



Paul Ricoeur: Philosophy, theology and happiness

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Abstract

Philosophy and theology have diverse and often opposite understandings of happiness. Both offer unique and valuable insights into happiness, but the concept of happiness of both can be criticised on crucial points. Ricoeur's work on happiness at first was as a philosopher, but he changed his discourse to a more religious register, one that appreciates the optative mood of language. It is within this optative mood that Ricoeur manages to bring philosophy's and theology's concepts of happiness into a fertile dialectic. The optative and religious images and metaphors provide for him a more holistic and unified way of thinking about happiness in relation to unhappiness and luck. An attempt to translate this optative understanding back to the indicative or imperative by theology and philosophy is futile, because happiness will then be again fragmented and reduced to descriptions and prescriptions.

Key words

Paul Ricoeur, happiness, optative language, philosophy, theology

1. Introduction

Paul Ricoeur repeatedly asked his students: *D'ou parlez-vous?* (From where do you speak?). An awareness and exploration of our vantage points, theoretically, contextually and in terms of disciplines, are not detrimental to what we want to say, but can rather open up new insights and possibilities of thinking and speaking. Ricoeur explored this notion in his own thinking by speaking sometimes as philosopher and sometimes as theologian. Each way of speaking has its motivation and benefits, but also its limitations, so that Ricoeur could say "môre" by speaking from different "places". This is characteristic of the way Ricoeur speaks about happiness as well.

This article will explore how Ricoeur speaks about happiness as philosopher, and how he then speaks (when he elaborates on his previous writings) about happiness from a theological or religious perspective. By changing his discourse or register, he provides us with some significant insights about happiness itself. I will first explicate the different understandings of philosophy and theology of happiness, and then move to a discussion of Ricoeur's understanding thereof.

2. Philosophy and theology on happiness

Philosophy and theology have their own distinct and often contrasting ways of speaking about happiness. An analysis of the similarities and differences about happiness between these two disciplines can be a book on its own. I will restrict the discussion here to only some main tendencies in these two disciplines, in order to provide some background for the discussion on Ricoeur.

In philosophy happiness signifies a huge domain, which includes notions of happiness such as a mental state like joy or pleasure (Haybron 2011, Feldman 2010, Haidt 2006), human well-being or flourishing (Diener 1984, Griffen 1986, Haybron 2008), an ethical way of living (Aristotle, Nussbaum 2001), fortune/luck (Gilbert 2006,), absence of pain (McMahon 2006), an impossibility (Schopenhauer 1966) or a by-product. Most of these notions of happiness involve something one should strive for, pursue and aim for in daily life. True happiness is to be found in “our daily intentional activities” (Haidt 2006:22), in the mundane of every day, and not in the supernatural. The philosophical discourse on happiness is mainly one of immanence, finiteness and analysis, and it quickly reduces happiness to something else (e.g. joy). The discourse is dominated by questions about what happiness is (the “indicative” as Ricoeur refers to it) and how to obtain it (the “imperative” in Ricoeur's reference).

In theology happiness may include some of the philosophical notions of happiness, but the main difference between the two approaches is that in theology, happiness is related to God (“knowing, loving and enjoying God” – Charry 2006:150). Augustine says for example: “True happiness is to rejoice in ... you, my God ... This is the happiness that all desire” (1961:229). The discourse on happiness in theology includes notions such

as love, hope, grace, blessedness (*makarios*), healing, beauty and peace (*shalom*), and it allows much more room for receiving happiness than only working for it. It is a happiness that includes notions of transcendence, the enigmatic and the supernatural, while not excluding the immanent and mundane. Happiness is for example closely related to the doctrine of salvation (Marais 2015b:6), but also ecological, earthly flourishing (Marais 2015a:141). A task ahead for Christian Theology, according to Venter, is therefore “to retrieve an acute sense of the Triune God, and to explore the potential of this symbol to contribute to human flourishing in a specific and concrete context” (2016:5).

