

# Editors' Introduction

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## Paul Ricœur along the Maze of Autonomy

“The truth is that we must constantly orient ourselves in a maze of intersections and badly marked roads. Practical problems are only rarely amenable to obvious interpretation. The order of action is the order of the probable.”  
(Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, 159)

This special issue of *Ostium* on “Paul Ricœur Thinker of Autonomy” finds its roots in the conference “Paul Ricœur and the Challenges of Autonomy” held at the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA), November 3-5, 2022.<sup>[1]</sup> Its aim is to explore Ricœur’s insights into the complex notion of autonomy, whose meaning can be addressed through a cross-fertilization between philosophy and other human and social disciplines. The contributions gathered in this issue offer analyses of Ricœur’s conception of autonomy as engaged with phenomenology, narrative hermeneutics, bioethics, semantics, political philosophy, and theology. Other interdisciplinary discussions on Ricœur and the notion of autonomy (e.g., phenomenology of embodiment, aesthetics, literary theory, philosophy of education, politics, philosophy of technology, environmental philosophy, theory of justice, and philosophy of memory) have been recently published in the volume *The Challenges of Autonomy. Thinking Autonomy in Challenging Times*<sup>[2]</sup> co-edited by the guest editors of this special issue of *Ostium*, Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra and Paolo Furia, with Dagmar Kusa. This introduction will provide a broader framework for a multilayered discourse on autonomy inspired by Ricœur. First, we will sketch out the problem of autonomy highlighting its structural polysemanticity and its inner dialectical tension. Then, we will show how Ricœur’s work can provide signposts in gaining an understanding of autonomy as a dimension oscillating between its exaltation and its crisis in our current time.

Autonomy is a polysemic notion that has a long history in Western philosophy. Nevertheless, it always remains open to renewed lines of development with reference to the interests of different historical contexts and worldviews. Autonomy arises as a challenge when, in attaining apparent independence, the individual or collective group views dependencies or relations to alterity as menacing this independence, whether these supposed threats are internal or external to the singular self or to a given community. Inextricably tied to a set of emblematic conceptual pairs, such as those of individuality and alterity, dependence and independence, freedom and necessity, peace and struggle, inside and outside, autonomy is shaped through many tensive dialectics from which the individual, intersubjective, and social realities spring forth. Therefore, autonomy is a challenging challenge precisely because the concrete realization of autonomy is an open process that is neither purely irenic nor necessarily destined to be trapped into unsolved conflicts. It appears that autonomy as a challenge cannot be discussed separately from heteronomous relations as well as various unavoidable practical challenges faced by individuals striving to live and die autonomously<sup>[3]</sup> or by groups (e.g., family, professional associations, etc.) and collectivities (e.g., nations, cultural

traditions, etc.) seeking to be recognized as autonomous. As such, autonomy develops through time as a dimension that must be gradually achieved. Yet, autonomy also concerns space since, as the example of invasion shows negatively, autonomous beings or groups are always localized in and identified with a spatial context.<sup>[4]</sup> The imputation of autonomy is a critically important quality to consider, on the one hand, in recognizing the agency of spatial determinations (places, landscapes) against attempts to reduce it to mere passivity, and, on the other, the agency of people and cultures against reductionism of its meaning to their simple geographical preconditions (i.e., environmental/geographical determinism).<sup>[5]</sup>

A philosophical inquiry on autonomy cannot be limited to a focus on the etymology of the term. Rather, in an interdisciplinary approach, a philosophical analysis of autonomy leads us to turn our attention not only toward the being of autonomy itself, that is, on its nature, but also onto the subject(s) of autonomy. Otherwise put, the answers to the question “what is autonomy?” cannot be formulated without considering “who” is the recipient of autonomy, i.e., without considering the question “who is autonomous?” Undoubtedly, thinking autonomy is an urgent task in our epoch characterized by rapid and radical transformations encompassing all aspects of our life. Today, autonomy finds itself in a paradoxical situation on the socio-political plane. On the one hand, connected with liberal-democratic societies, the ideal of autonomy is an exalted moral and political claim made in the name of an individual or a group based on rights, duties, and norms. On the other hand, though, we are experiencing a widespread crisis of democracy and a growing disaffection towards the institution of liberal democracy. Going through “periodic cycles of hope and fear,”<sup>[6]</sup> democratic crises lead to a roller-coaster ride of what we can call “the autonomy euphoria.” However, autonomy is not just a moral or a political matter. Profoundly intertwined with one’s life, particularly with the capacity of making decisions and to act on the basis of those decisions, autonomy is inseparable from many critical issues of contemporary bioethics (e.g., human enhancement, medical decision-making, the end-of-life context, etc.). Yet, philosophical discussions of autonomy cannot ignore the unfolding conceptual depth of this notion revealed in recent developments in both philosophy of technology (e.g., technological autonomy, technological artifacts and human decision-making, artificial intelligence and robotics, etc.) and environmental philosophy (e.g., autonomy of nature, organisms and autonomy, biodiversity and autonomy, etc.). Converging lines of reflections from these fields lead to the critique and the consequent rejection of “an all too human perspective on autonomy,” namely, of autonomy understood as a human-centered notion.<sup>[7]</sup>

Ricœur’s work can help us to make sense of autonomy in our challenging times. Evolving through the discussion of different inheritances that have a significant influence on his philosophical project, Ricœur’s approach to autonomy is not limited to the moral consideration of it as a universal principle. More precisely, his analysis of autonomy is intertwined with many other recurring themes of his thought, such as the body, language, action, identity, selfhood, otherness, institutions, and justice. For these reasons, Ricœur provides guiding threads that may lead us as we walk along the theoretical and the practical maze of autonomy. Each thread we will follow employs the structural pattern of “detour and return” through diverse disciplines in the human and social sciences, a pattern characteristic of Ricœur’s method of hermeneutical reflection. How to safely navigate, then, autonomy’s labyrinth? Ricœur engages many different perspectives in considering autonomy, opening possibilities and creating renewed directions for understanding this concept in its multifaceted forms. This special issue of *Ostium* aims to emphasize the multiple dimensions of the notion of autonomy in Ricœur’s thought and its resonance with the human and social sciences at large. The thirteen papers published here contribute in original ways to the understanding of Ricœur’s different takes on the problem of autonomy. Specifically, these contributions are organized around six overarching fields: phenomenology, narrative hermeneutics, bioethics, semantics, political philosophy, and theology. This has to be considered as a thematic separation since, among these fields, we can recognize complementary, convergent, and interpenetrating aspects. Therefore,

in a way faithful to Ricœur's thought, the division among these different research perspectives on autonomy is against any pretension of a sharp demarcation or a strict compartmentalization between them.

#### (a) *Phenomenology*

We will analyze Ricœur's conception of autonomy with reference to his phenomenology of the will. In his first major work, *Freedom and Nature. The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950/1966)<sup>[8]</sup> Ricœur offers an innovative and insightful phenomenological analysis of the structures of the will. By focusing on the mediation between the voluntary and the involuntary aspects of human existence, Ricœur describes human will as shaped by capacity and negation, freedom and necessity. In front of the "I can" that enables the project, there is always an "I cannot" of constraints given by means of physical resistance, circumstances, or by the necessities of biological life. As such, the human being is at once a creature marked by creativity and a vulnerable being touched by unchosen dimensions. Starting from his phenomenology of the will, Ricœur develops an integrated understanding of the human being as a finite and powerful, incapable and capable, suffering and acting being. In this perspective, human being as an autonomous being cannot but be fragile. In **Emanuele Curcio's** text entitled "Le problème de l'autonomie dans l'eidétique de la volonté chez Paul Ricœur," the issue of autonomy is addressed with reference to Ricœur's early phenomenology of the will. The author shows that in Ricœur's descriptive analysis of the structures of the will there is a hermeneutical inspiration. By focusing on the dialectical aspects of the relationship between the voluntary and the involuntary, Curcio explains that autonomy is not defined in terms of plenitude, i.e., of completeness, but as an open process.

