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RESPONSE BY PAUL RICOEUR: PHILOSOPHY AND LIBERATION [1]

I have entitled my intervention "philosophy and liberation" and not "philosophy of liberation" so as to not pronounce an *a priori* judgment on the success of the confrontation between those two terms, for I consider their link as problematic. As a justification for my reservation I provide two motivations. First, I admit that every philosophy has liberation as its ultimate goal. This term has received more than one meaning in the course of history, as is demonstrated by Spinoza's philosophy, which assumes that the third type of knowledge is to be considered as liberation, par excellence, of the imagination and of the passions. As a second motivation, it is not only the thematic of liberation which is problematic, but also the situations from which these different positions on liberation are articulated and developed. Thus, the Latin American philosophies of liberation depart from a precise situation of economic and political pressure which puts them in direct confrontation with the United States. However, in Europe our experience of totalitarianism, in its double aspects, nazism and Stalinism—eight million Jews, thirty or fifty million Soviets sacrificed, Auschwitz and the Gulag—serves as a different point of departure.

With respect to the recent history—still underway—of Central and Eastern Europe, it belongs to the annals of a monstrous history. Today, this adventure is lived under all of its aspects as an experience of liberation, as demonstrated by the fall of dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece. No one can deny that it is a question of the experiences of liberation.

It is therefore necessary to consider different thematics, and different original situations. We can talk with this intention, of a Plurality of histories of liberation. The question now resides in knowing what it is that each can teach the other, and what one can learn from the other.

With respect to this point, a corollary seems important to me: the philosophies and theologies of liberation that do not depend on this history can no more express themselves in the same terms before and after the collapse of Soviet totalitarianism and after the failure of its supposedly socialist and revolutionary bureaucratic economy.

If I insist on the heterogeneity of the histories of liberation, it is in order to prepare our spirits to admit not only that these experiences are diverse, but perhaps even incommunicable. Furthermore, the self-understanding that is attributed to the one creates obstacles to the full comprehension of the other, and a certain controversy with respect to this intention is perhaps insurmountable for us as well.

I had to make these preliminary clarifications before entering fully into the theme, which will be more philosophical than political, although here political philosophy occupies a broad space, albeit precisely as philosophy. The theme that I would like to discuss is this: What can Western thought contribute of greater and better solidity to a debate in which it accepts being only one of the partners? Here, we are only presupposing the agreement on the search for and reception of the better argument, as is suggested by Apel's and Habermas's discourse ethics. Because, we are by hypothesis in the realm of discourse, although we are not always aware of it, and are conscious that we proceed in a world of struggles that are not precisely struggles of discourses, but of force and violence.

I

I will not take up directly the question of hermeneutics and liberation, to which Domenico Jervolino and Enrique Dussel have allocated ample space. I will come to it only in my concluding observations. Instead, I would rather situate this discussion in which I am implicated too directly, against a broader background whose accent will be on those great Western thematics that are a legacy of a historical experience of liberation. I will remain within the limits of modern philosophy, which Hegel opposes to that of the ancients, defining it in general terms as the philosophy of subjectivity in opposition to the philosophy of substance, which Hegel had the ambition to reunite dialectically. Which elements of this philosophy of subjectivity (from Descartes through Locke, Kant, and Fichte) are bequeathed at the same time as cause and effect of the experience of liberation? It can be said for the moment, and in a general form, that it is to the extent that this has produced an indivisible ethical and political conception of freedom. With respect to this philosophy, I will refer shortly to its limits, but I will underscore above all the reason that demands that I declare that I have no shame of Europe. I will distinguish three components of this ethico-political conception of freedom.

1. Above all, the critique of the sovereign and sovereignty, conceptualized as transcendence, whether in a religious sense or not. This critique of sovereignty, demystified as domination, has extracted its effective experiences from the Enlightenment liberation of the formation of the Italian or Flemish free cities, the establishment and development of the British Parliament, and the

French Revolution. With respect to this, the contractualism of Rousseau and Kant will allow us to understand it as a critical arm: everything appears before its eyes as if power were born of an agreement freely assumed concerning the abandonment of savage freedom in favor of a civilized freedom. This contains a formidable force of subversion.

