MY RELATION TO THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

PAUL RICOEUR

I am most grateful to the *Iliff Review* for giving me the opportunity to reflect upon what I owe to my reading and meditation on other philosophers past and present. Upon completion of my studies at the University of Paris—studies which were influenced much more by French neo-Kantianism than by Bergsonianism—I found myself confronting simultaneously the thought of Gabriel Marcel and that of Husserl. This conjunction is typical of the sort of dichotomic influences which under varied and at times strikingly different forms have never ceased to put me to the test. Each of these two influences was a break with neo-Kantianism, though in entirely different ways. What I liked in Marcel was his Socratic method of teaching. Every Friday evening in his home Gabriel Marcel brought together twenty or so of his disciples and friends; we tried never to cite ready-made analyses or interpretations. Instead, we were required to think on the basis of fresh examples, whether real or imaginary, investigating the ontological implications of the situation under consideration, exploring new avenues, taking chances, using the resources of our dialogue alone. In this way we participated to a greater or lesser extent in developing and discussing the great themes familiar to readers of Gabriel Marcel: existence versus objectivity, the critique of the pretensions of the *Cogito,* the primacy of "I am," concrete being and dialogue, death, betrayal, despair, fidelity, hope, ... The desire for this concrete ontology has never left me. But it encountered the force of another desire, just as strong—the desire for a certain systematism, which I had first admired in my student days in the great architects of the Treatises on the Categories, Aristotle and Kant (I was barely familiar with Hegel at this time, except, following Hyppolite, with the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Mind,* who, in any case, was interpreted in the least logicist—as we then said—and most existential manner imaginable). Now this desire for systematism in philosophical method I found in Husserl, more precisely, in the *Ideas* (which I was to translate into French several years later). In Husserl I admired not only the care taken in his descriptions but the way they were linked together. Some of Husserl's theses could be made, without distorting them too much, to agree with the thought of Gabriel Marcel: the central nature of the question of meaning, the subordination of the linguistic and propositional level to the fundamental sense of experience itself, the privileged position of perception in apprehending reality

and that of intersubjectivity in developing any sort of being in common. Other theses of Husserl, however, ran counter to Gabriel Marcel's concrete ontology, in particular, the claim to bracket the natural attitude by means of reduction. Of course, the Marcelian opposition between existence and objectivity did not lack a certain affinity with the Husserlian opposition between the intentional sphere of consciousness and so-called natural givens. In the eyes of a disciple of Marcel, Husserlian bracketing, however, affected the ontological commitment of the concrete subject no less than the said natural givens. In short, Husserlian idealism did run counter to Marcel's concrete ontology.

This conflict explains why I have always tried to separate, after the manner of Roman Ingarden—with whom I was in complete agreement when I first discovered him in the years after 1947—the phenomenological *method* of description from the idealist *philosophy*. My resistance to the idealist interpretation of the reduction was to coincide with that of Merleau-Ponty, whom I also discovered after the Second World War, in his famous Introduction to *The Phenomenology of Perception*. The search for a means of conciliating phenomenology and ontology has remained the horizon of my thought up to the present day.

Onto this pair of seminal influences were to be grafted, before the war and especially during my captivity in Germany, the influences of Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. I had been introduced to both of them in Gabriel Marcel's circle. My forced leisure allowed me to read all that was available of each of them before 1945. I must say that my preference at the time tended toward Karl Jaspers, whom I found much closer to Gabriel Marcel and whose thought possessed an architecture I found most attractive. Even more than Jasper's confrontation with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, it was the majestic composition of the three volumes of his *Philosophy:* "Orientation in the World," "Illumination of Existence," "Metaphysics," which won me over. Upon our return from captivity, I along with Mikel Dufrenne, my friend and companion in misfortune, made a sort of synopsis—more systematic than usual!—of the thought of Jaspers, while at the same time paying my first debt to Husserl by translating the *Ideas*.

