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Truth and Eschatology in Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy: Key Points for a Renewal of Education

Prawda i eschatologia w filozofii Paula Ricoeura.
Punkty odniesienia dla odnowy edukacji

Abstract: The objective of this article is to highlight Paul Ricoeur's proposal on the relationship between truth and the 'eschatological horizon.' This relationship can be identified in some key works of the author. We demonstrate the implications and consequences of this approach for the understanding and implementation of education in accordance with a strong idea of the human person.

Keywords: truth; human person; education; eschatology; hope; Paul Ricoeur.

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie propozycji Paula Ricoeura dotyczącej relacji między prawdą a tym, co można nazwać „horyzontem eschatologicznym”. Związek ten można zidentyfikować w niektórych kluczowych pracach tego autora. Postaramy się pokazać implikacje i konsekwencje takiego podejścia dla rozumienia i realizacji wychowania zgodnego z silną ideą osoby ludzkiej.

Słowa kluczowe: prawda; osoba ludzka; edukacja; eschatologia; nadzieja; Paul Ricoeur.

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1. Introduction

Reflecting on the truth – its reality and its philosophical status – poses several consequences in the meditation on the human person and her education. This work wishes to introduce an eschatological perspective in this reflection, following the indications found in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. The study will first introduce the terms and limits of the debate, briefly outline Ricoeur's perception of eschatological approach to the truth, and draw conclusions for a better understanding of the human person and her education.

We use the term *eschatology* in this work to refer to 'the last things' – *éschaton* is a Greek word that means 'last.' It does not mean last in a set of things or a series of events within history, but *absolutely last*, when the word 'later' no longer has the temporal-intra-historical meaning that we usually give to it. This study of 'last' realities (that lie beyond earthly life) has normally been reserved for theology. Paul Ricoeur, however, speaks about what is eschatological within the context of his philosophical reflection, which will be analysed and related to his view on truth and to a new approach to education.

The truth and the true, on the other hand, have been thematised in Ricoeur's work in relation to other realities that were, at the time, the focus of his meditation: myth, language, history, interpretation, memory, action and intersubjectivity, to name a few. Other authors, such as Jean Ladrière, inspired by Ricoeur, developed a reflection centred on the epistemological aspect of truth. Our philosopher, on the other hand, always remained at a distance from such a conceptualisation, a fact that – in our opinion – could make his approach even more interesting from an anthropological and personological perspective.

We will not attempt to justify or develop the relationship between person and truth, or the relationship between truth and the education of a human person. We assume that the existence of such a relationship can be expressed in the following terms. Being a person means that it is a dynamism in place, which makes us the person we are (personification). Some dimensions of reality – such as goodness, beauty, and truth – play a fundamental role within this dynamism, since they 'enrich' the person according to the rightful sense of her being, allowing a particular relationship to other persons and to the Communion of Persons that radically constitutes her personal being.

We will develop an approach to the truth with an eschatological perspective. This could bring forth an understanding of truth closer to this dynamism through which we are fulfilled as persons taking part in a community (of memory, knowledge, history, etc.) and within a fraternal relationship with other persons.

2. Aspects of truth in Ricoeur's philosophy

Perhaps the text where the eschatological approach to truth is most present is a compilation that Ricoeur initially published in 1955, entitled *History and Truth*. Let us begin by highlighting some elements of Ricoeur's philosophy to understand the meaning behind the 'truth' with respect to the human person.

The first element, which Ricoeur makes quite clear from the introduction of *History and Truth*, doing – as he himself points out – a 'critique of himself' is the *overcoming of a false opposition between theory and praxis* in reference to historical action and truth. For Ricoeur, 'thinking in truth' (*penser en vérité*) and 'bearing witness in truth' (*attester en vérité*) are part of a single movement of the person who reflects (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 4–5). All of these essays, as he states in his introduction, are in praise of the word which reflects efficaciously and acts thoughtfully (ibidem, p. 5). A *truth that is thought* is always a *truth acted* in some way, which transforms the reality of human beings who think, and through them, makes possible the transformation of social environment and history.

