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Ricœur and the Poetry of Revelation

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Das Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, den Zusammenhang zwischen Ricœurs Darstellung der sprachlichen Vorstellungskraft und seiner Vorliebe für ein Verständnis der Offenbarung als einer Angelegenheit der Textwelt und nicht der religiösen Erfahrung zu beleuchten. Einem poetischen Offenbarungsverständnis liegt an der Wahrung der Reinheit und Alterität der Phänomene und zugleich an der Offenheit für jenen poetischen Reichtum der Textwelt, der neuen Sinn schafft und neue Wege auftut. Die Darstellung folgt Ricœurs Methode „detour–return". Der erste „detour–return" führt über Ricœurs Darstellung der produktiven Einbildungskraft und untersucht, wie der Begriff der „Welt des Textes" unser Verständnis von Offenbarung als Offenbarung einer neuen Lebens-Welt bereichern kann. Der zweite „detour–return" widmet sich der Rolle der kritischen Distanzierung bei gleichzeitiger Bewahrung der Unterscheidungskraft. Ricœurs Darstellung des menschlichen Wesens als einer Mischung aus Endlichem und Unendlichem ist dabei prävalent – wobei die menschliche Endlichkeit der göttlichen Unendlichkeit nicht gänzlich entgegengesetzt ist und das menschliche Verstehen daher nicht immer und ausschließlich eine Kontamination oder Begrenzung des göttlichen Übermaßes miteinschließt. Die letzte „detour-return" folgt Ricœurs Empfehlung, dass eine Phänomenologie der Religion den hermeneutischen Weg der Untersuchung der Texte beschreiten sollte, in denen religiöse Phänomene zum Ausdruck kommen. Ausgewählte Passagen aus dem „*Rig Veda*" sollen Offenbarung als *theo-poeisis* zu verstehen geben – d. h. als Teilhabe an der göttlichen Kreativität. Bei alldem soll gezeigt werden, inwiefern Offenbarung auf die „Stiftung" einer „neuen Welt" und die Restitution des menschlichen Vermögens abzielt, darin wohnhaft zu werden.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the important connection between Ricœur's account of the linguistic imagination and his preference for understanding revelation as a matter of the world of the text rather than of religious experience. Ricœur's hermeneutical phenomenology challenges the notion that a direct phenomenology of revelation is either possible or desirable. To understand revelation as poetic is not to violate the purity and alterity of the phenomena but to remain open to the poetic richness of the world of the text, which creates new meaning and enables new ways of being.

I will follow Ricœur's model of "detour/return."[1] With the first detour, I will explicate Ricœur's understanding of the productive imagination. Then, I will return to the question of revelation by considering the implications of connecting revelation to the productive

[1] In an interview with Charles Reagan, Ricœur says: "Detour/return is the rhythm of my philosophical respiration." *Charles Reagan*, Paul Ricœur. His Life and His Work, Chicago 1996, 133.

imagination, with special attention to Ricœur's understanding of "poetic feeling" as a central part of the way that we are enabled to dwell within the world of the revelatory text. With the second detour, I will consider the role of critical distanciation in preserving discernment. I will argue that critical distanciation does not dilute revelation but rather helps us discern between enabling and disabling worlds proposed by the text. An important part of this argument will be an examination of Ricœur's account of the human being as a mixture of finite and infinite. I argue that this implies that human finitude is not utterly opposed to divine infinitude and that, by extension, human understanding is not always and only a contamination or limitation of the divine excess.

In the final detour, I will examine a few of the creation hymns from the *Rig Veda*. My purpose here will be to consider the possibilities for understanding revelation as a *theo-poeisis* – a divine creativity in which we participate. I will argue that the revelation of the sacred is fundamentally a making and remaking – a *poeisis* – of reality and that our relationship to the world of the revelatory text is not simply asymmetrical or hierarchical. Rather, we are *participants* in the realization of the new world. By following Ricœur's recommendation to consider religious phenomena not as isolated conceptual problems or collections of propositions but as rooted in the communities and texts in which they come to expression, I argue that we receive an enriched understanding of the poetry of revelation – that is, of revelation as the creation of a new world and the regeneration of human capability such that we can inhabit that world.

