

Peter KEMP (2010) *Sagesse pratique de Paul Ricoeur. Huit études* [Paul Ricoeur's Practical Wisdom. Eight Studies] Paris : Éditions du Sandre.

Peter Kemp – a member of the Institute of Philosophy and Education of the new Danish University of Education and director of the Copenhagen Centre for Ethics and Law – is one of the most important pupils of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005). In this book he brings together essays published between 1986 and 2006 that are linked by a common motif, one no doubt of Aristotelian origin: that of *practical wisdom*, which the author considers lies at the heart of Ricoeurian hermeneutics, to the extent of constituting a fundamental characteristic of it.

The book adds a significant contribution to the interpretive debate around the work of Ricoeur. It engages the task of the reconstruction and critical analysis of his thought, notably in relation to the essential concepts of his narrative hermeneutics and practical philosophy (as laid out in the three works of Ricoeur's maturity to which Kemp gives particular weight: *Temps et Récit* (1983–85) [trans. *Time and Narrative* (1984–88)], *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990) [trans. *Oneself as Another* (1992)] and *Parcours de la Reconnaissance* (2004) [trans. *The Course of Recognition* (2005)]). We are thus presented with a work of critical analysis in the form of a dialogue, revealing on the one hand the recognition by the pupil of what he owed to his master, and on the other the ambition to pursue his own personal path of scholarly research.

The “properly Ricoeurian” nature of Peter Kemp's research in the field of ethics thus comes out in a certain sense on three levels: it is at once interpretive, appreciative and dialectic/dialogic. This can be seen clearly in relation to the philosophical problematics of the association between ethics and narration. In his foreword, Kemp acknowledges that the ethical implications of a hermeneutics of narrative constituted a special subject of interchange with his master: “Paul Ricoeur – he writes – was emphatic that resistance to violence was the foundation of ethics, whereas I insisted on the idea that, without narrative imagination, ethics would lack any basis for comprehension. We finally reached agreement when, at a conference in Chicago in 1999, I recognized that there are *at the same time* both narrative and non-narrative conditions for ethics. In this way Ricoeur taught me that it is difficult to practise a phenomenology which neglected hermeneutic, ethical and practical dimensions. For my part I identified an ethics in his hermeneutics and a hermeneutics in his ethics” (p. 9).

It is via this dialectic between reflection and conversation with his master that Kemp develops an original and personal ethical perspective. He does so starting from the idea that a theory of the narrative basis of ethics does not threaten the *universality* of the ethical experience (the “fundamental ethical attitude”) as this “becomes expressed only through our narrative competence to comprehend our actions and sufferings” (p. 36). From this follows the idea of the close and essential relationship that links ethics with narrative tradition, the story-telling tradition which is “deep-rooted in life” (“whose power persists across history, where stories have demonstrated their capacity in moments of crisis to bring encouragement to people who are thus provided the stability of a conceptual thought” (p. 32). If on the one hand it is philosophical research which brings out and gives greater depth to the role of narrative functions in ethics, on the other hand, “the basis of our ethics serving as imaginative and narrative models” is due “solely [...] to the poetic narratives” themselves; they provide us with the “models which allow us to evaluate any other narrative and any action-governing rule” (p. 59).

If the issues around narrative are at the heart of the first two studies of Kemp's book (and return in the fifth, entitled *Fondements pratiques de l'éthique* [Practical Foundations of Ethics]), the third essay – devoted to *originary affirmation* – contrasts the work of Ricoeur, Heidegger and Lévinas (“one must be harder than Ricoeur was with respect to Heidegger and not as severe as he with respect to Lévinas” (p. 84). In the third study, Kemp analyses the “small-scale ethics” contained in *Oneself as Another*, one of Ricoeur's best books, to which Kemp returns in the sixth essay, *L'Anthropologie philosophique comme condition de l'éthique* [Philosophical Anthropology as the Condition for Ethics]. He grants to Ricoeur (that “post-Kantian Aristotelian”) the acknowledgement that he helps us “to reinscribe in law and in the whole judicial system a reference to ethics” (p. 86), but considers that Ricoeur establishes too close a link between law and ethics, and reproaches him for being too directed towards distributive justice at the expense of corrective justice, “more concerned with the imaginative function of the social contract [...] than with the judicial system” (p. 91).

In *Une pensée du religieux en pratique* [Thinking a Praxis of the Religious], the seventh essay of this collection, Kemp proposes an interpretation of Ricoeurian philosophy which could seem a little audacious. In the contemporary context, Ricoeur might well be considered “the thinker *par excellence* of the religious” (p. 125). “The deep motivation behind all his efforts of thought” could well in effect have been “his passion to clarify the role of the religious dimension” (pp. 125–126). That inward, spiritual aspect points a way to explaining and justifying the direction of Ricoeur's philosophical work and the professional and personal commitment that accompanied it. But, with respect to the effects, importance, influence and meaning of his work on and for contemporary philosophy

and present-day thinking in general, it seems difficult to accept the idea that Ricoeur is “the greatest thinker of our time ... with respect to the question of the meaning of the religious” (p. 125); or that he may equally have been “for the 20th century what Kant was for the Enlightenment: the philosopher who, better than any other, showed how the religious sphere of thought is quite different from a theoretical and scientific form of knowledge” (p. 126). Yet unlike Kant, Paul Ricoeur was not a systematic thinker. One need not be a historian of philosophy to observe that he was recognized as being one of the greatest thinkers of our time for the reason that he took a major part, through his published work (both intense and immense), in the debates and research that have most marked our era and which have profoundly transformed it (sometimes to a prodigious degree). Research and debates initiated by psychoanalysis and structuralism, by reflection on the natural, human and social sciences, by the work of philosophy and its rich, varied and fragmented internal dialectic: its disciplines, methods and tendencies which have crossed the century. Paul Ricoeur was able to master this diverse range thanks to his interdisciplinary competencies and to his personal way of conceiving the essence of philosophy (with a methodology that was both descriptive and interpretive, reflective and critical, dialectic and mediatory, standing between philosophy and science, philosophy and linguistics, philosophy and literature, philosophy and law, philosophy and religion ...). The result is an *oeuvre* of exceptional accessibility which has lost nothing either of its philosophical configuration nor of the strong ethical tightness that has always bound it together. It is here that Peter Kemp’s interpretation finds its relevance and significance. It is well known that Ricoeur said that he himself was “struck” by the diversity of the themes addressed in his books, much more so in fact than were his pupils, who were more conscious of the elements of continuity through them than of aspects of rupture. Several of them have indeed made efforts to bring all aspects together: Kemp, as already mentioned, proposes as the foremost key that of *practical wisdom*. But the ethical tightness that binds the whole of Ricoeur’s work may have a dual source of unification, both philosophical (the ambition towards a practical wisdom) and religious (the inclinations of an interior motivation). In this light Kemp’s interpretation gains in both importance and consistency. It assists us to better understand how a thinker like Paul Ricoeur – who always upheld the autonomous nature of philosophical discourse and the secular nature of his thought, always declaring that he was a philosopher *and* a Christian but never a *Christian philosopher* – succeeded in producing a body of research of such immense moral depth. Is it not in this sense that we can think of Ricoeur as a *maître à penser*, a master of thought and method? In fact, as a Kant of our time?

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