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Evil or the Lack of Meaning

Abstract: I argue that Paul Ricœur displaces and decentres established theodicies; the issue of evil is perceived as a practical rather than a speculative matter. It is the view of evil as a productive *aporia*, which suggests that evil provokes action and obliges human beings to take a stand ethically and politically. Hence, the topic of evil is not necessarily about putting together a puzzle. The central problem of evil has less to do with logic than with resignation, inertia, despair and meaninglessness.

Keywords: Action, Aporia, Resignation, Paul Ricœur, Theodicy

1) Introduction

There is no doubt that violence, suffering and evil are very present in the world. Violence occurs in families and local communities, alongside criminality, terrorism and warfare on a broader scale. These are all strong, striking and frightening instances of evil. People die of hunger. Animals suffer. «The whole creation has been groaning in travail»¹. One could ask, desperately, whether it is therefore meaningful to devote time to the academic exercise of *talking* about evil. Or even worse, despairingly ask whether it is meaningful to do anything at all—and many of us despair from time to time. Yet this despair, and the potential inertia that seems to be connected to it, are perhaps part of the problem of evil. This paper turns on the terms evil, resignation, despair, action and God.

2) Evil and the Existence of God-Theodicy

A *locus classicus* for the talk about *evil* appears to be the question about the existence of God. Human thinkers have perennially struggled with the paradox of the possibility of God while there is suffering in the world; there are, however, some premises that must be present in order to make it a problem. In Western theologico-philosophical discourse, God is often described in terms of a good God, an almighty God and an omniscient God. The problem, then, is that great suffering also exists. This appears to be an impossible combination: so much suffering cannot be desired by a good God; an almighty God would certainly be able to ensure that suffering was eliminated; and a God who knows everything cannot be ignorant of the state of affairs².

Now, I believe that interesting modifications can be made to the formulation of the problem. Philosopher Thomas Anderberg, among others, modifies the parameters: God does not have to be almighty, for instance, and the sheer existence of evil does not suffice

¹ Romans 8,22 RSV

² B. Clack and B. R. Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion. A Critical Introduction* (2. ed.), Polity, Cambridge, 2008, p. 74; P. Cole, *Philosophy of Religion* (2. ed.), Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2004, p. 106; T. Anderberg, *Guds moral. En essä om lidandets och onskans problem*, Nya Doxa, Nora, 1997, pp. 84-85. This way of formulating the problem in theologico-philosophical terms is not necessarily the same everywhere. Even in other Christian milieus, like the Russian, the topic has often been dealt with differently, for instance, in the novels of Dostojevsky. For an introduction to the field from a global perspective, see, for example, G. E. Kessler (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion. Toward a Global Perspective*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, chapter 5, pp. 210-268. Meanwhile, in Islamic thought, the problem of evil is frequently overshadowed by other problems, such as the relation between the Almighty God and Human Free will, or between rational argument and revelation; see M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York & London, 1970.

to constitute a problem. Anderberg argues that it is enough to hold God to be very powerful in order to identify a problem with God and evil. Or it is enough to hold that God knows more than any other creature, for there to be a problem. Or God does not have to be absolutely good but it is reasonable to claim that God is good to a higher degree than other creatures. And yet, there is so much suffering³. In this vein, it is not a question of God being able to do what is logically impossible; the problem is that even on a modest level God does not seem to live up to expectations. Why, for instance, did not God simply create a world with less evil⁴?

Anderberg also argues from another perspective. The fact that there is some evil *in general* does not necessarily disqualify the idea of a good, almighty and all-knowing God. Perhaps it is impossible to construe a world where there is life without any sorts of collisions, conflicts and clashes and consequently some kind of violence and suffering; people must be hurt at some point in dynamic relationships. Perhaps not all suffering can be avoided. What principally disturbs Anderberg is the sheer quantity of suffering, and its meaninglessness, not the existence of suffering «per se»⁵.

This is insidious indeed. Why should God allow this excess of violence, suffering and evil? Why could not God, even if not absolutely powerful and exceedingly wise, do better? Indeed, traditional theodicies attempt to answer such questions. The etymological meaning of theodicy [from Greek: *theos* and *diké*] is ‘justification of God’, while a contemporary definition is ‘vindication of the justice of God especially in ordaining or permitting natural and moral evil’⁶. Philosopher Paul Ricœur qualifies the theodicy by saying that it is an exercise in which the objective is to find a way to keep together a certain number of premises without contradiction:⁷ God is a good God – at least more good than any other beings of which we know – almighty, at least more powerful than anybody else, and omniscient, or knowing a great deal more than other beings. And yet there is suffering, a lot of suffering, terrible suffering. How can these premises be true without contradiction? The history of philosophy and theology, at least in the West, can present numerous attempts to answer that question⁸.

3) Questioning the Very Structure of Theodicies

In this paper, the issue is addressed in a slightly different manner. Ricœur points out that the way in which the problem is formulated is decisive. In order to make a theodicy possible the problem needs to be formulated in such a way as if an unambiguous answer is the achievable goal, while the means of argumentation that are accepted must satisfy the logic of non-contradiction. Moreover, Ricœur points out that in a theodicy the objective is

³ Anderberg, *Guds moral*, pp. 74-75, 84-85. Anderberg is not the only scholar to make observations of this kind, but he develops this aspect at some length. See for instance R. Swinburne, 'Evil Does Not Show That There Is No God', in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology*, ed. by B. Davies, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 599.

