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Ricoeur: Dying to live 'for others'

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Richard Kearney

Department of Philosophy, Boston College, USA

I had the honor of visiting Paul Ricoeur in July, 2004, less than one year before his death. The fragments that have come to us as *Living Up to Death*¹ were then under way, and Ricoeur was also kindly making time to read my own *The God Who May Be* and an essay entitled 'Enabling God'.² The visit marked the continuation of a conversation we had enjoyed for some years concerning what he called his 'last book', one which would consider the relationship between *l'homme capable* and *le Dieu capable*. Had it come to pass, the book would have involved a dialectical response to his early *L'Homme faillible*,³ along with a response to the notion of a metaphysical God as ruler of the universe. And though the text did not come to be, our discussions revolved around two points that I believe stand as a helpful orientation to *Living Up to Death*: the idea of Ricoeur's 'last God' as a 'capable God', and his parallel notion of dying as a 'living for others'. Put in concert, we have then a decided attunement to *God for others* and *self for others*.

I Activity and possibility in the *Notre Père*

In his penultimate fragment to *Living Up to Death* entitled 'After Reading Philonenko's *Le "notre père"*', Ricoeur offers a reading of the 'Our Father' as an invocation to *action* rather than a statement about being.⁴ The 'Our Father', he contends, is not saying what God 'is'. Rather, the prayer takes the form of an address to a 'Thou' who 'can do what he does'. God acts because he 'can' act in response to human prayer which calls him to act. Ricoeur refers to this as an 'eschatological vision' where God acts by 'possibilizing' a kingdom in correspondence with what he calls 'the expectation' and 'petition' of those who invoke his grace as a 'capacity' to transform the world in dialogue. 'Two acts are paired: that of God, that of human beings.'⁵ This pairing involves a God who 'can' act

Corresponding author:

Richard Kearney, 21 Campanella Way, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

Email: rmkearney@gmail.com

in eschatological co-creation with humans, who in turn 'can' act in correspondence with him (that is, giving daily bread as we are given it, forgiving our neighbors as we are forgiven, delivering from evil as we are delivered). God's kingdom can only come if: (1) God enacts his capacity to reign in justice and love, and (2) if humans react by invoking and enacting this capacity in return – a sense in which an ethico-religious *poiesis* and *praxis* are running together. In the margins of this reflection, Ricoeur writes in brackets, 'Perhaps a God of the *posse*. Richard K.'⁶

What Ricoeur refers to here (as Catherine Goldenstein and David Pellauer note in their editorial comment) is the idea of 'enabling God' which I sought to outline in my book, *The God Who May Be*.⁷ My book took its name, and its cue, from a long hermeneutic tradition running from Rashi and Cusanus to Rosenzweig and Ricoeur, a tradition which translates Exodus 3:14 ('God answered: "I AM that I am. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them"') not as a metaphysical statement about 'what' God is (*ego qui sum*) but as an eschatological promise of what God can, may, or will be, and the notion of a 'sending' forth of this enduring possibility. As such the eschatological *posse* (to be able) calls for a translation into an ontological *esse*, so that the capacity can become actuality and the kingdom come into being. Recovering such a translation, I believe, marks a deeper, indeed more religious, element within the work of active 'clarification' Ricoeur has been seeking.⁸ He refers to the crucial translation, from Hebrew to Greek, as a possibilizing of a new relationship between capacity and action in the Aristotelian pair of *dynamis-energeia*. This relationship is not without precedent and is not a giving-in to the 'explanatory' comforts of theodicy or system. It finds its most articulate formulation in Nicholas of Cusa's neologism '*posset*' – the coming together of *posse* and *esse* in a double act of divine-human corresponding. As Cusa put it, '*Deus est omne id quod esse potest*' ('God is all he is able to be'). But this enabling depends for its actualization on human will acting in accord with divine grace – a double act which results in what Ricoeur calls 'a sublimated politics' of the kingdom and a 'sublimated psychology' of the will. Ricoeur concludes his fragment by speaking of a 'possibilization . . . of action' which involves the 'possibility of a rewriting of the verb "being" in the manner of Aristotle's being as *dynamis-energeia* . . . Action makes *possible* this rewriting of Greek being . . . as already in Exodus 3:14–15. See *Thinking Biblically* re "I am what I will be".⁹

In what would be our final dialogue in palison August, 2004, Ricoeur and I had a lively exchange on this idea of God as an intimate mutuality of *posse-esse*, *dynamis-energeia*, *possibilizing-acting* – a mutuality marked by a new reciprocity between eschatology and ontology, and a sense that the divine promise of the kingdom and the human will to realize it were, we agreed, inseparable.