2. First Detour: The Imagination

Ricœur distinguishes between two types of imagination: the productive and reproductive. The reproductive imagination works to combine two images that we already have – say, of horses and one-horned animals – and through this combination, offers a new image – i. e., that of a unicorn. This form of imagination is "reproductive" because it does not create a truly new image but simply reproduces existing images in a different way. Moreover, the implication is that what the imagination "creates" is either an imperfect copy of the real, or else it creates a fabrication, a non-thing. In either case, there is nothing truly creative about this form of imagination.[2]

However, Ricœur argues that there is another way to understand the imagination as truly productive of new meaning. The productive imagination is exemplified by the metaphor. Through metaphor, Ricœur argues, our ordinary vision of reality can be disrupted, and a new vision of reality can emerge. Importantly, Ricœur argues that a metaphor is not simply re-combinative in the way that the unicorn is simply a recombination of existing images. Through the copula, *is*, the metaphor forces us to see things *as* this or that. To consider one of Ricœur's favored metaphors, "time is a beggar": the poet is challenging us to reimagine

[2] As George Taylor writes: "For Ricœur, this model of original and copy exemplifies reproductive imagination. The image as copy is at best derivative from the original – from reality. At worst, to the degree the imagination tries to portray something different from the original, it is simply marginal, an escape or flight from reality; it produces nothingness." *Charles Taylor*, "Ricœur's Philosophy of Imagination", in: Journal of French Philosophy 16/1 and 2 [2006] 93–104, here 95.

both time and beggars in terms of one another.[3] Time *is* a beggar. Literally, of course, time *is not* a beggar, but if we only read the metaphor literally, we do not read it as a metaphor. We must read it *both ways* at once: time *is* (metaphorically) and *is not* (literally) a beggar. And this tension between "is" and "is not" resists resolution. The meaning created by the metaphor *is metaphorical*.

Thus, Ricœur concludes that metaphors are non-translatable. There is no literal rendering of the metaphor "time is a beggar." To try to render the metaphor literally, not only do we destroy the metaphor, but we also destroy the *meaning* of the metaphor. So, from this perspective, metaphors are much more than clever deviations from ordinary uses of language. Metaphors *create new meaning*, and in so doing, *redescribe reality*.

The language of "redescription" belongs to *The Rule of Metaphor*, published in the 1970s. In the 1980s, Ricœur published his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, in which the language of "redescription" is replaced by that of "refiguration." The purpose of this shift in language is to emphasize the way that the reader is impacted by, and even implicated in the new vision of reality.[4] "Refiguration" is the final moment of a threefold process of *mimesis*. In a provocative appropriation of Aristotle's account of mimesis in the *Poetics*, Ricœur distinguishes between mimesis_1, which he calls "prefiguration," mimesis_2, which he calls "configuration," and mimesis_3, which is "refiguration."

"Prefiguration" refers to the pre-narrative quality of our experience: we live in a world of agents, actions, intentions, consequences, etc. "If, in fact," Ricœur writes, "human action can be narrated, it is because it is always already articulated by signs, rules, and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated."[5] These symbolic mediations form the basic fabric of a narrative. However, this pre-narrative world of experience is too big for us to make good sense of it very often. Essentially, human action is intelligible to us, but it also requires some work of organization to become comprehensible.

Thus, we move to mimesis_2, "configuration." This is the work of composition, of drawing a coherent narrative out of the disparate actions and events that we encounter in our daily lives. The narrative focuses on the actions of *this* character and draws a causal line to *this* outcome. It draws concordance from discordance, to use Ricœur's words. That is, from "our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience," the plot constructs an intelligible, temporal whole.[6] And this is possible because of mimesis_1, the pre-narrative quality of experience. Narratives are intelligible to us because they work with the intelligible dough of pre-narrative action, so to speak.

Finally, with mimesis_3, we arrive at "refiguration." This essentially refers to the impact of the world of the text on the world of the reader. The "world of the text" is the world that

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[3] Cf. *Paul Ricœur*, "Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language", translated by David Pellauer, in: Mario J. Valdés (ed.), A Ricœur Reader, Toronto 1991, 77.

[4] Reflecting on this shift in a later interview, Ricœur says that "the role of the reader" was missing in his account of redescription in *The Rule of Metaphor* and that the expansion in *Time and Narrative* was meant to emphasize the "problem of the movement of language outside of itself and its capacity to redirect, restructure an experience, to produce a new manner of inhabiting the world." Id., Critique and Conviction. Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay, translated by Kathleen Blamey, New York 1998, 83.

[5] Id., Time and Narrative, Volume I, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago 1984, 57.

[6] Ibid., xi.

the story unfolds in front of itself. We are invited imaginatively to inhabit this world, temporarily to "bracket out" our ordinary dealings with the "real world" and embrace the play of the text. For a brief time, I *believe in* the fictional world, and through my belief, I can be transformed. In fact, Ricœur goes further and argues that "the 'me' who believes in fiction" is a creation of the text.[7] The text *constitutes me* as the one who takes the fictional world as the real world. This allows me to become more than a passive observer; I am an *inhabitant* of the fictional world, which means that this world can have a very real impact on my understanding of myself.[8] When I put the work down, I return to the world of action different than I was before I began reading. Accordingly, the mimetic circle is closed: we move from action to text and back to action.

