

Critique and Conviction (English version)

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My interest in philosophy dates from high school at the end of my secondary education. From the age of seventeen, I was confronted by an unforgettable professor of philosophy with a requirement for conceptual rigor and intellectual courage for which I have always felt grateful. I will never forget his advice, “When you meet an obstacle, don’t try getting round it, face it straight on.”

Several years later I had the pleasure of studying with the philosopher Gabriel Marcel, on the fringes of the official teaching of the Sorbonne. Contrary to the marvelous courses in the history of Greek, classical and modern philosophy that were part of public education, my first master proposed, as part of an independent course, an exploration of the embarrassing questions asked at the frontier between reflection and life. There were about twenty students assembled around the master: the rule was not to quote from any major texts but to find our own answers to the dominant questions such as time, solidarity, justice, and death. To summarize, the old Kantian adage resurfaced: “dare to think for yourself.”

The same year, when I took the *agrégation* examination that finished my studies, I was initiated to the already published work of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, and to his concern for an exact and fine description of psychic phenomena, such as perception, imagination, judgment, project, decision, etc. This influence is part of my deepest conviction next to that of my Parisian master, Gabriel Marcel.

When I was captive in Germany as a prisoner of war, I was influenced by Karl Jaspers, whose philosophical orientation can be found in his major book called *Philosophy*. It has three sections: the first, called “Orientation in the World,” was a philosophical reflection on science; the second, called “A Clarification of Existence,” discussed dramatic experiences such as solitude, conflict, suffering, and death, but also illuminating experiences such as friendship, the elan of responsibility at the crossroads of the fragility of existence and the courage of being. The third section, called “The

Numbers of the Origin,” was a reflection on the borders between the absolute and transcendence, the frontier between philosophy and religion. Reading Karl Jaspers was my food during the five years of my captivity in Germany. I was therefore, at the end of the Second World War, equipped for a career and personal work under the triple patronage of Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers and Husserl.

I first taught in secondary education, then from 1948 in the chair in the history of philosophy in the University of Strasbourg. The ten years in Strasbourg (1948–58) were for me the happiest ones. My election to the Sorbonne in 1958 was the beginning of a period of teaching and research shared between France and the United States (Yale, Montreal, Columbia, then Chicago for twenty-four years). I can say today that I have been a happy teacher. Concerning this, I would like to say a word or two about my relationships not just with my colleagues but also with my students, particularly my doctorate and research students. I think I established with them relationships based on confidence and friendship exclusive of any subordination and doctrinal dependence. I am happy not to have any disciples. My only wish now is to remain my successor’s contemporary.

I

My first contribution to philosophy, apart from my two works dedicated to the thought of my first masters, Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers (1947), was an exercise in phenomenological philosophy devoted to will: *Le volontaire et l’involontaire (The Voluntary and the Involuntary)* (1950). I described, in the manner of Merleau-Ponty in *La phénoménologie de la perception (The Phenomenology of Perception)*, the fundamental phenomena of the practical sphere: the project, habit, emotion and, for the first time, the subconscious subject to involuntary compulsions, to distinguish it from the resistance and the support that the will has in terms of the conscious that controls itself. Confrontation with the subconscious was to occupy me greatly during the 1970s. But before that, I widened the field of my study of will to take into account the ambiguous experiences that come from wrongdoing and are gladly attributed to dark forces. My interest in symbolic, mythical and poetic expressions in which humanity has inscribed its experience of wrong dates from this period. The second part of my

Philosophie de la volonté (The Philosophy of the Will), *Finitude et culpabilité (Finitude and Guilt)* (1960) deals with this excursion into the stranger regions of language. The work has three levels, the primitive symbols of evil (the master images of guilt such as the fall, the burden, and deviance), then those of the great myths on the origin of evil and finally the major speculations on the relationship between finitude and guilt.