⁴ Anderberg, *Guds moral*, pp. 84-85.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 34-35, 106.

⁶ ‘Theodicy’ in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Reprint ed.), Könenmann, Cologne, 2000. The term was coined by Leibniz «from the Greek for ‘God’ (*theos*) and ‘justice’ (*dike*). So theodicy is concerned with establishing the justice of God in the face of evil.» (Clack & Clack, *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 73, footnote 1). See also ‘théodicée’ in Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2002 (1926).

⁷ P. Ricœur, *Le mal*, Labor et fides, Genève, 2004, pp. 19-20.

⁸ For an introduction see, for instance, M. L. Peterson, ‘The Problem of Evil’, in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by P. L. Quinn and Ch. Taliaferro, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, or B. Davies, ‘Introduction [to Part V on the Problem of Evil]’, in *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology*, ed. by B. Davies, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 571-580.

apologetic⁹. Put differently, in a theodicy the aim is to find an unambiguous answer, a total and absolute solution, in accordance with the laws of non-contradiction. The context of a theodicy would typically be the debate regarding God's existence.

In this paper, the starting point is Ricœur's short text *Le mal* (2004), in which he suggests that evil can be seen as what he calls an invitation to think more and think differently. In this fashion, Ricœur displaces or decentres the question of evil, tackling it on another front, as it were, in explicit opposition to the *structure* of many established discourses on evil¹⁰. Interestingly enough, he does so philosophically – as a philosopher – while informed by a theological discourse giving rise to other philosophical concerns, as if the various approaches were interdependent.

There are two initial components in Ricœur's questioning of typical theodicies: first, dealing with evil in a theodicy appears to reduce the force of evil; second and paradoxically, in theodicies evil tends to attain too strong a position on its own.

Let me begin with what could be called the reduction of evil. It appears that Ricœur finds theodicies problematic as – perhaps unintentionally – they presuppose that evil can be understood or known. Yet talking about knowing evil as a problem is not only connected with knowing the precise character of evil – its metaphysical origin and so on – or even with the 'wittgensteinian insight' that many things can be grouped around the term 'evil' without having a substantial definition of 'evil'¹¹; it also raises the question of the link between knowing and controlling. Thus the emphasis here is on evil as un-knowable in the sense of un-controllable. What is at stake is whether it is possible to understand and explain evil in the same manner as other things in the world can be understood or explained. Here, Ricœur refers back to Augustine who, according to Ricœur, shares the position with many of the Fathers¹². If evil were thought of in terms of a thing, an element or a substance, in other words in terms of *being*, that would imply thinking in terms of its comprehension. Consequently, evil would be treated as knowable, which would present evil as smaller and more insignificant or easier to control than it appears to be¹³. Thus, in this particular sense it is vital to Ricœur that evil is ultimately *un-knowable*. Certainly, however, there is a need to see, recognise, and *know* evil when it takes place; it is crucial to identify concrete instances of evil in order to denounce and combat it. Evil is not un-known in the sense that we do not experience evil or that we are incapable of experiencing evil. We face evil every day, directly or through other people's testimonies. Yet to claim to know what evil *is* would be a different matter entirely. In the ricœurian discourse there is more to evil than can be comprehended; it is more cruel, more impactful and more disastrous than can be fathomed. Evil is simply *more*, ungraspably more, impossible to nail down, impossible to name and know entirely; in the same vein as *love*, on the other hand, which can be overflowing, and likewise *God*. It is in this particular sense that evil is unknown and

⁹ Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 38-39. I would say that the apologetic purpose can be reversed while the same structure is maintained. Instead of justifying God, it may be what can be called a 'negative theodicy'; in other words, a coherent argument aiming at an unambiguous answer in which God is *not* done justice, and which shows that it is *not* possible to justify God, rather the contrary: namely, that God *cannot* be justified, hence cannot exist. See, for example, J. L. Mackie, 'Evil Shows That There Is No God', in *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide and Anthology*, ed. by B. Davies, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, and Anderberg, *Guds moral*.

¹⁰ In this manner, Ricœur also differs from those who argue that it would be *morally* wrong to attempt to justify God in the face of evil. See, for instance, T. W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C, 1990, and D. Z. Phillips, 'On Not Understanding God', in *Wittgenstein and Religion*, ed. by D. Z. Phillips, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1993.

¹¹ Wittgenstein points out that there are various activities, which are easily seen as related and easily talked about in terms of a 'game', and yet it may be impossible to find a core definition of what 'game' means. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations / Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1953, §66. The same holds, of course, for 'evil'.

¹² P. Gisel, 'Avant-Propos', in *Le mal*, Labor et fides, Genève, 2004, p. 13. See also Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 34-35.

¹³ *Le mal*, pp. 34-35. See also Gisel, 'Avant-Propos', p. 13.

un-knowable. Therefore, to perceive evil as a substance, as a being or as a thing that can be understood and explained would reduce evil, and make it possible to handle and manipulate, although our experience is that evil is enigmatic, incomprehensible and inexplicable in a way that makes it particularly rapacious.

Second, and equally important, evil cannot be perceived as a thing, substance or being in its own right, as that would risk making evil too important – too divine, as it were. Ricœur holds evil not to *be*, as that would attribute too strong a value to evil. Ricœur does so as a philosopher but also, to a certain degree, informed by theology.

