

PAUL RICOEUR AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Paul Ricoeur's ideas are thoroughly linked to the multiple manifestations of philosophy in the twentieth century. His ability to establish a productive intellectual dialogue with a good number of contemporary authors has given rise to a philosophy in constant evolution that we cannot place within a single philosophical current or school. The thematic variety and the breadth of his work allow us to situate him among the classic authors of twentieth-century Philosophical Hermeneutics. Even so, his Hermeneutics follows various paths, and for this reason, I find it useful to offer a map to guide those who wish to explore his works.

The need to provide a unitary and systematic vision of Paul Ricoeur's thought has led a good number of authors to propose different reading schemes. Among them, very frequently, a philosophical concept will stand out as the leading thread. Such a method has, nevertheless, its risks. Indeed, we note that Paul Ricoeur himself has defined his philosophical thinking as a "fractured systematicity" (*systematicité brisée*) that confronts the fragmentary with the systematic. "Various benevolent critics—writes Ricoeur in 1987—have tried to deduce a systematic unity in my works, taking alternatively themes such as liberty, the imaginary, subjectivity, language, will and action, hope, ... I do not reject any of these interpretations, and without wishing to disparage them, I must insist today on the fragmentary character of my approach to such problems. Each of my books has attempted to respond to a question that emerged within a very precise configuration. And the works that have followed arose from questions not resolved by the previous one as well as from a question rejected in the previous book much like a remainder repelled by the barrier of a fence"¹.

¹ RICOEUR, P.: "Auto-compréhension et histoire", in *Paul Ricoeur: los caminos de la interpretación*, Ed. Anthropos, Barcelona, 1991, p. 11.

On the other hand, all of these interpretations deal with a living author with evolving thoughts and with an enormous intellectual curiosity. For this reason, all the proposals previously explored have suffered from a certain provisional character. In spite of these difficulties, I think that it is possible and in fact helpful to show the coherence and value of the Ricoeurian philosophical project. The way that I have selected to carry out this integrated overview of Paul Ricoeur's thinking is by structuring his philosophical creation with regard to the different themes that have concerned him at each moment and their internal articulation, attending especially to his hermeneutic stage.

STAGES OF A LONG PHILOSOPHICAL ITINERARY

We are beginning to see with a certain perspective and historical distance the entirety of Paul Ricoeur's contributions to contemporary philosophy. His death in May 2005 brings to a close the thinking of an author who has achieved a long philosophical itinerary. Paying attention to his work and the major themes he explored, we can structure his thought into four major stages:

1. His education and influences (through 1950)
2. Phenomenology (1950-1960)
3. Hermeneutics (1960-1990)
4. Practical Philosophy (ethical-political philosophy) (1990-2005)

Among these stages, the hermeneutic period is the largest both in the number of years and number of publications, followed by the last staged dedicated to themes related to ethics and political philosophy. In my following comments, I will give a brief overview of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical itinerary, structured according to these four stages.

1. STAGE OF EDUCATION AND INFLUENCES

In various autobiographical works, Ricoeur reflects on the influences he receives in his first years of philosophical searching, and he feels proud to admit the legacy of two opposed loves: one the one hand Gabriel Marcel, with whom Ricoeur adds the figure of

Emmanuel Mounier; and, on the other hand, Edmund Husserl. The first figures here lead toward an existentialist search, toward the problematics of commitment, which Ricoeur will never abandon throughout his life although he does not always concretely develop these concerns. Ricoeur never hesitates to recognize the profound imprint that Marcel's philosophy left upon him as well as his unique way of practicing and transmitting philosophy².

Nevertheless, Ricoeur also notes his differences with regard to Marcel's methodology, in whose work he detects a certain lack related to its conceptual structure. For this reason, even while sharing Marcel's deepest convictions, Ricoeur distances himself from Marcel's typical style of sliding from one concept to another, from one idea to another, as if he were dealing with an ensemble of variations that proceed from a function of assonances and dissonances³.

