Thinking After Ricoeur

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Through his teaching and scholarship, Paul Ricoeur's influence spans virtually every aspect of French philosophy in the latter half of the 20th century. As is well known, Ricoeur is the author of over 30 books and 500 articles, many of which have been or will be translated into English.1 Ricoeur's career as an author began shortly after World War II, with two books on the German philosopher Karl Jaspers (1947) along with an important translation and commentary on Husserl's *Ideas I* (1950). Shortly thereafter, Ricoeur published a series of studies on the human will, including *Freedom and Nature* (1950), *Fallible Man* (1965), and *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967). Although he never completed the final leg of the project which was supposed to conclude with a "poetics of the will," his important realization of the surplus of meaning in symbols at the end of this project necessitated what might be described as a "hermeneutic" turn. For the next twenty years, the interpretation of action, language, and texts thus became the focal point of his interest. Some of Ricoeur's important works in this period of his thought include *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1969), *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), the three volume work *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985), along with numerous journal articles addressing the polysemy of language, the theory of the text, and the interpretive task of hermeneutics. After the publication of what some consider to be his masterpiece - *Oneself as Another* (1990) - Ricoeur increasingly added an ethical and political dimension to his previous interest in the theory of action. Ethics and politics are the focus of many of Ricoeur's later works, including *The Just* (1995), *Reflections on the Just* (2001), *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), and *The Course of Recognition* (2004). On the whole, Ricoeur's work is most

often praised for its historical rigor and intellectual clarity. These traits ultimately derive, I suspect, from his lifelong commitment to teaching, such that Ricoeur's role as an author might be understood as an extension of his role as a teacher.

It is Ricoeur's influence as a teacher, which is perhaps less well known, even though it is of at least equal importance to his scholarship, that I want to highlight here. In France, Ricoeur held teaching positions at the University of Strasbourg (1948-1956), the Sorbonne (1956-1967), Nanterre (1967-1970), Louvain (1971-1973), and the University of Paris X (1973-1980). Over that span of time, Ricoeur directed more doctoral theses than any other French philosopher and thus served as the teacher of many philosophy teachers working in France (and abroad) today. Yet, his influence was not limited to French intellectual circles. In thought and deed, he engaged actively with the global issues of his time, whether it was in speaking in support for Algerian independence, in assisting dissident scholars from the Eastern Bloc, or in joining in dialogue with different religious traditions at Enrico Castelli's famous colloquia in Italy, to mention only a few examples. In addition to being an invited speaker at universities across Europe and North America, Ricoeur taught part of the year in the United States at the University of Chicago, beginning in 1970, where he held the John Nuveen Professor chair in the Divinity School, the Department of Philosophy, and the Committee on Social Thought.

To characterize the general spirit of Ricoeur's teaching and scholarship, one might begin with the observation that the central task of his philosophy is that of mediation. A philosophy of mediation, on Ricoeur's view, has the task of adjudicating between opposing views, each of which believes itself to possess the whole truth. For a philosophy of mediation, then, the truth is like the proverbial doorway, described in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which no one fits perfectly but which everyone can enter. That is to say that no single viewpoint possesses the truth in its entirety, but each viewpoint may have something to contribute to understanding a part of the truth. A philosophy of mediation thus must begin by setting the existing viewpoints (the *endoxa*), which are all too often disengaged from one another, side by side. By putting the opposed viewpoints into a productive dialogue, Ricoeur's philosophy of mediation seeks to highlight the underlying questions and concerns that they share in common, and in so doing, to gain insight into valuable new connections, for example, between the problems of the ancients and those of the moderns, between the natural

sciences and the human sciences, and perhaps most tellingly, between Analytic and Continental philosophy. One might worry that this task of mediation would limit Ricoeur's philosophy to viewpoints which have already been discovered and to ideas which have already been understood. However, in addition to working to establish a common ground, the adjudication carried out by a philosophy of mediation also has a critical edge. Through its critical evaluation of competing claims, this philosophy of mediation can also be productive in the sense that it can bring about new discoveries which none of the viewpoints, taken alone, could glimpse. Ricoeur's philosophy of mediation at once recognizes the importance of history and yet demands a creative and critical engagement with history. For this reason, Ricoeur's philosophical approach can be an especially good starting point either for an English-speaking student who seeks to learn about the background texts and concepts of Continental thought or, as is less often appreciated but equally valuable, for a Continental student who seeks an inroad to Analytic thought.