The significance of this account is that the so-called "real world" – viz., the world as we ordinarily see it – is "abolished" and replaced by the fictional world, which presents a new way for us to navigate and live within the world. The "world," then, is transformed through the collision of the "real" and "fictional" worlds, which also implies that the clear distinction between the real and the fictional breaks down.[9] The difference between the two worlds is not the simple difference between truth and falsity, fact and fabrication; rather, the difference is that the fictional world does not present the world *as I already see it*, but instead gives me a *new way to see*.[10] "The more imagination deviates from that which is called reality in ordinary language and vision," Ricœur writes,

> "the more it approaches the heart of the reality which is no longer the world of manipulable objects, but the world into which we have been thrown by birth and within which we try to orient ourselves by projecting our innermost possibilities upon it, in order that we dwell there, in the strongest sense of that word."[11]

The language of fiction, according to Ricœur, does indeed have a reference beyond itself – viz., it is not purely self-referential; it is more than a string of signifiers signifying further signifiers.[12] But it is not the reference of ordinary language, which is suspended so that the

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[7] Id., "Appropriation," in: A Ricœur Reader (see fn. 3), 94.

[8] Hanna Meretoja writes: "Through reading, we encounter what Ricoeur (1991a, p. 88) calls *imaginative variations* of ourselves that allow us to explore – as individuals and communities – who we are in relation to who we could be. Such exploration cultivates our understanding of where we come from, where we are now, and where we could go. This, in turn, affects who we in fact *are*." *Hanna Meretoja*, The Ethics of Storytelling. Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible, New York 2017, 15.

[9] As Christina Gschwandtner writes: "Narrative and life are not only parallel but deeply implicated in each other." *Christina Gschwandtner*, Reading Religious Ritual with Ricœur. Between Fragility and Hope, Lanham 2021, 39.

[10] "[W]hat is denied by poetry," Ricœur writes, "is the ordinary vision of reality as it is described in ordinary language. This suspension is the condition for the emergence of new dimensions of experience and reality, exactly those which are redescribed by fiction." *Paul Ricœur*, "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality", in: A Ricœur Reader [see fn. 3], 134.

[11] Ibid., 133.

[12] In "Narrated Time," Ricœur writes: "A text, actually, is not a self-enclosed entity. It has not only a formal structure, it points beyond itself to a possible world, a world I could inhabit, where I could actualize my own possibilities in so far as I am in the world. Certainly, this world of the text is still something textual: but it is already an indirect aiming at the real, a mimetic relation by which the text is externalized. The world of the text is a transcendence in the immanence of the text, an outside intended by an inside." *Paul Ricœur*, "Narrated Time", translated by Robert Sweeney, in: A Ricœur Reader [see fn. 3], 349.

possible world of fiction can become the reference. The fictional world is saved from total *non*-reference, and the real world is saved from the total *reduction* to reference.

Moreover, the visual arts are not eliminated from this account of imagination. The "imagistic" imagination is not synonymous with visual art. The question is whether the work of art – fictional, visual, musical – makes reality "problematic," in Ricœur's terms.[13] Does the work of art open a *new* vision of the world? Ricœur mentions the difference between "amateur" and "art" photography on this score. Amateur photography simply presents "a double of the real," whereas art photography affects a much more significant break with our ordinary dealings with the world and problematizes how we normally see things. As Ricœur says, "as the gap with reality grows wider, the biting power of the work on the world of our experience is reinforced."[14]

The "gap" between the work and our ordinary vision of reality does not require a denial of critical apprehension. We must not forget that Ricœur wants to maintain a productive tension between what he calls, in *The Rule of Metaphor*, "ontological vehemence," on the one hand, and demythologization, on the other.[15] "Ontological vehemence" refers to the naïve belief in the world of the work of art. To see the world *as* the work of art presents it is, indeed, precisely one of the aims of art. But for the world of the work to continue to have the "biting power" to make reality "problematic," it must remain fictional – not "unreal" or "false," but *fictional*. The tension between "is" and "is not" must not be renounced. On the other side, demythologization represents the critical reminder of the "is not." According to our ordinary vision of reality, nature *is not* a temple, but to see nature *as* a living temple allows the "ontological vehemence" of the work to keep demythologization on its toes, as it were. The tension is only productive if it remains a tension. If the two were to collapse into one another, we would return to the prejudice that we abandoned at the outset of our journey – namely, that there is only one world, the "real world," and anything outside this real world should be dismissed as falsehood and manipulation.