4) A Theological Slant

Undoubtedly, Ricœur was very clear on his identity as a Protestant, and he never hesitated to take up religious themes and religious examples in his writings. Yet he seemed to be uninterested in any dialogue with theology as a discipline of systematisation or speculation, according to theologian and philosopher Bengt Kristensson Uggla. While moving between intellectual schools and various disciplines in search of dialogue with many different thinkers, Ricœur appeared almost demonstratively distant from systematic theology, although he was very happy to work with biblical scholars, for instance¹⁴. In spite of this, there is a theological slant in Ricœur's discourse on evil. Moreover, somewhat surprisingly, he turns to the Swiss theologian Karl Barth when discussing evil. The reason may be sought in the fact that Ricœur was nourished in a particular way by Barth's work. In Ricœur's reading, Barth argues that it is only a broken theology, one able to refrain from a total system, which can start thinking through evil. This is attractive to Ricœur¹⁵. The question is what that means.

Ricœur observes that Barth talks about evil as *das Nichtige*¹⁶, the emptiness or nothingness that goes *against God*. Evil is seen in terms of privation, corruption and destruction¹⁷. In other words, this evil emptiness or nothingness is characterised precisely as that which God does not want. Evil can be seen as existing only because God does not want it to be. Or, to put differently once again, evil only exists as an object for the wrath of God. According to Ricœur, in this way Barth joins a long theological tradition in which evil is not perceived as having any proper existence; it does not have life on its own or any independent force¹⁸. Augustine is an emblematic figure in this line of thought. He insists that whatever exists is fundamentally good. The conclusion is that in whatever way evil is defined, it is not a substance, not a thing or an element that *is*. If it were a substance, or an element, it would be something good. As Augustine puts it: «Either it would be an incorruptible substance, a great good indeed, or a corruptible substance, which could be corrupted only if it were good»¹⁹.

There is a paradox in Ricœur's discourse. Evil is held to be un-knowable because it cannot be an object known and comprehended, as, in that case, evil would be minimised. Concurrently, evil is held to be parasitic, without a proper life – with no proper force – as otherwise it would be maximised and attributed too strong a position as something 'good'.

¹⁴ See B. Kristensson Uggla, 'Ricœur and/or Theology', *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift: Thematic Issue – Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Theology and Religious Studies (Guest Editor Patrik Fridlund)* XCI:1-2 (2015) and P. Kemp, 'Paul Ricœur in Theology. His Legacy from Karl Jaspers', *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift: Thematic Issue – Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Theology and Religious Studies (Guest Editor Patrik Fridlund)* XCI:1-2 (2015).

¹⁵ Ricœur, *Le mal*, p. 51.

¹⁶ The French word used in *Le mal* is *le néant*.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions* (Translated with an introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, VII.xii [18].

Thinking of evil in terms of *being* would thus both make it smaller, as a comprehensible, manipulatable *thing*, and at the same time up-grade it by attributing to it a position it cannot have.

Whatever point of entry one takes to Ricœur, the interesting conclusion is, I maintain, that evil cannot be an object like other objects; it cannot be observed and eventually mastered as a *thing*. It is in this particular sense that Ricœur says that we cannot know evil and in this particular sense that Ricœur refers to Kant's idea of evil as *inscrutable*. A consequence of evil seen not as a matter of knowing, not a thing or a substance, is that the issue of evil is perceived as a *practical* matter. In this, Ricœur continues to make a connection to his reading of Kant. Evil is about what should not be, and therefore what should be combated²⁰. Ricœur argues here not theologically and not with pastoral care in focus. He does not argue *pro* a particular God. He does not try to soothe any victims. In his argument, he provides philosophical reasons for excluding the idea of evil as a substance, based on phenomenological analysis²¹. This said, it can also be seen that even though Ricœur's argument is not theological, it possesses an intricate relation to theology, which indeed is noticeable in itself. Of course, one could say that discussing evil necessarily entails touching upon theological topics but that Ricœur does not directly deploy theology in his analysis. Nonetheless, Barth's theology is related to Ricœur's philosophy in an oblique way.

5) Aporia vs Total System

Ricœur affirms that the interesting side of Barth's theological approach to evil is that Barth accepts the dilemma of evil as a true and real dilemma, refusing the logic of non-contradiction as the absolute framework for thinking and thereby also rejecting the totalisation that is found in systems that form *theodicies*. According to Ricœur, in Barth the enigma of evil remains an enigma²².

Ricœur draws on the wisdom that he perceives in Barth's approach, claiming that wisdom is perhaps about seeing the *aporia* when thinking about evil²³. The Greek word *aporia* is composed of two parts, namely *a-* (without) and *poria* (passage)²⁴. It is precisely this 'without passage' that makes Ricœur claim that evil as an *aporia* can be said to constitute a radical challenge. As it does not pose a question that awaits a solution, it is something that creates a space for sense and meaning. This, I argue, is what Ricœur has in mind when calling an *aporia productive*²⁵.

These aspects of evil that Ricœur identifies are interesting – evil as a challenge, a radical challenge and a productive challenge, which does not ask for a *solution*²⁶. They come close to those that theologian and philosopher Bengt Kristensson Ugglå sees in his reading of

²⁰ Ricœur, *Le mal*, p. 42.

