizes human history and the violence inherent in it, Ricoeur straightforwardly avers: "Let no mistake be made: the intention of violence, the end which it pursues implicitly or explicitly, directly or indirectly, is the death of the other — at least his death or something worse than his death"². That which is worse than death inherent in violence is the torturing of the victim, for him to be "*there* to bear the conscious affliction of degradation and to live his destruction beyond his body to the core of his dignity, his value, his joy"³. Ricoeur's thesis is that precisely because man is *more* than his life, violence will attempt to eliminate the surplus which constitutes the meaning of man. In a word, the reason for being of violence is *murder*.

The logic here is simple. If history is intrinsically violent, and violence is murder, how can historical man claim to be ethical as well? How, given this apparent discrepancy, can human existence be concurrently and consistently historical and ethical? For if the thrust of violence is the total destruction of the other, if its will is the absolute nullification of human alterity, then the implication is that "all men are not compatible together: some are *de trop* for others"⁴.

Certainly, from Ricoeur's Reformed Christian theological perspective, such a conclusion proves problematic and untenable, for God is *creator omnium*. In another language, it is not up to man to determine the pre-existent good. This theological line of reasoning, however, is not the tack Ricoeur pursues to support his argument. Rather, he prefers to offset the dismal fate of history by the countervailing possibility in human beings to heed the summons towards solidarity. History, disruptive in its violence, is recognized as such at the very moment that it is transcended by *the judgment*.

This means that history no longer has domination over man. Its imperial pretension is held in abeyance. History is taken to task by the indignation felt by ethical consciousness, by a voice within that cries out, "You are wrong". Ricoeur writes: "The *ethical* nature of consciousness is essentially opposed to the *historical* course of events. History says: violence. Consciousness rebounds and says: love"⁵. Whereas violence aims to destroy, love means to preserve, conserve, cherish. Ricoeur implies that short of this dialectical interplay, the total monopoly of violence in existence would translate into the annihilation of man.

Ricoeur, however, is not dealing with conjectures, counterfactual conditionals, or other imagined situations. His interest lies in social reality, in actual human interactions,

1. Paul RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, Tr. Charles A. Kelbley, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965, p. 225.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

in our collective behavior. Thus, he grants that violence indeed erupts — periodically. Nevertheless, the aim of violence contravenes the persistent compatibility of humankind in its *ethnic diversity*, i.e., as an aggregate of peoples set against the backdrop of, and directed by, a unity of ethical consciousness. Here Ricoeur is invoking a formal transcendental structure that, *mutatis mutandis*, has not only a Kantian resonance, but a Naberian influence as well⁶. This line of thinking on the part of Ricoeur is supported by another source:

It is in the character of self-conscious activity that it may misunderstand itself and, therefore, may choose alternatives that are categorically proscribed. Thus, some measure of coerceable order is morally proscribed. Since maximal unity-in-diversity is morally comprehensive, *coerceable order is morally justified insofar as it is required by the maximal public world.*⁷

Gamwell's reference to the possibility of "self-conscious activity" misunderstanding itself is comparable to the partiality of truth that characterizes "perspective" or "point of view" in Ricoeur's *Fallible Man*. It is not necessary, however, to get involved in the detailed analysis of man's affective fragility that Ricoeur undertakes in that book. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to focus on the limited nature of "conviction" and its relation to the universality of truth. For while our actions may be motivated by the purest intentions, the disproportion between our finite understanding and the infinity of our will, as Descartes reminds us in the fourth meditation, may cause us to err⁸. In this respect, Plato's *Euthyphro* remains relevant text.

This fervent "theologian", acting out of piety and justice, prosecutes his own father for the murder of a domestic servant. But in punishing the servant, the so-called murderer was also acting in accordance with the principles of piety and justice. Yet, in depicting Euthyphro as impulsive and unflinching, Plato allows us to witness not only Euthyphro's alacrity and audacity, but likewise to discern the self-righteousness of which we should always be wary. In part, Plato's argument is that one's viewpoint, opinion, or belief, however cherished, cannot constitute truth. The relation between conviction and truth is crucial at this point. For embedded in the central nerve of the *Euthyphro* is *irony*: The dialogue is ostensibly about a person's profound conviction of his sense of piety. In fact, initially, Socrates is either uneasy with, or amused by, Euthyphro's cocksureness. But as the conversation proceeds, there is hope that between

6. For more on Ricoeur's relation to Jean Nabert, see Ricoeur's *History and Truth*, p. 16; *Fallible Man*, Tr. Charles Kelbley, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1965, p. xxvi, and Ricoeur's preface to Nabert's *Elements for an Ethic*, Tr. William J. Petrek, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1969.