When Ricoeur's work is criticized, it is commonly faulted for devoting too much time to presenting the views of others and, as a result, for having little originality of its own. In assessing Ricoeur's legacy, then, the extent to which Ricoeur's thought does or does not offer an original philosophical contribution is an important question to be considered. Admittedly, at its worst, Ricoeur's work can be criticized rightly for its lack of originality, but this criticism may not be an accurate characterization of his work as a whole. Valuing the end-result over the process, Ricoeur's critics may point out that he devotes relatively few of the pages in his works to the presentation of his own ideas. But, defenders of Ricoeur might reply that this criticism confuses Ricoeur's modesty with unoriginality. Ricoeur's modesty leads him to give credit to the ideas of others where it is due, to downplay the originality of his interpretations of other thinkers, and to understate the significance of his own conclusions. Ricoeur's work thus places heavy demands on the reader, because it requires not only a considerable degree of patience in order to work through the careful process of mediation but also a considerable degree of rigor in order to draw out the full significance of its conclusions. For this reason, it is likely that an accurate assessment of Ricoeur's originality will emerge only as a result of continued scholarship on Ricoeur's work. The essays presented in this volume take an important first step in this direction through their critical examination of Ricoeur's influence across the disciplines, including

the fields of philosophy, theology, rhetoric, law, political theory, history, psychology, technology, and the fine arts.

The essays collected in this volume were selected from papers delivered at a conference in honor of Ricoeur's life and work. The conference, "After Ricoeur," was held at Oklahoma City University on October 20-21, 2006. Over fifty participants were in attendance, representing the United States, Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, and Belgium. The conference participants were asked to assess the significance of Ricoeur's contributions in their respective disciplines. The conference led to the creation of "The Society for Ricoeur Studies," whose aim will be to provide a forum for the continued advancement of scholarship on Ricoeur's work across the disciplines.

Together, the essays collected here mark the development of a new generation of Ricoeur scholarship. While the preceding generation of Ricoeur scholars had the unenviable task of keeping pace with Ricoeur's prolific rate of publication and of presenting these works to the scholarly community, his works are now more widely translated and known. Instead of being called to introduce new works or to overview Ricoeur's philosophical development, this new generation of scholarship is now interested in examining the implications of Ricoeur's thought within a variety of new, interdisciplinary contexts. In this collection of essays, one can also detect a general shift of interest away from Ricoeur's middle period which focused on the polysemy of language and the need for hermeneutics. Instead, as the essays in this volume suggest, it is increasingly Ricoeur's early trilogy on the human will along with his later works on politics and ethics that occupy the interest of Ricoeur scholars today.

Charles Reagan, a personal friend and confidant of Ricoeur for many years, conjoins a textual analysis of *The Course of Recognition* with personal memoir. Quite movingly, Reagan describes the last days of Ricoeur's life as well as the events surrounding his funeral. In his analysis of Ricoeur's final completed work, *The Course of Recognition*, Reagan notes a subtle difference between Ricoeur's previous works and this one. Whereas his previous works typically concluded by pointing in the direction of a set of unexplored problems to be taken up in a future work, this work concludes perhaps with a glance back to the past and the loss of his wife Simone, when Ricoeur makes reference to Montaigne's expression of the loss of his friend La Boétie. Montaigne writes: "If you press me to tell you why I loved him, I feel that it cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I."

Likewise, readers of *The Course of Recognition* might lament that this book leaves many problems unresolved but for the first time these problems will not be taken up by Ricoeur.

