

## Ricoeur, Paul

### *Philosophical Theologian*

It is difficult to place Paul Ricoeur among the thinkers who populate the intellectual history of the last century. Neither strictly a philosopher nor a theologian, his work has ranged over subjects as diverse as human freedom, the problem of evil, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and narrative discourse. Certainly, though, he must be considered, along with Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, as one of the central figures in the development of what can be understood as a contemporary hermeneutic philosophy. The origins of Ricoeur's own hermeneutical method can be traced to the point where he first articulated his opposition to the "immediacy," "adequation," and "apodicticity," of the Cartesian and the Kantian "I think." Ricoeur set out to define this opposition by way of his exploration of what he called the "absolute involuntary" in his "first substantial philosophical work," *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, published in 1950. In this work, Ricoeur laid out the foundational elements of what was to be a sweeping philosophical exploration of the human will. Ricoeur conceived this Philosophy of the Will as an inquiry that would move from *Freedom and Nature* through the two-part project *Finitude and Guilt*, comprised of the texts *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*, finally arriving at a "poetics" of the "experiences of creation and recreation pointing toward a second innocence." This last has never appeared.

In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur argued that an exploration of the will must begin eidetically because an understanding of the most profound possibilities of the voluntary subject emerges only out of a descriptive analysis of the involuntary. Thus, the eidetics of *Freedom and Nature* are linked to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and, more

specifically, to the noetico-noematic analyses of his work during the time of the *Ideas* and the *Logical Investigations*. Ricoeur had been introduced to the work of Husserl in the 1930s and ultimately went on to translate his *Ideas* from the German in the 1940s. At the time of *Freedom and Nature*, what Ricoeur found so compelling about Husserl's analyses was that they sought to understand the voluntary, or "willing," subject and the correlative structures of the subject's intentionality before going on to describe the existential dimensions of intending itself. But from the first, Ricoeur extended the "eidetic analysis of the operations of consciousness to the spheres of affection and volition," weaving an existential thread through the fabric of the Husserlian phenomenology he had adopted. In so doing, Ricoeur was following the lead of Gabriel Marcel, whose famous "Friday" seminars he had attended in the 1930s, and attempting to define a new phenomenology that would disclose a "living being which from all time has, as the horizon of all its intentions, a world, the world," and not merely "an idealist subject locked within its systems of meanings."

What is revealed by understanding this "living being," said Ricoeur, is the "no of my contingency," the specter of my own nonbeing, the enigma of my "brute existence," which "secretly the most radical negation—the absence of aseity." In linking radical negativity to the impossibility of independent human existence, Ricoeur was beginning to form a career-long connection to the philosophy of Hegel, one that remains extremely ambiguous and yet vastly important within his work. As Ricoeur makes clear, in Hegel's philosophy the subject is characterized as an entity that comes to understand its existence only through the dialectical encounter with its own utter negation. It is this idea of

negation, says Ricoeur, which makes Hegel's philosophy fundamentally different from the eidetics of Husserl's.

Because of what he takes to be the phenomenological and existential dimensions of Hegel's philosophy, it's easy to understand why Ricoeur is drawn toward the Hegelian methodology as he attempts to rethink the eidetics of Husserl. But Ricoeur turns away from the "all too enticing Hegelian negativity," claiming that although it adds a "tragic tone" to his own phenomenological analysis, its call for an absolute mediation of negation acts to cover over the existential experiences that are originally disclosed by way of Hegel's dialectical method. The Hegelian negativity, argues Ricoeur, because it necessarily emerges within the synthetic boundaries of the absolute, is "not yet negation," but merely an expression of otherness: "There is only the distinction between this and that."

What was at issue, then, as he began to write *Fallible Man*, the first two volumes of *Finitude and Guilt*, was Ricoeur's attempt to define what he understood to be the necessary existential bond between the self and the other without lapsing into a naïve Hegelianism. Thus, Ricoeur suggested that in *Fallible Man* he sought to demonstrate that evil is not simply one of the "limit-situations implied by the finitude of a being submitted to the dialectic of acting and suffering," but a "contingent structure" of what he had been calling "the absolute involuntary." In this way, *Fallible Man* moved a step beyond the extended, more existential, eidetic inquiry of *Freedom and Nature*. Where the phenomenology of *Freedom and Nature* disclosed the "weakness of a being exposed to evil" and capable of "doing wrong," the phenomenological inquiry of *Fallible Man* explored the actuality of "being evil."

In attempting to understand the actuality of evil in *Fallible Man*, Ricoeur again lifted up the idea of fragility he had first detailed in *Freedom and Nature*. Now, though, he defined fragility as the “constitutive disproportion” of the subject necessarily located between the opposing poles of the infinite and the finite. It may be that the origins of this idea of disproportion are already to be found in Ricoeur’s appropriation of Hegel’s phenomenology at the time of *Freedom and Nature*. But again, the goal in the first volume of *Finitude and Guilt* was to supersede Hegel’s phenomenological act of synthesis, something Ricoeur sought to do in *Fallible Man* by adjusting his ontology of disproportion to Kant’s “brilliant discovery” of the transcendental imagination. What Ricoeur found so important about the transcendental reflection performed in the first *Critique* is Kant’s placing of the imagination at the “crossroads of the receptivity specific to sensibility and the spontaneity characteristic of understanding.” The significance of this Kantian discovery for Ricoeur is that after *Freedom and Nature* it seemed to offer him a notion of a necessary phenomenological synthesis defined by epistemological limits of disproportion without having to make a Hegelian move toward a sublative absolute.

Thus, as Ricoeur moved from *Fallible Man* to the second volume of *Finitude and Guilt*, he had delineated what might now be properly called a phenomenology of disproportion and begun to define what he took to be his own unique non-Hegelian reflexive philosophy. With this in mind, in *The Symbolism of Evil* he again took up the problem of the immediacy of the *Cogito*. By way of his long “detour through symbols,” Ricoeur attempts to demonstrate that the subject does not know itself directly, but “only

through the signs deposited in memory and in the imagination by the great literary traditions.” What this means is that the “I” of the *Cogito* is always a ciphered entity, one in need of a process of interpretation. Here, Ricoeur is setting out his first “definition of hermeneutics,” what he describes as a grafting of the hermeneutical onto phenomenology.

In the 1960s, this hermeneutic was conceived of as a “deciphering of symbols,” which themselves were understood as “expressions containing double meanings.” Ricoeur claims that what was lacking in his own hermeneutic during the 60s was a willingness to adopt at least one dimension of the system of “structural analysis” that had emerged at this time, that which would require an “objective” treatment of all sign systems. Although in a sense this is true, and although Ricoeur would go on to extend his hermeneutical method in the 1970s and 1980s by way of an examination of metaphor and narrative, something else seems to be at stake in his hesitancy to move beyond an analysis of symbols in the 1960s.

In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur argued that the double meaning of symbols is revealed in the “literal, usual, common meaning” pointing the way to virtually “unveiling” a second meaning. This second, deeper meaning is disclosed because the “symbol gives rise to thought,” it sets us thinking by way of what Ricoeur understands as a spontaneous hermeneutics. What this allows for, says Ricoeur, is a certain interpretive process of reflective “restoration,” by which the “surplus of meaning” contained in the symbol is recovered. Admittedly, it is difficult to know what Ricoeur means by a hermeneutics of restoration, as this notion appears at once both too Cartesian and too Hegelian for him to accept. It does seem, however, that this spontaneous process of

interpretation represents the dialectical counterpoint to fragility in Ricoeur's conceptualization of a reflexive philosophy as it is articulated at the time of *Finitude and Guilt*.

This will all be called into question, though, as once he finished *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur entered into a long and exhaustive examination of Freud in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. This endeavor caused him to redefine what he understood the general hermeneutical process to be. In his amazing reading of the texts of the "great Viennese master," arguably the best ever performed, Ricoeur discovered that the Freudian hermeneutic proceeds differently from the one that he himself articulated in *The Symbolism of Evil*. Instead of unfolding as a restorative process by which the most primordial meanings of subjectivity are disclosed, Freud's process of analytic interpretation functions as a suspicious "hermeneutics," exposing the ciphered, distortive, dissimulative quality of subjectivity.

As Ricoeur makes clear, fundamental to Freud's hermeneutics of suspicion is the notion that "the whole of consciousness" is a false consciousness. In this way, the work of Freud reminds Ricoeur of his own resistance to the claim for the immediacy of the *Cogito*. For although, like Descartes, Freud argued that everything that makes its way into consciousness must be called into question, he did not maintain that consciousness itself is the great "Archimedean point" that grounds subjectivity, but instead argued that along with the objects of consciousness, consciousness itself must be doubted.

Honest and superb reader of texts that he is, Ricoeur left himself in a precarious position after his examination of Freud's metapsychological systematization of psychoanalysis in *Freud and Philosophy*. Ricoeur says that this examination of the

Freudian metapsychology is concerned with disclosing the “epistemological problems in Freudianism,” what he takes to be the ambiguous “structures of psychoanalytic discourse.” The major difficulty in understanding the psychoanalytic epistemology, suggests Ricoeur, is that Freud’s texts present themselves as a “mixed discourse,” at times seeming to speak of the “conflicts of force subject to an energetics” and at other times seeming to speak of the “relations of meaning subject to a hermeneutics.” The purpose of Ricoeur’s examination, then, is to “overcome the gap between the two orders of discourse” and to arrive at the point where “one sees that the energetics implies a hermeneutics and the hermeneutics disclose an energetics.” For Ricoeur, it is at this exact dialectical point where an energetics and a hermeneutics come together that the “positing or emergence of desire manifests itself in and through a process of symbolization.”

This would seem to be familiar territory for Ricoeur, as it appears that at this point in *Freud and Philosophy* he has again arrived at a place where a reflective process of interpretation will allow for the “unveiling” of the deeper meaning of symbols. But this would be to misinterpret Freud; for as Ricoeur himself argues, in bringing an energetics and a hermeneutics together by way of his metapsychological description of desire, Freud is exposing only the fragility of the subject and not the possibility of a restorative moment within which this fragility is overcome. Again, the Freudian hermeneutic is not Ricoeur’s hermeneutic.

Oddly, at the end of *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur attempts to overcome the Freudian problematic of desire by way of Hegel’s phenomenology. This would seem to be the last place to which he would turn in an effort to redefine his own hermeneutical

method. But Ricoeur says that what Hegel offers him at this point is a restorative teleology that he can place over against Freud's archeology-like hermeneutics of suspicion. Here it appears that Ricoeur is attempting to recast Freudian desire as Hegelian negation and then to go on to argue that this desire is fulfilled in a synthetic movement toward the absolute. But this is something that Ricoeur will not allow himself to do; and thus, in the end, he shifts Hegelian negation, as desire, back within the epistemological boundaries of Kant's critical philosophy, claiming that although "desire is revealed as *human* desire only when it is the desire for the desire of another consciousness," it is never desire absolutely fulfilled.

It may be argued that it is his reading of Freud that ultimately convinces Ricoeur that his admittedly "Hegelian-style" attempt to totalize the mediations of disproportion revealed by his own phenomenological inquiry will never be successful. This is something that he does not address, though, because after he finished *Freud and Philosophy* he turned his attention to the "second front" of his "conflict of interpretations" with other philosophical systems. The second thrust of the conflict will be waged against "structuralism," the overarching title Ricoeur gives to the "vast linguistic current stemming from Ferdinand de Saussure." What he finds problematic about structuralist thinkers is their attempt to question subjectivity, not by way of a hermeneutics of suspicion, but by reducing language to the "functioning of a system of signs without any anchor in a subject." For Ricoeur, the limitation of this analysis is to be found in its notion of signs as differential units functioning within a system of units made up only of internal relationships. What has been missed, according to Ricoeur, is the fact that "the 'primary unit of meaning' in language is not the sign but the sentence,"

what he calls “the instance of discourse.” Here, Ricoeur has shifted his phenomenological argument from symbols to the wider problem of language. It remains the same argument, however, being Kantian in its articulation: Meaning emerges in the mediative moment when “someone says something to someone about something.”

The careful reader of the texts of Ricoeur that appear during the late 1960s, especially the articles gathered in *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays on Hermeneutics*, will notice his continued attempt to delineate a nontotalizing yet sublative-like system of interpretive restoration that will allow him to overcome what he takes to be the nihilating experience of a subject haunted by the “productions of the unconscious” and the “immense empire of signs.” Because, as Ricoeur himself says, this attempt began to seem ever more “vain and suspect,” he might have made a religious turn at this point in his career, as he does become extremely interested in the work of certain theologians at this time, but he remains true to his promise not to mix discourses, and thus the material of the 1970s and 1980s remains philosophical in its orientation.

Ricoeur extends his examination of the problem of language in what he takes to be the “twin texts” *The Rule of Metaphor* and the three-volume *Time and Narrative*, which ground his work in the 1970s and 1980s. Continuing the discussions of *The Conflict of Interpretations*, in the first of these “texts” Ricoeur sought to define the subject in relation to the “semantic innovations” of metaphor. In the 1970s Ricoeur argued that what makes metaphors so powerful is their ability to drive language beyond the limits of its prosaic boundaries and into an “extralinguistic” place of poetic creativity. This was clearly Ricoeur’s attempt at a phenomenological response to the structuralist argument that there is no “outside” of language, one that again sounds very Hegelian in

its expression. By the time he wrote the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* in the 1980s, though, he seemed aware of the limitations of *The Rule of Metaphor*. In particular, he understood he had not adequately defined his notion of the link between the intentionality of metaphorical statements and the subject that receives them in an experiential “act of reading.”

Although Ricoeur again took up this issue in the articles gathered together in *From Text to Action: Essays on Hermeneutics, II*, it is really in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* in which he addressed this problematic in depth. It seems clear that what makes *Time and Narrative* so innovative, and thus so important, is not its extension of the problem of language from metaphor to narrative but its exploration, by way of a reading of Augustine and Aristotle, of the “aporias of time.” For Ricoeur, the aporetic nature of time, especially as it is understood through the juxtaposition of the reflexive visions of Augustine and Aristotle, would seem finally to offer a way to define the elusive non-Hegelian phenomenology of disproportion that he has been seeking after for so long. But in the end, Ricoeur must concede that in turning towards Augustine, he has once again made a Hegelian move: the temporal aporias of finitude, like his own fragile moments of disproportion, are always already swept up within the perfection of the divine. Ricoeur understands the problem here perfectly: Augustinian time is simply Hegelian negation seen through theological eyes. Thus, as he writes *Oneself as Another*, the last great work to appear so far in his long and distinguished career, it may be that Ricoeur has come to the point where he must admit that

...one does not know and cannot say whether [the] Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute my very self, or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place. With this

aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end. (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 355)

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### **Biography**

Paul Ricoeur was born February 27, 1913 and is a philosopher, phenomenologist; recipient of numerous awards, including the Hegel Prize from Stuttgart in 1985, the Karl Jaspers Prize from Heidelberg in 1989, the Grand Prize of the French Academy for Philosophy in 1991, the Nietzsche Prize from Palermo (Italy) in 1987, the Dante Prize from Florence (Italy) in 1988; is the holder of honorary doctorates from more than thirty leading academic institutions in thirteen different countries; and has been made member of the learned societies of seven different countries, including the Academie Royale des Lettres, des Sciences, et des Arts de Belgique, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Boston), and Academie Royale Neerlandaise des Sciences.

Spanning a wide range of topics, including the history of philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, biblical narrative, and meditations on guilt and evil, his vast collections of writings is made up of landmark texts such as *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers: Philosophie du mystere et philosophie du paradoxe* (1948), *Philosophie de la volonte I: Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950), *Histoire et verite* (1955), *De l'interpretation: Essai sur Freud* (1965), *Le conflict des interpretations: Essais d'hermeneutique* (1969), *Le metaphor vive* (1975), *Temps et recit, Tome I, II, III* (1983, 1984, 1985), *Soi-meme comme un autre* (1990).

A teacher after completing his university studies in 1935, he married and became a father during the years before the war. Drafted, he became a combatant and a prisoner of war before returning to Chambon-sur-Lignon with his family in 1945. Holder of academic positions at the university of Strasbourg between 1948 and 1957, the Sorbonne between 1956 and 1967 (where he shared a seminar with Jacques Derrida), and, beginning in 1970, the University of Chicago. He gave the prestigious Gifford lectures in Edinburgh in February of 1986. Retired from formal teaching positions, Ricoeur continues to lecture and publish.

### **Selected Works**

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*Philosophie de la volonte. Finitude and Culpabilite, I: L'homme fallible*, 1960; as *Fallible Man*, translated by Charles A. Kelbley, 1965.

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### **Further Reading**

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