

# Not Choosing Between Universalism and Contextualism: Paul Ricoeur on tragedy and practical wisdom

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is about the source of and the proper response to cultural conflicts. Theorists about culture are commonly divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are those who think that differences in our cultural contexts are the source of conflicts, and that we should acknowledge the plurality of the good; call them contextualists. On the other, there are those who think that moral reflection can take us beyond the limitations of our cultural context, and makes it possible to resolve cultural conflicts; call them universalists. The two approaches are often considered to be incompatible. Contextualists typically blame universalists for being insensitive to differences in procedures for rational justification of moral beliefs. Since transcending all contextuality would be unattainable, they would be elevating context-specific values to universal principles (ethnocentrism). Universalists, in turn, accuse contextualists of refraining from any justification (relativism). In this paper, I will discuss Paul Ricoeur's position in this debate, which is characterized by a refusal to side with one camp, and an insistence to bring them together. He suggests that although universalism and contextualism cannot be reconciled conceptually, we do not have to choose between them in practice. On this view, the ongoing debates over universalism and contextualism testify of the tragic nature of action, which calls for practical wisdom.

I shall focus on the so-called 'little ethics' Ricoeur develops in *Oneself As Another*.<sup>1</sup> In this work, Ricoeur addresses the relation between universal and contextual limitations on the abstract level of the 'ethical and moral determinations of actions'. Clarification of these determinations will cover the greater part of the paper (sections 4 - 6). The internal structure of this part will become clear in section three, where I will introduce the 'little ethics'. It will lead up to a more concrete discussion of the relation between the universal and the relative in the case of cultural conflicts (in the second part of section 6). But first I will spend some words on two lessons Ricoeur draws from Greek tragedy, as a preliminary presentation of the central notions of *tragedy* and *practical wisdom*.

## 2. Two ethical lessons from Greek tragedy

As many before him, Ricoeur turns to the voice of Greek tragedy for restoring the proper place for conflicts in ethical life. In this section, I will explain why Ricoeur thinks tragedy is instructive for ethics and discuss the example of *Antigone*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur 1992. Hereinafter I will refer to this work parenthetically.

Aristotle defined tragedy as “an imitation [*mimesis*] not of persons but of action [*praxis*] and life, of happiness and misery.”<sup>2</sup> Aristotle thought *mimesis* to be possible because he defined action as “a connection (...) of incidents” which is “susceptible to conforming to narrative configuration” (152). The narrative integration of the incidents of a story parallels the integration of basic actions in coherent ‘practices’, a parallel Ricoeur calls ‘mimetic relation’ (157). Thus, Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as a ‘*mimesis* of action’ presupposes a mimetic relation between narrative and action. But this relation also makes another function of narratives possible, according to Ricoeur: we can use them to explore ‘imaginative variations’ in the way we organise our practices, which can become real when such variations make us realize how we can transform the organisation of our actions (164). Moreover, a narrative not only connects the various incidents of the story but also in doing so constitutes the identity of characters in the story. Similarly, practices not only integrate actions, but also shape the identity of their actors. Ricoeur thus concludes that tragedy (and art in general, for that matter) makes the exploration possible of imaginative variations in the relation between our actions and ourselves. In the fourth section, we will see which role these explorations play in Ricoeur’s ethics. Now, we turn to a concrete example of a Greek tragedy.

#### *The fragility of action and the need for practical wisdom*

Following Hegel, Ricoeur points to one Greek tragedy that is particularly instructive for ethics: *Antigone* (ca. 442 B.C.), part of Sophocles’ trilogy about the saga of Thebes.<sup>3</sup> The play tells the part of the saga where Creon, the ruler who had taken control of the city after the removal of Oedipus (Antigone’s father), denies burial to the corpse of Polynices (her brother). Antigone defies this order and defends this decision so resolutely, when brought before him, that Creon orders her underground imprisonment, where she starves to death. Tragic in this play is that Antigone and Creon both act in good faith, and obey the law they believe to be decisive. Ricoeur draws attention to two motives in *Antigone*, that of the law and that of practical wisdom.