The different approaches to happiness by philosophy and theology evoked different critique from each other. Philosophy’s notion of happiness is accused of being reductionist, hedonistic, individualistic, and dominated by empirical research on mental states (e.g. Positive Psychology). It lacks in clear definitions of fulfilment, meaning of life, hope, a sense of belonging (to something bigger) and a unity in the concept. Theology’s notion of happiness is accused of being exclusive (only valid for believers), contradictory (atheists are also happy), and focusing too much on the after-life (maximal happiness).¹ The dilemma is that “the highest possible form of happiness is thus only available for a religious person” (Verhoef 2014b:543) and philosophy’s immanent notion of happiness is seen as inferior. There is, however, different ways in which philosophy confirms “the interdependence of happiness and transcendence” (Verhoef 2014b:544). Ricoeur, for example, argues in his philosophical anthropology (*Fallible Man*) that happiness is transcendental in nature. It is something infinite. Ricoeur argues that “immanent concepts of happiness are inclined to reduce both happiness and human beings to mere causal beings – without complexity and mystery” (Verhoef 2014a:772). This insistence on transcendence (of being part of the nature of happiness) makes Ricoeur an important interlocutor between philosophy and theology.

1 Maximal happiness is “incompatible with temporal existence” and it “has to be ‘transcendent’” (Theron 1985:363). The argument is that “in the literal sense there can be no happiness in the temporal order” (Theron 1985:366) and that happiness cannot be only a matter of full actualisation of the self. Happiness is only ‘perfect’ when “the world has come to an end, i.e. [when] all the misfortunes of others, and a general resurrection ... [have] taken place” (1985:367), to form a ‘perfect whole’. Only in the after-life can one experience complete happiness.

What makes Ricoeur even more significant in this debate is that he separates his work as philosopher from his work as theologian.² To be a philosopher and a believer is, according to him, “two different ways of commitment, representing completely different levels of my life and thought” (Van Tongeren 2014:169). In another fragment Ricoeur writes: “I am not a Christian philosopher [...]. I am on the one hand just a philosopher [...] and on the other hand a Christian who expresses himself philosophically” (Ricoeur 2007:69). He does acknowledge that there remains something schizoid in the distinction but states that this schizoid situation “has its dynamic, its sufferings as well as its small moments of happiness” (Ricoeur 2007:69). We see this schizoid also in his discussion of happiness, when he changes his whole approach, language/discourse, and register from philosophical to religious. How and why Ricoeur does this, will be explored in the rest of the article. In this discussion I will indicate the unique but also limited insights which theology and philosophy offer in their respective understandings of happiness, and how we can gain new insights about happiness when we move to the ‘in-between space’ of these two disciplines.

3. Ricoeur on happiness

Ricoeur has not written a book specifically focused on happiness; but happiness and our longing for it, are a fundamental part of his philosophy. This focus is especially visible in his philosophical anthropology – *Fallible Man* (1960) (and *The Symbolism of Evil*, 1960), *Oneself as Another* (1990), and *Course of Recognition* (2004). These are all philosophical works.

Where to find happiness – philosophically speaking

Only after *Oneself as Another* in 1994 did Ricoeur write a philosophical essay devoted completely to the topic of happiness, namely “Le Bonheur Hors Lieu” (Happiness is out of place). This essay was published in the book

2 Ricoeur describes his separation of philosophy from religious works as follows: “I have always walked on two legs. It is not only for methodological reasons that I do not mix the genres, it is because I insist on affirming a twofold reference, which is absolutely primary for me” (1998:139). He adds that the relation is one of critique and conviction, but “... philosophy is not simply critical, it too belonging to the order of conviction. And religious conviction itself possesses an internal, critical dimension” (Ricoeur 1998:139).