²¹ Ibid., p. 35.

²² Ibid., p. 55.

²³ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁴ In Lalande's *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, the French word that Ricœur employs – 'aporie' – is defined as «difficulté logique d'où l'on ne peut sortir». In Oxford Living Dictionaries, 'aporia' is defined as «An irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory». <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/aporia> (accessed 23 February 2017), but the definition in Wikipedia comes closer to the point Ricœur wants to make when saying that in philosophy *aporia* means a «seemingly insoluble impasse in an inquiry». <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aporia> (accessed 23 February 2017). The definition in Wikipedia is almost a replic of how *aporia* is defined/described in *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Pan Books Ltd & Macmillan Press Ltd, London & Basingstoke, 1979, p. 15.

²⁵ Ricœur, *Le mal*, p. 57.

²⁶ Cf. Augustine who states that: «I was seeking the origin of evil and there was no solution». (Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. vii (11))

Ricœur regarding the symbol, whereby meaning comes *through* the symbol. The symbol is a source of reflection; the symbol invites us, or forces us, to *think*. What takes place in the thinking process is not performed or provided by the symbol; rather, the symbol makes space for the thinking process. It makes it possible to think, to see and to say many things – because it is, and has to be, *interpreted*. Thus human beings are obliged to interpret and, Kristensson Ugglå concludes, in Ricœur's philosophy human beings are capable of interpretation²⁷.

It is important, however, not to confound Ricœur's approach to evil as an enigma which may challenge us to think, with attempts to justify evil by attributing a positive role to it (here, perhaps, is also the point where the analogy with *symbol* stops). There is a crucial and fundamental difference with, for instance, Richard Swinburne's attributing a positive role to evil because, according to him, it serves a greater good. Swinburne sees evil as the grounds for human beings' applying free will, and thus being morally responsible. The fact that human beings may choose to do evil is considered a price worth paying for the greater good of free will²⁸. It could be claimed, of course, that human beings could have free will without the existence of evil as a choice. This is true, Swinburne admits, but the problem is that, in that case, there would be no *responsibility*²⁹. Swinburne goes a step further by also arguing that there is a direct proportional relationship between the potential evil and the responsibility. Put differently, were God to have allowed only a little evil, there would likewise be only a little responsibility³⁰. Swinburne concludes that God «thinks the higher good so worthwhile that he is prepared to ask a lot of man in the way of enduring evil»³¹. One vital consequence is that, for Swinburne, it is not morally wrong for God to permit evil as long as it constitutes a necessary condition of greater good³².

I maintain that there are significant differences between Ricœur's and Swinburne's respective thinking on evil. Swinburne aims at explaining evil in a systematic fashion. That means that *aporia* is absent in Swinburne's work, while it is central to Ricœur's discourse³³. Furthermore, while Swinburne *explains* evil and its role, Ricœur points to the *challenge to action* by human beings that evil constitutes.

6) Aporia and Action

For the capable and acting human being, evil may be identified in practical terms as *that which should not be*. This approach is different from a speculative mode in which the focus is on how evil can be explained (away). In the active, practical and non-speculative mode, the question is what to *do* against evil. It is a stance which is oriented towards the future, subsuming a mission to oppose and combat evil³⁴. The emphasis on action, however, does not preclude distance, thinking and reflection³⁵. What is at stake is the place of this

²⁷ Kristensson Ugglå, 'Ricœur and/or Theology', pp. 21-22.

²⁸ Swinburne, 'Evil Does Not Show', p. 601.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 603.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 612.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 600.

³³ Obviously, the point I want to make here is not that Swinburne would not have any room for conflict or contradiction, like when Eugene P. Northrop says: «There are many problems in which the obvious solution is never the correct one. That is to say, what offhand *appears* [my italics] to be true is false.» (E. P. Northrop, *Riddles in Mathematics. A Book of Paradoxes*, D. Van Nostrand Company, Toronto & New York & London, p. 13). What I want to emphasise is Ricœur's acceptance of the insufficiency in reason, as a sort of inherent irresolvability in rational argumentation, coming close to the sense of Derrida's *aporie* in J. Derrida, *Aporie. Mourir – s'attendre aux limites de la vérité*, Galilée, Paris, 1996.

³⁴ Ricœur, *Le mal*, p. 58.

³⁵ Cf. Kemp, 'Paul Ricœur in Theology'.

reflection and its function. In other words, I suggest that to Ricœur it is vital to step back and reflect, but also that it is vital to act concretely – ethically and politically – in a real-life context. Perhaps one could say that distance in Ricœur’s philosophy is necessary for action³⁶, while a philosophy searching for abstract solutions runs the risk of being an escape from action.

It would be a mistake to see Ricœur as someone who merely believes that if one acts, suffering can be ignored, discarded or overcome. According to Kristensson Ugglå, Ricœur learned from the classical tragedies that the human being who acts is also a human being who suffers. The one does not exclude the other – which goes both ways. Acting does not take away suffering, and the suffering human being is also acting. For instance, Kristensson Ugglå maintains through his reading of Ricœur that the hero of the tragedy always insists on being responsible³⁷.

