

○ THE SUBJECT SUPPOSED TO BE A CHRISTIAN

ON PAUL RICŒUR'S *MEMORY, HISTORY, FORGETTING*

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In this essay Badiou critiques Paul Ricœur's work, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. He argues that Ricoeur's theory of the subject cannot be understood without its Christian theological underpinnings, especially in terms of guilt, innocence and forgiveness.

Paul Ricœur's discourse, always gracious and characterised by infinite patience, even a kind of academic courtesy, is nevertheless, as a general rule, a combative discourse, always in close proximity to the liveliest debates. This is certainly the case for those debates that divide, roughly speaking, the 'consensual' camp, that is the one which unquestioningly ratifies the conjoint values of representative democracy and juridical humanism.¹

What is Ricœur's strategy concerning memory and history? In truth, it is a matter of subtracting history from what has come to be called the *devoir de mémoire* (the duty to remember). What does this 'duty' actually involve? The irreducibility of the extermination of the Jews of Europe (in the narrow version) or of the 'totalitarian' camps (in the broad one) to any ordinary rational conception of historical narrative. And therefore, the submission of history as a discipline to a trans-historical norm. Admittedly, the idea of such submission is not new. The use to which Bossuet put it, for example, is well-known. The novelty resides in the fact that the norm which governs the 'duty to remember' does not as such have the character of Providence, as is the case for traditional Christian historians. This 'duty' submits history to an ethical constraint whose origin lies not in a theory of salvation, but in an occurrence of Evil. It can also be said that the 'duty to remember' must, indefinitely, leave open an essential wound in the fabric of history, thereby contradicting the evangelical message of redemption, which asserts that a radical event (the coming of the Son) has *sublated* the destiny of humanity forevermore. From this stems the fact that the contention necessarily involves a third term: forgetting as dialectical correlate of forgiveness. The 'duty to remember' forbids forgetting, whose absolute possibility Christian redemption instead allows. Whatever the scandal at stake (including that of the massacre of innocents), our power of judgment is nothing in the face of the infinity of sacrifice to which Christ consented for our sins.

Let us be succinct, even brutal. Without the stake ever being specified, wagering on the possibility of maintaining himself, all the way though, within the framework of the rules of academic discussion, what Ricœur in fact seeks to obtain through the sophisticated means of conceptual analysis is nothing short of a full victory. The victory of the Christian vision of the historical subject against the one which today is gaining more and more ground, and which is mainly, although not exclusively, of Jewish origin. On the one hand, a saving event splits the history of the world in two and, by virtue of the narrative's sovereignty, dictates that nothing that ever happens can be allowed to subtract itself from forgiveness, from the remission of sins, from the

absolution of crimes, from ethical forgetting. On the other hand, an immemorial Law, of which some think a people are the repository, authorises absolute judgment and the eternal memory of the crime – the industrial massacre – through which the Nazis (in the narrow version) as well as the Stalinists (in the broad version) attempted to eradicate entire populations deemed unworthy of life as measured by a promethean and perverse project to found a ‘new man’.

Let us assume that one belongs, as is the case for any philosopher installed within the democratic *consensus*, to a spiritual tradition that claims to found the juridical humanism imposed by such a *consensus*. Then, it is necessary to choose between the subject of the Law, who confronts a tradition of persecution, and the subject of faith, for whom a sacrificial event opens the path of salvation. And as the current, crepuscular, times are devoted to historical reversal and selling the past, the battlefield is the discipline of history.

I will therefore argue that Ricœur’s great book, in all its subtlety and erudition, is no less than a muffled expression of a sort of abstract war which involves, via control over the practice of historians, the spiritual direction of the ‘democratic’ camp.

For those like me who do not make any claim to being part of that camp, nor of any of its components, the objective analysis of what is happening within it is nevertheless of great importance. All the more because a certain labour of clarification appears necessary: what I have just stated is not affirmed by Ricœur in those same terms, nor by those who respond to him. What is truly at stake in this polemic remains concealed, as always when one deals with the boundaries of ideology and conjunctural choices. One can even say that just like Descartes, Ricœur advances masked – although it is clearly necessary to invert the respective meanings, religious or unbelieving, of the face and the mask.