Où est le bonheur? (Where is happiness?) As a philosopher, Ricoeur answers this question: happiness is “out of bounds”, or “off-site”, but not “sans lieu” (without place). Ricoeur structures this essay in three parts, namely 1) Happiness and the characteristic, 2) Happiness and the near: friendship, and 3) Happiness and the distant: justice. This structure roughly follows the discussion of happiness that has been found in Ricoeur’s work up to now, namely that happiness is part of the individual human being’s desire for a complete and fulfilled life (*Fallible Man*), and that happiness always involves other: friends or people close by, and people further away (“to live well with and for others in just institutions”, as in *Oneself as Another*). These three places are, however, “out of bounds” for happiness, according to Ricoeur. The question is “why?” And where is happiness then to be found, according to him? Ricoeur indicates three threads or themes of happiness in his “Le Bonheur Hors Lieu”.

The first is that happiness is not within our reach, but it is within our aim. The question with this thread is whether happiness is a gift to receive, or a chance that behoves one. In other words, is happiness something that we should be striving towards in the ethical sense, a responsibility and duty to obtain; or is it just *luck*, something given or not given by a demonic (*démonique*) force? Furthermore: how can we distinguish in the moment of happiness (the transcending anticipations of happiness) between the good (which is obtainable/ethical) and the demonic (which is just given to us/diabolical – *démoniaque*)? Here, Ricoeur opposes the aim (good/ethical) of happiness to the gift (event/demonic) of happiness, as a way to describe this problematic of *luck* further.

The second thread Ricoeur identifies is that happiness calls for an opposite that would be at the same time a companion, an accomplice, and possibly a double (1994:327), namely *unhappiness*. This link between happiness and unhappiness became visible already in *Fallible Man*, where our longing for happiness has been described as part of the fragile synthesis of the human heart which finds it then in the human disproportion, *fallibility*; which has the potential to do evil and cause unhappiness.

The third thread is about the relation between my private wish for happiness and the role others play in denying or offering it to me. These others can be split into those who I know, those nearby (with a face), and those whom I will never see, but whose call to justice remains (the faceless other). This

third thread is developed further by Ricoeur, to see whether happiness is to be found in one of these places: on my own, with my own characteristic of happiness; with those nearby: friends; or with others: in justice.

Happiness as my own private wish, as a completeness to my human task (*ergon*), and as something I can achieve as an acting agent, is the teleological approach to happiness. The problem with this approach is, however, that we are always part of multiple social systems from which we expect certain interventions for our happiness. It is therefore not so easy to obtain happiness on our own – “it is to walk through walls” (Ricoeur 1994:329). Furthermore, according to Ricoeur, it is this request for undivided integral satisfaction (beyond local, topical, partial satisfaction) that meets unhappiness along the way. Should we therefore give up on happiness and resort to little satisfactions? Ricoeur says that this is what the antique chorus recommends, but he feels this is too short-sighted (there remains more to happiness), but that we should at least welcome states of happiness as “untimely flashes” (*fulgurances intempestives*) (Ricoeur 1994:330).

Can happiness be found with those close to us, our friends? What would “giving happiness” – instead of “demanding happiness” – mean? In other words: what is shared happiness? Is this the place where happiness is to be found? Ricoeur answers this by turning again to Aristotle and to his concept of *philia*-friendship, because it is in this friendship where a transition takes place between the seemingly solitary aim of good-living and justice (the virtue of politically oriented human plurality).³ It is in friendship of goodness, as opposed to friendship of pleasure and utility, where the possibility lies for living a good life together. Friendship’s reciprocity crowns the private pursuit of happiness. Happiness has thus moved away from a private wish for fulfilment towards the exchange based on giving and receiving. A new figure of the happiness/unhappiness pair arises, however, because shared happiness proves to be the most fragile good. The possibility of friendship brings the possibility of loneliness and desolation with the loss of a friend. Ricoeur says: “The death that will one day separate us is not limited to the event that has not yet happened; its shadow stretches ahead of time in the shape of unparalleled fear” (1994:332). A new figure of

3 “A happy man needs friends,” according to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX, 9.

the *luck* pair of aim/gift also emerges here. On the one hand, friendship is something we should “want really bad” (aim for) and we should cultivate happiness in friendship, but on the other hand, we receive it (as gift/luck) with the willingness of the pain it may bring. States of friendship should therefore be cherished as a gift because these states are so uncertain and fragile.