After 1945 I worked at coming to terms with (in the sense of the German *Auseinandersetzen*) my two masters, Marcel and Husserl, all the while orienting myself within the rich philosophical constellation of post-war France marked by existentialism and marxism, before the surge of the Nietzschean and psychoanalytic tide. On the one hand I felt closer to Merleau-Ponty than to Sartre. I saw the former's philosophical understaking developing somewhere between concrete on-

tology and phenomenology, that is, in a region where I wanted to situate myself and to proceed. Most of all, *The Phenomenology of Perception* was for me the model of the phenomenological work whose conception and method I was hoping to extend in the field of *The Voluntary and the Involuntary.* On the other hand, I had discovered in what sense Heidegger was more radical than Karl Jaspers, without denying my great admiration for the man and the citizen in the philosopher from Heidelberg. In truth, my respect for Heidegger, although it has never ceased to grow to this very day, has always been marked by certain ever increasing reservations. So, while the careful and frequent rereading of *Sein und Zeit* has always filled me with great admiration, I have remained hostile to the critique of humanism, in particular in the *Letter on Humanism.* This reservation conveyed, no doubt, my former allegiance to Karl Jaspers, but it also expressed my profound attachment to the Husserlian reflection on subjectivity. I was later to discover that in order to resist the critique of the subject (characteristic of philosophical interpretations coming from work in semiology and psychoanalysis in France), Heidegger's philosophy held but scant resources; more importantly, I was able to see that by contributing to the collapse of the question of the subject, Heideggerian ontology, in spite of itself, played into the hands of the new scientism represented by structuralism, even though the latter was worlds away from Heidegger.

I must state here that I was kept from spinning round and round inside this circle traced by the play of these opposing forces thanks to my university teaching. I had the good fortune of being appointed for almost ten years to a chair in the history of philosophy at the University of Strasbourg (1948-1957). Each year I set myself the task of reading the entire work of a great philosopher: it was in this way that the Pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, . . . became in turn or together my familiar companions. I might note here in passing that my experience as an historian of philosophy kept me from adhering to the Heideggerian idea of the unity of "Metaphysics"; instead I was struck —and bothered—by the singular nature of philosophical works, and this raised the thorny problem of the unity of truth. In addition, this has made me resist all the more strongly the Heideggerian project of "destroying classical ontology." In this respect I share with Gadamer the heightened sense of the continuity of the philosophical tradition, at least on the level of the great problems, despite the obvious discontinuity between the individual replies given to these problems by the great philosophers.

Classical philosophy has left its indelible mark on me. In this way, my recent work on metaphor witnesses the return in force of Aristotle, and it is his notion of being as *energeia* which founds my quest for a Poetics of the Will.

Kant, however, is without a doubt the philosopher who has never ceased to inspire me and to provoke me. I have always recognized in him the philosopher who joins a precise architectonic of the power of thought to an intransigent sense of the limits involved. When I started off along the path of symbolical interpretation, it was in Kant that I found the suggestion of uniting the investigation of schematism, hence of productive imagination, with the elaboration of limiting concepts, that is, of concepts which at once express the work of reason beyond understanding and prevent understanding from locking up sense within fixed and closed determinations. Of all my works, the one that is most strongly marked by Kant—whom I have explicated repeatedly in my role of historian of philosophy—is *Fallible Man*. The idea of a disproportion between the level of thought and that of feeling, and the idea of a fragile and hidden mediation in a third term, the imagination, both these ideas derive directly from Kant. At the same time, however, this work displayed an attempt to break with Kant on a decisive point. It appeared to me that the *Critique of Practical Reason* suffered from being constructed strictly on the model of the first *Critique* (the distinction between transcendental and empirical, *a priori* and *a posteriori* was made at the price of insurmountable dichotomies between duty and desire, virtue and happiness, etc.). So, after having proclaimed the autonomy of practical reason, Kant failed to recognize, it seemed to me, the specific character belonging to human action, its irreducibility to the categories of knowing. It was this hidden impasse of the *Critique of Practical Reason* which turned me toward Jean Nabert, principally toward his *Eléments pour une Ethique*. To begin with, I found in his works the lineaments of a type of thought perfectly suited to the practical sphere: for these are, in fact, truly practical experiences—soliture, fault, failure—which give rise to the reflective and regressive movement toward "originary affirmation." Secondly, this originary affirmation—which, according to Nabert, I *am* rather than I state or proffer—seemed to me to satisfy, by very reason of its distant Fichtean echoes, both the demands of the concrete ontology taught by Gabriel Marcel and the requirements of reflectivity deriving from Husserlian phenomenology.

