

Obituary

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005)

It is with a deep sense of loss that I report that Paul Ricoeur died May 20, 2005. Ricoeur, one of the giants of twentieth-century philosophy, served as a member of the International Advisory Board of *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, beginning in 1990 when I was first appointed Editor-in-Chief. Born in Valence, France in 1913, Ricoeur was inducted into the French army in 1940 and was soon captured by German troops. He spent the war years in a POW camp studying German philosophy from Kant and Hegel to Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers. Following the war he returned to France and a few years later was appointed a Lecturer in the history of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. In 1956 he was appointed to the Chair of general philosophy at the Sorbonne and subsequently held professorships at several universities including the University of Paris X, Nanterre and the University of Chicago. At Chicago he succeeded Paul Tillich as the John Nuven Professor of Philosophical Theology, a position he held until 1992. He also served as Director of the *Centre Phénoménologique et Herméneutique* in Paris where he worked with Derrida and Levinas.

Throughout his career Ricoeur developed a well deserved reputation as a mediator between opposing views in both his intellectual and his practical life. Among his early works were a comparative study of mystery and paradox in Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel (1948), and a French translation of and commentary on Husserl's *Ideen* (1950). Ricoeur adapted Husserl's phenomenological method for a study of the meaning of human existence in a series of volumes on the philosophy of the will, the first of which appeared in 1950. In these books Ricoeur argued that the human will always finds itself already immersed in a world of meanings which call into question claims to immediate or direct awareness of the self. The self on his view can be neither the *cogito* of Descartes nor the transcendental ego of Husserl.

Since the middle of the twentieth-century Ricoeur was particularly concerned with interpreting the meaning of human existence indirectly through myth, dream, text and narrative. This led to an interest in

hermeneutic and linguistic considerations and to a series of studies on symbolic and mythical meaning in such books as *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1969) and *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975). In the latter book Ricoeur sought to mediate between work in the analytic and continental traditions developing a theory of sense and reference that shared common ground with the interaction theory of such philosophers as Max Black and Monroe Beardsley. The 1980s saw the publication of his three volume work, *Time and Narrative*, which was followed in 1990 by the publication of his 1986 Gifford Lectures, *Oneself as Another*, in which he seeks through a distinction between ethics and morality to reconcile the Aristotelian and Kantian traditions in ethics. During the final decade of his life he was concerned in particular with examining the reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting, showing how this affects our perception of history. These studies were published in 2000 under the title, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

At the center of Ricoeur's wide-ranging philosophical investigations was a deep interest in philosophical anthropology. Human existence for Ricoeur is a project, something to be accomplished. In elaborating his understanding of human existence he takes into account the experience of fallenness, alienation and nothingness, but he argues that the experience of negation is overvalued by many of the existentialists. Anguish is understood to be the feeling *par excellence* of the lack of being in us, but affirmation and joy are at the root of human existence and testify to our positive link to being. Ricoeur's work is informed at many levels by a religious interest and he finds in Freud and Nietzsche a critique of religion that opens up the possibility of what he calls a post-religious faith, faith beyond a religion that is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection. The philosophical critique of the oppressive God of which Nietzsche spoke, helps prepare the way for a new faith, a pure affirmation of life, but philosophers cannot be the prophets of this new faith. Only a prophetic preacher, he argued, could return to the origins of the Jewish and Christian traditions and speak to a faith for our time. The philosopher exists in an intermediate time and as a responsible thinker must exist between nihilism and a purified faith, between an oppressive God who takes away human freedom and transcendence and a God who affirms life.

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