In "Paul Ricoeur and the Return of Humanism," William Schweiker examines the resources of Ricoeur's thought for thinking humanism today. Clearly, one of the central themes running the course of Ricoeur's oeuvre is his defense of the irreducibility of the human, viz. the first-person perspective. In developing Ricoeur's contribution to humanism, Schweiker takes a cue from Ricoeur's observation that we are "human, only human," contrasting this with Nietzsche's claim that we are "human, all too human" as well as calls for a superhuman destiny which would be something more than human. Situated between these two poles, Ricoeur's humanism paves the way for an ethics which is rooted in the love of life but yet is not egocentric in its affirmation of life. Taking the love of life as an ultimate source of value, this humanism would offer the resources to respect all forms of human (and possibly non-human) life. Schweiker's focus on the issue of humanism and the irreducibility of the human in Ricoeur's thought introduces a key theme in the papers that follow, each of which focuses on some aspect of the dynamic interaction between the self, others, and the world.

David Kaplan's essay "Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology" takes up the question of Ricoeur's relevance for thinking about the nature and role of technology today. Kaplan notes that Ricoeur himself has surprisingly little to say about technology, and when he does speak about technology his thinking is unoriginal and relatively negative. Nonetheless, Kaplan suggests that Ricoeur's work, and in particular his hermeneutical approach, contains the resources for a more rich and insightful way to understand the positive relation between technology and society. This approach would emphasize the hermeneutical relation maintained between technology and society.

Todd Mei, in "Form and Figure: Paul Ricoeur and the Rehabilitation of Work, examines Ricoeur's understanding of the role that work plays in shaping the meaning and value of human life. One of the centerpieces of Ricoeur's thought on the human being, from the beginning through the end of his career, is his definition of the human being as a capable being, an "I can." That is to say a being who can act, speak, recount, and impute an action to an agent. To understand human nature thus requires, in part, an understanding of the nature of human action and work. Because Ricoeur understands work to be an

essential ingredient in shaping self-understanding, Mei rightly situates Ricoeur within a Marxian legacy which emphasizes the positive role of work. Work, on this view, does not just serve an instrumental value as a means to an end, instead, like poetry, Mei reminds us that it has the capacity to create new forms of meaning for ourselves and our world.

The hermeneutical relation between the self and the text is the focus of John Arthos' essay "The Scholar and The Pub Crawler: Revisiting the Debate between Ricoeur and Gadamer." Both Ricoeur and Gadamer are known for their important contributions to the development of hermeneutics, yet Arthos highlights one fundamental difference between them, viz. their understanding of the social function of hermeneutics. While for Gadamer the hermeneutic task serves the cultivation of each individual as an active and vital participant in public life, Arthos claims that for Ricoeur the hermeneutic task becomes highly specialized and scholarly. The textual explanation and exegesis, which performs the mediating role between pre-and post-critical understanding in Ricoeur's hermeneutics, is a methodology that is relegated to specially trained scholars. For this reason, Arthos concludes that Ricoeur compromises the humanist spirit of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Tim Davidson, in "Ricoeur's Phenomenology of the Ego: A Clinical Emphasis," highlights the value of Ricoeur's work for clinical psychology. Countering the tendency to adopt the paradigm of the natural sciences in psychology, Ricoeur emphasizes the irreducibility of the ego, even if only in the form of a fragile or wounded *cogito*. The clinical significance of this insistence on the ego, Davidson suggests, is to remind clinicians that, behind every treatment of a symptom or behavior, there remains an encounter with another person. One can truly appreciate this point in the context of Davidson's own clinical work with war veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The war veteran is a prime example of Ricoeur's wounded *cogito*, be it on a psychological, a physical level, or both. The war veteran is, of course, a patient whose psychological wounds require treatment. Yet, Davidson would call on clinicians to recognize that the war veteran is more than a set of symptoms to be treated with medication. This is because, behind the clinical treatment, the war veteran still remains a *cogito* whose healing must occur on a personal level through a reconfiguration of the self.