It is fascinating to contemplate the naturalness with which Ricoeur overcomes this inveterate problem, which continues to cause limiting approaches in the education of persons at all levels, as the sense of the 'strength' of the truth is being lost. In young cultural contexts – such as Latin America – where the roots of thought are normally developed more in formal education than in tradition, this false opposition between knowledge and doing often translates into superficiality to approach reality and its problematic complexity, and a widespread mediocrity of vision with respect to the possibilities to face this reality. An actual educational challenge is the *recovery of the value of reflection*, and of critical thinking that is intimately linked to it. The relationship between access to information and the exercise of thought is not necessarily

directly proportional. On the contrary, being confronted with the present 'sea of information,' perhaps the most significant thing is to learn how to wisely lead the ship of thought. A recent publication on Ricoeur states: 'Despite its promises to more knowledge, greater access to information has led to less wisdom' (Boscaljon & Keuss, 2020, p. 4).

A second aspect, present only tangentially in *History and Truth*, is the *openness of thought to the reality of the symbol*. Perhaps this is one of the topics for which our author is best known; hence, we will limit ourselves to a simple review of the implications for education.

'The symbol gives rise to thought,' says Ricoeur at the end of his *Symbolism of Evil*, proposing a hermeneutic circle between the approximation of what is believed in the symbol and what is thought in philosophical reflection. This approach can be considered part of the 'widening' of the horizons of thought. According to Ricoeur, it is within the symbolic universe that humanity is revealed, since each symbol speaks to us 'as an index of the situation of man at the heart of the being in which he moves, exists, and wills' (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 356).

Thus, human thought is already 'situated' within a symbolic universe and expressed in a common language. This situation, on the one hand, frees us from the pretension of restarting thought from scratch, while on the other, it moves us to overcome the limitations of what Ricoeur calls a 'neutralized belief' (ibidem, p. 354). We will see that this approach to truth is always situated (in history, context or community) and simultaneously open to the future, becoming the crucial point of the 'eschatological' approach.

These considerations regarding symbol and thought also shed light for a debate on the education of the human person. All that surrounds us, from the first days of our life, is forging that place *from* which we think. What shapes us as persons is not only what comes to our understanding in a structured way through the classic educational institutions (school, university, etc.). The importance of relationship spaces (family, social environment, friendship) is increasingly evident, especially during human upbringing when the core beliefs and a vision of the world are being received. All of this is mediated by language, which cannot be considered only as an expression of something that is already constituted and hoped to be transmitted but is, in fact, a factor that shapes our own personal constitution. We should take care of language and recognise the power of words.

A third structural aspect of Ricoeur's approach to the truth is that the latter always occurs *intersubjectively*. Ricoeur says:

We should reject any definition of truth which is, as it were, *monadic*, wherein truth would be for each person the adequation of *his* answer to *his* problematic. On the contrary, we now approach an intersubjective definition of truth according to which each one 'explains himself' and unfolds his perception of the world in 'combat' with another (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 51).

In connection with the first two aspects already mentioned, the third one deems it useless to propose an 'individual truth' forged in the solitude of one's own mind looking for evidence. The exercise of thought is always communal: it's situated and connected with the life and action of persons, life and action that are never developed in an isolated or solipsistic way.

Applied first to philosophy, Ricoeur offers a new approach to what could be called *philosophia perennis*:

Truth expresses the being-in-common of philosophers. *Philosophia perennis* would then signify that there is a community of research, a '*symphilosophieren*,' a philosophizing-in-common wherein all philosophers are in a collective debate through the instrumentality of a witnessing consciousness, he who *searches* anew, *hic et nunc*. In this debate, the philosophers of the past are constantly changing their meanings: the communication that saves them from oblivion and death brings out the intentions and possibilities of response that their contemporaries had not seen (ibidem, pp. 51–52).

