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A Passion for the Possible

Thinking with Paul Ricoeur

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Capable Man, Capable God

RICHARD KEARNEY

For some thirty years I had the honor of conducting a dialogue with Paul Ricoeur on the subject of the “possible.” This dialogue extended from our initial exchanges during Ricoeur’s seminars at the Center for Phenomenology and Hermeneutics on Avenue Parmentier in Paris, some of which (like “Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds”) were published in the late 1970s, to my doctoral thesis under Ricoeur’s generous supervision, *Poétique du possible* (defended in 1980 and published in 1984), and finally to my more recent reflections on the eschatology of *posse* in *The God Who May Be* (2003) and *After God* (2006), reflections that Ricoeur cites in a final entry to *Vivant jusqu’à la mort* (2007).¹ Throughout this extended philosophical conversation Ricoeur’s profound understanding of what he called *l’homme capable* and its counterpart, *le dieu capable*, never ceased to inform my own modest efforts to think in his wake. By way of felicitous coincidence, one of the last communications I received from Ricoeur contained mention of a projected volume entitled *Capable Man*, conceived as terminal counterpart to his seminal volume *Fallible Man*. In what follows I attempt to show how these twin aspects of fragility and capacity, limit and potency, mark Ricoeur’s enduring quest for an ontology of the possible.

Ricoeur’s path toward an ontology of the possible steers a middle course between traditional metaphysics, which thinks being in terms of presence or substance, and skeptical deconstruction, which often considers being a

screen against the radical alterity of the other. While the former, often termed *onto-theology* after Heidegger, privileged notions of first Being as *actus purus* or *ipsum esse sustens*, the latter speaks more of *différance* and *désastre*, that is, of the *impossibility of being* understood as a totalizing identity. It is between these poles of extreme presence and extreme absence that Ricoeur navigates his *via media*—an itinerary guided by a wager to render human existence, in all its frailty and finitude, *capable of meaningful being in spite of everything*.

Ricoeur traces a neglected genealogy of the “possible” from Aristotle’s *dunamis* and Spinoza’s *conatus* right up to a contemporary phenomenology of the “I can.” Above all, Ricoeur seeks to found his analysis on a concrete description of the living human being as it acts and suffers in the everyday world. Following Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the “I can” precedes the “I think,” Ricoeur identifies a rich plurivocity of “possibles”—epistemological, moral, historical, practical, poetical, ontological, and eschatological. I cannot do justice to this complex variation here, but hope, nonetheless, to give a basic sense of Ricoeur’s understanding of “possibility” by looking at a number of key texts where he discusses this pivotal concept.

Let me begin with Ricoeur’s telling observations on the subject in two recent interviews, one entitled “The Power of the Possible” (2006), the other “A colloquio con Ricoeur” (2000).² Commenting on Heidegger’s claim for the primacy of *dunamis* in his 1931 course on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, *Book Theta*, Ricoeur explains: “The analogy of action operates as a highly differentiated phenomenology of *I can speak*, *I can act*, *I can narrate*, and *imputability*, that is to say the capacity to designate myself. So I would say that it is a phenomenology of *I can* which permits me to privilege the reading of the *dunamis-energeia* relation at the level of its capacity to articulate a phenomenological discourse.”³ Ricoeur then proceeds to inscribe his own phenomenology of the possible in the specific register of human action and passion. “All the *I cans*,” he says, “are structured by the idea of a suffering and acting being. . . . Redescending from the notion of being as action, as *energeia* and *dunamis*, I find the field of application in an anthropology of an acting human being. And the notion of an acting being finds its application in a very concrete, very descriptive phenomenology: what does it mean *to be able* to speak or not speak and so on. What are the modalities of potency that respond to the modalities of non-potency.”⁴ It is at this decisive juncture that Ricoeur relates his analysis to Spinoza’s innovative claim to overcome the metaphysical dualism of *dunamis* and *energeia*, combining both under the notion of *conatus*.⁵ Ricoeur also introduces here the Leibnizian notion of *appetitus*, whose dynamism

he finds far preferable to the mechanism of Descartes, and whose valencies of penchant, tendency, and *élan* make Ricoeur wonder if this is not already a radical anticipation of the phenomenological category of “capability.”⁶

