

PHRONETIC JUDGMENT IN REASON AND FAITH FOR PAUL RICOEUR: BLURRING THE LINES?

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Paul Ricoeur was a dialectical philosopher who tended to straddle many divides. He early brought together phenomenology and hermeneutics, Husserl and Marcel. His first major book in 1950, *Freedom and Nature*, attempted a “diagnostics” where he attempted to move Husserlian phenomenology to deal with a more empirical understanding of embodiment.¹ In the sixties and seventies, he attempted to bring together Freud and Hegel, then structuralism and hermeneutics in terms of the Continental split between the natural sciences (the *Naturwissenschaften*) and the social sciences and humanities (the *Geisteswissenschaften*). As he turned to narrative, he continued creatively to connect prose and poetry, discursive and figurative thought, in the process putting in dialogue Augustine and Aristotle, Kant and Husserl. All of these involved a great deal of integration. Strangely, however, there was one area that he left undialectically opposed for the most part, philosophy and religion, reason and faith, despite significant contributions to philosophy of religion and even biblical hermeneutics. Toward the end of his life, he remarked that such “conceptual asceticism” had been too strict, due in part to his particular French context where it was important to keep separate his philosophical works from religious works.²

What I want to traverse briefly in this paper is the way that this bifurcation in his thought left its trace of ambiguity with regard to the way that he regarded reason and philosophy. The particular path of illumination I wish to follow is to indicate the trajectory of his thought that leads to the significance of what he later called “phronetic judgment” and in light of it to reexamine the tenability of the sharp Kantian-like dualism that he typically maintained between reason and faith.

EARLY AMBIGUITY

From early on Ricoeur tended to separate what one can “know” or substantiate more easily with what one cannot. At the same time, however, he would indicate the virtual inseparability of the two, leading to a degree of ambiguity about what he regarded as within the ambit of philosophy per se and what was not.

In an article originally published in 1952, entitled “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” many of the themes of Ricoeur’s later work appear in incipient form as well as the tension with which we are concerned.³ Ricoeur treats here the problem of whether there is a proper objectivity in history, despite the attention to the subjectivity of any historian. Since positivistic history seems untenable, are we left with a polar relativism on the other side? To use Richard Bernstein’s language, are we caught within the dilemma of modernity between objectivism and relativism?⁴ This is especially acute in a discipline such as history, much less when Ricoeur then moves to the discussion of whether there can be a *philosophy* of history.

Ricoeur first accepts an unavoidable subjectivity for several reasons. There are the issues of the historian’s choices, the historian’s own historical context, and the fact that the historian is dealing inevitably with the role of human beings in the causation of history.⁵ These factors remind one of Ricoeur’s later emphasis on the inherent role of imagination and configuration, closely related to fiction, in historiography in *Time and Narrative* in the eighties. Second, he argues, calling especially upon Marc Bloch, that there is a difference in historiography between “good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian’s craft to decide between them.”⁶ He points out that there are “levels of objectivity” in various fields, so one should not expect historiography to be physics.⁷ The historian nevertheless does not deal with brute facts any more than the physicist, so, third, the issue is one of making integrated judgments that are based on analysis, not in spite of analysis. He uses the hermeneutical word “understanding” for these kinds of judgments, which he argues are not opposed to “explanation,” to anticipate the way he integrated them in his hermeneutical arc of the seventies.⁸ Fourth, such use of the understanding and of making syntheses does not take history out of the realm of reason or knowledge. He called it a “near rationalism” at one point but also pointed out that it is like modern physics in this respect and so “there is no reason for history to have an inferiority complex.”⁹ At another point, he says, “Feeling and imagination used to be opposed to reason; today we put them back, in a certain way, into rationality.”¹⁰ He later contrasts historiography with the way that mathematics may “denominate” its object and thus is “inexact and non-rigorous.”¹¹ In the tradition of Dilthey and Collingwood, he speaks of the way that the historian must have not only careful analysis of documents but also a sympathy for human beings in order to understand them in their historical exigencies. “Reasoned analysis,” he says, “is a kind of methodical step between an uncultivated and an educated sympathy.”¹² Such a need for

intuitive sympathy, however, does not mean a collapse into relativism; rather, he says, “We have only specified the kind of objectivity that arises from the historian’s craft.”¹³

When he moves to the issue of a philosophy of history, he recognizes and values the suspicion that a historian might harbor, but he still argues for its viability and its own level of objectivity. In an article published in 1953, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” he accepts, however, the historian’s suspicion against a Hegelian closure of history. Despite the threat of skepticism and relativism, however, he pointed towards the unity of truth as a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, one that could never be attained in history.¹⁴ He used the language at that time of such a unity being a matter of hope, even eschatological hope.¹⁵ He emphasized a phrase that he often repeated later, namely, “I hope I am within the bounds of truth.”¹⁶ The implication is that one makes fallible truth claims within history that one hopes can hold up. It is important to highlight here Ricoeur’s use of holistic judgments in historiography and in the philosophy of history that are rational, defensible, and objective but not in an objectivist sense, involving feeling and imagination in holistic ways that are not opposed to reason or knowledge but are integrated within it.

One more dimension of his thought can be added from essays within this time to the eschatological hope of truth, namely, a “primary affirmation,” drawn from Jean Nabert, that is also based on hope. The failure of Hegelian idealism raises the question of the meaninglessness of history, of any hope for meaning at the end of history. Ricoeur is concerned here in dealing with the failure to differentiate between true and false anguish.¹⁷ He argues in dialogue with Jean-Paul Sartre that only by moving through the depths of existential negation can one “reachieve” primary affirmation, reminiscent of his later language of a postcritical naivete or a second understanding in his hermeneutical arc.¹⁸ Even in dealing with Kant’s radical evil or the Job-ian threat of an evil God, there is a possibility of an affirmation or upsurge of being that never leaves the question behind that he calls a “timid hope” or a “tragic optimism.”¹⁹ Ricoeur says, “Thus, although hope is the true contrary of anguish, I *hardly* differ from my friend who is in despair; I am riveted with silence, *like him*, before the mystery of iniquity. Nothing is closer to the anguish of nonsense than timid hope.”²⁰ Is this a matter of faith outside of reason? Ricoeur rather says,

Hope therefore enters into the scope of reflection, as reflection of reflection and through the regulative idea of the totality of the goodness of being. But unlike absolute knowledge, primary affirmation, secretly armed with hope, brings about no reassuring *Aufhebung*; it does not “surmount,” but “affronts”; it does not “reconcile” but “consoles”; this is why anguish will accompany hope until the last day.²¹

What is difficult at this point is to determine whether such a hope or primary affirmation and the judgments made in light of it are in the realm of

knowledge, reason, and philosophy or in the realm of faith. On the one hand, he seems to think that the judgments one makes in history in light of one's hope for truth are clearly philosophical and rational, belonging to the proper objectivity of a philosophy of history. In the way that Ricoeur develops the centrality of primary affirmation, it is difficult to see how it is clearly outside of philosophy. On the other hand, the language of hope as regulative at least puts it in Kantian terms as a matter of faith, even if a rational faith. In an essay from 1951 explicitly addressing a Christian theology of history, Ricoeur identifies the meaning of history in terms of hope as "an object of faith."²² He says of the Christian that "he hopes that the oneness of meaning will become clear on the 'last day,' that he will understand how everything is 'in Christ.'"²³ Such language certainly seems to place a view of history in this light as a *theology* of history and not as he otherwise termed a *philosophy* of history, although in terms of their finitude, openness, and allowance for ambiguity, they seem to be quite similar.

THE HERMENEUTICAL ARC

These dimensions of his thought can be seen in his work of the late sixties and seventies, which can be treated more briefly since they are more well-known. On the one hand, one can see Ricoeur's development of a kind of holistic understanding as a part of philosophy and other disciplines in terms of his hermeneutical arc.²⁴ As we have seen, Ricoeur had in mind quite early that the dichotomy in Continental philosophy between explanation and understanding could be overcome.²⁵ Against the Cartesian idea of a presuppositionless beginning, Ricoeur argued that we always start too late.²⁶ The first moment of the hermeneutical arc is thus a first understanding or a first naivete. Such an understanding or initial "guess" needs to be tested, however, in terms of explanatory methods.²⁷ One should not get mired in the desert of criticism, as he called it, but move to the third moment, which is actually a second understanding, a postcritical appropriation of a text or event in terms of one might call its existential appropriation.²⁸ As this second understanding is more holistic and imaginative, it cannot be reduced to positivistic results of a method but is a kind of guess or wager. Rooted in interpretation of texts or of events as in historiography, we seem to be here in the ambit of knowledge and philosophy, albeit what we might call a postmodern conception of knowledge that is not required to possess Cartesian certainty or exactness.

It is interesting that at this time Ricoeur gave lectures on ideology and utopia where he dealt with the imprecision of noetic judgments. In this context of politics and culture, he argued clearly against any kind of Hegelian absolute knowledge. In dealing with the Marxist tradition, in fact, he pointed out that Karl Mannheim had dealt with the issue of whether one could ever be free from ideology as Marx had desired. In other words, in criticizing an ideology, is one not instituting another ideology? Ricoeur concluded, "I consider Mannheim's attempt to overcome this paradox one of the most honest and perhaps *the* most

honest failure in theory.”²⁹ He goes on to say:

My own conviction is that we are always caught in this oscillation between ideology and utopia. There is no answer to Mannheim’s paradox except to say that we must try to cure the illnesses of utopia by what is wholesome in ideology ... and try to cure the rigidity, the petrification, of ideologies by the utopian element. It is too simple a response, though, to say that we must keep the dialectic running. My more ultimate answer is that we must let ourselves be drawn into the circle and then must try to make the circle a spiral. We cannot eliminate from a social ethics the element of risk. We wager on a certain set of values and then try to be consistent with them; verification is therefore a question of our whole life. No one can escape this.³⁰

Such a conclusion may raise, Ricoeur thought at one point, the specter of fideism.³¹ In another essay on ideology about the same time, however, Ricoeur dismissed fideism. In light of the ubiquity of ideology, he asks, “How can we take a decision which is not a mere toss of the dice, a logical bid for power, a movement of pure fideism?”³² In answer, he appeals to “a viable solution” that he sees in his “hermeneutics of historical understanding.”³³ He then adds, “This knowledge cannot become total. It is condemned to remain partial, fragmentary, insular knowledge.”³⁴ In dealing with such political and historical judgments, even existential judgments that relate to larger meaning, Ricoeur implies that these limitations of reasoning do not expel them from the realm of knowledge and philosophy.

A HERMENEUTICS OF TESTIMONY

Also in the late sixties and seventies, however, Ricoeur was writing specifically on religious issues and developed a “hermeneutics of testimony” whereby philosophy could only “approximate” such large-scale convictions, which themselves remained a matter of religion and faith. Philosophy could thus deal with matters of the possibility of such convictions, but the actual convictions transcend philosophy proper. He deals with this most clearly in the “post-Hegelian Kantianism” that he unfolds in an essay written in 1968 entitled “Freedom in the Light of Hope.”³⁵ He follows Kant in a philosophy of limits that nevertheless allows a “practical demand for totalization,” or a regulative idea of hope that Kant called a postulate or faith.³⁶ He does say that this “discourse of religion within the limits of reason alone” is funded by being able to say, “*Spero ut intelligam*, I hope in order to understand.”³⁷ In drawing on Kant’s aphorism, “the symbol gives rise to thought,” Ricoeur indicates that philosophy is funded by the symbols of religion at times and in turn can speak of the conditions of possibility that can approximate religious faith.³⁸

In “The Hermeneutics of Testimony,” published in 1972, he develops further the way that not just a symbol but a concrete conviction by someone—perhaps

inspired and illuminated by symbols—funds philosophy and goes beyond philosophy. He begins again with Jean Nabert and sees testimony relating to primary (here translated “original”) affirmation of the Absolute, which he then conflates with testimony about God as a matter of faith.³⁹ He brings in here the way that a witness can be tested, which relates to the connection he consistently draws between understanding and explanation. He even relates this dynamic to historical debates.⁴⁰ This kind of historical meaning is then sublated (*aufgehoben*) in religious testimony.⁴¹ His main distinction then is drawn between a hermeneutics of testimony that cannot be considered absolute knowledge. Interpretation is always probable and thus “original affirmation cannot be subsumed by the standard of knowledge of objects.”⁴² This, he says, “prevents us from subsuming, in Hegelian fashion, religious representations to the concept.”⁴³ This difference between the concept and the judgment he calls an “invincible break” between reason and faith. He then goes on to say, “The mutual promotion of reason and faith, in their difference, is the last word for a finite consciousness.”⁴⁴

The problem is that many philosophies testify to a particular conception of the Absolute, their particular comprehensive construal of reality and the meaning of reality, even atheists in their own way, such as Sartre. In light of this, it seems odd to say of primary affirmations and the philosophical developments of them that they belong to an invincible chasm between reason and faith, that reason or philosophy can only deal with conditions of possibility and not argue for certain construals of possibility, such as those of a Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Sartre, and so on. Moreover, there is a difference between an absolute claim about the Absolute and a fallible testimony to the Absolute, both of which remain within the bounds of philosophy. In fact, Ricoeur ends the article on the hermeneutics of testimony not with the sharp contrast between reason and faith that he had just mentioned but with a contrast between two seemingly epistemological philosophies, “We must choose between philosophy of absolute knowledge and the hermeneutics of testimony.”⁴⁵ Ricoeur seems to conflate these different dynamics in these articles. In his hermeneutical arc, he defends the epistemological legitimacy of a second understanding that is irreducible to a scientific knowledge of objects, which is much like the hermeneutics of testimony, but in these articles, as we have seen, he takes that imprecision to mark faith over against reason.

ATTESTATION

To complicate matters further, in *Oneself as Another*, published in the late eighties, he put at the epistemological center of a hermeneutics of the self the concept of “attestation,” which seems quite close to the earlier category of “testimony.” He offers a “hermeneutics of the self” that is positioned between the modernist notion of a transparent, unencumbered self and a skeptical dissolution of the self.⁴⁶ He says further, “To my mind, attestation defines the sort of certainty that hermeneutics may claim, not only with respect to the

epistemic exaltation of the cogito in Descartes, but also with respect to its humiliation in Nietzsche and its successors. Attestation may appear to require less than one and more than the other.”⁴⁷

These judgments about the nature of the self also relate to ethical judgments about the good and the moral that Ricoeur develops in his creative synthesis of Aristotle and Kant.⁴⁸ It becomes clear here that he has creatively appropriated Aristotle’s *phronesis* or practical wisdom for his broader usage of attestation. This conclusion is confirmed in his similar reference to “phronetic judgment” in his later book on political judgments, *The Just*.⁴⁹

As such, these judgments about the self and the affirmations of value by the self seem to fit his appeal to “partial, fragmentary, insular knowledge” as related to political judgments about ideology and utopia as well as the considered judgments about interpretation in the hermeneutical arc. These would seem to belong to the realm of knowledge, even if partial. However, “attestation” is obviously quite close to his earlier category of “testimony,” which relates very much to affirmations of religious meaning for the self. They, too, seem to belong to a hermeneutics of the self. Yet, as we recall, he saw these kinds of judgments as across the divide between reason and faith, philosophy and theology.

BLURRING THE LINES

These reflections point to a broad category of phronetic judgment or thinking that runs throughout Ricoeur’s work and manifests itself in a variety of ways. It is, moreover, similar to the way Gadamer appropriated *phronesis* as an epistemological category. As in Gadamer’s idea of “the universality of hermeneutics,” which meant the fundamental place of *phronesis* in all thinking, the tenor of Ricoeur’s overall work is that basic judgments of philosophy, of meaning, of historical, and of interpretive judgment are phronetic.⁵⁰ The fact that these are holistic acts of the understanding that involve tradition and the emotions and are neither wholly objective or certain does not undermine their genuine epistemic nature, especially when he always sees them as allied with considered “explanation.” Yet at other points he takes what seems to be the same kind of reasoning and places it on the side of faith, beyond the capabilities of philosophy. It is striking, then, that Ricoeur had second thoughts about the sharp distinction that he had earlier drawn between reason and faith.⁵¹

While there are practical, political, and sociological grounds for distinguishing religious truth claims and philosophical truth claims, these reflections suggest that such lines are philosophically blurred. A conviction that there is a larger spiritual or rational reality, as in Whitehead, say, or even Hegel, is not necessarily that different as a judgment than the conviction that reality is wholly material. Nor, is it that different from a metaphysical judgment that reality is deterministic or contains freedom. As we have seen, these are phronetic judgments similar in many ways to political and hermeneutical judgments. Some of these are considered philosophical judgments and some

religious, but they are similar in striking ways. Perhaps the factor that makes them similar is not that they are partial, holistic, and underdetermined by the evidence but that they have moved through the testing of testimony in a way that many religious claims have not. In others words, these are all aspects of a hermeneutics of testimony that pertains not only to religion but also to interpretive, historical, ethical, and political judgments. As such, the critical issue for philosophy then is that such judgments have undergone a “trial” and have been tested.

NOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim Kohák, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 87.

2. Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1984), 43, 45.

3. Paul Ricoeur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” in *History and Truth*, ed. Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 21-40.

4. Richard J Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1985).

5. Ricoeur, “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History,” 26-31.

6. Ibid. 22.

7. Ibid. 21.

8. Ibid. 24.

9. Ibid. 25.

10. Ibid. 31.

11. Ibid. 27.

12. Ibid. 29.

13. Ibid.

14. Paul Ricoeur, “The History of Philosophy and the Unity of Truth,” in *History and Truth*, ed. Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 53.

15. Ibid. 55.

16. Ibid. 54.

17. Paul Ricoeur, “True and False Anguish,” in *History and Truth*, ed. Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 294.

18. Ibid. 288.

19. Ibid. 297, 303. He also speaks of this in Kant as “recuperative” reflection. (301)

20. Ibid. 303.

21. Ibid. 304.

22. Paul Ricoeur, “Christianity and the Meaning of History,” in *History and Truth*, ed. Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 94.

23. Ibid.

24. Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed.

John B. Thompson, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 197-221; Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 71-88.

25. Paul Ricoeur, "What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 145-64.

26. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I," in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde, trans. Denis Savage, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 267-68.

27. Ricoeur, "Model of the Text," 210.

28. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, vol. 17, Religious Perspectives (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 351.

29. Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 166.

30. Ibid. 312.

31. Ibid.

32. Paul Ricoeur, "Science and Ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 241.

33. Ibid. 242-43.

34. Ibid. 245.

35. Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 166.

36. Ibid. 167.

37. Ibid. 166.

38. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, vol. 17.

39. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge, trans. David Stewart and Charles Reagan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 120, 130.

40. Ibid. 125.

41. Ibid. 130.

42. Ibid. 150.

43. Ibid. 153.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4.

47. Ibid. 21.

48. Found in Studies 7-9 of Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*.

49. Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). xxii.

50. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xxviii-xxix.

51. Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1984), 45. Ricoeur says in this interview (given apparently in parts in 1995 and 2003), "And I might even concede here a point made recently by my young colleagues Dominico Jervolino and Fabrizio Turolfo that my thought is not so removed from certain religious and biblical issues as my standard policy of

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‘conceptual asceticism’ might have been prepared to admit in the past. I am not sure about the absolute irreconcilability between the God of the Bible and the God of Being.... The tendency of modern French thought to eclipse the Middle Ages has prevented us from acknowledging certain very rich attempts to think God and being in terms of each other. I no longer consider such conceptual asceticism tenable.”