

Augustine and Postmodernism

Confessions and Circumfession

Edited by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon

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Time, Evil, and Narrative

Ricoeur on Augustine

Richard Kearney

I want to concentrate here on two of Paul Ricoeur's texts on Augustine's *Confessions*. First, the opening chapter of volume one of *Time and Narrative*—entitled “The Aporias of the Experience of Time in Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*,” and second, an article written in 1985 entitled “Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology.”¹

These are by no means the only places where Ricoeur looks to Augustine, but they are in my view two key writings that bring together some abiding issues for Ricoeur—namely, *time*, *evil*, and *narrative*. In my conclusion, I will suggest that the resolution of this problematic triad points to a horizon of *pardon*: a theme which was, of course, crucial for Augustine, and which Ricoeur has chosen to explore in the Epilogue to his most recent book, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. The fact that his reflections on pardon are conducted in energetic and respectful dialogue with Jacques Derrida make them of additional interest here.

I. Ricoeur on Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*

Ricoeur makes it clear from the outset that his main aim in the opening chapter of *Time and Narrative* is to show (1) how Augustine's analysis of time is highly aporetic; and (2) how it points ultimately to some kind of narrative eschatology.

The aporia derives from the basic existential fact that two temporal directions of the human psyche work in antithesis—namely, the *distentio animi* and the *intentio animi*. Whereas the former (*distentio*) denotes the soul's character of dispersal and fragmentation over past and future, the latter marks the soul's countervailing movement of intensification and concentration. While Augustine will look to a religious faith in the Eternal to convert the *distentio* into *intentio*, Ri-

coeur initially seeks to bracket out this theological horizon. He resolves instead to interrogate Augustine's aporia of time from a more strictly phenomenological perspective. With this in mind, Ricoeur will go on to compare the Augustinian opposition between *distentio* and *intentio* to the Aristotelian pair of *peripeteia* (temporal vicissitude) and *muthos* (narrative emplotment) in chapter 2 of *Time and Narrative*.

Ricoeur begins with Augustine's question in Book 2 of the *Confessions*: "What then is time?" (*Quid est enim tempus*) (XI, 14, 17). Unlike the cosmological thesis of Plotinus and the Platonists, who seem to know what time is, Augustine opens his meditation with the famous avowal of ignorance: "I know well enough what it [time] is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, then I am baffled" (XI, 14, 17). He then proposes what Ricoeur terms a "psychological" response to the skeptical attitude to time, but this never fully succeeds—as we shall see—in overcoming the existential aporia. At most, Augustine will eventually intimate some kind of "poetical"—as opposed to "theoretical"—response to time.² But we will return to this in more detail below.

The first aporia that Ricoeur identifies in the *Confessions* is *the being and the non-being* of time. Augustine begins with an analysis of our ordinary language discourse. How, he asks, can the *positive* character of verbs attributed to time such as "to be," "to occur," "to take place," be reconciled with the *negative* character of adverbs such as "not yet," "no longer," "not always"? In short, how can time be said to *be* since the future is always *not yet*, the past is always *no longer*, and the present is always *not always*? But if the present moment cannot have indefinite duration, what can hold out against the skeptical collapse of the existence of time into nonexistence? And how, if time does not exist, can we continue to attribute measures to it, as when we say, for example, that time is long or short, or that it crawls or flies? (XI, 15, 18).

It is in response to these skeptical questions that Augustine comes up with his innovative thesis of the "threefold present." Ricoeur spends considerable time on this, realizing that it contains the seeds of a cogent phenomenology of time. Since past, present, and future cannot be said to exist if taken as three separate moments, Augustine proposes to take them together as modifications of each other. In other words, if we cannot consider the past and the present to exist as such, we must rethink them as temporal qualifications which can exist in the present. Past, present, and future must thus be reconsidered as qualities existing *within* the soul as implied by our experience of narrating the past and expecting the future. Past and future are not, therefore, to be seen as "things in themselves" but rather as signs (*vestigia*) by means of which the soul has a memory of things gone or a pre-perception (*praesensio*) of things to come. "It might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things and a present of future things. Some such different times do exist in the mind, but nowhere else that I can see" (XI, 20, 26). Augustine concludes, accordingly, that the acts of memory, attention, and expectation constitute the three horizons of time as "seen"

through the enlarged present: "I can see (*video*) three times and I admit that they do exist" (XI, 20, 26).

