



## Paul Ricœur (1913-2005)

Paul Ricœur was initially influenced by Karl Jaspers' existentialism as well as the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. In the 1950s he developed a philosophy of the will structured around the perspectives of freedom, fallibility and evil. Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology subsequently focused on the exegesis of foundational Biblical texts as well as other fields of interpretation and analysis spanning semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism, which he put to the test of critical comparative descriptions. Without questions, ethical concerns run through much of his work to a greater or lesser degree, be they when he describes the relationships between history and truth, time and narrative, justice and universalism, or symbols and thought. But directly pertinent to intercultural philosophy are his reflections on the self and alterity, and by extension self-identity and otherness.

In *Sois-même comme un autre* and *Parcours de la reconnaissance* Ricœur proposed a chiasmic conception of the relationship between 'self' and 'other'. Influenced by [Gabriel Marcel](#)'s notion of 'creative fidelity', Ricœur generally understands selfhood as creatively generative albeit in need of recognition. Just as religious texts make sense in the process of being interpreted, we should not seek to define self-identity and its correlative other as subject and object fixed in time and space; they call for interpretation. They are both generated dialectically, that is, through a dynamic of reciprocity instilled by complementary differentials such as activity and passivity or voluntary and involuntary. Moreover, the generative dimension of selfhood is not only understood in the light of inter-personal relationships; the dynamic at work that allows for selfhood to form and be recognisable also involves other dialectical elements such as time and narration, or questing and history, tradition, culture or language. Broadly speaking, the relational nature of selfhood should therefore be understood in both temporal and spatial terms, both in-motion and determinable. From an ethical perspective, the reciprocity at work is critical to realising what constitutes good practice in intercultural philosophy. Selfhood should not reduce otherness to what can be recognised in similar terms (an *alter ego*), any more than alterity should be contemplated as infinitely strange.

To this effect, Ricœur challenges what he calls the 'philosophies of the subject' that tend to conceive of the duality self/other in unilateral fashion. His 'hermeneutics of the self' stands in sharp contrast to the Cartesian *I/cogito* that posits itself as a thinking 'subject' (albeit through 'doubting') and ignores thereby the fundamental role played by the 'other'. Ricœur's chiasmic conception of self/other implies that neither 'self-consideration' (*estime de soi*) nor love of the 'other' should be comprehended as discrete entities. Oneself must be seen 'as another' as much as otherness must be 'at the heart of selfhood' implying thus a certain 'mutual vulnerability'.

Self-consideration and love of the other are therefore dialectically brought together to preserve a principle of equality that allows for differences - a reciprocity that for Ricœur constitutes the possibility of friendship and justice. The same primacy of reciprocity applies to the element of 'recognition' needed for the formation of selfhood and otherness. This is what *Parcours de la reconnaissance* attempts to show by examining 'recognition' as mode of 'identification' of 'objects' or 'persons'; 'self-recognition' as contingent on the ability to recognise one's 'acting' (*agir*) in whatever forms; and finally by highlighting the fundamental of mutual recognition in the shaping of 'self' and 'other' as can be found in the act of 'gift' and in contradistinction from any idea of 'struggle' for recognition. To sum up, Ricœur's chiasmic philosophy of alterity provides many indispensable ethical and methodological tools to develop an intercultural philosophy of a particular species: a dialogical philosophy of culture.

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### **Bibliography**

Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990) [*Oneself as another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)]

*Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004) [*The course of recognition*, trans. D. Pellauer, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005)].