In fact, the problem of wrongdoing and evil obliged me to supplement the phenomenological method of essential description with a method of interpretation borrowed from any other tradition than Husserlian phenomenology, that of classical philology, the exegesis of the sacred texts, jurisprudence, under the title of hermeneutics. A new problem presented itself where the detour via language and text imposed meditation between real-life experience and philosophical reflection. This problem may be resumed in two formulas that several readers have drawn from the work of this era: the “symbol gives thought” and “explain more to understand better.” The first formula concluded the philosophy of will; the second one opened a new era for my later work: it brought into contact two approaches often considered to be opposite, explanation, that brings together social sciences and the sciences of nature, and interpretation, that is not settled by empirical observation but opens up an area of discussion between competing interpretations applied to our culture’s major texts.

I dealt with such confrontation between rival interpretations in *De l’interprétation. Essai sur Freud (About Interpretation. Essay about Freud)* (1965).

In this ocean of perplexity, I looked for an appropriate guide in the complex operation of language: I therefore slid slowly from a philosophy of action to a philosophy of language before I was swung back into the practical field.

It was moreover the era of “linguistic turn” in all areas of philosophy. It happens that I was encouraged in this direction by my meeting with English-language analytical philosophy during my frequent and long stays in American universities from the end of the 1950s and in a more stable manner from 1967 in the University of Chicago in the departments of religious science, philosophy and social sciences. Language became throughout the 1970s and 1980s an area of great controversy. Without moving away from the phenomenological and hermeneutic movement, I concentrated on the creative aspect of language: how are new meanings formed? The problem may be called the problem of semantic imagination.

I cut out two well set out areas within this vast field of the semantic

imagination: firstly, the formation of poetic language in the wake of metaphoric expressions, well known in the rhetorical tradition of the Ancients and the Moderns, and secondly the formation of narrative language in the wake of structural linguistics applied to the narrative. *La métaphore vive (The Rule of Metaphor)* (1975) emerged from the first inquiry, *Temps et récit I, II, III (Time and Narrative I, II, III)* (1981–84) came from the second. This series of studies contributed to what I called semantic innovation or the creation of meaning based in three basic units of language; the word, the sentence and the text (the notion of discourse covers the two last units).

Based on this fundamental structure, I explored the major fields of narrative: ordinary conversation, historiography, fiction in Greek tragedy and the contemporary novel and Utopia in political dreamers. At the same time that I was exploring a major structure of language—the narrative—I was clearing an interesting path to the ancient and venerable problem of time: narrative unravels an intrigue over time.

These temporal structures give a foundation to what I proposed calling “the narrative identity of individuals and communities.” Narrative identity is different from biological identity, indicated by our genetic code, unchanging from the time of conception to death and other individual traits (fingerprints, signature, facial features, etc.), and has no other continuity than that of the history of life: narration, as philosophers say, recounts the “who” of the action; the only permanence that can be applied to narrative identity can only be that of a promise by which I remain in the persistence of a word given and maintained.

II

After my three volumes of *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)*, I answered the invitation made to me in 1986 to deliver the Gifford Lectures in the University of Edinburgh. I was asked to present a synthesis of my work. I had to then ask myself the question of what unit—if not systematic at least thematic—of my work, forty years after my first publications.

Soi-même comme un autre (Oneself as Another) (1988) was born from this task. It appeared to me that the many questions that had occupied my mind in the past could be brought together around a central question that appears in our discourse on the

use we make of the modal verb “I can.” Merleau-Ponty had explored this avenue before me. The work that came from the Gifford Lectures is organized around four major uses of “I can.” I can talk, I can act, I can recount, I can hold myself responsible for my actions, let myself be imputed as their real author. These four questions allowed me to join, without confusing them, the relative questions respectively to the philosophy of language, the philosophy of action, narrative theory, and finally moral philosophy.

The fourth major use of the modal verb, “I can” was formulated precisely in the concept of imputability that allowed me to link the moral sphere to the practical sphere of human capabilities. By imputability, I mean the ability to hold oneself accountable for one’s own acts; as suggested by the metaphor of account—to be found in German with the concept of *Rechnung in Rechnungsfähigkeit* and in English with accountability. Human beings are capable of being accountable for their own acts, to account for them to themselves and others, and therefore claim to be their real author. Only acts whose causality may be imputed to responsible people may be qualified morally as permitted or forbidden, good or bad, and just or unjust.