Ricoeur asks at this point if Augustine, by incorporating remembrance and anticipation into the "extended and dialectical present," has not here resolved the ontological aporia of time. By linking our experience of the threefold present to that of psychic distension, has he not, in Book XI, sketched out the basics of a phenomenological psychology, prefiguring the Husserlian analysis of retention/pretention and the Heideggerian description of retrieval (*Wiederholung*) and fore-understanding (*Vor-Verstandnis*)? Is this not "the stroke of genius of Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*," asks Ricoeur, "in whose wake will follow Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty"?³

But, Ricoeur goes on, in thus replacing the old cosmological basis of time with an account which locates this basis *within* the human soul, understood as *distentio animi*, Augustine has not *really* solved the problem. He has merely displaced it from "outside" to "inside" the psyche. Instead of time being split between being and non-being in the sense of external metaphysical substances, it is now our inner soul which finds itself cleft. As Ricoeur makes clear, Augustine's thesis of the threefold present does not ultimately resolve the enigma, for in order to make sense of it, he must retreat from any attempt to locate the three temporal moments somewhere in space (*where*, he asks, are future and past things to be found?) and redirect our attention instead to two contrary directions of the human soul, namely *distentio* and *intention*.

The *distentio animi* is vividly translated by Ricoeur as a "tearing apart" (TN, 18) or "bursting asunder" (TN, 20), conveying the way the human mind is stretched in opposing directions. Taking the example of the simple recitation of a verse, Augustine writes: "The scope of the action which I am performing is divided (*distenditur*) between the two faculties of memory and expectation, the one looking back to the part which I have already recited, the other looking forward to the part which I have still to recite" (XI, 28, 38). And, paradoxically, the more actively the soul seeks to engage itself in the intensifying action of the threefold *present*, the more it finds itself split and spread out, that is, non-coincident. Or as Ricoeur notes: "[T]hat the soul 'distends' itself as it 'engages' itself—this is the supreme enigma" (TN, 21). Ricoeur sums up this enigma as follows: "Augustine's inestimable discovery is, by reducing the extension of time to the distention of the soul, to have tied this distention to the slippage that never ceases to find its way into the heart of the threefold present—between the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present. In this way he sees discordance emerge again and again out of the very concordance of the intentions of expectation, attention, and memory" (TN, 21). And the implications of this apply not only to the recitation of a verse but, as Augustine himself insists, to a "man's whole life of which his actions are parts" and, by extension, to the "whole history of mankind, of which each man's life is a part" (XI, 28, 38).

Here we find the blueprint for that hermeneutics of narrative identity which is to become the preoccupation of Ricoeur's three-volume *Time and Narrative*.

“The entire province of narrative is laid out here in its potentiality,” claims Ricoeur, “from the simple poem, to the story of an entire life, to universal history” (TN, 22).

What is simply adumbrated by Augustine in the *Confessions* will be explored in detail by Ricoeur in the subsequent chapters of his work. More precisely, it is in response to the discordance-concordance enigma of temporal existence laid bare by Augustine, that Ricoeur proposes the practice of narrative emplotment—first announced in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. But Ricoeur insists that such a response operates at a poetic, not speculative, level.

The reason that Augustine ultimately feels compelled to place his phenomenology of time within the context of a poetic hymn to eternity is, Ricoeur argues, not simply a matter of Christian apologetics. There is something in the very matter of the being/non-being aporia that calls out for some kind of eschatological (Derrida might say “messianic”) response. Ricoeur relocates this pointer in the fact that as we move toward a psychological solution to the aporias of time, we confront a further and even deeper puzzle (*aenigma*)—how are we to give unity and identity to a human soul divided between its temporal dispersal over time and its unquenchable desire for constancy and perdurance? It is by way of seeking some response to this puzzle that Augustine includes his investigation of time within a poetical meditation on the eternal Word. There is “something missing,” says Ricoeur, “from the full sense of *distentio animi*, which the contrast with eternity alone can provide” (TN, 22).

But what exactly does Ricoeur mean by this? He seems to be saying that by thinking about time *in contrast to eternity* we learn to re-situate speculation about time within the horizon of a limiting idea that invites us to reflect simultaneously on *what is time* and on *what is other than time*. Augustine considered eternity superior to time in that it is something that exists that was *not created*. Eternity is “forever still” (*semper stans*) in contrast to temporal things that are “never still.” Or to put it in another way, for Augustine the divine Word (*Verbum*) remains, while human words (*verba*) perish. *Verba* are in fact “not at all, because they die away and are lost” (6:8). The more Augustine confesses his faith in eternity, therefore, the more Augustine marks time with the stigma of non-being and negation. As Ricoeur says, paraphrasing Augustine, “We must think of ‘nothing’ in order to think of time as beginning and ending. In this way, time is, as it were, surrounded by nothingness” (TN, 25). It is in this context of juxtaposing eternity with the non-being of temporality that Augustine speaks of God as having all his years “completely present to him all at once because they are at a permanent standstill (*simul stant*).” Eternity is described as being “supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, since God is at once *before* all past time and *after* all future time” (XI, 13, 16). The metaphysics of presence could hardly be more plainly stated.

