

PHAVISMINDA Journal

Volume 10 (May 2011): 79-88.

***SOLICITUDE IN FRIENDSHIP, INITIATIVE, AND
RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE 'FRAGILE' OTHER***

Ruby S. Suazo, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy
University of San Carlos, Cebu City

Abstract: In a society ravaged by poverty and underdevelopment, a hope for the privileged group to initiate genuine programs to alleviate the condition is prayed. The materialization of the said expectation, however, presupposes solicitude between the two groups. Solicitude is very basic as it expands the ethical life. From the value of self-confinement, the subject slowly recognizes the face of the other. Solicitude, the concrete care for the other as other and benevolent spontaneity, indicates the two parties' awareness of the mutual suffering, of the fragility, especially of the mortality that they all share in common. This being the case, solicitude has a more fundamental character than obedience to duty, which character Ricoeur defines as benevolent spontaneity based on self-esteem. This disposition allows the benevolent and compassionate self to rectify the initial asymmetry involved in either receiving an injunction from a "master of justice" (Lévinas) or offering sympathy toward one who is suffering. Through this awareness, persons take the initiative to reach out to the other. Initiative, an intervention of the agent of action in the course of the world, an intervention which effectively causes changes in the world (Ricoeur, 1992) of the self and of the other has to be a product of mutual recognition. Initiative as a product of mutual recognition is also a product of dialogical exchange. The aim is a formulation of an otherness that is homogeneous.

I. Introduction

Poverty is the most prevalent problem in developing countries. The study conducted by UNESCAP, UNDP and ADB (2007) in line with Millennium Development Goals points to the political barrier, the poverty of power, as the underlying cause of the problem. The study explains that the barrier effects the prevention of the poor from influencing decision-making, claiming access to basic services and holding the government and the service provider accountable for the service provided. Effectively, the poor and the marginalized are thereby excluded from sharing in the benefits of development. Essentially, empowering the poor and the marginalized, or in the words of Ricoeur, the 'fragile', in order to influence decision-making and to present their interests is imperative. The study further holds the government responsible for enabling the active participation of all people,

in particular the poor and needy, in the political process and setting policy objectives.

The rights-based approach to this issue distinguishes claimholders and duty-bearers. The claim-duty relationships link individuals and institutions in these roles and determine the gap in capacity of claimholders to claim their rights and of duty-bearers to fulfill their obligations. This approach provides a framework of actions that makes institutional changes supporting the realization of human rights for all people viable (UNESCAP, UNDP, & ADB 2007).

The rights-based approach expects claimholders to demand their rights from duty-bearers, while the duty-bearers are necessitated to fulfill their obligations towards the rights-holders. Here, empowerment of the rights-holders is vital. To empower the poor and marginalized is deemed as the effective solution to the problem of poverty. However, empowerment does not occur spontaneously, and it cannot come from those who wished to be empowered. Thus, it must have external intervention from those who are in the position to do so. Initiating mechanisms that will endow political power to the poor and the marginalized should come from those who wield power in the first place.

However, most governments as duty-bearers renege on that responsibility because it is not in their interest. Thus, the number one stumbling block towards the effort of empowering the poor are 'those with power themselves who tend to be reluctant to surrender space and power to the less advantaged' (UNESCAP, UNDP, & ADB 2007). Overwhelmingly, however, the political elite as duty-bearers are tasked to 'aim at the "good life" with and for others, in just institutions' (Ricoeur, 1992). As the people to whom the well-being of the people is entrusted, they are hoped to take care of the people, most especially, the underprivileged ones. Presumably, since they have the upper hand in life, they are expected to initiate the establishing of institutions where justice and equality are the ethical content of their initiated policies, which always consider the interest of the poor and the marginalized and feel responsible for their plight.