This distinction also appears in Ricœur's work as the tension between appropriation and distanciation. "Appropriation" refers to the act of *making mine* what is initially other to me – viz., making the foreign world of the text *my world*.[16] Part of the way this is accomplished is through the formation of *feeling*. Crucially, when Ricœur speaks of "poetic feeling," he is *not* discussing personal, internal emotions. In fact, through poetic feeling, the internal/external division is abolished. Poetic feeling is intentional, in the phenomenological sense. It is a way of "feeling into…" as it were. It "makes for participation in things," Ricœur writes.[17] Thanks to the poetic image, the metaphor, "*we* are assimilated" to the world of the

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[13] "Under the shock of fiction," Ricœur writes, "reality becomes problematic." *Ricœur*, "The Function of Fiction" [see fn. 3], 133.
[14] Id., "Aesthetic Experience", in: Philosophy & Social Criticism 24/2 and 3 (1998) 25–39, here 29.
[15] Cf. id., The Rule of Metaphor. The Creation of Meaning in Language, translated by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello SJ, London – New York 2003, 291–302.
[16] Ricœur writes: "'Appropriation'" is my translation of the German term *Aneignung*. *Aneignen* means to make one's own what was initially 'alien.'" (id., "Appropriation" [see fn. 3], 89).
[17] Id., The Rule of Metaphor (see fn. 15), 290.

text.[18] And to inhabit a world is not only to see from a distance, to grasp objects of knowledge, but to *dwell* there.

At the end of our first detour, what kind of return to the question of revelation is possible? Surely revelation, whatever else we make of it, must involve a certain "abolishing" of the ordinary world and a restructuring of our ways of living such that we can live according to the new, revealed world. A strictly experiential account of revelation cannot live up to this promise of abolishing and re-creating the world, for it limits revelation to the reproductive imagination – viz., to the reduplication of the present world. An unfamiliar combination of images is presented, and this unfamiliar combination is assimilated to the existing images. If, on the other hand, the set of images exceeds even unfamiliarity to become entirely unrecognizable, then nothing at all is revealed. We see nothing but an incoherent set of images. By instead locating revelation at the level of a transformation of the imaginary, we do not reduce revelation to the mediation of language but instead, allow revelation to be truly productive of new meanings. Revelation, on this account, presents a truly new world, which transforms the self who imaginatively inhabits it.

Moreover, we are assimilated to the world of the text through the work of poetic feeling. I do not simply receive a new set of propositions or images to be wedged into my existing propositions and images. Rather, my *way of inhabiting* the world is transformed, and to inhabit is to *feel*. As Ricœur writes, "The word forms our feeling in the process of expressing it. And revelation is this very formation of our feelings that transcends their everyday, ordinary modalities."[19] This is the kind of "feeling-into" the new world that the poetic text makes possible. The poetic word does not simply propose a counterproposition; rather, it problematizes reality itself.

To tie revelation to poetic texts – lyric, narrative, etc. – need not mean that we reduce revelation to an endless string of language talking about language. For, stories are spoken, heard, seen, and felt (both physically and emotionally). Our engagement with stories is thus affective, embodied, and linguistic, without being reducible to any of these (after all, what is language without the breath, lungs, vocal cords, eyes, ears, etc., which make it possible?). Stories appeal to my *whole being*. Moreover, according to Ricœur, there is a *density* to biblical narratives because they name God – not as a proposition, first cause, pure act, etc., but through the mode of history, narrative, wisdom, lament, etc. These texts name God as the "unfathomable mystery," the "ultimate ground" of our being, which means that "however deeply I dig, there is always further to dig."[20] The density of meaning is preserved by poetic language, which always presents a surplus of meaning.

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[18] Id., "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", in: Critical Inquiry Vol. 5/1 (1978) 143–159, here 156.

[19] Id., "Hermeneutics of the Idea of Revelation", in: id., Hermeneutics. Writings and Lectures, Volume 2, translated by David Pellauer, Malden 2013, 127.

[20] Id., "The Challenge of Evil for Philosophy", in: id., Philosophy, Ethics & Politics, edited by Catherine Goldstein, translated by Kathleen Blamey, Medford 2020, 98.

3. Second Detour: Discernment

The dialectical counterpart of appropriation is distanciation. Without the critical moment of distanciation, appropriation may indeed become the private, internal apprehension of emotional states. Ricœur also calls upon the language of "explanation" and "understanding," "guess" and "validation,"[21] and (as discussed above) "ontological naïveté" and "demythologization." The language of "guess" and "ontological naïveté" is particularly helpful for describing how our initial grasping at the meaning of the text may be clumsy and difficult to justify. We may be gripped by the profundity of a text without having a clear sense of just what is so profound about it. Taking critical distance can therefore *aid* our understanding rather than simply acting as a bad form of objectifying. The important thing is to maintain the tension. Ricœur explains this nicely in an interview:

> "A completely objective study kills the text, because one operates on a cadaver. But, inversely, reading which would be perfectly naïve and would not have passed through all the mediations of an objective and structural approach would be only the projection of the subjectivity of the reader on the text. Consequently, it is necessary that subjectivity be held in some way at a distance and that the appropriation be in some way mediated by all the objectifying activities."[22]

"Appropriation" underscores that the text is spoken *to me*, the reader. Ricœur defines a text as a *discourse that is fixed by writing*, and "discourse," in Ricœur's lexicon, is *someone saying something to someone about something*.[23] Unqualifiedly to embrace the death of the author, then, would be to risk forgetting that the text is discourse. On the other hand, to deny the importance of critical distance would be to risk falling back into a kind of anti-critical Romanticism. The dream of absolute knowledge – whether by way of affective immediacy or objective analysis – must be abandoned, Ricœur insists. And once this dream has been abandoned, we cannot avoid the conflict of interpretations.