Both Spinoza and Leibniz, it seems, explored notions of the possible that acknowledged a continuity between potency and act (*energeia*). And it was this very continuity that Aristotle seems to have contested when he gave primacy to actuality over possibility, defining the latter as mere privation or lack—whence Aristotle’s famous example of the architect who is only an architect in potency until he actually exercises his profession, that is, until he performs “architectural acts.” Ricoeur objects to this distinction with the question: what would be a potential architect? Someone making plans and projects before actually executing these plans? But is there not a continuity between the two?⁷ In other words, the “task” of an architect is both an *ergon* and a *dunamis* at one and the same time. Whether completed or not, the work of an architect is a task to be accomplished, in the sense of an “I can” that is both possibilizing and actualizing. Ricoeur identifies a similar instance of continuity in Heidegger’s classic example of the athlete who is poised and ready to sprint. “One can say that the runner is at once in potency and in act, namely that he is on the point of sprinting, therefore already in the process of being a sprinter, even as he withholds himself from the actual leap.”⁸

The difference is one of perspective: on the one hand, Aristotle, who distinguishes in an abstract fashion between potency and act; on the other, a phenomenology of “I can” represented by Spinoza, Leibniz, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and, of course, Ricoeur himself—a phenomenology that aims at the concrete event, which is always a mix of potency and act.⁹ Ricoeur does acknowledge, however, that Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, *Book Delta* and in the *Ethics*, enumerates a rich polyvalence of possibles—logical, virtual, a possible that is not yet possible, a possible that is still on the way to effectuation, and so on. There is more to Aristotle than the official scholastic version. And here, once again, we witness Ricoeur’s suspicion of any simplistic attempt to oppose a “metaphysical” understanding of possibility (for example in Aristotle) to an “antimetaphysical” understanding, as in deconstruction. This is typical of Ricoeur’s determination to remain attentive to the deep complexities of the great metaphysical thinkers, refusing to place them neatly in one camp or another. Which does not prevent him from making strong evaluative judgments and preferences between one metaphysical thinker and another—for example, in this instance, between the standard Aristotelian versus the Spinozist readings of possibility.

Ricoeur's reading of Aristotle is very nuanced, but it is on the question of "attestation" that he departs most explicitly from the Stagirite. Where the latter believed that one could only know potency through act, Ricoeur defines attestation as the primary "knowledge of potency (*puissance*)."¹⁰ In a little text called "Who is the Subject of Rights?" (*Qui est le sujet du droit?*), Ricoeur claims that in the case of a mental patient, prisoner, or other person deprived of rights, it is a matter of recognizing the "prevention of a capacity," and so it is in fact the capacity as such that is considered worthy of dignity (*axios*). In short, the dignity of these people remains intact precisely as a "capacity" that is impeded, deprived, or prohibited. Their "capacity" or "potency," no matter how ignored, retains the status of a task, a promise, a solicitation to which one can attest by responding to their "right" to liberty and recognition, their *appetitus* for expression, their *conatus* towards a good life. The reality of attestation is expressed by Ricoeur thus: "I think that I can, I think that you can, this is the truth of a capable being."¹¹

Ricoeur's phenomenological account recognizes a rich variety of possibilities—epistemological possibility (consciousness), moral possibility (recognition), and even practical possibility (the power to act). And it is probably this last capacity that is of most concern to Ricoeur in his various reflections on "*l'homme capable*." In a crucial essay in *From Text to Action*, entitled "Imagination in Discourse and Action," Ricoeur offers a detailed interrogation of the rapport between practical and poetical possibility. Sketching out a phenomenology of the "power to act" [*pouvoir faire*] in intimate rapport with fiction, he notes: "No action without imagination. . . . And this for several reasons: at the level of the project, at the level of motivation and at the level of the very power to act [*le pouvoir même de faire*]."¹²