Ricoeur underlines a number of salient points at this crucial point in the argument. First, Augustine does not merely *think* about the eternal as an abstract

presence; he *addresses* it as a personal “Thou.” And it is in light of the infinite perfection of this divine Other, spoken to in the second person by a first person, that we sense our temporal existence, *qua distentio animi*, to be a “lack or defect in being” (TN, 26). The absence of eternity in our lives is experienced negatively by Augustine, not just as a limiting idea of abstract thought, but as a gaping gulf of sorrow at the very heart of our existence. Time is experienced in the interiority of our own nothingness. We feel ourselves to be creatures hemorrhaged by the non-being of distention—this deep scar marking out the “ontological difference separating the creature from the creator” (TN, 27). In this manner, claims Ricoeur, the experience of distention is raised to the level of “lamentation”—a *pathétique of time* which calls in turn for a *poétique of narration* transcending the arguments of reason. In short, it is the narrative form of the *confessio* which, in Ricoeur’s words, brings “lamentation to the level of language” (TN, 27).

This is pivotal for Ricoeur. He makes it clear that for Augustine this appeal to the confessional narrative of lamentation is not just *any* kind of narrative. It is narrative with a difference, and narrative that makes a difference—narrative geared toward an eschatological hope in things to come. In spite of the fact that we find ourselves “torn asunder” in our creaturely existence, “deprived of the stillness of the eternal present,” and laid waste by distractions (*distentio est vita mea*); even though we are given over to dispersal into the many, like the aimless wandering of the old Adam, we are, for all that, still capable of seeking after the *intentio* of the inner self united with its Maker (XI, 29, 39). *Intentio*, as the appropriate confessional response to *distentio*, is thus construed as the “hope of the last things,” the hope that one may leave behind the old Adam and “forgetting what one has left behind, look forward (*non distentus sed extentus*) . . . to an eternal goal . . . not distracted by other aims (*secundum distentionem*) but intent upon this one purpose (*secundum intentionem*)” (Phil 3:12–14).⁴

The confessional narrative of lamentation is thus, in the concluding passages of Book II, supplemented by a narrative of praise galvanized by the belief that our temporal *distentio* may indeed be somehow healed by an eschatological *intentio*. This expresses the hope that time itself may, in spite all our phenomenological and empirical evidence of dispersal, approximate to eternity. How? By returning into the inner self and listening to the inner *Verbum* of unity. For, Augustine suggests, to engage with this divine language of interiority is to learn from the eternal Word and, heeding divine teaching, redirect our lives from the fallenness of non-being toward a new quest for reconciled being. “Between the eternal *Verbum* and the human *vox*,” as Ricoeur comments, “there is not only difference and distance but the relation of teaching and communication. . . . The teaching, we could say, bridges the abyss that opens up between the eternal *Verbum* and the temporal *vox*. It elevates time, moving it in the direction of eternity” (TN, 29).

But Ricoeur is quick to point out that this does not signal some kind of mystical or otherworldly repudiation of time. We should not read the conclusion to Book XI as some rehabilitation of the moment of Plotinian ecstasy recounted in

Book VII. Even the conversion experience of Book VIII and the ecstasy of Ostia recounted in Book IX never eliminate the temporal condition of the soul. Nor are they intended to. On the contrary, says Ricoeur, these keynote experiences “only put an end to wandering, the fallen form of the *distentio animi*. But this is done in order to inspire a peregrination that sends the soul off again on the roads of time. Peregrination and narration are grounded in time’s approximation of eternity, which, far from abolishing their difference, never stops contributing to it” (TN, 29).

In other words, it is, paradoxically, when we attend to the still and steadying character of the eternal Word that we fully realize just how distended and scattered our temporal lives are. But this very difference-in-comparison may in turn accentuate our realization that it is the same eternal Word which created “both past and future time” (11:13). Thus anchoring the dialectic of *distentio* and *intentio* in the larger dialectic of time and eternity, Augustine underscores the fact that it is in the very midst of our experience of temporal dispersal that our desire for some eschatological reconciliation emerges.

The reconciliation remains in the future, of course; it is expressed in narratives of hope, desire, and faith, which point forward to a promised land that is not yet, a messianic era that transcends the here and now.

All this, Ricoeur concludes, makes for an “intensification” and “deepening” of time, rather than its “abolishment.” For it is from our insights into the experience of time that our longing for eternity arises; it is from acknowledging the difference between creature and creator that we may address the latter as our most intimate and distant Other. The *Confessions* may thus be said to intensify our awareness of this complex dialectic between time and eternity, disclosing the fact that our temporal existence is itself a complex dialectic of narrative dispersal and recovery.