My work of reading must thus consist in showing where and how – though his name is never stated – what we will call the Christian subject enters the stage.

A. THE ENDEAVOUR

In order to construct history’s independence in relation to memory, Ricœur seeks to suppress all reference to operators which could *force* the unity of the two terms. This is why he declares explicitly that he does not presuppose either an identifiable psychological subject that as such would be the bearer of a ‘memory’, nor a determinate actor (class, race, nation...) destined to be the subject of History.

One can say that Ricœur practices a kind of *epoche*, or rather a differed entrance onto the stage, of all that could be, not, as in Husserl, the thesis of the external existence of an object, but rather of what would present itself, on the stage of the dialectics between history and memory, as a thesis of *identification* of a subject.

This is a central point of Ricœur’s strategy: to reach the topic of the subject *as late as possible*. Just as, I may say, God himself indeed took his time, with respect to the history of men and their sins, to organise the redemptive coming of his son.

In fact, the moment of the subject is pushed to the very end of the book, when it is a matter of treating the delicate but conclusive question of forgiveness. That is, it must be pointed out, at the moment when it is necessary – without it no forgiveness is possible – to *separate* the essential subjective identity from the criminal act that may be imputed to this it.

This question of the separation between the identity of the actor and the criminal nature of the act is obviously crucial. Indeed, what does it mean that the event of salvation has taken place, if not that our subjective nature is no longer intrinsically sinful and that as a result, it can, for all intents and purposes, always be separated from its vilest acts?

But once again, this is not the way Ricœur speaks. It is only at the very end that he comes to introduce, with elegance, the theme of the possible separation of a subjective identity, to authorise forgiveness and open the way for forgetting. The elegance goes so far as to present this end as a mere ‘epilogue’, concerned with a difficulty (‘The Difficult Forgiveness’), and concluding... inconclusively. As attested by the last lines: ‘Under history, memory and forgetting. Under memory and forgetting, life. But writing life is another matter. Incompletion’.

The epilogue takes up sixty-five pages out of a total of almost 700... What elegance, indeed! That of the smart politician, who knows that the crucial text, the one which will really determine the distribution of votes and the orientation of the Party, is to be found not in the lengthy report written in political jargon on ‘the current situation and our tasks’, which everyone claps, but in the brief and secondary motion dealing with the election of the assistant treasurer.

‘To write life is another matter’ ... But ‘life’, my dear Ricœur, the life of the redeemed subject, is really that to which you silently destined the very long and very fine discussions on the phenomenology of memory, on the status of archive or being-in-time. This is why during six hundred pages, the subject, be it that of memory or history, remains indeterminate. Yes, *almost* until the end, identity is neither separable, nor identifiable. It is an *attributive hypothesis*: that of which the operations of memory and of historical propositions could be said. And as it is possible – Ricœur tells us – to limit oneself to this ‘could’, one will describe those operations and those propositions without having to assume an identifiable subject. It is really the *epoche*, of which I spoke above, and which Ricœur renames ‘reserving attribution’.

Such is the endeavour that this vast and beautiful book displays: to settle ‘objectively’, by ‘reserving attribution’, the examination of the regimes of memory and the propositions of history, so as to make the subject enter the stage only at the crucial moment of correlation between forgetting and forgiveness. Then the subject, no matter how anonymous he may remain, has no opportunity of escaping its Christian overdetermination.

B. THE METHOD

We can call ‘method’ that which authorises the ‘objectivity’ of the first six hundred pages of the book. That is, the operations through which we are asked to proceed so as not to have to assume, or identify, ‘under’ memory or ‘under’ history, a philosophically recognisable subject.

There are clearly three fundamental operations in this book: attribution, proposition, unbinding. However, only the first two are methodical. The third, as we shall see, is apologetic.