This has relevant consequences for education; it is impossible to think of it as an isolated process within the individual. This is perhaps one of the most accurate applications of the relationality of human persons, as neither truth is sought in solitude, nor is it found outside the realm of a community of people seeking together. The now famous collaborative methods of teaching and learning find here an interesting anthropological foundation. Moreover, if the meaning of this 'community of thought' is well understood, they can be further enriched. It is solely a question of knowing how to listen to others, respect their opinions, and present one's own thinking. It is about fostering an authentic *friendship* in the truth and for the truth, where the search is authentic

and not just an excuse to do intellectual gymnastics trying to reaffirm what we already know or believe.

3. Eschatology and truth

For Ricoeur, the *eschatological* dimension can be expressed with terms that are articulated in different ways according to the context in which they are applied: 'horizon' and 'hope.' From a philosophical standpoint, approaching reality eschatologically assumes a view from a future that comes to us and brings with it a resolution, reconciliation, or a good that is always beyond the possibilities that we can calculate today; a future good that demands something from the person (from her thought and action) today. The well-known 'already, but not yet' that summarises the eschatological vision in theology – in reference to redemption acting in the present, but not yet fully realised – is applied by Ricoeur within a philosophical framework to explain and motivate human action and its history. As Begué states: 'Hope means a horizon, always more or less blurred, where only certain signs appear, something similar to what happens in art with creative intent. All of Ricoeur's work bear the stamp of this intention' (Begué, 2002, pp. 362–363).

As Ricoeur recalls in the introduction to *History and Truth*, he attempts to capture – both from a formal and rhetorical point of view and from a material and reflective point of view – 'the philosophical impact of hope' (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 11) and 'the insertion of an eschatological stage into philosophical reflection' (ibidem, p. 11). It seems to us that this perspective can open meditation on the human person and human realities to a renewal that is certainly much needed in the present day. Similar to a protological reflection has been able to exert an extremely positive influence on what we can say about the human person and her constitution, an eschatological one can also generate an understandable expectation in those who seriously take the task of an anthropological, personological and pedagogical reflection.

The relationship with the theme of truth is presented since the first moment: Ricoeur does not hesitate to affirm 'the theoretico-practical function' of the eschatological horizon of hope as 'a rational feeling that is regulative and purificative both of skepticism and fanaticism: skepticism which refuses to look for meaning, and fanaticism which declares it prematurely'

(ibidem, p. 12). The point of arrival will be an approach to the truth from hope itself.

It would be desirable to begin a meditation on truth with a celebration of unity. The truth does not contradict itself, falsehood is legion. The truth brings men together, falsehood scatters them and sets discord among them. But it is not possible to begin in this way. The *One* is too distant a reward; it is an evil temptation (ibidem, p. 165).

This quote from *History and Truth* reminds us of the realism required to approach the theme of truth and its realisation in history. Ricoeur eschatologically motivated this realism in the following ways.

Truth is polemic: you must fight for it as you fight on a battlefield. To deny this state *in itinere* of truth, when it is in the hands of human beings, is an evil temptation. The history of thought, as well as history in its own right, is precisely the testimony of this pitched battle. However, our own lives can be a testimony of this: how many times what we come to assume as true is the result of a journey that requires overcoming obstacles, with changes of route that could be radical? How many times our 'truth' ends up showing its provisional and surmountable character?

The authoritarian temptation that denies this 'polemic character' of truth leads to a *premature unification* of it. Ricoeur acknowledges that this temptation has occurred in the spheres of power, both religious and political: 'this culpability which is linked to the unity of the truth – this lie of the truth – appears when the goal of unifying coincides with the sociological phenomenon of *authority*' (ibidem, p. 176). Later he describes the 'striking affinity' between clerical and political temptation as follows:

clever submissiveness and cunning disobedience; propaganda adept at playing on all the psychological strings; censoring of opposing opinions and the placement of books and films on the index; the art of 'make believe,' coagulating all aspects of a civilization into a mentality impervious to external criticism; vicious transformation of Socratic doubt into self-criticism which merely restores the momentarily disturbed orthodoxy (ibidem, p. 185).