Consider the first motive. Ricoeur lays emphasis on the verses where Antigone calls on the laws of the gods, in opposition to Creon’s instructions: “Nor did I think your orders were so string that you [Creon], a mortal man, could over-run the god’s unwritten and unfailing laws”.<sup>4</sup> He criticizes Hegel for taking the narrowness of the commitments of the characters to be the sole source of conflict. Ricoeur interprets it not as a conflict between two moral forces, family and state but as a conflict between these moral forces and the singular strivings of Antigone and Creon as selves.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the source of conflict is not just the commitment of characters (one to the gods, the other to the state), but rather the

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 6.1450a15-19. Quotation taken from the translation by Ingram Bywater (Aristotle 1941a).

<sup>3</sup> Quotations are taken from the translation by Elizabeth Wyckoff (Sophocles, 1960), references are to line numbers of the Greek text. See pp. 152-163 of *Oneself as Another* for Ricoeur’s discussion of *Antigone*.

<sup>4</sup> ll. 452-455. Ricoeur discusses the passage in *Oneself as Another* (pp. 245-248) and by Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, (pp. 452-453 & pp. 491-495).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wall 2003: 362

‘one-sidedness’ of moral principles themselves, when confronted with the complexity of life. Ricoeur stresses that part of the reason that the instructions of the gods conflict with the instructions of Creon stems from the fact that Antigone narrows the unwritten laws down to concrete funeral instructions (245). This reminds us that even infallible principles need to be applied *in situation* by fallible human beings, if they are to guide our actions. The recognition of this ‘fragility’ is the first lesson from *Antigone*.

The second thread Ricoeur picks up in *Antigone* is that of wisdom [*to phronein*]. Tragedy shows not only that conflict is an inevitable feature of life, but also that there is no ‘solution’ to it. Ricoeur insists that this does not condemn us to accept the opposition as unsolvable, and points to the ‘middle road’ of a practical response (243). Because what we rely on in applying principles to concrete situations are our ethical convictions, it is our convictions we need to reflect on when conflicts arise. The insoluble conflicts that are invented in tragedies force “the person of praxis to reorient action, at his or her own risk, in the sense of a practical wisdom in situation that best *responds* to tragic wisdom” (247).

Ricoeur cryptically describes it as “the transition from tragic *phronein* to practical *phronesis*” (249). It advances, in other words, from ‘tragic’ wisdom in our response to fiction to ‘practical’ wisdom in our response to the tragedy of real life action. To make this move possible, Ricoeur has to establish that ethics can be informed by fiction and resolve their separation in Aristotle. This separation is central to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy as *mimesis*. Tragedy is not a story meant to explain rationally what happened, but is rather a dramatisation that incites an emotional response [*catharsis*] in the audience. This emotional response is one of ‘tragic wisdom’. Aristotle believed this ‘imitation’ not to be instructive for ethics, because situations invoke a different response when imitated in tragedy. Emotions we normally find painful (e.g. fear and pity) become enjoyable when presented through *mimesis*.<sup>6</sup> For Aristotle, this paradox showed that we react differently to situations we do not believe to be real. The emotional response triggered by artistic expression is quite differently from responses in real life situations, and is therefore not instructive for ethics. Tragedy produces something new, and belongs to the aesthetical realm; praxis belongs to the quite different realm of the ethical, which concerns the good that is already embedded in our life (Wall 2003: 317). Thus, tragic wisdom is confined to the aesthetic realm and is not applicable to ethical life.

Therefore, Aristotle contrasts mimetic representation with action. The passage continues: “All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end [*telos*] for which we live is a certain kind of activity [*praxis*], not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions –what we do– that we are happy or the reverse” [P 6.1450a]. Here, we encounter Aristotle’s ethics, to which we shall return later. Now, what it is important is that practical wisdom applies to real actions, and remains strictly separated from the aesthetic realm. Ricoeur, then, admits that we react differently to tragedy, but draws a different conclusion from that observation, as we have seen in the last part of section 2, where the transition for tragic to practical wisdom was at issue. It points to a relation between what has been so far presented as a problem *within* ethics to the distinction *between* the ethi-

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<sup>6</sup> Worth 2000: 333

cal and the aesthetic realm, which we encountered in the section on tragic wisdom. Scrutinizing this relation one more, now on the level of *practical* wisdom, will enable us to conclude the transition from tragic wisdom to practical wisdom – which we left un-ended before.

In short, the second lesson is that in the face of tragic conflicts we have the responsibility to re-consider our fallible interpretation of moral principles in a way that mitigates the conflict. In the remainder of the paper, I will clarify Ricoeur's argumentation for these two lessons as he develops it in his 'little ethics' – which I will introduce next.

