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# More than “Passive Preservation” – Ricoeur’s Understanding of *Phronesis* in the Context of the Renewal of Tradition

## Introduction

For both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer as representatives of hermeneutic philosophy, the issue of tradition is one of the leading philosophical themes. If, after Jerzy Szacki, we assume that tradition is the entirety of the relations between the present and the past,<sup>1</sup> it can be said that the aim of the mentioned philosophers was to recognise and understand these relations, mainly in the philosophical and cultural dimension. They recognise that such activity – interpretation of tradition, hermeneutic dialogue with it – can provide a creative basis for understanding and self-understanding, being an irremovable part of what can be – after Gadamer – described as a hermeneutic experience. In this sense, the hermeneutic reference to philosophical tradi-

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<sup>1</sup> Jerzy Szacki, *Tradycja* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2001), 37.

tion is not, in the strict sense, a “purely” historical-philosophical research, but a response to the “invitation to a conversation” which has been offered by this tradition – a form of meaningful activity – that can be called, using Jaspers’ term, “brightening up of existence”.

As representatives of hermeneutic philosophy stress, we are “immersed” in tradition, which is always inextricably linked to our understanding, which in this sense is an entry into the process of transmitting tradition, establishing meaning through interpretation. Therefore, Gadamer and Ricœur share the conviction that philosophising is not an act suspended in a vacuum that would begin at some point zero. Philosophising is always inscribed in a certain historical horizon to which we can refer – not only to understand our own philosophical and cultural affiliation but, above all, to try to answer the questions of tradition, which we relate to our own current experience. By answering such questions, we thus aim to understand, broaden this own current experience, and acquire new reference points for thinking. Such hermeneutic activity is exemplified by the reflections of Gadamer and Ricœur, who draw on the tradition of practical philosophy, focused around the concept of *phronesis*.<sup>2</sup>

These introductory remarks indicate which research topic I intend to focus on in this article. I am interested in Ricœur’s approach to tradition (especially the renewal of tradition) in the context of this author’s considerations on *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. My aim is to demonstrate how the interpretation of a specific concept, characteristic of ancient philosophy, enables the formulation of certain new philosophical contents, especially in terms of ethics, while at the same time being an example of the interpretation of tradition – a dialogue with tradition that ensures its permanence and makes it “alive”.

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<sup>2</sup> I am, of course, aware that there are differences between the concepts developed by these philosophers. In this article, however, I want to bring out the elements that are common and relevant to the issue at hand. For similarities and differences between the hermeneutic philosophy of Ricœur and Gadamer, see, for example, Jean Grondin, “De Gadamer à Ricœur. Peut-on parler d’une conception commune de l’herméneutique?”, in: *Paul Ricœur. De l’homme faillible à l’homme capable*, ed. G. Fiasse (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), 37–62; Elżbieta Kot, “Ujęcie tradycji w hermeneutyce Hansa-Georga Gadamera i Paula Ricœura”, *Logos i Ethos* 1, 20 (2006): 67–88.

## Hermeneutic Understanding of Tradition – Gadamer’s Inspirations

In order to achieve the research objective outlined above, I will also refer to specific themes present in the philosophy of Gadamer, whose considerations are an essential indicator of how hermeneutic philosophers relate to tradition and develop the possibility of making creative use of its resources in the context of specific dilemmas and challenges of the present day – as in the interpretation of the concept of *phronesis*.

First of all, in the context of Gadamer’s understanding of tradition, it is worth recalling the approach to experience used by the author of *Truth and Method*. This approach assumes that those who experience are aware of their own finitude: “The truly experienced person is one who has taken this to heart, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future”.<sup>3</sup> Experience in the right sense – as Gadamer calls it – involves an awareness of one’s own finitude and the recognition of the limits of creative possibilities and self-knowledge. A similar characteristic can be applied to hermeneutic experience, the subject of which is tradition. Hermeneutic experience, as Gadamer points out, “is concerned with tradition. This is what is to be experienced”.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the concept under discussion underlines the importance of the linguistic nature of the contact with tradition – according to Gadamer, tradition, when referring to someone, “speaks by itself like some kind of you”.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the attitude towards tradition is different from communicating with a partner in the form of another human “you”. However, as in the case of interpersonal communication, the attitude to tradition can also be sub-

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<sup>3</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer, Donald G. Marshall (London–New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 2006), 351.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 352.