#### (b) *Narrative Hermeneutics*

We will deal with the development of autonomy through the discussion of the practical aspects of narrative hermeneutics. Ricœur's concept of narrative identity represents a compromise between, on the one hand, the exposure of every individual to the narrations of others and, on the other hand, the constitutive capacity of the self to narrate. In this framework, narration represents a veritable bridge between the activity of the self and his or her own passivity in front of others. The concept of autonomy, here, stands on the side of the capacity to narrate, that is, the capacity to reconnect the events of the world from a relatively free and autonomous perspective. Clearly, our narrative autonomy is limited by a certain number of circumstances. For while each person has the right to write his or her own biography and to determine his or her own narrative identity, it is evident that one's birth and death must be written by others, for instance, by one's parents and children, for a person's birth and death entirely belong with these other life stories. At closer sight, the whole of a person's life is encompassed, framed, forged by the narrations of others and especially by those who hold the resources to influence historical events at large. In different moments of his work, Ricœur addresses the complex and dialectical relationship between the self's right to narrate and the self's passivity in front of other's narrations. Narrative autonomy is endowed with particularly positive meanings when it is claimed against ideological hegemonic narratives which alienate human being's singularity and do not respect the pluralism of perspectives and points of view. On the other hand, narrative autonomy may be charged with a negative meaning when it implies the disconnection of the self from the discourses of others: a disconnection which can be interpreted as a sign of individualism and even solipsism. **Güncel Önkal** and **Deniz Kanay's** contribution to this issue, "Ricœurian Hermeneutics of the Philosophy of Voyage," represents an effort to apply Ricœur's approach towards autonomy to the issue of travel, understood in philosophical terms as a fundamental characteristic of the human condition. Since the experience of travel consists in the encounter of the other rooted elsewhere, the very identity of the traveler is pushed towards a deeper reconfiguration of the way to approach the world and to understand it. **Jean-Paul Nicolai's** contribution to the issue, "Rendre autonome à partir de Ricœur," approaches the problem of autonomy using Ricœur's critique of Kant's conception of this notion as the point of departure. With

reference to Ricœur's distinction between ethics and morality, teleology and deontology, the author shows that autonomy is an open task connected to the diachronic relationality of human beings. The analysis of Ricœur's dialectic between the self and the other, autonomy and heteronomy, leads to rethink Kant's categorical imperative and the maxim to make something beautiful, free, and powerful. **Silvia Pierosara** draws on Ricœur's work on historicity and narrativity in order to explore the notion of narrative autonomy as connected to the recollection of the past and the reconfiguration of the future. Dealing with both the personal and the collective level of human existence, narrative autonomy leads us to think about the "pathic" core of autonomy and the relational dimension of our being autonomous. In their co-authored article, **Lydia Feito Grande, Agustín Domingo Moratalla,** and **Tomás Domingo Moratalla** aim at developing a renewed approach to autonomy by focusing on its contextual, relational, narrative, and emotional aspects. With reference to Ricœur's analysis of narrativity, they discuss human being's capacity to narrate as essential to understand the connection between autonomy and care. By proposing a "Mediterranean way" to understand autonomy in the field of bioethics, this contribution functions as a bridge to the next section.

### (c) *Bioethics*

We will explore the several possible applications of Ricœur's approach to autonomy to the growing field of bioethics. Ricœur's work develops philosophical anthropology revolving around the question "What does it mean to be human?" Developed from different perspectives, Ricœur's answer to this question can provide the framework to discuss bioethical issues and clinical ethics, e.g., the problem of patient autonomy, abortion, medicalization, euthanasia, etc. In his perspective, human being arises as a "being-toward-life-up-to-death"<sup>[9]</sup>. In defining the capacities and the incapacities that make human being an acting and a suffering being, Ricœur rejects the understanding of the human being as a self-positing subject who is immediately transparent to himself or herself. Rather than an immediate, self-transparent consciousness, Ricœur claims that human being has a reflective understanding of himself or herself as an interpreting being situated and embodied in time and space. Therefore, the human being cannot think himself or herself as a self-transparent being but only as an opaque self who emerges through the interpretation of the world and in communication with others. The common quest for self-esteem and solicitude, respect and recognition, grounds the relationship between the self and the others. It is in suggesting a connection between Aristotle's ethics and Kant's deontological approach that Ricœur criticizes formal conceptions of autonomy. Contrary to Kant, Ricœur claims that the autonomous self is neither a raw datum nor an *a priori* concept. Rather, autonomy is bound up with interdependence for and with others and it is accomplished by the mediation of institutions that create the structures for living well together. Ricœur's consideration of the ethical self and society as a whole can give concrete support for and shape to very sensible debates in the current bioethical discussion, understood in the broadest sense as concerning the implications of human actions in the living world (including animals and the ecosystems). In dealing with the ethical question of death, **Nel Van Den Haak's** article, "Ethical and Moral Autonomy with Regard to Living and to Dying," discusses the connection between an autonomous accomplished life and an autonomous good death. On the basis of Ricœur's work, Van Den Haak argues that our autonomy is a limited dimension shaped through our relationship with others. The analysis of an autonomous good death leads to the problem of the moral and the legal right to end our lives. **Brad DeFord's** article "Ricœur and the Challenges of Autonomy while Dying," provides an insightful application of Ricœur's concepts to deal with the ethical aspects of medical aid in dying (MAID). Despite the controversies raised by the practices of MAID, they resonate with the conceptual relation between autonomy, dignity, and capacity, according to a Ricœurian standpoint.