With Jean Nabert, however, I did not basically leave the Kantian sphere of influence. I was later to enter into a much more polemical relationship with this tradition, yet without ever abandoning it as an

essential reference. This was to occur as a result of a series of discoveries. First of all, my investigation into the *Symbolism of Evil,* which followed upon the *Voluntary and the Involuntary* and *Fallible Man,* carried me to the heart of the hermeneutical tradition. For in the case of evil there is no direct concept but, to begin with, symbols, narratives, myths instead. Understanding these expressions involves unfolding a second sense through a special technique of interpretation. Of course, this discovery did not necessitate a complete break with reflective philosophy, inasmuch as the interpretation of the great symbols inherited from the past seemed to be, on the contrary, the detour and the mediation through which self-understanding was deepened. What was destroyed was the claim to a *Cogito* which was held to be transparent and the master of meaning, not the positing of an opaque *Cogito* instructed by the signs received from the whole of its cultural history. If reflective philosophy had not been abandoned, it was, however, profoundly transformed by this graft of the hermeneutical method onto the phenomenological method.

The consideration of the hermeneutical dimension of reflection was to lead me, in turn, toward discoveries in which the primacy of reflection was once more put to a difficult test. Hermeneutics indeed is not a simple and tranquil enterprise. It very quickly appeared twofold to me, split into the reductive interpretations of what I called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and which I traced to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, and the augmentive interpretations I related to a hermeneutics of restoring sense, under the combined influence of Mircea Eliade, Heidegger and Gadamer. A conflictual structure, well in tune however with the inner crisis of inner philosophy, seemed to me constitutive of the work of interpretation. The notion of a "conflict of interpretations" was henceforth inextricably linked in my mind with that of a reflection mediated by interpretation. And yet after a long look at psychoanalysis and an assiduous frequentation of Nietzsche and Marx (although they have constantly appeared in my teaching, I have scarcely written anything on either of them), the reflective task of philosophy did not seem to me to be doomed. Quite the opposite, reflection appeared more than ever to be the only agency capable of arbitrating the conflict of interpretations.

On the basis of what, though, could I then construct a *teleology* of sense which would be capable of counter-balancing the *archeology* of sense through a creative reading of the symbolical foundation of our culture, in the face of a psychoanalytic-style reduction of the symbol to fantasy? It was here that an increasingly attentive and committed study of Hegel, not only as the author of the *Phenomenology of Mind*

but as that of the *Encyclopedia* and the *Principles of the Philosophy of Right* as well, made me understand the accuracy of Karl Barth's expression, when he said of Hegel's philosophy that it was "the greatest attempt (*Versuch*) and the greatest temptation (*Versuchung*)." If I have persisted in my various attempts to integrate a Hegelian phase in the path of an augmenting and restoring hermeneutics, this is because I am convinced that the Hegelian system itself is not complete, that it is much more rhapsodic than it might appear and that it can, although not without a certain arbitrariness and a certain violence, be dismembered. The possibility of remaining a post-Hegelian Kantian, as I have on occasion jokingly stated, rests on this very wager, the venturesome and fragile character of which I in no way contest.

Whatever the accuracy of these speculations, they have tended rather to aggravate the dichotomic structure of the influences I have undergone. To the conflict between concrete ontology and transcendental phenomenology had already been added the conflict between reflection and interpretation. The conflict inherent in hermeneutics itself has, in its turn, given rise to a powerful interest in Hegel, diametrically opposed to Freud but also to Kant and to Husserl, those two basic links in reflective thinking.