Thus, Ricœur argues that the phenomenology of religion must "run the gauntlet of a hermeneutic and more precisely of a *textual* or *scriptural* hermeneutic."[24] There is no Religion, only religions, just as there is no Language, only languages. Presumably, linguists cannot study "language itself," but must always study particular languages and from there, attempt to draw conclusions regarding the universal nature of language (if there is such a thing). Similarly, religious beliefs and practices never appear in their "naked immediacy," Ricœur insists, but come to us in the form of *this* belief and *this* practice.[25] This also informs Ricœur's tendency to avoid the language of "experience": without critical distanciation, it

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[21] For a discussion of both the dialectic of "explanation" and "understanding" and of "guess" and "validation", see chapter 4 of *Paul Ricœur*, Interpretation Theory. Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, Fort Worth 1976.
[22] "Phenomenology and Theory of Literature: An Interview with Paul Ricœur", in: Mario J. Valdés (ed.), A Ricœur Reader. Reflection and Imagination, Toronto 1991, 441–447, here 444.
[23] See *Paul Ricœur*, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding", in: id., From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics, Vol. II, translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Evanston 2007, 105–124.
[24] Id., "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky, in: Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn". The French Debate, Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricœur, New York 2000, 130.
[25] Ibid., 130.

may be difficult to prevent the experience from falling into "immediacy, effusiveness, intuitionism."[26] Ricœur's point is not that experience does not happen, but that a reliance on experience *alone* risks collapsing into a reliance on the privacy of one's own consciousness. But consciousness is not self-enclosed; it speaks a language it does not control; it is motivated by subconscious desires it does not know; it is embodied and thus subject to all the involuntary processes of birth, death, pain, affect, etc. To treat experience in isolation, as if it were not bound up with these processes that are variously involuntary, subconscious, and obscure, would be to deny the very richness of experience itself. Similarly, then, we should not be afraid to *interpret* revelatory phenomena, for they, too, are given – if they are given – to an embodied, speaking, feeling, and acting consciousness.

An obvious objection here may be that, in submitting the supposedly revelatory text to the objectifying methods of a critical methodology, we violate the otherness of revelation, bringing the infinite down into the finite, forcing transcendence to conform to the demands of immanence – or, more simply, we try to square a circle. However, I do not think that we must choose between *either* genuine revelation *or* critical distanciation. Here, Ricœur's account of human finitude helps clarify a third way.

Human finitude, in Ricœur's view, is not structurally (in the phenomenological sense) fallen or guilty. The human being is not simply finite but is rather a "mixture" of finite and infinite. In this way, Ricœur resists what he calls "the contemporary tendency to make finitude the global characteristic of human reality."[27] Human finitude is not self-enclosed but exists in tension with the infinite. And by this, Ricœur does not mean to re-inscribe the Cartesian account of the human being as an intermediate between "angel and animal."[28] Rather, Ricœur writes, the human being "is intermediate within himself […] because he brings about mediations."[29] Accordingly, the human being, in Ricœur's view, is "no less discourse than perspective, no less demand for totality than a limited nature, no less love than desire."[30] We can see the role of phenomenological intentionality in this analysis. Human consciousness is not closed in on itself but is always extended towards the world. As Ricœur writes, "Consciousness defined by its intentionality is outside, beyond."[31] Moreover, Ricœur writes, "I am a twofold intentionality: on the one hand, an intentionality signifying emptily, a power to speak in the absence of the this-here; on the other hand, a fulfilled intentionality, an openness to receiving, and a power of seeing in the presence of the this-

[26] Id., Critique and Conviction (see fn. 4), 139.
[27] Id., Fallible Man, translated by Charles A. Kelbley, New York 1985, 3. Ricœur also writes, in "From Existentialism to the Philosophy of Language": "My problem was to distinguish finitude and guilt. I had the impression, or even the conviction, that these two terms tended to be identified in classical existentialism at the cost of both experiences, guilt becoming a particular case of finitude and for that reason beyond cure and forgiveness, and finitude, on the other hand, being affected by a kind of diffused sense of sadness and despair through guilt." (id., Philosophy Today, Chicago 1978, 86.)
[28] Id., Fallible Man (see fn. 27), 3.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Id., Husserl. An Analysis of His Phenomenology, translated by Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree, Evanston 2007, 204. Dermot Moran writes that Ricœur interprets the notion of intentionality "not as self-possession but as openness to otherness." (*Dermot Moran*, "Husserl and Ricœur. The Influence of Phenomenology on the Formation of Ricœur's Hermeneutics of the 'Capable Human'", in: Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy XXV/1 (2017) 182–199, here 192.)

here."[32] Consciousness is outwardly *directed*, *open* to that to which it is directed, and *able* to receive it.