<sup>5</sup> In relation to Gadamer’s concept, Ricœur also refers to this aspect, he writes: “The universal linguality of human experience – this word provides a more or less adequate translation of Gadamer’s *Sprachlichkeit* – means that my belonging to a tradition or traditions passes through the interpretation of the signs, works and texts in which cultural heritages are inscribed and offer themselves to be deciphered”. See: Paul Ricœur, “The task of hermeneutics”, in: Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and transl. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press 2016), 22.

ject to certain illusions and distortions. According to the author of *Truth and Method*, such a fundamental illusion with regard to tradition is the conviction that it is possible to objectify it, which is established in the naturalistic model of the method – universal, certain, objective, and repetitive. Such an objectifying reference to tradition is characteristic for the work of a researcher who is not involved, i.e., not included in tradition, who learns about its contents, who seeks general regularities but is detached from its influence, who distanced himself from the “vital link” with it. It is, therefore, the work of a researcher, not the activity of an experiencer. Another illusion discussed by Gadamer in relation to the experience of tradition concerns a certain form of historical awareness. The pursuit of freeing oneself from prejudices and judgments, the conviction that it is possible to distance oneself from historical conditions causes the destruction of the sense of tradition, which can only be “regained” by drawing attention to the prejudices accompanying the understanding<sup>6</sup> and recognition of one’s own history. That is why Gadamer proposes to replace the historical consciousness condemned to wandering with an “effective consciousness”, which is characterised – above all – by openness to tradition. An earlier comparison of communication between people to communication between the interpreter and tradition does not lose its heuristic power: Just as we are being questioned by other “you”, so the experience of tradition, which realises the requirement of openness, through the moment of application, makes it possible to understand which is the “fusion” of the horizons of past and present. Gadamer states: “I must allow tradition’s claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me. This too calls for a fundamental sort of openness”<sup>7</sup>.

In view of the above, it can be concluded that the aim of Gadamer’s considerations is not to create rules of interpretation of tradition and its products but to develop a historical structure of understanding as such. The process of understanding is always determined by the structure of the historical situation in which the researcher finds himself. Tradition is not an

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<sup>6</sup> Gadamer discusses the issue of the rehabilitation of superstitions and traditions in the *Truth and Method* (Part II), recognising that the fundamental superstition of the Enlightenment is “prejudice to prejudice in general”, causing “incapacitation of traditions”.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

isolated research object which is objectified by using certain methods. Any experience, as Gadamer points out, assumes the structure of the question. Recognising the value of the experience of tradition, we should therefore try to answer the questions that tradition poses to us. It is precisely the model of conversation as a relationship between the question (coming from tradition) and the answer (formulated by the reader-interpreter) that enables the horizons of understanding postulated by Gadamer to merge: “[...] conversation is about exchanging words and answers. The conversation’s essence is the uniqueness of the questions asked and the answers given [...]. A conversation is a story that, by its very nature, cannot be recorded in the protocol”<sup>8</sup>

## Ricœur on the Heritage of the Past

Having recalled the important – in the context of the specificity of hermeneutic reference to tradition – statements made by Gadamer, I will now focus on Ricœur’s position. It is worthwhile to begin the analysis of this author’s standpoint by presenting his comments on the legitimacy of his attachment to ancient cultural heritage, expressing Ricœur’s attitude to tradition. In his article, “Que signifie *humanisme*?” (1956), Ricœur indicates: “If our attachment to the ancient heritage of our culture is more than a mere bias, then we need to rediscover the meaning of this ‘heritage’, which is a function of every cultural ‘memory’”<sup>9</sup>. The French author recognises that the attachment to heritage should be linked to finding the meaning of that heritage, to developing a “cultural memory” which is not, he adds, a “passive preservation” (*préservation passive*). It constitutes a kind of the core of culture, which Ricœur puts in the context of the contemporary horizon. In his opinion, this contemporaneity is a peculiar conglomerate containing not only ancient heritage but