If this conflict were resolvable, two conditions seemed necessary to me. First of all, reflective thought, to grow ever fuller, had to make a clean break with the *Cogito's* claim to be transparent and self-positing, in short, it had to break with idealism, so that the hermeneutics of "I am" would have indisputable precedence over the primacy of "I think." But at the same time dialectical philosophy, abandoning absolute knowledge, had to recognize its own status as hermeneutical philosophy and admit that the reciprocal constitution of the universe of sense and of the universe of subjectivity is an infinite process whose outcome is of its very nature undetermined. It was in line with the orientation of this immense task that I found both an ally and a master in the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

But a new element – perhaps my undoing? – was to be added to this skein of strictly European influences. Regular teaching in the United States has over the past ten years put me in continuous contact with English-language analytical philosophy and has at the same time tossed me into the midst of a global conflict between this philosophy and the entire Continental tradition, which, seen from the Anglo-Saxon countries, includes under a single term (involving a more or less exotic nuance!) precisely all the influence which I personally have experienced in their profound internal conflicts. Suddenly Kant and Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Sartre and

Merleau-Ponty and, finally, Gadamer were all lumped together and as a group made to signify "Continental" philosophy.

I must say that I am deeply grateful for having been exposed to the challenge of analytical philosophy. In it I have found essentially a level of argumentation and a sense of philosophical discussion sorely lacking in French philosophy, especially over the last decades. I should add that this new influence, far from shaking my principal position, has instead had the effect of reinforcing certain exigencies left unexplored in my philosophical tradition for lack of an adequate apparatus. Husserl, of course, was right to place himself at the level where lived experience is itself sense-laden. But where can these meaning structures be recognized if not in language? Phenomenology, therefore, had to be extended in the direction of a linguistical phenomenology, as Austin himself had suggested. Indeed, this meeting between phenomenology and linguistical analysis appeared to me to be beneficial to both sides. If, one one side, the understanding of lived experience did, in fact, find its clarification on the level of linguistic articulation, conversely, language found its origin and its referent in the deep-rooted expressibility of lived experience. By the same token—or as we say in French, striking two blows with one stone—I found in this conception of language, closely associated with the explicitation of lived experience, a forceful ally against the structuralist reduction of language to the purely internal play of coded significations, which completely neglects what I have just called the deep-rooted expressibility of experience.

In closing, I should like to say something about the two main areas of application of this linguistical-phenomenological *method* placed in the service of a reflective-hermeneutical *philosophy.* The first area is that of language itself, considered not so much in its stable structures as in its capacity for semantic *innovation.* My work on the *Rule of Metaphor* was the opportunity for me to reconsider the problem of the symbol in a new light by integrating into the most ancient tradition of rhetoric the most recent contributions of linguistical analysis. By more precisely delimiting in this way the properly semantic core of the symbol by means of metaphor, I was better equipped to identify the non-semantic dimensions of the symbol, namely its threefold rootedness in the deep levels of the unconscious, in the symbolical structure of natural "elements" (water, earth, wind, fire, etc.), and in the hierophanies of the sacred, so well described by Mircea Eliade.

The second area is what, in analytical philosophy, is called "action theory." It is here that the alliance of phenomenology and linguistical analysis appears especially promising to me. For it indeed has en-

abled me to take up anew what twenty-five years ago I conceived of as a Phenomenology of the Will. The subordination of linguistical-phenomenological *method* to a hermeneutical-reflective *philosophy,* in its turn, prevents this theory from being restricted to what is termed "action" at the level of ordinary language, but instead extends the philosophy of action into the regions of human *praxis* explored by Hegel and Marx. In this way a great philosophy of action would form the domain where my opposing heritages could be joined and reconstituted.

Now what do an exploration of semantic innovation in language and an investigation of human *praxis* have in common? The third term might perhaps be the creative imagination, the generative source of a Poetics of the Will.

Paul Ricoeur
Professor
University of Paris-Nanterre
and The University of Chicago

Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin