

The Challenges of Political Autonomy in Paul Ricœur's Thought

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Abstract

This essay seeks to shed light on the political philosophy of Paul Ricœur, which revolves around the dialectics between freedom and power. More specifically, the political relevance of the concept of autonomy in Ricœur's thought will be assessed by addressing three issues: first, the concept of personal autonomy between independence and initiative; second, the concept of autonomy as "power-with," according to which personal autonomy is achieved only by means of collective action; and third, the autonomy of the political bodies, of institutions and their symbols.

Keywords: politics, power, self, collective, freedom

Ricœur's philosophy is more commonly associated with ethics, morality, and philosophical anthropology than with politics. This does not mean that Ricœur's thought is insensitive to political issues. On the contrary, it can be argued that there is a political philosophy in Ricœur. It is true that his writings explicitly devoted to the political sphere are dedicated, for the most part, to the political thought of other philosophers such as Hannah Arendt (1983, 1987), Jan Patočka (1977, 1990), and Eric Weil (1957, 1984).¹ However, these writings are not just occasional in that they explore recurring themes in the author's thought. Since Ricœurian political philosophy is not systematically developed in a specific work, we aim to extrapolate some ideas from different sources of the Ricœurian corpus, with no claim to exhaustiveness, to answer two questions: how does Ricœur define political philosophy? And what role does the concept of autonomy play in it?

As an introduction to the subject, it must be noted that Ricœur has always been an engaged intellectual. It is now possible to consult the copious

¹ These essays have been collected in a special volume dedicated to the political lectures of Paul Ricœur, published in French in 1991.

archives of the Fonds Ricœur to discover a significant number of minor texts published in newspapers or local magazines, dealing with the political challenges of his times and with issues concerning the relationships between politics, religion, and society.² Ricœur's engaged texts represent, so to say, the extra-philosophical background of political philosophy, the tenets of which are spread across the major philosophical works of the author. Issues concerning the political dimension of authority and power can already be found in *History and Truth* (1965)³. In the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1988), Ricœur addresses the inherently political topic of the relationships between ideology, utopia, and power. Then, in *Oneself as Another* (1992), Ricœur's "small ethics" includes a theory of institutions essentially dependent on ethics. These themes are also taken up in several texts collected in the two collections, *The Just* (2003) and *Reflections on The Just* (2007).⁴ Finally, Ricœur's last book, *The Course of Recognition* (2007), draws on the fundamental tenets of modern and contemporary political philosophy (Hobbes, Hegel, Honneth) to build an original theory of recognition.

Ricœur also proposes a definition of political philosophy which can be found in the essay *La Liberté* (1971), included in the volume *Anthropologie philosophique. Écrits et conférences*, published in 2013:

A political philosophy distinguishes itself from political science in that it has the *realization of freedom* as its central theme. The theory of the state is connected to the theory of freedom insofar as, in the state, one can find the connections between the free will of individuals, the relation between the arbitrary and the normative, and the link between intention and work (...). How can freedom be recognized not only in personal freedom, but also in the collective exercise of power? This is Rousseau's issue in his *Social Contract* (1762). How to move from the wild freedom of the individual to the civil liberty of people in their community? Rousseau called this question "the maze of the political". In fact, the power of the state and, in general, of society seems to be transcendent, stranger, even hostile to anyone, when it embodies itself in the figure of the tyrant. A philosophy of freedom, understood in the sense of the meaningful action, can be realized only if it can be embedded in the field of the practical reason, which is the field of the achievement of freedom, the birth of the political sphere. (Ricœur, 2013, p. 217; author's translation).

² On the topic of autonomy, for example, one can find the paper "Autonomie et obéissance" (<https://bibnum.explore.psl.eu/psl/ark:/18469/3tbzg>), a text originally published in 1965 in the *Cahiers d'Orgemont* and in which the philosopher broaches the issue of autonomy from the engaged perspective of a religious community member.

³ See especially the fifth chapter entitled "The Question of Power."

⁴ See in particular the two studies of *Reflections on the Just* entitled "Autonomy and Vulnerability" and "The Paradox of Authority."