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<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Wiersz i rozmowa. Rozważania nad próbą tekstu Ernsta Meistra”, in: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Poetica. Wybrane eseje*, transl. Małgorzata Łukasiewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL 2001), 131.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Que signifie ‘humanisme’?”, *Comprendre. Revue de la Société européenne de culture* 15 (1956): 84.

also cultures that do not refer to this heritage, scientific and technological achievements.

The formula “more than passive preservation” contained in the title of this article, therefore, means that the attachment to tradition is, of course, linked to respect for it and concern for its preservation. But above all, it consists of updating the sense of the tradition that shapes us, to which we can refer through our interpretations, which are part of a “circular path” of understanding and self-understanding. That is why Ricœur recognises that »heritage« only lasts through ‘renewal’;<sup>10</sup> which is the realisation of creative human capabilities. These creative capabilities, linked to the development of the potential for reflection and criticality, make it possible to orient and evaluate human ways of life. The realisation of human creativity is a manifestation of the “renewal” of heritage, ensuring its sustainability. In this sense, cultural memory, which is more than just “passive preservation”, Ricœur links to humanism, which in this context is understood as a creative interpretation of the heritage of the past, aimed at shaping civilisation in the face of the challenges of the future.<sup>11</sup> The very idea of heritage, as the philosopher shows in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, is inextricably linked to the idea of debt: “We are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are. The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were. Pay the debt, I shall say, but also inventory the heritage”.<sup>12</sup> Although Ricœur’s statement refers primarily to the ethical-political obligation to remember, I assume it can also be applied to the hermeneutic attitude to tradition, which presupposes the existence of a certain debt to the heritage of the past. This is a debt that can be responded to through the work of “restoration” mentioned earlier, by – as I will show in the following analysis – treating tradition not as a “dead deposit”, but by seeking

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, 88–89. See also: Suzi Adams, “A Note on Ricœur’s Early Notion of Cultural Memory”, *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* 10 (2019): 113–114.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 89.

to make it a “living tradition”, which is important for orientation in the present and thinking about the future.

The claim that “heritage lasts only through renewal”, characteristic of Ricœur’s early reflections on humanism and cultural memory, is developed in the late work of this philosopher, especially in his works: *Time and Narrative* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*. These are works in which Ricœur deals, among other things, with the issue of the crisis of historical identity, referring to the work of Reinhart Koselleck, a representative of the so-called historical semantics. Ricœur’s approach to tradition,<sup>13</sup> combined with research on historical awareness, is connected with defining the relationship between anticipating the future and referring to the past. In reference to the categories of “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations”, which Koselleck dealt with, this relation is of dialectic nature. What does this mean? On the one hand, the space of experience (as a result of the narrative or non-narrative work of consciousness, which develops certain images of the past), on the other hand, the horizon of expectations (as a set of correlates of all activities of individual and collective consciousness relating to the future) are mutually dependent<sup>14</sup> and exist in the form of – as Ricœur acknowledges – “transcendentality of historical awareness” in general. They, therefore, provide a framework within which to assess the variable range between expectations and experience. The horizon of expectations refers to the future, the space of experience refers to the past – their dialectic relationship, as Elżbieta Kot notes, means that “the future is shaped by past experience, and what the space of experience looks like depends on what expectations we have of the future”.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the above, it can be concluded that the “restoration of the heritage”, advocated by Ricœur, is related to the attempt to give new forms to the horizon of expectations and space of experience. Refiguration of the

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<sup>13</sup> It may be added, after Maciej Bugajewski, that for Ricœur tradition is “[...] a complex linguistic structure, a derivative of the process of interpretation and reinterpretation, performed horizontally and vertically in relation to time” – see: Maciej Bugajewski, *Historiografia i czas. Paula Ricœura teoria poznania historycznego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2002), 72.