It does not mean that everything is in harmony or in order – a happy tragedy, so to speak. Ricœur presents an analysis of a complex and paradoxical situation, recognising suffering and unhappiness. Still, this does not preclude the capability to act or the call to action. In a parallel fashion, Ricœur does not claim that suffering and evil can simply be overcome by human action. It is clear that Ricœur is very aware of the fact that there are innocent victims, arbitrary suffering, natural catastrophes and diseases, that is to say, situations where the question arises: ‘why me?’. And where *practical* answers appear insufficient³⁸. In his short treatise on evil (*Le mal*), Ricœur suggests accepting that there are things we do not know and cannot understand. There is something called hazard; conditions are what they are at a certain point. Once this ‘point zero’ is reached – along with acceptance of unjust randomness, and incomprehensible affliction – then lamentations can be directed against God, against a god who allows this³⁹. Ricœur does not neglect suffering and he is not blind to the existential questions related to evil – why, whence, how? – and yet there is a significant difference between theodicies and Ricœur’s discourse on evil. I suggest that action is a key word.

The emphasis on evil as a practical issue, and the emphasis that one does not *have to* dwell on various types of metaphysical speculations, implies that such dwelling is simply not the necessary starting point and not necessarily the end. The emphasis on evil as a practical issue also implies that the human predicament is complex, and thus not possible to absolutise or totalise. It is precisely this that provides the opportunity to act. In fact, it obliges us to act⁴⁰.

There is another important trait when focusing on action, on the acting human being, according to Ricœur. Action is about acting in a particular situation, in a specific context, in order to obtain something in particular. Conversely, a speculative approach would tend to focus on very broad and general aspects, like *evil* generally speaking, allowed by God in very broad terms⁴¹. In a short essay on Ricœur and the language of the church community, philosopher Olivier Abel argues that Ricœur holds truth always to be a specific truth. One

³⁶ Cf. Derrida, *Apories*, p. 37.

³⁷ Bengt Kristensson Ugglå, ‘Ricœur and/or Theology’, p. 20.

³⁸ Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 59-60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ One could say, with Derrida, that *aporia* rather gives the necessary basis and condition for decision and action. (Derrida, *Apories*, p. 37).

⁴¹ Cf. Daniel Cornu who claims that Karl Barth’s political commitment must be seen in the light of Christian absolute and authentic *freedom* due to the non-adherence to certain principles or any particular programme; this royal liberty stands free from all systems and all -isms. (D. Cornu, *Karl Barth et la politique*, Labor et fides, Genève, 1968, pp. 202-204.

could say that, in a fashion, it stands in opposition to speculative, theoretical and philosophical truth, characterised by being general and universal in its scope⁴².

This part of Ricœur's thinking is certainly complex. Ricœur was a philosopher, unavoidably dealing with theoretical and abstract topics, which necessarily contain speculative elements – or so it can be argued. The question is rather what *weight* such dealing with theoretical and abstract topics has or what its fundamental aspiration or ambition is; what is the basic approach, the tendency or the guiding vision? While Ricœur's *œuvre* is characterised by concrete implications and dialogue with other disciplines, it is also clearly tentative and non-absolute⁴³.

I claim that an important aspect of Ricœur's emphasis on particular and specific suffering and evil is that it challenges us and requires us to take a stand ethically *and* politically. In this way, Ricœur echoes the German theologian Dorothee Sölle who advocates what she labels 'concrete theology'. By that she means a theology that is constantly and persistently aware of the political implications of its affirmations⁴⁴. Sölle underlines that a theological statement, like 'God loves you', must be transmitted *politically*. By this focus on the *political*, Sölle means that theological statements do not have any sense if they do not signify a movement towards a change of *status quo*⁴⁵. Clearly, this stands in contrast to the speculative mode in which there is a high level of abstraction – dealing with *suffering* in general. That is to say, when Sölle argues that a theological statement must be transmitted politically, it stands in contrast to dealing with suffering and evil as an issue regarding *suffering* as such – regardless of where, when, how, to what extent and regardless of its character. In an intellectual play with abstractions, no political implications must be drawn. In a timeless discourse, there is no ambition to transform and change, and there cannot be as that would be irreconcilable with its abstract – and absolute – character.

Once again, it would surely be a mistake to paint the alternatives in black and white, in a simplified and simplistic manner. Ricœur, for one, underlines the need for distance and for thought by taking one step back⁴⁶. Apparently he did not see this as a hindrance to an acting and capable human being – perhaps the reverse. Abstraction and generalisation are not automatically banned from the vision of humans as capable and acting beings. And, of course, abstract and speculative analysis can play a practical role in concrete and lived reality. What are at stake are the focus, the ambition and the framework. Is the philosopher's work about an intellectual problem where, for instance, political or ethical implications can be overlooked *or* is the practical problem in the foreground, which may require intellectualisation, distinctions, reflection, distance and abstraction in order to deal with it?

⁴² O. Abel, 'Paul Ricœur and The Language of the Church Community', *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift: Thematic Issue – Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Theology and Religious Studies (Guest Editor: Patrik Fridlund)* XCI:1-2 (2015). For a discussion of *la vérité générale* and *la vérité particulière*, see François Noudelmann, *Le génie du mensonge*, Max Milo Éditions, Paris, 2015, pp. 55-59. It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the point here is not to discredit speculation, or generalisation for instance. I simply want to indicate various approaches and tendencies, as well as some choices that one can see are made by Ricœur. There is perhaps a clue here to understanding Ricœur's engagement with biblical scholars reading specific texts, rather than theologians aiming at a general systematisation of a religious tradition. Whether Ricœur was right on this point or not is a different matter entirely.

