The Reality of Evil and the Primordial Self in Paul Ricoeur’s View of Fallibility

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ABSTRACT. The idea but also the reality of evil is essential for Ricoeur especially in connection with the concept of fallibility. In order to investigate the link between evil and fallibility, Ricoeur begins with a thorough analysis of evil from the perspective of human freedom. The discussion about man’s freedom and the fact that evil exists in the world leads Ricoeur to another fundamental concept, namely that of primordial self. The primordial self, however, does not exist without the inner reality of his own consciousness. For Ricoeur, the consciousness of the primordial self is double, so he speaks about the consciousness of fault and the consciousness of evil which are both critical issues for the primordial self. These analyses are detailed by Ricoeur within the context of the myth of the fall which is subject to complex symbolism. The reality of evil with reference to the myth of the fall pushes Ricoeur to consider the primordial self as both the Adversary and the Other. Despite the complexity of Ricoeur’s analysis, it seems that his final conclusion has to do with man’s freedom which is the very source of evil in the world. The factuality of this reality pictures the human being not only as a free agent but also as a victim, which is the direct consequence of evil that affects humanity.

KEY WORDS: freedom, evil, self, fault, fallibility

Freedom and Evil
Even if man’s will is bound, Ricoeur still speaks of freedom in connection to evil.¹ He cautions us to be very careful when we link freedom to evil because such a discussion does not solve

¹ David Tracy, Blessed Rage for Order, 213-214.
the problem of the origin of evil. The idea of freedom only shows the place of the manifestation of evil but not its origin. Ricoeur realizes that the introduction of freedom within the discussion about evil may direct our attention to the idea that evil may be a reality which stems from outside the human being. In other words, the human being itself may happen not to be what Ricoeur calls “the radical source of evil”.\textsuperscript{2} This also entails that man proves not to be “the absolute evil doer”.\textsuperscript{3}

At this point, Ricoeur’s vision appears to come much closer to traditional Christian theology where evil is indeed an external reality to the human being. Man is certainly not the source of evil; the source of evil must be searched beyond the possibilities and frontiers of man’s existence in what the primary sources of Christianity call “Satan”, seen as a creation of God who chose to use his freedom in an utterly faulty way. Therefore, in traditional Christianity, evil even has an ontological status in the sense that it exists as a reality which manifests itself actively. Moreover, evil is even a personal reality because the originating being of evil can related itself to the created reality of God’s universe, including the human being. It is true that Ricoeur does not seem ready to admit that evil has an ontological status as in traditional Christianity; he nevertheless acknowledges the possibility to ascribe to evil an external dimension or an otherness which has a real existence beyond the human being.

This is obvious when Ricoeur says that evil affects human existence. It is indeed very difficult to perceive evil on its own in the sense of pointing one’s finger to a reality—personal or impersonal—which can be called evil. What can be seen, however, is that human reality—to which evil may be external—is categorically affected by evil and it is in this particular way that evil can be seen as manifest. In other words, we can identify evil by noticing the way it manifests within human existence. Evil is

\textsuperscript{2} William Kerrigan, \textit{The Sacred Complex}, 100.

\textsuperscript{3} Ricoeur, \textit{Fallible Man}, xlvi.
manifest when it affects human existence, so it is from this empirical observation that we can trace evil back to its—probably external—origin beyond the human being. It is important to see at this point the very way Ricoeur describes the mechanism of evil. The human being is affected by evil—and this pretty much the only way we can see and understand the existence of evil—but we gather from this that evil can exist beyond us. If this is true, then evil does exist apart from us and beyond us but, at the same time, evil affects us in such a way that we are contaminated by it. So, in Ricoeur, the manifestation of evil within the human being is realized by contamination. This means that the origin or the source of evil is totally inaccessible to us directly; man can have access to evil only by the mediation offered through its relationship to us, namely through what Ricoeur calls “the state of temptation, aberration or blindness”. Thus, evil is mediated to the human being who in turn is contaminated by it. To quote Ricoeur:

> To try to understand evil by freedom is a grave decision. It is the decision to enter into the problem of evil by the strait gate, holding evil from the outset for “human, all too human.” Yet we must have a clear understanding of the meaning of this decision in order not to challenge its legitimacy prematurely. It is by no means a decision concerning the root origin of evil, but is merely the description of the place where evil appears and from where it can be seen. Indeed, it is quite possible that man is not the radical source of evil, that he is not the absolute evil-doer. But even if evil were coeval with the root origin of things, it would still be true that it is manifest only in the way it affects human existence. Thus, the decision to enter into the problem of evil by the strait gate of human reality only expresses the choice of a center of perspective: even if evil came to man from another source which contaminates him, this other source would still be accessible to us only through its relation to us, only through the state of temptation, aberration, or

blindness whereby we would be affected. In all hypotheses, evil manifests itself in man’s humanity.  

Such a presentation of evil can lead to some sort of an objectivised perspective on evil in the sense that evil is a reality which can affect us in a way which excludes our subjective contribution. Evil is out there, beyond the reality of our own being, and it affects us without any subjective contribution from us. We are affected by evil because evil manifest itself within us in a way which is rather implacably impressed upon us. Ricoeur realizes such a danger so he continues to portray evil as a reality which not only affects us but also is committed by us. The concept of responsibility as attached to freedom is crucial here because freedom must take upon itself a double role: that of accepting evil as committed and that of seeing evil as not committed. This apparently leads to the conclusion that evil is manifest and thereby committed by man through his own freedom. Therefore, freedom is both the manifestation and the author of evil as far as the human being is concerned. Man can equally manifest evil and author evil. This does not mean that freedom is the origin of evil but only that it can manifest itself as the author of evil within the human being. The bottom line for Ricoeur though is that evil can be set within the realm of human freedom which eventually places man in a position of relationship with the origin of evil:

It may be objected that the choice of this perspective is arbitrary, that it is, in the strong sense of the word, a prejudgment; such is not the case. The decision to approach evil through man and his freedom is not an arbitrary choice but suitable to the very nature of the problem. For in point of fact, evil’s place of manifestation is apparent only if it is recognized, and it is recognized only if it is

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6 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xlvi.
7 Ursula King, *Religion and Gender*, 80.
8 See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 239.
taken up by deliberate choice. The decision to understand evil by freedom is itself an undertaking of freedom that takes evil upon itself. The choice of the center of perspective is already the declaration of a freedom that admits its responsibility, vows to look upon evil as evil committed, and avows its responsibility to see that it is not committed. It is this *avowal* that links evil to man, not merely as its place of manifestation, but as its author. This act of taking-up-oneself creates the problem; it is not a conclusion but a starting point. Even if freedom should be the author of evil without being the root origin of it, the avowal would place the problem of evil in the sphere of freedom. For if man were responsible for evil only through abandon, only through a kind of reverse participation in a more radical source of evil than his freedom, it would still be the avowal of his responsibility that would permit him to be in contact with that root origin.9

Ricoeur is again quite close to the traditional side of Christianity because the manifestation of evil is evident in Scriptures and it is related to man’s acts, personality and nature, as well as to Satan as the very source of evil. Where Ricoeur departs from the Christian tradition is his theory of human freedom as connected to evil. In traditional Christianity, man is anything but a free being. Evil affects him in such a way that life can better be described as being choked by the reality of evil; man is utterly sinful because this is his very nature. Man cannot exert his freedom in connection to evil; what man can do is refrain from certain manifestation of evil in his life but this does not mean that he enjoys total freedom in living, assessing and manifesting himself in relationship to the reality of evil. In other words, man cannot avoid evil because evil is intrinsically linked to his very nature. Whatever man is in his natural state perspires evil even if man can—to a certain and very limited degree—avoid some manifestations of evil; he cannot, however, avoid evil because he is evil. Thus, traditional Christianity may accept Ricoeur’s theory of contamination when it comes to present the way evil

9 Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, xlvi-xlvii.
affects the human being but this must be supplemented by the observation that man is not only contaminated by evil and he chooses to act in an evil way; may even likes to act evil and cannot live without being and acting evil.

