Paul Ricoeur’s Concept of Fallibility as Fault, Myth and Symbol

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ABSTRACT. This article presents and analyses Ricoeur’s notion of fallibility from the idea of myth to that of symbol in the context of the dialectics between finitude and infinitude. In Ricoeur, myth is used to present natural reality in a symbolic way which, it is argued, contradicts the traditional Christian perspective on reality which includes the ontology of metaphysics. Ricoeur is concerned to find a way to decipher religious mythological imagery by means of symbolism, so he also talks about the transition from direct meaning to indirect significance. Concepts like bad will and evil are discussed within Ricoeur’s symbolics of evil which intends to find the locus of evil within human reality. This is why he concludes that the symbolism of evil is not only theoretical but also historical, in the sense that man’s reality as imbued with evil is not only a philosophical issue but also a pressing practical matter.

KEY WORDS: fallibility, fault, myth, symbol, in/finitude

Introduction

The notion of fallibility in Ricoeur is presented by means of the idea of fault.¹ In describing fault, Ricoeur resorts to the introduction of two fundamental aspects which depict the nature of fault, namely opaqueness and absurdity. Therefore, the very nature of fault is opaque and absurd, so it escapes pure description. In other words, there is no possibility of having a pure imagery of fault which can be presented in unmediated terms.

¹ See also Steven H. Clark, Paul Ricoeur, 32.
Fault cannot be presented in a purely theoretical manner because it goes beyond the reasonableness of pure rationality. In order for one to understand the nature of fault, one has to break the barriers of fundamental ontology and pure description. Thus, for Ricoeur, fault is somehow external to man’s ontological constitution.

In speaking about fault—and it is evident that fault has to do with the human being itself—Ricoeur places its philosophy over against Christian theology, understood in traditional terms. It is quite clear that he does not want to enter any dispute with Christian theology but the mere presentation of fault as part of the human being’s constitution—regardless whether fault is external or internal to man—begs for a comparison. One can speak of both similarities and dissimilarities between Ricoeur and Christian theology. The similarity resides in the fact that both Ricoeur and Christian theology see the nature of fault as opaque and absurd. Christian theology presents human fault in terms which leave no doubt that fault is a human reality that pushes human beings to act in unreasonable ways. The dissimilarity has to do with the possibility of describing fault. If for Ricoeur fault escapes pure description, Christian theology has no problem in identifying fault as a reality which is closely connected to what the human being actually is in the world or how it can be presented in a purely theological way.

**Fault and Myth**

Why cannot Ricoeur present fault in a direct way? Because his conviction that fault is external to man’s ontological constitution requires a certain mediation in presenting the idea of

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5 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xli.
fault. For Ricoeur, fault can only be properly described if we make use of mediating concepts. This is because while the inner constitution of man, which does not contain the reality of fault, can be presented by pure description, the idea of fault, which is external to the inner constitution of man, needs a more practical or empirical presentation and this cannot be done unless we use concepts which mediate the state of man as inner constitution and the state of man as external reality. It is clear that Ricoeur’s anthropology is dualistic when it comes to the representation of the human being: there is first the reality of man’s inner constitution which can be thought of in terms of pure description and then there is the reality of man’s external manifestation which is triggered by action of passions over the will. This is important because the concept of will seems to be the actual connection between what can be called the theoretical image of man, which has nothing to do with fault, and the practical/empirical image of man, which is characterized by fault. This connection introduces the mediating concepts which put Ricoeur’s theoretical and empirical man together, and these concepts are myths or what Ricoeur calls “concrete mythics”. Here is what Ricoeur has to say about the idea of fault in connection to mythology:

[…] Fault […] is not a feature of fundamental ontology similar to other factors discovered by pure description […] motives, powers, conditions and limits. Fault remains a foreign body in the eidetics [imagery, n.a.] of man. […] The passage from innocence to fault is not accessible to any description, even an empirical one, but needs to pass through a concrete mythics. Thus the idea of approaching the empirics of the will by means of a concrete mythics was already formed, but we did not then realize the reasons for this de-