In this essay, Ricœur first clarifies that there is no equivalence between political philosophy and political science. While political science is a modern construct, achieved through a specific process of objectification of the political field as independent from the moral dimension, political philosophy has not lost sight of the enlivening relationship between the political field and the moral sphere of personal autonomy, intention and action. The fundamental problem of political philosophy is the reconciliation of individual freedom and political power. It is on these grounds that Ricœur evokes a leading figure of early modernity such as Rousseau, who did not conceive of personal autonomy as simply opposed to political power but provided an explanatory model in which political power is the expression of the freedom of individuals.⁵ What Rousseau named “the maze of the political” is defined by the question of how to balance the autonomous self with the heteronomy implied in the social and political bonds. According to both Ricœur and Rousseau, humans are endowed with free will, but they also depend on each other, so they produce political constraint through their own actions. The paradox is represented by the fact that what is usually considered as something alien and constraining for the actions of the individuals, such as norms delivered by the state, must find its ultimate legitimation in personal autonomy, perceived as an inalienable character of the self.⁶ Ricœur feels the need to find an alternative to two opposing and equally one-sided definitions of personal autonomy: on the one hand, the view of autonomy as mere self-sufficiency, working against the “internal as well external obstacles blocking the path to its fruition” (Crittenden, 1997, p. 36), and, on the other, the view of personal autonomy as strictly subjugated to the general will, as an expression of the true historical subject represented by the state.

To penetrate the matter more deeply, it can be useful to differentiate between three layers of meaning of the term “autonomy” in Ricœur’s thought. The first layer of meaning is the Kantian one, according to which autonomy simultaneously means independence and self-determination. Independence is the precondition of self-determination, but it is not a pregiven, rationally assumable characteristic of the self. At this first level, autonomy is already more a precarious good requiring collective protection than an essential and untouchable trait of the individual. In order to reach independence, the self must be protected against various forms of abuse: from the most subtle, such as influence, to the extreme forms of captivity, humiliation, and violence.⁷ Moreover, the concept of personal autonomy entails the recognition of the individual’s capacity to act freely. By acting, the self introduces something

⁵ In his commentary on Ricœur’s 1957 text *The Political Paradox*, Ernst Wolff has maintained that “For Ricœur, Rousseau essentially continues the teleology of Aristotle” (Wolff, 2011, p. 225).

⁶ This is the whole gist of the political paradox, at least in the early formulation of Ricœur’s 1957 text: “This paradox must be retained: that the greatest evil adheres to the greatest rationality, that there is political alienation because the political is relatively autonomous” (Ricœur, 1965, p. 296, in Wolff, 2011, p. 224).

⁷ See *Oneself as Another*, Study VIII, par. 2.

new into the chain of causalities of the world.⁸ Of course, the self is always marked by a certain passivity and receptivity. Ricœur does not see passivity only in negative terms. We depend on each other not only in the sense that we are subjugated by others, but because our tastes, opinions, intentions, thoughts, and even most parts of our unconscious, are forged in social interactions. Therefore, self-determination must be thought of as initiative: it does not represent an absolute start that stands out above the pathological motives of action;⁹ rather, it can be defined as the ability of the self to react in non-mechanical ways to stimuli from the social environment and the actions of others. This conceptualization emphasizes the creative character of experience and action without spoiling an overly rigid and idealized notion of the subject, and it includes intersubjectivity and mutual influence in the ambit of autonomy. Moreover, the creative character of experience is not affirmed as an axiomatic principle, deducible a priori from the constitution of the subject, but emerges precisely in the confrontation with what lies beyond the inner circle of the self.¹⁰ Even if the first layer of meaning of autonomy is not immediately political, it prepares the ground for the next layer by introducing the unavoidable role of the others for the emergence of a creative and relatively free action.

The second layer draws on Hannah Arendt's philosophy of action, which Ricœur has referred to in several texts. In this context, autonomy is achieved through voluntary consent and proactive adhesion to a collective body by essentially contributing to defining its identity and goals. At issue here is no longer the individual's ability to act creatively and freely but rather the capacity to bring a political body to life. The political body is realized by people acting together ("power-with"). A political body exists only insofar as its members can interact together in a position of equality.¹¹ In an Arendtian (and Aristotelian) approach, the equation of autonomy and equality is what distinguishes the political sphere from other kinds of activities, such as labor and work. According to Ricœur, political autonomy is the power of equals. Equality, like autonomy, is simultaneously the hidden principle of fundamental anthropology and a task to be accomplished, a treasure to be discovered under thick layers of soil. Most of the time, in everyday life, equality and autonomy are equally unrealized. Moreover, they are pitted against each other by those political ideologies that emphasize the importance of one or the other as if the realization of one implied the negation of

⁸ See *Oneself as Another*, Study IV.

⁹ The adjective "pathological" is used by Kant in the first part of the *Critique of Practical Reason* and must be interpreted in the etymological sense as "influenced by the senses."

¹⁰ In Studies V and VI of *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur clarifies that the real self (*ipse*) emerges when the inner circle of the ego (*idem*) is challenged by the alien character of the alterity. A similar conception of alterity is also present in Bernhard Waldenfels' responsive phenomenology (2011), according to which the challenges posed by alterity are what vivifies the lifeworld and allows for a rearticulation of the meanings of experience.

¹¹ See *Oneself as Another*, Study VII, par. 3.

the other. Ricœur, rather, claims that autonomy without equality cannot be developed by every individual to the same extent and will end up relying on the heteronomy of others; he further claims that equality without autonomy prefigures the sacrifice of the political sphere of action and even of the creative character of experience, imposed by some sort of Leviathan. In both cases, the “power-with” that defines the political sphere and gives birth to the political body degenerates into the “power-on” of domination and abuse. The true nature of political power is the “pure power” in the sense of Arendt: it is dissimulated and concealed beneath the surface of the crystallized relations of power, but it is recognizable in the opposite moment of resurgence against them. Ricœur, in *Oneself as Another*, notes an interesting connection between autonomy and conflict;¹² in *Pouvoir et Violence* (1981), the author expresses himself in even more straightforward terms. In order to be recognized as an autonomous self, Ricœur says, following Arendt, that it is necessary to act with others whose autonomy is equally denied in order to subvert the established order of domination. Ricœur finds the manifestations of “pure power” in revolutions: to Arendt’s American and French revolutions, Ricœur adds (1991 p. 31) Soviets, students’ movements, the insurrection of Budapest, the Czechs’ resistance. In this sense, autonomy is always the result of a collective process of “collective autonomization” or “emancipation.” The “treasure” of autonomy is not discovered through self-reflection and introspection, but through collective action. Political autonomy is not a monologic/egologic character of the subject, but a political conquest to be achieved by acting together. This emancipative side of Ricœur’s thought has been recognized especially by those scholars that have been particularly attentive to Ricœur’s dialogue with the Marxian tradition.¹³ While not accepting economic reductionism and the structuralist background of dogmatic Marxism, Ricœur has always attached the utmost importance to the critique of ideology, as long as it does not pretend to be carried out from the standpoint of a disembodied and scientific gaze.¹⁴ As Johann Michel (2013) has noted, Ricœur’s claim that every criticism and struggle for recognition

¹² See *Oneself as Another*, Study IX, par. 3.

¹³ See for instance Johann Michel (2013) and Piero Garofalo (2021).

¹⁴ According to Ricœur, neither reality nor science can provide a sufficiently stable standpoint from which ideologies can be criticized, for ideology itself is a primitive function of social imagination, aiming at providing local communities with common values and cohesion: “If it is true that the images which a social group forms of itself are interpretations which belong immediately to the constitution of the social bond, if, in other words, the social bond is itself symbolic, then it is absolutely futile to seek to derive the images from something prior which would be reality, real activity, the process of real life, of which there would be secondary reflections and echoes” (Ricœur, 1981, p. 237). Nonetheless, ideology “poses a constant threat of distorting communal values and ideals to suit the interests of a particular subgroup” (Steeves, 2000, p. 224). Thence, “an antidote to distortive ideology must be found within the very symbolic medium by which a society understands itself. Ricœur finds such an antidote in the literary genre of political utopia” (*Ibidem*). An important effort to update Ricœur’s conception of ideology and utopia is provided by the collective volume edited by Stephanie Arel and Dan Stiver (2018).

begins in the embodied perspective of a concrete and vulnerable self brings his approach very close to many post-structuralist reworkings of Marxism.

Autonomy's second layer of meaning therefore achieves the transition from the pre-political sphere of the lifeworld to the political dimension of collective action that manifests itself through the realization of political bodies. However, Ricœur's satisfaction with the notion of "pure power" is only partial. Autonomy cannot be solely defined by the opposition of an emerging political body against a given social order. In fact, power is tied to the capacity to establish norms to govern society; "pure power," by contesting the established order, aims to build a fairer juridical and institutional system, capable of recognizing rights and capabilities that were not recognized in the previous arrangement. In his comment on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, Ricœur subscribes to the idea that "the class struggle is not a problem of suppressing one class but of overcoming struggle so that there may be a state where recognition between human beings occurs" (Ricœur, 1988, p. 227). Institutions, as showed in *Oneself as Another*, must be "the point of application of justice and equality" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 194): therefore, they belong entirely to the ethical perspective of the self. At this point, the Ricœurian path discreetly splits into two different directions: on the one hand, it goes towards the clarification of the idea of justice; on the other, it opens up a speculation on the nature of institutions, which leads towards the third layer of the concept of autonomy: the autonomy of the political sphere and of the body politic as a whole.