The Primordial Self between the Consciousness of Fault and the Consciousness of Evil

A certain apprehension of this necessity can be detected in Ricoeur when he acknowledges the fact that does not want to commit certain evil acts but he nevertheless does them. The realization of this dilemma which places the human being between the rock and the hard place in relationship to his own self is defined by Ricoeur as the “consciousness of fault”.\(^{10}\) When we commit evil acts we actually see who we really are. Ricoeur even says that we are “contracted and bounded”\(^{11}\) in an act which displays our inner selves. The mechanism or even the mechanics of evil presupposes a causality of evil which pushes the human being to act evil despite his desire not to commit evil. This means that there is something beyond our will but still within ourselves which forces us to commit evil acts despite our desire to oppose such manifestation. The phrase used by Ricoeur to introduce this entity beyond our will but still within ourselves is “primordial self”.\(^{12}\) The primordial self cannot be directly accessed by us; what we can do in relationship to it is see and perceive its specific acts which trigger within us the consciousness of evil. In this sense, the consciousness of evil makes us resort to the primordial self or, in Ricoeur’s words, “this consciousness is a recourse to the primordial self beyond its acts.”\(^{13}\)

The consciousness of evil cannot exist though without an awareness which allows the human being to realize its fallibil-

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10 See also Ernest Keen, *Depression, Self-Consciousness, Pretending and Guilt*, 90.
ity. This particular awareness which permits us to see our relationship with evil is termed by Ricoeur “the consciousness of freedom”.14 We have to enjoy this freedom if we want to see ourselves how we really are but at this point Ricoeur holds a divergent position in relationship to traditional Christianity. It is true that Christianity admits that the reality of sin cannot be fully apprehended without freedom. Man, however, does not possess freedom in his natural state affected by sin; man is free only after God intervenes in his life and makes him aware of his condition. So, in traditional Christianity, man reaches the state of freedom despite his natural sinful constitution which makes him a slave to sin and blind with reference to the consequences of sin. Man can indeed see both his sinful condition and the results of his sin following the external intervention of God upon his natural condition which results in freedom. Unlike traditional Christianity which presents the reality of human freedom as an external and divine intervention despite man’s natural state, Ricoeur posits the reality of freedom within the natural constitution of humanity. Man is free in his natural state even if his dual anthropology makes his aware that his will is bounded and constrained by the reality of the primordial self. Moreover, unlike traditional Christianity which allows the consciousness of evil and the consciousness of freedom only in man’s regenerated state—namely following God’s external intervention in man’s life—Ricoeur presents both the consciousness of evil and the consciousness of freedom as realities of man’s natural constitution.

This hermeneutics is possible because man is capable of handling the significance of religious mythology. For Ricoeur, the world of myths is broken15—a statement which is rather vague but could be interpreted in the sense that the world of myths is deciphered. If this is true, then it follows that myths have al-

15 For details, see also Theodoor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 156.
ready been translated into symbols, so we now have to grapple with the significance of symbols. As Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is based on his conviction that we must not work behind the symbol but from the symbol, it means that we must wrestle not only with the current significance we attribute to symbols but also with what the symbol can acquire in future. With reference to fallibility, we shall have to recapture the symbolism of evil as presented by the myth of the fall. Ricoeur’s translation of the myth of the fall into the symbolism of evil presupposes at least the recognition that the myth of the fall is not all encompassing.\textsuperscript{16} To be sure, in Ricoeur, the myth of the fall does not include other equally crucial myths. Here is Ricoeur’s explanation:

The main enigma of this symbolics lies in the fact that the world of myths is already a broken world. The myth of the fall, which is the matrix of all subsequent speculations concerning the origin of evil in human freedom, is not the only myth. It does not encompass the rich mythics of chaos, of tragic blinding, or of the exiled soul.\textsuperscript{17}

At this point, Ricoeur is again miles away from traditional Christianity which makes the fall responsible for chaos, spiritual blinding and a restless soul.\textsuperscript{18} At this point, it should be reaffirmed that traditional Christianity does not place the fall as well as the resulting chaos, spiritual blinding and the restless soul within the category of myths. The fall is the willful acceptance of sin and also the committing of sin, so it is a reality which can be seen as deeply rooted in man’s existence. Sin is a human reality and the way from total freedom to total sinfulness is not a myth which requires symbolic hermeneutics—or man’s intervention upon himself in order to refine the myth of the fall with view to producing the symbolism of evil. The fall is a human reality which requires God’s intervention from out-

\textsuperscript{16} Karl Simms, \textit{Paul Ricoeur}, 25.
\textsuperscript{17} Ricoeur, \textit{Fallible Man}, xlix.
\textsuperscript{18} See, for details, Patrick Downey, \textit{Serious Comedy}, 106.
side the human being in order to restore man’s existence with view to producing a new reality: personal, spiritual/physical, historical, existential etc. To draw the line, traditional Christianity—unlike Ricoeur—tackles the issues of man’s fall, chaos, spiritual blinding and the restless soul from the perspective of human reality and causality as historical events with ongoing historical consequences. Ricoeur though breaks the fall apart from the rest and insists that the fall is a myth which presents us with a symbolism of evil. One possible conclusion is that the fall—as a myth of course—cannot be held responsible for the reality of evil in the world. The fall is just a myth which talks about the reality of evil but it is not in itself the very cause of evil. This is why in Ricoeur freedom can exist “after” the fall; it is actually no “after” moment following the fall because the fall itself is not a historical event but only a myth. As a myth, the fall cannot be followed—in a chain of causality—either by chaos or spiritual blinding and the restless soul. They are all myths which present the reality of human evil in a form which can be refined symbolically. Myths are important for Ricoeur because they not only display our fallibility—and also our fault—but also the fact that we can related to our fallibility in freedom. So it is due to myths that we can fully realize the consciousness of fault as well as the consciousness of freedom. Myths are therefore ways which help us cope with our own existence by explaining to us that our faults not only belong to ourselves but they can also be understood by freedom. In other words, the myth—which is essentially part of the past—supports our understanding of ourselves in the present, so it is only logical to claim that myths connect the past to the present and the present to the past. This is because by understanding, deciphering and refining the myth—the fall, for instance—we affirm our awareness of fault, so we manifest our consciousness of fault which, for Ricoeur, is the condition of the consciousness of freedom.19

19 Ernest Keen, Depression, 90.
The Primordial Self as the Adversary and the Other
The myth of the fall is crucial for Ricoeur because it can be treated independently from other myths which means that, on its own, the myth of the fall is subject to colorful symbolism.20 Ricoeur can trace at least two aspects which flow directly from the myth of the fall. The first is the coming of evil into the world21 by means of man’s positing of it,22 while the second is man’s positing of evil as the result of man’s yielding to the adversary.23 It is quite clear that Ricoeur’s understanding of the myth of the fall is based on an exegetical hermeneutics which stresses the idea of evil; what is less clear—or actually rather unclear—resides in Ricoeur’s use of the concept of “adversary”. Ricoeur’s “adversary” is essential at this point provided we understand the mechanism of evil as extracted from the symbolism of evil based on the myth of the fall. Evil exists in the world because it came into the world and it came into the world because man affirmed or postulated it.24 Evil may well exist beyond the human being itself but this means that evil exists also beyond the world of man. Evil, however, entered the world of man as soon as man postulated it or acknowledged it. One could speculate on the meaning of Ricoeur’s idea of positing evil unless he had said that man posited evil because the yielded to the adversary. So, the coming of evil into the world is directly linked—through man’s positing of it—to the fact that man surrendered to the adversary:

Even if the philosopher gambles on the superiority of the myth of the fall because of its affinity with the avowal that freedom makes

20 For a good analysis of Ricoeur’s myth of the fall, see Thomas L. Brodie, Genesis as Dialogue, 146.
21 Karl Simms, Paul Ricoeur, 21.
22 William David Hall, Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative, 66.
23 See, for further details, Rosalyn W. Berne, Nanotalk, 267.
24 For an interesting discussion about the postulation of evil, which brings Ricoeur closer to Kant, see John Wall, Moral Creativity, 83.
of its responsibility, even if taking the myth of the fall as the central reference point allows us to regroup all other myths, the fact remains that the myth of the fall does not succeed in abolishing or reducing them. Moreover, the exegesis of the myth of the fall directly brings out a tension between two significations: evil comes into the world insofar as man posits it, but man posits it only because he yields to the siege of the Adversary.25

Who or what is the adversary? It is very difficult to say who or what the adversary is given that Ricoeur does not elaborate on the idea of adversary. Even without a clear definition of the adversary, one can easily notice that it is quite logical to see the connection between evil and the adversary as well as the fact that man seems to be in the middle—namely between the reality of evil and the reality of the adversary. The difficulty of identifying the adversary resides in Ricoeur’s—probably deliberate—decision not to name the adversary. Some observations can nevertheless be made: first, the adversary is somehow beyond man’s will because man yielded to him or it; second, the adversary is—at least to a certain degree—connected to the reality of evil as either the source or a cause of evil; and third, the adversary is not necessarily external to man even if it affects his will. These three characteristics lack a clear referent but they do remind us of Ricoeur’s definition of the primordial self. The primordial self lies within man, acts beyond man’s will and the consciousness of fault—and implicitly the reality of evil—is manifested in its specific acts. But why is the primordial self the “adversary”? Probably because it cannot be directly accessible to man, so man has no power or capacity to control the evil which is mediated through his specific acts.26 Man acknowledges the reality of evil, he can even realize that there is something in him which binds his will but he cannot refrain from doing the wrong deeds he hates to perform. This particular awareness of man triggers his consciousness of fault but the

25 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlix.
26 See also Anthony C. Thiselton, The Hermeneutics of Doctrine, 263.
consciousness of fault is available to man only through and due to the consciousness of freedom. In other words, man is aware of the reality of evil because he is a free being despite the binding nature of his primordial self. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Ricoeur’s conclusion that by means of affirming evil, freedom finds itself in an odd position, and this is the position of a victim.27 For Ricoeur, the position of a victim, which is clearly applied to friend, must be judged in relationship to what Ricoeur calls the Other:28

The limitation of an ethical vision of evil and of the world is already signified in the ambiguous structure of the myth of the fall: by positing evil, freedom is the victim of an Other. It will be the task of philosophic reflection to recapture the suggestions of that symbolics of evil, to extend them into all the domains of man’s consciousness, from the human sciences to speculations on the slave-will. If “the symbol gives thought,” what the symbolics of evil gives to thought concerns the grandeur and limitation of any ethical vision of the world. For man, as he is revealed by this symbolics, appears no less a victim than guilty.29

Of course it is not freedom which posits evil by man in his capacity of free being is capable of positing evil and therefore placing himself in the position of a victim. Man though is his own victim if the primordial self only transcends his will but not his being. Freedom, however, brings about responsibility and responsibility in connection to evil and especially the performance of evil acts produces guilt.30 This is why, in Ricoeur, man’s status of being a victim is doubled by his state of being guilty based on the responsible application of freedom with reference to the reality of evil.31

27 See also Ursula King, Religion and Gender, 80.
28 Also check Anthony C. Thiselton, Thiselton on Hermeneutics, 48.
29 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlix.
31 Ricoeur, Fallible Man, xlviii-xlix.