7. Franklin I. GAMWELL, *Beyond Preference: Liberal Theories of Independent Associations*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 144. Cited in Douglas Sturm, "Reformed Liberalism and the Principle of Nonviolence", *The Journal of Religion* 71, 4 (1991), p. 479.

8. In DESCARTES'S OWN WORDS: "D'où est-ce donc que naissent mes erreurs? C'est à savoir, de cela seul que, la volonté étant beaucoup plus ample et plus étendue que l'entendement, je ne la contiens pas dans les mêmes limites, mais que je l'étends aussi aux choses que je n'entends pas; auxquelles étant de soi indifférente, elle s'égaré fort aisément, et choisit le mal pour le bien, ou le faux pour le vrai. Ce qui fait que je me trompe et que je pêche." *Œuvres et Lettres*, ed. André Bridoux, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1953, p. 306.

them a glimpse of the truth may occur. It may occur because both interlocutors are engaged in dialogue.

But what about the “violence” which gives rise to the text itself? On closer reading, we notice that no dialogue takes place between the so-called murderer, whose physical violence occasions the victim’s death, nor between Euthyphro and his father, the victim of his son’s psychological violence. The question, then, is legitimate: Would the violence have occurred had there been dialogue? Plato indicates that the field laborer was killed by the drunken servant during a quarrel. Obviously, a quarrel is not dialogue and a dialogue cannot transpire when a partner is inebriated. In brief, the recurrent argument in the sources we have considered so far indicates that reasoned dialogue, not violence, can bring us closer to the truth about ourselves.

Thus, from the possibility of error in judgment, as we discover in the Cartesian project, to the caution about the inflexibility of what we consider to be true, i.e., concerning the rigidity of our views, as Plato reminds us, there is a clean conceptual continuity. The finite pole of the human synthesis, which expresses the limitation of our ability to act circumspectly, panoptically, and impartially, is “transgressed” (to use the language in *Fallible Man*) by the infinite pole, which enables us to apprehend the utter particularity and partiality of our version of truth.

At this junction, I want to return to the term “the judgment”, attributed to Ricoeur earlier in this essay. And in conjunction with this term, I also want to examine more closely the quotation by Sturm of Gamwell’s statement: “Since maximal unity-in-diversity is morally comprehensive, *coerceable order is morally justified insofar as it is required by the maximal public world*”. This statement can then be considered in light of Ricoeur’s “State and Violence”.

The judgment that “posits an end to history”, and at “the same time posits man as the possible friend of man”, emerges not from the natural intention of history, with its blind submission to instinct and inclination, and the claim that its course of events follows inevitable laws, but rather from “elsewhere”⁹. In *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, however, Ricoeur, explicating the functional structure of utopia and its relation to various concepts of ideology, employs another spatial metaphor: “nowhere”, to designate this ontological dimension. Ricoeur refers to it as a “special extraterritoriality”. From the vantage point of this “no place” an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living”¹⁰.

Could we not simply call this unfamiliar occurrence an “inspiration”? Is it not a virtual intrusion into our normal ways of seeing and of doing things? After all, such a happening enables us to regard reality in alternative ways. Henceforth, the social order, the system of reality which hitherto seemed invariable and absolute, to which we adhered with passionate tenacity and zeal, upon which we based our understanding

9. RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, p. 228.

10. ID., *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor, New York, Columbia University Press. 1986, p. 16.

of truth, is disclosed as merely a possible way of living, one possible scheme of things among an untold many. Differently expressed, the reality which formerly undergirded our notion of truth is irreversibly cast under suspicion. Our belief in its ultimate validity has collapsed.

Since this “judgment” on our socio-cultural identity is not grounded in any actual ordering of the world, its source, according to Ricoeur, is a transcendence, a nowhere — merely the field of the possible¹¹. Remarkably, it is from the coign of vantage of this transcendence, from this foothold nowhere, that ethical consciousness operates. More important, it is from this nowhere that ethical consciousness evaluates the activities of the state, indicting it when it tolerates injustice, condemning it when it fosters violence. In “State and Violence”, Ricoeur argues that ethical consciousness may collide with the authority of the state. Such a collision is termed by him an “ethic of distress”. Asking himself why war constitutes a problem, Ricoeur replies: “Because it is not merely the institution of murder but, more precisely, the murder of the enemy which coincides with the sacrifice of the individual for the physical survival of his own State”¹². In grappling with this problem, Ricoeur suggests that there is no moral justification for war, for although “there are preservative wars, liberating wars, and innovating wars...war as such remains unjustified and unjustifiable”¹³.