The question of the autonomy of the political is clearly addressed by Ricœur since his 1957 text *The Political Paradox*. In that work, Ricœur insists on the relative autonomy of the political sphere from other spheres fundamental to society, and primarily from the economy.¹⁵ By stressing the relative autonomy of the political sphere, Ricœur criticizes those regimes (and the corresponding philosophical dogmatisms) in which the political sphere is considered as a super-structural dimension determined by structural economic conditions.¹⁶ By defending the autonomy of the political sphere, Ricœur clearly aims to ensure that citizens have a free space for political participation: a space that is, nonetheless, haunted by the verticality of the power relationships established by the state itself. By taking this path, the young Ricœur actually reconnects with the problem of the autonomy of the self, insofar as the threats posed by the verticality of social relations and the contact between state authority and the exercise of violence are to be understood precisely as threats to freedom of action, i.e., to autonomy as

¹⁵ A complete reconstruction of the meaning of political autonomy in this sense is provided by Ernst Wolff in chapter IX of his book *Political Responsibility for a Globalized World* (2011).

¹⁶ In this sense, the texts Ricœur devotes to China following his trip in 1956 are very instructive. See *Lectures I: Autour du Politique* (1991).

independence, as initiative, and as “power-with.” Nonetheless, the inevitability of institutional power and the desirability of its autonomy from other powers, such as economic power, requires us to look for other shades of meaning in the autonomy of the political sphere. Long afterwards, in the seventh study of *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur touches on the topic of political autonomy by defining institutions as “the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community—people, nation, region, and so forth—a structure irreducible to interpersonal relations” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 194). What is key in this definition is the idea of institutions as irreducible to interpersonal relations. In the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, institutions are related to the deeper meaning of the word “ideology”: “the integrative function of culture” (Ricœur, 1988, p. 259). They are entailed by the very fact of living together and are charged with the very same symbolic dimension that gives meaning to social actions. In *Oneself as Another*, the philosopher does not linger over the issue of the origin of institutions in the lifeworld but refers to that problem by affirming that “what fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 194).

Acknowledging the irreducibility of institutions to interpersonal relationships would allow for a further development of the concept of autonomy of the body politic, although this is not explicitly focused on by Ricœur himself. The way is paved for the elaboration of a notion of the body politic as relatively autonomous from the single wills and the various instances brought by those who are part of it. Every body politic (*corpus politicum*) is a polity, that is, a historical community endowed with a certain identity forged over time. The continuity of the political body in time is ensured by the enduring functionality of both its institutions and its symbols. The sacrality of political and religious institutions, the normative contents of social practices, the solemnity and the respect due to the places of power are perduring signs of the autonomy of the symbols in which a political body materializes.¹⁷ The symbols of a historical community have the power to provide people with a sense of unity and commonality. The horizontality of social relations guaranteed by the sharing of common symbols also implies a certain respect due to the symbols in which these common values are embodied. Therefore, not only, as Ricœur clearly maintains, must the autonomy of the self be protected from power abuses, as “autonomy-from;” not only must the political sphere be thought of as a practical, albeit paradoxical, prolongation of personal autonomy as “autonomy-with;” but the political body must also be thought of as relatively autonomous from the arbitrariness and the

¹⁷ Here we do not consider the different historical ways in which the body politic was conceived or took shape, although of course the very metaphor of the community as a body politic is historically determined. For a theoretical and historical overview on the subject, see Rollo-Koster (2010).