How does this notion of God as *posse* – and a God who 'sends' – relate to Ricoeur's final reflection on a God 'for others' and a self for others? Death, he suggests, need not be the final word, and one's 'capability' in dying, like one's 'mourning' in testimony, need not be reducible to the objective category of the 'afterlife' or the irrevocable determinacy of suffering in history. My sense is that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of 'grace' does not stop with the one who receives it, but continues as an endless giving to others: a process of giving, not just one's bread but one's life, to one's neighbors, so that they may give it in turn to their neighbors. The task is to insist on 'a word of hope' that is 'torn from what is unspoken' in the encounter with the enigmatic 'limit situation' of death.¹⁰ This is one reason why Ricoeur interprets the Last Supper – the scene of Jesus on the

brink of death – not as some expiatory sacrificial rite, but as a service of sharing with others. The scene appears as a translation of divine *Posse* into the activity of kenosis and service. ‘Contemplation leads to action’, writes Victor Hugo. ‘It is the ideal that has the right to say, *Take of it, this is my flesh, this is my blood*. Wisdom is a sacred communion.’¹¹ It is also why Ricoeur abandons the notion of personal salvation in favor of service to others. If there is resurrection it is something I will *for others*, not for myself – a salvation I ‘send’ through myself into the possibilizing of my neighbors. And finally, this is why, I believe, Ricoeur turns in his last testaments to a form of ‘interreligious hospitality’ which involves a radical openness to what he calls the ‘Essential’ in all great wisdom traditions.

II The Eucharistic gesture and the life of hospitality

Ricoeur’s reading of the Eucharist regards it as a celebration of blood-as-wine, as transubstantiation taken as a sign of life lived and shared, rather than as a token of sacrificial expiation. The Eucharistic commemoration of the giving of one’s life – ‘Do this in memory of me’ – thus becomes an affirmation of the gift of life for the other rather than an anxiety about personal survival after death. In other words, when Christ said ‘it is finished’, he meant it. He was offering up his own personal life, in a gesture of kenotic emptying, so as to give life to others, in *both service and sacrament*: namely, the breaking of bread at Emmaus, the cooking of fish for his disciples in the form of the risen servant, and ever after, down through human history, in the guise of feeding the ‘least of these’. Ricoeur sums up his reflection with this remarkable note:

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Hence the link between feast and service. The Last Supper conjoins the moment of dying unto oneself and serving the other in the sharing of food and wine which joins the dying person to the multitude of survivors reunited in community. And this is why it is remarkable that Jesus never theorized about this and never said *who* he was. Maybe he didn’t *know*, for he *lived* the Eucharistic gesture, bridged the gap between the imminence of death and the community beyond. He marked a passage to glory (through suffering and death) without any sacrificial perspective.¹²

I think that what Ricoeur is contesting here is the notion of Christ’s death as a scapegoating ritual, that is, as a function of periodic blood-letting to propitiate a divine blood lust. He is *not* rejecting Christ’s act of ‘offering’ his life out of love for others. Rather he espouses a post-sacrificial Eucharistic of sharing with the stranger, the other, the guest. And this is what he calls ‘Eucharistic hospitality’ – a notion which he pairs with linguistic hospitality where, in the act of translation, a host language risks opening itself to a foreign language, receiving it as a gift (and challenge) from a ‘guest’. This risk of translation is experienced as the challenge of a stranger. Such hosting exposes us to what Ricoeur, following Antoine Berman, calls ‘*l’épreuve de l’étranger*’.¹³ In his earlier essay, ‘The Paradigm of Translation’, Ricoeur outlines the ethical implications of the parallel between linguistic and Eucharistic hospitality:

Translation sets us not only intellectual work, theoretical or practical, but also an ethical problem. Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk

of serving and of betraying two masters: this is to practice what I like to call *linguistic hospitality*. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resembles it: confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another, with their lexicon, their grammar, their stylistics which we must learn in order to make our way into them? And is Eucharistic hospitality not to be taken up with the same risks of translation-betrayal, but also with the same renunciation of the perfect translation?¹⁴