With regard to Ricoeur's debt to Mounier we can say that it is not only philosophical but that it affects Ricoeur's personal approach and his commitment as a philosopher to the historical and social problems of the day⁴. In this sense, Ricoeur writes: "Mounier's philosophical and Christian orientations were familiar to me. [...] I learned with Mounier to articulate spiritual convictions with taking a political stand, which had remained juxtaposed during my university studies and during my youthful commitment to protest movements"⁵.

This information reveals that more than a specific influence that can be traced to a specific text, what we find is a general influence internalized by Ricoeur that informs his personal approach and unique way of understanding philosophy. The coexistence of

² "Gabriel Marcel est de loin la personne avec qui j'ai entretenu le rapport le plus profond, dès mon année d'agrégation, en 1934-35, et par suite encore, de façon épisodique jusqu'à sa mort en 1973. Durant ses fameuses 'soirées du vendredi', que j'ai commencé de fréquenter dès 1934, on choisissait un thème de discussion, et la règle était toujours de partir d'exemples, de les analyser et de n'avoir recours aux doctrines qu'à titre de soutien des positions défendues. Je goûtais là à un espace de discussion qui faisait tout à fait défaut à la Sorbonne. Chez lui, on avait l'impression que la pensée était vivante (...) Je crois que c'est cela que je lui dois fondamentalement: oser tenter de faire de la philosophie, et le faire dans une situation polémique assumée". RICOEUR, P.: *La critique et la conviction conviction -entretien avec François et Marc Launay-*; Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1995, pp. 41-42.

³ Op. Cit., p. 43.

⁴ Cf. AGÍS VILLAVARDE, M.: "Paul Ricoeur y E. Mounier" in AGÍS VILLAVARDE, M. (et alia) eds.: *Hermenéutica y Responsabilidad. Homenaje a Paul Ricoeur*, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 2005.

philosophy and Christianity becomes a stable element of his intellectual profile; the notion of the person enriches and completes the notion of the existential subject taken from existentialist authors; the intimate embedding between person and community humanizes intersubjectivity in Husserl's descriptive phenomenology; the articulation of his spiritual and political convictions gives rise to a constant taking of positions vis-à-vis historical events.

Finally, it is necessary to include a thinker whom we know mainly because of Paul Ricoeur's kind comments. I am referring to Jean Nabert, a little known author but one thoroughly linked to the years of Ricoeur's education and influences. Among all his teachers, Nabert represents the "binding" of Paul Ricoeur's thought with reflexive philosophy⁶.

2. PHENOMENOLOGICAL STAGE

Paul Ricoeur's thought cannot be justly understood without recognizing the shaping influence it receives from Husserl's phenomenology. Paul Ricoeur values Husserl for his intellectual and reflexive rigor, for his painstaking analyses and complicated articulations within the area of phenomenology. In a volume entitled *A l'école de la phénoménologie* (Vrin, Paris 1986) gathers Ricoeur's principal works devoted to this theme. Ricoeur, who was in Germany continuing his education just before World War II broke out, became one of the proponents of German philosophy and, in particular, of phenomenology after the war. Besides the many articles dedicated to phenomenology in various philosophical journals beginning in the late 1940s, he translated from German the text of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und Phänomenologischen Philosophie)*, which appeared in 1950. He wrote, also, an appendix dedicated to Husserl in the second edition of the *History of German Philosophy* by E. Brehier (1967), among other works that could be mentioned.

⁵ RICOEUR, P.: *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle*; Ed. Esprit, Paris 1995, p. 18.

⁶ Cf. COLIN, P.: "Herméneutique et philosophie réflexive"; en GREISCH, J. and KEARNY, R.: *Paul Ricoeur: Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*; Actes du Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle; Cerf, Paris, 1991, pp. 16 ss.

Paul Ricoeur's interest in phenomenology will leave its mark on the method he practiced in his first major work, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (Philosophie de la Volonté I. Le volontaire et le involontaire)*, from 1950. In this work he provides a phenomenological description of the voluntary and the involuntary. In his opinion, Husserl forgets in his phenomenology to make empirical reality gravitate around human will.

Phenomenology undergoes profound transformations after his encounter with hermeneutics. Ricoeur dreams initially about the possibility of a hermeneutic phenomenology, a project already begun by Heidegger and continued later by Gadamer in the tradition of German philosophy. What is at stake is the possibility of a phenomenological hermeneutics as a critique of and at the same time an improvement upon pure phenomenology.