discretion of those who are in charge of representing it *pro tempore*.¹⁸ This is why a king must always live up to the crown he wears; this is also why, in constitutional regimes, power must always be exercised according to the limits imposed by the constitution. The difference between domination and legitimate power is set precisely by the constitutive possibility, for a body politic and its symbols, to remain independent from the arbitrary uses of power of the established authorities. This also explains why, even in some secular democracies, those who assume institutional roles have to swear by God or the Bible. There is no need to understand this type of oath in theological terms. The point is that the vertical relations of power that take place within a political body must not be founded on the brute superiority of the powerful over the weak, but on a structure of legitimation of authority that keeps it independent from personal charisma or the socio-economic means of those who contingently hold positions of authority. Thence, totalitarian regimes and dictatorships can be understood as the negation of the autonomy of the political bodies as well as the negation of the autonomy of the personal selves: in a totalitarian regime, in fact, whoever is in charge does not seek to interpret the goals of the whole, does not respect the autonomy of institutions and their symbols, and does not recognize higher sources of legitimacy of power, except instrumentally. On the contrary, the despot bends common mores, cultural narratives, institutions, and their symbols, to her own will, and, in denying the first and the second layers of meaning of autonomy, also ends up denying the third.

It must be acknowledged that Ricœur does not fully elaborate the claim for autonomy of the body politic. That may be due to a metaphysical complication concerning the metaphor of the body politic. The attribution of autonomy to a polity, in fact, seems to imply a strong analogy between the collective and the person, an analogy to which Ricœur does not seem willing to subscribe. This can be deduced not only from the general attitude of Ricœur's philosophical anthropology, opposed to any form of totalization or fusional overcoming of the subject,¹⁹ but also from specific passages of the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* devoted to the nature of the socio-political bond. In the first lecture dedicated to Max Weber, Ricœur denounces the risks implied in any nostalgic attitude towards premodern forms of *Gemeinschaft*, where the communal feeling of belonging to the same collective entity does not leave room for criticism and conflict:

¹⁸ Federico Vercellone has approached the issue of the symbolic dimension of political power in his two last books, *L'archetipo cieco* (2021) and *L'età illegittima* (2022). The instability of symbols is singled out as a key characteristic of modernity and mirrors a condition in which socio-political bodies can no longer find themselves around a shared identity. In this lack of legitimation of power, symbols and institutions are subjected to heteronomous drives, such as the market.

¹⁹ Very insightful and innovative lines have been written on this subject by Paul Downes in *Concentric Space as a Life Principle* (2019): here the author contraposes the Nietzschean way to overcome the personal self, built around the idea of a monistic Dionysian fusion, and the Ricœurian one, in which a positive interrelation between the self and the other does not develop into monistic fusion, but preserves and enriches the personal and moral life of both.

In today's society we often resent the bureaucratic system, and with more right than Weber. What Weber may still teach us, though, is that any dream of a return to the communal instead of the associative may be quite ambiguous. Any effort to reconstruct society as a big commune may have either ultra-leftist or ultra-rightist consequences: anarchism or fascism. (Ricœur, 1988, p. 109)

This warning sounds so topical in our troubled times and sets inviolable limits to the consideration of the body politic as an organic whole endowed with autonomy. The organic interpretation of the body politic, by attributing full personality to the collective, scleroses public memory and does not recognize the original contributions and changes triggered by individuals and groups that do not conform to the given socio-political forms.

In conclusion, it is useful to outline the three principles around which a phenomenological conception of institutions can be developed, with a view to further research. Based on Ricœur's insights, a phenomenological approach to institutions represents a middle ground between the organic models and the contractarian ones, which reduce political bodies to mere convention consciously stipulated by fully developed and autonomous individuals. A phenomenological view of institutions revolves around three tenets. The first is the dependence of the self on institutions, whereby the self depends on institutions under several respects: she does not choose to enter into a socio-political body, but she finds herself as part of a set of institutions.²⁰ Moreover, the self needs institutions to enforce the rule of justice in order to achieve a really autonomous development.²¹ The second is the creative character of experience: the self's experiences are creative, for they are not strictly necessitated by the context, occurring instead with many organic processes concerning, for instance, the movement of muscles and parts of the bodies in relation to physical stimuli. New cultural contacts, for instance, can produce a transformation in people's lived experience that can be mirrored by an evolution of institutions. The third tenet is the mutual and enactive relation between selves and institutions. Institutions must be recognized simultaneously as necessary and precarious, unavoidable and everchanging, relatively stable in order to ensure processes of self and mutual self-recognition, but designed in ways that include a certain margin of reinterpretation and transformation.

²⁰ An early phenomenological understanding of institutions as necessary objectifications of the life-world is provided by Peter Ludwig Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966).

²¹ See *Oneself as Another*, IXth Study.

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