### 3. Introduction of the 'little ethics'

Ricoeur develops his 'little ethics' in the seventh, eighth and ninth studies of his *Oneself As Another*. In these studies, he aims to explore a dimension of selfhood that is "at once ethical and moral" (169). He aims to show that we do not have to choose between ethics and morality, but need to keep both in the right place. Briefly, Ricoeur reserves "the term 'ethics' for the *aim* of an accomplished life and the term 'morality' for its articulation in norms" (170). For Ricoeur, the distinction is tied to the difference between two traditions: Aristotelian teleological 'ethics', characterized by aiming at the good life, and the Kantian tradition of deontological 'morality', based on respect for universal norms.

As Ricoeur himself points out, his little ethics' is structured along two intersecting axes.<sup>7</sup> The first axis is that of the ascending order of predicates applicable to action, respectively 'good', 'obligatory' and 'equitable'.<sup>8</sup> It is along this axis that the three studies are located: in the seventh study Ricoeur explores the aim for the good life, in the eight study its articulation in universal and obligatory norms, and in the ninth study its concrete application with the equity of practical wisdom. The subsequent three sections will be organized along this axis, proceeding from the *ethical* perspective (our section 4) and the *moral* perspective (section 5), to the final phase of *actualisation* (section 6). This structure parallels Ricoeur's central argument, which consists of three theses (170): (1) the primacy of the ethical aim over morality; (2) the necessity for this aim to pass through 'the sieve of the moral norm'; (3) the legitimacy of recourse by the norm to the aim, whenever the norm leads to impasses in practice. The second axis is that of the dialogical constitution of the self. Central to Ricoeur's ethics is the idea that the autonomy of the self has an interpersonal and institutional dimension. Each study has a tripartite structure, proceeding from the pre-dialogical to the institutional dimension, passing by the inter-personal. To simplify, I shall limit my analysis in this paper to the pre-dialogical.

### 4. The priority of the ethical aim

The appraisal as 'good' (the first position on the axis of 'good', 'obligatory' and 'equity') takes place at the *ethical* stage. For Ricoeur, the ethical is the perspective we take when we reflect on what we consider good, prior to its articulation in norms (what is obligatory)

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<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur 2000: 14

<sup>8</sup> The terms 'equitable' and 'equity' will be explained in section 6.

and their application (what is equitable). He offers a re-interpretation of Aristotle's teleological ethics, especially his notion 'practical wisdom', discussed in the second part of this section, and his idea of the good as 'what we aim for', which will be introduced next.

### *The good we aim for*

Ricoeur defines the ethical intention as "*aiming for the good life with and for others, in just institutions*" (172). The pre-dialogical dimension we consider here involves only the first component, which specifies the object of the ethical aim. Ricoeur's understanding of this object draws on Aristotle in two ways. The first thing Ricoeur takes from Aristotle is that action is the basis of the ethical aim, as the latter sets out in the first lines of his *Ethica Nicomachean*: "Every art and inquiry, and likewise every action [*praxis*] and pursuit, is believed to aim at the good. The good has therefore rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim".<sup>9</sup> Aristotle contrasts this conception of the good with that of Plato, who reserves the term 'good' for things 'good in themselves' rather than because of their effects. Aristotle believes this is a reduction from the complexity of the way usually think about 'good', and turns the good into something "beyond man's attainment"; instead, the good must be the complex outcome we aim for in our actions.<sup>10</sup>

### *Convictions: mediating between living and acting well*

The second lesson is to "to set up the teleology internal to action as the structuring principle for the aim of the good life" (172). In other words, what counts as the good life should be determined in a similar way as we establish what counts as a good practice. This connection is vital for Ricoeur's idea that when we appraise our actions as 'good' we, indirectly, also esteem ourselves, as their author (171).

