

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Discussion II: Ricoeur's *Symbolism of Evil*

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The Symbolism of Evil (1967)

PART I

The Phenomenology of Confession

Introduction: Ricoeur uses his introduction in a somewhat unusual way. Instead of merely laying out the steps of his argument, he writes a mini-essay on the experience of 'confessing' one's evil or badness (within certain historical, cultural, and intellectual parameters). In his attempt to develop a philosophy of religious consciousness and its experience, he wants to begin with the idea that 'confessing evil' is a key component of that experience. Philosophy would then ask the confessing consciousness: 'well, what do you mean by evil?' Ricoeur then tries to lay the groundwork for his argument—what a symbol is, what a myth is, etc.—while also using this topic of 'confession' for an introductory thought-exercise. He calls this a propaedeutic: it's meant to 'instruct' (Greek *paideu-ō*) us 'in advance' (*pro-*), so that we will be in the right frame of mind to receive his arguments about particular symbols and myths.

Speculation, Myth, Symbol: As a philosopher, Ricoeur remains interested in *speculation*, or a systematic approach to thinking through problems (e.g., the problem of evil). However, given that he sees philosophical enquiry as embedded in a historical tradition of meaning (cf. hermeneutics), he thinks that there are some topics that must first be addressed within that tradition itself, before they are 'elevated' to the level of abstract analysis. Before we speculate about 'what evil is,' then, we'll have to look at how evil has been talked about within some specific historical cultures. We'll have to look at a tradition's *myths*: the stories we tell ourselves about evil. These myths, in turn, are narratives that string together smaller units of meaning: *symbols*. These symbols are obviously related to hermeneutics, since they are what we interpret when we read myths. But, for Ricoeur, they also have a phenomenological component: they connect us, almost immediately, to certain experiences in ourselves (a feeling, a 'sense' of something).

Not Just Allegory: By symbol, then, he does not just mean that we see a symbol (x) and, running it through some translation software, figure out that it stands for something else (y). The interpretation of symbols would then just be doing a 'find/replace' on the myths we read: wherever we see an x , we know that it's really a y . The End. Ricoeur associates this 'find/replace' function with allegory (and we could challenge him on that, but let's grant it for now). What he wants to aim at when we think of symbols is instead a transition from textual interpretation to lived experience. So when I encounter the symbol x , I don't think y , but instead feel something different in my own lived experience. Symbols should 'light up' some aspect of that lived experience; otherwise, they're dead symbols.

Contingency of Historical Symbols: At the end of his introduction (p. 19-24), Ricoeur acknowledges that there's a fundamental contingency in his project. That contingency comes out of the fact that he has to start from within a certain historical tradition of symbolism. His happens to be 'Western,' which he takes to be a kind of encounter between philosophy as it was practiced by the Greeks and ancient Jewish culture. He is not saying that all humans from every possible background must be held up to some standard of Western symbolism. Instead, he is trying to get from a historically situated position—the symbolism of evil in 'Western' texts—to a broader understanding of the experiences those texts can evoke.

It may seem awkward that he puts historical contingency side by side with a description of human experience, but his procedure here is related to how he sees phenomenology and hermeneutics intersecting (see above). Phenomenology's openness to meaning also opened it up to history, culture, contingency. The 'bare evidence' of lived experience was then made slightly less bare, since it comes to us dressed in historically and culturally influenced clothing. If we want to get at meaningful experience, then, we have to start with specific historical traditions and then try to go through them to reach out at something more broad-ranging. In other words, we have to start with *symbols* and go through *myths* before we get at abstract or universalizing *speculation*.

The Symbols

Ricoeur starts to get at the 'substance' of his argument in the next three chapters, each of which deals with a way of symbolizing fault. What he gives us is a *typology* of symbols. The point is to run through these three *types* of symbols and trace out the picture of evil they paint for us. On the one hand, Ricoeur's approach is *historical* and *hermeneutical*: it makes use of particular examples from textual traditions (e.g., the prophets, the Pharisees, Greek tragedy). On the other hand, his main criterion for judgment is *phenomenological*: he is trying to demarcate different types of experience, not just different historical representations. He is, in some way, trying to use historical representations to get at distinct modes of possible experience.

Defilement: In Ricoeur's terms, *defilement* is a way that evil can be symbolized without differentiating between ethical evil (e.g., a war) and physical evil (e.g., a disease). Both kinds of acts are simply taken as 'evil,' in the sense of an impurity that contaminates some more pristine state (e.g., peace, health). The cure for evil, then, would have to involve some kind of ritual remedy (e.g., ceremonies of cleansing, etc.). This kind of symbolism makes evil seem like something fairly *external* to us. Evil 'comes at me' from the outside like an insect or 'gets on me' like dirt. The only question then is: how to get it off?