II. The nature of responsibility

The investigation on the relationship between the poor as rights-holder and the powerful as duty-bearer is anchored initially on the semantic analysis of the concept of responsibility. The concept of responsibility evolves from purely a juridical concept to a moral concept. It responds to the question: 'What is it to be responsible for one's action when that action

has caused harm?’ The answer to this question takes responsibility in the context of being liable to be punished or be obliged to pay compensation or make reparation for the harm done (Van Hooft, 2004). This notion of responsibility ‘consists in the ability to designate oneself as the author of one’s own acts’ (Ricoeur, 1996). However, this notion of responsibility signifies ‘an incompleteness occurring in the aftermath of action’ (Ricoeur, 1996). The incompleteness is due to the fact that this notion of responsibility refers to the past and seeks to connect an agent with an action that has already occurred so as to make that agent answerable for it. There is no continuity as it fails to consider the implication of the same action for the future. Ricoeur (1996) explains that ‘this incompleteness remains even when we are willing to repair the damages caused by our actions (definition of responsibility according to civil law), or when we assume the penal consequences of punishable actions (definition of responsibility according to the penal code)’. This indicates the retrospective character of one’s responsibility.

This incompleteness effects the evolution of responsibility to its second notion as it seems to be farfetched in considering the appeal coming from the ‘fragile’ other. The second notion of responsibility, in other words, immerses in relation to fragility. This kind of responsibility is future-oriented as the actor considers the existence of the ‘fragile’ other, the poor and the marginalized, and is a moral concept. The moral concept of responsibility points to things or people who are ‘fragile’ for whom we should accept responsibility. Thus, he asks himself: what shall I do with this ‘fragile’ being, what shall I do for her or him? This condition brings the actor “towards the future of a being in need of help to survive and to grow” (Ricoeur, 1996). This recognition of the existence of the ‘fragile’ other enables the actor to look after the former’s future. With this recognition, the actor’s “ability to designate oneself as author of one’s act is affirmed, or better, attested, in the relation of self to self” (Ricoeur, 1996).

In relation to the second notion of responsibility, there are two summonses to responsibility. The first summons to responsibility is an initiative that comes from the ‘fragile’ other and characterized by sympathy for the suffering other while the second summons to responsibility is an initiative that comes from the loving self and characterized by friendship appearing as a midpoint where the self and the other share the same wish to live together (Ricoeur, 1992).

Ostensibly, the powerful has not been able to recognize well the two summonses to responsibility inasmuch as there are still people languishing in poverty. The question on the inability of the powerful to recognize the

existence of the 'fragile' other boggles the mind. Ricoeur however takes his analysis of this phenomenon on the focal point of political society which is centered on 'the phenomenon of power' (Ricoeur, 1996). This characteristic of political society becomes the source of conflict which contributes to the neglect of the fragile members of the society.

Historically, the phenomenon of power is traced to its roots – the violence of masters and the institutionalization of the initial violence. Ricoeur (1996) writes:

Power as such proceeds from the encounter of two major forces in the course of history. On one hand, there is the violence of masters, who gathered lands, seized inheritances, and oppressed ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities. On the other hand, there is the institutionalization of the initial violence under the pressure of legal rationality.

This nature of the acquisition of power makes the powerful uneasy all the time lest the wielded power will also be taken away from him violently. Thus the powerful is always busy consolidating his power to assure its preservation and securing himself from the threats of the purported enemies as his hold to power is in itself fragile. This makes him perpetually suspicious of other people. This being the case, the poor and marginalized becomes of no consequence to him.

Second, the intersection of power at the vertical relation of domination/subordination and at the horizontal relation as constituted by the will to live together of a historical community (Ricoeur, 1996) is another source of conflict in the political society. Supposedly, the vertical relation of domination/subordination happens because of the horizontal need of people to live together. Because of the need of the people to live together and be assured of their sustenance, a pact has been forged. Consequently, the vertical relation of domination/subordinated has been effected. Thus, the will to live together is the source of the power exercised vertically.

The conflict arises, however, as the authority emanating from the vertical axis tends "to hide or even inhibit, the will to live together" (Ricoeur, 1996). This conflict is very vivid in a representative democracy where a representative is elected to serve as the alter ego of the electorate. Once elected, however, the representative turns out to belong to another world—"a political world which obeys its own laws of gravity" (Ricoeur, 1996). As this happens, the bond of trust presupposed by the virtual pact sealed by the two parties in the horizontal level disintegrates. In both cases, i.e., at the vertical and horizontal levels, the root of the disintegration of the fiduciary bond is the absence of solicitude.