III

I would remove from the general picture of what I have just described the last three chapters devoted to moral experience.

In *Soi-même comme un autre (Oneself as Another)* I started with an expose of the main teleological concept of moral life, that of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* from which I borrowed the “ethical” denomination extended to all moral experience placed under the sign of good rather than obligation, as in so-called deontological morals because of their dependence on *deon*, obligation.

My thesis here is that it is in the deeper structures of reasoned desire that the fundamental ethical aims of “good living” or “good life” are drawn. This schema dominates ancient morals where virtues are models of excellence capable of marking out and structuring the aim of “good life.” I enriched the ethical concept using dialogal and community components of this aim of “good life” in happiness. I proposed therefore the following ethical formula: to live well with and for others in just institutions. The transition between ethics (teleological) and morals (deontological)

seems to be imposed by situations of conflict and violence.

Kant is therefore taken as a guide in the exploration of purely “moral” level of moral experience.

The Kantian criterion of universalization under whose judgment the moral subject ensures the legitimacy and the validity of his action plans is called into question. The difficulties in exercising this criterion of universalization of maxims lead on the abstract level of obligation—the formalism of the categorical imperative—on the concrete level of practical wisdom—to decisions in concrete, singular situations of incertitude. I find in this practical wisdom advice, common deliberation, in situ decision making formula, that Aristotle put under the aegis of *phronesis* of advised judgment translated by the Latins as *prudentia*, that does not separate speculative wisdom from practical wisdom exercised by the wise in flesh and blood. I refer this practical wisdom to the forms of in situ moral judgment encountered in two examples of applied ethics: medical ethics and legal ethics.

The first comes from a need for care caused by suffering. The second, in its penal form, comes from the existence of conflicts and the need to ensure fair rules. Both are marked by a specific act of judgment: medical prescription on the one hand and legal sentence on the other. Both use precise moral rules. On the medical side, the rules covering the pact of care that links patient and doctor are sharing medical secrets, exercising the right of truth concerning the diagnosis and treatment, stating the clear consent to risky treatment. The contribution of medical knowledge and bio-medical science are grafted on these basic ethics that covers the pact of care; likewise any edifice of medical law (biolaw) and public health policy supplements the edifice of medical ethics. Yet the demand for care caused by suffering remains the ultimate reference.

As far as legal sentencing is concerned, it concludes a series of operations that comprise a trial held within a court of law. They are operations of language that confront two claims, the prosecution and the defense. Practical procedural rules mark the discussion between the adversaries under the aegis of an ethic of discussion that controls the distribution of speaking time between the parties. The sentence concludes these ceremonies of language. Whilst the pact of medical care unites doctor and patient, legal sentence separates the adversaries and puts them at a just distance from each other. It is not important to punish but to say the law, pronounce the word of justice in the

specific situation. The parallel between medical ethics and legal ethics is continued in the combination between argument and interpretation, the argument rests on abstract rules of reason and interpretation on the reasonable weighing of contextual components of a judgment and the personal commitment of the decider, whether he is a judge or a doctor.

IV

I would not like to finish the exploration of the field of applied ethics with a simple comparison between two uses of judgment. Beyond critical reflection lies personal commitment to one or the other field. I will deal successively with the legal and medical fields.

In a short work entitled *Le Juste*, I discussed the problem of punishment in the penal section of law. Starting with a remark that punishment adds new suffering to the suffering inflicted by the attacker on his victim, I asked myself about the justification of such sentences. It seemed that the argument of social defense and dissuasion was not sufficient to give meaning to the sentences if there was no idea of rehabilitation for the prisoner, i.e., reintroducing the prisoner to the public domain of citizenship. This maxim alone can justify the addition of suffering to suffering. The first consequence of this is the death sentence, which abolishes the guilty person's future. The second consequence is that prison reform aimed at personality rebuilding is not prevented but that a return to freedom defines the finality of the whole penal system? Such penal policies have become one of the major issues in education in democracy in our highly civilized societies. Through reflection and concrete commitment on the justification of the sentence, legal ethics meets medical ethics. They both apply the ability to judge to the enigma of the meaning of suffering, whether it accompanies medical treatment, is inflicted by violence or murder, or is meted out as a punishment.