<sup>14</sup> See: Kot, *Ujęcie tradycji*, 75–76. See also: Jean Grondin, *Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 100–106.

<sup>15</sup> Kot, *Ujęcie tradycji*, 76.

space of experience consists, in referring to tradition in such a way, that from a “dead deposit” it becomes a “living tradition”. As the French philosopher notes, tradition cannot be seen as already formed because it leads to a denial of the need to interpret it, to a tightening of the space of experience. The refiguration of the horizon of expectations, on the other hand, is to confront purely utopian expectations with the present, with the current experience. In Ricœur’s view, these two activities: resisting the narrowing of the space of experience by “opening the past” in the act of creative interpretation, and “modelling” the horizon of expectations by specifying (realising) the expectations themselves – are mutually dependent. As he notes, “For these are two faces of one and the same task, for only determinate expectations can have to retroactive effect on the past of revealing it as a living tradition”.<sup>16</sup> The creatively interpreted tradition, a “living tradition”, can guide people’s actions towards the future, enabling them to go beyond utopian expectations of the past.

In Ricœur’s approach to “renewing tradition”, decrypting the heritage of the past, a prominent role is obviously played by the interpretation of texts (according to the philosopher, a text is any discourse fixed in writing), which is a “model case of communication at a distance”.<sup>17</sup> The historical distance to the texts, and problems, concepts and questions they contain, is never completely overcome. The interpretation constantly oscillates between overcoming distance and belonging to tradition. Ricœur recognises that in the dialectic process of interpretation one can distinguish between moments of distance, connected with the activity of explaining and understanding, and moments of assimilation – existential acts – when the text is set back in the reality of life and becomes an intermediary of participation in culture. As a result – thanks to the text’s interpretation – it becomes possible to self-understand in relation to it.

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, transl. Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 216. Comp. Jean Philippe Pierron, “La tradition vivante ou l’être affecté par le passé. Une lecture de Paul Ricœur”, *Studia Phaenomenologica* XI (2011): 179–194.

<sup>17</sup> See: Paul Ricœur, “The hermeneutical function of distanciation”, in: Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 93–94.

## *Phronesis* – Outlining the Issue

After presenting the characteristics of the treatment of tradition in Gadamer and Ricœur, before presenting the specificity of the hermeneutic turn towards the tradition of practical philosophy focused around the notion of *phronesis*, I will refer to the source treatment of *phronesis* in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. It is crucial to indicate the reasons why it has become an important element of hermeneutic philosophy focused around the ethical issues.

Referring to the description of the term *phronesis* presented in the *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, it can be pointed out that the Greek term *phronesis* (Latin for *prudentia*), meaning, among others, the virtue of prudence, the ability to know or reason in practice, the ability to see the nature of things, understanding or wisdom, has already appeared in pre-Socratic philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Later, for Socrates, as Aristotle points out in *Eudemian Ethics*, *phronesis* is the most vital factor in man’s inner life, while Plato, in the 9th chapter of *The Republic*, treats *phronesis* as a tool needed to give a proper assessment in practical matters.<sup>19</sup> *Phronesis* is, therefore, the criterion for a good choice between what is worse and what is better, and it serves as a basis for a proper understanding of human affairs, creating the basis for a “good life”. This Platonic understanding of *phronesis*, complemented by Aristotle’s definition as a disposition to make wise decisions and act, is a reference point for Gadamer and Ricœur’s interpretations of practical wisdom. Aristotle’s views, which are primarily expressed in *Nicomachean Ethics*, are an important reference, as they provide a basis for the inclusion of the question of wisdom, as a distinctive element of practical philosophy, which is developed in hermeneutic ethics. Aristotle, by recognising that “Now it is thought to be a mark of a man of practical wisdom to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing

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<sup>18</sup> See: *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, vol. 3: E–G, term: *fronesis*, ed. Zbigniew Pańpuch (Lublin: Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, 2002), 648–653.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, transl. Tom Griffith, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 299 (582 A).

