

Theo L. Hettema (Seminary FEC/PThU, Amsterdam)

The Otherness of Mutual Recognition. Ricoeur's Course in the Shifting Landscape of Transcendence

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### 1. *The Postsecular*

For some decades we may notice a return of the topic of religion in Western cultural debate. It is not only that religious phenomena that occur in society are analyzed, but also that the theme of religion is taken seriously in cultural reflection. This is a remarkable, especially for the secularized West, religion had become an outdated object of research, simply not interesting for those who intended to catch the spirit of current times. When this feature is characteristic for 20<sup>th</sup> century secular thinking: that religion is hardly relevant, and can be removed from fields of reflection without any waste for reflection, the landscape of thinking in Western culture, however, has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In entitling this cultural landscape as 'postsecular', we may use this notion a) as the observation that religion and religiosity are visible phenomena in society, be it that religion appears in de-institutionalized and non-institutional forms, especially, and comes to the fore in fields like art, music, and literature; b) as an input for reflection in and on Western culture, enabled through the de-institutionalized position of religion in society; c) as an expression of the intention and wish that room for another cultural discourse is made after the cultural reign of secularism.<sup>1</sup> In short, we have to consider the postsecular, postsecularity, and postsecularism as possible themes for reflection. A monograph like Richard Kearney, *Anatheism*, shows what the far-reaching consequences are, when the postsecular as a cultural phenomenon, as a form of reflection, and as a new discourse for philosophy and theology is explored.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. *The Transcendent*

The possibilities of postsecular thinking receive a sharper profile when we focus on the notion of transcendence. The word transcendence as such refers to the fact that 'certain boundaries are exceeded' (Stoker, forthcoming). These boundaries may concern our knowledge, our acting, and our perception of reality. In the history of ideas, transcendence has been connected to the perception of a higher reality, especially. Transcendence has to do with an experience that exceeds our common ability of knowledge. It concerns a range of perception that has more to do with hope (in acting) and belief (for thinking), or rather: a kind of knowledge, added by or transformed by belief. The object of such transcendent knowledge is often called 'God' in Western tradition. The notion of God and the possibility of transcending

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Habermas, 'Notes On A Post-Secular Society'.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism*.

the boundaries of our common knowledge in order to know God have been firmly established by a metaphysical tradition in thinking that ranges from Greek antiquity to modernity, and a theological tradition of a supranatural conception of God that has survived many currents of modernity and modernism.

However, the secular age has undermined the possibilities of such metaphysics, and the clearest instance of this undermining work has been the elimination of the notion of transcendence. The secular age has favoured the realm of immanence for thinking, acting, and feeling.

When this secular age gives way to the postsecular, the question arises what this implies for the notions of the transcendent and transcendence. Its appearance will not be self-evident, so much may be clear, and any reflection that is fed by a conception of transcendence will have to miss SYN the self-evidence of former metaphysical and supra-natural thinking. I will not posit an inner, systematic necessity of the transcendent, appearing in a postsecular setting, but I may simply observe that the notion of transcendence arises in manifold.

A recent project has attended me to the plurality of appearances of the transcendent in a postsecular context. I refer to the project of Culture and Transcendence, led by W. Stoker en W. van der Merwe, which has resulted in the publication of two volumes with selected articles (REF).

The first volume offers a fourfold typology of transcendence, as a phenomenology of the notion. Transcendence may be set out into four types: the first type of immanent transcendence – in which the transcendent is borne by symbols and expressions of an immanent reality (e.g., Tillich). The second type of a radical transcendence, in which the transcendent is conceived as something that comes from a vertical beyond (i.e., Barth), or radically as a horizontal transcendence. The third type is one of radical immanence, in which the absolute hands itself fully into mundane reality (Mark Taylor). The fourth type is one of radical alterity, in which the couple of transcendent/immanent is changed for one of alterity.

Clearly, these forms originate in secular thinking, and many examples from 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and theology may be given as examples of the four types. A second volume shows how these types flourish in current thinking, covering authors from philosophy, theology, politics, and artists. The mere collecting of all these examples suffices to show that transcendence is a ‘trending topic’ for current thinking in a postsecular context.

#### *4. Ricoeur, the postsecular and the transcendent*

The question now arises what the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur could contribute to these recent figures of thinking.

