

On the Subject of Epigenesis: An Interpretive Figure in Paul Ricoeur

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All behavior is determined by reality.
This adaptive point of view is found not
only in psychology, with its basic schema
of stimulus-response, but in biology, where
reality plays the role of environment,
and even epistemology,
where reality is called objectivity.
(Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 351)

The following text explores “epigenesis” as a philosophical figure of thought and a conceptual structure of transformation. Epigenesis has its own varied history as an interpretive concept both in the life sciences and in philosophy and psychology, and it has proved itself no less relevant to contemporary discussions of genetics and human development. For my part I wish to focus on the figure as it pertains to the work of Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and the way epigenesis somewhat abruptly makes its appearance in Ricoeur’s work on Hegel and Freud in the 1960s. Taking my point of departure in epigenesis as it applies to Ricoeur’s dialectical theory of religion, I argue that this seemingly peripheral figure may productively be taken as a central interpretive edifice in Ricoeur’s philosophical oeuvre as a whole. Epigenesis, in both the sciences and the arts, confronts us with history, time, and change as the nonnegotiable terms of any interpretive endeavor. Within the wider framework of our joint venture in this collection, I seek to address the question of what the appearance of such a figure of thought means, what it offers to interpretation, and where such a notion finds itself between the future and past of a contemporary philosophy of religion.

1. Epigenesis in Contemporary Science

The last fifteen to twenty years have seen a burgeoning interest in and focus on the notion of epigenesis in the field of genetics and embryology. It has its roots in Aristotle, who put forth epigenesis as a way of explaining

how organic growth comes about. The Greek roots of the word (*epi* + *genesis*) point to a genesis, an origination, coming *after* or *upon* a primary genesis, similar to an epilogue attached to a primary instance of speech. The classical discussion of scientific epigenesis came to a climax in the eighteenth century, when the theoretical dispute over the origin of complex organisms revolved around the opposing schools of preformation and epigenesis. Preformationists held that an organism's developmental history is already programmed and in place at the embryonic outset of life. Epigenesists on the other hand – of which Kant's contemporary Caspar Friedrich Wolff (1733–1794) was a central proponent – saw form and differentiation as products of time and subsequent change.¹

In contemporary genetics, epigenesis has arisen as a powerful notion for understanding the interaction between heritage and environment in the development of an organism. In epigenetics, an organism's genetic makeup is seen as a kind of original switchboard, where external factors – chemical, physical, and social – influence the way switches on the board are set and changed. This provides clues, for example, as to why a pair of identical twins, with the same genetic makeup, nonetheless turn out two very different individuals, as the result of various extragenetic influences.

Such a model of development uses epigenesis to describe the interaction between heredity and environment in the organism as it moves in time. A brief sample of the scientific field today thus confronts us with terminology such as “gene regulation,” “replication timing,” “activation and inactivation,” and “events” which have an impact on gene activity.² By way of definition, the field of epigenetics “refers to changes in gene expression due to mechanisms other than changes in the underlying DNA sequence.”³ An epigenetics of the pea aphid – plant lice – would then seek to explain how the insect “can form different types – sexual and asexual, winged and wingless – based on environmental factors like temperature or day length, without altering its genes.”⁴ Interestingly, epigenesis also plays a role in geology, designating a change in the mineral character of a sediment due to external influences, a process akin to, but not identical with, metamorphosis. Epigenesis in the field of geology denotes the “phenom-

¹ For a survey of the interesting and complex historical backdrop to this debate, see Jane Maienschein, “Epigenesis and Preformationism” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/epigenesis>. Last modified September 21, 2008.

² See, for example, Alan P. Wolffe's introduction to *Epigenetics: Novartis Foundation Symposium 214* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 1–5.

³ Susan A. Lanham-New et al., eds., *Nutrition and Metabolism*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/08/sci_nat_enl_1268231318/html/1.stm [Called up on October 28, 2011].

enon by which a mineral changes its chemical nature while retaining its crystalline form.”⁵

Epigenesis as it applies to the hard sciences – in embryology, genetics, and geology – must also here be taken as an *interpretive* figure. The figure represents a complex way of conceptualizing certain processes of change in nature. For our purposes, the basic figure I wish to retain is the notion of a change, a transformation, taking place as the result of external influences, but which may not be reduced solely to the workings of these influences. The figure of epigenesis thus far points broadly towards a change which is not random, but where everything is also not already set. With this basic figure in mind, we move on to Paul Ricoeur and his use of epigenesis.