Why should an individual sacrifice his or her life, kill other human beings merely to ensure the physical survival of a state? To help us answer this crucial question, let us observe Ricoeur’s definition of the state and of war respectively: “The state is that reality which up to now has always included murder as the condition of its existence, of its survival, and first of all, of its inception”. “War is and must remain for us a cataclysm, the outbreak of chaos, the return, in the external relations between States, to the struggle for life.”¹⁴

It is obvious that according to the conceptual scheme within which these definitions are formulated, both the state and war are evil *per se*. Yet, every individual is a member of some state. Does this imply that the individual is obliged to obey the state’s command to take up arms against another? Or, does he or she have the right to disobey? Ricoeur’s reply is that individuals may indeed disobey, if they are willing to bear the consequences of this gesture: the risk of their own death. They should likewise understand the meaning of their concrete decision: the danger into which their disobedience puts the state. For in spite of the fact that such cases of disobedience are rare and may have only a nominal effect on the state, “I must act with the idea that the maxim of my action might become a universal law. The meaning of my act of disobedience, when extended to all, is therefore a threat to my State whose chances of survival I lesson”¹⁵.

11. I have dealt with the role of possibility in Ricoeur’s thought in my extended review of Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology*, *Laval théologique et philosophique* 47, 3 (1991), pp. 436-39.

12. RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, p. 243.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 244.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 242; 243.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

In a word, the individual is faced with an enigma, is caught in a dilemma, exists in an ambiguous situation. For, commanded to respect the welfare of others, to live “within the boundaries of the interdiction of murder”, the individual is nevertheless compelled by the force of circumstance to remain in the state, which “is a reality maintained and instituted by murderous violence”¹⁶. The primordial discord whereby love and coercion coexist is, paradoxically, the disunity which accounts for the existence of the state and the movement of history. Without it, there would be a total “reconciliation of man with man”, and that, Ricoeur concludes, “would be the end of history”¹⁷. Ricoeur’s conclusion is a reasonable point of entry into Sturm’s version of Gamwell’s thesis, and Sturm’s own reflections on the role of non-violence in history.

According to Sturm, Gamwell contends that our decisions and actions should be motivated by a moral imperative and directed towards the cultivation of the primary human good, i.e., the “maximal public world”. In other words, since this maximal public world, which amounts to a unified arrangement of diverse individuals, associations, ethnic communities, and societies, *is* the human good, then preserving its order is the divine imperative that binds us all¹⁸. Hence, by virtue of its internal logic, this moral law sanctions the use of force or coercion to suppress any agency whose intentions and actions prove contrary to the legitimate social order. As might be expected, the state provides this structural configuration. Gamwell defines the state as “that association whose identifying purpose consists in setting the coerceable conditions for all associations”¹⁹.

However, the state itself must be constrained by the same moral imperative if its powers of enforcement are to be legitimate. Without this moral law as its telos, such an order forfeits its legitimate authority, thereby justifying aggression against itself by revolutionary action, if “the action is informed, in its aim and in its form, by the moral imperative”²⁰. This amounts to saying that while violence per se is not justified, violence is nonetheless acceptable when inflicted against an alleged injustice.

For the sake of clarity, Sturm distinguishes between two kinds of violence: The practice which foments contestation, rebellion, or revolt, is termed first-order violence; the action directed at a morally reprehensible state of affairs is called second-order violence²¹. Surely, there is something sinister about the claim that violence can ever be acceptable, especially since we have already stated categorically that violence per se is unjustifiable. Then, how are we to construe second-order violence? Is it not in essence an assault on another? If we probe deeper into the implications of redressing the wrongs of first-order violence with the sense of justice animating second-order violence, we cannot help noticing the moral contradiction involved. Yet, the statement

16. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

17. *Ibid.*

18. STURM, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

19. GAMWELL, *op. cit.*; quoted in Douglas Sturm, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

20. STURM, *op. cit.*, 487.

21. Sturm indicates that the source of the terms “first-order violence” and “second-order violence” is Dom Helder CAMARA, *Spiral of Violence*, trans. Della Couling, Denville, NJ, Dimension Books, 1971, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

of second-order violence is fundamentally an indictment, an accusation. Second-order violence refuses to accept the innocence of the existing order. In fact, second-order violence implicitly complains that the social order that now claims legitimacy, demands allegiance, and compels obedience from us, is intrinsically guilty because it came into being through murder.