1. ATTRIBUTION

It consists in taking the view that the processes of memory are objectively intelligible, without having to suppose the existence of a subject. To this end, one has to articulate the core of the problem – the presence of absence – in terms of an ontology of time of Heideggerian style.

It is only in a second moment, once this ‘pure’ core of intelligibility has been extracted, that the processes of memory become *attributable* to this or that type of subject. It is really because

this attribution can be relegated to a second moment that one can assert that the first moment holds it in reserve.

In essence, the processes of memory can be thought as predicates that one is free to then attribute to subjective types.

Ricœur can then embark into a long discussion of the possible types of subjects to which this type of ‘memorial’ predicate can be attributed. In a very classical manner, he distinguishes three such types: the self, collectives, and ‘neighbours’. In other words, the givens of history (collectives) framed by the fundamental diptych of the self and the other, of the soul and its neighbour. Which goes in the same direction as Saint Paul’s thinking: belonging to the collective is ideally secondary to what commands charity: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Let us add: you will remember it all the more to the extent that you have no memory of yourself. Here we witness the preparation, between the lines, of the subordination of memory, as the supposition of a collective imperative, to the saving space of forgiveness that a self grants to others.

The flip-side of reserving attribution is the mobility of this attribution between the three types in question. Let us draw attention to the rules of this mobility, such as Ricœur finds them in Strawson:

These predicates possess the capacity of being attributed to others than oneself from the moment they are attributable to oneself. This mobility of attribution implies three distinct operations: 1) that attribution be suspended or performed; 2) that these predicates retain the same meaning in two distinct situations of attribution; 3) that this multiple attribution preserve the asymmetrical relationship between ascription to oneself and ascription to the other (Ricœur 2000: 154; 2004: 125).

Despite the final clause of asymmetry, the pair which is constituted, in relation to attribution, by its reserve and its mobility, seems really to forbid memory processes any *singularity*. Isn’t a memory that is in some manner averred precisely the kind that makes reserving attribution impossible? Aren’t we dealing here, against its purely predicative treatment, with all the real of memory, as the quilting point between a subject that cannot be evacuated and that which, in its happening, constituted it in time? When Strawson and Ricœur declare that memory predicates must ‘retain the same meaning in two distinct situations of attribution’, they disregard the fact that the central question that one addresses to a memory is not that of its meaning, but that of its truth. And that unlike meaning, a truth cannot be predicated in identical fashion about two distinct subjects.

We must therefore entertain the hypothesis that attribution is an *ad hoc* operator which aims at granting memory only a predicative status, reserving subjective singularity for the economy of salvation.

2. THE PROPOSITION

It underpins the fundamental operation of historical representation. The proposition’s axiom of use is formulated numerous times, for example on page 227:

The fact is not the event, itself brought back to the life of a witnessing consciousness, but the content of a statement seeking to represent it (Ricoeur 2000: 227; 2004: 178–9).

One sees how Ricoeur tries to follow a middle path. He opposes the confusion between historical fact, on the one hand, and remembered real event, on the other. But he opposes just as much the dissolution of the fact in normative rhetoric or the laws of fiction. If, as Michelet believed, history is the ‘integral resurrection of the past’, there will be confusion between history and memory. But if, as nominalists think, history is strictly speaking co-extensive with narrative, without anything real being represented in it, no historical event can ever be certified. In particular, I would add (but Ricoeur wouldn’t), the Christ-event will never ever be anything else but the effect of one discursive regime among others. Consequently, all that one might suppose as real will be subjected to the vagaries of memory.

In actual fact, Ricoeur’s middle path obstinately aims at maintaining the prerogatives of history over memory, without having to suppose, at this stage, any historical subject. Hence a kind of positivism of representation, which is certainly the riskiest part of his undertaking.

Indeed, what does it mean for history to be a set of propositions? That one has to write ‘the fact that this or that happened’, and not directly ‘this or that’. This is what allows us to debate truth in history, not as the truth of a fact, which doesn’t mean anything, but as the truth of a proposition.