Ricoeur extrapolates the following key conclusions for his own thesis on the relationship between time and narrative: “If it is true that the major tendency of modern theory of narrative—in historiography and the philosophy of history as well as in narratology—is to ‘dechronologize’ narrative, the struggle against the linear representation of time does not necessarily have as its sole outcome the turning of narrative into ‘logic,’ but rather may deepen its temporality. Chronology does not have just one contrary, the a-chronology of laws or models. Its true contrary is temporality itself. Indeed it was necessary to confess what is other than time in order to be in a position to give full justice to human temporality and to propose not to abolish it but to probe deeper into it, to hierarchise it, and to unfold it following levels of temporalisation that are less and less ‘distended’ and more and more ‘held firmly,’ *non secundum distentionem sed secundum intentionem* (XI, 29, 39)” (TN, 30).

In light of this conclusion, we may say that Augustine’s *Confessions* prefigure the blueprint for Ricoeur’s own hermeneutic interpretation of the relation between the aporetics of time and the poetics of narrative, an interpretation which he

scrupulously and rigorously unfolds in the subsequent chapters and volumes of *Time and Narrative*.

II. Time, Evil, and Narrative

The second text that I wish to look at here is Ricoeur's reading of Augustine's theory of evil. This text, entitled "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," traces the genealogy of the Western understanding of evil in which Augustine plays a key part. The pivotal link between the Augustinian notions of *time* (discussed in Book XI of the *Confessions*) and *evil* (discussed in Books VII and VIII) is that both expose us to an experience of "non-being." Indeed, Augustine defines evil in the *Confessions* (and elsewhere) as the lack of being or deficiency of good (*privatio boni*). In view of Ricoeur's claim in his *Time and Narrative* reading of Augustine—discussed above—that it is the limiting idea of eternity which "strikes time with nothingness" and reveals how our souls are dispersed over the non-being of what is no-longer and not-yet, we are faced with a deep conundrum: how do we, as temporal beings, deal with evil if our own very being is in part made up of non-being?

Before examining Ricoeur's answer to this question, let me say a few words about his presentation of the Augustinian view of evil. Augustine's account of evil is, in Ricoeur's view, innovative in relation to previous treatments of the problem and (like his treatment of time) deeply aporetic. It is innovative to the extent that it tries to combine the human and non-human aspects of evil in terms of a new metaphysical concept—namely, *malum* as *nihil* or *privatio boni*. Augustine develops this new speculative position in response to the gnostics, more particularly, the Manichees, under whose sway he had personally come as he admits in Books V and VIII of the *Confessions*. Whereas the Manichees had taught that evil is a substance implanted in the cosmos, Augustine replies that it is a perversion of the human will and therefore something which we are—at least partially—responsible for (Books VII and VIII). His question is this: "Where does evil come from, if God made all things and because he is good, made them good too?" (Book VII, 5). Since for Augustine "the Creator and all his creation are both good," it follows that evil must be something human beings bring into the world by their own actions. As such, it is a *human* product. And since everything that God creates "is" and "is good" (*ens et bonum convertuntur*), the evil generated by the perverted human will is actually a *deficiency* of what is. So it is by way of countering the gnostic view that evil is a cosmological substance that Augustine reinterprets the biblical notion of punishment (*poena*) for human sin (*peccatum*) and invents the category of "nothingness" (*nihil*). In short, for Augustine, if there is evil in the world, it can only be the result of humans turning away from the good being of God toward a lack of being.

Ricoeur commends Augustine's advocacy of a radically *moral* vision of evil. He approves the attempt to replace the genealogical question *Unde malum?* with the question of willful human wrongdoing, *Unde malum faciamus?* This marks,

Ricoeur believes, a significant departure from the more anonymous accounts of evil previously proposed by mythic, gnostic, and even neo-Platonic explanations. The novelty of Augustine was to have clearly articulated the view that the causes of evil are not to be found in cosmogony but in some form of *willed* action—the sins of the “bad will.” Ricoeur especially appreciates the deeply existential and anthropological character of the Augustinian innovation; but this does not prevent him from recognizing that it brings new problems and paradoxes.

Foremost amongst these, for Ricoeur, is the problem of “just suffering.” The Augustinian account leads ineluctably to a penal view of history where no one—in theory—suffers unjustly. Everyone gets their reward, and all pain is a recompense for sin. Responsibility, by this view, must be commensurate with accountability. But this is not, of course, what experience bears out. Suffering befalls many *innocent* people; while happiness is often the lot of *wicked* people. The notion of punishment proportionate to wrong-doing is not always sustainable—or convincing. In other words, if evil is something we as humans *do*, we cannot deny that it is also *done to us*: something we suffer, something inherited, something already *there*.