2. Paul Ricoeur on the Subject of Epigenesis

“How can a precipitate of identifications deposit itself in the ego and modify the ego, if the process is not a progression by means of regression? And what is the principle according to which this progression operates?”
(Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 491)

For my own part, I first came across the notion not in the sciences, but on reading Ricoeur's work on Freud and interpretation from 1965.⁶ The earliest use of the term I have found, however, appears in an essay on the philosophical significance of the unconscious in Freud, reprinted in *Le conflit des interprétations* from 1969, but based on a contribution that Ricoeur made already in 1960. The context was a conference gathering psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and philosophers at Bonneval, France under the auspices of Henri Ey. Among the participants were also Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As Ricoeur here emphasizes the dual displacement of immediate consciousness by Freud and Hegel respectively, he concludes that any Hegelian theory of the self after Freud may “speak of consciousness only in terms of *epigenesis*.”⁷ It is, however,

⁵ “Épigenèse,” *Le Petit Robert 1: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1991). My translation.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965). All textual references to the book are from the English translation by Denis Savage: *Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “Le conscient et l'inconscient” in *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 101–121. Textual reference is made to the English translation by Willis Domingo in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 109.

his more elaborate reflections on the notion in the later study *Freud and Philosophy* that I take as my point of departure here.⁸

⁸ It is not self-evident precisely where Ricoeur himself picks up the figure of epigenesis as a metaphor for reflection, but two possible sources – not mutually exclusive – immediately suggest themselves. 1) *The Work of Kant*. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) utilizes the term in trying to grasp the cogenerative and dynamic relationship between our intellect and experience in the *a priori* categories of understanding involved in our cognition of the world. In the second edition of the transcendental deduction of the categories (KrV, §27, B 166–168), Kant likens his own conception of the constitution of reason to “ein System der *Epigenesis* der reinen Vernunft” [a system of the epigenesis of pure Reason], pitting this against the alternative of “eine Art *Präformationssystem* der reinen Vernunft” [a kind of “preformation system” of pure Reason]. This latter alternative would imply, problematically, that our faculty of understanding was implanted directly in us, and that the universe from the Creator’s hand would be constructed in such a way that our faculties of reasoning corresponded exactly to the physical laws of nature. The model of epigenesis, on the other hand, attempts to capture that difficult constellation which Kant tries to think, namely, a faculty of reason grounded on our understanding’s own *a priori* categories that does not simultaneously make these purely subjective or without reference to anything objective and empirical. The figure of epigenesis in Kant seeks to describe the generative character of reason as something that is neither already planted in us from birth, nor simply the result of subsequent experience of the world. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. 2nd. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995 [1787]), B 166–168. Gunter Zöller impressively formulates this difficult but central aspect of Kant’s *First Critique* in the following way: “In the Transcendental Deduction the categories are shown to ‘contain ... the grounds of possibility of all experience in general’ (B 167) [KrV] ... Yet although experience does not constitute the origin of the categories, something about experience is nevertheless an essential factor in the transcendental deduction of the categories; for it is only with respect to possible experience that categories refer a priori to objects.” Gunter Zöller, “Kant on the Generation of Metaphysical Knowledge” in *Kant: Analysen – Probleme – Kritik*, ed. Hariolf Oberer et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1988), 87. Zöller’s article presents a most helpful discussion of epigenesis in Kant, both in the cited paragraphs and in Kant’s encompassing work. 2) *The work of Erik H. Erikson*. The second likely background for the use of epigenesis by Ricoeur is the work of psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994). In Erikson’s continuation and modification of Freudian psychoanalysis, he centers in his ego analysis on an “epigenesis of the ego” in discussing the social context for the development of the individual. In his epigenetic theory of ego development, Erikson wishes to underline the reciprocal exchange between an individual and the individual’s surrounding psychosocial environment, and to underline the mutuality of this exchange. For our purposes, it is interesting to note that in the text where Ricoeur more extensively deploys the concept of epigenesis, his Freud-study, in a footnote he cites the psychoanalytical use of epigenesis with reference to Erikson. In David Rapaport’s systematic survey of psychoanalytical theory from 1958, which Ricoeur sees as an especially important aid to his own work, the genetic point of view (of Erikson and others) implies “neither that behavior arises from the ‘maturation’ of a preformed behavior repertory, nor that behaviors ‘develop’ from accumulating experience; rather it views behavior as the product of an epigenetic course which is regulated both by inherent laws of the

The notion of epigenesis in this study appears in the dialectic that brings to an end Ricoeur’s extensive work. Once more, epigenesis crops up in a discussion of Freud, and once more it comes as a result of bringing a Freudian archaeology into confrontation with an Hegelian teleology of the subject. As the argument progresses in Ricoeur’s intimations towards a new philosophical dialectic, we find Ricoeur constantly on the lookout for some point where the two opposing directions of interpretation – Freud’s regressive archaeology and Hegel’s progressive teleology – may intersect.