At the end of the section on defilement, Ricoeur is quick to remind us that this kind of symbolism will pop up throughout history, often mixed in with other kinds of symbolism. He does this to make sure we understand that he's drawing *phenomenological distinctions*—in experience—rather than purely historical distinctions. (Otherwise, we might think that the symbolism of defilement is just succeeded or conquered by the symbolism of sin, as if this were some sort of march of symbolic progress.)

Sin: *Sin* occupies the middle position between defilement and guilt. Whereas defilement symbolizes evil as an external contaminant and guilt (as we'll see) makes it an internal self-accusation, sin represents evil as an *objective* accusation. It is not that evil came in from outside and made you faulty (as in defilement); rather, you have done something evil (and so it's *internal* to you; it comes from inside you) and now you stand accused before some third party. In Ricoeur's description, that third party is usually a god. Still, he also contends that the symbolism of sin can be experienced without fully passing over into guilt. Sin somehow lacks that more direct relationship with yourself that is implied by guilt. Ricoeur's favorite example for sin is the prophetic critique of the Old Testament, where the main issue is often someone's position (as good or evil) before God.

The *negativity* of sin is that it cuts you off from something; it's the severing of a connection or the breaking of a contract. (Defilement, meanwhile, made evil more of a positive substance, in the sense that it was 'actually there' as a thing, rather than simply being a rupture between two things.) The *positivity* of sin, though, is that it remains 'there' even if you don't notice it. It doesn't seem to need a dimension of subjective awareness, whereas guilt will.

A phenomenological continuity from defilement to guilt?

	Objective	Subjective
External	<i>Defilement</i>	{nothing?}
Internal	<i>Sin</i>	<i>Guilt</i>

Guilt: The third symbol of evil discussed here is *guilt*. If sin is the real situation of someone's responsibility for fault, guilt is the *subjective awareness* of that situation. In Ricoeur's terminology, no court could ever find you 'guilty.' Instead, they'd only find you 'sinful' (objectively responsible for your own inner fault); your own subjective experience would decide whether you felt 'guilty' or not. Guilt is then the "achieved internality of sin." (103) Ricoeur also differentiates guilt from sin by suggesting that the symbolism of sin usually speaks about collectives and dichotomies, while guilt can be personalized and ranked in *degrees* (just like punishments; perhaps guilt is a form of self-punishment, then?). So: you are either a sinner or not, while you may be more or less guilty. This is also shown, he thinks, in the degrees of conscience that someone can have.

Certain traditions, such as the Pharisees, seem to have latched on to the symbolism of guilt. This has allowed them, in Ricoeur's view, to actualize their inherited texts in a new way: by making the Law (for example) into a program for conscientious individual living. In so doing, they give us one possible way of dealing with evil when it is understood under the symbol of guilt: living in a morally conscientious manner so as to lesson one's guilt (to decrease it by degrees).

Ultimately, Ricoeur sees the symbolism of guilt as leading to an *impasse* in experience, or perhaps a *paradoxical experience*. To sketch this out, he uses Paul's version of guilt. Even though Paul and the Pharisees share a pretty similar symbolism of evil, they don't point to the same way out of evil. Paul thinks that the subjective experience of guilt is both inescapable and irreducible. Chasing ethical perfectionism turns out to be both impossible

and beside the point, in his view. Instead, we have to somehow realize that we are both totally responsible for the evil we do and unable to stop doing it. The paradox is this: if we are unable to stop doing evil, then how can we be held responsible? Isn't it just going to happen anyway? And yet, the experience of guilt remains.

This finally leads to the paradox of the *servile will*, with which Ricoeur ends Part I. The servile will is the name for the narrowest version of this impasse: if my will is servile and in bondage to some binding force, then in what sense is it 'my will' anymore? How can I experience my own evil-doing as both utterly internal (it's my will!) and strangely external (it's the chains that bind me!)? Ricoeur doesn't actually try to answer that question here. Instead, he's just sketching it out as the point where the symbolism of guilt begins to reach its limit or perhaps break down. In the end, there's still a kind of 'externality' (as in defilement) or 'quasi-externality' involved in the symbolism of evil. And this reinforces his earlier suggestion that aspects of symbolic defilement (now 'contamination') and sin (as 'captivity') can be found even in what seem to be more complex or internalized understandings of evil.