conduce to the good life in general”,<sup>20</sup> he draws attention to the importance of *phronesis* in relation to all activities relating to human life. “Phronetic reflection” – as it relates to life as a whole – therefore makes it possible to choose what is good and beneficial and to act wisely. It is also worth pointing out that the relationship between *phronesis* and ethical virtues is important for Aristotle. This relationship determines the correctness of human action: virtues ensure the correctness of the goals that man decides to pursue, and *phronesis* guarantees the correctness of the means to achieve them. The issue of the goal and the means to achieve it will, as I will show, become one of the crucial points of reference for the ethical project that Gadamer and Ricœur are creating, which can be seen as a certain consequence of a hermeneutic “renewal” of tradition.

### Ricœur’s View on *Phronesis*

The above discussion of some aspects of the issue of practical wisdom in Plato and Aristotle’s view leads, I assume, to the question of why the concept of *phronesis* has become – for both Gadamer and Ricœur – one of the essential components of their ethical reflection. One of the basic premises justifying a hermeneutic dialogue with tradition in the form of an interpretation of the concept of *phronesis* can be considered to be the practical dimension associated with this concept. Practical wisdom relating to human activities becomes part of a hermeneutic ethical reflection, which does not aim to develop some universal ethical knowledge but is rooted in the experience of human *praxis*. The development of the *phronesis* theme present in *Nicomachean Ethics* in the context of its links with human action, with the pursuit of a “good life”, is evident in the concepts of the philosophers in question.

According to the author of the *Truth and Method*, the Greek *phronesis* is wisdom that comes from the experience of being in the world, from participation in social *praxis*, from the dialogue. The primacy of practical reason is

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<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 105–106 (1140 B).

noticeable in the philosophy of Gadamer, who placed dialogue in the plan of *phronesis*, assuming that it is not a virtue of some kind, but an effect of life experience based on dialogue with others. *Phronesis* is not a set of rules for Gadamer, nor is it a specific social action method. It should be understood as a special kind of vigilance towards oneself and care for the *praxis* of being among others. In this context, practical philosophy turns out to be man’s reflection on normative assumptions and living conditions, which, as Gadamer claims, makes it a philosophical ethic.<sup>21</sup> Inherent to this reflection is the assumption of the primacy of practical reason, which, according to Kant’s findings, is treated by Gadamer as an autonomous power.

Ricœur also reinterprets the concept of *phronesis* in reference to the tradition of Aristotle and Kant’s philosophy. Importantly, he develops the meaning of *phronesis* within the framework of his distinction between ethics and morality. For Ricœur, ethics is a teleological theory, the subject of which is “good life”, and morality is a deontological theory, centered around the concept of duty.<sup>22</sup> *Phronesis* turns out to be a kind of link, a “third term” that dialectically unites the Aristotelian and Kantian heritage, a synthesis of the ethical pursuit of “good life” and moral duty. Therefore, the author of *Symbolism of Evil* recognises that ethics takes precedence over morality and ethical aspiration over the norm, but this does not mean that there is no need to relate this ethical aspiration to a moral norm. According to Ricœur, this reference is *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Małgorzata Kowalska formulates an accurate opinion on this subject: “Ultimately, a proper moral judgment in a specific situation is for Ricœur the fruit of prudence – Aristotle’s *phronesis*, based on experience and intuition rather than any general law”.<sup>23</sup> The practical wisdom is one of the elements of the ethos of a responsible man.

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<sup>21</sup> See: Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy”, transl. Frederick G. Lawrence, in: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 244–245.

<sup>22</sup> See: Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, transl. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 170–171.

<sup>23</sup> Małgorzata Kowalska, “Wstęp. Dialektyka bycia sobą”, in: Paul Ricœur, *O sobie samym jako innym*, transl. Bogdan Chelstowski, ed. Małgorzata Kowalska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005), XXIX.