At the level of the project, Ricoeur speaks of the "pragma" or "thing to be done by me" as a schematizing network of means and ends that permits us to prefigure possible modes of action. It is in this anticipatory imagination of action, says Ricoeur, that I "try out" various potential modes of action, that I "play" with practical possibilities and possible practices. It is at this point that pragmatic "play" rejoins "narrative play." The function of the project, turned toward the future, and that of the narrative, turned toward the past, here "exchange their schemata and their grids, as the project borrows the narrative's structuring power and the narrative receives the project's capacity for anticipating."¹³

Regarding the next level—that of motivation—Ricoeur speaks of a "luminous clearing" opened up by imagination. This involves an "imaginary

milieu" in which we can "compare and evaluate motives as diverse as desires and ethical obligations, themselves as disparate as professional rules, social customs or intensely personal values."¹⁴ In other words, the practical imagination here initiates a realm of "free play," to cite Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, where one can test and experiment with contrasting motives and terms. It is a question of a certain "figurability" that permits desire to enter into the common sphere of motivation. And this figurative experimentation with motives unfolds according to a conditional mood—a "hypothetical transposition" analogous to Husserl's notion of "neutralisation"—which expresses itself in such linguistic expressions as "I would do this or that if I wanted to." It is in such an imaginary realm that I try out my power to act in ways that reveal my capacities to take this or that course of action. In such wise, imagination and language (Ricoeur cites Austin's famous linguistic analysis "Ifs and Cans") cooperate to facilitate the passage from possibility to action.

And so we encounter, finally, the power to act itself. Passing from a) the schematism of motivations, and b) the figurability of desires, we arrive at the imaginative variation of my capacities for action. Here we find ourselves back at the heart of the "phenomenology of I can," consonant with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the "body-subject" and Heidegger's reading of Dasein as existential projection (*Entwurf*) of its own "possibles." "It is in the realm of the imaginary," concludes Ricoeur,

that I try out my power to act, that I measure the scope of "I can." I impute my own power to myself, as the agent of my own action, only by depicting it to myself in the form of imaginative variations on the theme "I could," even "I could have done otherwise, if I had wanted to." Here, too language is a good guide. . . . One can say that in expressions of the form "I could, I could have . . .," the conditional provides the grammatical projection of imaginative variations on the theme "I can." This conditional form belongs to the tense-logic of the practical imagination. What is essential from a phenomenological point of view is that I take possession of the immediate certainty of my power only through the imaginative variations that mediate this certainty.¹⁵

One sees here how, for Ricoeur, the practical and poetical registers of the possible cross over and confirm each other.

But the "possibilities" of *l'homme capable* are not confined to the personal realm of action. They are also interpersonal. The "I could" can go beyond the self as the power of a singular subject to include the possibility of

others. There is an intersubjective aspect to imaginative action. One does not simply act for oneself; one acts for or against others. The “here” of my own action, when imaginatively or empathically paired with the “here” of another’s action, becomes a “there.” As Ricoeur puts it: “The analogy implied in pairing (*Paarung*) . . . is the transcendental principle according to which the other is another self similar to myself, a self like myself. . . . Like me, my contemporaries, my predecessors, and my successors can say ‘I.’ It is in this way that I am historically bound to all others.”¹⁶ The imaginative projection of possible practices involves not just my action but also that of countless others.