⁴³ Cf. A. Caputo, 'Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of the Gift', *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift: Thematic Issue – Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Theology and Religious Studies (Guest Editor Patrik Fridlund)* XCI:1-2 (2015).

⁴⁴ 'Avant-Propos', *Bulletin du Centre protestant d'études* XXIV: 2 (1972), p. 3: 'seule une théologie concrète, c'est-à-dire consciente de la portée politique de ses affirmations...'

⁴⁵ D. Sölle, 'Pour ou contre une théologie politique', *Bulletin du Centre protestant d'études* XXIV:2 (1972), pp. 3, 6.

⁴⁶ See Kemp, 'Paul Ricœur in Theology'.

Such questions are not innocent or simply a matter of intellectual preferences. Choices made at this point can be traced down to divergent views of human beings and ultimately of God. Or so I argue.

7) Theology and Philosophy

One aspect of this discussion that I find particularly interesting is the movement between theology, philosophy and ethics. It seems uncontroversial to see reflection on evil as a theological problem. Yet, in the hands of Ricœur, this discourse starting in theology on the topic of religious terms like *evil*, turns out to be very important for philosophy in several ways. I claim that Ricœur, in a discreet manner, is asking questions about what philosophy does, can do and must do. Moreover, he evokes questions concerning the world and language, and of course anthropological questions about what the human being is. Evil perceived as an *aporia* that cannot be understood, grasped or explained is so also because in Ricœur there is some excess of language: not everything can be captured.

If evil is something that forces humans to think and to interpret in a non-absolute way, according to Ricœur, it is completely consonant with Ricœur's view of philosophy as taking a step back from aspirations to absolute knowledge. Ricœur's visions of language, of the world, of human beings and of knowledge nourish each other. He says:

for me the philosophical task is not to close the circle, to centralize or totalize knowledge, but to keep open the irreducible plurality of discourse. It is essential to show how the different discourses may interrelate or intersect but one must resist the temptation to make them identical, the same⁴⁷.

In Jean-Luc Almaric's reading, Ricœur's unwillingness to claim absolute knowledge is connected to his insistence on the necessity of using metaphors⁴⁸. The crucial part here, I suggest, is the emphasis on metaphors, as they appear to indicate linguistic mobility or, to put it differently, the permanent development of new linguistic uses⁴⁹. This is vital. Otherwise, reading – in a broad sense of the term – would be sheer deduction. Without mobility, such reading, whether of a specific text or broadly speaking of the world, would simply show what is already known and in this sense simply confirm what would be seen as the pre-existing absolute knowledge⁵⁰. If everything were crystal clear, we would be like automates. In other words, the very idea of interpretation would be lost⁵¹. It seems as reducing metaphor and ultimately seeking to overcome metaphorical language could be seen as coinciding with the fulfilment of a philosophical process in which the hope for absolute knowledge prevails⁵². The price is high. Movement, history, agency and subjectivity would be lost⁵³.

Philosopher Annalisa Caputo speaks about Ricœur's philosophy as «philosophy without an absolute»⁵⁴. While it appears that everyone can more or less agree that philosophy is not

⁴⁷ P. Ricœur and R. Kearney, 'The Creativity of Language', in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers. The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. by R. Kearney, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p. 27. Cf. P. Fridlund, 'Ambivalent Wisdom as the Fruit of Reading', *Logoi.ph* I:2 (2015), p. 183.

⁴⁸ J.-L. Almaric, *Ricœur, Derrida. L'enjeu de la métaphore*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2006, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Cf. P. Ricœur, *La métaphore vive*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1975, pp. 145-50, 62-63; see also J. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, Galilée, Paris, 1990, pp. 26-36, 95-100, 252-54; P. Fridlund, *Mobile Performances. Linguistic Undecidability as Possibility and Problem in the Theology of Religions*, Peeters, Leuven, 2011, pp. 71-73.

⁵⁰ P. Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1986, pp. 175-76.

⁵¹ Cf. Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, pp. 48-50, 71-72, 83-87; Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action*, pp. 124-25, 38-40, 70-71. Cf. Fridlund, 'Ambivalent Wisdom', p. 174.

⁵² Almaric, *Ricœur, Derrida*, pp. 48-49.

⁵³ Cf. Fridlund, *Mobile Performances*, pp. 134-37, 45-47. Cf. Fridlund, 'Ambivalent Wisdom', pp. 173-174.

⁵⁴ Caputo, 'Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of the Gift', p. 36; see also Almaric, *Ricœur, Derrida*, pp. 48-49.

absolute, the point Ricœur makes is rather that the absolute is not desired or desirable because humans are active and capable, and that is a vital part of Ricœur's philosophy. There is a link between evil as enigma, *aporia* and a productive challenge on the one hand and non-absolute philosophy and action on the other⁵⁵. As I suggested above, there also seems to be an interplay play between religion, theology, philosophy and ethics. The problem of evil as a theological problem regarding God gives rise to questions about absoluteness, knowledge and the human predicament.

Ricœur's focus on evil as a productive *aporia* challenging us and calling us to take a stand ethically and politically, stressing activity and capability, implies a significant move with regard to the discourse on *evil*. An interesting thing here, I believe, is the move from a focus on God to one on human beings. Ricœur claims that if we started with the atrocities created by human beings, the charge against God could be significantly altered. Consequently, Ricœur argues that it is more important to discuss what humans do and the direct implications of human action than to discuss the distant and indirect role that God may play⁵⁶.