Ricoeur agrees with Aristotle that the teleology internal to action should be the structuring principle for the good life. But he points to a paradox: commentators have long noted that in Aristotle discordance exists between two aspects of practical wisdom [*phronesis*] (173).<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, practical wisdom "makes us use the right means", rather than aim at the right target.<sup>12</sup> This conception of practical wisdom is applied to deliberation on the level of *practices*, which are ends in themselves. "We deliberate not about ends, but about means. A doctor, for instance, does not deliberate as to whether he shall heal (...); nor does anyone deliberate about his end".<sup>13</sup> For example, medicine has an end in itself (e.g. healing), so that all a doctor has to deliberate about is the means to achieve that end. On the other hand, Aristotle asserts that practical wisdom involves "deliberating well, not about how particular things are to be produced" (e.g. health), but about "what sort of things are conducive to good life in general".<sup>14</sup> In this sense, practical wisdom is the deliberation about the path one should follow to guide his life (174). The paradox is that Aris-

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<sup>9</sup> 1094a. Quotations are from the translation by W.D. Ross (Aristotle, 1941b). References are to the Bekker edition of his *Collected Works* (I. Bekker, 5 vols. 1831-70).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1109b

<sup>11</sup> See also Wall 2003: 319

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica* 1144a

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica* 1112b

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1140a

total maintains both “that each practice had an ‘end in itself’ *and* that all action tends toward an ‘ultimate end’”, that of the good life (178). Aristotle does not offer an adequate solution, as he fails to hierarchize different units of action and their corresponding ends. Ricoeur therefore introduces his own conception of action.

Ricoeur develops the hierarchy necessary to resolve the Aristotelian paradox in two steps. First, he discerns and hierarchizes three levels of organisation: practices, life plans and narrative identity.<sup>15</sup> *Practices* are coordinations of basic actions, such as gestures and postures; famous examples are professions, arts and games (153). They are governed by rules that have a social origin, beyond the individual practitioner. Particularly, each practice has its ‘standards of excellence’: precepts of doing (something) well that allow practitioners to evaluate actions as good (176).<sup>16</sup> Medicine, to return to this example, is based on procedures that are developed in interaction with other medical practitioners, and are evaluated against common standards of excellence. In short, each practice has its own principles of organisation, which are the basis for our evaluation of actions within that practice. In this sense, each practice has an end in itself. But practices are themselves nested within ‘life plans’; examples are family life, professional life and leisure time. This second level of organisation integrates local practices within global projects, which allow us to have a sense of our life ‘as a whole’. Parallel to standards of excellence in practices, life plans have an ethical dimension in what Aristotle calls the function [*ergon*] of man. Our conception of this ‘function’ has the same role as the standards of excellence on the subordinate level: it allows us to evaluate our actions and appraise them in terms of good’ (178). To sum up, by nesting ‘good internal to practice’ as second order units within global projects of the ‘good life’, Ricoeur clarifies how they can be meaningfully related in the *organisation* of action. The question remains, however, how they can be combined in *reflection* on this organisation.

Re-interpreting ethical reflection is Ricoeur’s second step. Here, he proposes a kind of hermeneutical circle between our aim for the good life and choices that are based on the ends internal to practices (179). With Gadamer, he re-interprets practical wisdom as a ‘back and forth’ movement between abstract notions of the good life, that is, aiming well, and choices on the level of practice, that is, acting well (158).<sup>17</sup> It is an ongoing process of mutual adjustment, similar to the hermeneutical understanding that of a text and its context each in terms of each other. In hermeneutical terms, the mutual adjustment of abstract ideals of the good life and concrete ends of action requires interpreting the good against the ‘horizon’ of the good life, but with a particular situation as its area of application. In other words, reflecting on the good is interpreting oneself and one’s actions, which results in ‘convictions of judging and acting well’. Such convictions are not based on abstract rational justifications, but on experiences with various self-interpretations. Now we can see in how appraisal of our actions and esteem ourselves is connected: both depend on a conviction about what action is the best specification of what we believe to

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<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur takes the first two, ‘practices’ and ‘life plans’ from MacIntyre (1981).

<sup>16</sup> MacIntyre suggests that standards of excellence do not preclude controversy, but rather provoke it (176). In the next section, we will see that Ricoeur proposes the same for moral principles.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gadamer 1986: 278-89

be the good life. Recall Ricoeur's suggestion that tragedy and art imitate how we relate our actions and ourselves in the organisation of our practices. This mimetic relation allows us to explore imaginative variations in our convictions, which in turn allow us to "poetically re-shape our practices".<sup>18</sup>

Ricoeur's first thesis, that the ethical aim must have priority over moral norms, gives priority to this re-orientation of our practices. Nonetheless, the second thesis stipulates that the ethical aim must 'pass through the sieve of the norm'. Paradoxically, we need this second stage not to resolve tragic conflicts but to invoke them. As *Antigone* taught us, the reorientation of practices is enforced by tragedy, the source of which is our specifications of moral principles. In the next section, the dynamic Aristotelian-style developed so far will thus assume "the rigors of a Kantian-style morality" (249), which will take us from the first to the second position on the axis of 'good', 'obligatory' and 'equitable'.