The implications of this for our understanding of the historical past and future are critical. Ricoeur treats of this in several of his later writings, notably *Time and Narrative*, in his analysis of our “debt towards the dead,” and in *History, Memory, Forgetting*, where he speaks of the enigma of betrayed or blocked memory. In the third volume of *Time and Narrative* he holds, for example, that a critical “hermeneutics of historical consciousness would be one which can resurrect lost or even massacred possibilities of time.”¹⁷ And later in the same text he claims that in serving life, history must be used “to discern in the past its unaccomplished promises, its cut-off possibilities of actualization rather than its successes.”¹⁸ Ricoeur develops this point about retrieving the lost or suspended possibilities of history in a telling conversation with Charles Taylor and David Carr in Ottawa in 1983, published under the title “Ricoeur on Narrative.” He insists here on our singular indebtedness to the forgotten ones of history who call out to our poetical and ethical powers of response, their very tragic impotency summoning in us a redoubled potency to recover their occluded voices from the past. Here is a key passage from this exchange:

In the historical past there is what is implicit, what is inchoate; in particular, there are those history has forgotten, the victims of history: it is to them that we are indebted, much more than to the conquerors, whose renown inundates triumphalist history; and there are also those impeded possibilities, all that in history was inhibited, massacred. Here one sees how fiction comes to history’s aid; it is fiction which liberates these inhibited possibilities. What has taken place has also prevented something else from happening and existing. . . . It may be said that every event, by the fact that it has been realized, has usurped the place of impeded possibilities. It is fiction that can save these impeded possibilities and, at the same time, turn them back on history; this reverse-face of history, which

has not taken place, but which had been able to take place, in a certain way *has been*, only however in a potential mode.¹⁹

Here again we find Ricoeur thinking possibility not only in contrast to actuality, but also in relation to forgetfulness, impediment, and repression, categories that are political and poetical as well as ontological. *Dynamis* is never just an abstract metaphysical concept for Ricoeur. It *matters*, it *counts*, it *affects* the lives of really existing and suffering human beings. To be attentive to the repressed voices of history is a way of giving a future to their muted past, thereby seeking to redress some of the injustice committed by the powerful against the powerless, retrieving the betrayed promises of their projects and desires, honoring and commemorating the “perhaps” buried in the untitled crypts of the historically defeated and downtrodden. Here historical memory acts retrospectively to re-enact the histories and stories that “could have been” if things had turned out differently. And, so doing, it serves to remind us that the “potencies” that were never actually realized in fact retain nonetheless the power of uncompleted and unfulfilled “promises” that can be recognized as such in the present in the mode of possibilities-to-be—which is a far cry from *nothing*. To remember the unremembered is a way of revivifying the “traces” of those victims of history, just as Ezekiel reanimates the dry bones in the desert. In this respect, one might say that if a number of postmodern thinkers—Blanchot, Derrida, Levinas, Agamben—have a tendency to think the possible in terms of the impossible, or “impotentiality,” Ricoeur attempts the opposite: namely, to think impossibility in terms of possibility, incapacity in terms of capacity, impotency in terms of potency. This is only a matter of emphasis, to be sure, but a significant one.

This brings us to the threshold of a phenomenology of the “I can,” the line or limit between ontology and eschatology. In the epilogue to *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur reviews the question of historical remembering and forgetting in light of what he calls the “spirit of forgiveness.” Without embracing an explicitly theological or confessional stance, Ricoeur speaks here of an “eschatology of memory.” If formulated in the optative mood, as he puts it, “this eschatology is structured starting from and built on the wish or a happy and peaceful memory, something of which would be communicated in the practice of history.”²⁰ Granting the persuasiveness of Derrida’s account of “impossible forgiveness,” Ricoeur speaks of the possibility of a forgiveness that “unbinds” (without denying) guilt and thereby renders the guilty person “capable” of beginning again.

This unbinding of forgiveness, which releases the agent from past acts, is *difficult*, says Ricoeur, but not *impossible*. Herein lies the slight nuance that differentiates Ricoeur's position from Derrida's, close as it is to the latter's up to this point. The difference is between the difficult pardon and the impossible pardon. The former calls for a certain act of trust, credit, or faith, which Ricoeur associates with the "Abrahamic memory" of the Religions of the Book.²¹ The dialectical pair of forgiveness (which cuts across time and "permits neither before nor after") and repentance (which is a human choice and endeavor occurring in time) opens up a horizon of eschatological possibility beyond the impossible. But Ricoeur is reluctant, here as elsewhere, to embrace some form of blind fideism. He insists that this eschatological gesture is not incompatible or discontinuous with his long-held philosophical advocacy of a hermeneutics of action and suffering, ranging from his early anthropology of "fallible man" to his later anthropology of "capable man."

