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Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Challenge of Cultural Authority in Education

Paul Ricoeur i hermeneutyczne wyzwania
autorytetu kulturowego
w edukacji

Introduction

The basic theme in this context seems to me to be linked to the position of Ricoeur against reduced shapes of authority within what he terms the wars of hermeneutics. All this seems crucial in view of the indispensable deposit of power which is destructive for authority as such, which returns under various disguise. It is of the utmost importance to overcome it.

Ricoeur was particularly sensitive to the complexities of the term in front of various paradoxes of authority, including the impossibility of its final and decisive justification in any form, something which he particularly emphasized during the debates with Pope John Paul II in Castel Gandolfo. He emphasizes the illusions of typical semantic immediate recollections, coming automatically to the fore whenever one is inclined to see references to power,

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asymmetric positions and the right to influence and domination as obvious. The “last instance” of justification remains under such circumstances of recognition as well as the credit of trust which is completely untouched. The very term “credit of trust” also seems crucial for Ricoeur’s approach to authority, showing that this credit is to be under constant and profound supervision and control, including the possibility of withdrawing one’s agreement to keep this credit as valid. There has to appear the reference to the roots of such a credit, usually not perceived in political or institutional contexts, including the discourse dominating in tradition. He perceives the tension between the Bible tradition of the saint world and that of the Hellenic, placing critical reflection of a philosophical nature to the fore. Moreover, with reference to Medieval times, Ricoeur emphasizes the necessity of coincidence or the complementarity of institutional sanctions and symbolic sanctity, illustrating the tensions between monarchical and church powers and authorities. This illustrated for him the kind of dual faithfulness necessary where one has to oscillate between fidelity to symbol and fidelity to critical thinking. This bipolar tension which results in a serious conflict seems crucial for the Ricoeurian perception of the challenge of authority, linked possibly with the Medieval *coincidentia oppositorum* principle or the ambivalence as the type of complexity.

Ricoeur rightly opposes reference to the Enlightenment conception of authority and the one sided requests of superficially perceived rejection, denial of authority as such. The place appears then instead of untouchable sanctity of texts or the *a priori* powerful position of dominance, to the challenge of the truthfulness of the author involved. It is crucial to emphasize that this means the complete insufficiency of power and the *a priori* unquestionability rooted in tradition, and it brings to the fore the quality of reference in critical discourse to the narration involved in claims for authority, where—again, let us recall once more—we find reference towards credit of trust, sincerity of expression, and genuine knowledge.

The symbolic order is crucial above any institutional constitutions and qualities for Ricoeur for perceiving the complexity of the authority issue. The presence in one’s mind and thinking need not be reduced to dictating decisions as undisputed consequences, but rather as inviting them to be taken under consideration, and an effort

to think over, which may not be replaced by anybody's suggestion once and for all. The link of entrusting somebody is not deprived of reflection concerning the continuation of such trust, and authority as such is not in contradiction with the need for verifying claims to truthfulness, or reflecting personal inclination to trust for the future approach. Lively and sincere thinking, even in the Church, may be forced to withdraw the credit of trust in view of the various occasions and circumstances which threaten credibility—as boldly was mentioned by Ricoeur in Castel Gandolfo.

It is interesting to see also references in Ricoeur to some hidden or partly unconscious aspects of authority built into the human attitude towards oneself and the world via family, social habits, traditions and teaching and the normative presence of institutions and their claims. Human, personal wishes are perceived via the Other, being such an authority. Wishes, desires, imagination, the will to exist and the image of human fulfillment are enrooted into sublimated or unconsciously respected contents of claims under such circumstances, including the historically changeable visions of 'good life' and various 'orders of truth'. No authority unless reduced in its shape may claim ability to solve such issues once for all without further deliberations and modifications under human reflection. No authority, unless reduced, may feel exclusive and self-sufficient in its integrity and unifying potential for others. Pathos and a claim to be a witness of truth are insufficient in view of the permanent emergence of the Other who has the right to put forward questions and challenge the way in which we see the reality surrounding us. Such reference to the Other gives a chance to better understand oneself thanks to enriching one's cultural capital, due to impulses from the Other. The efforts linked with contributions of the Other may not be neglected, although always brought into an interplay, a kind of game with oneself, not necessarily with the Other but thanks to the latter. What is at stake is what is stemming from the debate, dialogue, the effort to read and understand as a game with the author, possible thanks to taking under consideration, no matter what was intentionally programmed by the author for any reader. It is not the purpose of being locked in the perspective of the Other but to permit oneself to open one's world by new impulses for self-understanding thanks to such a meeting.



Authority as an object of games (interplay) with time

Ricoeur is very sensitive towards approaches to identity which would be dominated by a one sided “monumentality” of time and experience, which means forgetting about time as passing, including death, inherent in true life. It means in particular, of course, that the approach to Authority and Power should not be dominated by a one sided monumentality. There is a risk of a deadly incoherence between life and monument, when authority is already deprived of appealing meaning/significance even when there is a vivid need for valuable thinking inherent in the inner attitude of the one who is receiving narration, killed by its monumentality, particularly in a reduced historical approach. Personalities formerly embodying Authority may be destroyed in their monumental, pathetic vision, when their greatness will not be shown in their *Gestalt* which is now accessible. A vivid symbolic impulse may not be appearing both within a destructive approach as in an apologetic. Monumentality destroyed or appreciated cannot bring new impulses to symbolic life. Following a Nietzschean approach to history, Ricoeur strongly emphasizes what harm can be done to history itself and via history in its monumentality by not being able to bring new thinking via essential memory and criticism in its reception/reflection upon it. Great personalities in historical terms may not appeal to the imagination, being reduced even by an admiration from the past deprived of vivid significance via critical reflection for modernity. Let us recall that with reference to Greek *pharmakon* Ricoeur emphasizes that even the “cure” for a disease may become a poison depending on its dose rather than serving as something which aids the patient. Such poison may stem from pressure from the attitude of followers, uncritical tribute, or one-sided criticism. Authority should appear as the Greek *pharmakon*, ambiguous and ambivalent in its role, due to the analogy with history concerning three types of approach serving: monumentality, enrooting, and as an object of playing “game with time”. The latter “game with time” is on permanently, no matter whether it is consciously perceived or treated via official rituals of institutions (e.g., education, ideological apparatus) as settled once and for all.

Against the sociological reduction of authority in politics and theology

There are two dominating forms of such a reduction in Ricoeur's perception: the political and the theological. The theological approach takes as its hostage a series of individual narrative claims of a doctrine and its authoritative influence as having full agreement with the fundamental truth of the sacrum. Another is linked with imposing one single sense/interpretation, homogenizing view of history and way of perceiving contemporary times of present powers. Both the clerical and political approaches claim silent obedience, and stress unity under their auspices, primordially closing care for truth against doubt, questioning and reflection which would undermine a comfortable but dangerous habit and ritual, laid down as a stony foundation to social behavior and identity. Both sociologically treated emphasize striving for influence and pressing for agreement, summed up in a unilateral domination, including power of imposed truth, deprived of ecclesia, important for a Protestant reformist approach. Ricoeur is conscious of the danger of reducing God's authority by his followers replacing it with the pathos of claims to power and domination beyond doubt and criticism. Legitimacy and values are replaced by the request of obedience to their reduced but powerful shape. In this way the value of the Godly word may be caught in a trap applied to the interests of the power of given social subjects and their institutional forms. Striving for truth is thus replaced with the struggle for power and obedience, destroying capacity of reflection which would deny superficiality, simulation and lies, all inherent in clerical claims for a complete and absolute truth apparently present in actual system hiding its violence upon truth. Thus the reduction of authority is linked with the clerical violence and institutional pretense. All this may be hidden under pedagogical troubles brought by scrutiny, pathos of fidelity and detailed scholastic analysis, and deep devotion to the ideas and statement taught as the only truths. The deep interest in the symbolic mission is thus replaced by pressure upon obedience towards the institution declaring its faithfulness, and moreover reduced to the level of the interest of power and domination of the elites and their office. Claims to power and alienating heteronomy beyond institutional tolerance is combined with claims to completely embody the symbolic



mission. The Reformation in the history of Catholic Church is here an essential illustration of how I perceive Ricoeur's preoccupations.

Authority: between possessing the truth, witnessing and the pathos

In the 1960's Ricoeur strongly emphasized the necessity of changing the status of teaching, inviting philosophers to rather be witnesses of their own choice and not as deep but dogmatic possessors of truth. This opened the way towards the reflexive confrontation of various choices and commitments, not deprived of the risk of subjective failures, and thus requesting justifications and explanations and not excluding proper limitations and errors. There must only be modest hopes for gaining complete access to the truth via insights and narrative elaborations. Authority has to be conscious of the proper limitations and open for new interpretative perspectives due to the plurality of views and commitments. Thus there is a permanent danger even in teaching philosophy that philosophical greatness will be replaced with its reduced presentations, deprived of life and alternative approaches. Thus pathetic witnessing should not be engaged to undermine the alternative and press towards domination after having colonized thinking with just one approach. What is essential here in my perspective may be inserted into a reformist commitment sometimes showing the necessity of clashing with the followers of some truth as its destroyers and traitors. They may be guilty of representing, often an occasion of repressing and restituting the primordial meaning with something radically in separation with it, and even its replacing with the opposite under the same label.

Authority as a source of ontological debt of gratitude and obligation/commitment and as a chance to enter into critical dialogue with the giants of human thought

Important theoretical insights are to be found in the *Autobiography* by Ricoeur, where we have profound indications of his intellectual debt towards Roland Dalbiez, Ricoeur's 'first master' in his studies. It seems important to stress that we find here a perspective where intellectual development is linked with a conscious situating and by

taking care of symbolic debt one is able to express and reflect upon such matters. As a result, one is more conscious of oneself, thanks to a significant Other, contributing to one's identity, through inspirations opening new perspectives and supporting one's inclinations and attitudes, like—in Ricoeur's confession: sense of resistance against alleged obviousness and apparently straightforward relationships, deprived of various conditionings, including psychoanalytic mechanisms. Similarly we get a confirmation of the special debt to Gabriel Marcel for an occasion to be socialized into Socratic discussions, of the nature of initiation for a young philosopher. Another type of debt emerged in relation to Léon Brunschvicg, for very attentive readings and analyses, and to Maurice Merleau-Ponty for a "great book" of *Phenomenology of Perception* which has become a major personal discovery for Ricoeur, as he confesses. A number of further confessions of debt go to Karl Jaspers, to Hans-Georg Gadamer, to Sigmund Freud, who in the last case motivated Ricoeur to read as a great philosopher, and to emphasize the difficulties in finding a stimulating approach by the 'pupils' of Freud to their 'master', having difficulty in reacting to the logic of the development of his thought. The philosophical lecture is a way of indicating a chance to treat Freud as an authority deprived of the sharp contrast between uncritical followers, and finally rejecting his thought completely, disappointed by some aspects of the former pupils. Ricoeur does not leave space for doubt as to how much he owes to Freud, treating him in a special way as an authority viewed and reflected seriously as a significant other who gives symbolically, inspiring freedom of thought, and also oriented towards self-reflection and auto-analysis in liberating philosophers from a sense of guilt turned into an issue of suffering, as he expresses it explicitly.

An outstanding way of treating authorities by Ricoeur is indicated in his decision in Strasbourg to study one new philosopher each year, both profoundly and thoroughly. In this way Ricoeur resolves not an issue of erudition but rather the problem of the danger of seduction with any single case, while the way out of this risk is to multiply significant others not their elimination. It is also a way to increase the level of one's criticism. In order to be critical one has to be first competent in cognizing and recognizing the criticized. The contact with the thought of the other gives a chance to a triple intel-



lectual effort of the developmental nature: discovering new germs for one's ideas, then their crystallization and structural coordination up to a complete settlement of a new individual perspective. It requests an effort first to understand other ideas, then needs the elaboration of a space for a productive conflictuality, opening the way to an alternative approach, involved in and emerging from indicating reasons for disagreement, something which may finally lead to an indication of one's essential originality, separated in a mature way thanks to this confrontation. Equally interesting are efforts to discover hidden influences, analyzed through intensified reflection. The seriousness of influence does not coincide with an inclination to agree and affirm their point of view but rather express themselves in the need of serious debate and even conflict. It is not casual that not agreeing with Kant in various aspects Ricoeur would state: "I always remain indebted to Kant", as a post-Kantian thanks to reading Husserl and Hegel. One has to resist temptations to follow certain solutions, while agreeing to the importance of questions. Temptations to uncritically follow or to reject sharply are both dangerous and deprived of intellectual maturity. A number of such opposed approaches all together lose the potential of the admired or of the lost and it is not perceived following various academic manuals and their unproblematic reductions. Novelty in thinking calls for a radically new approach to philosophical tradition and not just its rejection. This approach to tradition seems to express the essence of Ricoeur's vision of treating authorities aimed at a vivid debate with past giants, even a serious polemic, because they happen to be authors whose potential remains in many aspects undiscovered or even neglected and destroyed by temporarily dominant interpretations claiming their adequacy of representation, apparently liquidating the need for a renewed reading and analysis in future generations.

Referring to the example of Hegelian texts, Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of defining the scope of disagreements with this author, while with many points he may still remain very close intellectually. One needs not cut any relations with former thought in order to become independent of its influence. Tradition has to be protected from inclinations to treat it as dead, as fixed with formulas replacing it in canonic interpretations, forgetting about this reduction and manipulation. Some potential is not only not profited from, but it

might equally be excluded as impossible as it is hidden under masks of general reductive representations, unfortunately having the power of their authority. Those who replace giants on their Chairs or institutes often seem unprepared to adequately represent them, despite their claims and efforts to speak on their behalf, or to continue, or to recognize the sophistication of the past closed under canonic texts or their interpretations, also dominated by a canonic interpretation, treated as unconditional for the future, while sentenced to various modifications and even transpositions. The debate between Catholic and Protestant references to canonical texts shows the difficulty which is not solved even by the ecumenical approach.

Authority and its permanent loss in university education

The debate on authority was in Ricoeur shadowed at the end of the 1960s by his sense of an approaching catastrophic tension, even contradiction, between the mass nature of the university and its cultural mission and valuable teaching, requesting a reflexive approach to words in social and public sphere and practical activity, against the danger of reducing education to instrumentality and empty phraseology. He faced the disappearance of the community of professors and students, and expressed a feeling of being in a cultural desert despite the richness of the traditions and cultural heritage within his grasp in libraries and book stores, and still not being of interest to the new generations of students of that time. Access to diversified texts during seminars and debates was supposed to mark the opening of new cultural spaces necessary for building common experience and profiting from the heritage for benefit of the future. The authority of such a heritage was not contradicted by the right to put various questions to it, criticisms and doubts, against primordial syntheses and conclusions, inclined towards closing debates before they could come to the fore.

Culture is perceived here as a symbolic ground necessary for revitalizing and intellectual growth, leading to new creative achievements showing greatness of man of modern times. Culture would be dying without renewal, without a vivid dialogue with the past and the present, and without great spirits ready to add new impulses for future development. These new impulses also contain a renewed reading of



the tradition, viewed from a new perspective, not in order to follow or repeat but to think again in the presence of unprecedented challenges and dangers. Former qualifications, in favor or against some names or traditions are inconclusive but request a new confrontation, and reorganization of meaning and symbolic influence in new discursive structures. No authority is treated as given once and for all in its value and meaning, and a critical approach is not directed against the criticized in order to destroy it but rather to strive for new impulses for an emerging perspective to renew and revitalize thinking and the ability to act. Similarly art has a revolutionary impact, also while producing hatred and rejection, in order to contest dead schemas and revolt against collective habits and cumulative expectations. In this context authority need not to apply for approval and agreement, risking a lack of understanding and respect. Ricoeur emphasizes a double, dual nature of education where adaptation is always to be confronted with reflection and defense, including active resistance against any objectifying pressures to adapt to a reduced world. Authority has to protect the potential to critically question all aspects of the human condition throughout the world and across individual and collective lives, profiting from poets as well as from philosophers and artists. Education must be full of pulsating powers giving instruments of adaptation and the reflexive symbolic power to resist any reduction of human beings to such an adaptation.

Authority in vertical and horizontal perspectives

An interesting approach to authority is linked in Ricoeur with the above mentioned contrast between the vertical and horizontal approach to this phenomenon. It is worthwhile mentioning that in particular it is contrary to what is analyzed in the Jürgen Habermas and Lawrence Kohlberg perspective of levels of identity. It is also in open tension with Axel Honneth, and what is close to my intuition at the post-conventional level, there is equally possible a modern and sophisticated vision of authority which does not dictate law and rules but lets us think in symbolic terms. In opposition Honneth, Habermas *versus* Ricoeur I take the position of the latter, justifying it separately in my book with reference towards a complete profile of authority which is not dominated by power relations, and concentrated upon horizontal, reciprocal relations of the post-conventional

community. The authority of anybody need not disappear when an autonomous individual starts a serious debate with him/her, putting forward profoundly justified questions, doubts or criticisms. Similarly “great ideas” or conceptions need not be perceived in opposition to what is minor but treated as what merits serious reflection, as reflecting an attentive approach to oneself. Higher status is not perceived here institutionally but as great in value to be treated seriously with profound reflection. Higher as great is not what has more power or which replaces more in thinking but what merits being shared in community reflection and not replaced by anybody’s verdict or decision or pressure. It merits serious, intensified attention and not obeying or disciplined following. All together it modifies the “economy of greatness” from the vertical and powerful to the thoughtful and inviting to a joint effort, permitting the building of a community of reflection and responsibility concentrated upon the quality of narration emotionally confirmed on the basis of reciprocal commitment.

To perceive authority horizontally is a fascinating task, I believe, particularly in the space of plurality of cultural references, requesting reciprocal recognition and involvement permitting the construction of a community of values and care for being together. No sociological forms, including recognition or prestige, declarations or gestures of appreciation are enough, since there is a need for a new ontology of gratitude stemming from the fact that the Other’s approach may enrich the way we are and think. This ontology of gratitude can be taken as one’s own capital and existential gain originated from the meeting of the Other and his thinking. Respect is not enough, there must be evidence of an emotional link and internalization.

Return to authority of cultural works masterpieces as a permanent and distorted return to oneself

The concept of authority found an important part in Ricoeur’s philosophy of the human being, also calling for the application of psychoanalytic contexts, including a Lacanian approach and the reference to the symbolic mediation as always failing in confrontation with the Real. The subject doesn’t know itself completely and always needs for its imagination insufficient references in emotions, and replacing unconscious with symbolic (individual and mythical, collec-



tive) ways which are always inadequate, requesting further play with the symbolic patrimony, and the individual reflexive approach to it. The orders of desire and language are here in a constant interconnection, and therefore any reference to authority cannot be given once and for all. Human achievements, including recognized masterpieces, are not supposed to be possibly given in an unchangeable way since idiosyncrasy and unconscious permanently come to the fore in a mixed ways of drives, suppression, condensation, transference, etc. All this is a way of treating a conflict of interpretations as natural, where no one has better reasons or rights to fix a single one for recognition, including the lack of powerful position of author's intentions concerning status of his/her text. A reader is inclined to search for impulses stemming from beyond any powerful dictates and still there are various risks to be faced, including too much subjectivity or the arbitrary status of the interpretation, which has to be challenged by an effort to confront various ways of reading and perception, discovering various layers of sensitivity, symbolic and imaginary, always going towards something deeper and more universal or, as one might say in Lacanian terms, closer to the Real.

Conclusion

This journey which is now coming to an end has raised a number of points in relation to Ricoeur which I regard as very close to my own intuitions and are the fruits of reading other philosophers and pedagogues, so that the concept of authority should be applied in educational practice in a much different way than it is most often encountered. Hopefully I will be able to build a more representative vision of this alternative, enriched with reference to some other positions in philosophy and in the wider space of humanities and social knowledge.

I remember a dispute between Ricoeur and some students when he was Dean, where he claimed the right for recognition of better insight into the university with the argument that... he had read more books. He also deplored an excess of partnership with students, when their claims seemed insufficiently rooted in a cultural patrimony of texts. All of this seems essential to avoid being held hostage by an overly liberal approach to culture.

Summary Streszczenie

The author of the article addresses the issue of understanding of the cultural authority in education. In the background of his considerations there are the insights of Paul Ricoeur, who revolutionized the methods of hermeneutic phenomenology, expanding them by creative reflections drawn from the field of mythology, biblical exegesis, psychoanalysis, theory of metaphor, and narrative theory.

The article consists of seven parts, in which the author takes under the consideration the following issues, inspired by Ricoeur, and associated with the understanding of cultural authority: (1) The authority as an object of games with time; (2) Disapproval to the sociological reduction of authority in politics and theology; (3) The authority between the claim to be a possessor of truth, witness to the ongoing process of seeking the truth, and pathos of claim to be transmitter of truth; (4) The authority as a source of ontological debt of gratitude and obligation/commitment; (5) The authority and its disappearance in university education; (6) Authority in vertical and horizontal perspectives; (7) Return to the authority of the masterpieces of culture as a permanent and “distorted” return to oneself.

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Autor artykułu podejmuje kwestię rozumienia autorytetu kulturowego w edukacji. Tłem jego rozważań są poglądy Paula Ricoeura, który zrewolucjonizował metody hermeneutyki fenomenologii, poszerzając je twórczo refleksjami z dziedziny mitologii, egzegezy biblijnej, psychoanalizy, teorii metafory czy teorii narracji.

Artykuł składa się z siedmiu części, w których autor podejmuje następujące zagadnienia, inspirowane twórczością Ricoeura, a związane z rozumieniem autorytetu kulturowego: (1) Autorytet jako przedmiot gry z czasem; (2) Sprzeciw wobec socjologicznej redukcji autorytetu w polityce i teologii; (3) Autorytet pomiędzy rozszczeniem posiadania prawdy, świadectwem danym nieustannemu poszukiwaniu prawdy, a patosem bycia jej przekazicielem; (4) Autorytet jako źródło ontologicznego długu wdzięczności i zobowiązanie; (5) Autorytet i jego zanikanie w edukacji uniwersyteckiej; (6) Autorytet w perspektywie wertykalnej i horyzontalnej; (7) Powrót do autorytetu arcydzieł kultury jako trwały i „przenicowany” powrót do siebie samego.