George Taylor's essay on "Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination" draws from a set of unpublished lectures that Ricoeur delivered on the imagination at the University of Chicago in the fall of

1975. For Ricoeur, the imagination is of central importance for the self, because it is not just one faculty of thought among others but pervades all modes and activities of thought. Taylor suggests that these lectures point, in particular, to the important role of the productive imagination. The productive imagination, on Ricoeur's view, does not create out of nothing, instead it starts from our acquired concepts and then produces through a reconfiguration of them. This does not just transform how we think; for Ricoeur the productive imagination has an ontological significance which transforms reality. In its transformation of reality, the productive imagination, as Taylor rightly cautions, can be the site of both brilliant innovations as well as terrible distortions. This duality of the productive imagination is reflected in the contrast between utopia and ideology.

In his essay "Towards a Monumental Phenomenology: Paul Ricoeur and the Politics of Memory," James Ambury examines the role of monuments in creating a shared memory of a common history. Monuments, in their best function, take up the demand never to forget important events in history and also call on the imagination by evoking its future. They thus establish a public place in which society can commemorate an important event in its past and express a shared vision of its future aspirations. In addition to being important sites for building social memory and a shared vision of the future, monuments can also be distorted into serving an ideological function. This occurs either when they distort a society's past or future in order to serve present interests.

The musicologist Roger Savage, in his essay "Is Music Mimetic? Ricoeur and the Limits of Narrative," examines Ricoeur's thought in the context of the question of representation in music. Music, as Savage notes, would seem to be a key exception to Ricoeur's defense in *Time and Narrative* of a concept of narrated time. Music is clearly a temporal form of art, but it is not clear that it need either be representational or governed by a plot structure. Yet, Savage cautions against going too far in the opposite direction, as Schopenhauer, Wagner and others do, where music would be an "absolute" language wholly separated from any dependence on conceptual representation or emplotment. Neither an outer representation nor an inner feeling, Savage suggests that music should be understood to evoke a mood in the phenomenological sense, that is, an attunement directed toward the world or others. It is here that Ricoeur's work on narrative can become instructive: music would provide an avenue for reconfiguring

our attunement toward the world and others.

John Starkey, in his essay "Ricoeur and the Symbolic Roots of Religious Experience," examines Ricoeur's philosophical convictions, explicit and implicit, with respect to what can be said about the nature of religious experience Specifically, he argues that Ricoeur's concern with the "linguistic turn," in his analysis of language and literature, ought not overshadow the insights into the nature of religious experience that can be culled from his earlier work. Regardless of Ricoeur's own religious convictions or their possible utility to particular theologies, the symbolic roots of religious experience straddle the line between the nonlinguistic and the linguistic. Starkey thus calls on scholars to return to Ricoeur's earlier work in order to discover a rich account of non-linguistic and symbolic religious experience.

In "Systematic Theology after Ricoeur," Dan Stiver highlights the significance of Ricoeur's thought in the context of systematic theology. Stiver begins by noting that both systematic philosophy and systematic theology have suffered a thoroughgoing crisis in the 20th century, which can be attributed to the persistent attacks on their founding methods and concepts by skepticism, relativism, and irrationalism. While Ricoeur's work, on its surface, does not present itself as a systematic theology in the traditional sense, Stiver argues that his hermeneutic method nonetheless offers valuable tools for reconstructing a new, more modest, systematic theology in the wake of its 20th century collapse. This form of systematic theology would no longer set out to provide a foundational basis for religious experience but rather would seek a continual, interpretive elucidation of it.

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Notes

[1]Vansina, Frans D. *Paul Ricœur: bibliographie primaire et secondaire = primary and secondary bibliography, 1935-2000*. Leuven: University Press, 2000. I will refer to works by their English titles but date them in terms of their original French publication. English publication dates and further bibliographical information can be found in Vansina.