Such a question should not be affirmed beforehand. We are not obliged to search for an artificial application of his philosophy if there is not a decisive reason to do so. Perhaps we should honour Ricoeur as a philosopher who is deeply rooted in modernity and the secular, and restrict our reflection on his philosophy to the aim of clarifying the routes that modern and secular thinking have taken in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such a restriction would, however, limit the impact of Ricoeur’s thinking. Ricoeur himself has had intensive discussions with authors

who nowadays feed postsecular reflection, and these authors often refer to Ricoeur (NOTE). Moreover, his hermeneutical approach offers some fruitful possibilities for a non-metaphysical, postsecular understanding of the transcendent. Therefore, we turn to some elements of his philosophy that can possibly foster our reflection on transcendence.

##### *5. Stretching the limits of human being: the prevalence of hope*

The theme of transcendence is developed in the whole of Ricoeur's philosophy. There is an external drive to the development of the notion of transcendence, laid down in Ricoeur's continuous engagement with the philosophical tradition and contemporary philosophers. It is already in his early work, that Ricoeur confronts his philosophical questions with the thought of Karl Jaspers. This leads him to developing the theme of hope in acting as a philosophical notion, and leads him to a full confrontation with Heidegger.

Another example of engagement with a philosopher is his conversation with Levinas, who will return in our exposition. (Figuring: reg.).

##### *6. Transcending the limits of human being*

There is also an internal drive in developing the theme of transcendence for Ricoeur, given in Ricoeur's philosophical programme. From *Freedom and Nature* on, Ricoeur has reflected upon the nature of human being, as a being that is hindered in his willing. The human being is intentional: he or she wills, thinks, feels and acts, but also experiences how his willing and acting is obstructed by evil, by the fallibility of himself and the actual faults done by himself, or inflicted upon him by others. However, there is also some human drive to transcend the limits of evil: to do good, to lay down righteous institutions, and to overcome the boundaries of evil in thinking, acting, and feeling. Human being is a transcendent being, trying to exceed the boundaries laid down by himself or by others. This transcendence is more a task for human being than a given fact. This task extends to all kind of expressions of human being.

This explains why Paul Ricoeur needs a very ample methodology for exploring human being as willing and as obstructed by evil. He needs a phenomenology to sketch the nature of willing, but he also needs a hermeneutics to invest the empirical expressions of willing and of evil. And he needs a poetics of the will, to explore the ways in which human imagination transcends the limits that are laid down by evil.

It is well-known how this tripartition has governed the development of Ricoeur's philosophy, from the phenomenology of *Freedom and Nature* and *Fallible Man*, through the discovery of hermeneutics in *The Symbolism of Evil*, to a poetics of the will, which did not lead to a single monograph, but extended all over the rest of Ricoeur's oeuvre.

##### *7. Human being: transcending capabilities*

It is the human condition of being confronted with evil that leads to continuous human endeavours of transcending. Ricoeur's article on 'Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and to Theology' is a fine example how human being in confrontation with evil comes to transcending the aporias of thinking in acting, and the aporias of acting in feeling and spiritualising. Evil

cannot be managed by thinking acting, and feeling. There remains an eternal enigma (quotation last sentence of Evil...), but there is also the capability SYN of transcending the boundaries that limit human being by searching for new ways of interpretation: conceptuality gives way to (narrative) imagination: imagination leads to involvement and engagement: engagement leads to a spiritual conception and acceptance. There is a certain transcendent capability in human being, as a capability to search for ways of thinking and acting that exceed given frameworks of operating.

Transcendence as self-transcendence in the confrontation with evil is a philosophical-anthropological principle for Ricoeur. Such a principle does not prove anything about the reality of a transcendent object, the object, projection or horizon of the act of transcending. Philosophical hermeneutics can only examine how human expressions extend to an object that transcends the borders of immediate understanding.

As a matter of fact, this transcendent movement becomes the ratio of all interpretation for Ricoeur. Where the chain of immediate communication is broken, for example when oral communication between speaker and audience becomes textual communication between author and reader, a movement of transcendence arises to establish new forms of communication. The ways in which a narrative projects a world to the reader is an example of poetic transcendence.

It is interesting to examine how this poetic transcendent lines up with objects of transcendence that have received fixed names in tradition; I mean the way in which God as the Transcendent (with a capital T- capitalization as a linguistic form of realizing a transcendent movement) shows up in religious texts. Language is for Ricoeur referential by nature, and it maintains this referentiality when language transcends the borders of immediate communication. In religious traditions, at least in the Biblical traditions that Ricoeur examines, 'God' is an object of reference, be it in a transcending form of referentiality. [UIT>>Quotation from 'Naming God' on God as ultimate referent.]

The religious traditions are interesting for Ricoeur, as they offer clear examples of dealing with the transcendent, but they are not essential for his argument. They remain forms of regional hermeneutics, which contribute to the development of a more general thesis on the self-transcendence of human being.