The major difficulty here, as Ricoeur sees it, is how to reconcile (a) Augustine’s somewhat extreme hypothesis of *moral* evil with (b) the need to give sin a “supraindividual” and historical-generic account in order to explain how suffering is not always justly apportioned as retribution for individual sins (for in countless cases it is clearly excessive). It is precisely in response to this difficulty, Ricoeur suggests, that Augustine sought to reinterpret the Genesis tale of Original Sin in order to rationalize this apparently irrational paradox: namely, we are responsible, but not *entirely* responsible, for evil. Ricoeur sums up the Augustinian account thus: “By conjoining within the concept of a sinful nature the two heterogeneous notions of a biological transmission through generation and an individual imputation of guilt, the notion of original sin appears as a quasi-concept. . . .”⁵ But the aporia remains. If sin is, even in part, an historical-genetic inheritance going back to Adam and repeatedly evidenced in our temporal nature as dispersed finite beings, then how can we avoid the trap of predeterminism? If, on the other hand, sin is an individual act freely chosen by the perverted human will, how can we explain the absurd fact that in a universe ostensibly created as “good” by God, the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper? There seems no solution.

Ricoeur argues that these Augustinian speculations on Original Sin were to exert a profound influence on subsequent philosophical and theological theories, from the Middle Ages right down to more modern thinkers like Leibniz, Hegel, and Kant. Leibniz tries to resolve the Augustinian aporia by proposing the principle of Sufficient Reason to explain the judicious balancing of good with evil in the “best of all possible worlds.” This balancing act of retribution and compensation, attributed to the infinite mind of God by Leibniz, is dialectically humanized by Hegel and the German Idealists. Hegel’s “cunning of reason” silences the scandal of suffering by subsuming the tragic into a triumphant logic where all that is real is ra-

tional. And it is here, Ricoeur says, that the hubris of systematic speculation reaches its untenable extreme: “The more the system flourishes, the more its victims are marginalized. The success of the system is its failure. Suffering, as what is expressed by the voices of lamentation, is what the system excludes.”⁶ The explanations of speculative reason are utterly insensitive to the particular agony of evil. They ignore the horror suffered. The System does not weep.⁷

On the other hand, Ricoeur is equally wary of the mystical irrationalism which declares, against Augustine, that God is not only beyond being but beyond all questions of good and evil to the point of being a pure “superessential” nothingness. Certain apophatic mystics can bring us so far down the *via negativa* that we are struck dumb before the sublimity of the absolute. (Or as Derrida remarks on the apophatic surpassing of good and evil: “Evil is even more devoid of essence than the Good. Let us draw, if possible, all the implications of this strange axiom.”)⁸

No version of theodicy—rationalist or mystical—Ricoeur argues, can provide a convincing answer to the protest of unjust suffering: *why me? why this particular victim?* This is a recurring protestation echoing through the testimonies against evil from Job and Gethsemane to Auschwitz and Hiroshima. And it surfaces dramatically and eloquently in the agonizing query of Ivan Karamazov—why does this innocent child have to suffer this evil? Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor scene would suggest that no speculative account can explain this enigma away. At best, suggests Ricoeur, we might look for a more ethical and practical—rather than theoretical—response to this enigma.

As philosophers, Ricoeur recommends that we start with the debunking of “rational theology” and theodicy in part three of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant moves from a purely speculative explanation of evil (in terms of metaphysics) to moral-political action rooted in human decision. And in so doing, argues Ricoeur, Kant liberates the insight that evil is something which *ought not to be* and needs to be struggled against. By de-alienating evil and making it a matter of contingency rather than necessity (cosmogonic, theological, metaphysical, or historical), Kant retrieved the anthropological aspect of the original Augustinian account, bringing us face to face, once again, with our human responsibility for action. But Kant goes further than Augustine in freeing us from metaphysical speculation on evil. He seeks to remove evil from the realm of both metaphysics and mystique, thereby diminishing some of its captivating power. And in this wise, Kant enables us to see that evil is not a property of some external demon or deity, nor indeed some original ontological property inherited from “our First Parents,” but a phenomenon deeply bound up with human acts. With the arrival of Kantian ethics, Ricoeur notes with approval, evil ceases to be a matter of abstract metaphysical accounting and becomes instead an affair of human practice and judgment. Kant, in a word, *re-anthropologizes* evil.

But the aporia of evil is not so easily resolved. Even Kant, as Ricoeur is compelled to concede, could not ultimately ignore the paradoxical character of evil. For if he clearly called for a response within the limits of practical human reason, he could never completely deny some residual inscrutability (*Unerforschbarkeit*)

in the matter. This he called “radical evil.” At one point, indeed, Kant even admitted that there might be “no conceivable ground from which the moral evil in us could originally have come.”⁹

There is indeed no solution. The lament of *Why? Why me? Why my beloved child?* remains as troublingly enigmatic as ever. Augustine’s bewildered cry, *Unde malum faciamus?* still goes unanswered. Ricoeur thus terminates his genealogical critique of evil, from Augustine to Kant, by noting that victims of evil cannot be silenced with either rational explanation (theodicy) or irrational submission (mysticism). Their stories cry out for other responses capable of addressing both the *humanity* and the *alterity* of evil.