In fact, there exists in the center of power an opaque point, and around it an aura almost sacred, which Hannah Arendt liked to relate to the distinction Roman thinkers made between *potestas* and *auctoritas*: "Power is with the people. Authority with the senate." In the same way, there is in Spinoza, in his political philosophy, a comparable distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*. Its limit leads to the nakedness of power, which could be the desire to live within a historical community. But this origin is forgotten, and can—within another being who is only symbolically represented through higher forms which is suggested by the word *auctoritas*—augment the public potency which comes to less. From this there comes a struggle without end for the reduction of domination to authentic power; a reduction which is resisted by a residual sacredness that is manifested in the personal access to power and in general in the personalization of power. To which it is necessary to add the slow learning of the separation between the political and the religious, and toward the religious, of the distinction between the ecclesiastical community of the people of God and the authoritarian and hierarchical instance that surrounds it. This first historical experience presents a disquieting paradox: If the critique of domination had not had success, would power, now rendered naked, be feared and believed? It is required that we admit that democracy is the first political regime that knows itself poorly founded because it must be continually justified. With respect to this, the best that Western thought can offer is the crisis of its foundational notions. Perhaps it is the only thought that is at the same time foundational and critical, or better, self-critical.

This affirmation is probably not indifferent to the goals of our debate with Liberation Philosophy, to the extent that this puts the main emphasis on the economic dimension of oppression, more than on its political dimension. As for myself, I see the necessity for a serious warning. If the critique of political and social oppression does not go through the critique of political domination, and if it is pretended to judge economic liberation by any political path, this condemns it to a terrible vengeance by history. Leninism is the example for the left. For the West the path through political liberation appears unavoidable, as has been continuously taught by the totalitarian catastrophe.

2. I would like now to emphasize the search for and crisis of the *concrete universal* in the thinking and in the historical experience of Western Europe. This is a problem that supersedes and comprises the prior, namely, the question concerning the sovereignty of the state. This concerns the rationality of historical experience. In order to introduce the problem I will successively call

up the historical-political writings of Kant, especially the *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View, Conjectures on the Beginnings of Human History and Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. The notion of universal history is here treated as the regulative idea under which it is possible to think humanity as developing one history, and not inasmuch as it constitutes only one species, albeit this does not reach a universal political institution.

This investigation of the *concrete universal* has halted because of a specific crisis. In order to comprehend this formulation, I will suggest the transfer to the realm of language the attempt by the Kantian and post-Kantian philosophical projects to formulate the universal at the level of the rational plane. Language constitutes a good territory for this exercise, to the extent to which, on the one hand, language does not exist but through the plurality of natural languages, and, on the other hand, its fundamental unity is disclosed thanks to the phenomenon of the possibility of universal translation. This is an *a priori* when we establish that any language can be translated into any other. It is the only way in which we can affirm the universality of language. Now, that which applies at the level of language, applies equally at the level of the moral and political. At the level of the moral, we can easily conceive that a duty is an imperative only if it can be, in one way or another, considered universal. On the other hand, moral life exists only under conditions of cultural contexts that we denominate customs. Between the universality of duty and the historicity of customs there persists a caesura. This fissure is reflected in the element of language, as is evidenced in the contemporary discussion between Rawls and Habermas. The first formulates a purely procedural conception of justice which ignores the historical conditions of its realization. The second projects, within the framework of a universal pragmatics, the idea of an "ideal communication community" which regulates the ethics of the better arguments. But the question remains nevertheless of knowing which contents can be attributed to either one of these ideas, be it to this purely procedural idea of justice, or be it to the conditions of possibility imposed by universal pragmatics. To put it more simply: Which arguments are exchanged in a post-conventional morality? Is it not through the passions, the sentiments, the interests, and the convictions that is shaped what Kant called the maxim of action? I would like to insist on the last term of the preceeding enumeration, the convictions, since it is in through them that conflicts are introduced into discussion, without which negation and the need for arbitration would not be even an issue.