Positivism, in so far as everything in the end depends on the correspondence between the signifying aim of a proposition and a factual referent.

But can a proposition represent without implying in the representation a subjective adherence to the proposition as such? Is it really possible to escape a maxim that one could draw from Lacan, a maxim that would stipulate that it is only *for a subject* that a proposition represents a historical content?

This is clearly what is at stake in the enormous passage on ‘historical representation’, between pages 302 and 372 (Ricoeur 2004: 234–280), which alone would be worthy of detailed technical analysis. In it, one re-encounters Lacan, inasmuch as the capacity of the proposition to stand ‘there’ where the historical fact has taken place is christened a ‘lieutenancy’ in a way that echoes the psychoanalytical doctrine of the ‘place holder’ of unconscious representation. One can nevertheless note that Ricoeur ends up throwing in the towel, since at the end he simply speaks of an ‘enigma’ which he presents as the enigma of a ‘refiguration’. In short, it is a feature of the being of history to be able to be represented in propositions. The enigma is one of nature, it must be shifted, so says Ricoeur, towards an ontology of historical being: historical being is the being to which it can happen that it is refigured as such in propositions.

It seems to me that there could be a different way of lifting the enigma than this rather dormitive virtue of the historical opiate. One would need to suppose that the historical proposition only exists as such once it has to configure the fact *for a subject in the present*. There would thus not be one historical representation, but a partition originally distributed among immediately active subjective types. This does not mean that there would be no historical real, far from it. Rather, this real would be averred as representation only in a field where all becoming-represented (any lieutenancy or place-holding, if you like) confronts a multiple.

This can be said more simply: history is well represented in propositions. But the genesis and destiny of these propositions are subordinated to the present multiplicity of *political* subjects.

Ricœur cannot accept this subordination, because he wishes to preserve, to his own (political?) ends, the univocal existence of some historical representations. Moreover, he is also not willing to accept that the subjective adherence to representations is a constitutive phenomenon, because he wishes to engineer the entrance on stage of the subject only when the identity of this subject will be practically constrained.

This is taken care of by the third great operation of his *dispositif*: unbinding.

C. UNBINDING AND REDEMPTION: THE CHRISTIAN SUBJECT

When all of Ricœur's effort, through the operations of attribution and proposition, is directed to safeguarding a kind of phenomenological objectivity on the side of memory, and a 'narrative' objectivity on the side of history, without letting the two being confused, the process of unbinding seeks to organise forgiveness – and forgetting – into a completely new subjective element. Up until this point, we had temporalised predicates whose attribution was suspended. We now have a completely new register, that of power and possibility. Identity, hitherto suspended, proves impossible to find on the side of the substance, the bearer or the predicates attributed to it. All subjective identity is the relation between a capacity and its possibilities.

Wasn't this in a way what I suggested, when I said that memory and history become activated only from the point of view of a subject in the present? Shouldn't we understand by this that history itself in the end is a representation that depends on the new possibilities that a subject inscribes in the future of the past, its to-come? It is clearly at the point where, through unbinding, the author engineers the entrance on the stage of a flexible and active subjective identity that I feel closest to him. Without all the same being able to agree with him.

For the path adopted by Ricœur avoids having to consider history from the perspective of politics, his goal being to entrust morality if not with its narrative, at least with its judgment. Let us suppose that his starting point is a juridical question broadly understood: can one separate a criminal act from the identity of the culprit? For example, can one separate the extermination of the Jews of Europe from the Nazi group, or from the German people, or even from a given identified executioner? We have seen that one can separate attributions from the process of memory and the representative propositions of history from any pre-constituted subject. But when culpability is at stake, the subject is required, *precisely as a subject whose entire being is either guilt or innocence*. Put differently: the question of the subject, of his identity and of the separability of this identity only emerges – and this is good old post-Kantian logic – with moral judgment.

To be more precise, only a third separation, after that of memory and that of history, summons *in advance* the theme of subjective identity: the separation between the identity of a subject and the moral or juridical qualification of his act. This separation is the one that is at work in forgiveness and whose way of operating is unbinding.

Those pages, precisely entitled 'Unbinding the actor from his act', which propose 'an act of unbinding', to my mind, contain the ultimate meaning of the book as a whole.

The fact that these pages spar with Jacques Derrida is not irrelevant. This is a very short but incisive confrontation, very different from the peaceful quibbling with American academics as

regards historical narrative, or even from the good-natured reference to the positions of Jankélévitch regarding the forgiveness granted (or un-grantable) to the Germans. Here we encounter, in a flash, the real adversary, the other spiritual virtuality of the democratic camp.

Jacques Derrida indeed contends, in a 1999 text entitled *The Century and the Pardon* (*Le siècle et le pardon*; Derrida 1999; Derrida and Wiervorka 2001), in accordance with his ontology of difference, that if one separates the culprit from his act, one in fact grants forgiveness to a subject other than the one who has committed the act, or, to quote him, that as consequence of the unbinding, ‘it is no longer *the culprit as such* that one forgives’.

Ricœur, as can be expected, responds with a doctrine of possibilities which originated in Aristotle. There is the act, it is clear, but the act does not exhaust what the subject potentially is, or what he is capable of. Now, the identity of the subject resides precisely in this capacity. This is why Ricœur in the end rejects Derrida’s objection: the subject one forgives is really, he says, ‘the same, but potentially other, not another’.

In fact, it is necessary to engage in an even more radical decoupling than that of act and power or potentiality. It is necessary to distinguish, within the very power of action, between the capacity and its effectuation. Here lies the true foundation of unbinding:

This intimate dissociation means that the moral subject’s capacity for commitment is not exhausted by its various inscriptions in the way of the world. This dissociation expresses an act of faith, a credit addressed to the self’s resources of regeneration (Ricœur 2000: 683; 2004: 490).

One can see the force of such a gesture, just as one can read its provenance: there is a fundamental asymmetry between the capacity and the act, between the criminal, even abominable, effectuations, and the credit that can be accorded to the possibilities of subjective redemption.

Under the sign of forgiveness, the culprit would be deemed capable of something else than his offences and his faults. He would be restored to his capacity to act, and the action to that of continuing. It is this capacity that would be saluted in the minor acts of consideration where we have recognized the *incognito* of forgiveness played out on the public scene. Finally, this restored capacity would be invested with the promise that projects action into the future. The expression of this liberating discourse, abandoned to its naked enunciation, would be: you are worth more than your actions (Ricœur 2000: 642; 2004: 502–3).

How indeed could it be any different *for a Christian*? If the moral economy of a subject does not reside in the power to act and if it is not this power as such that is sublated by God’s sacrifice, of what worth is the immense forgiveness granted by the Saviour to a generic humanity?

It all comes down to the fact that it *is indeed necessary that the subject may always be saved*, no matter what his action has been, for the christly economy of salvation to prevail eternally and universally. ‘Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone’. Yes, of course. Even if it is Himmler or Eichmann? The law of men, admittedly, must be carried out. So says, so demands Ricœur: this however has virtually nothing to do with the ‘true’ judgment, the aptly named ‘last judgment’.

But then why does Ricœur remain so silent on the evidently Christian pre-formation of a subject who – being substantially separable from memory and history – is identically exposed to

the immeasurable resource of forgiveness and forgetfulness? Fundamentally, my main criticism bears on what I consider to be not so much hypocrisy as a lack of civility, a lack of civility common to so many Christian proponents of phenomenology: the absurd concealment of the true source of conceptual constructions and philosophical polemics. As if it were possible that as radical a choice, especially today, as the one of a specific religion could, at any time, erase its adherence to the effects of discourse!

This is to offend Christ – so Pascal would have thought.

But it does not dispense us from the need to examine the form of the argument.