Ricoeur's final notion of dying to oneself for the sake of others is echoed in his corollary notions of dying as rebirth (through others) and of 'living against death'. The preference for natality over mortality brings him close to Hannah Arendt and far from Martin Heidegger; this priority of living *against* death, as we live *until* death (*jusqu'à la mort*), is indebted to both Spinoza and Levinas.¹⁵ Ricoeur contrasts Heidegger's elitist notion of being-towards-death qua 'heroic authenticity of anxiety' with Spinoza's idea of wisdom as a 'meditation not on death but on life and on living "until"'.¹⁶ And from Levinas he learns that the 'before' is a 'being against death and not a being-toward-death'.¹⁷ Remarkably, though in a somewhat different register, Ricoeur also sees dying to live for others as requiring a 'cheerfulness' which is the other side of mourning. Cheerfulness is an anthropological term for what he will also call 'Grace' and it not only solicits a letting-go of make-believe personal salvation, but also involves a form of mystical detachment. Interestingly, Ricoeur associates this detachment with Eckhart and the Rhine mystics (though up to his last testaments on living and dying Ricoeur was not, to my knowledge, much prone to mysticism). But what form, we are prompted to ask, does such wisdom, such grace, take in this path of detachment? What is the religious and intersubjective shape of this testimonial horizon?

Speaking of a certain kind of 'grace' accompanying the experience of death, Ricoeur notes that

... it is not important... for the quality of this moment of grace that the dying person identifies himself, recognizes himself... as one who confesses this or that religion, this or that confession. [But] it is perhaps only in the face of death that the religious gets equated with the Essential and that the barrier between religions, including the nonreligions... [(like) Buddhism] is transcended. Because dying is transcultural, it is also transconfessional, trans-religious in this sense.¹⁸

Admitting his basic suspicion of 'immediacy and fusion', Ricoeur makes one exception for 'the grace of a certain dying'.¹⁹ He talks about this grace as a paradox of 'immanent transcendence', as an especially intimate transcendence of 'the Essential rending the veils of the codes of confessional religions'.²⁰ Such authentic grace flows from the scriptural paradox that 'he who clings to his life loses it and he who lets it go gains it'. And if life is indeed, as he told his friends gathered at Chatenay Malabry on his 90th birthday, 'the first, the inaugural gift', it is a gift received so as to be passed on to others. Ricoeur's last wish was to 'honor life until death'.²¹ And his terminal reflections, written around Easter 2005, were not insignificantly on the resurrection. It is, however, important to note that Ricoeur understands resurrection not in the conventional sense of a miraculous transfer to another world but rather as a rebirth in the singular now, the eternal now, of this living present: 'At the hour of decline the word resurrection arises... From the

depths of life, a power suddenly appears, which says that being is being against death.' 'Believe this with me', he wrote in a letter to a close younger friend.²²

Ricoeur's dying words, in short, were about living up to death as a living against death in the sense of removing death's victory so that life continues in others, through others, for others. Such a position for Ricoeur is held in the context of 'belief', but the new birth of the instant and the new life of living through others is not reducible to any one faith community. The refiguration of dying into living, of mortality into natality, of sacrifice into service thus rejoins the practice of what Ricoeur calls 'interconfessional hospitality'.

In the concluding fragment dedicated to Derrida, it is telling that Ricoeur agrees with his former student that if one is to 'learn finally how to die one must accept absolute mortality without salvation'. But Ricoeur adds, perhaps in a way Derrida would not, 'I yield my spirit to God *for the others*.'²³ The nature of such yielding is also to be understood, based on Fragment (0) 2, within the vein of interreligious hospitality. Here he affirms that just as Christ was the expression of a God 'for us' (rather than a deity of omnipotent self-sufficiency), so each religion may be seen as an expression of service for and towards other religions. Recalling his long practice of hermeneutic detours, Ricoeur declares that he, as a Christian, wants to seek in 'extrabiblical traditions encouragement for *another* way of speaking'.²⁴ The interest in confessional hospitality as a translation between different faiths – biblical and non-biblical – is thus grafted onto the question of linguistic hospitality (other ways of 'speaking'). After Babel, he insists, there can be no claim to a single perfect religion or language. However, the hermeneutic relativism of absolutes that flows from this limitation on language should not, he suggests, be considered a 'catastrophe', but rather a genuine token of the 'plurality characteristic of all human phenomena'. Thus we find ourselves in a 'field of inter-religious options' which allow for 'adhesion' to a particular religion without the threat of 'religious violence'.²⁵ Confessional creeds, in this way, are not debilitated so much as recalled to their basis in a nexus of giving and receiving, of interanimating and intersignifying. In an optimal sense, 'doctrine arises out of constant interaction'²⁶ – a dynamism which allows for both critical *discernment* and confessional *adhesion*. Adhesion as a choice of belief should never be a matter of exclusion at the expense of reciprocity.²⁷ Adhesion preserves the element of possibility at the heart of belief, and in the various significations of the sacred. At this juncture Ricoeur makes one of his clearest pronouncements on interconfessional hospitality. Given its importance, I quote at some length:

I don't want to leave the ground of the hermeneutic status of *adhesion* without having confronted the corollary problem of *reciprocity* in the situation of inter-religious confrontation. The other too can claim the same chance transformed into destiny by a continuous choice. Certainly, from an external point of view, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha are to be placed on the same plane enumerating the founders of religion, and the believers of these multiple forms of obedience have a right to equal consideration. But if one speaks in terms of personal adhesion to one of these communities, the question becomes that of reciprocity and not of comparison; and that aporia arises [out] of the dissymmetry I encounter in the mutuality I come to at the end of *The Course of Recognition*. The other will never be an alter ego. In Husserlian language, he will never be more than apprehended, reached through an analogizing grasp as regards his intimate act of adhesion at the ground of his conviction. I am speaking here in terms of imagination and empathy.²⁸

The gravity of the personal incorporation of otherness in the heart of one's own religious adhesion should not be overlooked. Adhering belief is like the analogical 'as' or the mimetic 'as if', a vital trope of confession that is oriented to/by the Essential but without the smug certainties of exclusivity. Interreligious hospitality may thus be conceived as a celebration of the capacity for belief and conviction rooted in the recognition that I have wagered on the resilience and promise of one narrative, while you have, by equal rights and destiny, wagered on another. Put simply, something in the other escapes analogy and imagination. Part of the other always remains a stranger to me, just as I am always a stranger to the other. And so Ricoeur endorses Renée Petrie's claim that 'religion can only exist by defining itself relative to other religions'.²⁹ This, he repeats, calls for a difficult hermeneutic balancing of both personal commitment and critical detachment. It involves an interconfessional hospitality where we translate one religion into another in a creative conflict of comparison and controversy.

This means, in sum, avoiding a superficial Esperanto of religions in favor of the 'study and transformation in depth of the contents of belief'. Ricoeur has no time for easy syncretism or spiritual 'Don Juanism' (a phrase he borrows from Jaspers). He insists instead that the 'otherness of the other as other remains irreducible'; and this means resisting a blithe relativism in favor of a deep cultural and political challenge 'in the broad sense of a cohabitation of religious differences'.³⁰ But perhaps we may say that this challenge is to be met with an eye toward the very resources that provoke his larger translation of 'dying' into 'living' and 'my survival' into service 'for others': capability surpassing, if never denying, fallibility.

III Traversals

On this score, I want to turn to some final thoughts on Ricoeur's pairing of *l'homme capable* and *le dieu capable*. The pairing marks a pertinent jointure between his work in narrative and religious hermeneutics. Here, suggests Ricoeur, we have a discreet eschaton which respects the incognito of an intimate *corps-à-corps* where human and divine desires traverse each other. The 'I can' of human being finds its correspondent in the 'You can' of sacred love. *L'homme capable* and *le dieu capable* respond to each other in an act of daring complicity and co-creation. And it is no accident, I suspect, that Ricoeur chooses the term 'metaphor' to describe this divine-human exchange. Why? Because metaphoricity is precisely that 'tensive' power of language which comes alive in the crossing of ostensible opposites – immanent-transcendent, sensible-intelligible, finite-infinite. For Ricoeur the divine is 'capable' precisely because it is *eros* as well as *agape*: a dynamic potency (*dynamis, conatus, appetitus, posse*) which expresses itself as a desire that is less lack than surplus: an eschatological desire to make human being more capable of new genesis, incarnation and natality: *Désir à être* rather than *manque à être*. This is the Desire beyond desire that he writes about in his reading of *Song of Songs*, entitled 'The Nuptial Metaphor'.³¹ Desire as a love that answers desire with more desire – and death with more life. In such a process of mutual traversal, desire reveals 'God' as another name for the 'more', the 'surplus', the 'surprise'. 'The unexpected erupts from a syllogism', writes Hugo. 'There are still men on earth who know how to open and shut the surprise boxes of paradox with joy . . . Man lives by affirmation even more than he does by bread.'³²