At the end of a long life, I am capable of embracing the problem of suffering in all its scope and diversity. I would like to say how much I understand the act of living with suffering until death.

There are indeed situations where suffering escapes all of Man's three relationships with it, whether it is cared for, is inflicted by crime, or is meted out as

punishment. The paradigm is suffering for which there is now a healing project, when care is not the therapeutic finality. It is suffering that is simply concomitant. Judgment has not lost its place, but it is no longer the final word. Decisions of conscience have to be made when care that is called palliative comes close to two dangerous frontiers: life-prolonging medical treatment and euthanasia.

- a) Life-prolonging medical treatment, to be honest, is more of a routine and obstinacy than a well-argued project: care is administered whatever happens. Yet, the meaningful silence that hides behind a gesture that does not know how to stop can be exposed. It is, firstly, a sanctification of the simple fact of life, given that life is not just another value, but the condition necessary to implement all the other values. This is true, but it is a truth that is limited by the brutal fact that living is apparently dissociated from any quality of life, and it is therefore impossible to exercise any of the other values. It also means, just as fundamentally, avoiding the task of mourning, mourning the other person, and in the background, the early mourning of one's own life. Yet, stopping care is not easy. Is this not close to the opposite of treatment, euthanasia, at least in its benign form of passive euthanasia that ceases maintaining a life that is whatever happens lost?

- b) Many people argue the case for and against either with indignation or demands. What is the value of life when physical and moral pain are put under biological surveillance deprived of any quality of life? What is left of human dignity when its existence is humiliated by the spectacle it shows to the outside, in addition to the internal blows given to its self-esteem? Above all, what about man's moral attribute par excellence, his autonomy, the subject of his own life, when a situation of absolute dependence brings the heteronomy which all modern cultures seem to want to eradicate. From protest it is easy to cross the bridge into claiming the right to die with dignity, a right that some people would like to have written into the law in the same way as other civil liberties. The sanctification of life and the avoidance of the mourning that has to be done in case of life-prolonging

medical treatment, through an almost symmetrical passage, imply an affirmation of the act of supremacy by which we would like to eliminate the effects of the passivity and vulnerability of the man's lot. This supremacy has been magnified by the suicides of the great Roman stoics. Pascal, in his *Les Pensées*, spoke of the "stoical magnificence." The truth about active euthanasia is that it is assisted suicide. A human being makes an authoritarian decision about the frontier between the acceptable and unacceptable. Yet, for whom is this prolonging of life intolerable? For the sick person? For the family? Who is requesting death? What does this request mean? Is it not often a call for help veiled in modesty and despair? Certainly, a doctor would not be able to be associated with such an attack on life: a doctor by definition protects life. In certain extremes that would make suicide respectable, the act of suicide becomes the one which brings together, just once, life and death, the act of living and the act of dying. If it has to be admitted that secret acts of euthanasia will never be eradicated and the ethics of despair are confronted by situations where the choice is not between good and evil, but between evil and worse, even legislation would not be able to approve.

V

Wise advice

I would like to finish with a few words of advice inspired by a spirit of benevolence.

First piece of advice: Before making claims about truths to say to dying people, try to be clear with your own ideas and fears concerning death, and to be truthful concerning your own death wishes for people close to you as well as for yourself.

Second piece of advice: Think about the responsibility we have to those people placed in our care and protection, and not just the responsibility we have to ourselves. Give that responsibility the form of a team including the sick person, the care

team, family and close friends, advisors and mediators (psychiatrist, chaplain or friends).

Last piece of advice: Brighten death by welcoming birth and a salutation addressed to all those who are growing up around us.