Thus, the intractable and apostrophic question that bedevils the legitimate order is this: Given that you plundered, pillaged, ravaged, tortured, mutilated, and murdered in order to assume your present configuration, at what point in the process of your indecency and violence did you arrogate the right to exercise moral judgment? Why was violence permissible then but intolerable now? Is the moral law so indeterminate that instead of commanding obedience, it yields to the wiles and fancies and the villainy of men? Or, is it the case that the state tacitly subscribes to the principle according to which might is right? Although these are clearly relevant questions, we cannot explore them in the limited space allotted to us. Suffice it to say, however, that if second-order violence is deemed morally unacceptable, first-order violence cannot fare one iota better.

For this reason, both Ricoeur and Sturm argue that violence can never be morally justified because its aim is the elimination of human life. We are not the creators of life; therefore, we cannot be its destroyers. Our *ability* to take away life does not confer on us the *right* to do so. Yet, within and without the bounds of law, in secular and ecclesiastical history, murderous violence leaves indelible traces of its ignominy as a constant reminder of the ambiguity of human existence. While it is generally agreed that violence *per se* cannot be condoned, it cannot be denied that violence is protean and ubiquitous. In this respect, I shall now address the question of the multiple forms of violence.

As alluded to earlier, there are different types of violence. While its ultimate aim is *murder*, as Ricoeur avers, murder can assume the form of humiliation or dehumanization. According to Douglas Sturm, violence may be personal and institutional, overt and covert.

Personal overt violence is illustrated by the standard case. Institutional overt violence is instanced most obviously in war and some forms of police action. Personal covert violence occurs when one, through language or gesture, humiliates or dehumanizes another. Institutional covert violence is example where the institutions of a society deprive or degrade whole classes of persons of full participation in the system.²²

Without intending to minimize the significance of personal violence, I shall focus on the violence established, fostered, and practiced by the institutions of a society. This type of violence is both invidious and insidious: invidious because of the dreadful effects it exerts on its victims; insidious in virtue of the fact that its practices are more often than not sanctioned by the legal system itself. In this context, violence functions

22. STURM, "Reformed Liberalism and the Principle of Nonviolence", *The Journal of Religion* 71, 4 (1991), p. 488.

under the guise of legitimacy, and as such, readily resists any effort that dares to upset its operations. Yet, this is one of the most pervasive forms of violence in any given state. “Interethnic violence” falls within this category. For example,

Black children brought up in situations of substandard housing and inferior schooling, with consequent limitations of available job openings, are victims of institutionalized covert violence. It may be that no knives have been drawn, no blood has been shed, no bones have been broken, and yet the personhood of those children may have been violated to such a degree by the structures of their society that violence is an appropriate term to describe what has happened to them.²³

The violation of someone’s personhood, which amounts to humiliation and dehumanization — what Ricoeur calls *murder* — is a practice that is built into the very fabric of the society to which the foregoing citation referred. Let us examine the texture of the reality in question. The subject of our discourse is a social system whose violence continues to incur our indignation. However, since this system establishes its own laws, hence is sovereign, the manner in which it operates is deemed unequivocally correct.

Further, the system is purposely constructed on the basis of exclusion: it is contrived to prevent minority ethnic groups from deriving maximum intellectual and socio-economic benefits from the system itself. Differently stated, certain ethnic groups are not meant to enjoy all the advantages available within this social structure. That is how the system has been designed; and it works perfectly well — as designed. In other words, insofar as the system works precisely as designed, nothing is defective with its mechanics. But *something* is grossly wrong. What, then, is wrong? While nothing is awry with the system’s mechanics, everything is wrong with the system’s *ethics*. But if this is the case, if the social structure functions flawlessly in terms of the mechanism of its institutions, in what way is it ethically wanting? Why, for example, does an African-American child feel compelled to reject the social structure of this society?