In the search for essences, phenomenology had not taken into account the discourses with double meanings and the coded languages that humans use to express their awareness of themselves and of the meaning of reality. This is one theme that Ricoeur examines in the second volume of his *Freedom and Nature* when he deals with questions such as guilt and transcendence. For the adequate treatment of these themes a primary hermeneutics is necessary that will suppose a methodological revolution, and this will distance him from his initial phenomenological statements.

3. HERMENEUTIC STAGE

A) Primary Hermeneutics

In effect, Ricoeur discovers in *The Symbolism of Evil*, the second half of *Finitude and Culpability* (1960), the semantic potential of indirect language, characteristic of archaic mythical-symbolic discourses. Hermeneutics is revealed as the empirical-descriptive method necessary for analyzing symbols and myths in which are expressed multiple modalities of the problem of evil or of guilt. By proceeding in this way, Ricoeur produces what he calls the "grafting of hermeneutics onto phenomenology." Such a "grafting" implicitly bears a critique of the phenomenological method that fails to

contemplate human reality in its totality because it marginalizes the sense expressed through symbolic forms and myths. This is a serious failing especially if one takes into account that “the subject does not know itself directly, but only through the symbols deposited in its memory and in its imaginary by the great cultures”⁷.

Myths and symbols are understood as productions that refer us to a more fundamental language that is thoroughly symbolic. In order to understand this language, an exegesis of the symbol or a “primary hermeneutics” was needed, in other words, a group of rules that would allow us to understand this more fundamental language.

By applying this primary hermeneutics, Ricoeur achieves two objectives. On the one hand, he is able to respect the specific character of the symbolic world. On the other hand, he manages to think not behind the symbol but rather from the symbol. This is exactly what he is trying to express when he gives the title “The Symbol Gives to Thinking” (“Le symbole donne à penser”) to the epilogue to *Finitude and Culpability*; he indicates with this brief formula the orientation of the symbolic hermeneutics he practices.

Symbolic hermeneutics recuperates in addition the principal sacred symbols (hierophanies) that modern humans have forgotten but whose meaning is at the base of our language and our thought. As Ricoeur tells us, “in this epoch our language becomes more precise, more univocal, more technical, in a word, more apt for integral formalizations, which are called precisely symbolic logic. It is within this discursive epoch that we wish to place our language, from which we propose to depart again toward a full language”⁸.

However, it is not a matter of only recovering meanings lost in time. The symbol “gives to thinking” only to the degree in which we are able to add to it an interpretation that promotes a sense that goes beyond the symbol. And it is at this point we discover that the symbol is not alien to philosophical reasoning, perhaps because it is found in the roots of our language.

⁷ RICOEUR, P.: *Reflexión faite. Autobiographie intellectuelle*, Éd. Esprit, Paris 1995, p. 30.

⁸ RICOEUR, P.: *Philosophie de la Volonté. Finitude et culpabilité II. La symbolique du mal*. Aubier, Paris, 1960 (reed. 1988), p. 481.

Thus, thanks to symbolic hermeneutics, what was once an incoherent and obscure discourse becomes a comprehensible discourse that illuminates for us not only an archaic cultural universe but also parts of our own mode of existence in the present. According to these proposals, hermeneutics, such as it is conceived in this initial stage, fulfills several functions, among which are:

1. The semantic recovery of the archaic mythic/symbolic discourse.
2. The expansion and better organization of the spontaneous interpretations that symbols always cause.
3. Defense of the philosophical/ontological dimension of primitive creativity that is expressed through symbols and myths.
4. The incorporation to philosophical discourse of the fundamental symbols of consciousness.

The shift from an intrinsic reflection about symbols to a reflection that takes us beyond symbols takes us into a philosophical hermeneutics that is not limited to interpretive methodology. This is a similar orientation to the one that, in the same period, Gadamer is giving for hermeneutics in his *Truth and Method*, also published in 1960. The symbol, therefore, is not only responsible for awakening Ricoeur's hermeneutic consciousness but also for expanding his purpose thanks to its ability to express a double meaning that takes us beyond, to the realm of thought.