Given that Ricœur questions the need to accept the way in which theodicies traditionally construct the problem of evil, and even the very *logic* that underpins it, there are two implications, as I see it. First, when Ricœur emphasises the *aporia* of evil, it must not be perceived as a way of excusing God. Rather, the *aporia* of evil is taken as something that may provide sense and meaning as it challenges human responsibility, without any claim that evil is willed by God. The shock produced by evil is not taken away or reduced. Second, this displacement entails a small and yet very significant shift in focus, which has to do both with images of God and of human life.

This may be illustrated by the reading of Samuel Beckett's play *En attendant Godot* (1952). In one reading of this play, God is absent from a world marked by evil, broken relationships and suffering. God (Godot) makes promises but is unwilling or incapable of doing anything. Or God (Godot) does not bother. This, I suggest, corresponds to a framework for theodicies. Is there a God and who is this God? Why this suffering? And why does not God intervene?

In Anderberg's essay on God and evil, for instance, the starting point is that suffering is evil, and also that someone has to be responsible for this evil. That is the very core⁵⁷. Following the logic of this approach, the ultimate candidate for such responsibility is the most powerful, mighty, knowable and loving creature or entity that one could think of, viz. God. After a thorough analysis Anderberg concludes that he cannot, and one should not, believe that such a God exists. To put it bluntly, a coherent system cannot keep the premises together⁵⁸. The main issue is Godot lurking in the background; apparently he is a mighty man who makes explicit and implicit promises to humans but who – as far as can be seen – does not care a bit. Godot (God) could and should intervene but chooses not to do so.

This appears to be exactly the point at which Ricœur suggests a different approach. He does not accept that Anderberg's way of formulating the question is the only way and he aims to indicate a direction that is different from both Anderberg's formulation and those of apologetic theodicies. Consequently, following Ricœur's perspective, Beckett's play may be read otherwise.

Informed by Ricœur one may say that it appears unfair and even bizarre to accuse Godot in *En attendant Godot*. Now this position is not an attempt to justify God – or Godot. What turns out to be the dramatic and absolutely crucial issue is resignation, that is

⁵⁵ Cf. Derrida, *Apories*, p. 16; See also Fridlund, 'Ambivalent Wisdom'.

⁵⁶ Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 58-59.

⁵⁷ Anderberg, *Guds moral*, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Anderberg, *Guds moral*; see also Mackie, 'Evil Shows'.

to say the risk that we feel that there is absolutely nothing to do – echoing in the phrase *rien à faire* (nothing to be done) from the very beginning of Beckett's play; the deep human problem seems rather to be despair and the inertia that follows.

8) Resignation as Evil

Ricœur and Sölle are contemporary scholars but working in different disciplines, with different aims, as well as with different temperaments and style. Regarding the topic of evil, I nonetheless suggest reading them together. Both seem to hold the question of evil to be a practical one, an issue about acting and offering resistance; and the light is on the human being rather than on God. Evil is thus an ethical and political issue rather than a metaphysical one. In that case, the core problem seems rather to be the inertia on the part of humans.

This is clearly illustrated in *En attendant Godot*⁵⁹. From beginning to end the two characters Estragon and Vladimir are incapable of action:

ESTRAGON (*renonçant à nouveau*). – Rien à faire.⁶⁰

VLADIMIR (*s'approchant à petits pas rapides, les jambes écartées*). – Je commence à le croire. (*Il s'immobilise*)⁶¹.

This is the very first exchange of the play, while the last lines of the play reflect the first:

VLADIMIR. – Alors, on y va ?⁶².

ESTRAGON. – Allons-y !⁶³.
*Ils ne bougent pas*⁶⁴.

The whole story, or the non-story, is to be found here between the opening of the play – «Rien à faire» (Nothing to be done) – and the end: *Ils ne bougent pas* (They do not move). Estragon and Vladimir do *nothing*; they seem devoid of action yet, at the same time, they do not support this inactivity. They wait and wait and wait. They wait for Godot. They wait, apparently without knowing for what they are waiting, hoping for something 'better' without knowing precisely what this 'better' might be, only that Godot, the magical and mystical man, will bring it. And they wait and wait, apparently in vain.

If evil is primarily a practical question associated with action – what to *do*, taking a stand concretely, ethically, politically – the relation with God must also be treated differently, perhaps. In Sölle's thought, to say *rien à faire* (nothing to be done) is to disown relations with God⁶⁵. This is contrary to the scenario wherein the primary interest is denouncing a supreme being as responsible, or presupposing that a supreme being needs to be justified in the face of evil. Or arguing for the non-existence of such supreme being, as it cannot be justified in the face of evil. In Sölle's work, resisting evil is the vocation; losing hope is being disconnected from God. In this context, it is perhaps appropriate to suggest that resignation is sin, and also that pointing the finger at God and blaming God

⁵⁹ Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot. Pièce en deux actes*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1952.

⁶⁰ (*giving up again*). – Nothing to be done.

⁶¹ (*advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart*). – I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. (*he stops*)

⁶² Well? Shall we go?

⁶³ Yes, let's go.

⁶⁴ *They do not move*.