We should consider the pedagogical consequences of this first pole of our discussion: *truth cannot be imposed by submission*. There is an intimate relationship between truth and the freedom of the person. From a Christian point of view, we can recall Jesus' affirmation to the Jews: 'the truth will set you free' (Jn 8:32), and realise, through the very context of the evangelical affirmation, that it is not a 'possession of the truth' that liberates the person, but a path of discipleship, of permanence in Someone. Are our educational spaces and institutions places that promote this 'path' into truth, searching for it, struggling to conquer it in any way possible?

To the temptations raised by Ricoeur, perhaps today we could add another one, linked to a weak and invisible authority: the authority of a culture of what is banal and immediate. This culture is indeed a very important actor in education in the present day, through social networks, social media, and the relationships they determine. It imposes 'truths' on a sort of invertebrate subject that absorbs them. It would be interesting to evaluate how much of what is proposed today as 'critical thinking' is only an education that introduces this ability to question the established, to polemicise and, finally, to seek with passion the truth.

However, if the truth is controversial and polemic, are we condemned *de facto* to relativism? For Ricoeur, the answer is certainly no. This leads us to develop the opposite pole of our discussion. Just as it is polemic, *truth also demands to be one*. We are destined for unity, as our philosopher loves to insist (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 175).

We can see all of this reflected clearly in the work 'Truth and Falsehood' – one of the most interesting works collected in *History and Truth* on the subject that congregates us – where Ricoeur develops two levels of this destination to the unity of truth:

Our wish is that truth be in the singular, not merely in its formal definition but also in the works of truth. We would like for there to be a total meaning which would be as the meaningful form totalizing all our cultural activity. What is the meaning of this intention concerning the unity of truths? It seems to me that this wish is very ambiguous. On the one hand, it represents an exigency, that is to say an authentic goal: an absolute pluralism is unthinkable. This is the profound significance of 'reason,' in the sense in which Kant distinguishes it from the understanding: the understanding applies itself to objects, embodies itself in the works of thought, it is already in dispersion. Reason is the supreme goal

of unifying thoughts and works, unifying mankind, unifying our conception of virtue and happiness. Unity is the goal of feeling just as much as the goal of reason. By the word feeling I mean this confused pre-possession, on the mode of desire, of sadness and joy, of the unity sought, lost, or foreseen; unity is loved. ... Whatever may be the case in respect to this wish for unity, it is at the beginning and at the end of truths (ibidem, pp. 175–176).

Exigency and goal, on the one hand, and feeling and desire on the other, give shape to the experience that we as human beings have of the unity of truth. It is a unity never realised, but always desired and necessarily demanded by our reason as a horizon: it is present at all times, pointing towards the goal that is never really achieved.

Far from being meaningless, for Ricoeur it is precisely this 'exigency for the unity of truth' that moves the human person 'to stitch together the various domains of science, ethics, the fine arts, and faith into an elaborate and self-same tapestry' (ibidem, pp. 192–193). We have no way of knowing this unity, but we demand it constantly. 'This is why we call this unity "formal." For it only prescribes the task of unifying all the domains of existence – of human thought, action, and experience – without giving us the intuition which would fulfill this empty form' (ibidem, p. 193).

This 'rational feeling' constitutes the heart of the French philosopher's eschatological approach:

If Christian preaching refers hope to an *eschaton* which judges and completes history without belonging to it, this hope with eschatological intention has its impact in philosophical reflection in the form of an actual rational feeling. I receive the 'pledge of hope' when I momentarily perceive the harmony of the diverse philosophical systems which are nevertheless irreducible to one single, coherent discourse (ibidem, p. 6).

Similar to how it is imperative to educate in a certain restraint so as not to hasten an unfounded or not sufficiently founded synthesis and form in a healthy critical attitude so as not to accept immediately as true an approach where 'everything is explained' (typical of ideologies and other sectarian approaches), it is also very important to educate a disposition that seeks harmony with said 'rational feeling of the unity of the truth.' This will allow the person to think

in an integrated manner (or as it is said today in educational ‘slang’: to think in a *holistic* way), looking for real consonances without forcing reality into a scheme.

