

RICŒUR AND FOUCAULT ON TRAGEDY AND TRUTH

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Abstract. The purpose of this text is to confront some Paul Ricœur's and Michel Foucault's significant reflections on Greek tragedy, in order to discuss their interpretation of its truth and the knowledge it makes possible. Ricœur supposes that tragedy implies a theology that, though it is not explicitly developed, points to the knowledge of the self, his conflicts with others, and even to a possible redemption. For his part, Foucault determines that in tragedies a set of discourses opposing against each other is at stake, without the possibility of overcoming their conflict in a higher knowledge. Does tragedy allows knowledge through the spectacle and the emotions aroused? Is the truth of tragedy manifested in the confrontation and intensification of passions, but cannot be developed as knowledge of the self and his reconciliation with others?

Keywords: Paul Ricœur; Michel Foucault; tragedy; truth; knowledge

Contemporary reflection on the classics of antiquity is a common and fundamental practice in the philosophical field, even if it involves certain risks. One goes back to the Greeks to rethink all kinds of questions, in the same way that an individual has to remember the principles that he learned from his youth to make any important decision. The risk is that by bringing to the present what was irretrievably left in the past, the spirit of the classic will be betrayed and distorted by historical distance.

Among the many contemporary philosophers who have read the classics to shape their thinking, I will discuss in this text some important reflections by Paul Ricœur and Michel Foucault on Greek tragedy, because they allow addressing a fundamental question, both of our time and of antiquity: the relationship between knowledge and truth.

The relevance of opposing these seemingly dissimilar thinkers lies in the fact that, in their particular interpretation of tragedies, two different ways of relating to the truth are established: For Ricœur, tragedy implies a theology, that although is not explicitly developed, points to a knowledge of the self and his relationships with others, and even to a possible redemption. For Foucault, what is at stake in tragedies is the confrontation of discourses that struggle to assert their truth, relying

neither on some kind of knowledge, nor on the possibility of overcoming their opposition in a superior knowledge.

Both thinkers confront us with the question on the nature of the truth manifested in tragedy. Does tragedy enable knowledge through the spectacle and the emotions it arouses? Or is its truth only manifested in the confrontation and intensification of passions, without the possibility of apprehending it in a knowledge about ourselves and our conflicts that makes reconciliation possible?

The objective is not to opt for one or the other thinker but to pose the problem of the truth of the tragedy, discernible from both lines of reflection. Nor is it intended to determine the fidelity of these thinkers to the spirit of the original tragedies but to discuss a fundamental philosophical issue, through the work of two of the most outstanding exponents of contemporary thought, who try to appropriate the Greek legacy to base their thinking on tradition and, at the same time, to promote its update.

Ricœur: The theology implicit in tragedy

In general, Paul Ricœur approaches tragedy as the narrations of the Greek texts, which are configured by the action and sufferings of imaginary characters.¹ However, what do these texts specifically show?

In chapter II of the second part of “La symbolique du mal” of his *Philosophie de la volonté*, entitled “Le dieu méchant et la vision tragique de l’existence”, Ricœur (1998) shows that tragic texts display a theology, which is not explicitly elaborated.²

In such theology, we find a god to whom man cannot address as “you.” He is rather an “it” that confronts man with evil, as a form of predestination. As something that is there, inevitably, in front of him, beyond his will. In this sense, the tragic hero can be considered a kind of victim, but also a possible transgressor, as in the case of Prometheus, who asserts his freedom against fate.

In this sense, the hero introduces a seed of uncertainty into the immobility of nature, which is why, according to Ricœur, the supposed tragic theology proposes that man was originally constituted against misfortune, in a response based on a will that denies and resists the divine design. Thus, for example, Ricœur (1998, 366) argues that a kind of love that comes from misfortune is at stake in *Prometheus*. A love that is an excess for which Prometheus pays the price, and that implies a freedom of challenge and not of participation.

How is it that the tragic text can show this theology, if it has not been explicitly elaborated? Ricœur proposes that this supposed knowledge about the human condition and its relationship with the divine is shown in the characters, through specific emotions, such as terror and compassion.³ Ricœur (1998, 369 – 371) even speaks of a tragic liberation or salvation manifested in the text through a kind of “sympathy” that is experienced by the audience as a powerless emotion of participation in the hero's misfortunes, and that in the succession of tragedies

makes them dream of a possible redemption. However, this redemption is never accomplished, because as in the case of *Oedipus at Colonus*, his wisdom, more than a realization, is the suspension of the human condition.⁴⁾

In any case, Ricœur thinks salvation is only glimpsed in suffering, which is probably why the teaching of tragedy is that one has to suffer in order to understand. This does not imply that the spectator directly experiences the sufferings that lead him to know, since what happens, in reality, is a kind of *catharsis* through the spectacle and the poetic elaboration, which generates a conflictive *jouissance*.⁵⁾ We do find here neither an Apollonian advice nor the Dionysian alteration of personality but an illusion that, through emotion, shows *another destiny*. This illusion is the show itself, which introduces the spectator into the chorus to cry and sing with the hero. For this reason, Ricœur (1998, 372 – 373) supposes, the chorus is the place where the possible reconciliation is configured, as an aesthetic transposition of fear and compassion, which could be elaborated thanks to the fact that the myth became poetry and the ritual ecstasy became the aesthetic effect of the spectacle.

It is important to remember that tragedy not only points to redemption but to evil as predestination. Therefore, the essence of this theology is its unsolvable tension, thanks to which it can show the non-chosen part of all our choices. Rather than displaying the good and the bad, as a model of behavior, tragic knowledge reveals the non-guilty side of sin: that evil precedes and is external to the will. That evil does not fundamentally depend on our choices, so it can be considered a kind of divinity: the other, the adversary, the inhuman that seduces, tempts, and leads the characters to ruin.

Ricœur's (1998) example to illustrate this point is not taken from Greek texts but from the Bible.⁶⁾ Job, in his resistance to accept guilt, breaks with the judicial worldview. He does not accept that his suffering is the product of a retribution, which makes evident the irrationality of divine power and that it is possible to return the accusation to the *ethical god of the accusation* (449). In his innocence, Job restores the tragic understanding: the divine will is represented as unjustifiable and man standing before God as before his aggressor and enemy, which turns God's gaze into a source of terror.

Such a situation places Job in the possibility of accessing, through his suffering, a new dimension of faith: that of unverifiable faith (Ricœur 1998, 453).⁷⁾ As in the Greek texts, nothing was explained to Job, but the experience changed his perspective. Now Job understands that evil and good are received in the same way: as grace. And, thus, they are revealed as gratuitousness and overabundance.

Because of this excess, for Ricœur (1998), tragic theology is always possible, although *undecidable*. Always possible because suffering is not the consequence of an avoidable error, nor a punishment for the miscalculation of our actions; evil and suffering happen beyond our will. And it is undecidable because the tragic vision ruins the overall vision, the total vision. Tragedy confronts us with contradictions that are not only inevitable but unsolvable or non-dialectical (456).

The only figure that for Ricœur (1998) could mediate this contradiction and resolve the *undecidability* of this theology is that of the *suffering servant*, who gives meaning to suffering by voluntarily consenting to it, in a reversal of meaning in which the acceptance of the non-sense founds mercy as opposed to resistance, because only a conscience that has fully assumed suffering also begins to reabsorb the *wrath of God* in the *love of God* (459).

The ethical and political consequences of this knowledge implicit in tragedy are taken up by Ricœur (1990) in several of the discussions of his fundamental work *Soi-même comme un autre*.⁸⁾ In the second part of the seventh study, where he addresses the theme of the tendency to the good life, under the title "... avec et pour l'autre...", Ricœur highlights the dialogical dimension of ethical and political life, in which the other acts as a mediator between action and suffering. Here, tragedy instructs to share the suffering of the other and expresses a particular dimension of friendship that cannot be reduced to the joy of the other's company and its benefits.

In the third part of the same study, entitled "... dans des institutions justes", Ricœur refers to tragedy as the immemorial origin of the idea of justice. In his opinion, justice emerges from tragedy because the first thing we are sensitive to is a suffered injustice. Justice, like redemption in tragedy, only shows up in a negative way as what is missing.

Finally, in the ninth study, which begins with the interlude "Le tragique de l'action" and continues with a section entitled "Institution et conflit", *Antigone* is the center of reflection, because according to Ricœur, this tragedy manifests the limits of our institutions by configuring an ethico-practical contradiction that forces the audience to overcome their prejudices – their moral and legal conception of the world– and reorient their understanding of action based on practical wisdom, teaching that the other is always conflictive and that this is the essence of political and institutional life. At the same time, it makes evident the conflict between the Universalist claims of the law and its context of application, namely, that the mere form of law and the institution is not enough to make a decision in the political sphere. The *undecidability* of tragedy allows us to understand that it is necessary to deliberate on the conflict in a context in which interests are irreducibly plural. For this reason, Ricœur supposes, tragedy maintains the place of the other as an obligation to always take him into account, in the impossibility of reducing him to our interests.

Tragedy, by representing the voice of two actors in conflict, promotes self-knowledge through suffering and the inevitable confrontation with the other that allows the plot to blaze a trail to a higher threshold of awareness.

Foucault: The distinction of truth and knowledge

In contrast to Ricœur, Foucault's interest in tragedies lies in the idea that their structure questions the relationship between truth and knowledge, which points to the impossibility of elaborating a theology based on those texts.⁹⁾

In “Le savoir d’*Œdipe*”, within the framework of his analysis of the techniques of enunciation of truth in antiquity, Foucault (2011) highlights the function of the Greek notion of symbol, as a unification of diverse dispersed discourses. Particularly, in relation to the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*, he points out the way in which the various versions of the murdered Laius come together to shape the truth, in the supposition that Oedipus is a “symbolic” story of fragments that circulate and pass from hand to hand, and in which the lost half is sought (230). *Oedipus Rex* is, therefore, like a staging of the practice of a series of truth-enunciation techniques, so that none can realize the totality of truth by itself. Truth is only shown when circumstances allow the symbol to be completed, without it being able to configure knowledge. Hence its tragic character, since what the symbol will finally reveal is a figure made up of excessive and monstrous halves (231).

From this point of view, in tragedy, the dispersion of truth in various perspectives is the condition of access to it, as well as of the implementation of the techniques that carry it out. The mute gaze of the slave and the word of the sovereign who claims to see everything, for example, are “symbolized” one against the other in *Oedipus Rex* (Foucault 2011, 233).

For Foucault (2011), Oedipus attempts to order the multiplicity of knowledge (245) and ends up becoming aware that he cannot tyrannically control them all. That he cannot see everything, as if he were in the top of a *panopticon*, because in the confrontation of truths he has to expose himself to the scrutiny of others without the possibility of being aware of his own position. In this way, his story culminates in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the former king now occupies the place of who stays silent and listens, allowing him to recognize truth and a final rest. In Oedipus, truth prevails over knowledge, releasing power relations in their authentic multiplicity.¹⁰⁾

In this sense, Foucault supposes that the tragic hero is far from being the expression of a natural will to know. Rather, in tragedy, a word that is not sought out or possessed by the characters is spoken, and reveals its truth by interacting with others that oppose to it. From this perspective, tragedy implies the separation of knowledge and truth: truth happens even if the characters don’t know about it.

In accordance with Nietzsche’s (1994) interpretation, tragedy releases the truth of any subject-object relationship and manifests itself as a violence that disrupts the facts and that can only be understood through this break, as a function of the different discursive practices that oppose each other in various power relations. In this way, one of the names of truth is the “will to power”, not because this will tends towards truth, which knowledge would allow us to control and carry it out in a possible redemption, but because truth only manifests itself in confrontations of different discourses, beyond their pretensions to know.¹¹⁾

Foucault (2008) develops his understanding of the confrontation of these discourses in his seminar on *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres*, by analyzing the manifestation of truth through the notion of *parrhesia*, which consists of a

rhetorical form of enunciation that creates an effect of clarity and sincerity, because it is presented as exceeding the calculations of the speaker. In particular, in his analysis of the tragedy of Euripides' *Ion*,¹²⁾ Foucault shows how the protagonist –who needs to enunciate the truth to exercise the voice of command – manages to access Athens political sphere without even have tried it.

Foucault shows that in the context of this tragedy, the right to political participation is only achieved by expressing the truth of the autochthonous origin of the speaker, of who he really is, which will earn him the recognition of the Athenians as one of their own. Here *speaking the truth* means being able to give an account of who your parents are, otherwise you will be a Nobody. In this tragedy, he who has the right to say the truth is the one who can be linked to the land and to the historical continuity based on a territory, through a genealogical association. A bond, however, that the protagonist does not know and that cannot be inferred from the conditions of the context, so that he can only access truth without the support of any certainty of his origin.

How, then, does truth emerge in this tragedy? Contrary to *Oedipus Rex*, in which the protagonist consciously investigates it (although he also ignores that truth is related to his origin), in *Ion* truth is not sought; rather, the clash of the passions of Creusa and Ion, to the extent that they have not recognized each other and believe they are mutual enemies, is what made the truth shine, without the will to seek it or to undertake an investigation.

In the confrontation, in a dramatic conflict, without any of the antagonists expecting it, the truth about Ion's origin suddenly appears, emancipating both. However, it is important to note that truth was not presented by virtue of calculation but because the rivals took the risk and had the courage to speak frankly despite the danger. Specifically, Creusa had the audacity to speak out against the god Apollo, to reproach him for hiding the truth about the intercourse he had with her, about his paternity, about his irresponsibility, whose secret keeps her in an illegitimate situation. The reproach, the complaint, the cry of indignation, the challenge to the almighty, are exercises of *parrhesia* without premeditation, founding in this case, by chance, the right to take part in power.

Parrhesia here consists of the following: There is a powerful man who has committed an act of injustice against someone who has no means of retaliation. It is a situation of profound inequality. And the only thing left to do is to take the floor and, at his own risk, stand up in front of the powerful and speak up.

Parrhesia is the practice of speaking out against power, even despite weakness and despite risk, because an unbearable injustice is experienced. Because a situation of illegitimacy in which one's own word is worthless is maintained, and it is the last resort. Because the last thing we have, that power has not taken from us, is our courage, our will, and our decision; our freedom in its purest form. No options given to choose and calculate.

Now, does the representation of the risk of such decision-making in tragedy aspire to certain knowledge? Is tragedy a mere representation of the dispersion of discourses and the irruption of freedom that challenges power, but does not aspire to generate knowledge that favors the recognition of oneself and others? Is it nothing more than an expression of conflict, which cancels the possibility of redemption, which would allow speculation on theological and a metaphysical knowledge? Is the truth of the tragedy irretrievably disassociated from knowledge?

By confronting Ricœur's and Foucault's positions, we face a question that does not seem to have a decisive answer: Does truth in tragedy configure or point to knowledge? Ultimately, it seems that we have to risk and choose one of them, without any guarantee that it is the correct one. And, perhaps, this is one of the most outstanding characteristics of tragedy. Beyond certainty, it confronts us with a conflict that forces us to think and demands to adopt a position on the matter, which may well define the attitude that we will assume towards the other, in our own political context.

Conclusions

In the prologue to his version of *Antigone*, Slavoj Žižek (2016) argues that fidelity to an original text is a criterion foreign to the narration of mythical stories of pre-modern cultures, such as the classical Greek one. Respect for the original is the product of modern notions of art and author that relate a work to the creativity, expression and opinion of a certain individual. Greek tragedies, on the contrary, respond to an effort to introduce variants in the myths that essentially modify the truth that they attempt to express.

In this regard, Žižek justifies his alteration of the argument with respect to Sophocles' version, introducing anachronistic elements such as Judeo-Christian myths and spirituality traits, in discussion with various interpreters of the same tragedy such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Lacan or Judith Butler, in order to question predominant forms of political action and propose others.

What Žižek's case illustrates is that tragedy, like any classic work, is not only an element of cultural patrimony or aesthetic enjoyment but a fundamental argumentative resource for the development of philosophical thought. Hence the importance of discussing, as Ricœur and Foucault do, about the nature of its truth and the possible knowledge it can offer.

Based on what was developed here, we can conclude that the elucidation of the truth of the tragedy, of two intellectuals of stature, rather than leading to a consensus, leads to the opposition of hermeneutical horizons. And that the importance of elaborating them lies not so much in determining which is the best but in understanding their incommensurability and that to choose one at the expense of the other is a decision without guarantee where radically different perspectives of existence are at stake.

Specifically, we can summarize them in the following:

– For Ricœur, the tragic expression of truth, in the passions generated by the conflicts and sufferings of the characters, even if it cannot be controlled or anticipated because it precedes and goes beyond their will, enables a sort of knowledge capable of founding a theology that refers to the origins of good and evil, which, although does not directly represents a possible reconciliation, can be the basis of the spectator's reflective process and open up a path towards it.

– For Foucault, truth is radically dispersed in a multiplicity of discourses and, because of it, cannot legitimately aspire to constitute itself as a unifying discourse in a stable form of knowledge such as theology. Influenced by Nietzsche, Foucault sees tragedy as a series of techniques for accessing the truth that do not require knowledge, but instead occur as confrontations between different positions of power. Ultimately, in this perspective, there is no possibility of establishing an *a priori* representation of how to deal with these conflicts, which does not mean that circumstantially local forms of mutual recognition cannot emerge from the multiplicity of discourses in their dispersion.

Ultimately, we can say that in the confrontation of Ricœur's and Foucault's perspectives, we face the fundamental philosophical problem of choosing between the unifying representation of public space and history, and the dispersion of multiple local conflicts that are the final form of the reality of power beyond any kind of knowledge.

NOTES

1. Ricœur (1994) explains his views on tragedy in "Sur le tragique". See also Nussbaum's (2002) analysis of the general implications of Ricœur's notion of tragedy.
2. See Daughton's (2019) specific analysis of the dialectics between tragedy and hope of the religious dimension, in Ricœur's work.
3. This is a clear reference to Aristotle's (1997) *Poetics*.
4. In the second study of *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Ricœur (2004) argues that, from *Oedipus Rex* to *Oedipus at Colonus*, there is a reversal in the forms of recognition of the character. While in the first work Oedipus' recognition is reduced to the identification of objects, situations and people, the tragic event allows him to access forms of self-recognition and mutual recognition. The possibility of achieving such recognition, however, came at a price: at the cost of losing power. For this reason, it cannot be considered that in this tragedy, despite the wisdom or inner peace achieved by Oedipus, the character's redemption is consumed.
5. It seems clear that Ricœur follows here an Aristotelian interpretation and opposes the Nietzschean interpretation that privileges the ecstatic aspects of the rite over the cognitive elements of the experience.

6. In the section of “La symbolique du mal” entitled “La réaffirmation du tragique”.
7. Which, in a way, recalls Kierkegaard's (1986) reflection, in *Fear and Trembling*, on Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, but in opposite sense. While Abraham accesses the realm of faith by accepting the imposition of the divine will, Job resists it, because punishment seems unjust to him.
8. In this regard, see Fishers' (2011, 2012) analysis on Ricœur's conception on the relation of tragedy and *phronesis deimon*, developed in *Soi-même comme un autre*.
9. For a general analysis of the role of the Nietzsche-influenced notion of tragedy in Foucault's thought, see Cutrofello (2005).
10. In this regard, see Incerti (2018) for an analysis of the notion of knowledge and the access to the truth in Foucault's interpretation of *Oedipus Rex*. See Tirkkonen (2015), for an argumentation on how Foucault's conceives in *Oedipus Rex* the basis of shared space and recognition.
11. In this regard, see "Leçons sur Nietzsche" (Foucault, 2011a). Also, see Cook's (1989) discussion of the influence of Nietzsche's notion of tragedy on Foucault's thought.
12. January 19th, 1983. Second hour of the session.

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