

Hope and the Embodied Will for Life

Revisiting Paul Ricoeur's Original Affirmation through a Dialectic of
Actuality and Potentiality

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Abstract

With his notion of original affirmation, Paul Ricoeur wishes to reinstate the primacy of being over nothingness, joy over anguish, and affirmation over negation. Having adopted the term from Jean Nabert, he draws from the tradition of French reflective philosophy to formulate his conception of the originally affirmative nature of existence. Ricoeur argues that positive values can be found in and through their lack in the world, and that it is via the reflective means of hope, imagination and myth, that such values can be attested to. In this regard, original affirmation signifies a potentiality of being, actualisable through reflection. However, there is another aspect to Ricoeur's original affirmation, namely, its embeddedness in the very foundation of being. Here, I argue that he takes Nabert's reflective affirmation in a Spinozist direction, grounding it in the already actual power of life and in our desire to exist. Through applying a dialectic of actuality and potentiality as a theoretical lens, I identify and constructively engage with, what I refer to as, the reflective and the conative dimensions of original affirmation: between hope and the embodied will for life. Finally, I discuss how such understanding can have relevance in relation to present-day anguish.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Paul Ricoeur first conceptualised the notion of original affirmation in the 1950s as a response to the existential anguish present in post-war Europe. He regarded it a task of the philosopher to engage with the public consciousness of their time; to face and seek to comprehend sources of despair, and when possible, to find ways to move beyond them.¹ He saw an absence of such a pursuit in thinkers like Martin Heidegger, who he claims: “wrote *Sein und Zeit* without mention of the European crisis and within the framework of an ontology more allied to Parmenides than the contemporary public consciousness.”² Moreover, he conceives Heidegger’s stoic approach to anguish, as something that the individual must face alone, detached from lived reality.³ In this regard, Ricoeur perceives existentialist thinkers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, as showing a deeper engagement with the world through their view of angst as invoking both freedom and responsibility to others.⁴ Ricoeur finds value in such a position, but despite this, he renounces the view that anguish is the final or most appropriate ontological “mood” in a genuine approach to being.⁵ Furthermore, he rejects Sartre’s emphasis on negation in *Being and Nothingness* as the definitive mode for understanding existence. Ricoeur finds significance in Sartre’s view that there is nothing *given* in existence; no determinable fixed essence or form that can be considered as grounding of morality or truth.⁶ Yet, he maintains that life can nonetheless be affirmed, and that such affirmation can, in fact, be extrapolated without a postulation of grounding *essence* or *form*.⁷

¹ Paul Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish” in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 285-328.

² Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 289.

³ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962), 279-311; Heidegger famously argues that we must face the anguish of death through a solitary inward journey, where we must turn away from the world and fully realise the reality of our own mortality.

⁴ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 299.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 161.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation” in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 325.

⁷ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 328.

Ricoeur, a French philosopher whose work spans over half a century from his first publications in 1947 to his final in 2005, offers an oeuvre of prolific writings that cover a vast array of topics: from freedom of the will to religion, politics, language, history, and narrative identity. Yet, a theme that many scholars have noted as appearing throughout, is his affirmative approach to being and life.⁸ Having been orphaned as a toddler, and with five years spent in a Nazi war camp as a young man, Ricoeur's affirmative stance does not shy away from anguish, rather, he seeks to affirm life through a deep engagement with despair. Against this background, his claim that an overemphasis on negation leads to a "flimsy" conception of being, carries a certain weight.⁹

That a theme of affirmation runs through his work, makes it difficult to isolate his initial conception of original affirmation on its own accord. Yet, in doing so, the aim of this thesis is to constructively reveal the dynamic approach to being and life contained already within this early idea. As the title of this paper suggests, it is my view that a useful approach to take in this regard, is to apply a dialectic of actuality and potentiality. With this, I hope to magnify a dual aspect that I encounter in my reading of his texts that deal directly with this concept, primarily: *True and False Anguish*, *Negation and Primary Affirmation*, and *Fallible Man*. This dual aspect is rooted in Ricoeur's phenomenological valuation of lived and embodied experience, coupled with his engagement with reflective philosophy, and its openness to mythic and religious symbolism: I refer to these aspects as 1) embodied-conative affirmation and 2) reflective affirmation.

Through separating these two aspects, I argue that, on the one hand, to affirm life through the reflective is, for Ricoeur, to open it to the transcendent; to something beyond what is actual. It is to engage the symbolic, mythic and transcendent, and to offer hope. In this regard, the influence of Jean Nabert is given primary attention.¹⁰ In relation to the embodied-conative, on the other hand,

⁸ The scholars I am here referring to will be detailed in section 1.5 of this thesis.

⁹ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 324; Ricoeur is here referring more specifically to Sartre, and his distinction between being and non-being, where he critiques the notion that being itself does not *contain* non-being. The distinction between the two allows too much merit to be ascribed to negation and nothingness on their own accord, in Ricoeur's view.

¹⁰ Jean Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, trans. William J. Petrek (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 41-81; Nabert's own conception of original affirmation teeters the line between the embodied and reflective, as well as the immanent and transcendent, but his influence on Ricoeur in relation to the more transcendent and reflective dimensions of original affirmation will be isolated to allow for a deeper focus on original affirmation as potential.

human nature is revealed by Ricoeur as already embedded in an affirmative relation with being. Here, I contend that Ricoeur's emphasis on the phenomenology of the will as originally affirmative provides an optimistic view of life, where the influence of Gabriel Marcel and Baruch Spinoza is highlighted.

While I initially exaggerate the division between the actual and potential; the embodied and reflective, it is nonetheless my contention that a unison of both these dimensions has most value. Ricoeur's original affirmation contains both sides and thus offers a point to explore their tension and necessary interaction, where the reflective must engage with embodied life to understand it, transform it, or confront it; but never simply override it. While I hence regard the interaction of these dimensions as integral, I nonetheless argue that a polarity must remain between the two. As a concept applied in relation to anguish, original affirmation can therefore be understood as an attempt by Ricoeur to re-establish the significance of hope in an affirmative ground of being, which is both actual and potential; immanent and transcendent. This, without a turn to absolutisms, and without rejecting the complex interpretative nature of experience. I conclude by exploring what practical application such a perspective has in the world today, with consideration to the anguish that we continue to face. Here, I argue that original affirmation signifies both the inherent and already present value of life, and the potential for life's transformation.

1.1. Aims and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to revisit Ricoeur's notion of original affirmation through a dynamic of actuality and potentiality, in order to better comprehend and illuminate how two dimensions feature and interact towards an affirmation of life: the embodied-conative and the reflective. These two sides are already inherent to this concept, but by separating them, I can more deeply engage with each, delving into its drawbacks and potential worth, while carving out new meaning. This will allow me to subsequently reconcile my findings, offering a deeper and transformed understanding of this concept.

To achieve this, my ambition is to first analyse and better understand how original affirmation is initially delineated by Ricoeur, through his meditation on forms of existential anguish prevalent in the public consciousness of his time. His application of this concept in relation to the, so perceived, fallible nature of human existence, will also be given central focus. However, with this approach my desire is not to discover the most accurate interpretation of original affirmation; the scholarship surrounding this concept is vast, and it is not my intention to make a novel contribution to this specific area of study. Rather, my aim is to more constructively demonstrate how Ricoeur highlights two aspects of human life that are important to consider when approaching the affirmative value of existence. Considering these sides in isolation, through the applied theoretical lens of actuality and potentiality, will allow me to discuss each critically and creatively, with the hope of discovering new meaning. Focusing too heavily on discovering the ‘correct’ interpretation of this concept would serve to distract from these aims. I will, however, in revisiting and re-conceiving original affirmation, attempt to stay rooted in, and build upon, what I consider to be valid interpretations of original affirmation, grounded in both primary and secondary sources.

Finally, my ambition is to consider what value original affirmation, as illuminated through this discussion, might have in relation to the anguish of present times. To narrow the scope for this analysis, this will more specifically be considered in relation to the modern-day environmental anguish of finality, guilt, and uncertainty. To achieve these aims, the following three research questions will be considered:

1. How is the concept of original affirmation first delineated by Ricoeur, and what does he aim to achieve through its conceptualization in relation to existential anguish?
2. How can an exploration of original affirmation through its division into the categories of actuality and potentiality allow for a more isolated and deeper understanding of the embodied versus the reflective dimensions of this concept, and how can it subsequently be reconceived through their synthesis?
3. What practical application might such a perspective have in relation to modern day environmental anguish?

1.2. Actuality and potentiality as a theoretical lens

In Aristotle's metaphysics, the terms potentiality (*dunamis*) and actuality (*energeia* or *entelecheia*) are core to understanding the state of being of some object or phenomenon, where the former represents a capacity or potential of being, and the latter the fulfilment of such potential or capacity.¹¹ The understanding of how these two dynamic states or properties interact has a rich history both in philosophy and theology. What has been central to this dialogue is to what extent the nature of a thing or phenomenon can best be understood through its present state, or through its depth of potential. In Neo-platonic philosophy this has led to an understanding that the actuality of being emerges from a first principle or source, representing the *essence* of all potential: a perspective which has featured heavily in classical philosophy.¹²

In theology, actuality and potentiality are often related to God's immanence versus transcendence and are applied in differing manners to explicate the origin of creation. For instance, this dynamic is employed by Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus to define God as the *pure actuality* that gives rise to the potential for all else to exist.¹³ In a contemporary landscape, such a dialectic continues to carry relevance, where theologians such as John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, among others, reject (at least in part) the actuality of God in favour of an image of the divine as radical potential; brought into the actual through human experience or action.¹⁴

¹¹ See, for instance, Aristotle, "Book Theta" in *Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Hope (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 181-199; Aristotle, "Book III" in *The Physics: Vol I*, trans. Francis M. Cornford and Phillip H. Wicksteed (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), 191-265; Aristotle, "Book VIII" in *The Physics: Vol II*, trans. Francis M. Cornford and Phillip H. Wicksteed (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), 267-425.

¹² See, for instance, Plotinus, "The Fifth Ennead" and "The Sixth Ennead" in *The Enneads*, second edition, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber, 1916) 255-625; Proclus, proposition 1-23 in *The Elements of Theology*, second edition, trans. E.R Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3-29.

¹³ See Thomas Aquinas, "First Part. Treatise on the Trinity," in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1911-1925) 3-210; John Duns Scotus, *A treatise on God as first principle*, (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), 41-71.

¹⁴ See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 84-97, 150, 151; Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 80-112; Jean-Luc Marion, *The God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

My own appropriation of these terms concerns their application in relation to Ricoeur's attempts at affirming the inherent value of life, despite, and with consideration to, the existential anguish of his time. In relation to this I intend, through a dynamic of actuality and potentiality, to offer an interpretation of original affirmation both as a condition of being, and its possible and potential achievement. Thereby, this lens is applied to unearth the originally affirmable value of life as determined by *what life already is* as well as by *what it may become*. Through applying this lens, I will also be able to engage with the metaphysical and theological weight of this concept: the way it signifies both a ground of being, as well as the pursuit, and the striving, for meaning and purpose.

This decision was inspired, in part, by Ricoeur's own usage of this dialectic tension in *Oneself as Another*, where he expresses the desire to formulate an ontology of being that pertains to "a ground at once actual and in potentiality."¹⁵ The metaphysical and theological significance attached to such an undertaking is further illuminated by Ricoeur in conversation with Irish philosopher Richard Kearney, where he states his desire to bridge the immanence of a Spinozist God with the transcendence of the God of the bible.¹⁶ I do not intend to analyse the possibility of such a theological reconciliation. However, I believe what Ricoeur in part expresses here, is a desire to expound a ground of being to which we already adhere, but one that nonetheless contains a higher purpose and underlying transformative potential. In his conceptualisation of original affirmation, some 50 years earlier, he indicates this as an act of transcending the actual through revealing its inherent possibilities by means of reflection, hope and imagination, as well as something inherent to our embodied experiences and our will to live.¹⁷ In this sense, it is my view that Ricoeur's original affirmation already contains these dimensions, more explicitly engaged within his later ontology. Through applying a lens of actuality and potentiality, I will be able to draw these aspects out.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 315.

¹⁶ Richard Kearney, Anne Bernard Kearney, Fabrizio Turold, "A Conversation with Paul Ricoeur" in Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (London: Ashgate, 2004), 371-372.

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "Introduction" in Jean Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, trans. William J. Petrek (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), xxii.

As may be apparent, this project is also motivated by my own suspicion that comprehending an affirmation of life more prominently through either end of this spectrum (of actuality or potentiality) would overshadow vital aspects of being. It is my supposition that to value life by too heavily affirming its actuality would negate the value of its transformative potential and its depth and mystery, whereas affirming its potentiality alone might thwart the value of life in the here-and-now or turn to a baseless utopian vision. Furthermore, in analysing the original affirmation through this applied theoretical lens, which this section has presented, I can engage with some of the ethical consequences of affirming life in the face of anguish. This will feature as a discussion in the final chapter, in which I investigate the ways in which original affirmation might have applicable value in relation to present-day environmental anguish.

1.3. Theoretical underpinnings: existentialism, phenomenology and idealism

My application of the theoretical lens of actuality and potentiality is rooted in both phenomenology and idealism, where existentialism serves as a framework to explore the value and interaction of these two modes of understanding. A phenomenological stance, which finds its roots in the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is implicated in this thesis through its dedication to the value of experience and the embodied and intersubjective nature of being, as formed through the meeting of a plurality of different perspectives. Phenomenology emphasises the interiority of being, and hence carries an appreciation for the many modes of living, feeling, and suffering. From its various expressions and applications in the philosophy of Husserl to that of Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Ricoeur, a common thread is the primacy granted to experience. In this regard, it can be understood as a philosophical tradition that places value on the actual, lived, and immanent. Yet, such immanence does not necessarily translate into the possibility for direct or unmediated experience or understanding.

As initially devised by Husserl, phenomenology can indeed be understood as an attempt to develop unbiased methodologies to study the essential aspects of phenomena and the structures of

cognition.¹⁸ However, later phenomenological approaches, as developed throughout the 21st century, leave behind this initial emphasis on the immediate and the direct. For instance, in the work of Heidegger, attention is given to our “being-in-the-world,” which entails a rejection of our unbiased access to reality. This, owing to his understanding that historical, cultural, and social circumstances of lived existence impact our preconceived and precognitive beliefs and prejudices about reality.¹⁹ Furthermore, in the existentialist phenomenology of Beauvoir and Sartre, among others, our existence is seen as entangled in human predicaments, such as suffering, anguish, guilt, and freedom, which impacts our experience and understanding of life.²⁰ Yet another example can be found in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, where an importance granted to our bodily existence problematises the possibility of a ‘disembodied’ and objective philosophical approach, and emphasises instead our corporeal engagement with the world, as shaping our perceptions and understanding.²¹

All these intuitions are carried into Ricoeur’s philosophical approach, where he couples them with a more deeply engaged, participatory, and active understanding of being. For instance, in his phenomenology of the will, Ricoeur grants attention to interior motives and desires that translate into embodied action.²² He hence complicates matters further, by marking the conative and affective as entangled with our comprehension and involvement with the world.