A Freudian archaeology of the subject gives us man as subject to ancient archaisms and destructive repetitions of the same. An Hegelian teleology of the subject moves in the other direction, laying bare the essential workings of the reconciled self by taking the ultimate end of the process as key to the subject’s progression. Ricoeur, for his part, wishes to bring the two directions of interpretation together in a true dialectic that is not eclecticism. In short, Ricoeur wishes to expose how the human subject is a product of both its own archaeology – through the primordial figures that constitute its being – and of its teleology – through the progressive figures that move the subject along the path towards freedom. The point of intersection between the two directions of meaning is where we, based on my analysis, should situate the Ricoeurian notion of epigenesis.

However, it is not until his concluding considerations on the validity and the limits of a psychoanalysis of religion that the notion of epigenesis appears this time. For it is precisely in his theory of religion that the application of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory reveals its weakest point. Due to what Ricoeur considers to be Freud’s *personal* distaste for religion, Freud comes to analyze religious phenomena and sentiments in a manner paradoxically at odds with his own encompassing theory. The effect of what Ricoeur thus considers a misplacement of religion in Freud is that Freud thereby problematically fails to grasp the potential for *new* meaning that religious figures and sentiments also harbour. Furthermore, this failure to understand religion in its full complexity is tied to Freud’s lacking appreciation of the historicity appropriate to religion and religious language.

For Freud, religion is an essentially atemporal phenomenon. This means that all historical development subsequent to the originary act of parricide is nothing but one and the same monotonous repetition of the primordial crime marking the birth of religion: “naïve religion is religion proper”⁹

organism and by cumulative experience.” Cf. David Rapaport, “The Structure of Psychoanalytic Theory: A Systematizing Attempt,” *Psychological Issues*, monograph 6, vol. 2, no. 2 (1960): 43. Reference to this set of problems in Rapaport is made by Ricoeur in *Freud and Philosophy*, cf. p. 350, n. 8. It should be noted, however, that Ricoeur’s own use of the term is neither identical to Kant’s use nor to Erikson’s.

⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 545. It should be noted, however, that the role of Judaism in the life and thought of Sigmund Freud is not simple and straightforward. An

(Ricoeur). Religious symbols are consequently not accorded the same potential for discovery that Freud is willing to allow for artistic creations as evidenced, for example, in Freud's analysis of the smile of the *Giaconda* by Leonardo da Vinci. For Ricoeur, this is furthermore tied to Freud's reductive view of language, where words primarily echo and function as imprints of what is perceived rather than being seen as carriers and producers of meaning in themselves. Freud thereby overlooks the need for exegesis and interpretation also in the case of religious symbols, and mistakenly opens the door to a direct psychology of the believer and the notions held.¹⁰

In contrast to weight otherwise given to interpretation as the exposition of latent meaning, Freud here misses the productive role of human imagination as itself a carrier of meaning and also underplays the speculative potential of religious illusion:

For Freud an illusion is a representation to which no reality corresponds. His definition is positivist. Is there not, however, a function of the imagination which escapes the positivist alternative of the real and the illusory?¹¹

Against such an interpretation, and by way of an Hegelian account of symbolic progression, Ricoeur sets forth epigenesis as a polemical counter figure to Freud's reductionist account. On this view, the Freudian insistence on primal religion as the accomplished matrix for all religion represents a preformation at odds with change and the notion of a *history* of religion. Opposing Freud's view, Ricoeur sets forth the possibility of an epigenesis of religious sentiment and religious symbols. By this, he means the possibility that what is truly and rightly identified as a repetition of the primordial and archaic may – as a product of the mythopoeic imagination – simultaneously be open to transformation and converted into an instrument of liberation and education.

On this view, Freud is correct in seeing both fear and the desire for consolation as fundamental driving forces in the religious imagination, but he is wrong in seeing only this. For in the figures of fear and desire reside also – with epigenesis – the possibility of a transformation of man's destructive desires and fears. And it is here that Ricoeur's dialectical theory of religion, to my mind, reveals itself at its most incisive. In one of the most interest-

interesting study of this complex relation may be found in Yosef H. Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 544.

¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Le psychanalyse et le mouvement de la culture contemporaine" in *Le conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 122–159. Textual reference is made to the English *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 145. This reductive shortcoming in Freud is, incidentally, not restricted to religious phenomena in Ricoeur's eyes, but affects Freud's interpretation of culture as a whole.

ing statements of the book, Ricoeur formulates his epigenetic point with extensive implications:

The force of a religious symbol lies in the fact that it recaptures a primal scene fantasy and transforms it into an instrument of discovery and exploration of origins.¹²

The gist of Ricoeur's argument runs as follows: To the banal question of whether religion is good for us or bad, a Ricoeurian response would have to be something like: it is good *because* it is bad. The truly dialectical point of this view is that it is precisely because religion is a repetition of the primal father and a striving for consolation that it also has contact with the subject at that deep level where transformation and healing may occur. Such is the figure of epigenesis employed in a dialectical theory of religion that takes seriously both the pitiless destruction of Freud and the progressive recapitulation of Hegel.

The intersecting figure between the opposing interpretations of man's repetitive and timeless archaeology and man's progressive teleology, is epigenesis. Epigenesis thus comes to denote the character of something – a representation, a sentiment, an illusion – *being* something, but also harboring the possibility of *becoming* something else. Not by the *ex nihilo* arrival of something completely new, but by the laborious internal rearrangement of an edifice under the guidance of original form and external variation.

It is thus not by the sudden appearance of a new and liberating symbol in the religious imagination that the unhealthy redundancies of the archaic lose their grip. Rather, it is through the continual chain of interpretations and reinterpretations which religious symbols represent, that the internal meaning of a certain edifice is transformed and also opened up towards new meaning. The primal father is not simply abolished as the traumatic origo of the divine, but through the successive figures of divinity even this traumatic knot may be undone and reworked in a transformative way. The primal parricide attached to the Mosaic edifice is not unmoved by the successive refigurations of divine authority in Hosea, the Deuteronomist, and Johannine theology. By excluding the possibility of such symbolic progression, Freud also excludes the possibility of religious faith being something which concerns not so much the consoling of the child within us, as the maturing of our power to love – "in the face of the hatred within us and outside us – and in death."¹³

This transformative and serial reworking of one symbolic figuration upon another is what Ricoeur captures in the figure of epigenesis. In a manner suggestive of its Hegelian frame of reference, Ricoeur closely links the possibility of such an epigenesis of the subject – such maturing and

¹² Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 540.

¹³ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 536.

“education” – to the possibilities of an epigenesis of the religious symbols themselves.¹⁴ The interconnectedness of the subject and the symbolic deposits of this subject in culture is central to Ricoeur’s analysis, but it is also key to the central dynamic of the figure of epigenesis in Ricoeur as a whole. Furthermore, although it is the *religious* symbol and sentiments that are most specifically discussed in relation to epigenesis in *Freud and Philosophy*, we should nonetheless see the notion of epigenesis as tied to the more *general* operations of the mythopoeic imagination and the birth and maturation of the subject in its dialectical progressions. Finally, it is time to say something about the temporal implications of the notion of epigenesis.

3. The Time of Epigenesis

I wish to start here by giving an illustration which Harvard psychologist Erik H. Erikson takes up in his work on the epigenetic quality of identity formation. This presents us with a more tangible application of the theoretical considerations so far. Erikson gives the example of the newborn baby arriving at the family home. This crossing of thresholds represents an important change for this human individual. The baby by this moves from the uteral chemistry of the mother – from its embryological progression in another’s body – to the social chemistry of the family. Now this fragile, newborn being could easily be construed as the very symbol of radical passivity in life. Only it is not. From the very moment the child arrives with the family, the baby – in its fragility, with its mimicry, signs, and sounds – begins giving some very precise instructions to the family. On how to respond to this instruction, the parents have recourse to two things. On the one hand, they have tradition – the culturally embedded praxis on how to care for a child. On the other hand, natural instinct. So, far from the arrival of the baby solely being the start of a process of instruction and education by the parents, an intense education and raising of the family by the baby is similarly set in motion. Those who have raised a child will know that this education does not end at three months.

I mention this example not only because it gives a fine illustration of the intertwined character of biology and culture relevant to the notion of epigenesis, but also because it comes to reveal the *plastic* quality of epigenesis. Plastic is that which both gives form and is able to receive form. The notion of plasticity has been intriguingly expounded by Catherine Malabou in her work on the future of Hegel,¹⁵ and it is not by chance that her

¹⁴ Ibid., 537.

¹⁵ Catherine Malabou, *L’avenir de Hegel: Plasticité, temporalité, dialectique* (Paris: J.Vrin, 1996). Textual references are from the English translation by Lisbeth During, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

name suggests itself in my reflections on epigenesis. For what Malabou has argued in her work on Hegelian temporality is that far from signalling the final closure of time, Absolute Knowledge in Hegel points towards “a new era of *plasticity* in which subjectivity gives itself the form which it at the same time receives.”¹⁶ It is thus “not *stasis* but *metamorphosis* that characterizes Absolute Knowledge,” a quality that “forms and transforms individuals, fashioning their ways of waiting for and expecting the future.”¹⁷

And it is precisely the *epigenetic* quality of time that I, for my part, identify in Malabou’s plastic notion of time. What we are confronted with here, in Hegel and Malabou, is the genealogical character of time itself. Genealogical in the sense that time comes from time. And genealogical in that other sense, in that the speculative recuperation of the moments of time is what opens time up to new time.¹⁸ With such an epigenetic temporality in mind, we can also see why time is of the essence for the human subject. Not that, in moving in time, anything can happen. But also not that, coming from time, everything has already happened: “Plasticity designates the future understood as future within closure, the possibility of a structural transformation: a transformation of structure within structure, a mutation ‘right at the level of form.’”¹⁹ What the plastic quality of epigenesis points to is an opening up towards the accidental and the contingent becoming an essential moment for the subject. And, conversely, epigenesis also comes to reveal the subject’s essential being in its accidentality.

But epigenesis gives us not only a way of conceiving of the subject in its temporal formation. It is also reflected in the very act of trying to understand this subject as it forms in time. The epigenetics of time consequently puts us not to the task of quiet contemplation, but to acts of exegesis and interpretation. The historicity of the subject leaves us with the task of interpretation, with a reading of texts, symbols and events, in order to expound and understand this subject moving in time and constituted by time. This reading and interpretation will in turn take on the very quality of epigenesis itself. On reading I give the text or work form, but only at the price of myself receiving form. I do not start from nowhere and discover everything. I discover myself up on interacting with a text or a work that is already there and is other than me.²⁰

¹⁶ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 133.

¹⁷ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸ Cf. Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” in *Michel Foucault: Dits et écrits IV: 1980–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 562–578.

¹⁹ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 192.

²⁰ Cf. Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, 167ff., but also as the central starting point for the reflective philosophy of Ricoeur, in keeping with philosopher Jean Nabert (1881–1960) that “understanding is inseparable from self-understanding and that the symbolic

In my own reading of Ricoeur, I have stumbled across a term that in a lexical survey undoubtedly must be characterised as peripheral. Epigenesis is discussed in a handful of places in his entire work. The figure nonetheless comes to reveal itself, on my reading, as a central interpretive edifice for Ricoeur's entire oeuvre. I have tried to show this in my own work on *La Symbolique du Mal* along the lines illustrated above,²¹ but I do not take this as important only to his theory of religion. The notion of epigenesis – as that fundamental imprint of history, finitude, and temporality on all acts of interpretation and figuration – has put its mark on more or less each and every one of the philosophical notions taken up and creatively rethought by Paul Ricoeur. We find its marks on Ricoeur's textual hermeneutics – between explanation and understanding – and in his engagement with structuralism. It is also present in Ricoeur's study of the self between idem and ipse, and in his later work on memory, forgiveness, and historical consciousness. Something accidental and peripheral becomes to me, the reader and interpreter, something central and essential.

The attentive reader will no doubt in this last observation identify a mimicry of the way Catherine Malabou herself finds and reflects upon the notion of plasticity in Hegel. Her work is impressive and forceful. But we also recognize in her work a clever mimicry of Hegel himself. For is not Hegel eminently that philosopher who puts us in contact not only with thought, but also with the experience of thought; with how we receive our selves in the very reflection on how the self receives its self? That the notion of epigenesis in Ricoeur in fact leads us on such a path of interpretive mimicry should alert us to the fact that we are in the vicinity of an essentially Hegelian concept in Ricoeur. But it is not a Hegelianism without Freud. We find in Ricoeur not simply a repetition of Hegel, but a dialectical reading with and against Hegel, possibly making it all the more Hegelian in return. The notion of epigenesis is a powerful figure at play. It puts in motion symbols, culture, and time, and involves also a contemporary philosophy of religion in that interesting quest for the epigenesis of the subject.

universe is the milieu of self-explanation." Paul Ricoeur, "A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 169.

²¹ Øystein Brekke, "Anamnese og eskjatologi: Religion, minne, genealogi med Paul Ricoeur." [Anamnesis and Eschatology: Religion, Memory, Genealogy with Paul Ricoeur,] (PhD dissertation, University of Oslo, 2010).