##### 5. Through the sieve of the norm: the critical function of moral obligations

Ricoeur believes that the ethical and the moral are not opposed but complementary to each other: the moral is nothing else than a second stage in which we put 'naïve' appraisals of our actions and ourselves to the 'critical test' offered by a morality of obligation. Ricoeur aims, first, to show the continuity between the Kantian morality of obligation and the teleological perspective of the previous section. Secondly, he criticizes Kant for the way he formalizes this critical test of our ethical intentions. In the following, I will explore how Ricoeur achieves this twofold aim, after spending a few words on why Ricoeur's thinks a critical test of our aims is necessary.

##### *The propensity of evil and the necessity of constraint*

Historically, the addition of a deontological moment to Aristotelian ethics results from a change in the appreciation of self-love. Aristotle believed in a harmony between self-love and the good life: because the good life and happiness coincide, living the good life and 'love of self' reinforce each other. By contrast, the bad life is one of internal separation: on the short term, we are pleased by bad decisions, but on the long bad actions will have bad consequences, cause remorse and lead ultimately to a loss of self-love. This harmony is called into question by Kant, who questions whether we can derive what 'ought' (the good life), from what 'is' (the conditions under which we are happy). In his view, we are always internally separated: we have both a predisposition to good and a propensity for evil, and a capacity to choose on what basis we act. This separation does not manifest itself on the level of our (first-order) desires, as in Aristotle, but on the (second-order) level of our appraisal of our desires, that is, on the level of self-esteem. Kant thus splits our self-esteem between two kinds of self-esteem: self-*respect* is the variant of self-esteem that is solely motivated by the disposition to good, while self-love [*Selfstliebe*] is the variant that is perverted by 'the propensity [*Hang*] for evil' (215). The choice is not just between acting well and acting badly, but rather between 'what ought to be done' and its opposite: evil.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Wall 2003: 326

Because of this split in our self-esteem, we need some kind of ‘critical function’ with regard to it, which purifies self-esteem through exclusion of its perverted variant. This purification requires an addition to the ethics developed so far: in aiming for the good, we need to *constrain* our propensity to evil. It is for a criterion for this constraint that Ricoeur turns to Kant’s morality of obligations, as we will see next.

*Kant’s morality: universal and constraining obligations*

If Kant’s morality is an addition to rather than a replacement of the ethical perspective, the two perspectives must be continuous. Ricoeur believes they are, which he illustrates with Kant’s notion of the good will. “It is impossible”, Kant writes in the *Groundwork*, “to conceive of anything at all in the world (...) which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*”.<sup>19</sup> The quote contains two assertions: (1) the moral good is unqualified; (2) it is the will that is good in this sense. Ricoeur argues that both have some continuity with the ethical perspective. First, the proviso ‘without qualification’ protects the moral character of the good while conserving its teleological nature (205). Principles that guide actions are still taken from the class of ‘the good we aim at’, but now have to satisfy the further requirement that they are not just good for us, but are good without further qualification (that is, universally). Secondly, the identification of the good *will* as what is good in this sense re-interprets the Aristotelian idea of determining oneself through deliberation: the Aristotelian idea that we can derive the good from *what we aim for* is replaced in Kant by the idea of a ‘good will’ that is recognized by *its relation to the moral law* on the basis of which it constrains the unqualified good.

In Kant, what distinguishes a good person is not the goodness of the desires he adopts into his maxim (its ‘content’) but the totality of his *subordination* (which is the ‘form’ of the maxim). That means, says Ricoeur, that evil must be defined as “a reversal of the order that requires respect for the law” (216). Here we return to the distinction between self-love and what can now be identified as self-respect. *Self-respect* is the variant of self-esteem that “has passed through the sieve of the universal and constraining norm”, while self-love is the variant that is perverted by ‘the propensity [Hang] for evil’ (215). The latter is a maxim that grounds all bad maxims and has ‘recalcitrance’ as its form: it puts self-love, obedience to empirical desires, above obedience to the moral law. This propensity for evil does not pervert our desires, but our capacity for acting out of duty, that is, it affects the *exercise* of freedom (216). The criterion that separates good from evil is therefore that of universalization. Thus for Kant, obligations have a universal and an obligatory aspect, both of which are continuous with the ethical perspective.