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon that behind some of these ‘holistic’ educational approaches are eclectic and rather superficial proposals. Hence, the capacity for in-depth analysis, as much as patience in reasoning, without haste, should be pedagogical required goals in our frenetic postmodern times.

4. ‘I hope to be within the truth’

As a response to clerical and political synthesis – both premature unifications of truth – Ricoeur proposes the same ‘purification of the truth’ from a Christian perspective, which is, according to him, essentially eschatological:

For the Christian, the rupturing of this violent unity of truth is desirable. On the one hand, it indicates the conscious awareness of all the possibilities of truth and the range of man. On the other, it signifies the purification of the truth of the Word (ibidem, p. 181).

Simultaneously, this eschatological approach reminds me that I cannot give up the horizon of unity. That horizon is demanded by human reason, and not because of a megalomaniac whim of human subjectivity, but rather due to the very open nature of reality itself. As Paul Ricoeur points out: ‘the search for truth is itself torn between the “finitude” of my questioning and the “openness” of being’ (ibidem, pp. 50–51). This tension is explained in an existential way that already specifies the pedagogical transpositions that it entails:

On the one hand, I have something to discover personally, something that no other except myself has the task of discovering. If my existence has a meaning, if it is not empty, I have a place within being which invites me to raise a question that no one else can raise in my place. The narrowness of my condition, my information, my encounters, my reading, already outline the finished perspectives of my calling to truth. And yet, on the other hand, to search for truth means that I aspire to express something that is valid for all, that stands out on the background of my situation as something universal. I do not want to invent or

to say whatever I like, but what *is*. From the very roots of my situation I aspire to be bound by being (ibidem, p. 50).

An educational space that promotes this attitude towards reality would be a giant step forward on the current pedagogical proposals. We should value each human person and her unique path through the vastness of being, and, at the same time, we should also encourage each person to aspire to that unity that we rationally feel is demanded by truth.

Finally, we would like to develop the concrete expression with which Ricoeur proposes the eschatological way of approaching the truth. The French philosopher sums it up in a single sentence: 'I hope to be *within* the truth.' This phrase expresses 'the relation between the duty of thought and a kind of ontological hope' (ibidem, p. 54).

First, the desire to be *within* the truth (*dans la vérité*) is affirmed. Here, the truth is not 'merely a term or a horizon but a milieu such as the atmosphere or light, the latter being an expression common to Gabriel Marcel and Martin Heidegger' (ibidem, p. 54). It is different to say that we would like to find ourselves on the way to the truth, or in the direction of it. Our hope is to 'dwell' *within* truth.

I hope that what I call my philosophy and my thought 'bathes in' a certain milieu constituted by its non-resistance to mediations and even by its power of establishing all mediations – like the way in which light, according to the *Timeus*, mediates between the fire of the eye and the fire of the object (ibidem, p. 54).

This same metaphor of the preposition 'within' – says Ricoeur – leads the reflection towards that *ontological opening* mentioned above. The openness is explained in Ricoeur's words as follows:

It signifies that the many philosophical singularities (Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, etc.) are *a priori accessible* to each other, that all dialogue is possible *a priori*, because being is *that act* which, preceding and founding all possibility of questioning, grounds the mutuality of the most singular philosophical intentions. It is this openness, this clearing, this *lumen naturale*, that the naive

imagination projects in the Elysian Fields where dialogues among the dead are possible.

‘Plurality – concludes then our author – is therefore not the final reality, nor is misunderstanding the ultimate possibility of communication’ (ibidem, p. 54).

Within truth is the first clarification that changes our paradigm by placing truth in an intimate relationship with being and its possibilities always open. Radical freedom is imposed on the part of the person who thinks and educates the person: ‘Truth is not a possession. I cannot hold it or have it’ (Herrerías Guerra, 1996, p. 5). We should question whether it’s valid to speak of ‘*my* truth.’ Perhaps a way to fight the prevailing relativism at the educational level is not through a monolithic approach to truth, but rather by promoting the free openness of spirits to dwell in that ‘milieu’ where a fruitful dialogue is possible.