### (d) *Semantics*

We will consider the notion of autonomy with reference to language. In Ricœur's theory of the text, the process of autonomization of meanings ties into the notions of distanciation and objectification. A

text is in itself a relatively autonomous entity whose meaning no longer depends on authorial intentions. However, the text cannot constitute a fully autonomous world; on the contrary, the text, by virtue of its autonomy, has the power to reconfigure the world of meanings of the reader. Ricœur also maintains that actions can be regarded as texts because of the peculiar interplay of event and meaning they display. Here again, the meaning of a social action does not depend in the first instance on the individual's intention, but on established and sometimes institutionalized senses attached to gestures and behaviors that stem from social life, but that have become relatively fixed, therefore autonomous from the flow of the lifeworld. However, no meaning attached to social actions is definitive: every time an action is actually undertaken, its meaning depends on the intention of the actor, and it is evaluated on the basis of the produced effects. In both texts and actions, we are dealing with a sort of "relative autonomy," according to which this latter is the open result of ongoing processes of distancing and objectification, whose significance consists in the capacity of producing new and unforeseeable effects. In his article entitled "Semantic Autonomy and Historical Representation," **Marco Sechi** explains the concept of semantic autonomy through the discussion of Ricœur's analysis of the epistemological role of metaphor in the philosophy of language. Specifically, Sechi connects the question of semantic autonomy with the problem of representation in history and the use of narrative to represent the historical past. Following Ricœur's line of thought, he shows that the act of writing contributes to the configuration of the ontological structure of historical representation. **Sara Rocca** is on the same page in her article "Metaphor and the Problem of Reference: A Perspective on Ricœur's Semantic Model of Autonomy." With reference to Ricœur's theory of metaphor, Rocca discusses the problem of autonomy as related to that of the reference of the text. She maintains that a fundamental notion to understand the connection between autonomy, text, and metaphor is that of productive imagination.

(e) *Political philosophy*

We will take into account some relations between the notion of autonomy and the political philosophy of Ricœur. The political philosophy of Paul Ricœur basically consists in the elaboration of the dialectics between freedom and power. In Ricœur's thought, autonomy concerns politics at three levels: the personal, the collective and the body politic. First, Ricœur's concept of personal autonomy is already political, as long as the claim for autonomy of an individual within society depends on social recognition, attained through the implementation of a system of rights. This is a path followed by Ricœur in dialogue with the philosophies of authors like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Second, autonomy realizes itself in the "power-with," according to which personal autonomy is achieved only by means of collective action. Ricœur develops this idea by retrieving Hannah Arendt's theory of collective action and developing it into an original ethical-normative framework, mainly in *Oneself as Another* (1990). Third, the autonomy of the political bodies, animated by institutions. When Ricœur speaks of institutions, he mainly refers to the customary and pre-categorical dimension of the lifeworld, which is from the very beginning informed by symbolic forms of integration allowing for self and social recognition: this is the deeper layer of the notion of ideology developed in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986). The notion of autonomy plays an important role in Ricœur's political philosophy insofar as non-consensual forms of influence and the lack of recognition of one's autonomy are full-fledged expressions of violence. The article of **Paul Custer**, "Forgetting / Violence: Politics, Law, and Unbeing in Arendt, Ricœur, & Benjamin," focuses on the topic of violence. In this text, the author puts Ricœur into dialogue with Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin with respect to the role of forgetting in making sense of violence. The author remarks a different attitude between Arendt and Ricœur in relation to forgetting: whereas Arendt is more focused on the equality of citizens within the polis, in the framework of an all-encompassing theory of action, Ricœur uses the notion of forgetting also as a way to detect "a political unconscious into Arendt's polis" and reveal its historical limits in the inevitability of violence. The two positions of Arendt and Ricœur, then, are confronted with Benjamin's threefold articulation of violence in legal, mythical, and divine. **Gianluca Ronca's** article "Les nouvelles frontières de la responsabilité:

disproportion et gratuité chez Ricœur” rather focuses on the concept of responsibility and its relations to justice and recognition. Just as Ricœur’s idea of autonomy cannot be understood without reference to responsibility, the rule of law and its categorical imperative cannot be fully grasped if disconnected from the ethics of giving.