Ricoeur agrees that moral obligations should have a universal and obligatory nature, but contests the way Kant formalises them. The style of Kant’s morality can be characterized, says Ricoeur, as a progressive strategy of purification, in which our empirical motivation (the basis of self-love) is more and more excluded from the maxims constituting the will.

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<sup>19</sup> Kant, *Groundwork for a metaphysics of morals*, 4:393. Quotations are taken from the translation by H.J. Paton (Kant, 1964). References to the German text.

Ricoeur discerns three stages, each crossing a further threshold of formalisation.<sup>20</sup> First, maxims are assessed on their adequacy qua *form*, by being subjected to the categorical imperative in its most general formulation: “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”.<sup>21</sup> The formalisation at this stage merely consists in the exclusion of qualifications that threaten the *universality* of objectives. It is not yet, Ricoeur emphasizes, a constraint on their empirical motivation. The second stage is that of isolating objectives that are compatible with a multiplicity of their *matter* (that is, their ends). The will should not be based on objectives that merely *can* be universal, but only on objectives that are *by their nature* universal. The only objective that meets this criterion is the aim to act morally. Here, a further threshold of formalisation is crossed: all empirical motivation is removed from maxims, which determine the will not through the objectives adopted in them (their matter), but purely through their legislative form.

The purification is finalised by the idea of self-legislation or autonomy (210). The distinction between autonomy (self-legislation) and heteronomy (rule by nature) is for Kant the ultimate difference between morality and ethics. At this stage, the criterion is added that the aim to act morally must *completely constrain* all maxims that are not by their nature universal. It has a negative aspect, the ‘humiliation of self-love’, and a positive aspect, respect for the power of reason in us. In other words, the split between the will and its finite condition is carried beyond ‘epistemic adequacy’ (with respect to the criterion of universality) to ‘ontological adequacy’ (with respect to the *criterion of constitutive constraint*). Ontological adequacy requires that the will is constrained in its fundamental structure, rather than in its finite condition.

### *Judicial reasoning: beyond Kantian formalism*

What, then, is the problem with this formalisation? Ricoeur needs another criterion, I said, to purify our self-esteem from self-love, which is perverted by the propensity for evil. He finds it in the criterion of universalizability, but criticizes the way Kant formalizes it.<sup>22</sup> In Kant, the coherence of the whole set of moral obligations is secured through a criterion of non-contradiction: if a maxim is the source of internal contradiction it is considered non-moral. Thus, the test of universality is interpreted as a test of non-contradiction. Ricoeur admits that coherence is important, but redefines its scope in terms of *judicial reasoning*, in order to make space for the tragedy of action. The idea is that ‘tragic’ moral conflicts share certain similarities with ‘hard’ legal cases, for instance complaints that have not been the object of any previous judicial decisions (277). In a legal system, the application to new cases takes place on the basis of precedents, which already have a legal status. On the moral plane, in contrast, the applications of the law to cases in which it is

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<sup>20</sup> Kant indicates that “a progression takes place” in three stages: “through the categories of the *unity* of the form of the will (its universality), the *plurality* of the matter (its objects, that is, its ends) and of the *totality* of its system of ends” (*Groundwork* 4.436).

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *Groundwork* 4.421

<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur also criticizes the Kantian idea of constraint, especially the idea of a separation between description and prescription. The ‘other’ of evil must not be excluded from but integrated into autonomy as the capacity to *mediate between* what is and what ought (not) to be (275-76; Wall 2003: 328).

not decisive without further specification is based on convictions. The application of moral principles in situation is based on, often unexpressed, 'specificatory premises' that delimit, correct, or even extend the class of actions to which the law applies.<sup>23</sup>

Here, a striking parallel exists with *Antigone*, where the source of tragedy was the narrow vision of the protagonists on the law governing their actions. Similarly, the locus of moral conflict in real life is the specification of our moral principles to apply them to new and hard cases. Its source is the "perverse use of the 'specificatory premises', which has to be unmasked by a critique of ideologies" (280). The critique of prejudices in the way we 'narrow down' our moral principles is the critical element of practical wisdom. Thus, on the one hand we have the 'naïve' element of our own experience-based self-interpretations, on the other the critique of prejudices in the way we articulate them in universal moral norms. Precisely because universal norms invoke conflict, they are capable of shaking up our practices and forcing us to reorient our action. It is for this reason that the ethical aims has to pass through the sieve of the norms, as Ricoeur's second thesis stipulates. In the next section, we will see how this can be reconciled with Ricoeur's first thesis, that the aim for the good should have primacy over the moral norm. This will take us from the second to the last position on the axis of 'good', 'obligatory' and 'equitable'.