However, Ricoeur immediately warns us:

We must be on our guard against separating the ‘within’ (‘within the truth’) from the ‘I hope’ (‘I hope I am within the truth’). I cannot express, articulate, or enunciate this unity rationally, for there is no Logos within this unity. I cannot compress within a coherent discourse the ‘openness’ that founds in unity all questions (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 55).

When consonance and coherence become a system is when we lose the truth and are left with that premature synthesis of which we spoke above, a particular form of falsehood. Along with *freedom*, as the attitude of those who find themselves within the space opened by the truth that precedes them, there must be also *humility* and humbleness, as the attitude of one who knows that this space does not belong to anyone and cannot be embraced in its entirety by any human being or by any system of thought.

This does not mean, however, that the unity that corresponds to the openness of being is a fiction or an illusion. Ricoeur is very explicit about it, stating:

Ontological hope has its *signs* and its *guarantees*: the deeper the knowledge one has of a philosophy, the more one is inclined to allow oneself to be seduced by it (and consequently, one better understands the irreducibility of this philosophy

to types). The more one affirms its autonomy in relation to the influences it has experienced, the more one accentuates its *otherness* in comparison to every other philosophy. Consequently, one is proportionately rewarded with the joy of hitting the essential, as if by plunging oneself into the denseness of a philosophy, along with its difficulties, its intentions and its refusals, one thereby experienced its inexpressible consonance with every other philosophy. In this way, one may reach the conviction that Plato, Descartes, and Kant are animated by the same being (ibidem, p. 55).

According to Ricoeur, the function of hope in relation to the truth: 'lies in always keeping the dialogue open and in introducing a fraternal intention into the most bitter of debates.' The hope is the 'vital milieu of communication, the "light" of all our debates' (ibidem, p. 55). Perhaps, *educating in hope* is one of the most important tasks of a pedagogical proposal that declares to be centred on the person.

We would like to conclude with the interpretation that Jean Ladrière makes of a passage from Ricoeur's work. It summarises, interprets, and opens before our eyes the horizon that this perspective has to offer.

Thirty years ago, Paul Ricoeur wrote: 'History remains polemic but illuminated, as it were, by this *eschaton* which unifies and eternalizes history without being able to be coordinated to history. I maintain that the unity of truth is a timeless task only because it is at first an eschatological hope.' ... There is diversity of systems, variety of movements, thesis confrontation, or simply reciprocal ignorance. And yet, there is a common gaze (*visée*) through which all thoughts are communicated one with each other, a gaze that makes them in a certain way contemporary one with each other. Despite the diversity, the opposition, the distance, the separation, there is a kind of implicit dialogue that always lasts between the works and those who have created them. In every authentic thought there is a view at the truth, as a partial, provisional, and deficient figuration of what it implies, of what it invokes, of what it demands. But the truth is not of such a nature that it can be imprisoned in a formulation, a system, or a conceptual network. It cannot be determined as an ideal object that can be grasped, in the style of a concept. It cannot be the object of a vision nor is it really sketchable. It is, however, what gives meaning to the enterprise of thought. The truth is present, but as subtracted; it's inspiring, but it's kind of

out of reach. It is... in the manner of what is always to come, acting in the now, but as something distant that remains unclassifiable. The relationship that is established with it is not a relationship of evidence, or even – strictly speaking – of belief, but a relationship of hope (Ladrière, 2004, p. 215).

Truth is eschatological as reality itself is eschatological. Within the reality, the person of the thoughtful human being is also eschatological: we are *already* who we are, but we are also always on the way to being who we will become and who we are not *yet*. A quote from the book of *Revelation*, the book of the final victory, reminds us about this important aspect of personhood:

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it (Rev 2:17).

In the *éschaton*, we will receive a new name (*ónoma kainón*), a sign of who we will finally become – a name that we already know. Perhaps the most important task of education is the daily cooperation with that kind of *eidós* and knowledge that is conscious and can recognise the truth.

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