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7 Karl Simms, Paul Ricoeur, 10.
8 Phillip Stambovsky, Myth and the Limits of Reason, 60ff.
9 See Charles E. Reagan, Paul Ricoeur, 23.
tour. Indeed, why can the “passions”, which affect the will, be spoken of only in the coded language of a mythics? How are we to introduce this mythics into philosophic reflection? How can philosophic discourse be resumed after having been interrupted by myth?\(^\text{10}\)

It is crucial once again to underline Ricoeur’s standing as compared to traditional Christian theology and in this respect one can only identify a thorough dissimilarity between Ricoeur’s thought and Christian anthropology. Human fault is seen in Ricoeur as being properly mediated as well as described by means of the idea of myth, which calls for a symbolic, even supernatural, presentation of a natural reality. In Christian theology, however, there is no such thing as myth in presenting human fault. Christian theology has a very concrete image of fault as ontological reality because it is fault which breaks the connection between God and man. In Ricoeur, the idea of myth automatically disannuls what traditional Christian theology sees as ontologically real. In other words, the notion of myth makes reference to supernatural realities which must be understood in terms of natural realities while in Christian theology supernatural realities are understood as having ontological existence. But why is myth so important for Ricoeur? Because it presents the practical reality of the human being as affected by passions which result in the empirical reality of fault and fault cannot be adequately presented unless introduced into philosophical reflection. In other words, if one really needs to know how the reality of human fault should be understood, then he or she must resort to philosophical discourse which is capable of presenting the issue of fault provided fault is understood in mythological terms.

Myths belong to religion but as far as Ricoeur is concerned religion cannot help philosophy because religious myths exist

\(^{10}\) Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xli-xlili.

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in an “unrefined state”. This can mean that religion in itself is unable to offer a relevant as well as meaningful explanation of what the human being is in its fundamental ontology unless accompanied by the philosophical discourse which informs both the theoretical and the practical existence of man. Ricoeur’s plan is to refine the myths of religion—and theology—in order to provide a relevant account of man’s existence in the world. Therefore, he perceives myth as the shell of language. Myth is the image of language or, as Ricoeur puts it, a secondary development of a primary language. This particular sort of language is the “language of avowal” which, in Ricoeur, presents the idea of fault. It is crucial to notice here that for Ricoeur it is this primary language which presents fundamental importance as compared to the myth. This is because the fundamental language behind the myth addresses philosophy while the myth itself can only speak to religion and theology. The language behind myth is to be approached by the philosopher and it is the philosopher who can eventually decipher as well as refine the idea behind the religious and theological myths. In Ricoeur’s words:

[...] the myths of fall, chaos, exile, and divine blinding, all of which are directly accessible to a comparative history of religions, could not be inserted in their unrefined state into philosophic discourse. First they had to be put back into their own universe of discourse; for this reason I devoted several preparatory studies to its reconstruction. It then appeared that myths could be understood only as secondary elaborations of a more fundamental language that I call the language of avowal; this language speaks of fault and evil to the philosopher, and what is noteworthy in it is that it is symbolic through and through. It does not speak of stain, sin, or guilt in direct and proper terms, but in indirect and figurative terms. To un-

11 Patrick L. Bourgeois, Extension of Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic, 63.  
12 See John Wall, Moral Creativity, 29.  
13 Dan A. Stiver, Theology after Ricoeur, 54.  
14 John B. Thompson, Critical Hermeneutics, 44.
nderstand this language is to bring into play an exegesis of the symbol, which calls for rules of deciphering: a hermeneutics. In this way the initial idea of a mythics of bad will has been expanded to the dimensions of a symbolics of evil. Now, in the center of this symbolics, the most speculative symbols, such as matter, body, and original sin, refer to mythical symbols such as the battle between the forces of order and the forces of chaos, the exile of the soul in a foreign body, the blinding of man by a hostile divinity, Adam’s fall, and these refer to the primary symbols of stain, sin, and guilt.\(^\text{15}\)

In other words, any direct reference to myth will lead to discussions about sin and guilt which are both irrelevant for today’s people and philosophically crude in the sense that philosophy just cannot accept them unless refined by means of philosophical discourse. If Ricoeur’s ideas are applied to Christian theology, it means that traditional Christianity is religiously irrelevant for the men and women of today’s world as well as philosophically inadequate for those involved in the quest for truth. To give just one example, the traditional idea of sin as presenting traditional Christianity is totally irrelevant without being refined through the idea of fault as extracted from the mythological image of religious sin.