This general thesis of Ricoeur's philosophical quest receives, at least according to me, its most explicit expression in his book on *Oneself As Another*, , in which Ricoeur describes human being in its basic capabilities: the capability to speak, to act, to narrate, to make oneself disposable to another, and to anchor these capabilities in just societal institutions.

Where the start of Ricoeur's quest sketched human being as *Fallible Man*, he ends with a tableau SYN of human being in its capabilities amidst the fallibility and faults of living.

We may notice the transcendent movements in this anthropology: from speaking to acting, to narrating and into a stance of imputability. Where being the narrator of one's life-story may involve a certain captiveness, the radical alterity of the exigency to dispose oneself to an other transcends one's life-story. And where the call of an other might run the risk of a

timely experience, the exigency of just institutions transcends the immediacy of the confrontation with an other.

### *8. The Course of Recognition*

After the momentary conclusion of his philosophical quest in *Oneself As Another*, Ricoeur has presented two more major intellectual efforts: the books on *Memory, History, Forgetting*, and *The Course of Recognition*. These books enable Ricoeur to elaborate some of the consequences of his thinking that could not be taken into account in *Oneself As Another*. Thus, *Memory...* explores the act of remembering and the boundaries of remembrance: a forced remembrance or amnesia. *The Course of Recognition* explores the act of recognition.

Thus far, my argument has been we encounter in Ricoeur a hermeneutical philosophy. This hermeneutics is not only a way of analyzing human acts, but it appears to belong to the essence of human being to live as an interpreting being. This interpretive existence is characterized by movements of transcendence, which try to overcome the stumble blocks that a human life within the boundaries of fallibility and fault invoke. In religious traditions the transcendent movements often receive a fixed transcendent object, named God. More interesting for philosophy is transcendence as a movement of thinking, acting, and feeling that is inherent to human existence.

The conclusion of this argument may be tested by reading *The Course of Recognition*, for the act of recognition seems to be a plane on which transcendence is not a self-evident notion. As a matter of fact, the notion of transcendence scarcely appears in *The Course of Recognition*, and this fact makes it far more intriguing for us to connect our subject of transcendence to Ricoeur's reasoning in the book.

### *9. Forms of Recognition*

In his *Course of Recognition* Ricoeur intends to present an epistemology of the act of recognizing. The very fact that such an epistemology has never fully been given, while there is a clear account of the word in the dictionaries makes him aware of the perplexities with which philosophy has to deal.

The dictionary offers three basic meanings for the word recognition: 1) to grasp an object with the mind; 2) to accept something; 3) to show gratitude that one is indebted to someone for something (Ricoeur 2005, 12). The philosophical task is not simply to repeat this lexicographical unity, but to 'compose at a higher degree of complexity a chain of conceptual meanings that will take into account the gaps between those meanings governed by heterogeneous ways of stating the problem' (Ricoeur 2005, 18).

This working hypothesis leads Ricoeur to a threefold trajectory. First, recognition has an active aspect. In this sense it is a matter of identification. A sensible sensation can be subsumed under a general concept, and, by that operation, at any time be recognized as a certain sensation. We need the transcendental philosophy of Kant to express that such subsumption is not only an empirical experience of the mind but can be read into the transcendental structure of perception. Such a transcendental philosophy has to confront a

difficult job with many real life experiences, in which the changes of time make a person or an object unrecognizable.

But there is more hard work for philosophy, for at a second level of meaning a reflexive aspect of recognition is considered. I may recognize myself as being someone. This is the point where Ricoeur can shortly bring in the main features from *Oneself as Another*. Man may recognize himself as a capable human being, who has a capability to say, to act, to narrate and to expose imputability. Moreover, he is someone who is capable of remembering and making promises. This act of reflexive recognition, the act of recognizing oneself in a certain capability, extends to the social level: the possession of a certain capability leads to a sense of responsibility for others. This is where the social level enters.

It is also clear that other people are not a mute party, to which a sense of responsibility is uttered. They may be people who object to acts inflicted upon them, who react and create a conflict over against my acting. This aspect of the input of others could be expressed with a grammatical passive voice: I am recognized by another in my capabilities, and I, in return, recognize others in their capabilities. I am dependent upon an other for my recognition, which creates a dissymmetrical relation between me and the other (Levinas!). Yet the other also calls for recognition by me, and then a sense of mutuality arises. The exciting question for philosophy is whether such mutuality remains a timely experience or can be extended into a full sense of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> Dependence upon the other in a reciprocal sense: that is the ultimate challenge in the philosophical trajectory of recognition.