B) Interpretation and Double Meaning

In this new stage Ricoeur applies what he has learned through symbolic hermeneutics to other discursive modalities, noting that any discourse is susceptible to manifesting a double meaning that the interpreter should clarify through interpretation. The book that marks the beginning of this new stage is *On Interpretation: Essays on Freud*, published in 1965. In this work the concept of interpretation will be the central problem for two reasons: in the first place, because it is a key concept in Freud's psychoanalytic theory; in the second place, because Ricoeur's work is not constructed as psychology but as hermeneutics.

Ricoeur carries out a series of reflections upon the title of one of Freud's most important works: *Traumdeutung (On the Interpretation of Dreams)*, in order to confirm the hermeneutic relevancy of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud does not speak of a "science" of dreams in a general way but of "interpretation"⁹.

Archaic and oneiric symbols share the same structure of double meaning that calls for interpretation. Our sensation before a symbol is one of finishing the opening of its signification, advancing from the literal meaning to another meaning in the second order. Dreams, in the psychoanalytic context, also produce the same sensation and generate a similar hermeneutic process. In fact, in *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud positively appraises the symbolic interpretation of dreams in order to get to know the most profound regions of the mind. The study of psychoanalytic interpretation reaffirms for Ricoeur his thesis that one must conceive of hermeneutic work as a function of the structures of double meaning at work in the object of interpretation (symbols or dreams). "What is brought up for examination by interpretive work—writes Ricoeur—is an intentional structure that does not consist of a relation between meaning and the thing, but rather of an architecture of meaning in a relation between meaning and meaning, between the second meaning and the first meaning... It is this texture that makes interpretation possible, even if only the actual movement of interpretation makes it manifest"¹⁰.

But just as one can say that the structure of the symbol sustains the structure of interpretation, once can also state that interpretation gives meaning to the symbol, constituting it linguistically. Effectively, thanks to interpretation the problem of symbolism is inscribed in the larger problem of language. This is a conceptualization that will be reiterated in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1969), a book of hermeneutic essays that gathers studies **from the earlier stage**.

⁹ "Le mot est choisi à dessein et son voisinage avec le thème du rêve est lui même plein de sens. Si le rêve désigne –pars pro toto- toute la région des expressions à double sens, le problème de l'interprétation désigne réciproquement toute intelligence du sens spécialement ordonnée aux expressions équivoques; l'interprétation c'est l'intelligence du double sens". RICOEUR, P.: *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris 1965, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰ Op. Cit., pp. 26-27.

Thus, initially the notion of interpretation remains united to the notion of symbol. Ricoeur expresses it in the following terms: “I call symbol every structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates in addition another indirect, secondary, figurative meaning that cannot be understood except through the first. This circumscription of the expressions of double meaning constitutes, properly speaking, the hermeneutic field”¹¹. Consistent with this conceptualization of the symbol, Ricoeur will define interpretation as “the work of thought that involves deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, developing the levels of signification implied by the literal signification”¹².

Finally, one must also bear in mind that the symbol has not only expressive value in the semantic sense but also a heuristic value by helping us in the understanding of ourselves and of the other, a proposal that Ricoeur will later apply to the notion of the text by stating that “to understand is to understand oneself before the text.”

C) From the Interpretive Conflict to the Ontology of Understanding

The interrelation between hermeneutics and understanding is in itself one of the focal points of Ricoeur’s book *The Conflict of Interpretations*. We are in the years of the appearance of philosophical structuralism and, true to his position, Ricoeur will maintain a fluid dialogue with this philosophical current that was born hand in hand with linguistics and that will reach a good portion of the sciences of language in the 1960s. Structuralism chose to defend the anonymous functioning of sign systems, without subjective bases. Before a text, there are two possibilities: an internal one that carries out the analysis of the units that make up a discourse; and an expanding one that searches for the meaning of discourse understood as a whole freighted with signification. Ricoeur recognizes the technical interest of the first possibility but he inclines toward the latter, which is inherent in the hermeneutic task. For this reason Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model in this stage cannot be reduced to a group of interpretive rules necessary for carrying out a primary interpretation; instead, he proposes a hermeneutics oriented toward the

¹¹ RICOEUR, P.: *Le conflit des interprétations*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris 1969, p. 16.

¹² IBID

discovery of being through the multiple modalities of discourse in which **being** is expressed.

This line of hermeneutics coincides in its philosophical aspiration with Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity," even though Ricoeur will speak of two different paths:

- The short Heideggerian path: an ontology of understanding that advances in the understanding of being through an existential analytics.
- The long Ricoeurian path: he takes reflection to the ontological plane through a long hermeneutic circling of the plurality of the discourses of being.

In this new sense, being coincides with being interpreted. The "I" cannot be analyzed from itself but only through a large detour of signs, symbols, and figures of culture, from which results the impossibility of a single, universal hermeneutics. There must be various styles of interpretation, and consequently, the emergent ontology also must be contingent, not substantialist, "militant" and always dependent on the development of the interpretation. It is impossible to consider an ontology of consciousness as absolute because being, consciousness, and the "I" are all the results of interpretation, and for this reason they should emerge at the end of the hermeneutic-reflexive activity.

This large circling or long path leads Ricoeur to delve into the different discursive modalities in which being is expressed, with textual hermeneutics becoming the next object of his attention.

D) The World of the Text

The world that the text generates is peculiar. It enters into conflict with the real world in order to describe it; it remakes the real world, taking advantage of all the figures that language offers in order to speak about reality. The writer makes use of all the expressive elements within his or her grasp. And all of this in order to re-describe the world and insert it into a definitive and apparently unchanging mode of existence: the text.

It is not possible to understand the meaning of a text in an immediate, emphatic manner, such as romantic hermeneutics advocated (Schleiermacher). But neither is understanding entirely achieved through the structural analysis of the sign systems that make up the text, such as structuralism proposes. The hermeneutics proposed by Ricoeur aspires to understand texts on the basis of intention, on the basis of what the text tells us in our present circumstance. For this reason, it is not the author's original intention, when the text was written, what the interpreter must discover. And in order to accomplish this understanding, the interpreter must overcome a distance, a cultural distancing.

Every text produces a double hiding that one must overcome in order to understand it: that of the author, in the first place, who is absent from the reading and interpretation process; and that of the interpreter, who is absent from the writing process.

Because of these essential traits of the text, Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics will center on the following aspects:

1. Autonomous meaning, with relation to the author's intention
2. Plurivocality or the opening of meaning, once the common situational world of orality is shattered in order to produce the world of the text
3. The activity of the reader, responsible for completing the text, the open work
4. Text and the self-understanding of the subject, who discovers through the reading process a new project of being-in-the-world.

Ricoeur practices a hermeneutics in which the meaning of the text is a conquest of the interpreter, who understands by understanding. Reading introduces us in the imaginative variations of the *ego* and reminds us that we are beings characterized by an opening to the world of the other, which is also the world of the text. By incorporating the meaning of texts to our understanding, we as humans broaden our visions of ourselves. A text invites us to interpret a proposed world that could be inhabited by us.

This double itinerary of meaning that goes from the interpreter to the text and from the text to the interpreter is also found in metaphor, recovered as an expressive and even a hermeneutic element in the twentieth century. Paul Ricoeur will reclaim a new

hermeneutic style based upon the living metaphor: metaphor is alive not only because it livens up an already constituted language but above all because it produces the need to “think more” at the level of concept. The poetic destiny of language constitutes the possibility of expanding speculative discourse. For this reason, the value of metaphor resides in its ability to create meaning, whose recovery we assign to hermeneutics.

4. PRACTICAL STAGE

In 1990, Ricoeur publishes *Oneself as Another (Soi-meme comme un autre)*, a book that marks the transition from hermeneutics to practical philosophy. In this work he delves into concepts such as narrative identity, personal identity, and the problem of human action in all its dimensions. His effort to shift from the text to action had been manifest in various hermeneutic works, in which he had incorporated the perspective of the British philosophers of language¹³. In this work he will develop the four different levels that make up hermeneutic and ethical perspectives: language (the speaking person); action (the acting/suffering person); narration (the narrating person); and ethical life (the responsible person).