The third possible place to find happiness is with people further away: in justice. Ricoeur says this issue arises as soon as we admit that the desire to live among righteous institutions originally belongs to the deepest ethical plan, determined by the wish to live a good life. With the cohesion of a fulfilled or happy life and the demand for justice, the idea of the other is not exhausted by friendship, but includes “the faceless others” (1994:333). Living under just institutions with the faceless other does not, however, do away with the quest for happiness, because of two reasons. The first is that satisfaction of the ‘common good’ is not happiness, but only partial acquisition of it. Happiness asks for the integration of partial projects in the “order of recognition” to obtain public peace as tranquillity of order at the level of cosmopolitics (Ricoeur 1994:334). The second is the problem that when a political power is entrusted to bring about public happiness, the idea of justice becomes antagonistic to happiness, because happiness becomes imposed to each one by the sovereign. There is thus an ambivalent attitude when it comes to the relation that can be recognised between justice and happiness in the course of history. The happiness/unhappiness pair becomes visible in this sphere where justice is sought without worrying about the happiness of others, in the historic state where the happiness of some is paid for by the unhappiness of others. The fragility of good living under just institutions further highlights the pair aiming/gift in the fact that states of happiness are “added unto you” as uncertain states in our search for justice (Ricoeur 1994:336).

Ricoeur, as philosopher, concludes that happiness remains “hors lieu”, out of bounds, or off-site, when equated to the *forced will* to gain private happiness, to the *reciprocity* between friends, and to the quest for *justice* to take charge of by the sovereign. In all these places or projects happiness remains intrinsically connected to unhappiness – none offers fulfilled happiness which is protected from unhappiness. All three further indicate that happiness is “off-site” compared to our obsessive will to make oneself

happy (aiming), because happiness is so often luck (gift). It remains something fragile, uncertain and fleeting.

Happiness is not, however, “sans lieu”, without place. Ricoeur says we do have the possibility of brief states of happiness, but these are not to be discussed in the language of morals and politics – philosophical discourse in its strict rational sense reaches its limits here. Ricoeur proposes that the discourse on happiness should change to the language of poetry.⁴ He argues that it is *only* in the lyric states of language that states of happiness are shared, because this kind of language transcends the language of happiness that has been used up to now. It is also only in this language where the luck pair of aiming/gift can be transcended; in other words, where we can stop talking about happiness either as a “voluntary quest” or an “untimely gift” (1994:336). It is here in the optative language (the lyrical language and poetry) of “may I be happy” that happiness can be understood and shared not only as desire (quest/aiming) or demands (ethical/political), but as a song that unites “happiness and kindness” (*que dans le chant qui joint bonheur et bonté*) (1994:336). In other words, in the optative mood of language, in the song, the “ethical moment of kindness joins opaquely the demonic moment of luck” (*laquelle joint de façon opaque le moment éthique de la bonté et le moment démonique de la chance*) (1994:335). How exactly does this happen in the optative mode?

Happiness in the optative mode – a different (religious) way of speaking

Ricoeur answers this question years later in his “L’optatif du bonheur” (2001) in the edited book *Demain L’Église* (The church of tomorrow). In the religious context of this book, Ricoeur argues that the ‘place’ of happiness is to be found in the optative mood of language – the only mode which can accommodate the luck pair of aiming/gift *and* which accepts the happiness/unhappiness pair at the same time. Happiness is understood here as the completion thereof, as the fulfilment of the spiritual (*eros*) desires as he discussed it in *Fallible Man*. He finds an example of this optative language (poetics, lyrics) on happiness in the *Beatitudes* of Matthew 5.

