

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)

Andrzej Wiercinski

Preview

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It is with great sorrow that I note the death of Paul Ricoeur, Honorary Member of the International Institute for Hermeneutics. On March 13, 2002, with this same profound sense of loss, we bid adieu to Hans-Georg Gadamer. Two major hermeneuticians of the twentieth century, great supporters of the Institute, and close friends of many of our members are no longer with us. Indeed, an era has passed!

To celebrate Ricoeur's 90th birthday, we published the volume *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003). It was not a formal *Festschrift*; our goal was to address the complexity of Ricoeur's philosophy in the multiplicity of voices that constitute the tradition that we are. Ricoeur had originally offered to respond to all contributions, but his weakening health did not allow him to individually address over 50 papers. Upon receiving the volume, Ricoeur graciously responded with a personal letter:

It is with great joy and gratitude that I receive the volume of the "hermeneutic series" which you have gathered and published. The title renders precisely the tension which runs through all my work: between suspicion and sympathy. This tension resonates with another one which is equally dear to me, between critique and conviction. I am conscious of the fragility of the balances that in turn threaten the unity of my work, and welcome the dynamism which pushes me from one work to another. I am grateful to the pleiad of authors you have solicited. The totality of my work is thus covered and the dominant tone of the authors themselves situates it ... "between sympathy and suspicion"!

When we last met in November 2003 at the International Symposium, *Herméneutica y responsabilidad: Homenaje a Paul Ricoeur* in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, Ricoeur once again expressed his appreciation for the volume, calling it "a thorough and comprehensive companion to his work."

Born on February 27, 1913, in Valence, France, Ricoeur, was "the son of a victim of the First World War" as well as a prisoner of war for five years during the second World War, and a witness to the atrocities of our time, all of which made his personal and intellectual journey a passionate search for the balance between love and justice. He has been a remarkably interdisciplinary scholar, a philosopher of dialogue, whose mission was to bring the tradition alive to his contemporaries. Although he was one of the most influential philosophers of the Twentieth Century, Ricoeur's intellectual depth allowed him to maintain a self-critical stance, to foster dialogue

partners instead of disciples, which is a crucial requirement for hermeneutic understanding. Following Heidegger and Gadamer in understanding existence itself as a mode of interpretation, Ricoeur reinterpreted hermeneutics, seeing it as an art of deciphering indirect meaning. He shared the conviction that life interprets itself; the hermeneutic task was to show *how* existence finds its expression through signs, symbols, narratives, and texts, which are cultural media that require our interpretation to understand their meanings. He established a middle way between Gadamer's hermeneutic with its focus on sympathy and conviction and the radical hermeneutics and deconstruction of Jacques Derrida and John Caputo, which celebrates rather suspicion and detachment. Ricoeur's diacritical hermeneutic allows for a discovery of the other in the self and the self in the other, thus offering new ways of interpreting oneself in terms of otherness.

On a number of occasions Ricoeur addressed the question of the philosopher encountering the message of Christian revelation. He confessed: "This is my case, I am a believer, a Christian of the Protestant confession, to whom it is important to maintain a necessary distance between my faith and my philosophical practice." Ricoeur talked about himself as someone who professes a "*cristianesimo da filosofo*"—a Christianity in the mode of a philosopher. His Christian faith was undoubtedly influenced by his philosophical thought. But the reverse is equally true: his religious convictions made him aware of philosophical problems: evil, suffering, responsibility, and the relationship between love and justice. The real power of the personal God of Christianity lies in a disarmed love. The only icon of God that we have access to is the human face.

While enjoying his overwhelming international recognition, Ricoeur remained a humble man. He was well aware of the fact that even the most elaborated human concepts are temporal, reflecting the finitude of those who create them.

One of the active members of the International Institute for Hermeneutics, Eli Holzer from Bar Ilan University in Israel, responded to my death notice of Paul Ricoeur with a wonderful self reflection. He compared Ricoeur to his "*hevruta*," which etymologically means both a study partner and a friend. For him, even though he had never met Ricoeur in person, he was his study partner, with whom he engaged during years of intimate and intensive studying of texts from his tradition. The Talmud says "O Hevruta, o mituta"—"Either a study partner or death." A truly hermeneutic conversation has this powerful transformative character. It challenges us with its maximalistic demand to allow ourselves to be carried by the subject matter and reaching new self understanding through the long process of appropriation. Paraphrasing Ricoeur, he said: "What would we know about hermeneutic engagement with texts of tradition and with action, with religious language and with the

hermeneutic way of being, if some of these had not been brought to language and articulated by Paul Ricoeur?”

Ricoeur’s final words were “Our Father.”

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