With respect to this, the more respectable convictions that emerge from historic experience generate irreducible controversies. It would appear now that the sign of universality can only be found in the formation of fragile compromises that weave the net of conflicts of the dangerous slope of imminent civil war. Perhaps, with reference to this question, this may be one of the major

contributions of Western Europe, namely, the learning of the resolution of conflicts and the invention of the procedure of negotiations and compromise. It will be objected that not everything is discourse. Habermas, not too long ago, evoked the phenomenon of "systematic distortion of communication" under the pressure of money and power. This is true. But the mediation of discourse, of debate and argumentation, remains as our only recourse. It is equally relevant that although the North-South debate derives from relations of domination of another order, that is to say, of an order that is not ethical-political, it would be, just the same, one day or another, a conflict that will need to be arbitrated and treated. Either discourse or violence, as was taught by in testimony by Eric Weil. The consequences of the implications are unavoidable: from the practice of negation to the logic of argumentation, and from this to the ethics of discussion.

3. I would like now to proceed to a third aspect, namely, that of *right* (*diritto*) and *juridical institutions*, which concerns the crisis of the concrete universal, paying close attention to the regulative idea of "justice." The investigation of the principles of justice has a long history, which is also marked by a crisis of great importance. It can be said, although in a general way, that juridical thinking constitutes the condition and the horizon for the formation of a state of the rule of law, and of the practice of negotiation or compromise I mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. I am not only thinking of the considerable labor of passing from reason to action in the elaboration of penal right (to establish the proportional punishment to according to the crime), but also of something that is much more interesting, namely, of civil right (when repairing the damages caused to others by the effects of culpable action). We find that the birth of the idea of responsibility consists in that each one is disposed to render account of their actions, to assume the consequences of their actions, and thus to recognize being obliged to repair the damages caused to others and to suffer the penalty of culpability for something that is considered a crime by society. One cannot but be impressed by the formidable juridical edifice of law codes which have been born out of juridical practices (written laws, courts of law, institutions of judgment of individuals invested with the power to decide the tight of particular situations, dispensers of sentences, the monopoly of legitimate violence). Should we denounce the hypocrisy of the law? One may certainly do so. The relations of power and violence do not let themselves be occluded. But, in whose name is the law denounced if not in name of a better justice, in the name of the exigency of more independent and honorable judgments, that is, with the hope of an institution of justice that conforms better to the idea of justice?

This idea leads to an internal critique and to its crisis. Since Aristotle we have distinguished between arithmetical justice, strictly egalitarian, and geometric justice, proportional to merit, which regulates unequal divisions. This

distinction continues to impose itself, to the degree that, despite the extension of the sphere of egalitarian justice (equality before the law, right of expression, of gathering, freedom of the press and opinion, etc.), the problem of unequal and unfair (unjust) divisions, operated according to other rules of distribution, remains the central paradox of social justice.

This problem is treated by John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. In his purely procedural conception of justice, that of a social contract accomplished under the "veil of ignorance," the idea of justice divides in two: civil and political justice defined as equality before the law, and social and economic justice for the unequal distribution which lends ear to the principle of "maximin" (the principle by virtue of which the increase in privilege of the more favored ought to be compensated by a decrease in the disadvantages of the less favored. Thereof the expression maximin: to maximize the minimum.)

The difficulty is immediately apparent: the heterogeneity of the social goods to be distributed, the aleatory state of every concrete system of distribution, the always contestable character of every order of priority assigned to the satisfaction of goods at the expense of others (productivity, citizenship, education, security, health, etc.). From the dispute provoked by this difficulty, there comes the bifurcation between "procedural universalism" and "contextual communitarianism" which characterizes the contemporary discussion concerning the idea of justice. It will be objected that this discussion concerns only the internal dispute of Western social-democracy. I accept this objection voluntarily. This dispute is the best that we have to offer in this third register of the politics of freedom. I would suggest that it is to the extent that we have been propelled to maximize the resources of social-democracy, with its contradictions and conflicts, that we may be able, inasmuch as one is a valid interlocutor before the protagonists, to select other ways of development (against the simplistic schema of linear development and the search for an arborescent schema of development). Our complex and confused history only allows us to warn our partners in discussion against the temptation to any foreshortening of history. Rawls displays an exemplary firmness in this proposal: one cannot economize the first principle of justice (civil and political equality before the law) and confront with any political means the problem of social and economic justice. Equality before the law is the political condition for economic-social liberation. Do we find ourselves now in a tragic return to leninism?