#### 6. The legitimacy of recourse from the norm to the aim

If what is really at stake in tragic moral conflicts is 'specificatory principles': the problem is not the universality of principles, but the way we narrow them down to standards that are capable of guiding our actions in specific situations. Ricoeur calls this the problematic of the *actualisation* of our norms. He asserts that excessive concern with the *justification* of moral norms would leave this problematic uncovered, in concealing that the proper response to the tragedy of action is one of practical re-orientation rather than theoretical objections against the universality of moral principles. On his view, there "would be no room for a tragedy of action unless the universalist and the contextualist claim had to be maintained each in a place yet to be determined" (274). Ricoeur's insistence on the tragic nature of action thus entails that we should appreciate the validity of both the ethical and the moral perspective.

Tragic conflicts force us to transform our convictions into what Ricoeur calls 'considered convictions': self-interpretations that are based on self-respect rather than self-love. Such convictions are only achieved through a dialectic of *conviction* and *critique*. This dialectic is the critical equivalent of the 'naïve' mutual adjustment between the good life and making good choices. We shift back and forth not only between our conception of the good life and actual choices, but also between the conviction that mediates between these levels, and its impartial articulation in universal norms. This second dialectic is necessary because the problem is not the norm itself, but the way we narrow it down in specificatory premises. Because *we* are the source of tragedy, it calls for changes in *us*. Responding to the tragedy of action with practical wisdom is reconsidering your convictions. It is in this sense that the ethical has priority over the moral: the actualisation of norms depends on

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<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur takes the notion of 'specificatory premises' from Donagan (1977: 56).

recourse from the moral norm to the ethical aim – Ricoeur’s third thesis. In the following, I shall first clarify what Ricoeur means by this recourse, and then apply it to the case of cultural conflicts.

### *The corrective function of practical wisdom*

Recall that one function of specificatory premises is correcting the class of actions to which the law applies. This idea, that laws sometimes need correction, can be traced back to the Aristotelian notion of the ‘equitable’. The equitable, Aristotle states, is what characterizes someone “who does not stand strictly upon his rights (...) and tends to take less than his share although he has the law to back him”.<sup>24</sup> Standing strictly upon one’s rights is wrong if applied to practical affairs, which because of their practical nature cannot be governed by fixed laws. But, Aristotle underlines, we need not conclude from this that the law is wrong, only that strict adherence to it may not always be the right thing to do. Justice has two faces: the law is “legally just” and the equitable is just in the sense of “a corrective of legal justice”<sup>25</sup>. Priority has the *sense* of justice, which we rely on when we apply the *rule* of justice in context.

Aristotle suggested that its reliance on *practical wisdom* is what makes equity superior in relation to justice.<sup>26</sup> In correcting the law where it defects, practical wisdom rescues us from the potential rigidity of universal laws. For Ricoeur, actualizing norms with practical wisdom means, “breaking the rule to the smallest extent possible”, through recourse to our convictions in affairs that the norm does not (yet) govern (269). That it is a correction of *norms* based on *convictions* indicates once more that *practical wisdom* depends, in the final analysis, on a ‘critical’ dialectic of ‘naïve’ ethical intentions and impartial moral norms. Because it takes place on the level of convictions, this dialectic “has no theoretical outcome but only the practical outcome of the arbitration of moral judgment in situation” (287). In the next part, I will discuss where Ricoeur’s ‘practical alternative’ leaves us in the case of cultural conflicts.

### *The case of cultural conflicts*

Ricoeur points to a dilemma at the heart of cultural conflicts: the dilemma between claims for universality and the contextual limitation of practical solutions. He shows that this dilemma can only be resolved if we simultaneously “maintain the universal claim to a few values” *and* “submit this claim to discussion” (289). The first requirement prevents us from the arbitrariness of a relativism that demotes convictions to mere conventions, which neither have nor seek an impartial basis. For Ricoeur, this is unacceptable, as it fails to offer both yourself and others the respect rational beings deserve. Human beings are fallible, but do have a responsibility to avoid what not ought to be done (evil). On this basis, people from different cultures are able, in the end, to reach agreement about ‘thin’ universal principles (289). Justifications are not vulnerable to tragedy; tragic conflicts

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<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica* 1138a

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 1137b

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

only occur at the stage of actualisation. At this stage, people from different cultures may disagree how ‘thin’ moral principles must be specified to ‘thick’ action-guiding standards. But such conflicts do not justify refraining from claiming universality, but call for wisdom in their use.