III. Three Modes of Response

Finally, I want to briefly review three ways in which Ricoeur attempts to respond to the double Augustinian aporias of *time* and *evil*—sharing as the latter do a common contact with the *nihil*. Ricoeur’s attempts, sketched out in a number of books and essays, may be roughly regrouped under the following headings: (a) Practical Understanding, (b) Working-Through, and (c) Pardon. I will, by way of conclusion, say a few words about each in turn.

Practical Understanding

Practical understanding is the name Ricoeur gives to that limited capacity of the human mind to *deliberate about* or *reflect on* the enigma of evil. He draws here from a number of precedents, notably Augustine’s confessional narrative (as opposed to his speculative metaphysics), but also Aristotle’s “practical wisdom” (*phronesis*), and Kant’s model of “reflective indeterminate judgment.” What these models share is an ability to transfer the aporia of evil from the sphere of theory (*theoria*)—proper to the exact knowledge criteria of logic, science, and systematic speculation—to the sphere of a more practical art of understanding (*technè/praxis*): a practice which allows for an approximative grasp of phenomena: what Aristotle calls “the flexible ruler of the architect.” Where speculative theory, epitomized by theodicy, explained evil in terms of ultimate causal or genetic origins, practical understanding is geared toward a more hermeneutic comprehension of the singular and contingent characteristics of evil—while not abandoning all claim to quasi-universal criteria (that would account for at least a minimally shared sense of evil). Such practical understanding operates on the conviction that evil is something that must be actively *contested*. In that sense, it resists the fatalist archaeologies of evil—mythical and theodical—in favor of a future-oriented praxis.

For Ricoeur, the ultimate response (though by no means a solution) offered by practical understanding is to *act against evil*. Instead of acquiescing in the fate of an origin that precedes us—including Adam’s original sin—action turns our understanding toward the future in view of a *task* to be accomplished.

The moral-political requirement to act does not, therefore, abandon the le-

gitimate quest for some model (however limited) of reasonable discernment; in fact, it solicits it. For how could we *act against* evil if we could not *identify* it, however approximately, that is, if we could not *in some way* and in fear and trembling discern between good and evil? In this respect, the genuine struggle against evil presupposes a critical hermeneutics of suspicion. And such hermeneutic understanding would fully respect Kant's insistence on a practical reason, which embraces the quasi-impossible task of thinking the unthinkable. (And does so, in Ricoeur's words, with the "sobriety of a thinking always careful not to transgress the limits of knowledge.")¹⁰

Such a critical understanding of evil might never surpass the provisional nature of Kant's indeterminate judgment. But it at least judges, and in a manner alert to both the singular alterity of evil and to its quasi-universal character as grasped by the *sensus communis*. It is not exact or adequate judgment, I repeat, but a form of judgment for all that, based on the practical wisdom conveyed by confessional narratives and driven by the hunger for moral justice.

We may say, accordingly, that practical judgment is not only "phronetic" but "narrative" in character. In proposing such an ethical role for narrative, Ricoeur seems to be forging some kind of strategic alliance between Aristotelian *phronesis* and Kantian *Urteilung*, on the one hand, and Augustinian *confessio* on the other. This plea for a narrative model was already prefigured, as we saw, in Augustine's response to the aporia of time (as being and non-being) in terms of a narrative poetics of hope. But we could enlarge this response to include the very genre of the *confessio* itself as a singularly narrative account of the great conundrums of time, evil, and creation. For if it is true that Augustine engages in speculative metaphysics in this work, especially Book XI, it is equally true that these arguments are themselves framed by the overall confessional form of narrative (a far more narrative form, let it be noted, than either Aristotle's *Poetics* or Kant's *Critiques*).

Ricoeur's reasoning here is that while morality often speaks abstractly of the relation between virtue and the pursuit of happiness, it is the task of confessional narrative to propose various fictional figures that comprise so many *thought experiments* which may help us see connections between the ethical aspects of human conduct and fortune/misfortune. Poetical expressions—like those of Augustine in the *Confessions*—can dramatically illustrate how reversals of fortune result from a specific kind of behavior, as this is re-enacted in the "plot" of his life and that of many of his acquaintances. And at a broader level, it is thanks to our familiarity with the particular types of emplotment inherited from our culture or civilization that we may come to better relate virtues, or forms of excellence, with happiness or misfortune.¹¹ These "lessons" of poetry, as Ricoeur calls them, constitute the "universals" of which Aristotle spoke, and which we today might more properly call approximate or "quasi-universals" of a lower degree than those of purely theoretical thought and logic. And so, Ricoeur suggests, we may speak of some kind of "phronetic understanding," where narrative and interpretation have their proper place, in contrast to theoretical understanding, which is the domain of science and metaphysics proper. One of the most appropriate methods for treat-

ing the fundamental aporias of time and evil so powerfully articulated by Augustine in the *Confessions* is, it appears, narrative understanding.