What, then, are the implications of such a 'capable God' for living and dying? In what way is the testimony of possibility appropriate or adequate to the specters of evil that hover over suffering and death and haunt our historical memory? We may say, in summary, that God as *posse*, in contrast to theodicy and cosmological externalization, is not a panacea for history's victims. The eschatological *posse*, for Ricoeur, implies a God of enabling service rather than of sacrificial blood-letting; a God who is willing to efface his own being for the sake of giving *more* being to humans. A God who has also suffered. In this sense we can speak of a God beyond religion (conceived as confessional absolutism), or at the very least of an inter-religious or trans-religious God. I think Ricoeur comes close at this terminal juncture to his Paris friend, Stanislas Breton, who espoused a form of mystical kenosis whereby divinity becomes 'nothing' in order that humanity can become more fully human.³³ The notion of divine *posse* – of an enabling God who says 'You are able!' – repudiates all forms of theodicy and theocracy by returning power and responsibility to humans. Death is not a system and must not be afforded the authority of a final 'as such'. It is real, and, all too often, repugnant, but the invocation of enabling is, in the very least, a refiguration of our intentionality when we behold the paradoxes of lived experience. And here we might again recall Ricoeur's specific invocation of the great Rhine mystics who 'renounced themselves' for the sake of opening to the Essential, to the point of being, in their contemplative detachment, incredibly active in the creation of new orders, in teaching, in traveling and tending to the forgotten of this world. By being available like this to the Essential they were motivated to 'transfer the love of life to the *other*'.³⁴ Who would risk such love and action on the basis of a 'sacred' doomed to paralysis? The faith of 'faith', in this way, is a belief in the work of love capable of testifying to the 'worst' while translating it into the hope of new possibility. The 'shock of the possible' in narrative is also true of belief. Adherence names the imagination in the mode of active hope and determined service. It is refiguration with an eye to transfiguration – not mine, but yours.

God thus becomes a God *after* God, a God who no longer merely *is* but who *may be* again in the form of renewed life. Such a divinity is 'capable' of making *us* 'capable' of an increasingly abundant existence; and it does so by emptying divine being into non-being so as to allow for rebirth into more being: life more fully alive. In this option for natality over mortality, the dichotomy between before and after death may be refigured. Dying to live opens onto this 'may be', this *posse*. But it is a space of possibility – beyond impossibility – never a *fait accompli*. Nothing can be taken for granted. Wagers are called for, again and again, to the very end. *Jusqu'à la dernière seconde . . .*

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009). The original French text appeared as *Vivant jusqu'à la mort suivi de Fragments* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007).
2. See Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).
3. Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986[1967]).
4. Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, pp. 82–3.

5. *ibid.*, p. 83.
6. *ibid.*, p. 82.
7. See also my discussion of Ricoeur, religious hermeneutics and hospitality in my recent book, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
8. Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, p. 8.
9. *ibid.*, p. 84.
10. *ibid.*, p. 39.
11. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. L. Fahnestock and N. MacAfee (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 519.
12. Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, pp. 54–5.
13. See Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. E. Brennan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006). The text appeared originally as *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Bayard, 2004).
14. *ibid.*, p. 22.
15. See Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, pp. 99–100, n. 2.
16. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 357. See also the original French edition: *La Mémoire, L'histoire, L'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), especially the epilogue on 'La Pardon Difficile'.
17. *ibid.*, p. 361.
18. Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, pp. 15–16 (I have slightly modified the original translation here).
19. *ibid.*, p. 16.
20. *ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
21. Cited by Goldstein in 'Postface', in Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, pp. 94, 96.
22. *ibid.*, p. 96.
23. *ibid.*, p. 85.
24. *ibid.*, p. 72.
25. *ibid.*, pp. 65, 62.
26. *ibid.*, p. 67.
27. On this topic, Ricoeur learned much from his friend and Chicago colleague Mircea Eliade, about the need to look beyond exclusively Abrahamic traditions to other traditions like the Greek and Egyptian, and to other wisdom traditions in the East (*ibid.*, p. 74).
28. *ibid.*, p. 66.
29. *ibid.*, p. 72.
30. *ibid.*, pp. 66–7. See also 'Entretien Hans Kung–Paul Ricoeur: Les Religions, la violence et la paix. Pour une éthique planétaire', *Arte* 5 (April 1996), published in *Sens* 5 (1998): 211–30.
31. See Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 265 f.
32. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, pp. 139, 519.
33. See Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. J. Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).
34. Ricoeur, *Living Up to Death*, p. 42.