Hegel can provide an impetus to reflection, because of his dialectical conception of the spirit in history, who finds itself brought to a higher level in the other (181). Hegel's philosophy of the spirit may be accused for dealing with a self-contained spirit (181), who distantiates itself; his philosophy certainly needs a less speculative level of expression, rooted in society. In short, a conception of recognition as social esteem has to be developed.

Mutual recognition is destroyed by the struggle for one-sided recognition of oneself. Though such struggle might seem the predominant reality, Ricoeur maintains to express his conviction that

'The alternative to the idea of struggle in the process of mutual recognition is to be sought in peaceful experiences of mutual recognition, based on symbolic mediations as exempt from the juridical as form the commercial order of exchange. The exceptional character of these experiences ... underscores their importance, and precisely in this way ensures their power to reach and affect the very heart of transactions stamped by the seal of struggle' (Ricoeur 2005, 219).

An analysis of the act of the gift (which resumes what the epilogue of History, Memory, Forgetting had given) repeats what is essential for Ricoeur: that real mutual recognition cannot simply be put into a system of reciprocity.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. p. 232 mutuality= exchanges between individuals, reciprocity = systematic relations.

### 10. *Transcendent elements of recognition*

Now the question arises how this reflection on recognition relates to transcendence. It is not enough to say that the reflection of the trajectory of the book twice exceeds to another level.

A certain sense of transcendence may be attributed to acts recognition. Ricoeur treats the example of the gift in archaic Maori society, as analyzed in Mauss's famous *Essai sur le don* (Mauss 1924), where a notion of transcendence (the *hau* as the spirit of the gift) is more of an interpretive notion than an expression of the actual acts of reciprocal giving (Ricoeur 2005, 229-230).

We search for senses of transcendence that are more inherent to the notion of recognition itself. Such sense could be given in the Levinassian alterity: the self needs an other to be recognized. However, Ricoeur refuses to elaborate this alterity into the radical alterity that Levinas favored (157-161). So, one out of four schemes of transcendence as discerned by Stoker does not apply here. We may neither simply put forward transcendent types like immanent transcendence or horizontal transcendence. These types all presume that the Absolute or the Transcendent is experienced in immanent expressions and horizontal relations. But the very idea of recognition does not support the sensitivity to something that is beyond a framework of experiencing and acting.

I mean that recognition leads to a need for mutual recognition as acknowledgment. This very mutuality leads to a closed system of reciprocity, leading to a continuous struggle for recognition. We cannot operate from a sheer dissymmetry and need acts of mutuality. But any appearance of mutuality leads to a hunger for more recognition, which destroys the real gratitude of free bestowing of recognition upon someone. The horizon of reciprocity, mutuality made into a system, is a danger that forecloses the human capability of recognition. It leads to a bad infinity of endless struggle for recognition. Such bad infinity destroys any openness for something transcendent, i.e. something that comes from outside the common framework of experiencing.

Yet, the act of recognizing is not bound to such infinite struggle:

...the experience of actual recognition in the exchange of gifts, principally in their festive aspect, confer on this struggle for recognition the assurance that the motivation which distinguishes it from the lust for power and shelters it from the fascination of violence is neither illusory nor vain (Ricoeur 2005, 246).

In another place Ricoeur speaks of 'symbolic mediations'. There are some symbolic gestures in giving and in bestowing recognition that exceed juridical exigencies and commercial values of exchange. Such forms of mediation transcend the acts of giving recognition from an endless struggle.

If we want any typology of transcendence connected to this description, I would take the type of radical immanence. Acts of giving and recognizing do not have to be governed by any transcendent reality. They do not necessarily need the horizon of heavenly reward or divine origin. They may be interpreted as immanent acts, viewed from the context and the

reality in which they occur. However, there is a transcendent aspect in this act of recognizing which guards it from its own destruction. It is a transcendence that lies at the bottom of the immanent act of recognition. It is more radical that the very roots of recognition, and, by this trait, are its very reason of existence.

It needs the skills of hermeneutic to interpret symbolic mediations of recognition in their relation to this radical immanent transcendence. The acts that transcend an endless struggle for recognition are not self-evident. They need interpretation, they ask for estimation in order to contribute to stable peace. This makes hermeneutics more than an analytical instrument: it is a means to perform the task of developing human capability.

#### *11. Ricoeur's course of transcendence and the postsecular*

Such a view of recognition and such a task for hermeneutics are exactly the elements that make Ricoeur's *Course of Recognition* important in a postsecular setting. The postsecular needs a form of reflection without a presumed existence of some transcendent being. But it searches for a way of naming the transcendent forces that break through the imminent forces of immanence. The hermeneutics of Ricoeur is an excellent contribution to these needs.