Working-through

But Ricoeur goes further. If narrative understanding addresses the action-response to evil, it sometimes neglects the *suffering*-response. Evil is not just something we *struggle against*; it is also (as noted above) something we *undergo*. Something that befalls us. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering. It is also to underestimate that irreducible alterity of evil which Augustine could not but acknowledge in spite of his rejection of the gnostic notion of evil as a cosmic substance. Evil may indeed be “nothing,” but it is still “something” we suffer as well as something we choose. And precisely as something endured it needs to be worked through. One of the wisest responses to evil is, Ricoeur suggests, to acknowledge its traumatizing effects and work-them-through (*durcharbeiten*) as best we can. Practical understanding can only redirect us toward action if it has already recognized that some element of alterity almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe, or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil, we are never prepared enough; and the sense is always inflected with senselessness. That is why the “work of mourning” is so important as a way of not allowing the inhuman nature of suffering to result in a complete “loss of self” (what Freud called “melancholia”). Some kind of catharsis is necessary to prevent the slide into fatalism that all too often issues in despair. The critical detachment brought about by cathartic mourning elicits a wisdom which turns *passive lament* into the possibility of *active complaint*, that is, *protest*.¹²

The role played by narrative testimony is, Ricoeur repeats, crucial here—whether it be that of political victims generally or of specific survivors of the Holocaust and other extreme traumas. For such narrative remembering may invite the victim to escape the alienation of evil, that is, to move from a position of mute helplessness to speech-acts of revolt and (where possible) acts of self-renewal. (Augustine’s own *Confessions* are, of course, a micro-model of such renewal.) Some kind of narrative working-through is necessary, it seems, for survivors of evil not to feel crippled by guilt (about the death of others and their own survival), or to succumb to the syndrome of the “expiatory victim.” What the catharsis of mourning-narrative offers is the realization that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered*. Confessional catharsis may thus be said to detach us from the obsessional repetitions of the past and free us for a less repressed future. For only thus might we free ourselves from the disabling cycles of retribution, fate, and destiny: cycles which—as Augustine knew all too well from the Manichees—*estrangle* us from our power to act. (The Manichees instilled the view that evil is overpoweringly alien, that is, irresistible.)

This is not to suggest that Ricoeur thinks evil can be magicked away, or cordoned off into some hinterland from which we, now purged and purified, would remain forever after immune. Mourning, for Ricoeur, is not a way of instituting

a new sacrificial dialectic of us versus them. On the contrary, it is a way of learning to live with the monsters in our midst so that by revisiting and renaming them, we might outlive them. If monsters arise when reason sleeps, as Goya says, then confessional narrative might be seen as a certain kind of reckoning with unjust and unmerited suffering. Not that it can ever provide a solution. The evil of suffering can never be explained away by *confessio*—for that would be to return to the “rationalization” of theodicy and its secular equivalents. At best, confessional narrative serves as a necessary, but never sufficient, condition for an ethical and practical resistance to evil. There are, of course, many *non-narrative* criteria of judgment and protest that are equally indispensable for a more complete response—ranging from a phenomenology of the face *à la* Levinas, to a discourse ethic *à la* Habermas, to an existential pragmatism *à la* Dewey or Sartre, to a religious intuitionism *à la* Bergson, to a deconstructive hope for justice *à la* Derrida and Caputo.

All that Ricoeur is claiming for confessional catharsis here is that it offers one step, amongst others, that may be taken in face of the paralyzing lure of evil: a lure before which the gnostic and theodical accounts remain helpless. In sum, working-through the experience of evil—narratively, confessionally, cathartically—may enable us to take, however provisionally, some of the allure out of evil, so that we can begin to distinguish between possible and impossible modes of protest. In this sense, working-through is central to a hermeneutics of action, for it resolves to make evil *resistible*.

Let me cite, in summary, some emblematic examples. If Moses had not compelled the sublime numen of the burning bush to say its name and explain its pledge to history, Moses might have perished on the spot. If Christ had not confronted and debated over forty days with the demons in the desert, he might not have survived his three posthumous days in hell on the eve of resurrection. If Milarpa, in Buddhist legend, had not faced his monster head on and spoken to him face to face, he might never have left his cave. Or to give an example from our contemporary film culture, *Apocalypse Now*, the epic retelling of the horror of Vietnam based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: without the narrative catharsis brought about by Captain Willard's final exchange with his nation's sacrificial monster, Kurtz, he would not have been able to resist evil. It is only by listening patiently and acknowledging the evil for what it is, that Willard can eventually decline Kurtz's tempting offer to replace him, and walk on.