**From Myth to Symbol**

What Ricoeur proposes is to advance a philosophical discourse which reinterprets the direct language of religious myths in order to present them as indirect and metaphorical concepts that inform our image of humanity. Thus, the idea of sin as direct and proper term must be turned into an indirect and figurative term if we want it to be philosophically relevant. In Ricoeur, this transition from direct meaning to indirect significance and from mythology to symbolism is called the “exegesis of the

\(^{15}\) Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xlii.
symbol”.16 To put it in simple terms, the exegesis of the symbol is actually hermeneutics, so in order to refine mythology Ricoeur resorts to hermeneutics. The application of hermeneutics to religious mythology results in philosophical symbolism. With direct reference to the idea of fault, the application of hermeneutics to the traditional religious and theological mythology of sin leads to the symbolism of evil.17 It should be stressed here that Ricoeur’s symbolism of evil is the philosophical translation of what he calls the mythics or the mythology of “bad will”.18 This seems to be the practical application of his understanding of man as external reality because it can be investigated by means of the concept of fault. Thus, fault must be understood symbolically by deciphering and refining fundamental myths—such as original sin—as symbols of the conflict between order and chaos. To take the practical example of traditional Christian theology, the myth of Adam’s fall, for instance, should be understood as the symbol of sin. It is clear therefore that, in Ricoeur, hermeneutics starts from myth to symbol and then from knowledge to philosophy.19

It is not enough for Ricoeur to understand and apply the dynamics of hermeneutics from mythology to symbolism; this would be to go only half way through. After the refinement of myths and their subsequent understanding as symbols, it is absolutely necessary that symbols should be drawn closer to man’s knowledge of himself. Actually, following the transformation of myths into symbols, one must perform the insertion of symbols into man’s knowledge of himself.20 With reference

16 Patrick L. Bourgeois, Extension of Ricoeur’s Hermeneutic, 64.
17 See also Andrew Tallon, Head and Heart, 89-90.
18 For details about the concept of “bad will”, also in connection to Ricoeur, see Frank K. Flinn, “The Phenomenology of Symbol: Genesis I and II”, in William S. Hamrick (eds), Phenomenology in Practice and Theory, 227.
19 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xliii.
20 For the connection between fallibility and knowledge in Ricoeur, see Thomas W. Ogletree, “Christian Social Ethics as a Theological Discipline”, in Barbara G. Wheeler, Edward Farley (eds), Shifting Boundaries, 234.
to the concept of fault, Ricoeur leads us to believe that the myth of Adam’s fall cannot be properly understood if taken on its own or in its original religious and theological setting. In order for the myth of Adam’s fall to be accurately presented today, we must apply the hermeneutics of the symbolism of evil to this myth and this is how we shall expose it as the symbol of sin (or of original sin). Once here, we have to understand that symbolism must also be deciphered by means of language—in Ricoeur’s case, the language of avowal which expresses the ideas of fault and evil in philosophical terms. This particular language, however, is a matter of self-consciousness and self-consciousness is a matter of one’s will since the symbolism of evil is based on deciphering the mythology of bad will.

So fault and evil have to do with bad will and we know this because we translated the myth of Adam’s fall into the symbol of original sin and we reached the conclusion that the idea of fault or evil is an issue which has a direct connection to the individual will. This does not mean that we have automatically discovered the locus of evil in human will;21 this would be all too simple. Having established the way hermeneutics functions from mythology to symbolism or from the mythology of bad will to the symbolism of evil with reference to the idea of fault, Ricoeur still asks himself which is the locus of evil.22 If human reality is affected by evil, how and where did evil manage to get within it? What actually makes evil possible in human reality?23 Finding an answer to this question is unveiling the essence of fallibility:

The exegesis of these symbols prepares the myths for insertion into man’s knowledge of himself. In this way a symbolics of evil is an initial step toward bringing myths nearer to philosophic discourse. In the present work this symbolics of evil occupies the second of three projected books. Now, in this second part, linguistic prob-