The second requirement is a measure against ethno-centrism. By committing ourselves to engage in dialogue with people from other cultures, we admit that the way we specify the ‘thin’ common principles may be based on hidden ideology, on prejudices we ourselves are not aware of. Intercultural discussions will not lead us anywhere, unless both parties adopt this modest attitude, and acknowledge that claims that may seem strange to us now, may turn out to be universally justified principles (or their specifications). Ricoeur explains: “nothing can result from this discussion unless every party recognizes that other potential universals are contained in so-called exotic cultures” (289). By ‘universals in context’ he means that we can recognize foreign “proposals of meaning” as *potential* universals that may be elevated in the discussion to universals recognized by all (289). The universals we recognize today have developed out of such ‘universals in context’. Notice that what must be recognized is not the *actual* worth of ‘exotic’ claims, but their *potential* worth. Thus, after understanding in what sense and for what reasons our specifications differ from that of a distant culture, we may still be convinced that we are right, and they are not.<sup>27</sup>

It is one thing to hypothesize the possibility of keeping the universal and contextual limits in tension, but another to bring it into practice. How can we live in what Ricoeur himself admits to be a paradox? All it requires, according to Ricoeur, is replacing the discussion to the level of convictions. Claiming a norm as universal while simultaneously subjecting it to discussion is paradoxical only at the formal level, when we think of claims as being solely based on a rational capacity we all share. On the level of convictions, by contrast, claims are appraisals that are expressions of our own judgment, which depend on our personal and collective experiences. There is every reason to expect that new experiences will change our self-interpretations and the judgments derived from them. By interpreting our claims as experience-based appraisals we believe to be impartial, Ricoeur combines the two in a way that keeps our rationality and our fallibility in tension. He is willing to take contextual claims serious, but does not believe this demands relativism. Rather, it requires keeping universalistic and contextualist claims both in their place, and making space for practical wisdom to mediate between them.

## 7. Conclusion

In the introduction, I said that Ricoeur suggests a way of not having to choose between universalism and contextualism. The preceding section should have made clear what this ‘third way’ entails. What distinguishes Ricoeur from both universalists and contextualists is that he keeps the aspiration for rational justification and the need for contextual actualisation in a fruitful tension.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Taylor 1994: 42.

First, he suggests that the *source* of cultural conflicts is the fallibility of the specificatory premises on the basis of which we derive ‘thick’ action-guiding standards from ‘thin’ universal principles. This fallibility leaves us vulnerable to the injustice of ethnocentrism. With universalists, he appreciates the possibility and the necessity of universal claims, but he also admits that they will always be of limited use, and need to be complemented with individual judgment. His view of the source of conflicts is appealing, but needs further investigation. Especially, his suggestion that teleology and deontology can be combined needs careful scrutinizing. It would be illuminating, I think, to contrast his view with that of Bernard Williams, who suggests a more radical prioritisation of the ethics over morality.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Williams proposes another model of convictions, based on *confidence*, and maintains that it is a social-scientific question how to foster them, not a matter of self-interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

Secondly, Ricoeur suggests that the proper *response* to culture conflicts is not to give up the claim to universality (which would amount to relativism), but to reconsider our inner convictions and re-orient our action, if warranted. Ricoeur argues that the *good* must have priority over the *obligatory*, in the form of the *equitable*: a context-sensitive correction of universalism in order to avoid the injustice of ethnocentrism. Ricoeur thus endorses those objections of the contextualist that are based on the contingent nature of actualisations of moral principles, while denying claims based on scepticism about their justification. I think this aspect of Ricoeur’s approach is most convincing. Surely, we can and should reach beyond mere scepticism, but must remain aware that we never attain complete impartiality.

To grant the chorus the final word: “The mighty word of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate, and at long last those blows will teach us wisdom” [ll. 1350-53].

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<sup>28</sup> See Piercey (2001) for a comparison of Ricoeur and Williams’ view on the relation between ethics and morality.

<sup>29</sup> Williams 1985: 170-1.

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