Pardon

Finally, there is the difficult issue of forgiveness. I conclude with this, recalling that it is in the very nature of a certain kind of *confessio* to call out for pardon. Against the “never” of evil, which rules out pardon, Ricoeur—following Augustine—recommends that we think of the “marvel of a once again” which might make the impossible possible.¹³ But the possibility of forgiveness is a “marvel” precisely because it surpasses the limits of rational calculation and explanation. There is a certain gratuitousness about pardon due to the very fact that the evil it addresses is

not part of some dialectical necessity. And here Ricoeur rejoins not only Augustine but Derrida. Pardon is something that makes little or no sense before we give it. *Before* it occurs it seems impossible, unpredictable, incalculable in terms of the economy of exchange. So it requires a leap of faith, of trust—but not a *completely blind* leap. And this is where confessional-phronetic understanding, attentive to the particularity of specific evil events, joins forces with the practice of patient working-through to ensure that past evils might be prevented from repeating themselves and give way, instead, to future possibilities of non-evil. Confessional narration can help us make the impossible task of pardon a bit more possible. That is why amnesty is never amnesia: the past must be recollected, reimagined, rethought, and worked-through so that we can identify *grosso modo* what it is that we are forgiving. The cult of the “immemorial” sublime should, I suggest, be resisted. For if pardon (for us humans) is indeed beyond reason—as Augustine recognized in the *Confessions*—it is not without a certain awareness. Or to put it in Pascal’s terms, pardon has its reasons that reason cannot comprehend. Only a divinity could forgive indiscriminately. And there may indeed be some crimes that God alone is able to pardon. Even Christ had to ask his Father to forgive his crucifiers: “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Presumably the “man” in him found it impossible; he couldn’t do it himself.

But here ethics approaches the threshold of religious hermeneutics. And it does so, bearing in mind Derrida’s timely warning: “I believe it necessary to distinguish between forgiveness and this process of reconciliation, this reconstitution of a health or a ‘normality,’ as necessary and desirable as it would appear through amnesties, the ‘work of mourning,’ etc. A ‘finalized’ forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy.”¹⁴ Derrida does add the telling admission that he himself “remains ‘torn’ between a ‘hyperbolic’ ethical vision of forgiveness, pure forgiveness, and the reality of a society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation.”¹⁵ Here Derrida seems to concede that between his own version of “impossible” pardon and Ricoeur’s notion of “difficult” pardon, there may not be an unbridgeable divide. Perhaps such pardon is only *quasi-impossible*—especially if one believes, as Augustine certainly did in his *Confessions*, that infinite forgiveness can somehow traverse at moments the limits of finite forgiveness.

In light of the above, I tender this hypothesis. By transforming our experience of distention, alienation, and victimization into a response of protest and forgiveness, might not a hermeneutic practice of *confessio*—inspired by Augustine, Ricoeur, and Derrida—offer us some kind of answer, however tentative, to the challenge of evil?

NOTES

1. P. Ricoeur, “Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology,” first published in English in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 (1985): 635–50; reprinted

in P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Originally published as a short book in French entitled, simply, *Le Mal* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986).

2. Here is Ricoeur's own statement of intent as he embarks on his reading: "A constant thesis of this book [*Time and Narrative*] will be that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. Not that this activity solves the aporias through substitution. If it does resolve them, it is in a poetical and not a theoretical sense of the word. Emplotment (*la mise-en-intrigue*) replies to the speculative aporia with a poetic making of something capable, certainly, of clarifying the aporia (this will be the primary sense of Aristotelian *catharsis*) but not of resolving it theoretically. In one sense Augustine himself moves toward a resolution of this sort. The fusion of argument and hymn in Part 1 of Book XI—which I am at first going to bracket—already leads us to understand that a poetical transfiguration alone, not only of the solution but of the question itself, will free the aporia from the meaninglessness it skirts" (*Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], pp. 6–7).

3. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, p. 16. Hereafter cited in the text as *TN*.

4. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

5. Ricoeur, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," p. 254.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

7. See William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult and Comedy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 231.

8. J. Derrida, "Comment ne pas parler," in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1978), p. 571.

9. I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p. 38.

10. Ricoeur, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," p. 259.

11. P. Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. D. Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.

12. P. Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," in *Questioning Ethics*, ed. R. Kearney and M. Dooley (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 5–12.

13. P. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), pp. 574f.

14. J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 50.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 51.