⁶⁵ D. Sölle, *The Mystery of Death*, trans. by N. Lukens-Rumscheidt and M. Lukens-Rumscheidt, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p. 114.

may be seen as an escape. Being preoccupied by God's (Godot's) responsibility is perhaps a way of not doing anything. This very resignation would then be evil.

On this point, a theological approach complements philosophical analysis and raises an ethical perspective – these three appear to be intertwined. The very structure of the problem of evil is transformed. Ricoeur comes to the topic as a philosopher, but theology shapes his thought, which in turn has implications for theology. What I mean to say is that the image of God—the idea of a figure in the sky deciding fates in absolute majesty – is questioned. Perhaps the implication of political action is also present, along with a focus on the practical side – as opposed to speculation *without* political ambitions. It is flipping the question. Hence, in allusion to John F. Kennedy, 'ask not what God can do for you; ask what you can do for God'⁶⁶.

9) Human Political Action *or* Waiting for God to Act

The phrase, 'ask not what God can do for you; ask what you can do for God', could be a key. Sölle develops this notion of action and the need to take a political stand with reference to a number of thinkers in history. Let me give three brief examples. They are different in several respects. Yet they illustrate what Sölle perceives as a decisive aspect, namely the central role that human action plays.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a contemporary of Sölle, emphasises that God indeed needs human beings. Without friends, God has no power, he says. In Auschwitz God was weak and powerless, as there were so few friends in Germany at that time⁶⁷. Angelus Silesius, who was a Catholic priest and mystic, maintained 300 years earlier that without him, God could not live a minute. He did so precisely in order to highlight God's relationship with humans⁶⁸. A century before that, Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun and a Teacher of the Church, pointed out that God has no hands except our hands⁶⁹. Teresa also sees an image in streams of water; what would they be like without all the small drops? She concludes, what would God be without us? What is love without those who share love⁷⁰?

With this rendering of Sölle's stress on the important role that human action plays, I intend to illustrate, in a condensed format, a multiple question: When evil is seen in the world, what action is required and by whom? Are we supposed to look out for a God who saves or should we realise that without human's taking concrete action nothing will improve? Sölle's discourse is not an analysis or a description of 'empirical facts', so to speak. It has to do with expectations and orientation. Ineluctably, this is a question in theology and philosophy. Obviously, it has to do with ethics.

10) Concluding Remarks

A *locus classicus* for the question of evil is the argument *pro/contra* the existence of God. It appears to be a theological topic with ethical implications that is discussed philosophically. Hence, in addressing it, there is an inevitable movement between theology, ethics and philosophy. The interesting thing is to see *how* this relationship can be described. What are the topics and what types of implications are identified as significant?

⁶⁶ «Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.» (John F. Kennedy's famous phrase from his inauguration address on January 20, 1961.) <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/JFK-Quotations/Inaugural-Address.aspx> (accessed 13 February 2017).

⁶⁷ Sölle, *The Mystery of Death*, p. 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

In a previous study, I have chosen Sölle as a very good exponent, although far from the only one, of someone working within theology, using ethical arguments based on a specific understanding of the human being. In that study I argue that, to Sölle, many established images of God must be rejected, as they are authoritarian and consequently *ethically* problematic and therefore problematic from a *theological* perspective. If God is seen in terms of an all-mighty Being, in stark contrast to fundamentally powerless human beings, Sölle maintains that the distinction between God and idol (*Gott* and *Abgott*) is dissolved; the object of veneration is might – not life – and power is adored – not the divine⁷¹.

As my suggestion is that the theological move made by Sölle entails a particular anthropology, it also brings the discourse back to *philosophical* issues and specifically to a theme in Ricœur's *œuvre*.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, Ricœur points out that established discourses on evil, labelled theodicies, are born out of a desire to keep together premises in a systematic account without contradiction. In this paper, I have argued that the way Ricœur tackles the issue of evil implies another structure to the question. Ricœur refers to Barth's theology and I connect Ricœur's argument to Sölle's theological perspective. Ricœur perceives the issue of evil as an *aporia*. Evil is not, and cannot be, known, understood and explained. It is precisely this view on evil as an *aporia*, a productive *aporia* – echoing Barth and Sölle – that suggests that evil provokes action and forces human beings to take a stand ethically and politically. I have also argued that Ricœur's displacement and decentring of the classical approach to evil entails a questioning of some theological and philosophical assumptions, such as that of God's majesty and human subordination. This displacement of the question puts emphasis on the issue of evil as a practical rather than a speculative one, and thereby directs the gaze towards action – human action. The topic of evil is not necessarily about putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The central problem has less to do with logic than it has to do with resignation, inertia, despair and meaninglessness. Questions like '*why me? why now?*' are raised, and must be raised⁷². The crucial thing is to ask whether they are perhaps of a secondary rank, not being what Ricœur calls 'productive'⁷³. The task is not let them block responsible action in offering resistance to resignation.

⁷¹ P. Fridlund, 'I See That from Both Sides Now: On the Intricate Relation between Dialogue and Conversion'. *Australian Religious Studies Review* XXV:3 (2012). p. 266. D. Sölle, *Theology for Sceptics*, Mowbray, London, 1995, pp. 48-49. A typical example of how God is presented in terms of power and might, can be found in P. Cole, *Philosophy of Religion*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2004.

⁷² Ricœur, *Le mal*, pp. 59-60.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

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