PART II

The Myths

Myth and Symbol: Part I tried to make the case that our lived experience of fault or evil is mediated to us through symbols. Part II acknowledges that these symbols don't come to us in isolated packages. We don't just stumble on the thought of 'defilement' or 'sin.' Instead, these symbols come to us through *myths* that are handed down as historical, cultural traditions. Ricoeur actually set this up in his introductory chapter, when he discussed symbol, myth, and speculation. At first, we wanted to speculate about what evil was; but then we realized that our understanding of evil was rooted in cultural narratives (especially myths). But before we could get at the myths, we had to distinguish the different symbols used in them. Presumably, it would have been too confusing to try to do this while reading the myths themselves, which jump back and forth between different symbols or mix them with one another.

In other words: While lived experience is mediated to us through symbols, symbols are mediated to us through myths. Just as we interpreted symbols to get at experiences, now we should interpret myths to see how symbols work together to create more complicated kinds of meaning. Whereas Part I more obviously tried to do both hermeneutics (interpreting symbols) and phenomenology (sketching a typology of experiences), Part II leans more towards hermeneutics, as we try to occupy the space between symbols and myths. (This is still related to experience, but we're at a 'higher level' of meaning-making here.)

To try to map it out:

Experience → PART I ← Symbol → PART II ← Myth → (???) ← (Speculation)

Myth and History: At first, we might think that Ricoeur is wasting his time. Since modern scholarship has discovered so much about humanity's past, shouldn't we look to history

rather than myth in order to talk about the origins of evil? Ricoeur doesn't have a problem with turning to history, but he does think that myths have something special to offer here. In fact, he says that it's only now that we've given up on so many myths that we can appreciate them *as myths*, rather than as (false) histories or pseudo-scientific explanations. What he means is that we can appreciate how mythic narratives still carry a *symbolic meaning* for us, even if that meaning doesn't at all correlate to the idea of some literal past event. Myths can then still help us to *understand* our experience of the world, even if they can't *explain* the world in a scientific fashion. (Ricoeur calls *gnosis* the attempt to substitute myth in for such scientific explanations, which can only lead to pseudo-science.) We should compare this to what he has to say about understanding and explanation in "What is a Text?"

What Myths?: Ricoeur is especially interested in myths that contrast an idea of what humanity really 'is' in itself and how humanity looks in practice. He's after that disjunction between what we could be and what we end up as. This leads him to consider four kinds of myths about the beginning and end of evil. Though these four differ in a number of ways, they all respond to the questions 'why is there evil?' and 'how can evil be gotten rid of?' (This latter question could be categorized as one of salvation.)

Myths of Evil's Origin and End: Four Types

- (1) Creation Myth
 - a. Origin of evil: it's just there from the beginning (as primal chaos).
 - b. End of evil: the creative act itself begins a process of 'setting things in order' that gradually diminishes evil chaos.
 - c. Example: Mesopotamian creation stories.
- (2) Tragic Myth
 - a. Origin of evil: the divine leads humanity into evil for seemingly unjustifiable reasons.
 - b. End of evil: there isn't one, really, except for maybe the cathartic sympathy the audience feels for the tragic hero/victim.
 - c. Example: Greek tragedy.
- (3) Adamic Myth
 - a. Origin of evil: it 'befalls' a world that was already created good.
 - b. End of evil: a second process (other than that of creation) is instituted to gradually or eschatologically extinguish this accidental evil. (cf. different mechanisms by which 'pardon' could be brought in... e.g., a second Adam?)
 - c. Example: the Genesis story, which Ricoeur doesn't want to call a Fall (because that confuses it with the next myth).
- (4) Orphic Myth
 - a. Origin of evil: the bodiless soul falls or is exiled into a body, which causes it to be evil.
 - b. End of evil: the liberation of the soul from its bodily prison.
 - c. Example: 'strict' Neoplatonism.

The Cycle of the Myths: In the final chapter of Part II, Ricoeur wants to drive home the point that this is not supposed to be read as a progression narrative of discrete myths.

Instead, the myths interpenetrate each other and transform over time. Even myth-types that don't seem especially dominant today can still resonate through other, more dominant myths. To show this, Ricoeur adopts the Adamic myth as his anchoring point. He acknowledges that this is a culturally relative move, but he thinks that it's necessary if we're going to be able to understand how all these myths cycle into each other, sometimes easily, sometimes with more friction. Beginning with a myth that remains alive in his own tradition, Ricoeur also reaffirms what he suggested much earlier: that philosophy should first attempt some self-understanding (through interpretation of its own historical-cultural-traditional position) before rushing on to abstract speculation.