III. Solitude strengthens the fiduciary bond

The absence of solicitude between the powerful and the poor and the marginalized causes the dissolution of the fiduciary bond. Thus, a need to reinstate the initial solicitude between parties is necessary. Solitude which is the 'with and for others' aspect of ethical life prays that the powerful initiate the establishment of institutions where justice and equality are the ethical content. Nevertheless, this situation does not imply that responsibility solely lies on the shoulders of the former. Ricoeur (1996) even emphasized that each one "must feel particularly responsible for the constitutive horizontal bond of the will to live together" (Ricoeur, 1996). Cooperation and collaboration between classes is eminent for the conservation of the integrity of varied institutions.

Solitude as the 'with and for others' aspect of ethical life embodies the Kantian second categorical imperative, the "unconditional respect for the other as an end in herself" (Marsh, 2002). This case calls for the powerful's character modification, i.e., a shift from the egological focus on one's good life to the moral desire "to live well with and for others in just institutions" (Reagan, 2002). With solitude, the meaning of the good life, the object of the ethical aim, progressively expands from the self of the powerful to immediate others, most notably the poor and the marginalized, to just institutions. In other words, solitude expands the ethical life. From the value of self-confinement, the powerful slowly recognizes the face of the other, notably, the 'fragile' other. Principally, solitude is based on the exchange between *giving* and *receiving* (Ricoeur 1992). Ricoeur argues that the initiative of exchange must start from the good and happy self and not from the 'fragile' other. This is in contrast to the noted position of Levinas that the self is summoned to responsibility by the other. In other words, for Levinas, the 'other' initiates the intersubjective relation. Ricoeur (1992) argues however on its impossibility because this "initiative establishes no relation at all, to the extent that the other represents absolute exteriority with respect to an ego defined by the condition of separation." Bourgeois (2002) comments that this reading of Ricoeur on Levinas "interprets the role of the self before the encounter with the other face to face as 'a stubbornly closed, locked up, separate ego'" (Cf. Ricoeur, 1992). Pointing out the critique of Cohen on Ricoeur, Bourgeois says that what is wrong with Ricoeur is that he "overlooked something in ...the epiphany of the face: that is the role of other people in interiority, with its economy, enjoyment, and hospitality" (Bourgeois, 2002).

Nevertheless, Ricoeur really read Levinas properly. That he points to the primacy of ethics over that of morality signifies that he agrees with Levinas that, pre-reflectively, man is an ethical being. This is related to the position of Husserl saying that primarily, the subject is related to the object. It is only at the level of reflection that the mind separates them into separate entities (Kearney, 1994). Truly, as Kemp (1996) shows, the other is included in the enjoyment of life – the other is seen to be “present in intimacy and sweetness, in familiarity and femininity” (Bourgeois, 2002; Cf. Kemp, 1996). The epiphany of the face may lead the self to open his home to the other. But, quoting Kemp, Bourgeois (2002) noted that the hand may be “a manipulator, and one may close one’s house instead of opening it to the poor and the stranger.” In these cases, the same closes in on itself, “so that interiority and the economy of the home cannot constitute an ethics. Indeed, it is only the face entering from the exteriority which assigns us to responsibility” (Bourgeois, 2002). So, at the level of reflection, considering the economy of the home and the possibility of fraud in the face of the ‘other’, the self may not be able to sympathize spontaneously with the ‘fragile’ other, i.e., the poor and the marginalized.

The concept of solicitude as benevolent spontaneity makes “receiving... on an equal footing with the summons to responsibility” (Ricoeur, 1992). This benevolent spontaneity recognizes the superiority of the authority of responsibility enjoining the self to act in accordance with justice. The self’s recognition of the situation of the other as a suffering other moves the self to care for the other. Here suffering must not be understood “solely by physical pain, nor even by mental pain, but by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting, of being-able-to-act, experienced as a violation of self-integrity” (Ricoeur, 1992).