In the conclusion of this first part, I want to insist on the equivocations of the term liberation. As I said at the beginning, there exist many histories of liberation that do not communicate. If Latin America is confronted by a specific problem which inscribes itself within the framework of North-South relations, Europe is the inheritor of the struggles which have culminated with the liquidation of totalitarianism as illustrated by the words Gulag and Auschwitz. Does this history constitute an obstacle for understanding the Latin American

projects of liberation? What is needed is that Europeans admit that the totalitarianism that Latin Americans confront is of a different nature from that which has been known in Europe. These questions ought to remain open. But the reserve and silence that impose themselves should not impede warning our friends that they ought to extract all the lessons from the failure of bureaucratic economy in Eastern Europe, and that they ought not to set aside political freedom in favor of any increase in technological and economic productivity, which ought to be seen instead as components of economic and social liberation.

II

Against this background I would like to return to the *controversy*, hermeneutics-liberation, in which we are greatly implicated, although I will insist more on the problems than on the solutions (mine among others). In essence, we agree with Domenico Jervolino. It is in light of his contribution that I will take up some problems formulated by Dussel.

It is true that the hermeneutic problematic would appear to be extraordinarily distant from the problematic of liberation, in whatever sense this is understood. Is it not from the closure of the text that we have departed? I want to speak with great caution on the legitimacy of the textual transition, even in the situation in which we take liberation as presupposed. It is despite everything, with the favor of an inscription, that writing is the most notable expression, that the past experience of our predecessors comes to us in the form of a received inheritance, of transmitted traditions. It is, in another time and now, under the textual form that the great changes between the past of the tradition and the future of our most alive hopes, according to which our utopias require that they be considered, are founded. I will add now that hermeneutics consists of a struggle against textual closure. With respect to this, Domenico Jervolino has underscored the importance of the functions of the recognition exercised by texts at the level of effective human action. Thanks to this process of recognition, textual critique reinscribes itself at the center of the philosophy of action, which I also consider the great engagement of every investigation relative to language. That which we mentioned about the exchange between tradition and utopia (in the text and through it) has its equivalence in the philosophy of history under the form of the exchange between what Koselleck calls the "space of experience and horizon of hope."

In conclusion, one cannot talk of hermeneutics without situating the process of interpretation within the relation text and reader. With respect to this a critique of reading provides an element of an answer to Dussel's main objection, according to which the producer/produced relation encompasses (*enveloppe*) the author/text relation. In this short-circuit, the vis-à-vis relation that constitutes a critical reader, who may ask about the pertinence of the preceding

equation and denounce the relation of domination which is masked in the process of transmission and tradition, is forgotten. The most important phenomenon for our purposes is not so much inscription or writing or, said differently, the *transition from the text to action*, but rather the critical relation of reading that makes possible the *transition from action to the text*.

This transition from the text redirects hermeneutics to ethics, more precisely to an ethics which assigns a central place to the phenomenon of alterity. I allow myself to point out that this is a place for diverse philosophies of alterity: asymmetric for Levinas, reciprocal for Hegel. Here there is also a place for diverse figures of alterity: corporeality, the encounter of the Other, the search for interiorized moral consciousness. Here one may also find the diverse figures of others, others qua face-to-face encounter; others such as the "each one" of the relations of justice. I accept in good will that these figures of alterity, and of the other, may come to be summarized and to culminate in the moment of alterity in which the other is the poor. It is here that the philosophy and theology *of* liberation search for and find themselves.

Note

1. This text is based on the transcript of Ricoeur's answer to Dussel's presentation, occasioned by the seminar “Hermeneutics and Liberation” (chapter 5 above) in Naples, 16 April 1991. The translation is based on the published version, *Filosofia e Liberazione. La sfida del pensiero del Terzo-Mondo* (Lecce: Capone Editore, 1992), pp. 108-15.