Let me be more precise. The act of pardon, understood as an act of radical unbinding, is not, Ricoeur insists, some philosophical aberration: "it conforms to the lines of a philosophy of action in which the emphasis is placed on the powers that together compose the portrait of the *capable being*."²² Ricoeur goes on to claim that this anthropology of capable being is itself founded on a fundamental ontology that involves a hermeneutic retrieval of the categories of potency and act in light of such thinkers as "Leibniz, Spinoza, Schelling, Bergson and Freud," in contrast to the preference for an ontology of substance that prevailed up to Kant. And this fundamental ontology, in turn, brings us to the "borders of moral philosophy, at the point where a philosophy of religion is grafted onto a deontological conception of morality."²³ Citing in particular Kant's philosophical analysis of radical evil, Ricoeur agrees that as radical as evil may be, it is not original. "Radical is the 'propensity' to evil, original is the 'predisposition' to good."²⁴ Commending Kant's "immense project of restoration" regarding the primacy of good over evil, Ricoeur returns to his reading of the Adamic myth of the Fall, first explored in his early hermeneutics of *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960). "The gap with respect to the state of creation holds in reserve the *possibility* of another history inaugurated in each case by the act of repentance and punctuated by all the irruptions of goodness and of innocence over the course of time. This existential-existential *possibility*, placed under the protection of the narrative of origin, is echoed by the predisposition to good upon which the Kantian philosophy of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* is constructed."²⁵ This Kantian philosophy of good and evil, nourished by both the symbols of "Jewish and Christian imagination"

and a certain fundamental ontology of potency and act, provides additional support for Ricoeur's claim for an eschatology of "restored capacity." For just as we move from a first naïveté to a second naïveté of consent, so too we have the option of moving from a first capacity to a second capacity of being that exceeds the limits of incapacity. And it is this surplus of promise over pastness, of hope over destiny, of credit (*creance*) over defect, that nourishes the possibility of forgiveness. In spite of evil you are still capable of doing good! You are capable of being better than your past actions, you are more than what you did, the future holds the promise of a possible goodness that is greater than the sum of your past deeds—and more primary! Disabled by the past, you are still able in the future! We leave the last word on the subject to Ricoeur himself: "Under the sign of forgiveness, the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offenses and his faults. He is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing. This capacity is signaled in the small acts of consideration in which we recognize the *incognito* of forgiveness played out on the public stage. And, finally, this restored capacity is enlisted by promising as it projects action toward the future. The formula for this liberating word, reduced to the bareness of its utterance, would be: you are better than your actions."²⁶

But the horizon of eschatological possibility informs not only the notion of *homme capable* but also of *dieu capable*—or what Ricoeur also refers to as *capax dei*. Always one to oppose schismatic oppositions, Ricoeur suggests that the critical encounter between the categories of Greek ontology and biblical theology involved in the famous translation of Exodus 3:15 opens up new resources for understanding the nature of the divine as being-capable or enabling. Noting the traditional rendition of the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as "I am who am," Ricoeur is as intrigued by such alternative renditions as "I am who may be" or "I am who will be with you." The latter acknowledges a certain "divine dynamism" in the Hebrew formulation, which in Greek and Latin translation amplifies the existing range of understanding of the ontological categories of being and can-being.²⁷ He is particularly interested in the connotations of promise, becoming, and futurity that the Exodic formula contains. Here Ricoeur commends the fertile and creative tension emerging from the mutual crossing-over of Greek ontology and biblical theology. "It is truly the verb 'to be,' but in none of the senses found in the Greek," he writes. "There is a sort of enlargement of the meaning of being as a being-with, or being-faithful, that is the being as accompaniment of a people, another dimension of being. When Aristotle says there is a variety of meanings of being,

he had not anticipated the being of Exodus 3.14. I am for this kind of enlargement of ontology rather than a reversal of ontology in moving from Greek to Hebrew."²⁸

Here we encounter an eschatology of the possible shared by both philosophers and theologians alike. Eschatology is, by Ricoeur's own admission, his intellectual and spiritual "secret."²⁹ It usually arises at the end—or limit—of certain hermeneutic analyses (such as the *Interpretation of Freud*) in a relatively discreet or laconic fashion. Eschaton serves as a limit-horizon for Ricoeur's work in both philosophy and theology, as suggested by his embrace, in a late essay of *Thinking Biblically*, of a medial position between "philosophical theology" and "theological philosophy."³⁰ This latter-day acknowledgment of an eschatological *posse* marks something of a departure from Ricoeur's habitual reservation—what he calls his "methodological asceticism"—regarding the intermingling of philosophy and theology.³¹

In his beautiful essay on the Song of Songs in *Thinking Biblically*, entitled "The Nuptial Metaphor," Ricoeur pushes his eschatological secret to the point of rhapsodic avowal.³² Here we find the eschatological potential of the divine responding to the liturgical power of the human in the form of a theo-erotic chiasmus. Commenting on verse 8:6 of the Song, where the shortened and unprecedented allusion to God appears as *yah*, Ricoeur notes that the famous "seal of alliance" inscribed on the human heart is to be understood as both wisdom and desire. Here, suggests Ricoeur, we have a discreet divinity who respects the incognito of an intimate *corps-a-corps* where human desire and divine desire traverse each other. In this nuptial crossover, the "I can" of the human being finds its correspondent in the "You can" of the divine lover. *L'homme capable* and *le dieu capable* respond to each other in an act of daring complicity and co-creation. And it is no accident, I suspect, that Ricoeur chooses the term "metaphor" to describe this divine-human exchange, for metaphoricity is precisely that "tensive" power of language that comes alive in the crisscross of ostensible opposites—immanent-transcendent, sensible-intelligible, finite-infinite. Reading this text one realizes that for Ricoeur the divine is "capable" precisely because it is *eros* as well as *agape*, a dynamic potency (*dunamis*, *conatus*, *appetitus*) that expresses itself as a desire that is less lack than it is surplus: an eschatological desire to make human being more capable of desire, in turn, as it reaches towards new genesis, incarnation, and natality. *Désir à être* rather than *manque à être*. Desire as a love that answers, to cite that decisive passage of the Song celebrated by Ricoeur:

Under the apple tree I awakened you
There where your mother conceived you
Set me as a seal upon your heart . . .
For love is as strong as death . . .
Its flame a flash of sacred fire.

(Song of Songs 8:5–7)

What are the implications of such a "capable God" for human questions of living and dying? Such an eschatological *posse* is, for Ricoeur, a promise of living up to death, a God of enabling service rather than of sacrificial bloodletting. Ricoeur poignantly struggles with this postsacrificial notion of death and resurrection in his final testament, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort* (2007). Here he writes of a God who is willing to efface his own being for the sake of giving more being to his beloved creatures. In this sense we might even speak of a God beyond religion (in the sense of confessional absolutism), or at the very least an interreligious or transreligious God. Speaking of a certain kind of "grace" accompanying the experience of death, Ricoeur notes that "it is not important for this moment of grace that the dying person identifies with a particular religion or confession." Indeed, he supposes that it may be only when "faced with death that the religious becomes one with the Essential and that the barrier dividing religions (and non-religions like Buddhism) are transcended. Because dying is trans-cultural it is also trans-confessional and trans-religious."³³

I think Ricoeur comes close here to the position of a mystic such as Eckhart who "prayed God to rid him of God," or to his close friend, Stanislas Breton, who espoused a form of mystical kenosis whereby divinity becomes nothing in order that humanity can become more fully human. Admitting his basic suspicion of "immediacy and fusion," Ricoeur makes one exception for "the grace of a certain dying."³⁴ He describes this grace as a "paradox of immanent transcendence," an especially "intimate transcendence of the Essential which rips through the veils of confessional religious codes."³⁵ To encounter such authentic grace one must, Ricoeur suggests, forgo the will for one's own personal salvation by transferring this hope onto others. He also speaks, in this respect, of renouncing the metaphysical fiction of an otherworldly Being dispensing punishment and reward in some kind of celestial court. The notion of divine *posse*, of an enabling God who says "You are able!" requires the rejection of all forms of theodicy and theocracy. Invoking instead the great Rhine mystics, Ricoeur remarks how they "renounced themselves" for the sake of opening to the Essential, to the point of being, in their contemplative detachment, incredibly active in the creation of new orders,

in teaching, in traveling and tending to the forgotten of this world. By being available like this to the Essential, they were motivated to “transfer the love of life onto others.”³⁶ God thus becomes a God *after* God, a God who no longer is but who *may be* again in the form of resurrected human life, a God of the living rather than of the dead. In this option for natality over mortality, for service over mastery, the dichotomy between “before” and “after” death suddenly dissolves.

Here, in his parting intellectual *mémoire* of living and dying, Ricoeur confronts the basic scriptural paradox that “he who clings to his life loses it and he who lets it go gains it.” Or to put it in Joyce’s terms, “without sundering there is no reconciliation.” In this context Ricoeur offers a startlingly refreshing reading of the Eucharist as a celebration of blood-as-wine, transubstantiation being taken as a sign of life and sharing rather than as a token of sacrificial bloodletting.³⁷ The Eucharistic commemoration of the giving of one’s life—“Do this in memory of me”—thus becomes an affirmation of the gift of life for the other rather than an anxiety about personal survival after death. In other words, when Christ said “it is finished,” he meant it. He was offering up his own personal life, in a second gesture of kenotic emptying (the first being the descent of divinity into flesh), so as to give life to others. This kenotic giving of life to others is done in *both* service (Luke 22, 27) *and* sacrament: the breaking of bread at Emmaus, the cooking of fish for his disciples when he returned—incognito—in the form of the risen servant, and ever after, down through human history, in the guise of feeding the “least of these” (*elachistos*). Ricoeur concludes his valedictory testament with this remarkable note: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Hence the link between *death-rebirth in the other* and *service as gift of life*. And the link between service and feast. The Last Supper conjoins the moment of dying unto oneself and the service of the other in the sharing of food and wine which joins the man of death to the multitude of survivors reunited in community. And this is why it is remarkable that Jesus never theorized about this and never said *who* he was. Maybe he didn’t *know*, for he *lived* the Eucharistic gesture, bridged the gap between the imminence of death and the community beyond. He marked a passage to glory (through suffering and death) without any sacrificial perspective.”³⁸ Ricoeur is rejecting here, it seems to me, the notion of Christ’s death as a scapegoating ritual of periodic bloodletting to propitiate divine bloodlust; he is *not* rejecting Christ’s act of “sacrificing” his life out of love for others. He is saying, in short, that divinity is “capable” of making human life “capable” of sacred life, and that it does so by lovingly emptying divine being into nonbeing so that it may be resurrected as human being more “fully alive.”

The fact that Ricoeur calls himself a “Christian who writes philosophically” rather than a “Christian philosopher” seems to me significant here. For he is acknowledging the importance of a certain gap, which allows us to freely and imaginatively revisit, and at times retrieve, the often forgotten, concealed, or taken-for-granted resources of traditional religion. God must die to *being* so that God may be reborn as *can-being* (*posse*). Or as Ricoeur puts it, “we must smash false idols so that genuine symbols can speak.”³⁹ The voice of such resurrected symbols responds to the call of the eschatological *possible*.⁴⁰