Bearing in mind the gist of what was said earlier, it is not surprising that those whose essential personhood is targeted for violation by the existing order, repudiate the perpetrators of the system in question. I’ve shifted the focus from the abstract generality of “the system” to the concreteness of the individuals who complacently thrive on it. For, in point of fact, persons, not systems, must be held accountable for setting the system in motion and for securing the status quo. After all, a system cannot intend; an individual can. And the worth of an intention can only be measured by the quality of the agent’s volition, as we’ve learned from Kant. In this regard, what happens when the perpetrator’s intention collides with a contrary will? What happens when the perpetrator’s vile designs clash with the other’s sense of dignity? In this case, the other *rebels*.

23. Robert McAfee BROWN, *Religion and Violence: A Primer for White Americans*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1973, cited in Douglas Sturm, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

Ricoeur reminds us that to rebel is not only to say *no*, to say that I've reached the limit of my tolerance and endurance. He informs us that in this very act of defiance I *affirm* that *I am right*. He quotes Camus: "In every act of rebellion, man experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights, but also a complete and spontaneous adhesion to a certain part of himself". In order to do full hermeneutical justice to this text, however, we need to continue with Camus. He adds, and here is the kicker: "Not every value leads to rebellion, but every rebellion tacitly invokes a value"²⁴. A beautiful phrase, this! Immediately, I think of Max Scheler; unfortunately, I cannot dwell on him.

In this context, the value invoked by rebellion is my "existence-value", the "soul of respect", in Ricoeur's apt phrase²⁵. In rebelling against the perpetrator's violence, the victim affirms his "worth". This affirmation of axiological primacy — this resistance to dehumanization — is the foremost act, the supreme value, of human existence; it is, in fact, the absolute justification for what, in this presentation, we term second-order violence. This oxymoronic act of affirming and refusing states categorically, unequivocally, positively, that the existence of the other is correlative to mine. Are we justifying violence? Yes: but only second-order violence. For no one has the right to deprive me of my dignity as an ensouled being. It is true that some people usually have the material means to humiliate me, but that does not give them the right to do so. If they attempt to degrade me, however, then I am justified in rebelling against their action. For my foremost duty in life is to execute what Nabert calls *le désir d'être* (the desire to be). This, and nothing more, justifies resisting the efforts of any one who tries to deny, in any way, my basic humanity.

Ricoeur, of course, situates us in ambiguity. For him, the challenge lies not so much in confronting violence with violence as to resist violence with non-violence. As such, he remains faithful to Plato: Ricoeur allows rhetoric to overlap into praxis. Like Plato's Socrates, Ricoeur thinks that dialogue and persuasion, not brute might and main, can rectify an injustice. He considers the art of persuasion to be paramount in human affairs. In the same way that the life of Socrates exemplifies the coincidence of word and deed, Ricoeur expects human beings to sort out their differences through verbalization and non-violent resistance. Ricoeur, like Sturm, invokes Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of nonviolence, Gandhi's principles of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, i.e., non-injury and the love of truth and of all human beings²⁶. Satyagraha is construed as a force that can effectively transform first-order violence.

However, to be consistent with his ontology of ambiguity, Ricoeur would have to remind us that while Gandhi's satyagraha worked, Socrates, despite the rationality of his speech to the court of Athens, and his adherence to the laws of that state, was put to death. Gandhi struggled against interethnic violence; Socrates defended himself against the state. I agree with Leo Strauss: "Socrates obeyed without flinching the

24. Cited in RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, p. 323.

25. *Ibid.*

26. RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, p. 230; STURM, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

law which commanded him to die because of his alleged corruption of the young; yet he would not have obeyed a law formally forbidding him the pursuit of philosophy"²⁷.

In other words, there are things we simply cannot tolerate. Since Socrates regarded the pursuit of philosophy as the meaning of his existence, he would have resisted any effort that prevented him from practicing philosophy. The question remains: how would he have resisted? Of what we know of him, Socrates would have considered all the rational options available to him, and based on what the situation required, acted accordingly. Would he have acted violently? Not if violence is tantamount to injustice. But can justice ever require violence? I think that when the question involves our basic effort to exist, when another attempts to deprive us of our essential humanity, then our obligation is to resist such encroachment. The actual situation will dictate the method we employ. With qualification, the Greeks called such state of affairs *phronesis*: practical wisdom.

27. Leo STRAUSS, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, edited by Hilail Gildin, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1989, p. 228.