4 Ricoeur says: “It might be by the grace of poetry that luck can be welcomed as a gift” (*C’est peut-être par la grâce de la poésie que la chance peut être accueillie comme un don*) (1994:336). Ricoeur found examples of this poetry especially in religious text, as is shown later.

In his discussion of the Beatitudes, Ricoeur emphasises that the term *happiness* (Joy, Blessedness)⁵ are followed with a description of figures that are “unhappy” – the poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted. The people this poem is addressed to are those who are living in misery, in “sheer adversity” (*entre les deux pôles du manque et de la franche adversité*) (Ricoeur 2001:34). The poem then turns the confession of unhappiness into a promise of happiness: a reversal of fate will take place, the last shall be first. The optative mood is not limited to the reversal of the symmetry, but “triggers a verbal explosion which audacity never ceases to astound us: possession of the kingdom of heaven, to see God” (2001:35). The strength of this promise of fulfilment is expressed in its unconditional character and Ricoeur finds here a “paradox of the logic of overabundance” (2001:36).

Following these characteristics of the optative mood on happiness, Ricoeur asks how we can take on the challenge of happiness. In other words: What does this language that transcends the luck pair of aiming/gift and which keeps the tension between happiness/unhappiness, tell us about happiness in our own lives? How can we translate this language back to the acting agent’s wish for a good life (a well-being with other and under just institutions)? Ricoeur makes three points, which form the basis for his own understanding of happiness in relation to unhappiness and luck.

The first is that there is uncertainty about *unhappiness*. Is unhappiness a lack, adversity, or poor living all together? The list of unhappiness is also not closed in the Beatitudes. There is, for example, the unhappiness of misfortune which comes between intention and event. Unhappiness can thus become unrecognisable and also something different than evil, whether suffered or inflicted.⁶ Ricoeur therefore concludes that the field of unhappiness is *immense*.

The second is the *scandal* of the optative mood of happiness. To hear a song to the glory of happiness is an insult for those who suffer. They may ask: How is happiness possible in the presence of evil and suffering? Where was God (happiness) in Auschwitz? Ricoeur says we can only reply that God

5 In English, the Beatitudes usually translate the Greek term *makarios* (happy, blessed, to be envied) as “blessed are ...”, while in French, it is translated as “happy are ...”, hence the connexion to happiness here.

6 According to Ricoeur, to ignore the “passivity of evil suffered, is to underestimate the irreducible alterity of evil” (Verhoef 2014c:267).

(happiness) was absent from Auschwitz, but he (it) was heard elsewhere. The persistence of “happiness’s word” comprises that it will be heard, it will be expected: “Life is beautiful” (Ricoeur 2001:38). Happiness is not, for Ricoeur then, an insult to its own misfortune, but rather a challenge to it, and therefore patience is needed.

The third is that the optative mood of *happiness* opens multiple trails: happiness can be thought of in many ways in the optative mood. One way – “for the intellectual who drinks from both the Hebraic and Hellenic sources” – would be to revive the contexts in which these words of the Beatitude took on a meaning (2001:38). From the Jewish perspective one can say that behind the utopia of the ‘kingdom of heaven/God’ the question remains about the loss of the king and reign, the symbols which were replaced by the Enlightenment’s republic of ends. Who shall we glorify now? Who and what is glorified now unjustly? And from the Greek side we hear the warning not to be in a kingdom reigned by our extreme desires, but to find happiness in the Good. The contrast between these two traditions emerges in different ways to pursue happiness. Matthew 6:33 says that the kingdom of God should first be sought, and then the other things shall be added to you. Said in perhaps a too simplified way: a just society, ‘the kingdom of God’, gets priority, and then happiness will follow. Aristotle argues the other way around: “Happiness then is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed”.⁷ This is a more optimistic view on the possibility of happiness than the Christian one, which has often been compared to those of the Greek “cynics” (Ricoeur 2001:39). Ricoeur, however, chooses neither of these paths, but finds direction in the Jewish text of Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*.

Rosenzweig’s book is divided in three great themes which structure our experience of time (past, present and future) and Ricoeur suggests that these themes can produce three major figures of happiness. The first theme is that of creation (the past, but which is still here). In creation we can find happiness in admiration and amazement (as the Psalmist and modern poets do). The second is revelation (the present): “the word directed now

7 *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 5.

to the intimate character of the soul” (Ricoeur 2001:39). Happiness is found in revelation in the words pronounced to each other in jubilation (as the first words of jubilation of Adam towards Eve). Here happiness is the personal bond, the words from person to person which culminates in the optative mood, the jubilation of happiness: “you, love me” (as in the Song of Songs). The third is the theme of redemption (future): the “projecting of looking to the community’s future that is still to come” (Ricoeur 2001:40) – in the words of the Beatitude, the kingdom of God, or in Ricoeur’s terms: living well with and for others under just institutions. This is a happiness we wait for – or rather: a happiness in waiting. Ricoeur asks: What can we call the happiness in waiting? (*Comment nommer le bonheur d’attendre?*), and answers “maybe aspiration” (2001:40). But is there a happiness of aspiration? This is an important question in terms of the argument that it is our longing and desire for happiness that make us unhappy. Ricoeur answers yes: it is possible to find happiness in aspiration, and the reason for this he finds in another optative mood of language, namely the hymn to charity or love of 1 Corinthians 13. This needs to be explained carefully because it forms a crucial part of Ricoeur’s dialectic between happiness, unhappiness and luck, and because of his use of a religious text for dealing with this dilemma of happiness.

Ricoeur emphasises that the Apostle Paul places the word “covet” (desire, pursue, aspire/*aspirez*) before the chapter on love (1 Cor 13), in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 12: 31: “Now eagerly desire the greater gifts”) and also directly after this chapter in 1 Corinthians 14:1 (“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”). This puts the hymn to love in the context of seeking and aspiring. Ricoeur says that it is “absolutely remarkable” that in this text of Paul, the “idea of aspiration is associated by giving (gift)” (2001:40). He argues that this is what makes happiness of aspiration an optative mood. In other words, the aspiration (aiming) is united in the song, in this lyric/poetic language, with the unexplainable of the gift (in the example of love/charity). The luck pair of aiming/gift is here united. The translation back to the indicative and imperative language breaks this unity – which is the problem of philosophical discourse. The best that one can perhaps say, then, is that happiness is to be found in the simultaneous aspiring (aiming) of happiness and the accepting/giving of happiness (as luck). It is orientated towards the

future, with the expectation of working and aspiring fulfilment (eagerly desire as in 1 Cor.), but with the knowledge that fulfilment (happiness/love/justice) is a gift to be received. It is to be loved, and to love (with its link to justice as Ricoeur wrote in *Amour et justice*, 1990) unconditionally, with all the risks it takes. This makes it a very fragile enterprise: a fragility of which Ricoeur is continuously very aware in his dialectics between happiness, unhappiness and luck.

4. Conclusion

In his works on happiness, Ricoeur clearly moves from a philosophical discourse, from the indicative (*Fallible Man*), to the imperative (*Oneself as Another*)⁸ where happiness is ‘hors lieu’, to the more religious discourse of optative language on happiness (*L’optatif du Bonheur*). Philosophy’s ordinary rational discourse is found too restrictive, while religious discourse is more diverse or ‘mixed’ by nature – allowing the optative to be voiced along others. It is in this optative language where religious texts and metaphors offer for Ricoeur visions and images from where the possibility of happiness (and the ethical)⁹ can be thought. Philosophy lacks for him in this regard. The optative, and religious images and metaphors eventually provide a more unified way of thinking about happiness in relation to unhappiness and luck – these three cannot be thought of in separation. Happiness is always fragile, unhappiness a result of tragedy (the sadness of happiness), and luck the inexplicable result of both. The different poles of happiness, namely happiness/unhappiness and aiming/

8 Happiness is not to be found without seeking it with others. In that sense happiness is a political term. In seeking happiness with others, Ricoeur indicated that friendship relations are too short if they do not include justice. This justice becomes visible in the relationships with others who are tied to me through institutions. This all forms only part of happiness, according to Ricoeur, and happiness remains *hors lieu* in these places. Even with justice (as part of our wish for a good life among righteous institutions) there is not only happiness, because the idea of power is introduced – power to establish justice and that may include force. Within the link of happiness and politics (the authority to use violence) there is thus for Ricoeur a “terrorist threat” (1994:341) – again happiness and unhappiness cannot be separated.

9 In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur finds it necessary to move to the optative mode of language when he wrote in his epilogue on forgiveness and repentance. To move beyond paradoxes of mere reason, only “the grammar of the optative mood” (Ricoeur 2004:493) is viable.

gift (luck), are within the optative kept in a fragile dialectical tension by Ricoeur. It recognises happiness (unhappiness and luck) as immense, unexplainable and transcendent.¹⁰ This allows in the end for a more holistic understanding of happiness than the mostly fragmented understanding thereof in the indicative or imperative.

Philosophically speaking, happiness will therefore always be ‘out of bounds’, but the optative mode of language (as found in religious discourse by Ricoeur) allows a fragile moment and availability of thinking and sharing of happiness – albeit only as transcending anticipations of happiness; with the knowledge that fulfilment (happiness/love/justice) is a gift to be received. It is this transcending and undetermined nature of happiness which escapes our thoughts, which escapes our language, as which does our thinking about God. Therefore, to avoid a reductionist or and absolutist thinking about happiness, a different mode of language is to be sought. Without restricting such a language only to Christian discourse, Ricoeur indicates the value of the optative within religious language which functions in a unique way in helping us to get more insight into happiness. To try to translate this back to the indicative or imperative, is futile for theology and philosophy.

Ricoeur’s appreciation of the optative thus becomes a critique of tendencies in both theology and philosophy that want to say what happiness finally is (indicative) – for instance joy or God – and how one should obtain happiness (imperative) – for instance through daily intentional activities or through “knowing, loving and enjoying God” (Charry 2006:150). The optative language about happiness (with its explicit religious examples used by Ricoeur) functions as a critique of the immanent notions of happiness prevalent in philosophical discourse on happiness. Ricoeur consistently argues for a transcendent notion of happiness throughout his work and his appeal on the optative fits seamlessly into the rest of his work. This appreciation of the transcendent with regard to happiness, however, does not mean for Ricoeur that a certain religion has a monopoly on or exclusive access to it. The exclusivity of theological notion of happiness (as only for

10 It is in this sense that we might better understand one of Ricoeur’s most famous and fundamental views on humanity, namely that it is “the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite” (1986:140).

believers or only for certain religions) is rejected by Ricoeur.¹¹ Happiness and our longing for it transgress the borders of theology and philosophy, of cultures and languages, as a song, as a wish, that reminds us of our deepest shared humanity; a humanity that dares to say “Yes” for life in the sadness of the finite.

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11 Ricoeur, a Christian in the Protestant tradition, did not have an exclusive understanding of God or his religious tradition. He speaks of the “Essential” which is inclusive, it is “that which is common to every religion and what, at the threshold of death, transgresses the consubstantial limitations of confessing and confessed religions” (Ricoeur 2009:14). In an interview with Richard Kearney Ricoeur says “I am not sure about the irreconcilability between the God of the Bible and the God of Being” (Kearney 2004:169) and he later adds that “‘God’ can be said in many ways” (Kearney 2004:169).

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