On this basis, initiative belongs exclusively to the self “who *gives* his sympathy, his compassion” (Ricoeur, 1992). As Ricoeur (1992) explains, “confronting this charity, this benevolence, the other appears to be reduced to the sole condition of *receiving*.” And the self recognizes the suffering other as he suffers-with the other. Thus, “in true sympathy, the self, whose power of acting is at the start greater than that of its other, finds itself affected by all that the suffering other offers to it in return” (Ricoeur, 1992).

IV. Solicitude in friendship

What makes this attitude possible? Ricoeur traces the source of solicitude to the Aristotelian notion of friendship. Solicitude is anchored on the goal of ethics which is the ‘good life’. This being the case, it must be lived with and for others (Reagan, 2002). Aristotle himself takes on

friendship as playing “a mediating role between the goal of the good life found in self-esteem, a solitary virtue, and justice, a political virtue. Friendship introduces the notion of ‘mutuality’” (Reagan, 2002).

Although friendship introduces the notion of “mutuality”, it faces, however, a problematic of reciprocity which is brought forth by the question of otherness as such (Ricoeur, 1992). Ricoeur (1992) sees in Aristotle that “according to the idea of mutuality, each loves the other *as being the man he is.*” The notion of mutuality cannot be related to the idea of friendship based on utility or on friendship for pleasure. Thus, Ricoeur (1992) sees reciprocity as “imposing itself already on the ethical plane, which reciprocity, on the plane of morality, at the time of violence, will be required by the Golden Rule and the categorical imperative of respect.”

Indeed, ‘through mutuality, friendship borders on justice’ (Ricoeur, 1992). In fact, “friendship forms the bed of justice, as virtue ‘for others’” (Ricoeur, 1992). Nevertheless, friendship only serves as a transition for it is not yet justice since the latter governs institutions while the former governs interpersonal relationships. What is true to friendship is approximated in institutions. In friendship, friends render to each other a portion equal to what he or she receives. In other words, equality is presupposed in friendship. In society, on the other hand, equality is an aim to be attained. Friendship entails the consciousness of the other as well for it is only realized in living together (Ricoeur, 1992). Therefore, in friendship, in times of suffering, a friend recognizes the lack that dwells at the heart of the friend. Hence, only in friendship is the ethics of reciprocity, of sharing, of living together realized. In recognition of the suffering of the other, the self initiates the connection with the other. It intervenes in the world of the friend, an intervention which effectively causes changes in his or her world (Ricoeur, 1992). The friend sees himself in the other that he is moved to become responsible for him or her. He initiates such connection inasmuch as “friendship... works toward establishing the conditions for the realization of life, considered in its *intrinsic goodness and its basic pleasure*” (Ricoeur, 1992).

V. Initiative based on self-esteem and taking responsibility for the “fragile” other

To speak of initiative is to speak of responsibility (Ricoeur, 2007). Ricoeur (2007) emphasizes initiative as “a category of *action*, of doing, and not of *seeing*.” As a category, the actor commits through a tacit pledge of sincerity by reason of which he actually means what he says (Ricoeur, 2007). This is so because “every initiative is an intention to do something and, as

such, a commitment to do that thing” (Ricoeur, 2007). An analysis of initiative shows a four-phased path: “first, I *can* (potentiality, power, ability); second, I *act* (my being is my doing); third I *intervene* (I inscribe my act within the course of the world: the present and the instant coincide); fourth, I keep my promises (I continue to act, I persevere, I *endure*). This assertion involves commitment whereby the self believes that what it says is true and offers his belief to others so that they too will share” (Ricoeur, 2007).

Primarily, initiative is related to self-esteem. The first phase on the analysis of initiative taken as ‘I *can*’ indicates the relation of initiative to self-esteem. Self-esteem, the very foundation of solicitude, is not founded on accomplishments but on capacity. Thus, “the ability to judge (to esteem) is based on the ability to act” (Reagan, 2002). This becomes the reason why “friendship makes a contribution without taking anything away. What it adds is the idea of reciprocity in the exchange between human beings who each esteem themselves” (Ricoeur, 1992). This self-esteem can eventually be complemented by the self-respect that comes from living according to the best intentions of the agent (Pellauer, 2002). Consequently, the corollary of reciprocity, which is equality, places “friendship on the path of justice, where the life together shared by a few people gives way to the distribution of shares in a plurality on the scale of a historical, political community” (Ricoeur, 1992).

Nevertheless, as reciprocity appears evident, initiative becomes a product of mutual recognition for the reason that equality also comes into the scene. A course initiated among equals, “although it is not yet clear what is to count as equality or who is to count as an equal” (Pellauer, 2002), brings about a dialogical exchange. The self must not force his way into the other. Instead, “a two-pronged conception of otherness remains to be constructed here, one that does justice in turn to the primacy of self-esteem and also to the primacy of the convocation to justice coming from the other” (Ricoeur, 2007). In intervening with the life-world of the ‘other’, the agent, which makes “a partial and contributing cause in forming dispositions and character,” (Ricoeur, 1992) needs to exercise prudence.

The self must not be autocratic in the sense of demanding from the friend that the latter accepts his generosity. The self’s recognition of the fragility of the other all the more marks equality. “Equality is reestablished only through the recognition by the self of the superiority of the other’s authority; in the case of sympathy that comes from the self and extends to the other, equality is reestablished only through the shared admission of fragility and, finally, of mortality” (Ricoeur, 1992).

IV. Conclusion

The failure of the powerful to share space and power to the fragile in order to empower them to solve the problem of poverty is a result of the very nature of politics centered on the phenomenon of power as an offshoot of violence and the very nature of politics which is a deviation from the expectation of the people who are aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions. The powerful's recognition of the very condition of the poor and the marginalized or the 'fragile' other will be made possible only if the initial bond enjoyed at the horizontal level, as when they desire to live together in a community in solicitude, be established again.

References

- Bourgeois, P. L. 2002. Ricoeur and Levinas: Solicitude in reciprocity and solitude in existence. In R.A. Cohen and J. L. Marsh (eds.), *Ricoeur as another: The ethics of subjectivity*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Cohen, R. A. and J. L. Marsh, eds. 2002. *Ricoeur as another: The ethics of subjectivity*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Joy, M. 2008. Paul Ricoeur and a hermeneutics of human capability and fragility. Available at <http://britishphenomenology.com/2008Paper4.aspx>. 10 September 2009.
- Kearney, Richard. 1994. *Modern movements in European Philosophy: Phenomenology, critical theory, structuralism*. Second Edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kemp, P. 1996. Ricoeur between Heidegger and Lévinas. In Ricoeur, P. *The hermeneutics of action*. R. Kearney (Ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Marsh, J. L. 2002. 'The right and the good: A solution to the communicative ethics controversy.' In R.A. Cohen and J.L. Marsh (eds.), *Ricoeur as another: The ethics of subjectivity*. New York: State University of New York Press.

-
- Pellauer, D. 2002. At the limit of practical wisdom: Moral blindness. In R.A. Cohen and J.L. Marsh (eds.), *Ricoeur as another: The ethics of subjectivity*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Reagan, C. 2002. Personal Identity. In R.A. Cohen and J.L. Marsh (eds.), *Ricoeur as another: The ethics of subjectivity*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1992. *Oneself as another*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____. 1996. *The hermeneutics of action*. R. Kearney (Ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- _____. 2007. *From text to action: essays in hermeneutics, II*. Reprint edition. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- UNESCAP, UNDP, & ADB. 2007. *Access to basic services for the poor: The importance of good governance*. Asia-Pacific Millennium Development Goals Series.
- Van Hooft, S. 2004. 'Ricoeur on Responsibility.' *Borderlands e-journal* 3 (1). Available at <http://www.borderlands.net.au/issues/vol3no1.html>. 10 September 2009.