It is precisely within the framework of this book where Ricoeur presents his “Little Ethics” (*Petite Éthique*), as a contribution to Moral Philosophy, in which he analyzes the ethical and moral determinations of action, related to the categories of the good and the obligatory. The passage from hermeneutic philosophy to practical philosophy has been realized.

As far as the shift from ethics to politics, it comes about as a thematic continuity by exploring the question of the other¹⁴. The idea of the just corresponds to what we could call a “public ethics” that strives to elucidate, as stated in the title of one of Ricoeur’s papers, the place of the just between the legal and the good. With this, in

¹³ Cf. RICOEUR, P.: *Le discours de l'action*; Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1977. Cf. also. RICOEUR, P.: *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique*, Éd. du Seuil, Paris 1986.

¹⁴ “La distinction entre deux sortes d'autrui, le toi des relations interpersonnelles et le chacun de la vie dans des institutions, me parut assez forte pour assurer le passage de l'éthique à la politique et pour donner un ancrage suffisant à mes essais antérieurs ou en cours sur les paradoxes du pouvoir politique et les difficultés de l'idée de justice”. RICOEUR, P.: *Réflexion faite*, p. 80.

reality, we do not go beyond the realm of a practical philosophy (ethical-political) that seeks to determine the extension of the idea of the just.

CONCLUSION

What sense can we make out of the fact that after the long survey of Ricoeur's philosophical works we end up at a practical, ethical-political philosophy? Why does a philosopher who has devoted himself for three decades to hermeneutics, his main creative stage, end up working in practical philosophy? Maybe there is no single answer to these questions but only a collection of circumstances that have to do with the manner of philosophizing practiced by Ricoeur throughout his life: plural and with a permanent conflict of interpretations.

Ricoeur has been a philosopher not only committed to his discipline but also to the reality in which he lived. This commitment has given rise, throughout his career, to articles with an ethical-political or social orientation, which have often appeared in the journal *Esprit* or in other publications such as *Philosophy Today*, *Christianisme Social*, and *Archivio di Filosofia*, among others.

Nor can we discount the hypothesis that the frustration of Philosophy as a science that is sometimes overly theoretical and little oriented toward practice—a sensation inherited to a certain degree by contemporary hermeneutics upon broadening its philosophical and ontological ambition—is what explains this final outlet for Ricoeur in ethical-political themes.

Finally, I would like to underscore the constant concern for humans, for the person, that Paul Ricoeur has always manifested as the unfettering force that leads to this practical final stage. In all of its stages, his philosophy has remained true to a philosophical anthropology determined to unveil the meaning of humans, of their manner of expressing themselves and behaving. It is an anthropology that is not always easy to detect because of Ricoeur's rejection of a short path toward speaking about the subject, of its existence, of being. In effect, the long path—the path of a hermeneutics of action that involves studying the expressions and discourses of humans in order to arrive at

knowledge—leads inevitably to the practical realm. The acting human, the suffering human, the able human, the responsible human is the subject and supreme object of any practical philosophy.

But one does not arrive at this human directly but only through the mediations used to make sense of his or her existence. For this reason Ricoeur has carried out such an ample dialogue with the various philosophical currents and proposals that have made relevant contributions to knowledge of the human subject: reflexive philosophy, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, structuralism, analytical philosophy, or deconstruction, among others. His philosophy responds to a project of reconstruction of the subject through the discourses used for expression: symbols, myths, texts, figures of language, narrative plots.

Any organizational outline for the complete work of an author such as I have just set forth of course entails risks. The most serious is the risk of fragmenting the unity of an intellectual life and a unique philosophical project.

In spite of this risk, I think it is necessary to offer a global vision of what I have called Paul Ricoeur's philosophical project. It is necessary not only for academic reasons, given that Ricoeur is one of the classic authors of contemporary thought, but also in order to show the coherent trajectory of a philosopher whose itinerary reflects faithfully the multiple manifestations of philosophy in the twentieth century.

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