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lems hold an important place. Indeed, the specific feature of the language of avowal has appeared more and more as one of the most astonishing enigmas of self-consciousness—making it seem as though man reached his own depth only by way of the royal road of analogy, as though self-consciousness could be expressed only in riddles and would necessarily require a hermeneutics. While the meditation on the mythics of bad will was unfolding into a *symbolics of evil*, reflection was pushing on in another direction: what is the human “locus” of evil, what is its point of insertion in human reality? In order to reply to that question I wrote the outline of philosophical anthropology placed at the beginning of this work. This study is centered on the theme of fallibility: the constitutional weakness that makes evil possible. By means of the concept of fallibility, philosophical anthropology comes, as it were, to the encounter of the symbolics of evil, just as the symbolics of evil brings myths closer to philosophic discourse. With the concept of fallibility, the doctrine of man approaches a threshold of intelligibility wherein it is understandable that evil could “come into the world” through man. Beyond this threshold begins the enigma of an upheaval in which discourse is only indirect and ciphered.\(^\text{24}\)

It is clear that man is fallible and evil is part of his existence but the actual way evil grew to affect human existence is what concerns Ricoeur.\(^\text{25}\) It is absolutely essential to stress here that Ricoeur notices a crucial fact, namely that it is possible to admit that evil came into the world through man. At this point—at least at the level of basic linguistics—Ricoeur concurs with traditional Christian theology because both admit that evil came into the world through man. The problem begins, however, when we attempt to see what the coming of evil into the world through man means for Ricoeur and what it means for traditional Christianity.

\[^\text{24}\text{ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xliii.}\]

The explanation is pretty straightforward with traditional Christianity. Sin is not understood as a symbol because Adam’s fall is not considered a myth. Adam’s fall is a historical fact, therefore original sin and sin in general is an ontological reality which places the human being in sheer opposition to God—and God is neither myth nor symbol but a person who has an ontological status. In other words, traditional Christianity promotes a dual ontological reality: the metaphysical reality of God and the physical reality of man. Sin is performed by man and caused by man, so the locus of sin is the human being. Traditional Christianity also allows for the difference between sin and evil, as the sin of man is the manifestation of an evil which exists beyond man.

For Ricoeur though, things are a bit more complicated. Sin is a symbol because Adam’s fall is a myth, so Adam’s fall is not a historical fact; therefore, original sin and sin in general are mere symbols of human’s reality as characterized by evil. Ricoeur’s presentation of Adam’s fall as a myth leads not only to the explicit transformation of sin into a symbol but also to the implicit disannulment of traditional Christianity’s dual ontological reality. Thus, in Ricoeur, God can be either a myth or a symbol because sin itself is a symbol. There is no ontological status attached to sin in Ricoeur, so if sin does not exist as ontological reality, why should God? There can be a metaphysical reality of God in Ricoeur but this does not necessarily have to be ontological; it can be mythical or symbolic, or even conceptual but it does not seem to be ontological. Therefore, in Ricoeur, God seems to be present only as a concept which symbolically explains the fundamental nature of religious and theological mythology.

**Between Finitude and Infinitude**

Ricoeur’s philosophy of fallibility cannot be understood unless the fundamentals of his understanding of man are unveiled. For him, man is a dual being in the sense that it is ontologically confronted with the disproportion between the polarity of finitude
and the polarity of infinitude. Man must be understood in terms of the mediation between human finitude and infinitude because it is this mediation that explains man’s fallibility. Thus, the translation of myths into symbols and their subsequent insertion in man’s knowledge of himself lay the basis of a philosophical discourse which paves the way to the idea of the possibility of evil and this is fallibility. In other words, fallibility is the possibility of evil because fault and evil realities which resulted from the translation of myths, such as Adam’s fall, into symbols, such as original sin. Nevertheless, both myths and symbols must be inserted in man’s knowledge of himself, so sin—understood as symbol—teaches man about himself, not about something beyond him. But this is not enough for Ricoeur. Translating myths into symbols and then inserting symbols into man’s knowledge of himself is not sufficient. What we have to do from now on is apply a certain type of hermeneutics to symbols. Thus, symbols must be understood over against the text but Ricoeur’s hermeneutics does not only read the text by working behind the symbol but from the symbol. This means that the symbols we find in the text can lead to new meanings that inform man’s knowledge of himself.