One way that this two-way intentional movement occurs is through the signification of speech. As Ricœur writes, "I say more than I see when I signify."[33] Through speech, we extend ourselves beyond our limits.[34] Thus, we are limited yet engaged in a movement of transcendence, extended by the desire[35] and effort[36] to move beyond the limits of our perspectives.

The salient point here is that human finitude is not the absolute other of infinitude; human beings need not be interpreted as simply a privation of, or a guilty turning away from the plenitude and goodness of divine being. Ricœur follows Kant in arguing that our basic predisposition is toward the good.[37] There is a fundamental *capability* in the human being that is only disabled by evil. But that our first orientation is toward the good indicates that every encounter with the good need not be understood as an immediate and unconditional *contamination* or *perversion* of the good. We *can* encounter the good and act according to it. The question, then, is not whether this basic capability exists, but how it can be recovered or "regenerated."[38]

Moreover, if otherness is already inscribed within selfhood – as Ricœur argues in *Oneself as Another* – then perhaps the involvement of the self in the interpretation of otherness is not simply a contamination, as if *same* and *other* exist on opposite sides of a chasm that can only be bridged through an act of violence. Through Ricœur's account of narrative identity, we receive a picture of the self as outwardly oriented – finding the resources for weaving a "concordant discordance" in the socio-cultural world – and as fragile insofar as it is not self-instituting. The self, in other words, is neither obliterated nor returned to the throne of a self-transparent *cogito*.

From here, I think we can wager that to interpret revelation is not *necessarily* to violate its alterity. As noted above, the text as discourse is a text *addressed to me*; this means I do not master the meaning, to be sure, but it also means that the meaning is given to me *for me to appropriate*. Thus, in the case of the world of the biblical text – the Kingdom of God – it is not given to me *simply* to overwhelm me, shatter my self-certainty, etc., but to *enable me to live differently*. This enabling is possible because the human being is a "mixture" of finite and infinite rather than simply being a self-enclosed finitude. If finitude were self-

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[32] *Ricœur*, Fallible Man (see fn. 27), 28.
[33] Ibid., 44.
[34] Don Ihde summarizes this point in the following way: "Human transcendence is the intention to signify and is the power of speech." *Don Ihde*, Hermeneutic Phenomenology. The Philosophy of Paul Ricœur, Evanston 1971, 69.
[35] The fundamental role of desire in human existence is exposed by Freud.
[36] Ricœur draws his notion of "effort" from Spinoza's understanding of *conatus*. For a helpful discussion of Ricœur's debt to Spinoza, see *James Carter*, Ricœur and Moral Religion, Oxford 2014, especially chapter 2 "Reading Religion as Metaphysical Life in Spinoza" (21–48).
[37] According to Brian Gregor, "Like Kant, Ricœur believes there is an original, created goodness 'rooted in the ontological structure of the human being' but that this is bound by radical evil—what Ricœur calls fault." (*Brian Gregor*, Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Religion, Lanham 2019, 83).
[38] Ricœur often speaks of "regeneration," a term that he also draws from Kant. See, for example, id., "A Philosophical Hermeneutics of Religion: Kant", in: id., Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, translated by David Pellauer, edited by Mark I. Wallace, Minneapolis 1995, 75–92.

enclosed and utterly incapable of reaching beyond itself through the movement of desire, then it would only be shattered by an encounter with transcendence. But the shattering of an enclosed horizon is only revelatory if it enables the recipient to live within a new, transformed horizon; it is only good if it enables me to live within the new understanding of goodness. This, then, provides a basic starting point for *discernment*: does this text enable or disable human capability?

4. Third Detour: Divine Creation

The previous detour–return leads us to the threshold of a third detour – namely, the detour through creativity. A *theo-poetic* emerges here: revelation is understood as the *creative transformation* of human capability. And if, as argued above, human finitude is not fundamentally incapable, then we can wager that human capability *participates* in this creative transformation.

Here, I would like to venture a brief suggestion regarding the possibilities opened for a comparative philosophy of divine creativity. In the creation hymns of the *Rig Veda*, the mystery of divine creation – the creation of reality, of humanity, and even of the gods – is expressed in poetic language. Often, this language is paradoxical, emphasizing the impossibility of grasping the truth of Brahman – the primordial whole out of which existence emerges – in human thought and language. In the Creation Hymn, for example, the author asks who or what preceded the division of reality into existence and non-existence. In response, the author writes, "Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? When was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterward, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?"