Ricoeur is himself, along with Hans-Georg Gadamer, often associated with the so-called ‘hermeneutic turn’ in phenomenology, where it becomes clear that our lived experiences and engagement in the world are always mediated by various contextual factors that function as an

¹⁸ See Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1982), 8-14.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 78-85.

²⁰ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) 433-556, 625-628; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus: The Citadel Press, 1972), 35-71.

²¹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 203-206.

²² See Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 201-230.

interpretative lens.²³ When I approach and discuss the embodied and the experiential in this thesis, I do so with an indebtedness to these thinkers, and many others, who have been influential in bringing forth an understanding of the multitude of complex factors that shape the way that we experience, perceive, and understand existence.

Yet, beyond phenomenology, I also position idealism as a theoretical underpinning of this thesis. The relationship here is perhaps not immediately intuitive. However, Husserl does himself elucidate a form of phenomenological idealism that blends the immanent and the transcendent, drawing influence from Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism. His approach attempts to 'bracket' the contingent and the given, to reveal the essential structures of consciousness, and in agreement with Kant, he regards these structures as the lens through which the world is made knowable to us. Yet, he takes distance from Kant in significant ways, for instance through his notion of *intentionality*, which emphasises a more integrative relationship between cognition and world.²⁴ Nonetheless, Husserl retains a Kantian disjunction between objects and their appearances when he 'brackets' the world to study appearances themselves. In this regard, as Danish philosopher Dan Zahavi has pointed out, phenomenology contains the potential to remain open towards the ideal and the metaphysical.²⁵ However, as we have seen, the notion that one can achieve an unbiased access to consciousness and reality is problematised through the later phenomenological approaches that were touched upon above, signifying a deeper interrelationship between world, mind, and body, than Husserl accounted for. This certainly complicates the relationship between the phenomenological and the ideal, but does it render their fruitful engagement untenable?

It is my contention that phenomenology can support idealism, but it is an idealism that has been exposed to the intellectual trends of modern continental century philosophy, where universal truths

²³ Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory is developed across a range of texts, including *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Dennis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), and *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, trans. Ted Klein (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations: Vol II*, trans. J.N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2001), 79-127; Husserl's notion of *intentionality* entails that cognition is always *about* something; that it always has a specific object or target.

²⁵ Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 39-43.

and objective categories of thought have been rendered unstable. As argued by Ricoeur, the “masters of scepticism,” namely, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, each in their own way “render the philosophy of being difficult.”²⁶ This is achieved by Nietzsche through pointing to fundamental driving forces and motives behind human actions and utterances; by Marx through his emphasis on political and economic power structures that frame our view of reality; and Freud through revealing the pathological and unconscious mechanisms which steer our inclinations, hopes and fears. In the face of such uncertainty and doubt, the limits of our access to any universal pillars of truth become revealed.²⁷ Phenomenological idealism, construed through such a lens, must even more deeply engage with the limitations of consciousness, while also considering the intersubjective, contingent, and embodied nature of understanding. Yet, to remain an *idealism*, it must nonetheless posit something beyond the contingent. It is here that I consider the metaphysical blending of actuality and potentiality, which I aim to reveal as inherent to Ricoeur’s original affirmation, as precisely signifying such a merging between our contingency and the limitations of consciousness, on the one hand, and the possibility of something beyond, on the other.

It remains important to note that phenomenological idealism, so conceived, does not negate contextual factors of lived existence, however, it allows a certain openness towards the transcendent and perhaps the metaphysical, which must nonetheless be understood through and in relation to these complex embodied-experiential features of being. Through presenting Ricoeur’s original affirmation through such a dynamic, I hence indicate the value of a combination between the phenomenological and the ideal. In this regard, to attempt to extract new meaning through revisiting Ricoeur’s notion of original affirmation through the lens of actuality and potentiality is, in a sense, to deconstruct and re-reconcile the relationship between phenomenology and idealism, which I consider as underlying its initial conception. This implicates both traditions of thought as having significance when approaching the nature and value of being.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32-33.

Finally, existentialism offers a kind of framework to explore this phenomenological idealism, through the emphasis it places on concrete lived experience, including the suffering, anguish, guilt, and responsibility, as well as the freedom to make meaning amidst and in relation to uncertainty. Most importantly, it provides a point of access to engage the idea of original affirmation with both anguish and hope for the human condition, while providing a ground to assess its value in relation to our contemporaneous human predicaments.

1.4. Material and methodological approach

Adopting a dialectic between actuality and potentiality as a theoretical lens, aligns with a methodology that takes into consideration the limits of philosophical analysis, while also offering scope for affirming or indicating that which transcends such an analysis. Recognising the boundaries of theoretical inquiry is necessary, from the start, when engaging with the rather abstract notion of an original affirmation of being, which signifies something beyond conceptual and theoretical grasp. Furthermore, owing to the complex and mediated nature of our understanding, as expressed in the previous section, *hermeneutic* and *deconstructive* strategies must be employed, which make their gains through recognising the interpretative nature of knowledge, and the unattainability of a completely objective reading of a text. This entails an acknowledgement that the ‘true’ meaning of a text cannot be directly or objectively accessed, and that methodological tactics must therefore be employed to approach its meaning, nonetheless.

As argued by Gadamer, who builds on the hermeneutic methodology and philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Heidegger, among others, in his seminal text *Truth and Method*, we operate from within our own historical and cultural contexts, which can differ from that of the author, and this impacts our reading of any given text. In his words: "Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event."²⁸ For Gadamer, this signifies the importance of a

²⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Bloomsbury: London, 1989), 310.

dialogical engagement between the context of the interpreter and that of the author, to understand how best to find meaning through a unison of differing perspectives.²⁹ Here, Gadamer furthers the notion of a *hermeneutic circle* to encompass the movement of such a dialogical process, which involves a coming together of the author's and the interpreter's historical situatedness to achieve deeper understanding.³⁰

Ricoeur builds upon Gadamer's dialogical approach, but also grants a certain autonomy to the text, as something that can be meaningfully engaged with beyond a merging of historical perspectives. This autonomy signifies that meaning, while being outside our immediate grasp, can be discovered through a more creative and imaginative engagement between text and interpreter, allowing new understanding to emerge that was not necessarily intended by the author.³¹ As Dutch linguist Theodoor van Leeuwen points out, this hermeneutic approach connects to Ricoeur's phenomenology, which opens towards a "surplus of meaning," and hence towards the possibility of engaging with something beyond that which is immediately *given* in history, tradition or language.³² Such a method has been termed by some as a kind of 'post-phenomenology' or deconstruction, which is an approach that Jacques Derrida influentially develops. For Derrida, the notion that there is an excess or surplus of meaning beyond what can be immediately apprehended, calls, not only for interpretive measures, but also deconstructive strategies, which can reveal a deeper meaning beyond what is more readily apparent in the text.³³ Inherent to such a perspective, is that there is no end to interpretation, because the 'horizon' of our understanding is never fully reached.³⁴ In Ricoeur's view, one must therefore remain sceptical of one's ability to grasp the

²⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 288.

³⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279, 586.

³¹ Gary Madison "Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Ricoeur" in *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, ed. Richard Kearney (Routledge: London, 1994), 259.

³² Theodoor Marius van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning: Ontology and Eschatology in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981), preface, 68-69.

³³ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

³⁴ John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 22; Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), preface, 97.

ultimate meaning of a text, while remaining faithful, nonetheless, that deeper meaning can be formed and received.³⁵

A combination of these methodological approaches, now briefly outlined, will be drawn upon in this thesis, in which the textual and conceptual analysis will seek to contextualise, construct, as well as deconstruct. As made clear in section 1.1., my aims have been developed into the three research questions, which will now be individually explored, alongside the relevant material, to discuss what strategies can be employed in relation to each.

The first question that will be addressed regards Ricoeur's initial development of original affirmation, and what he desires to achieve through its conceptualisation. This will involve engaging extensively with two articles that explicitly deal with this concept, namely, *True and False Anguish* (1953) and *Negation and Primary Affirmation* (1956). Another primary text that will here be considered is *Fallible Man* (1965), which is written in dedication to Jean Nabert, and grants renewed attention to the concept of original affirmation.³⁶ To gain deeper clarity surrounding the meaning and significance of original affirmation, I will contextually situate these texts, giving attention to their historical environment, including the socio-political landscape in which they were formulated. I will also analyse them in relation to the philosophical influences and ideological traditions that impact Ricoeur's position. Attaining a truthful exposé of Ricoeur's intention will hence be understood as a desirable but not *fully* attainable aim. To seek out this aim nonetheless is to adopt, what Ricoeur himself refers to as, a kind of methodological "faith."³⁷

In relation to the second research question, my ambitions are more constructive and critical: I hope to draw out meaning from the notion of original affirmation beyond what Ricoeur himself more readily acknowledges, but which I contend is revealed nonetheless through his theoretical outlining of this concept. This necessitates a deconstructive strategy, which attempts to draw out underlying

³⁵ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* 28; Here, Ricoeur develops a method of hermeneutic "faith" and "suspicion" in to represent the value of striving for meaning, despite the recognition that the definite 'truth' remains out of reach.

³⁶ There are, of course, other texts in which this concept features, but it features most prominently in the texts indicated here.

³⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28.

meaning. My objective here is to constructively carve out a dual aspect of Ricoeur's original affirmation through applying a dialectic of actuality and potentiality as a theoretical lens. To achieve this, I will employ what Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger refer to as a hermeneutic strategy of "retrieval," which involves a circular move between "suspicion," "identification," and "retrieval."³⁸ The "hermeneutics of suspicion" was a phrase coined by Ricoeur, as a counterpart to his notion of a "hermeneutics of faith," and the rotary motion of Habel's method mirrors that of the hermeneutic circle, as delineated by Hans-Georg Gadamer.³⁹ However, the centrality placed on "retrieval" by Habel helps clarify my purpose, which is to return with a transformed understanding of Ricoeur's concept of original affirmation.

Through beginning with an act of *suspicion*, the presuppositions that underlie my own understanding of what an original affirmation of life might entail will be acknowledged. Yet, while remaining conscious of the inevitable impact of my own preconceptions, the way that they can assist in unearthing new meaning is considered ultimately to be positive. Therefore, I will consider my engagement with Ricoeur's work as an act of *identifying* certain aspects and themes that have importance in relation to my own purposes. Here I will permit myself to engage more broadly with original affirmation in relation to relevant themes and ideas that are expressed in other texts authored by Ricoeur. It is my view that such an intertextual approach will facilitate a more in-depth analysis. For instance, the will to live is implicated in Ricoeur's original affirmation, and to better comprehend its significance, I engage with texts that touch more broadly on the will, such as *Freedom and Nature* and *Symbolism of Evil*, whereas the affirmative value he grants to hope and imagination will allow me to draw from texts such as *Oneself as Another* and *Time and Narrative*.

Furthermore, I will engage with secondary literature which helps me isolate two sides of original affirmation, while simultaneously acting as a point of external critique. On the side of potentiality, I will draw on the work of philosophers and Ricoeur scholars such as Jean-Luc Almaric, Luz

³⁸ Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, "Introduction" in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 1-8.

³⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27-28; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 279, 586.

Ascárate, Daniel Frey, and Theodoor van Leeuwen. On the side of actuality, I engage with the philosophy of Pamela Sue Anderson, James Carter, and Peter Kemp.⁴⁰ While these philosophers expound more nuanced views than I give them credit for here, I take the liberty of drawing on their ideas in a way that serves my own aim, which is to apply a dialectic of actuality and potentiality to indicate two opposing dimensions that I identify as vital to the concept of original affirmation: the embodied-conative and reflective.

Through a subsequent Gadamerian “fusion of horizons,” I will consider the integral relationship between these two dimensions of Ricoeur’s original affirmation, reconciling them towards a deepened understanding.⁴¹ However, a deconstructive lens will be applied to avoid a total synthesis between embodied-conative versus reflective affirmation, emphasising their integral relationship, while also signifying their necessary tension. The results of this analysis will be considered as “retrieved” through an act of *abductive reasoning*, allowing new creative ideas to emerge from my dialogue with Ricoeur’s texts.⁴² While attempting to elucidate an honest reading of Ricoeur, this method will hence allow me a certain freedom to carve out a new way of understanding the original affirmation through a creative, productive, and interpretative approach.

Finally, I will briefly assess the practical application of my results by discussing them in relation to present-day environmental anxiety. This will entail a synthesis of my findings with a cultural critique, where I link my analysis to a broader context to allow for a consideration of their ethical implications, while also carving out new possibilities for research.

⁴⁰ The specific works by these authors will be discussed later.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 415.

⁴² Berth Danermark, Mats Ekström and Jan Ch Karlsson, *Explaining Society* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2018), 147; The *abductive* method was developed by Charles Sanders Pierce, and refers to when a concept or phenomenon is placed within a wider pattern or interpretive structure to draw out meaning. My application of the theoretical lens of actuality and potentiality can hence be considered an *abductive* strategy.

1.5. Research overview

In this section I will situate my research in the context of relevant scholarship, while illustrating the original contribution this thesis makes. Many philosophers have considered the centrality of affirmation in Ricoeur's impressive body of work, which has been positioned by some as the core feature of his entire philosophical anthropology. This view has for instance been expressed by philosopher Bernard P. Dauenhauer, who claims that the theme of affirmation has coloured most of Ricoeur's subsequent work.⁴³ Furthermore, theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer highlights how affirmation has been a vital theme since his early writing, stating that: "Ricoeur firmly believes that the passion to be is more basic than dread."⁴⁴ In Addition, professor of law, George H. Taylor, argues that Ricoeur's methodology favours meaning over deconstruction, writing that: "Ricoeur's promotion of ontological meaning seems a vital salve in contemporary times that can otherwise overwhelm, confine, and reduce."⁴⁵ Moreover, philosophers of religion, Anderson and Boyd Blundell both concur that Ricoeur's philosophy is weighted towards his faith in an affirmative foundation, over doubt or suspicion.⁴⁶

When considering the centrality of affirmation in Ricoeur's philosophy, the breadth of this topic becomes clear. With this thesis, I carve out a narrower focus by limiting my discussion to the idea of original affirmation, and to better understanding how this concept contains or invokes a dual aspect of life affirmation, through the lens of actuality and potentiality. In my view, original affirmation contains actuality and potentiality as already entwined in its conceptualisation, however, to my knowledge it has not previously been thematised as such. While I consider this to be an original approach, there are several thinkers who touch on similar themes and ideas.

⁴³ Bernard P. Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics* (Oxford: Rowman, 1998), 166, 173.

⁴⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 262.

⁴⁵ George H. Taylor, "Addressing Contemporary Challenges to Hermeneutics" in *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021), 74.

⁴⁶ Pamela Sue Anderson, *Ricoeur and Kant: Philosophy of the Will* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 129; Boyd Blundell, *Paul Ricoeur: Between theology and philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 79.

Beginning with a broader context, the work of this thesis puts me in dialogue with a field that seeks to delineate an affirmative philosophy of life. There are two general approaches that seem to be taken in this regard. First, there are those philosophers who attempt to affirm life through the immanent, embodied, and actual. Here, one might locate philosophers such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Michèle Le Doeuff, but also in more modern scholarship, Jane Bennet, with her notion of “vibrant matter.”⁴⁷ The second approach, is to instead seek affirmation by transcendent means, looking beyond the given towards the future. Here one might situate the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Derrida, Kant, Søren Kierkegaard Richard Kearney, and John Caputo.

In recent scholarship, there has also been intriguing new attempts at merging the immanent and transcendent to affirm life. Markedly, in relation to the work of Ricoeur, a theological ‘turn’ in French phenomenology has opened its traditional focus on the study of the lived and experiential towards the transcendental and religious in novel ways. This can for instance be seen in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, where his notion of “saturated phenomena” indicates experiences that are profound beyond cognitive grasp, and hence exceed the bounds of our subjective ability to receive them.⁴⁸ Here, the transcendent is merged with the phenomenological by way of experience.

Furthermore, in scholarship that more profoundly emphasises the reflective and interpretative nature of being, a deeper focus on the immanent and embodied is also pursued. This is evident in what Kearney refers to as the “carnal turn” in hermeneutics, which he takes to indicate that “reflection must take a detour through embodiment.” An anthology that he has edited together with Brian Treanor titled *Carnal Hermeneutics*, focuses precisely on this topic, where myth, poetry and imagination is offered as a point of connection between the embodied and the reflective. Here interpretation is not merely considered a cognitive function, but a point where our bodily and sensual experiences influence how we understand and perceive the world. As Kearney and Treanor write: “our finite experience calls for a phenomenological appreciation of meaning as a projection

⁴⁷ See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), preface.

⁴⁸ See Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), xxi-xxii.

of possibility and reception of reality.”⁴⁹ Moreover, Anderson has developed a life affirmative philosophy, where she, through the work of Kant, Spinoza and Ricoeur, argues that the reflective must engage with the bodily more deeply to facilitate our ethical relationship with others and with the world.⁵⁰ Anderson’s work will feature later on in this thesis.

So, there are already many attempts to open the phenomenological to the transcendent, and the transcendent to the phenomenological, seeking a bond between what is (the actual) and what might be (the potential). In splitting original affirmation into the categories of actuality and potentiality, I can hence contribute within this sphere of study. Here, I make my unique contribution by bringing Ricoeur’s concept of original affirmation to the forefront, and by discussing how two dimensions, the embodied-conative and reflective, must simultaneously interact and be held in tension, for Ricoeur’s conception of original affirmation to be most richly conceived.

1.6. The structure of this thesis

In each chapter of this thesis, I analyse the relevant material, discuss my findings, and present the outcomes of my research. In chapter two, I explicate and contextualise Ricoeur’s notion of original affirmation, focusing primarily on its initial conception in relation to the existential anguish of his time. Here, I present original affirmation as something that is revealed through two forms of anguish: what Ricoeur refers to as 1) “metaphysical anguish” and 2) the “vital anguish of death.”⁵¹ In chapter three I argue that, in relation to the former, original affirmation is uncovered as a potential tied to reflection and imagination, representing a hope amidst the uncertainty of existence. In chapter four, I contend that the anguish of death reveals it instead as an actuality, encompassed within the embodied will for life. In each chapter, the limitations of affirming life

⁴⁹ Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor, “Introduction: Carnal Hermeneutics from Head to Foot” in *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2

⁵⁰ Pamela Sue Anderson, “A Thoughtful Love for Life” in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, 85, no. 3 (2009), 119-129.

⁵¹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290, 301.

through its potentiality versus its actuality are highlighted. Chapter five seeks to reconcile these two perspectives, and here it is argued that Ricoeur's later ontology, as presented primarily in *Oneself as Another*, can bridge these two interpretations. This entails merging the results of chapters three and four with Ricoeur's later attempt to unify Aristotelian categories of actuality and potentiality with Heideggerian ontology and Spinozist metaphysics. I argue that, through such a perspective, original affirmation can be conceived as a ground of being that holds the embodied and the reflective in tension and mutual relation. In chapter six, I briefly discuss the practical applications of this reconceptualised notion of original affirmation in relation to modern day environmental anguish. Chapter seven offers a concluding discussion and highlights some points for further research.

Chapter 2: Negation and Affirmation

2.1. Introduction

In *History and Truth*, Ricoeur groups two articles under the heading of “The Power of Affirmation:” *True and False Anguish* (1953) and *Negation and Primary Affirmation* (1956).⁵² In these texts, he states his aims to support a philosophy denoted by a “style of yes” over a “style of no”; one that is fundamentally grounding of joy over anguish and on an affirmation rather than a negation of existence.⁵³ This is a theme that is also continued in one of Ricoeur's most well-known works, *Fallible Man* (1965), which these two articles on affirmation can be considered as laying ground for. This chapter will focus on analysing and contextualising these texts in relation to the philosophies of negation that Ricoeur aspires (in part) to refute, and the philosophies of affirmation that he wishes to draw upon. The aim of this chapter is hence to gain an understanding of what Ricoeur desires to achieve through his conceptualization of original affirmation, before subsequently analysing it more deeply through the theoretical lens of *actuality* and *potentiality*.

As those familiar with Ricoeur's writing will already be aware, negation is for him considered fundamental alongside hope and affirmation; a dialectic which constitutes a crux of his entire methodological approach.⁵⁴ Yet, in these two articles on affirmation, Ricoeur wishes to make the less diplomatic claim that an affirmative understanding of being is primary to negation, that joy is precedent to anguish, and that existence is therefore precedent to nothingness.⁵⁵ As van Leeuwen writes: “However powerful the negative element in existence and reality may be, Ricoeur's thinking goes beyond the tragic towards an affirmation of the ultimately *positive* meaning of

⁵² Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 285-328.

⁵³ “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 305.

⁵⁴ Ricoeur's hermeneutic method is further explicated in the first chapter of this thesis.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 287-288; Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 305-306.

being.”⁵⁶ Bernard P. Dauenhauer has also highlighted how the concept of an original affirmation (as formulated first in 1956) has coloured most of Ricoeur’s work.⁵⁷

2.2. The influence of Jean Nabert

The term *L'affirmation originaire* was taken from Jean Nabert, whose work greatly influenced Ricoeur. The original affirmation was conceptualised by Nabert in *Elements for an Ethic* to represent an “interior” affirmation that can be recognized “exteriorly” in human action.⁵⁸ In this regard, action includes not only the physical, but also acts of interpretation, imagination, hope and striving for meaning. It is, according to van Leeuwen, this interiority as realised in the exterior that this yes of life can be located, as he himself succinctly puts it: “Man strives for truth, for humanity, for happiness; he wants to live, to contribute to history and society; he longs for a meaning to his life: in all this a primordial ‘yes’ is reflected.”⁵⁹ It is hence in the desire towards a deeper meaning, located both in and beyond what is already present in being, that affirmation can find its expression.

Nabert outlines the concept of original affirmation most clearly in *Elements for an Ethic*, first published in 1943. Belonging to the French reflective tradition of philosophy, and drawing influence from René Descartes, Maine de Biran, among others, this work is dedicated primarily to a deliberation on the structures of consciousness and subjectivity. In the preface to the 1969 publication of this text, Ricoeur writes that reflection for Nabert: “[...] is to show that in this consciousness there is an order which can be understood and which can help one understand why this self has not yet attained satisfaction, why reflection is desire.”⁶⁰ This relationship between reflection and desire is crucial to Ricoeur's own repurposing of the original affirmation, where it signifies an urge to understand, to find meaning, and to conceptually reveal what is hidden in intuition, or as Ricoeur, more elegantly phrases it, to offer a deeper understanding of what is

⁵⁶ van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 26.

⁵⁷ Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics*, 166, 173.

⁵⁸ Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, 5, 91.

⁵⁹ van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 26.

⁶⁰ Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, xviii.

revealed through the “coincidence of reflective action with intuition.”⁶¹ This construal of the original affirmation thereby reveals it not only as something that is intuitively grasped, but as having a deeper, more original meaning than what is made available through cognitive reflective means. What reflection hence offers, according to Ricoeur and Nabert, is a negative act of surpassing what more immediately exists, to reveal a deeper affirmative meaning already contained within. This, Ricoeur writes, is achieved through a “continual coincidence of the existential with the rational” (experience with reflection), to transcend the more immediate feeling and content of consciousness.⁶² The original affirmation is hence not, from this perspective, some tangible thing or essence of being, but signifies an inherent depth; what van Leeuwen refers to as the “surplus of meaning.”⁶³ In this regard, original affirmation is a potential born through human fault and fallibility which springs from the gap between consciousness and itself.⁶⁴

To understand how Ricoeur’s original affirmation stands in relation to Nabert’s, I suggest that we look at the context in which he appropriates this concept, and at what aims it is directed towards. As we will later see, such an analysis grants Ricoeur’s conception of original affirmation a greater phenomenological and ontological weight than that of Nabert’s. Furthermore, it will be argued in dialogue with philosophers of religion Pamela Sue Anderson and Brian Gregor, that he takes this concept in a Spinozist direction, which allows a deeper value to be ascribed to lived, embodied experience.⁶⁵ Yet, as made evident in this section, the embodied and reflective are already inherently entwined in the notion of original affirmation, and my aim is therefore to explore these dimensions more deeply. Before we get into this later analysis, the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to unpacking the relationship between Ricoeur’s original affirmation with the

⁶¹ Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, xx.

⁶² Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, xxii.

⁶³ van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, preface.

⁶⁴ This ties in with the lack of immediacy between consciousness and itself, which was discussed in the section 1.3 of this thesis.

⁶⁵ Pamela Sue Anderson, “On Loss of Confidence: Dissymmetry, Doubt and Deprivation in the Power to Act and (the Power) to Suffer” in *Moral Powers Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Religious Philosophy*, ed. Joseph Carlisle, James Carter and Daniel Whistler (New York: Continuum, 2011) 92, 100; Brian Gregor, *Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Religion: Rebirth of the Capable Self* (London: Lexington, 2019), 193.

negation and anguish of human fallibility, which is brought to light by his response to existentialist philosophy.

2.3. Negation over affirmation and essence

Ricoeur's articles on affirmation were written (around ten years after Nabert's) in the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, when Europe was in a state of reconstruction, needing to rebuild unstable economic and political structures. In the wake of the Cold War, the fragility and uncertainty of human life was tangible, and the tensions between West and East continued. As argued by Patrick Baert, while its roots can be traced to Karl Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and earlier thinkers, existentialism grew and gained popularity in post-war France precisely within the context of these threats and tragedies; in facing the anguish of death, meaninglessness, ambivalence, and crimes against humanity.⁶⁶

In 20th century existentialist philosophy, especially that which was circulating around the 50s, the 'negative' aspects of human existence and being, such as, alienation, fallibility, guilt, and the contingency and limitations of human life, had been brought to the forefront. Many notable existentialists (Beauvoir, Camus, Sartre), while differing widely in their views, held that anguish and negation were foundational for human existence, and prior to any successful attempts at affirming life. Ricoeur sheds light on the nature of such existential anguish in *True and False Anguish* by contrasting it with *fear*:

[...] fear has a determined object or, in any case, one that is determinable, and that it anticipates a partial threat limited to a part of ourselves. Anguish, on the other hand, has an indetermined object and one which is all the more indeterminable as reflection attempts to coin its aim into fears with precise contours; but in return, this indetermined object of anguish signifies a threat for my totality over and above the division of my body into vulnerable parts, my psychism into discordant

⁶⁶ Patrick Baert, *The existentialist moment: The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 2-17

functions, my social personage into opposed roles, even over and above the scattering of my freedom into discontinuous acts.⁶⁷

In other words, anguish is more profound than fear in that it arises through situations which endanger the entirety of our being (our entire life, identity, future, purpose, or moral character), rather than one specific aspect or component of it. Anguish is hence tied to that which poses a fundamental threat to the fixity of our lives. This is what Kierkegaard points towards when he links his concept of *Dread* to an inherent contradiction of being, indicating a lack of solid understanding of our own nature.⁶⁸ Anguish therefore indicates the cruciality of negation through a denial of positive grounds, previously considered essential, and when harnessed it can function to deny *totalising foundations*.

Ricoeur's two articles on negation and affirmation can largely be considered a response to this contemporaneous intellectual trend (that positions anguish and negation as primary to affirmation). His allegiance to an affirmation more primary than anguish and negation, perhaps demonstrates a kind of hope and optimism in the face of despair. Yet, while one might be tempted to label an original affirmation of human being (the view that human existence is at its core affirmative), despite the horrors of war and crimes against humanity, as a regression or naive optimism, it should be noted, as it was in the introductory chapter, that Ricoeur had himself spent five years in a Nazi prison camp, having been released only in 1945. He was hence not entirely shielded from the perils and anxieties of his time. Furthermore, Ricoeur does not fail to acknowledge the value of an increased emphasis on negation, nor the reasons for its resurgence.

2.4. The value of negation

The value of the resurgence of negation is demonstrated in Ricoeur's view that a deeper focus on negation is an important philosophical advancement, which constitutes a move away from classical (pre-Hegelian) philosophies, and their locating of a fixed and positive substance or essence at the

⁶⁷ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 287.

⁶⁸ See Søren Kierkegaard, "Problem III" in *Fear and Trembling* (London: Everyman's Library, 1994), 71-107.

ontological centre of human life.⁶⁹ Finding basis in Platonic philosophy of ideal forms, the notion that all of existence depends upon a perfected or unchanging substance can be attributed to many classic philosophical thinkers, such as Aristotle and Plotinus. This view considers a transcendent and universal substance or essence to be the grounding source of being, and such primacy given to substance can also be found (in various forms) in the work of Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, among others. What Hegel's philosophy is successful in demonstrating, according to Ricoeur, is that negation is a crucial aspect of being.⁷⁰ Again, this cruciality of negativity is central to much existentialist philosophy, which tends to hold that existence does not depend upon a prior essence but is always in a complex and dynamic process of transformation and becoming, often considered as epitomised in Sartre's famous statement that "existence precedes essence."⁷¹ Accordingly, an acceptance of the constructed, contingent, and uncertain nature of existence requires acknowledging the necessity of the negation of universal truths or fixed foundations, where anguish is the most genuine response. This view throws being, as something concrete and graspable, into doubt, and it is precisely such doubt that Ricoeur recognises as the valuable contribution of philosophies of negation:

[...] the virtue of the philosophies of negativity since Hegel is to have put us back on the road toward a philosophy of being which cuts away from the thing and essence. All classic philosophies are, in varying degrees, philosophies of the form, whether the form be interpreted as Idea or as Substance and quiddity. The function of negation is to render the philosophy of being difficult [...] Under the pressure of the negative, of negative experiences, we must reacheive a notion of being which is act rather than form, living affirmation, the power of existing and of making exist.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 326.

⁷⁰ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 328; Hegel represents a move away from this kind of thinking, according to Ricoeur, because his dialectic approach gives negativity a vital role in understanding the contradictions inherent to reality. Simply put, Hegel regards existence as too complex to locate a positive source as its immediate determinate. Instead, oppositions must be put in dialogue to approach the truth of being, which is a method that problematises the certitude of a singular and prior source.

⁷¹ This idea was originally expressed by Friedrich Schelling in an 1841 lecture but was famously formulated as "existence precedes essence" [*l'existence précède l'essence*] in Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 568.

⁷² Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 328.

In *Negativity and Primary Affirmation*, Ricoeur therefore makes clear that he does not want to dispel negation, but to refute a fallacy implicit within philosophies of negation: that their only alternative is a return to essences.⁷³ With this, we find a core ambition of Ricoeur's articles of affirmation: to philosophically affirm being without a retort to essentialism. This, in his view, entails locating a foundation of being as "act rather than form."⁷⁴

In the articles of affirmation, his strategy takes two primary steps: 1) to locate affirmative values as indicated through forms of existential angst and their correlative *lack*, and 2) to claim that these values indicate the possibility for a deeper or more original meaning to be discovered in being: one which is both grounding of, and embedded within, the act of being. How the first step is achieved will be touched upon in this chapter, however the second step will be engaged with more deeply within chapters three and four.

2.5. Confronting existential anguish

In *True and False Anguish*, Ricoeur states that his aim is to study the anguish of his time, with the hope to learn from it, while also exploring the possibility of rekindling a connection with higher meaning as a response to such anguish.⁷⁵ He refers to anguish as a feeling that "is at once indetermined and massive." Recall that unlike fear, anguish has no single determined object, but represents a threat to the entirety of one's being. Yet, while anguish is a feeling, it can best be understood through reflection.⁷⁶ For Ricoeur, reflection allows us to "experience in order to understand, to understand in order to go beyond – or failing to go beyond, to confront."⁷⁷

⁷³ Ricoeur recognises that many great thinkers of the 19th and 20th century have made essentialism problematic. As already mentioned in the introduction, the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (whom Ricoeur refers to as the "masters of suspicion") have each shown that the contingency and facticity of our being determines our understanding of the world, making it difficult to locate Absolute signifiers of Truth. Amidst the uncertainty occasioned by the radical contingency of being, a retort to essentialism cannot be justified in Ricoeur's view; See Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 328.

⁷⁵ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 287.

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 288.

⁷⁷ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 287.

Furthermore, he urges the reader to reflect upon angst in relation to its opposing force, which is original affirmation and its power to:

[...] designate the intense passion for existence which anguish puts into question [...] to meditate on anguish is, I believe, to use its hard schooling in order to explore and reach the primary affirmation, more primordial than all anguish which would lay claim to being original.⁷⁸

To position affirmation as prior to negation, Ricoeur offers a systematic analysis of how various forms of anguish, inscribed in European thought, can indicate a prior value. These include: 1) alienation, 2) the “ambivalence of history” 2) nonsense/meaninglessness 3) the “metaphysical anguish” of guilt, suffering, and evil, and 4) the “vital anguish” of death.⁷⁹ Ricoeur’s aim is not to deny these sources of anguish, but to dig beneath their surface to reveal what they affirm about humanity, and to achieve this he attempts to find, reflected in angst, a positive value and reason for life.⁸⁰ This seems initially as a difficult task, especially considering Ricoeur’s emphasis on the importance of negation as revealing an inherent lack of certitude: how can that which has acquired impetus through negation become indicative of an affirmative origin? To approach this question, Ricoeur references Camus, who argues that implicating a positive value is unavoidable even through the inherently negative acts of *rebellion* or *revolt*:

Out the slave who rebels against the master not only repudiates the master, but he also affirms that he is right; as Camus so rightly expressed it, without perceiving all the metaphysical implications of it: “In every act of rebellion, man experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights, but also a complete and spontaneous adhesion to a certain part of himself.” And he adds: “Not every value leads to rebellion, but every rebellion tacitly invokes a value.”⁸¹

For Ricoeur, like Camus, it is unavoidable to affirm something through negation, since even the negative act of revolt implies an underlying value, perceived as lacking. It is this lack that indicates something valuable yet missing, revealing an unrealised potential. Ricoeur hence indicates that

⁷⁸ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 288.

⁷⁹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290, 301.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 287-304.

⁸¹ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 323.

recognizing lack as potential entails a move from the fallibility of existence towards the possibilities of reflective thought, and his meditation on anguish therefore begins with an attempt to reveal the limitations that emerge through the fragility of human life, expressed in various forms of anguish.⁸²

2.6. Negation as invoking an affirmative value

Firstly, alienation manifests itself primarily in “the possibility of not recognizing oneself, of being other, of being literally alienated.”⁸³ It is linked to the totality of our identity, and here the influence of Freud reveals itself in the recognition of the *unconscious* aspects of self; the parts which are unknown to us but nonetheless govern our way of being in the world. The loss of a stable ego, and thereby a fixed source of identity, results in an anguish of being ‘alien’ even to oneself.⁸⁴ Second, he approaches the “ambivalence of history,” which comes with the relinquishment of ideologies of progress.⁸⁵ The abandonment of the idea that history represents the teleological advancement towards stages of greater and greater progress, leads to an abandonment also of the notion that “our dreadful history is a ruse of reason heading toward higher synthesis.”⁸⁶ The aimlessness of history, as not leading towards some greater point of justification, gives rise to the anguish that our past of suffering and despair is not a means for achieving a greater end, but pointless and, perhaps, banal.⁸⁷

The same desire for purpose also underlies the third anguish of meaninglessness and “nonsense.” Ricoeur considers this form of anguish as symptomatic of his modern and privileged Western society.⁸⁸ Here, the comforts of modern life, such as entertainment, pleasure, and instant gratification, that distract and fill the void of an inherent meaninglessness of existence, run the risk

⁸² Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 323-324.

⁸³ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 292.

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 292.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 295, 299.

⁸⁶ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 294.

⁸⁷ Banal, not in the sense of uninteresting or unimportant, but in the sense of occurring without any direct reason or justification.

⁸⁸ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 296.

of leading to a collective narcissism.⁸⁹ Again, Ricoeur sees this as signifying the falsity of the idea that history leads to progress, arguing that modern luxuries lead us (at least in part) towards despair and not prosperity. Underlying these various forms of despair is the void or deficiency of higher meaning: “the insignificance of lives without horizon and purpose.”⁹⁰ As Ricoeur writes: “a frightening possibility is discovered by anguish: what if *actual* history did not have meaning.”⁹¹

Finally, we have Ricoeur’s “vital anguish” of death. The topic of death has pervaded the philosophical pursuit with great consistency, while the anguish of death has, since Kierkegaard, represented a core existential topic, influencing Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, among others. This “vital anguish” poses an ultimate threat to our physical existence, which has led many of these thinkers to suggest that to individually confront death is integral to a genuine understanding of reality.⁹² While the previous forms of anguish pertain to a sense of meaninglessness, through the loss of access to foundations of truth, death is understood by Ricoeur as a more deeply embodied form of anguish. He therefore defines death as a “vital anguish,” whereas the other forms of anguish are delineated as forms of “metaphysical anguish,” in that they relate to an uncertainty surrounding meaning and purpose.⁹³

To locate original affirmation in relation to metaphysical versus vital anguish, hence requires differing approaches. In terms of the former, original affirmation must certify the value of *meaning* in the face of *meaninglessness* and must therefore relate to a deeper sense of purpose. With regard to the latter, death must delineate the primacy of our embodied will to live. Whereas the former requires an act of affirmation through reflection, the latter signifies an affirmative and embodied feeling and desire to be-in-the-world. The difference is, in my view, directional: the former brings affirmation to the world through reflection, and the latter is an affirmation already located in our lived presence within it.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 292-293.

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 302.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 294.

⁹² Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 301.

⁹³ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 301-304.

To understand how the theoretical lens of actuality and potentiality applies to original affirmation, it is my view that this division between “vital anguish” and “metaphysical anguish” can serve as a useful framework.⁹⁴ Here, original affirmation can be considered, in relation to metaphysical anguish, as a potential relating to the striving for higher meaning that transcends our current predicament. Regarding vital anguish, it can be seen as surfacing the will to live, as encompassing the actual value of embodied life. Therefore, this dynamic will serve as a point of reference for the subsequent analysis offered in this thesis.

2.7. Summary

In this chapter it has been established that Ricoeur finds value in negation, which he regards as central within 20th century existentialist thought. In post-war France, the fragility of human life was not easy to refute, yet Ricoeur argues that this line of thinking has nonetheless moved too far in the direction of negation. His own ambition is to demonstrate that, while negation is crucial to being, affirmation is more original.⁹⁵ While Ricoeur hence praises the work of Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, among others, for advancing beyond essentialism, he wishes to refute the accompanying intuition that the only alternative to a philosophy of essences is the negation of affirmative foundations.⁹⁶ The alternative, which he advocates for, is a philosophy centred around an affirmative and grounding act of being, which does not entail the positing of underlying substance or form.⁹⁷ In relation to various forms of anguish, which Ricoeur regards as prevalent in modern consciousness, he attempts to achieve this by locating affirmation as an underlying and more primary value. Here, he divides anguish into two broad categories: the “metaphysical anguish” of meaninglessness and lack of foundation, and the “vital anguish of death.”⁹⁸

In the next chapter, this divide between the “vital anguish” and the “metaphysical anguish” will be appropriated to serve as a framework for the application of the theoretical lens of actuality and

⁹⁴ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290, 301.

⁹⁵ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 305.

⁹⁶ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 287-288; Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 305-306.

⁹⁷ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 328.

⁹⁸ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290, 301.

potentiality.⁹⁹ Chapter three will begin by looking at how acts of reflection are employed to overcome metaphysical anguish, where I will argue that this implicates original affirmation as a potential beyond the actual. Thereafter, a discussion of vital anguish will be offered, and here I will contend that affirmation must be understood as an actual and embodied will to live. Metaphysical or theological implications of each of these elucidations of original affirmation will also be considered. In this regard, the approach will be both critical and constructive, and the results of the discussions will be brought into deeper synthesis in chapter five.

⁹⁹ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 290, 301.

Chapter 3: Original Affirmation as Potentiality: in Confrontation with Metaphysical Anguish

3.1. Introduction

The last chapter sought to demonstrate Ricoeur's relationship to philosophies of negation and elaborate his position in relation to existentialist philosophy, prevalent at the time (1950s France). This section will look more closely at how he attempts to confront "metaphysical anguish," which he perceives to contain other forms of existential despair, such as alienation, ambivalence, meaninglessness, and nonsense. Ricoeur takes the root of these forms of anguish to be the loss of a (good) foundation, and in my view, it is in response to such anguish that an understanding of original affirmation as potential can best be conceived.¹⁰⁰

The aim of this chapter is hence to elucidate what it means to conceptualise original affirmation as potential, rather than something graspable in the world. It will be argued that this entails an invocation of hope, imagination and myth, in order to affirm life through (and not over or against) the limitations of human nature and understanding. Regarding the aims of this thesis, the questions explored here will assist in isolating and more deeply engaging with the reflective dimensions of original affirmation, while also remaining anchored in an exploration of existential anguish.

3.2. Freedom to negate and to affirm

When seeking to face anguish, the traditional existentialist move is to emphasise that its confrontation can deepen the possibilities for freedom. In relation to "metaphysical anguish," Ricoeur himself initially makes such an advance, following Camus in his claim that if there is no ultimate ground, or definite aim or purpose of human life, we are free to create our own meaning. Beyond a mere dense preoccupation with the absurd and the meaningless, Ricoeur hence states his

¹⁰⁰ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 301-304.

recognition of the value of existentialism, both in its confrontation and “courage before the uncertainty of the meaning of history.”¹⁰¹ This, he argues, reveals a freedom capable both to affirm and to negate. However, for Ricoeur, such freedom gives rise to the most primordial of anguishes, and it is therefore a freedom that:

[...] becomes anguish precisely at the moment when I go beyond the strictly moral level of observance of commandments fixed by tradition; when I switch from the concern over moral rectitude to that of perfection and unlimited sanctity. Moral codes are transcended, but so too is the security of everyday duties and habitual obligations. I enter into this zone of absolute danger heralded by the tragic chorus and by the prophet of Israel: I am a freedom in “odyssey,” a ‘lost’ freedom.¹⁰²

Here Ricoeur blends existential freedom with a classically theistic notion, which is tied to an even deeper anguish that: “springs from ancient myths, from Greek tragedy, and from the Hebraic Bible.”¹⁰³ Ricoeur delineates this as a “metaphysical anguish” that contains meaninglessness, alienation, guilt, suffering and evil.¹⁰⁴ This angst can be surmised as fallibility, and the distance such fallibility draws between the divine and humanity; uncertainty and truth; innocence and transgression. The suffering and seduction towards evil that saturates life, is tied to this form of anguish, which Ricoeur considers to be one that arises from the suspicion that human nature at its foundational level is “evil or free to do evil.”¹⁰⁵ Yet, despite this theological terminology, what Ricoeur more broadly wishes to indicate is the loss of universal foundations as signifiers of morality and truth, and the recognition that there might be no reason or ultimate justification for evil and suffering, and thus no fundamental aim for existence. Even worse, this may indicate an evil foundation: that human beings at their origin are *not* good. The mourning of a loss of innocence through such a recognition is, for Ricoeur, the most fundamental of anguishes.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 297.

¹⁰² Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 298; Quote from Isaiah vi:5.

¹⁰³ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 297-298.

¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 297-298, 301.

¹⁰⁵ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 298.

¹⁰⁶ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 301-304.

3.3. A loss of innocence: the myth of the fall

Ricoeur's response to such anguish is an act of reflection and hope, and this is where he makes a departure from many existentialists, including Camus and Sartre. For Ricoeur, freedom is not merely an act of creating one's own meaning through negation, but a possibility to hope for deeper affirmation as a ground of being.¹⁰⁷ Here, one might object that this hope is precisely the creation of meaning, but Ricoeur remains, in a sense, hopeful that this is an act of revelation rather than construction. For him, freedom is capable to both affirm and to negate, and this later freedom of negation does not 'cement' nothingness as a ground of being, rather it allows for, what in my view could be referred to as, an *imagination of nothingness*, which arises through the perception of a lack of foundation.¹⁰⁸ Such a perspective is also supported by French philosopher Jérôme Porée, who writes that for Ricoeur: "our dreams of eternity exist within the same finite existence as our anxiety about nothingness."¹⁰⁹

What can counter the imagination of nothingness, according to Ricoeur, is the freedom to hope, which can have an aim that is both protological and eschatological: envisioning an origin and destiny of man. Such determinants of hope cannot be tangibly located, yet Ricoeur highlights their emblematic value, which he considers as most poignantly symbolised in the mythic fall of *Genesis*. Here, innocence can be understood as an originally good state of being from which humanity has inevitably transgressed.¹¹⁰ As French philosopher Daniel Frey notes, for Ricoeur the hope that we can return to innocence also contains an understanding that, despite the inherent suffering that permeates human societies and history, goodness can nevertheless be defined as the original characteristic of being.¹¹¹ As Frey points out, this contention is supported by Ricoeur when he writes the following in *The Symbolism of Evil*:

¹⁰⁷ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 303-304.

¹⁰⁸ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 327-328.

¹⁰⁹ Jérôme Porée, "Karl Jaspers: the Clarification of Existence" in *A Companion to Ricoeur's Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 20.

¹¹⁰ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 300.

¹¹¹ Daniel Frey, "Imagination and Religion: The Myth of Innocence in Fallible Man" in *A Companion to Ricoeur's Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 10-12.

This is what Rousseau brilliantly understood: the human is “naturally good,” but we know the human under the regime of civilization- that is to say, of history- only as “depraved.” Above all, what Kant understood with admirable rigor in his *Essay on Radical Evil*: the human is “destined” to the good and “prone” to evil. This paradox of “destination” and “inclination” concentrates the entire meaning of the symbol of the fall.¹¹²

This “paradox of inclination and destination” in the symbolism of the fall, indicates for Ricoeur a loss of innocence, born from our inherent tendency towards depravity, and yet signifies a possibility that such innocence might someday be regained.¹¹³ What I think Ricoeur seeks to highlight, through his engagement with biblical imagery in relation to “metaphysical anguish,” is that while freedom contains a loss, it also indicates a possibility to push beyond such loss. This is because, as noted above, reflection can replace the imagination of a foundation of nothingness with a hope in a foundation that is innocent. This is understood by Ricoeur as a “leap” of hope out of uncertainty,¹¹⁴ and he states in *Negation and Primary Affirmation* that it is this act that constitutes the original affirmation, while also stressing that we must:

[...] be mindful here that we cannot privilege this act and leave without misgivings as after the happy ending of a sad movie. The act of hope, to be sure, presages a good totality of being at the origin and at the end of the “breath of creation” [...] That “it is good”— wie auch es sei das Leben, es ist gut — this I do not see: in the darkness, I hope it is.¹¹⁵

Ricoeur hence does not aim for original affirmation to supersede sadness, but to replace the imagination of nothingness with hope in a primordially good affirmative ground, more original than evil, and “more primordial than all anguish which would lay claim to being original.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, such hope grounds affirmation in a human capacity to act, which does not postulate but signifies a good foundation of human being:

¹¹² Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 252.

¹¹³ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 301.

¹¹⁴ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 303.

¹¹⁵ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 303.

¹¹⁶ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 288.

Thus, although hope is the true contrary of anguish, I hardly differ from my friend who is in despair; I am riveted with silence, like him, before the mystery of iniquity [...] And yet this insignificant act works in silence and at one and the same time is hidden and reveals itself in its power to recapitulate all the degrees of primary affirmation. It is through this recapitulatory power that it comes to the level of reflection, as in a broken mirror.¹¹⁷

I would like to highlight this “silence” of hope as one of humility: hope does not capture the original affirmation as an actuality, but as a potential revealed in darkness or through a “broken mirror.”¹¹⁸ This sentiment is epitomised, perhaps, in Ricoeur’s infamous phrase: “Man is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite.”¹¹⁹ From such a perspective, this “Yes” is an attestation of hope amidst metaphysical anguish; a desire for purpose and truth reflected in uncertainty.

3.4. Hope, imagination and myth

Porée emphasises the influence of Kant and Kierkegaard in relation to this dynamic between affirmation and hope. He argues that it is through Kierkegaard that Ricoeur is able to make the move away from anguish, while positioning hope as a fundamental pillar of affirmation. Through Kant, Porée claims that Ricoeur can merge his view of finitude with the imagination, thereby salvaging the subject from a negation of meaning. It is hence through both hope and imagination (our ability to desire for and construct meaning), that affirmation is given its full expression in Ricoeur’s work, according to Porée. Located, as such, between Kant and Kierkegaard, this act of *creating* meaning is not severed from the possibility of *accessing* deeper meaning.¹²⁰

This, in my view, connects Ricoeur’s original affirmation to his later emphasis on narrative imagination, developed in his three-volume series, *Time and Narrative*. Here, Ricoeur adopts the Aristotelian notion of “emplotment” (*muthos*), to refer to the assignment of meaning to our

¹¹⁷ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 303.

¹¹⁸ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 303.

¹¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 215.

¹²⁰ Porée, “Karl Jaspers: the Clarification of Existence,” 19-22.

experiences through a creative interpretative process.¹²¹ He makes clear that this is neither an act of fabrication, nor an immediate access to truth; rather it is the only way that truth can be approached, given the mediated and interpretative lenses of our understanding. Understood in such light, original affirmation appears not as an actual quality of being that can be immediately felt or grasped, rather the inevitable divide between human history and the tangibility of such an ideal, positions it as a possibility. Therefore, according to this perspective, it is primarily through imagination, myth, and hope that the original affirmation may find expression.

Such a view has been granted support by Ricoeur scholars Luz Ascárate, Jean-Luc Almaric, Daniel Frey, and Theodoor van Leeuwen, among others. While they do not necessarily argue that original affirmation is a pure potential, they support this view by presenting it as a perspective interlaced with hope, while emphasising Ricoeur's rootedness in reflective thinking. These scholars argue that while Ricoeur's philosophy is motivated by a desire for truth, it is core to his phenomenological (and later hermeneutic) approach that such truth can never be wholly acquired. One such thinker is Almaric, who writes that:

According to [Ricoeur], finitude only makes sense on the basis of an *originary affirmation*, which constitutes the pole of the infinity of the human being [...] Everything that appears to us, in the human, as *finitude* or as 'the negation of finitude' can only be revealed to us on the basis of an original and absolute affirmation which has always transcended or transgressed the finitude.¹²²

Almaric's notion that original affirmation transcends finitude positions it as always beyond our reach, and hence as a potential beyond the actual. He therefore writes that it is the limitations of existence that surface the "fundamental possibility" of original affirmation.¹²³ Furthermore, van Leeuwen also emphasises this relationship between finite limitation and original affirmation when he writes:

¹²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol I*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1984), 5, 31.

¹²² Jean-Luc Almaric, "Finitude, Culpability and Suffering: The Question of Evil in Ricoeur" in *A Companion to Ricoeur's Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 189.

¹²³ Almaric, "Finitude, Culpability and Suffering," 190.

The basis of man's affirmation is never fully assured, '*jamais donné*'. That is why the effort is at the same time a '*désir d'être*,' a desire to be. *Man affirms being in the lack of being*. He lives from a basic affirmation of being, the ground of which remains, however, always beyond his grasp.¹²⁴

It is hence a "lack of being" that signifies the need for hope, myth and imagination, in an affirmation of being. Therefore, as Frey argues, Ricoeur's original affirmation must be *schematized* as mythic innocence to be most accurately understood.¹²⁵ In this regard, Ascárate also brings to light (the previously discussed) connection between original affirmation and mythic innocence, which he argues positions it as our future encounter with our good origin. Ricoeur's interpretation of *Genesis*, in this regard, positions innocence as a mythic structure that can motivate hope in the promise of its 'ever-receding' return.¹²⁶

3.5. Original affirmation as potential

It is my view that the work of these thinkers can support a conception of original affirmation as potentiality, rather than actuality. The primarily affirmative nature of being as indicated by anguish, signifies its having-been-lost. Original affirmation can therefore not be located, verified, or grasped within history and time. In unison with such a view, highlighted by the scholarship discussed in the previous section, it is my contention that Ricoeur conceptualises *loss* as containing an underlying potential. Here, as Almaric and van Leeuwen argue, it is the absence or sense of lack of a foundation of being that can instigate a future-oriented pursuit, grounded in imagination and hope. This provides an eschatological aim to re-establish the originally affirmative nature of being within history and time, which constitutes a prospect realisable someday, but not yet.

I also consider this perspective to have theological implications: while Ricoeur was at the time committed to keeping his religious and philosophical convictions separate (as might be evident

¹²⁴ van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 67.

¹²⁵ Frey, "Imagination and Religion," 11-12

¹²⁶ Luz Ascárate, "The Imagination for Ideation to Innocence" in *A Companion to Ricoeur's Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 194.

from his choice of the term *hope* over *faith*) he explicates original affirmation as both hopefulness for restoration of good origin and as a driving or motivational force. This desire for a restoration of an origin of human being can indicate an eschatological aspiration, guided by a belief in its eventual fulfilment.¹²⁷ However, on the other hand, it could also signify a search for perfection that will never be met; where the meaning such a pursuit imbues upon human life is an end in and of itself. What both such perspectives nonetheless mutually imply, is that original affirmation is an ideal that transcends the here-and-now, whether someday attainable, or forever beyond our reach. In other words, from the standpoint of both positions, the world inevitably falls short.

However, such a negation of the world, if it can be considered as such, seems rather unintuitive for a philosophical attempt at affirming life, especially given Ricoeur's stated aim to "reachieve a philosophy of the primacy of being and existing."¹²⁸ In the next chapter, further light will therefore be shed upon the ontological implications of original affirmation through exploring it as actuality rather than as potentiality.

3.6. Summary

What I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, is that the human striving for meaning and purpose, in confrontation with metaphysical anguish, can be taken to reveal original affirmation as something achieved in coalescence with hope, as well as with the mythic and imaginal. Original affirmation is, in accordance with the perspective offered here, therefore an abstract value or a conceptual ideal, which can only be theorised as possible. While it might indicate an *origin* of being, it is not one that can be tangibly or empirically discovered in the world, and to gain momentum, it must therefore become engaged in the human propensity to hope, to narrate, and to create meaning. What this suggests, in my view, as established in relation to the work of Almaric, Frey, Porée, and van Leeuwen, is that original affirmation is a value indicated through loss, and

¹²⁷ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 303.

¹²⁸ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 305.

hence through human fallibility.¹²⁹ This points to a paradox located at the heart of the human condition: we desire to affirm amidst uncertainty; to replace uncertainty with hope. It is hence doubt and lack of certainty that grant essential value to the rich potentialities of the human imagination, and its engagement with the mythic and symbolic.

Where this chapter and the last, have emphasised the reflective potential of the original affirmation, revealed through a hopeful response to metaphysical anguish, I made the claim that Ricoeur's approach to discover affirmation through the vital anguish of death follows a different route. I suggested that it reveals an understanding of original affirmation that is more embodied and conative than it is reflective. Beyond this, I argued that this could indicate the original affirmation as an actuality, and not a 'mere' potentiality indicated through hope. It is this perspective that will be explored in the next chapter, before elucidating a possible point of reconciliation between these two interpretations.

¹²⁹ van Leewern, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 67; Frey, "Imagination and Religion," 11–12; Almaric, "Finitude, Culpability and Suffering," 194.

Chapter 4: Original Affirmation as Actuality: Meeting the Vital Anguish of Death

4.1. Introduction

While the last chapter was dedicated to comprehending original affirmation as potentiality, this chapter will look more closely at how it might be conceived, instead, as actuality. I would here like to again remind the reader, that by emphasising the actuality versus the potentiality of original affirmation, I do not consider myself to be drawing out dimensions that are unexplored in other research and scholarship. Rather, I wish to isolate and polarise two aspects already intrinsic to original affirmation, with the aim of carving out new meaning.

In this chapter, an analysis and discussion will be offered surrounding the anguish of death, and how it can be overcome through locating an embodied will to live as more originally affirmative. Here, I will highlight that, primarily in *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur presents the idea of a “pre-reflective naivete,” which he connects to our bodily experience of being in the world, and to the feelings of joy and love for life, as encompassed in our desire to exist.¹³⁰ Here, my constructive aim is to isolate this deeper embodied dimension of the will as an inherent part of original affirmation, which, in my view, offers the best chance to certify it as actuality. In Ricoeur’s approach to the anguish of death, I believe this dimension is well expressed.

4.2. The anguish of death and an embodied will for life

Like other forms of anguish, Ricoeur approaches death by attempting to locate the affirmative value that a loss of life indicates. Perhaps rather obviously, he argues that the fear for a loss of one’s life signifies that life is understood to have value. Rather than the “existential vertigo” brought about from the metaphysical anguish of freedom from any grounding or fixed foundation

¹³⁰ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 79.

(coupled with the continued desire for such a foundation) death instead signifies a more rudimentary drive for life.¹³¹ In confrontation with a more solipsistic conception of angst, which Ricoeur regards as epitomised in the philosophy of Heidegger, the value that death imbues upon life, understood as both intersubjective and relational, is considered by Ricoeur to be primary.¹³²

Heidegger famously argues that to face our mortality, we must confront a limit inherent to our existence, where death becomes the horizon that is the ultimate *boundary situation* of our lives.¹³³ This is epitomised in Heidegger's notion of "Being-towards-death," which signifies the need to consciously embody the reality of our future dying in the very fabric of our being. This calls us to confront the inevitability of death through a solitary inward journey, where it is only through drawing away from the world and grappling alone with that which ultimately limits or negates our being (i.e., death), that a genuine affirmation of life can begin.¹³⁴

For Ricoeur, the anguish of death reveals the value of life, and therefore such value must have been established prior to the totalising threat posed by our mortality. He here points out that before we learn that our lives will someday end, we first become engaged in the world, and that it is through our participation in the world that death is first made known to us. In most cases, we experience and grapple with the death of another (a family member or loved one) more immediately and pervasively, than we do our own death, as positioned, rather abstractly, in the future. Ricoeur does not thereby disagree with Heidegger that more deeply grappling with our own mortality has value, however, he argues that death is experienced, first and more immediately, in relation to the other, and it is thus not something that can be posed as a 'boundary' to life. In this regard, Ricoeur argues that death cannot be considered as separate from our embodied experience

¹³¹ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 290.

¹³² Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 290-292.

¹³³ The "boundary situation" is a term coined by Karl Jaspers and refers to any situation that pushes our existence to its ultimate boundary, thereby challenging our perception of being, and often forcing us to change. See section three of Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 218-222.

¹³⁴ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 279-311.

of life, which mediates our experience of the world, stating that: “the world is not the boundary of my existence but its correlate.”¹³⁵

What Ricoeur hence highlights here, is that death is first and foremost experienced within life, and this problematises the idea that it should be grappled with in solitude. Instead, this signifies that a genuine comprehension of death requires understanding the interrelationship between self and other, which in turn allows Ricoeur to challenge the idea that the anguish of death comes prior to any possible affirmation of life.¹³⁶

With this, Ricoeur argues that the will to live, as the value indicated through the anguish of death, is connected to our desire for a continued embodied existence, as enmeshed with the world.¹³⁷ In my view, the will to live can therefore be understood through Ricoeur as a *will to live with another*, where this desire to exist is experienced, prior to the anguish of death, as a desire for continued existence in the world. Furthermore, it is this will to exist that can constitute original affirmation as actuality. However, in texts such as *Fallible Man* and *Freedom and Nature*, a deeper complexity of Ricoeur’s understanding of the will for life is revealed, where its capacity to both affirm and negate life is brought to the surface.

4.3. The will to live as an affirmation or negation of life

In *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur appropriates Platonic terminology to consider the will, as our desire for life, divisible into two modes: the first is a more basic utilitarian desire (*epithumia*) and the second spiritual desire (*Eros*). The former indicates our innate urges, drives, and desires for subsistence and pleasure, whereas the latter a higher striving for goodness, purpose, and meaning.¹³⁸ In this regard, *Eros* can be understood as synonymous with the reflective aspects of the will, and *epithumia* with the pre-reflective; these terms will therefore be used interchangeably. It is *Eros*

¹³⁵ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290-292, 307.

¹³⁶ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 318.

¹³⁷ Ricoeur, “Negation and Primary Affirmation,” 310, 317.

¹³⁸ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 139.

that more readily relates to the reflective affirmation discussed in the previous chapter, since it is directed towards higher meaning or ideal value. *Epithumia*, on the other hand, represents the more impulsive, baseline desires of the will, which, given our previous discussion, might be considered as connected to our natural inclinations to transgress, and hence to our fallible human nature.¹³⁹

However, such a ‘neat’ division is problematised in *Fallible Man*, where Ricoeur makes clear that he does not consider *epithumia* as inherently transgressive. This becomes apparent in relation to his analysis of *having*, *power* and *worth*, which are the names he gives to the impulses of the will to live. These, he argues, are at their root, originally innocent.¹⁴⁰ Whereas in the last chapter an innocent origin was considered as a protological or eschatological ideal, it is here regarded as the ground of our embodied will for life.

4.4. Having, power and worth

The first of such impulses is *having*, which represents the desire to possess, to have more of what one desires. In its essence, Ricoeur contends that *having* is the will to possess a certain abundance in life, rooted in the desire for a fruitful existence. Such a will to have a prosperous life, is not only good, but necessary for human survival.¹⁴¹ The same can be said of *power*: this represents the need for control and order (to escape chaos), which is in and of itself not a bad thing to seek out, as the need for structure is necessary for human civilization.¹⁴² Furthermore, as Frey points out this connects to a desire for benevolent power, which is the seeking of a compassionate order in the world.¹⁴³ In addition, power understood as the driving force of the will, also contains a good aptitude for life, facilitating the urge to act, achieve, produce and create. Finally, Ricoeur considers *worth* to be an innate sense of self-love; a love for one’s existence that arises through the joy of

¹³⁹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 139-141.

¹⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 191-202.

¹⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 172-175.

¹⁴² Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* 176-183.

¹⁴³ Frey, “Imagination and Religion,” 14.

being in the world. In its initial form, each of these desires is necessary for the value of life to be affirmed.¹⁴⁴

However, Ricoeur also points out that these desires of the will turn to excess in their expression within human history and time. When observing how these impulses become manifest in the world around us, we can see that the need for *having* abundance often comes at the expense of the poverty of others.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, *power* when taken to its excess becomes “power-over” another, leading to domination, oppression, and violence.¹⁴⁶ Even the love for one’s life, encapsulated in the sense of its *worth*, turns to excess depending on where it becomes focused: when directed only towards oneself, one’s own ethnic group, nationality, or culture, self-worth comes at the expense of the worth of another.¹⁴⁷

However, according to Ricoeur, there is nonetheless an innocence prior to the corruption of these innate impulses of the will, that he considers as primordial. While in the last chapter, innocence was given mythic significance in relation to a biblical image of Eden, Ricoeur hence now seems to position innocence as a root of *epithumia*, and therefore on a pre-reflective, embodied, and experiential level. To better understand what constitutes such a change, it can be useful to briefly consider how Ricoeur’s comprehension of the will shifted in the context of his writings during the 1960, in comparison to his earlier work.

4.5. Contextualising *Fallible Man*

Ricoeur’s writings on the will are not limited to *Fallible Man* (1960), but constitute an important focus of his work, explored in *Freedom and Nature* (1950) and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), as well in his later writings on human agency and selfhood in *Time and Narrative* (1983), and *Oneself as Another* (1990). However, of these texts it is *Fallible Man* that most readily deals with the

¹⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 183-189.

¹⁴⁵ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 174.

¹⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 178-179.

¹⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 184.

concept of original affirmation. While Ricoeur continues to be influenced by Heidegger, Nabert, Merleau-Ponty, and existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, this text arguably reveals a deeper allegiance also with the work of Gabriel Marcel and Spinoza. This is the view of American philosopher Brian Gregor, who argues that what Ricoeur draws from Marcel, is the necessary groundedness of reflection in embodied and engaged being. As Gregor puts it: “[Marcel’s] insights are essential to Ricoeur’s reflections on the lived body – the embodied *I can*.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, Gregor sheds light on the relationship between Ricoeur, Marcel and Spinoza when he writes:

For Marcel, being is best understood not in terms of objects or things, but as a presence, a nourishing source that resides at the roots of human being. In his words, ‘existence is not only given, but giving.’ This vision became highly influential for Ricoeur, who found similar descriptions in Spinoza, Nabert and Schelling. For Ricoeur the subject is not the self-founding and self-grounding source of itself; its own act of self-positing is not a *creatio ex nihilo*, but instead an affirmation or attestation of itself that is more deeply rooted in the soil of being.¹⁴⁹

It is this deeper emphasis on our groundedness in the “soil” of being that I believe reveals original affirmation as embedded in the actual. Such a conception was already rooted in Ricoeur’s earlier work, but in my view this bodily and relational understanding of existence is even more deeply expressed in *Fallible Man*. As was revealed in the previous chapter, his conception of “metaphysical anguish” grapples with the angst of human freedom, and the evil and suffering that we are capable of bringing into the world.¹⁵⁰ This was indicated in chapter two as an immediate reaction to the atrocities of the second World War, and the horrors of the Holocaust.

However, in *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur's focus is more deeply dedicated to coming-to-terms with human fallibility and limitations. As Ascárate and Gregor argue, his aims are therefore more interpretative than they are confrontational, and he is here more interested in both resistance and

¹⁴⁸ Gregor, “Reflection, the Body, and Fallibility: The Mysterious Influence of Marcel in Ricoeur’s *Fallible Man*” in *A Companion to Ricoeur’s Fallible Man*, ed. Scott Davidson (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 43.

¹⁴⁹ Gregor, “Reflection, the Body, and Fallibility,” 49.

¹⁵⁰ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 290, 301.

receptibility; in human limitations and capacities as expressed in the world both ethically and socially.¹⁵¹ This, I believe, allows the notion of original affirmation to be grounded more deeply in the embodied experience of life, and not only in hope. It is here that the will becomes of greater importance in terms of comprehending original affirmation, in its ability to indicate both a desire to exist with others, and to negate existence through its embeddedness in the fragilities and fallibility of human life. This is evident already in his previous book *Freedom and Nature*, where Ricoeur attempts to locate the aspects of the will that are within our control, in contrast with the ones that are involuntary.¹⁵² A theme that is carried into *Fallible Man*, is an attempt to find ways to lift the less voluntary aspects of the will into conscious ethical action. He thus seeks to uncover how we can affirm the world through a more innocent will to live, which becomes, in my view, integral to the understanding of original affirmation as actuality.

4.6. Between innocence and excess

How then, should this division between the innocence and the excess of the will be comprehended in relation to original affirmation? On the side of innocence, *epithumia*, as the pre-reflective dimension of the will, has already been located. Rather than a signifier of hope, Ricoeur here refers to innocence as a “pre-reflective naïveté,” which constitutes an initial openness to the world.¹⁵³ Such openness is understood by Ricoeur as a joy for life which entails saying yes to existence through a more immediate felt attestation.¹⁵⁴ Recall that in the previous chapter, saying yes was understood as an act of hope, yet here Ricoeur claims that: “Joy attests that we have a part of us linked to this very lack of being in beings.”¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, he writes that:

This is the being in question in man’s being. Being here is affirmation, yes, joy. I do not thrust this being aside as the already transpired and dead; I am it and I participate in it... Feeling alone, through its pole of infinitude, assures me that I can ‘continue my existence in’ the openness of thinking and

¹⁵¹ Ascárate, “The Imagination for Ideation to Innocence,” 85; Gregor, “Reflection, the Body, and Fallibility,” 46-53.

¹⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 4.

¹⁵³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 79.

¹⁵⁴ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 161.

¹⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 161.

of acting; the originating affirmation is felt here as the Joy of “existing in” the very thing which allows me to think and to act; then reason is no longer an other: I am it, you are it, because we are what it is.¹⁵⁶

In relation to feeling the joy of existence, original affirmation is located in an openness of being, because: “I am it, you are it, because we are what it is.”¹⁵⁷ From this perspective, the will for life is not only reflective, but it is grounded in our felt presence in life, and in our continued desire for the existence of such presence. In my view, it is precisely this presence, this joy of being expressed through our embodied will for life, that is the value of life indicated in Ricoeur’s discussion of the anguish of death in *Negation and Primary Affirmation* and *True and False Anguish*.

Perhaps then, through indicating such a desire to persist in being, the anguish of death can certify original affirmation, not merely as a potentiality, but as an actuality within our felt presence in the world. More than an imagined goodness, this is a sense of unity and belonging that is affirmed as good through the joy of being, entails an act of saying yes to life.¹⁵⁸ From this perspective, it is our desire to exist in unity with being that grounds original affirmation.

However, what becomes key to consider, in terms of determining the status of original affirmation as actuality, is whether this desire can ever truly be fulfilled. Here, a problem emerges, for as we have seen, the impulses of the will, namely, *having*, *power* and *worth*, are not originally affirmative in the way they are expressed in the world. Ricoeur makes clear that he does not wish to affirm life through a full acceptance of our drives and impulses, a position closer to philosophers such as Nietzsche. In fact, Ricoeur explicitly rejects such an all-encompassing affirmation of the will, arguing that this would entail an act of “reducing human affectivity to its animal root.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, this would offer a more biologically rooted affirmation of the innate drives of *having*, *power* and *worth*, as primal creaturely instincts that govern, at a primordial level, human behaviour. This, argues Ricoeur, constitutes a “physics” rather than an “ethics” of the will, which is not sufficient

¹⁵⁶ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 209-210.

¹⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 210.

¹⁵⁸ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 50.

¹⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 169.

when attempting to understand, more particularly, the complexities of the *human will*, through which *having, power and worth* must be given consideration.¹⁶⁰ Ricoeur therefore concurs with Kant that our innate impulses are not given complete consideration, without due emphasis granted to the “aberration or frenzy under which they enter into history.”¹⁶¹

In this regard, Ricoeur draws a distinction between the will as it becomes expressed in the world, and its initial and innocent form. As Frey argues, Ricoeur therefore follows Kant in considering human beings as predisposed to transgression, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in considering us as “naturally good” yet encountered only “under the regime of civilization” and therefore ultimately as corrupted or *fallen*.¹⁶² In this fallen state, the will is always driven by a reason that is not inherently innocent. From this perspective, we do not have immediate access to this initial innocence, understood here as a unity of being, even though we naturally embody and participate in it. While we are engaged in unity, through the very act of our being in the world, we disengage from it through the imperfect nature of our will and drives. In lieu of this paradox, brought about through our imperfect and fallible nature, we cannot immediately or directly experience the underlying unity to which we adhere. Indeed, this is what Ricoeur himself recognises, when he states that the origin of our primal desires requires an “imagination of innocence” to be considered good.¹⁶³

If we, nonetheless, wish to isolate the roots of human embodied-conative existence as innocent, or originally affirmative, imagination and reflection must hence again be evoked, since we cannot seize or verify such innocence empirically. Yet, despite our initial innocence being lost, it is nonetheless initially grounded in an embodied and felt presence. In relation to the perspective offered in the previous chapter, the difference is hence directional: while a mythic innocence was located first through reflection and subsequently directed upon the world, embodied innocence is located first in the world, and subsequently lifted to the level of reflection. In this regard, Ricoeur

¹⁶⁰ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 169, 173.

¹⁶¹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 169.

¹⁶² Frey, “Imagination and Religion,” 10-11; Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 252.

¹⁶³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 170.

does not consider an invocation of imagination to be merely inventive, rather he hopes it can reveal something *actual* about being. As understood here, affirmation could perhaps be considered as an actuality *concealed* within history and time, rather than something strictly located beyond the world.

Nonetheless, original affirmation cannot be conceived without the invocation of imagination. So, while the last chapter concluded in the admission that affirming life at the expense of the world is contradictory, this chapter has arrived at the conclusion that to affirm life without recourse to reflection is untenable. What appears to be revealed as the crossing-point of these two positions, is hence the notion of human fallibility, indicating the inherent imperfections and limitations of consciousness, which prevent us from coinciding in unity or innocent relation, both with ourselves and with others. If it is human fallibility that prevents us from rooting original affirmation fully in the embodied-conative, on the one hand, and in the reflective, on the other, perhaps it is such limitations, coupled with the desire for their transcendence, that also necessitate that these two dimensions are understood in unison. In the next chapter, this perspective will be given consideration.

4.7. Summary

In meditating on the anguish of death, in his two articles on original affirmation, Ricoeur indicates the desire to exist as an affirmation of life that is more primary. He here suggests that our embodied presence in the world, and our relationship to others, are integral to an original affirmation of life.¹⁶⁴ In *Fallible Man*, this view is developed further through a deeper analysis of the will, and its vital impulses. Ricoeur remains anchored in a conception of human nature as inclined to transgress from such an affirmative origin, but argues nonetheless, that the primordial desires of the will are, at their root, innocent.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 285-328.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 191-202.

Since the will is embodied in life, such a perspective has the capacity to ground original affirmation as actuality. However, Ricoeur argues that the will, as it becomes expressed, does not retain this initial form of innocence, rather, it is inclined to become corrupted and turn to excess.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, this innocent root of the will, which could be understood as originally affirmative, is not locatable in the world, and can only be grasped through the indirect means of hope and imagination.¹⁶⁷ It seems that the original affirmation can hence not be conceived without an interaction between the reflective and embodied-conative. The subsequent chapters will therefore demonstrate how these two sides can be reconciled again, towards a more holistic and coherent comprehension of original affirmation, with the hope of revealing this concept in new light.

¹⁶⁶ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 178-179.

¹⁶⁷ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 170.

Chapter 5: (Re)reconciling embodied-conative and reflective affirmation through actuality and potentiality

5.1. Introduction

This chapter will seek to reconcile the two interpretations of original affirmation offered in chapter three and four, towards a more coherent understanding. To do so, we will look to Ricoeur's own attempts, in his later work, to locate a metaphysical blend of actuality and potentiality as a ground of being. This can, in my view, be correlated with the ambition outlined already in *Negation and Primary Affirmation*: to ground being as "act rather than form."¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, it can show how the embodied and reflective dimensions of original affirmation must work together towards an attestation of the value of life.

In traditional metaphysics, to grant priority to actuality over potentiality is to position essence as prior to existence (recall Sartre's famous reversal of this logic through the axiom "existence precedes essence").¹⁶⁹ In section 2.4 of the second chapter, it was however demonstrated that Ricoeur, in his "negation of negation" does not wish to return to a philosophy of essences.¹⁷⁰ To understand the original affirmation as foundational, while nonetheless avoiding a turn to essentialism, a correlation between act and actuality must hence be established. This, I believe, is best achieved by Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* (1990), where he draws from Aristotle, Heidegger, and Spinoza to explicate an ontology of being.¹⁷¹ While this involves drawing on Ricoeur's later work, it is my contention that his earlier conception of original affirmation was already rooted in such an understanding. This will be demonstrated in this chapter, through correlating his later

¹⁶⁸ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 328.

¹⁶⁹ As mentioned in chapter two, this idea was originally expressed by Schelling in an 1841 lecture but was famously formulated as "*l'existence précède l'essence*" by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, 568.

¹⁷⁰ Ricoeur, "Negation and Primary Affirmation," 318.

¹⁷¹ This is primarily achieved in the last chapter of *Oneself as Another*, titled: "What ontology in view?"

ontological ambitions, with the two sides of original affirmation as elucidated in the previous chapters.

Furthermore, in an interview with Kearney, Ricoeur makes an explicit connection between Spinoza's comprehension of Being, and Nabert's original affirmation, which also supports such a connection (this will be discussed with more detail).¹⁷² This chapter will hence seek to demonstrate that it is a blending between the work of Nabert, with that of Spinoza, but also Aristotle and Heidegger, that offers a point of fruitful reconciliation between the actuality and potentiality of original affirmation, as discussed in the previous chapters.

5.2. Actuality as act: Aristotle, Heidegger, and Spinoza

Ricoeur's ontology is largely influenced by Heidegger, and he never severs his allegiance from a phenomenological understanding of being as entangled and enmeshed with history, culture, and social structures, remaining true to an emphasis on our being-in-the-world. However, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur states his dissatisfaction with the way that the Aristotelian notion of actuality (*energeia*) was appropriated into Heidegger's ontology, along with an ambition to take such an ontology in a Spinozist direction.¹⁷³

In his seminal work, *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger moves away from the traditional metaphysical focus on essences, and emphasises the facticity of being, as an already-there-ness in the world. As demonstrated in the introduction, Ricoeur is influenced by this notion of our factual presence in the world but wishes, nonetheless, to recapture a more traditional Aristotelian understanding of *energeia*. He argues that for Aristotle, *energeia* is more active and dynamic, because it contains a deeper capacity or potential as inherent in being.¹⁷⁴ This, he contends, is not accurately captured

¹⁷² Kearney et al., "A Conversation with Paul Ricoeur," 373.

¹⁷³ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 309-315.

¹⁷⁴ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

by Heidegger's notion of facticity, which emphasises the contingency and limitations of human existence.¹⁷⁵

Ricoeur hence wants to support a more dynamic notion of *energeia* that contains both actuality and potentiality. What this means is not replacing actuality with potentiality, but extending the notion of actuality to include, not only what is brought into fulfilment through our active presence in the world, but also that which constitutes an innate *capacity* in our being. It is Spinoza who Ricoeur considers as offering the best attempt at capturing this conception of being, both as activity (phenomenological being-engaged in the world), and as capacity (innate potential). Here it is, more precisely, Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, that Ricoeur has in mind.¹⁷⁶

The *conatus* is understood by Ricoeur as the "power of existing" that is both "the phenomenology of the acting and suffering self and the actual and potential ground against which selfhood stands out."¹⁷⁷ This hence signifies a blend of our embodied engagement in the world and possibilities which have not yet been brought into fulfilment. This is understood by Ricoeur as a: "ground at once actual and in potentiality."¹⁷⁸ In this regard, actuality is not *essence*, as some static or unchanging form, but an active essence (*essence actuosa*) which is better understood as a power of being that both grounds and facilitates human existence. Furthermore, he argues that it is this power, or active essence, that Spinoza perceives as God.¹⁷⁹

It is my contention that this conception of *conatus*, which contains the force of existence as an active essence, and that merges the categories of actuality and potentiality, can encompass a notion of original affirmation that contains both its reflective and embodied-conative. However, this is not a completely constructed claim on my part, but adheres to Ricoeur's own statement in an interview with Kearney, where he himself draws a connection between Spinoza's notion of active essence and the concept of original affirmation:

¹⁷⁵ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 314.

¹⁷⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

¹⁷⁷ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

¹⁷⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

¹⁷⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 316-317.

I am not sure about the absolute irreconcilability between the God of the Bible and the God of Being (understood with Jean Nabert as "primary affirmation" or with Spinoza as "substantia actuosa"). The tendency of modern French thought to eclipse the Middle Ages has prevented us from acknowledging certain very rich attempts to think God and being in terms of each other. I no longer consider such conceptual asceticism tenable.¹⁸⁰

Ricoeur hence makes a direct correlation here between Nabert's affirmation and Spinoza's conception of "substantia actuosa" (also translatable as essence actuosa) through the notion of the "God of being."¹⁸¹ Several scholars have taken interest in the short but potent statement made by Ricoeur in his interview with Kearney. Here, two intriguing points for exploration are offered within a single sentence. First, there is the connection between Nabert and Spinoza in relation to original affirmation, and second there is a suggested reconciliation between the "God of the Bible" and the "God of Being." This thesis will not be so bold as to attempt to tackle this latter point. However, in my view, Ricoeur's *desire* for such a reconciliation can, in and of itself, shed light on the dual nature of original affirmation.

Anderson and Gregor are two thinkers who have given attention to this attempt at bringing together the biblical God with a Spinozist God. Both signify that Ricoeur's desire for their reconciliation is rooted in a love for life, but they take different approaches. Anderson argues that Ricoeur, more significantly, wishes to redirect a love for a transcendent God towards being itself:

[...] to love God is not to trust in the benevolent purposes of a transcendent creator – the purposes for which we await satisfaction. Instead, it is the mind's joyful recognition of itself as corporate, that is, as part of the unified whole of nature which expresses an intellectual love.¹⁸²

Gregor, on the other hand, contends that Ricoeur's aim is to: "open Spinozist substance to a higher - and thus deeper - source of love and personhood than purely immanent substance can sustain."¹⁸³ However, it is my view that Anderson here places too much emphasis on the immanent, and Gregor

¹⁸⁰ Kearney et al., "A Conversation with Paul Ricoeur," 372.

¹⁸¹ Kearney et al., "A Conversation with Paul Ricoeur," 372.

¹⁸² Pamela Sue Anderson, "On Loss of Confidence," 92.

¹⁸³ Brian Gregor, *Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Religion*, 193.

too much on the transcendent. Ricoeur does not desire for one such dimension to be swallowed up by the other, rather, he seeks their mutual engagement. It is my own contention that he is here driven by two overlapping desires. The first is a desire to achieve greater alignment with the power of life as the actual essence of being, which represents its inherent unity. The second is a desire for the ultimate *benevolence* and *purposefulness* of such power of life, which brings an eschatological dimension to Spinoza's notion of God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*).

In this regard, it is not merely a desire to belong to the immanent power of life (understood as the God of Being) that Ricoeur seeks to emphasise, but also the hope that there is a higher aim, direction, or purpose of this power of life, that we can more deeply align with. This means that Anderson is on the one hand correct, when she highlights that the *conatus* contains the will for life as rooted in a joy for existence:

The joy characterising Spinoza's *conatus* enhances our efforts to persevere in being, empowering us as we act and suffer in this life. Each and every individual moves forward in striving for a joyful continuation of the bodily existence which she or he expresses.¹⁸⁴

However, what she neglects to give as much attention to is Ricoeur's emphasis not just on Spinoza but on Nabert; not just on the God of Being, but on the God of the Bible. She hence does not, in my view, offer enough consideration to the value that such a dynamic imbues to hope in a higher purpose (which, as I previously argued, is what invokes the significance of imagination, myth, and symbolism). Here, Anderson is perhaps driven by her own stated aims to emphasise a Spinozist God of nature, as having a deeper ethical impact than a more traditionally conceived Christian God.¹⁸⁵ Yet, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur also makes clear that, with Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, he wishes to indicate both an "infinite power" and an "acting energy" that facilitates a

¹⁸⁴ Anderson, "On Loss of Confidence," 100.

¹⁸⁵ Anderson herself calls for a blending of the reflective and the embodied, emphasizing the need to bring philosophical reflection into deeper a more attentive relationship with lived experience, in "A Thoughtful Love for Life," 129.

ground of being that is at once actuality and potentiality.¹⁸⁶ In relation to his critique of Heidegger, this entails something beyond the contingent and phenomenological dimension of being, and hence something beyond what is immanent.

It is precisely this valuation of both the phenomenological and the metaphysical that I consider as integral for the coalescence of the embodied-conative and reflective dimensions of original affirmation. In this regard, the transcendental leanings of Nabert's reflective philosophy, must be merged with Spinozist immanence, for the original affirmation to be more holistically conceived.

5.3. Merging Nabert and Spinoza

A problem with my argument must however be acknowledged. I am here attempting to blend a desire for a higher purpose, which invokes the value of the imagination, with a Spinozist notion of immanence. Yet, Spinoza's notion of God, as the power of life, is not usually considered as compatible with this notion of intention or purpose. Rather, his monism and pantheism equate God with the sum of the universe, and hence with the laws of nature. This is also why Spinoza values a kind of rational intuition over the imagination, the latter of which he considers as prone to disillusionment. Since his God of Being acts out of necessity rather than from intent, Spinoza's ethics entail an intuitive and rational self-comprehension of our complete reliance on God (or Nature), from which imagination can function to separate us through superstitions and biases.¹⁸⁷ Spinoza here also offers the ethical notion of "adequate" and "inadequate" ideas, in which the former indicates a sufficient understanding of our complete reliance upon the force of life that permeates all nature, and the latter our ignorance of such reliance, which leads to an illusion of separation (which the imagination is thought to contribute towards).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

¹⁸⁷ Eugene Garver, *Spinoza and the Cunning Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2; Garver highlights that, while Spinoza considers the imagination as having a rational function, he nonetheless ascribes to it a "weakness."

¹⁸⁸ Garver, *Spinoza and the Cunning Imagination*, 55, 69; Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 316-317.

Ricoeur offers support for this view when he argues in *Oneself as Another*, that for humans to align with this immanent power of life more deeply, and thereby engage in a more nourishing relationship with being, we must recognise our “dependency” upon this power of life, in which we all adhere:

Thus there is a close connection between the internal dynamism worthy of the name of life and the power of the intelligence, which governs the passage from inadequate to adequate ideas. In this sense, we are powerful when we understand adequately our, as it were, horizontal and external dependence with respect to all things, and our vertical and immanent dependence with respect to the primordial power that Spinoza continues to name “God.”¹⁸⁹

Here, Ricoeur hence suggests that we must learn to form “adequate ideas” that reveal our utter “dependence” on Nature or God (*Deus sive Natura*). However, with consideration to the continued value he places on Heidegger’s ontology (and with regard to the discussion of our inherent belongingness in the world offered in the previous chapter) my understanding is that Ricoeur views this “primordial power” as our phenomenological unity with all of being. In this sense, understanding our reliance upon such power therefore means to perceive this unity both within ourselves and in relation to others.¹⁹⁰

Yet, within the tradition of reflective philosophy, to which Nabert belongs, a complete self-comprehension of our reliance on the power of life, is not possible, owing to the limitations of human consciousness. As Nabert puts it: “the self must forgo the hope of ever being equal to itself and still always strive for this.”¹⁹¹ In a sense, all ideas are therefore insufficient, because of the ultimate lack of transparency in the self’s comprehension of its own true nature. As French philosopher Philippe Capelle-Dumont puts it, for Nabert the self ultimately fails to locate the original affirmation it seeks.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 316.

¹⁹⁰ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 316.

¹⁹¹ Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, 51.

¹⁹² Philippe Capelle-Dumont, “Ethique et religion. Ricoeur heritier de Nabert” [online], *Simposio Paul Ricoeur*, 11-12 August 2011, Universidad Católica Argentina, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad del Norte Santo Tomás de Aquino, Universidad Católica de Santa Fé, Buenos Aires. [Accessed: 15 May 2024], 4-5. <http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/ponencias/ethique-religion-rocoeur-heritier-nabert.pdf>.

So, if Ricoeur draws from Spinozist ethics the idea that our human propensity to be good depends on an adequate understanding of our utter reliance upon nature, he takes from Nabert the suspicion that such adequacy cannot be gained, coupled with the impetuous to strive for it, nonetheless. As we have seen, for Ricoeur it is this suspicion, brought on by the limitations of consciousness, that is tied to our fallibility.¹⁹³

As was pointed out in chapter three, many existentialist philosophers (Beauvoir, Camus, Sartre), consider such lack of certitude as indicating a potential to create our own meaning, which gives rise to freedom coupled with responsibility. As we saw in chapter three, for Ricoeur, it also indicates a freedom to hope, for the certitude of a good foundation.¹⁹⁴ It is this freedom to hope amidst the limitations of self-consciousness that enlist imagination, myth and symbolism as vital tools¹⁹⁵ In unison with the perspective offered here, it might be surmised that we anticipate the fulfilment of a purpose, which is rather paradoxically, a striving to return to that in which we are already fundamentally sustained. In my view, it is in such a paradoxical relation that the embodied-conative can be bridged with the reflective, where the reflective is required to direct us towards a potential already inherent in our being.

5.4. Summary

A conception of unity is already present in a Heideggerian ontology, through its emphasis on relationality and our embeddedness in the world. Yet, the notion of anything that is transcendent of such phenomenological unity is absent, according to Ricoeur.¹⁹⁶ Through combining a Heideggerian ontology with Spinozist metaphysics, Ricoeur conceptualises an origin of being, which contains more than what is readily available in existence, as we know it within history and time.¹⁹⁷ It is my contention that such a conception of a ground of being, as primarily outlined in

¹⁹³ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 303.

¹⁹⁴ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 303-304.

¹⁹⁵ See section 3.4 of this thesis; Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 300.

¹⁹⁶ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 314-315.

¹⁹⁷ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

Oneself as Another, was already present in Ricoeur's understanding of original affirmation, expressed in earlier texts.

To merge a Nabertian perspective with Spinozist metaphysics, and thereby reflective affirmation with embodied-conative affirmation, is hence to consider being as already permeated by an affirmative foundation, that is both grounding of being, and yet contains potentials that are beyond immediate cognitive grasp. While this perspective both accepts and emphasises the limitations of human consciousness, it contends, nonetheless, that we are interwoven in an original affirmation of life through our very act of being in the world. This offers a conception of original affirmation that is both actuality and potentiality, combining a Spinozist active substance (“*substantia actuosa*”) as a power of life embodied in the will, with a Nabertian emphasise on the reflective and interpretative nature of being.¹⁹⁸ The latter of which signifies the necessity of hope, and the value of imagination, myth and symbolism, in our striving to return to an inherent unity.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

¹⁹⁹ Frey, “Imagination and Religion,” 11-12; Almaric, “Finitude, Culpability and Suffering,” 194.

Chapter 6: An Affirmation in Sight?

6.1. Introduction

Having now arrived at an understanding of original affirmation as a concept that blends our phenomenological and ontological embeddedness in the world, with the conception of an inherent potential for both deeper unity and transformation, it might be useful to consider what practical application such an idea could have in the world today. In *True and False Anguish*, Ricoeur highlights the importance of such an attempt, when he states that: “We have a duty to understand our time, if only to speak the language of its anxiety.”²⁰⁰ This chapter will heed this call, by briefly exploring the practical application of original affirmation, as presented in this thesis, in relation to the anguish of our time. It asks: how can this dynamic conception of original affirmation, which mediates between actuality and potentiality; between embodied will and hope, assist us in relation to the anxiety present in the world today?

Certainly, we now grapple with many new and familiar totalizing threats: geopolitical unrest, rapid technological advancements, the mass dissemination of information, the obliterated certainty of a single narrative, and deeper fanaticism brought about through the echo-chambering of our own beliefs and prejudices. The resulting polarity has presented itself in conflicts of ideology, politics, and epistemology. Furthermore, nonsense, guilt, suffering, death, and a loss of certainty, remain paramount in our present-day despair. In the face of such negation, what can be affirmed?

Perhaps, in want of answers, we can return to Ricoeur’s own approach to anguish, which is to “experience in order to understand, to understand in order to go beyond – or failing to go beyond, to confront.”²⁰¹ This going beyond is the original affirmation *par excellence*, but it cannot be separated from the previous two steps. Furthermore, if we fail to conceive of a world beyond our

²⁰⁰ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 288.

²⁰¹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 287.

current predicaments, the question then becomes: can original affirmation provide a means to more deeply understand or confront the anguish of our times? As suggested in the title, some proposals will be offered here, but a ‘question mark’ will remain essential to this inquiry.

To narrow the scope of analysis, this chapter will focus, rather briefly, on the environmental crisis, which evokes an anguish of death brought to the level of collective mortality, but also one of uncertainty, purposelessness and guilt, combining “metaphysical anguish” with the “vital anguish” of death.²⁰² Global extinction represents a totalizing threat, not only for oneself, but for all of civilization and for the welfare of the planet, throwing the future itself into uncertainty. Furthermore, it enlists as complicit our will to live a fruitful, prosperous, and abundant life, which often comes at the environment’s expense. In this regard, the complicity of the will perhaps offers a useful starting point, to both better understand and confront environmental anguish through original affirmation.

6.2. The will for life and the environmental crisis

As we have seen, the will to live, in one sense, affirms life as having value through the very act of striving to exist, yet, as Ricoeur points out, as it becomes expressed in the world, the will often does not affirm but negates the value of life.²⁰³ In *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur unravels the feelings of pleasure, joy, and love for life as tied to the wilful impulses of *having*, *power* and *worth*, showing that, while not inherently bad, these impulses can easily turn to excess, seeking gratification in forms of pleasure that results in greed, hunger for power, and narcissism.²⁰⁴ When considering environmental destruction, it is not difficult to observe how an air of excess is bound to its roots.

That the desire for more of what is good (i.e., increased wealth, prosperity, and comfort) can further the destruction and negation of life, is palpable today in consumerism, hierarchical power structures, as well as the depletion and overexploitation of nature. From this perspective, it is also

²⁰² Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 301-304.

²⁰³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 79, 161.

²⁰⁴ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 172-184.

easy to understand why Ricoeur connects these vital impulses to our natural human inclination to transgress. As we have seen, Ricoeur here finds allegiance with Kant's claim that such impulses "enter history in a frenzy."²⁰⁵ However, he also offers a more optimistic Rousseauian view that these desires are not inherently bad, yet they become corrupted through their expression in our (fallible) human lives.²⁰⁶ To both confront and better understand how our human desire to persist contributes to climate change, I suggest that we must first comprehend how the will becomes a negative force, and thereafter consider how it might be taken in a more affirmative direction.

6.3. Understanding the will in relation the environmental crisis

Given our analysis in the previous chapter, what this might entail, is a realisation that our current way of life is driven by insufficient ideas. This also aligns with the ethical position that Ricoeur draws from Spinoza. Recall that for an idea to be "adequate," according to a Spinozist perspective, it needs to be rooted in an understanding of our complete belongingness and reliance upon God or Nature.²⁰⁷ Through a radical Spinozist immanence, an ethic is made possible through the understanding of our "dependence" on the power of life.²⁰⁸ Ricoeur appropriates this to signify our phenomenological embeddedness in being, as an underlying unity to which we adhere, but from which we nonetheless transgress.²⁰⁹ Here an adequate idea becomes one that can allow us to realign with such unity. However, what Ricoeur also establishes, along with Nabert, is that the limitations of consciousness ensure our continued *disunity*.²¹⁰ A fully adequate idea is therefore beyond grasp.

²⁰⁵ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 169.

²⁰⁶ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 252.

²⁰⁷ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315-316.

²⁰⁸ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 316.

²⁰⁹ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 309-314.

²¹⁰ Capelle-Dumont, "Ethique et religion. Ricoeur heritier de Nabert," 4-5; Nabert, *Elements for an Ethic*, xvii.

Yet, Ricoeur also points out that the embodied will to live is always governed by ideas, where we cannot separate the will from being drawn into a reason for life. In the animal kingdom, Ricoeur considers such reasons to be biologically driven by procreation or the survival of a species.²¹¹ Yet, when it comes to the human desire to persist, things are complicated through intricate socio-political layers that encompass our lives. In my view, to understand the desire to live, as enmeshed in such complexity, requires that we begin by asking: what reason to live is currently guiding our wilful impulses? For if we cannot locate one, the risk is perhaps that we are being guided, not by a conscious reason, but by an external one, and our inclinations are being drawn into an idea or vision that we are unwittingly ascribed to.

6.4. Sufficient and insufficient ideas

To understand how our natural desire to persist and strive towards a good life has relevance in terms of environmental anguish is therefore, in my view, to comprehend that there are many systems set up that capitalise on our inclination towards excess: our seeking of pleasure, comfort, and instant gratification. It's to understand how our embodied will for life becomes embedded in insufficient ideas. What the conception of original affirmation can achieve in this respect, is to offer an understanding of our innate impulses, as not inherently bad, but instead as easily misdirected.²¹² This distinction is not trivial, for what it also offers is a hope that they can be redirected. Since, if the actual and original state of the vital impulses of the will (as grounded in both actuality and potentiality) are not bound to the greed and excess that they are inclined to manifest, there is then a potential that they can be harnessed towards a better and more sustainable future. To understand this is to become aware of how our desire for a good life is used, and perhaps abused, and it is also to take responsibility for how our own will and desire is directed.

²¹¹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 169, 173.

²¹² Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 172-186.

As we have seen, Ricoeur separates *Eros* from *epithumia* to make a distinction between reflective desire, and the pleasure-seeking impulses of the will.²¹³ As established, for Ricoeur, there is a potential that *Eros* can be harnessed to direct our impulses towards a deeper affirmation of life.²¹⁴ Here Ricoeur shows, through Nabert's influence, that reflection has the potential to create new ideas and instigate action by way of imagination and myth.²¹⁵ What original affirmation can then offer in relation to environmental anguish, is primarily a hope: that we can recapture natural human desire for a good life, under a new vision. Yet, what is most important in this regard, is not employing original affirmation as a strategy or fixed idea, rather it is to recognise that our human desire for the good, for comfort, for wealth and for prosperity, is not *bad* in and of itself. Therefore, our impulses and desires are not bound to the excess that they manifest.²¹⁶

So, while a certain optimism here is required, it is an optimism that can perhaps inspire us to re-engage with life and re-route our desires in more fruitful and life-affirming directions. Yet, as was admitted above, what exactly such a sufficient new vision would entail, is complex and difficult to ascertain. Furthermore, one might question if the notion that our wilful impulses are innocent can really be considered as useful. If this is not something that can be verified empirically, can we really be sure that our desires can be severed from the excess that they manifest? Does this all not simply function to override the complexities of being in favour of a disconnected vision?

Certainly, if this vision of hope is disconnected from the embodied, this would be the case. However, what is precisely key to the original affirmation, is the need for the abstract, imaginative, and transcendent, to merge with history, memory, and the embodied experience of life. It is here that original affirmation contains the potential to instigate the imagination to take us beyond what is, without simply overriding the reality of the world, since our capacity for change is considered as inherent to being. What this calls for then is not only hope, but the need for a deep engagement with the complexities of human society and life that are integral for both understanding and

²¹³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 191-202.

²¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 170.

²¹⁵ Porée, "Karl Jaspers: the Clarification of Existence," 19-22; Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 303.

²¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 79, 161, 209-210.

confronting environmental anguish. Such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, for the embodied and not only the reflective dimensions of original affirmation to both be granted weight, such an undertaking is necessary.

Furthermore, while reflection, as directed through a recognition of our dependence upon the world, can offer a hopeful vision, it is true that we can make no pretence to discern fully or adequately, what such a vision concretely should consist of. Because even a vision driven by a desire to affirm being, might not be the right vision to lead to a more positive relationship with life. Therefore, it is important to also retain a critical tension, being sure that we do not meet the *totalising anguish* of the climate crisis, with a new *totalising vision*. Nonetheless, original affirmation, as the hopeful potential that our desire for a good life can align with a more fruitful relationship with being, is in my opinion, a perspective worthy of consideration. For what it points to, is not merely an abstract value, but the worth of life, rooted in both actuality and potentiality as the very ground of our being.

6.5. Summary

This final chapter has attempted to respond to Ricoeur's call for philosophy to engage with the anguish of its time, by briefly considering what practical value original affirmation, as conceived through this analysis, might have in relation to the environmental crisis. The attempt here has not been to offer any concrete strategies, but to more broadly consider if original affirmation is a concept that can have meaning in relation to the environmental anguish that we face in the world today. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give this topic proper consideration, but what I have hoped to achieve, is to demonstrate that the value placed on both our embodied existence, and the powers of hope, imagination, and myth, gives weight both to our lived experiences in the world, and to our actual potential for change and transformation. Through recapturing the will under reflection and imagination, we can therefore perhaps reorient our embodied actions towards new horizons of hope.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis has divided original affirmation into two broad categories, by applying a theoretical lens of actuality and potentiality, which were subsequently reconciled into a more coherent and holistic concept. Our discussion commenced with a contextualization of Ricoeur's original affirmation in chapter two, where it was presented as his answer to the existential anguish prevalent at the time. Here, Ricoeur highlights the possibility of an original affirmation of life in relation to anguish, and hence in consideration of the inherent limitations of human nature and consciousness.²¹⁷

An interpretation of original affirmation as potential was thereafter elucidated in chapter three, where it was presented as reflective affirmation, influenced by the work of Nabert, among others. As conceived here, original affirmation is seen to indicate that life can be affirmed through acts of hope, which evoke the value of imagination and myth.²¹⁸ This was considered in relation to Ricoeur's conception of "metaphysical anguish," understood as the mourning of a loss of innocence and the lack of a good foundation.²¹⁹ In the face of such uncertainty, affirmation was regarded as a hope amidst the prevalence of suffering and evil, which reflects an origin of goodness as a protological and eschatological potential.²²⁰ This approach hence locates original affirmation as fundamentally beyond reach, and therefore accessible only through reflective means. However, this was argued to affirm life at the expense of the world, which is inconsistent with Ricoeur's attempts to grant primacy to being.

The second interpretation, offered in chapter four, positioned original affirmation as embedded in being itself: as engaged within our will for life. Here it was argued that Ricoeur indicates an affirmation of life through his focus on our human desire and striving to exist, which he positions

²¹⁷ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 303.

²¹⁸ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 300-301.

²¹⁹ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 302.

²²⁰ Ricoeur, "True and False Anguish," 301-304.

as more primary than the “vital anguish of death.”²²¹ This was delineated as an embodied-conative affirmation, grounded in the primal desires of *having*, *power* and *worth*. What these desires indicate, in their initial form, is a craving for a good life, which is itself innocent.²²² Yet, these impulses easily turn to excess, and hence instigate our departure from innocence.²²³ This means that original affirmation cannot be located or verified empirically, but must be approached through reflective means, nonetheless.²²⁴

In making such a division, I aimed to highlight and magnify two sides that are already inherent to original affirmation, as conceived by Ricoeur. Chapter five reconciled the results of each analysis, providing a deeper constructive investigation of how these two sides can fruitfully overlap and interact. Here Ricoeur’s later ontology was engaged as a point for their unification, in which he conceptualises a ground of being “at once actual and in potentiality.”²²⁵ What becomes integral to the original affirmation, revisited in such light, is that through the reflective means of hope, imagination and myth we can draw out new potentialities of being *through* engaging more deeply with our embodied experiences and our desires for a good life. Hope must hence collaborate with the concrete, embodied, material reality of lived experience, to be able to affirm and not simply transcend the world with detached optimism. On the other hand, if affirmation is understood as an original unity or belonging to the world, the recognition of the limitations of consciousness prevents such unity from being fully accessed.²²⁶ It is this gap, or sense of loss, that enlists hope, myth and imagination as valuable tools. But it is this same gap, or fissure, which insists that such abstraction, or transcendence, does not stray too far from the given and the concrete.²²⁷ Original affirmation demands, precisely, their juncture.

²²¹ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 290, 292, 301.

²²² Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 191-202.

²²³ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 174–184.

²²⁴ Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, 170.

²²⁵ Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 315.

²²⁶ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 252, 300.

²²⁷ Almaric, “Finitude, Culpability and Suffering,” 189–194; Frey, “Imagination and Religion,” 11–12; van Leeuwen, *The Surplus of Meaning*, 69.

In my view, to properly engage with the embodied experience of life, original affirmation must be conceived *through* and not merely *beyond* the actuality of the world. Yet it must retain its idealistic value, as something that can capture and redirect our embodied will for life towards new ways of being in, and conceiving of, life. The role of the imagination hence becomes crucial, for a more ethical relationship to the world to be facilitated. It is my opinion that such an interpretation of original affirmation, which both retains a sense of vital interaction and tension between the embodied and reflective, designates its value in the world today.

Such applicable value was explored briefly in chapter six in relation to environmental anguish, where it was argued that original affirmation indicates a hope that the impulses of the will, and our natural human desire for a good life, can be re-directed towards more fruitful aims. It is here that imagination, myth and symbolism can coalesce with the embodied-conative towards new hopeful visions for the world. However, to avoid these visions becoming totalising, a vital tension must be retained between our ideas of what might constitute a better world, and the complexities of the actual world, which we together inhabit.

While this chapter posed more questions than it provided answers, it allowed for an opening towards a wider field of research to be revealed. For instance, the concept of original affirmation could be further explored in relation to modern forms of existential anguish: both more deeply in relation to the environment, but also with regard to artificial intelligence, technological advancements, and wider socio-political threats. What might be intriguing to investigate in such a context, is how the interaction of actuality and potentiality, inherent to this conception of original affirmation, could allow for a point where the value of symbolism, myth and imagery, both religious and cultural, can conjoin with embodied experiences of life. This would facilitate a more comprehensive exploration of how our natural human desire for a good life can be re-directed towards new creative visions for a better future; an idea that has been presented within this thesis, but not extensively investigated in relation to present-day anguish.

Furthermore, this fusion between the mythic and symbolic with the embodied-conative also ties into the fields of research that were briefly touched upon in section 1.5, including what Kearney

and Treanor refer to as the “carnal turn” of hermeneutics, as well as to a shift in phenomenological inquiry towards an exploration of the transcendent, situated in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, among others.²²⁸ Here, original affirmation, understood as a concept that blends the phenomenological with the metaphysical and the ideal, while retaining the necessary tension between these spheres, could function to both support and challenge attempts to unify the embodied and reflective dimensions of human meaning and life.

Ricoeur himself demonstrates how myth and symbolism can function as useful methods, in employing biblical imagery, derived from the symbolism of *Genesis* to approach anguish. He here indicates an origin and possible destination of being as an affirmative ground, that is both intangible (hence requiring imagination to be comprehended), and foundational to our embodied presence in the world. Through demonstrating the applicable value of such conception, in relation to the anguish of his time, Ricoeur indicates the value of the use of myth and symbolism, and its potential to be employed in creative new ways to confront the anguish we face in the world today.²²⁹

What the analysis offered in this thesis has hence shown, is that the original affirmation contains an inherent point of overlap and tension between the embodied and transcendent; between our carnal presence in the world and the striving for a higher purpose, which can direct the will through hope. It is here that transcendental, universal, and mythic ideas can coalesce with our presence in the world, allowing original affirmation to emerge through a tension-and-meeting of *what is* and *what could be*; through hope and the embodied will for life.

²²⁸ See Kearney and Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 2; Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, xxi-xxii.

²²⁹ Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” 298–303.

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