#### (f) *Theology*

In the final section of the special issue, the concept of autonomy will be tested in a field characterized by the experience of a radical dependence of the self on the alterity of the divine. How to combine autonomy and transcendence? This question does not only concern the existential dimension of the self, who finds her/himself confronted with the ultimate limitations of human experience and control, but entails an epistemological side, namely the relationship between philosophy and theology. In fact, if philosophy can be understood as a mark of a critical and autonomous thinking, capable of addressing different topics according to rational argumentations and free comparisons between multiple premises and assumptions, on the other hand theology develops its reasonings within a given framework accepted by faith. The point is to avoid radical separation and opposition between philosophy and theology, while preserving their productive distinction. The recognition of the limits of the philosophical enterprise is consistent with the legitimacy of extra-philosophical sources of meaning. Ultimately, the limits of philosophy are the very limits of autonomy. Theology is about the possibility of a positive heteronomy, in which freedom and autonomy are not neglected but enhanced thanks to the emancipative and fulfilling experience of transcendence. The article by **René Dentz**, “Mémoire, conscience et pardon: dialogues entre la philosophie et le théologique chez Paul Ricœur,” deals with the inherent limitations of subjectivity, as exemplified by the fact that the freedom of the self can be achieved thanks to the others and, in particular, thanks to the other’s forgiveness. The very idea of forgiveness is not fully attainable in rational terms and is based on a logic of surabondance which alludes to the possibility of a personal redemption and a reconciliation of memory enabled by alterity. **Giulia Zaccaro**’s article, “An Omnipresent Stepping Back: Paul Ricœur between Narcissism, Passivity, and Grace”, aims to investigate what he calls “the kierkegaardian part of myself”, that is, the grace of imagination and possibility against the all-encompassing logic of philosophical knowledge. Zaccaro compares the claim to absolute autonomy raised by philosophical knowledge to what Kierkegaard means by despair and closure. The text investigates the Protestant roots of Ricœurian ethics, especially the influence of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the centrality of the notion of *kenosis* in thinking of a new model of subjectivity beyond the rigid dichotomy between activity and passivity.

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#### Notes

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<sup>[2]</sup> Paolo Furia, Dagmar Kusa, Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra (eds.), *The Challenges of Autonomy and Autonomy as a Challenge. Thinking Autonomy in Challenging Times*, Kritika and Kontext, Bratislava 2022.

<sup>[3]</sup> The notion of autonomy is connected not only with life, but also with the process of dying and the complexities of death. On the connection between autonomy and death see Nel Van Den Haak's and Brad DeFord's papers collected in this issue.

<sup>[4]</sup> See Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra, Paolo Furia (eds.), "Ricœur and the Problem of Space. Perspectives on a Ricœurian 'Spatial Turn'," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 12/2 (2021), pp. 1-7.

<sup>[5]</sup> See Paoli Furia, *Spaesamento. Esperienza estetico-geografica*, Meltemi, Torino 2023.

<sup>[6]</sup> Pippa Norris, "Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens," in Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 3.

<sup>[7]</sup> See Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra, "Embodied Autonomy and the Natural Environment. Thinking Ecological Autonomy," in Paolo Furia, Dagmar Kusa, Maria Cristina Clorinda Vendra (eds.), *The Challenges of Autonomy and Autonomy as a Challenge. Thinking Autonomy in our Challenging Times*, Kritika and Kontext, Bratislava, 2022, pp. 111-125.

<sup>[8]</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature. The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. by Erazim Kohák, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1960.

<sup>[9]</sup> See Janet Donohoe, "The Phenomenological Shift of Parenthood," in Mark Sanders, J. Jeremy Wisniewski (eds.), *Ethics and Phenomenology*, Lexington Book, Lanham 2012, p. 188.

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