The elaboration of the concept of fallibility has provided an opportunity for a much more extensive study of the structures of human reality. The duality of the voluntary and the involuntary is brought back into a much vaster dialectic dominated by the ideas of man’s disproportion, the polarity within him of the finite and the infinite, and his activity of intermediation or mediation. Man’s specific weakness and his essential fallibility are ultimately sought

26 For details, see Bernard P. Dauenhauer, Paul Ricoeur. The Promise and Risk of Politics, 61.
27 Details about Ricoeur’s view of finitude can be found in Walter Lowe, Theology and Difference. The Wound of Reason, 156.
29 Karl Simms, Paul Ricoeur, 15-16.
30 Don Ihde, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, 161.
within this structure of mediation between the pole of his finitude and the pole of his infinitude. [...] by preceding the symbolics of evil with an elucidation of the concept of fallibility, I was confronted with the difficulty of incorporating the symbolics of evil into philosophic discourse. [...] this philosophic discourse leads to the idea of the possibility of evil or fallibility, and it receives new life and considerable enrichment from the symbolics of evil. But this is achieved only at the price of a revolution in method, represented by the recourse to a hermeneutics, that is, to rules of deciphering applied to a world of symbols. Now, this hermeneutics is not of the same nature as the reflective thought that led to the concept of fallibility. The rules for transposing the symbolics of evil into a new type of philosophic discourse are outlined in the last chapter of the second part under the title “The symbol gives thought.” The text is the pivotal point of the whole work. It shows how we can both respect the specific nature of the symbolic world of expressions and think, not at all “behind” the symbol but “starting from” the symbol.31

It seems that Ricoeur’s theory of fallibility based on his hermeneutics which works from the symbol makes sure that his anthropology benefits from some sort of an ongoing relevance.32 If the symbol is the starting point of hermeneutics, then it means that the meaning of the symbol undergoes a constant process of change which is aimed at offering an understanding of humanity which presents constant relevance throughout history. Thus, Ricoeur’s philosophy is historically conditioned to such a high extent that it can offer a relevant image of humanity at any given historical stage. The symbols of religious and theological texts can therefore be permanently translated from myths into new images of humanity that explain why the possibility of evil is present within man’s existence. It is interesting that Ricoeur prefers to talk about fallibility in terms of the possibility of evil, not in terms of the actuality of evil. This does not of course cancel his recognition of the actuality of evil; on the

31 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xliii-xliv.

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contrary, he seems to attempt to provide an explanation of why evil is constantly present in human life and fallibility described as possibility makes evil an immanent reality of man’s existence. In fact, it is the possibility of evil that explains the actuality of evil as manifestation of human fallibility, and in this respect Ricoeur resorts to psychoanalysis and political philosophy.

So, he is convinced that in order for us to understand fallibility in a proper way, we have to go beyond religion and theology in the realm of psychoanalysis and political philosophy. Human fallibility is so vividly confirmed by the historical reality of evil that Ricoeur cannot conceive human fallibility without the problem of power. Resorting to psychoanalysis and political philosophy does not mean breaking up with religion and theology—it is actually the other way around: psychoanalysis and political philosophy continue what religion and theology initiated by symbolically presenting the reality of human alienation. In other words, Ricoeur acknowledges that the human being has a fundamental problem which can be described in terms of the possibility of evil or fallibility. This is because fallibility is present in everyday reality to such an extent that from mythological religion and theology to scientific psychoanalysis and political philosophy man has plentifully proved his utter inability to know himself. Ricoeur is convinced that the symbolism of evil is always followed or accompanied by the empiricism of the will; fallibility is not only a philosophical-theoretical issue but also a historical-practical problem. Man has a serious problem which can be understood only if he accepts the reality of his will as being a slave-will, namely a “free will that is bound and always finds itself already bound.” To conclude,

36 See also William David Hall, *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative*, 66.
37 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xlv.
man’s fallibility must be perceived by means of the tension between his free will and the realities which constantly bind his will.