At a very abstract level, one can simply point out that the pure power to act, in its very indetermination, even if it is not that of an other – as Derrida objects – is not correlated to the identity of the subject either. Strictly speaking, it identifies neither the same nor the other. It is, to adopt the Hegelian vocabulary, the share of non-identity in identity. Therefore, if, to put forward this part of the subject, one forgives the act, one may as well say that *one does not forgive anybody in particular*, which means that any form of forgiveness is aimed at the generic humanity in each of us. This is really the case of Christ's manoeuvre, which welcomes each and every one only in so far as his gesture relieves him of an 'original' sin, therefore of a fault which, having in effect been committed by all, will be seen as committed by none. This is a supposition, it must be said, which exceeds the resources of philosophy and which hands the baton over 'to the ultimate paradox proposed by religions of the Book', as Ricœur alludes to on one occasion alone (Ricœur 2000: 369; 2004: 278).

Why not reverse the perspective and start from the act as the unique real point of subjective identity? If the apparatus of Aristotelian thought here proves necessary, isn't it ultimately because the correlation between the power and the act is fully intelligible only through a pre-comprehension of objective end of subjects? In reality, for Aristotle and all the successors attributed to him – or invented – by Ricœur (Leibniz, Spinoza, Schelling, Bergson, Freud, and Kant himself, see Ricœur 2000: 639; 2004: 491), capacity (power) is directed to its own good, and in the end to the Good. If the act diverts it from the Good, it is only an accident, perhaps one of extreme gravity, but inessential when it comes to the always available resource of good action. This is the decisive point for a Christian, because it alone allows the logic of redemption to be comprehensible also *philosophically*. All that will have to be done is to rename as 'the subordination of power to the essential positive dimension of the act' what for the believer has historically been the consequence of the Saviour's effective coming (it is here that all the themes connect up): the universal establishment of all souls in the possibility of salvation.

Fundamentally, Ricœur has to distinguish history from memory carefully because the saviour has *really* come, and this could not possibly be shielded from the historical facticity of which the New Testament and its erudite commentaries provided representative propositions. And because, for that matter, there is no need to remember it, nobody remembers it. He must also criticise the idea of a 'duty to remember', because Christ's sacrifice, breaking as it does the history of the world in two, is the exemplar of a pure projection which re-absorbs time in an eternal sublation and imposes a sole duty of belief and fidelity, always in the present. In terms of the 'duty to remember', it is soon only a matter of 'letting the dead bury the dead'. And ultimately, Ricœur must connect the motif of subjective identity to pure power, to potentialities, to capacity, because this path, and this path only, allows an apparent synthesis of the evangelical message (left in the shadows, although it constitutes the main motor of the argument) and of a philosophical theory

of responsibility. As always, *Fides quaerens intellectum*. Even if in the book, with its almost theatrical imbalance between discursive quantities, it is as if the maxim was: *Intellectus quaerens fidem*.

My sole ambition in this text was to clarify things. I for one believe that there only exist human animals whose generic soul has never been sublated by any sacrifice, bar those sacrifices they themselves have performed so that some truths could exist. It is permissible for those animals to become subjects, in always singular circumstances. But it is only their action, or the mode in which they persevere in the consequences of such action, that qualifies them as subjects. So that it is decidedly impossible to say, as does Ricœur: ‘You are worth more than your acts’. It is the very opposite that must be affirmed: ‘It can happen, rarely, that your acts are worth more than you’.

This is why the only path leading to subjective identity is that of mis-recognition.²

As Lacan said, in a point which François Regnault has commented on so well: ‘God is unconscious’.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Translator’s note: the title of Badiou’s article is implicitly modeled on Jacques Lacan’s formulation *le sujet supposé savoir* (the subject supposed to know), introduced in the first lesson of Seminar IX.
- 2 Translator’s note: The French term used by Badiou (*méconnaissance*) carries with it not only the idea of a mistake in appreciation but also that of ignorance as distorted recognition.

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Cite this article as: Badiou, Alain. 2006. ‘The subject supposed to be a Christian: On Paul Ricœur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting*’. Translated by Doyle, Natalie; Toscano, Alberto. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2 (3): pp. 27.1–27.9. DOI: 10.2104/bc060027.