He then goes on to show how the Adamic Myth relates to the other three. The Tragic Myth lies closest, because the story of Adam includes a kind of tragic fatedness. While Adam remains responsible for choosing to sin, he did also encounter an evil that was already there in the world (the serpent). Humanity is then both responsible and not responsible for there being evil in the world. Of course, it's not as cut-and-dry as it is in tragedy. The divine didn't cause humanity to sin; but all the same, from a certain point of view, the situation was set up to lead to sin. Ricoeur thinks that Job, better than Genesis, shows this element of tragedy even in Biblical literature, since Job emphasizes the inscrutability of suffering in this life. Regardless, this intermingling of the Adamic and Tragic Myths seems to correspond to our paradoxical experience of being at once responsible and not responsible for evil. (cf. the servile will in Part I)

This dominant Adamic-Tragic Myth-complex, then, also appropriates a bit of the Creation (or Chaos) Myth. Even though it holds that evil was not originally in the world but 'befell' that world, the Adamic-Tragic cycle still might allow that there's an ongoing process that is continuously trying to repair the situation. This ongoing process would be a kind of salvation, in that it would bring evil to an end. This could happen in two ways, broadly speaking: (1) through a process that gradually overcomes evil by mediating conflict and rising to higher levels of understanding (cf. Hegel); or (2) through a rupture that would convert the tragedy of life into some kind of redemptive gift (cf. Christology). In both processes, 'evil' would be incorporated as an almost necessary part of the story of the world. [For (1), this would be because oppositions are needed if there is to be dynamic overcoming and elevation; for (2), this would be because evil would be what the savior-figure would be there to redeem.]

Finally, Ricoeur paints the Orphic Myth as the enemy of the mixed-Adamic cycle of myths. This is because he sees its message of body-soul dualism as on some level incompatible with his interpretation of the Adam story. He could probably be challenged on this, but a charitable reading would take him as saying that the Orphic Myth scapegoats the body. Evil is too easily reduced to something the soul *suffers*, and this misses the *paradox of experience* that Ricoeur is aiming at: that we are simultaneously *responsible and not responsible* for evil. (The Orphic Strawman would just say: well, my body is responsible but my soul is not; and since I'm more my soul than my body, I'm not really all that responsible, am I?!)

The Symbol Gives Rise to Thought: Ricoeur ends the whole volume by going back to the problem of how to jump back and forth between speculative thought and textual interpretation. He began (in *Fallible Man*, which we didn't read) with an abstract consideration of fallibility. Then he spent some time interpreting the symbols and myths of

fault (in *Symbolism of Evil*). But, from there, can he get back to the heights of speculative thought? He thinks he can, though he acknowledges this might only be a kind of wager. He doesn't really see any other way, since he is committed to the position that there is no philosophy without *presuppositions* (be they cultural, historical, etc.).

The question he leaves us with is then: how can thought be both 'bound' (to its symbolic context) and 'free' (to rationally speculate)? (Note that this repeats a similar paradox of experience: how can something be *both bound and free*? How can a will be servile?) Philosophical reflection on rational foundations (such as phenomenology tries to be)—which we'd like to be free—requires an acceptance of its own embedding within a tradition of contingent, historical symbols. That is: *philosophy needs hermeneutics* if it's ever to 'get started' on the big questions.

Some Questions:

1. In general, how do we judge Ricoeur's attempt to walk the line between hermeneutical (historical?) work and the phenomenological description of experience? Is he just jumping back and forth between methods? Or is there some way that these two sides are able to feed off one another to the benefit of the whole project?
2. Do we agree with Ricoeur that, in order to properly interpret the myths in relation to one another, we have to adopt one myth as our own, so as to get a perspective on the rest? Would his project work as well with a more 'objective' approach to the types of myths?
3. Ricoeur suggests that philosophical speculation (e.g., about what evil is and what to do about it) would be well served if it paid more attention to the symbols and myths we've traditionally used to discuss recurring problems (such as evil). (cf. 237) Is his suggestion plausible? Or are we just confusing ourselves with all these old stories? Should we just skip to speculation? Or does the symbol give rise to thought?
4. Do we think that the servile will is a real paradox of experience? Or is it just Ricoeur's own particular obsession, guiding his project for contingent reasons only? Does deciding between these two options affect how much we get out of reading his book?
5. Why do you think Ricoeur calls his project 'Anselmian' on the last page of the book? (Hint: *fides quaerens intellectum*...)
6. What do you think Ricoeur means, in his concluding section, by a 'transcendental deduction' (cf. Kant) of symbols?