In the final verse, the author risks an answer, only to undermine it at the last moment: "Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know."[39] The poem attempts to say what cannot be said, and think what cannot be thought. And in the end, we must acknowledge that as soon as we name Brahman, we have merely named a particular thing rather than the source of all particular things. As soon as we refer to Brahman as "he," we name an individual who, *qua* individual, does not know the full mystery of Brahman.

In subsequent hymns, the origin of existence is further described as a birth,[40] as a ritual offering,[41] and as arising from the erotic primordial heat (*tapas*) that is compared to the heat generated through ritual activity.[42] (Thus, we find here attestation to Richard

[39] "Creation Hymn", in: The Rig Veda, translated by Wendy Doniger, New York 1981, 25–26.
[40] "In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose" (The Rig Veda [see fn. 39], 27).
[41] "The sage, our father, who took his place as priest of the oblation and offered all these worlds as oblation…"
[42] "Order and truth were born from heat as it blazed up." Wendy Doniger explains the title of this hymn – "Cosmic Heat" – in the following way: "*Tapas*, the heat produced by the ritual activity of the priest, is equated with the primeval erotic or ascetic heat of the Creator." (The Rig Veda [see fn. 39], 34)

Kearney's argument that "Theopoetics is theoerotics."[43]) The recitation of these hymns is humanity's opportunity to participate in the ongoing divine creation.[44] Revelation is not primarily a matter of a personal deity revealing something to an individual person; rather, *reality reveals itself*, and this revealing emerges through the participation of human creative action.

The Vedic understanding of revelation thus appears to avoid falling into the psychologizing trap that Ricœur is keen to avoid – namely, the trap of understanding revelation as a divine "insufflation" or whispering into the ear of the author.[45] According to Ricœur's hermeneutics, as we have seen, the meaning of a text is *in front of it*, in the possible world that it projects, rather than behind it in the mind of the author. The Vedas seem to unfold a world in front of them in which the readers can participate – a world of divine creativity. The question is not so much *who* reveals, much less of *what* is revealed in terms of a set of propositions, but of *how*, of a *way of being*. The revelation is creative, active, and participatory. In other words, revelation is neither purely asymmetrical nor symmetrical but is rather dynamic and dialogical. The revealed meaning emerges through the *interplay* of self and other.

Accordingly, revelation can be tied more closely to *play* than to authority or rational discourse. Ricœur presents play as "the mode of being of appropriation." Reality, author, and reader are "metamorphosed by the heuristic fiction" – that is, all are caught up in play. According to Ricœur, "Play is not determined by the consciousness which plays; play has its way of being. Play is an experience which transforms those who participate in it."[46] Moreover, Ricœur writes, "In entering a game, we hand ourselves over, we abandon ourselves to the space of meaning which holds sway over the reader."[47] We bracket ourselves and our ordinary dealings with the world and enter the world of "as-if." In this fictional "as-if" world, I am neither a sovereign master nor a passive subject. Rather, the self who plays is constituted as a new kind of self in the very to-and-fro of the play.

According to Ricœur, "revelation, if the expression is to have a meaning, is a feature of the biblical *world*."[48] As we have seen, this "world" unfolds in front of the text, inviting the reader to imaginatively inhabit the fictive world – which means that the reader is called to *dwell* through feeling. In so doing, the reader "appropriates" the world of the text and is

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[43] *Richard Kearney*, "God Making. An Essay in Theopoetic Imagination", in: The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy (2019) 145–160, here 147.

[44] *John Koller*, Asian Philosophies, New York [7]2018, 17: "Life was sanctified and given meaning through the ritual re-creation of existence. The liturgy of the cosmos-creating and life-creating rituals consisted primarily of recited, chanted, and sung verses from the Vedas." Id., The Indian Way. An Introduction to the Philosophies and Religions of India, Upper Saddle River [2]2006, 36: "The supreme challenge to human beings is to create and employ the instrumentalities that will effectively create a continuing self-world that participates most fully in the powers and glories of existence."

[45] In "Philosophy and Religious Language," Ricœur writes: "to put the 'issue' of the text before everything else is to cease to ask the question of the inspiration of the writings in the psychologizing terms of an insufflation of meaning to an author that projects itself into the text." Id., Figuring the Sacred. Religion, Narrative, and Imagination, Mark I. Wallace (Ed.), Minneapolis 1995, 44.

[46] Id., "Appropriation" (see fn. 3), 90.

[47] Ibid., 91.

[48] Id., "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics", in: From Text to Action (see fn. 23) 89–101, here 96.

thereby transformed. This is all made possible thanks to play, wherein the ego, as master of meaning, is bracketed so that both reader and author can be caught up in the play of the text. As such, revelation, as a "feature" of this world of the text, is enacted through play. I am creatively engaged in the interpretation and realization of the possibilities presented in the text.