For Ricœur, the object of an ethical aspiration, that is to say, a “good life” can be achieved if the person who is guided by this aspiration is accompanied by a phronetic reflection that takes into account both the reference to the rules, and the individuality (exceptionality) of the situation. The recognition of good practice rules that allow responding to specific situations is linked to the reference to “standards of excellence”. Ricœur, referring to the findings of Alasdair MacIntyre from the *After Virtue*, points out that “[...] standards of excellence are rules of comparison applied to different accomplishments, in relation to ideals of perfection shared by a given community of practitioners and internalized by the masters and virtuosi of the practice considered”.<sup>24</sup> With regard to the field of practical philosophy and interpretation of the concept of *phronesis* included in the ethical project, it can be pointed out that this considered practice is a life practice. Patterns of excellence refer to it, functioning as a kind of signpost in the pursuit of a “good life”. As Ricœur acknowledges, they make it possible to give meaning to the concept of “immanent goods” (“as teleology within action”) to practice. Taking into account the indication that the practice under consideration is a life practice, one can also refer to the issue of unity of life plans raised by Ricœur, connected with his understanding of the term *phronesis*: “The action-configurations that we are calling life plans stem, then, from our moving back and forth between far-off ideals, which have to be made more precise, and the weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of the choice of a given life plan on the level of practice”.<sup>25</sup> Thus, practical wisdom turns out to be a kind of link between the previously described standards of excellence and the possibility of making it concrete in life plan activities.

### A Critical Dimension of *Phronesis*

Ricœur’s dialogue with the tradition of practical philosophy exposes a critical dimension of *phronesis* – it can be noticed in his reflections on the

<sup>24</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 176.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 177. For more of Ricœur’s understanding of “good life”, “life plan”, “life” – see: Marek Drwięga, *Paul Ricœur daje do myślenia* (Bydgoszcz: Homini, 1998), 149–168.

hermeneutics of the self, a concept developed in the work *Oneself as Another*. Jean Wahl draws attention to this: “Ricœur’s hermeneutics of the self allows him to take up the concept of phronesis – generally shunned by post-modernists as helplessly hegemonic – as a practice in which selves take the singularity or alterity of others into account. [...] It is in ‘critical phronesis’, in fact, that, for Ricœur, Aristotelianism and Kantianism ultimately meet, in which one finds their profoundest hidden common presuppositions.”<sup>26</sup> Such a view on *phronesis* – as combining practical wisdom with the recognition of the alterity of the other – is linked to the issue discussed earlier – the pursuit of a good life. According to Ricœur, practical wisdom makes it possible to make a moral judgment, that is to say, one that takes into account the prudent reference to specific, individual moments of human life, which are an expression of the pursuit of a “good life”, but without neglecting the universality of the moral norm. What can be described as “doing the right thing” as the result of phronetic reflection relates thus to an ethical perspective which, as a whole, takes into account the presence of the other person. The relationship with the other is part of a certain dialectic: there is an asymmetry between me and the other and a mutual relationship.<sup>27</sup>

The pursuit of a “good life” is not just an individual activity, but a common aspiration, which the author of the *Symbolism of Evil* describes as “aiming at the »good life« with and for others in just institutions”.<sup>28</sup> This activity can be carried out when the judgement of a reasonable person, who has the ability to go beyond the norms, which may not take into account various specific cases, that is to say, above all, conflicts related to the tragedy of human action, is considered to be the proper measure of assessment. As Ricœur points out, practical wisdom, if it is to guide action, must move from universal to concrete knowledge, and it is discernment and sense of what to do.<sup>29</sup> The link be-

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<sup>26</sup> John Wall, “Phronesis, Poetics, and Moral Creativity”, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice. An International Forum* VI, 3 (2003): 323–324.

<sup>27</sup> See: Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, transl. David Pellauer (Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 260.

<sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

<sup>29</sup> See: Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 88. Comp. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Ricœur on Tragedy. Teleology, Deontology, and Phronesis”, in: *Paul Ricœur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, ed. John Wall, William Schweiker, W. David Hall (New York–London: Routledge, 2020), 264–276.

tween *phronesis* and the presence of another human being (with the recognition of the alterity of the other) can relate to a particular type of relationship between people: friendship. Coming back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ricœur stresses that friends are linked by a targeted reference to the good, that is to say, a common desire for a "good life" and reciprocity (mutuality) based, on the one hand, on self-respect and, on the other, on the care of the exchange between giving and receiving.

Summarising, the interpretation of the concept of *phronesis* proposed by the author of *Oneself as Another*, one can indicate that the horizon for *phronesis* is "good life", reflection – its mediation, *phronimos* (reasonable man) – its perpetrator, and concrete situations of life in which the presence of another is inscribed – its application. However, all these terms are subject to a moral obligation. Ultimately, therefore, Ricœur is developing the concept of *phronesis* into critical *phronesis*, trying to reconcile ethical aspiration with moral commitment, care with justice.

## Summary

The formula "more than passive preservation" contained in the title of this article, referring to the hermeneutic "renewal" of tradition through interpretation, is illustrated by Ricœur's "deciphering" of the term *phronesis*. In Ricœur and Gadamer's case, the inclusion in the dialogue with tradition has become, as I have demonstrated, the starting point for the creative formulation of reflections on practical philosophy and the outline of a hermeneutic project of ethics.

I think that Ricœur's proposed interpretation and extension of Aristotle's view on problematics of practical philosophy and *phronesis* has highlighted the fact that ethics in hermeneutic terms does not focus on the issue of the purpose of action and the identification of possible rules and measures to be chosen in order to "live well". Ricœur's interpretation of *phronesis* makes it possible to bring out the "dialogical element" by indicating that phronetic reflection can be seen as keeping an eye on oneself and one's actions and as taking care of the *praxis* of being among others. Therefore, following the

*phronesis* is supposed to lead not only to a “good life” but also to “good fellowship”, understanding and agreement. It may be assumed that practical wisdom creates a vision of the “good life” with reference to bonds of friendship and the idea of justice.

Ricœur’s attitude to tradition and his reflections on *phronesis* can be combined with one of the tendencies present in contemporary philosophy, which consists in the “rehabilitation of practical philosophy”, and point to the wisdom dimension of his philosophising.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, referring to the Socratic formula, so close to Ricœur’s, which indicates that “the unexamined life is not worth living”, it can be said that the “renewal” of tradition through interpretation is a form of mediated study of life, or a form – as I indicated in the introduction – of “brightening up of existence”. The French philosopher stresses that Socrates is a paradigmatic example of a synthesis combining the order of research and the search for “better insights of life” with the order of activities that are to realise a “reasonable order of life and values”. In other words, it would be about combining “philosophical inquiry” with “philosophical commitment”. The postulate from hermeneutic philosophy to conduct a creative dialogue with tradition (interpretation of the text and self-understanding in relation to the text) undoubtedly takes these two moments into account.

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<sup>30</sup> It is most often pointed out that this trend is represented by, for example, the following: M. Riedel, J. Ritter, E. Berti, H.-G. Gadamer, E. Anscombe, A. MacIntyre, M. Nussbaum, H. Jonas, B. Williams, Ch. Pereleman. On the wisdom dimension of hermeneutic philosophy, see: Włodzimierz Lorenc, “Mądrość i filozofia na gruncie hermeneutycznego rozumienia filozofii”, *Sztuka i Filozofia* 20 (2001): 54–73.

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### Abstract

This article focuses on characteristics of the hermeneutic approach to tradition in the context of Paul Ricœur’s (and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s) deliberations on *phronesis*, i.e., practical wisdom. The author indicates how the interpretation of the concept, characteristic of ancient philosophy, enables the formulation of new philosophical contents, especially in the ethical-moral field, while at the same time being an example of the “renewal” of tradition, a dialogue with tradition that ensures its permanence and makes it “alive”.

**Keywords:** Paul Ricœur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutic philosophy, tradition, “passive preservation”, *phronesis*, interpretation, hermeneutic ethics



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