My brief engagement with the *Rig Veda* is intended as an experiment in doing precisely what Ricœur recommends – that is, to "run the gauntlet" of hermeneutics and to engage the texts in which the question of revelation emerges. I certainly have not *proven* that revelation is, *in fact*, best captured by a theo-poetic account rather than a theo-logic. My wager is much more modest: the detour through poetic texts such as the *Rig Veda* allows an enriched understanding of revelation as a theo-*poeisis*, a creative transformation of self and reality.

5. Conclusion

The challenge for any phenomenology of religion is to identify something *universal*. And Ricœur argues that if there is anything universal to be found – and this remains, I think, a big *if*[49] – it will only be found by taking a hermeneutical detour through the expressions in which revelation is attested. This "long route" of hermeneutics, as Ricœur calls it, is not meant to deny altogether the legitimacy of seeking something universal. But if there *is* something universal to be found, it will not appear to us – not, at least, in any comprehensible way – outside these contexts. We always understand through the lens of particular languages, histories, religions, etc. Even a phenomenon that overwhelms these categories and reverses the relationship of phenomenological intentionality[50] must still be understood *from somewhere*, from *within* a set of traditions, ideas, etc. – in a word, it still appears within a *horizon*. Otherwise, it would remain incomprehensible. Thus, for revelation to be revelatory *at all*, it must speak to us and enable us to live in the revealed world.

The philosopher does not begin anything, Ricœur argues; rather, she arrives on a scene where humans are *already* speaking, desiring, acting, narrating, etc.[51] And to bypass the debates that arise in the different fields of study devoted to these arenas of human life – i. e.,

[49] Ricœur writes, for example: "We cannot even be sure that the universal character of the structure call/response can be attested independently of the different historical actualizations in which this structure is incarnated." Id., "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse", [see fn. 24], 130.

[50] Ricœur writes that symbols reverse phenomenological intentionality. "But in saying this," Ricœur writes, "have we not already broken the phenomenological neutrality? I admit it. I admit that what deeply motivates the interest in full language, in bound language, is this inversion of the movement of thought which now addresses itself to me and makes a subject that is spoken to." Id., Freud & Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation, translated by Denis Savage, New Haven – London 1970, 31.

[51] Ricœur writes: "Philosophy does not start anything independently: supported by the non-philosophical, it derives its existence from the substance of what has already been understood prior to reflection." (id., Fallible Man [see fn. 27], 4). Similarly, he writes: "There is no philosophy without presuppositions. A meditation on symbols starts from speech that has already taken place, and in which everything has already been said in some fashion; it wishes to be thought with its presuppositions. For it, the first task is not to begin but, from the midst of speech, to remember; to remember with a view to beginning." Id., The Symbolism of Evil, translated by Emerson Buchanan, New York 1969, 348 f.

linguistics, psychoanalysis, etc. – would be to deny ourselves precious critical resources that can help us understand the human being in the varied and complex ways that it speaks and acts. So, too, with revelation: the philosopher arrives on a scene where revelation is already attested, sometimes in dramatically different (perhaps even contradictory) ways. To avoid both subjectivism and absolutism – that is, to avoid saying, on the one hand, that revelation is the strictly private experience of an individual or, on the other hand, to assert that *our* account of revelation is *the* account of revelation, take it or leave it – the phenomenology of revelation should instead patiently work through the conflict of interpretations with the hope of arriving at an ontology, however piecemeal it may be.

The poetry of revelation is the creation of a new world, of a new vision of reality and a regenerated human capability to inhabit that reality. Without poetry, revelation would not be purer in its revelatory power. Without poetry, revelation would not be revelatory at all.

The aim of this paper is to explore the connection between Ricœur's account of the linguistic imagination and his preference for understanding revelation as a matter of the world of the text rather than of religious experience. To understand revelation as poetic is not to violate the purity and alterity of the phenomena but to remain open to the poetic richness of the world of the text, which creates new meaning and enables new ways of being. To make this argument, I will follow Ricœur's method of detour–return. The first detour–return will traverse Ricœur's account of the productive imagination and consider how the notion of the "world of the text" can enrich our understanding of revelation as the revelation of a new world that we can inhabit. In the second detour–return, I will consider the role of critical distanciation in the preservation of discernment. An important part of this argument will be an examination of Ricœur's account of the human being as a mixture of finite and infinite. I argue that this implies that human finitude is not utterly opposed to divine infinitude and that, by extension, human understanding is not always and only a contamination or limitation of the divine excess. In the final detour–return, I will follow Ricœur's recommendation that a phenomenology of religion take the hermeneutical path of examining the texts in which religious phenomena come to expression. I will examine select passages from the *Rig Veda* to consider the possibilities for understanding revelation as a *theo-poeisis* – viz., a divine creativity in which we participate. Ultimately, I hope to show that revelation involves the creation of a new world and the regeneration of human capability such that we can inhabit that world.