The Philosopher Paul Ricoeur and His Influence on Theological Anthropology

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**Introduction to Paul Ricoeur**

Paul Ricoeur, 1913-2005, was born to a Protestant family in Valence, France, positioned himself in the academy of philosophy, and never claimed to be a theologian (Musser & Price, 1996, p. 387). As I approach this theological paper, I must admit that before this study, I have been unaware of Paul Ricoeur’s work and influence upon philosophy or theology. In my new understanding, his work resides in anthropological and personhood. His work is attested as having a profound and growing influence on theory and practice of theological reflection, biblical scholarship, both in theory and practice (p. 387). Certainly, this is recognized by theologians and religious leaders. Shortly before his death, in July 2003, Pope John Paul II awarded Ricoeur the Paul VI International Prize and acknowledged that the philosopher’s research “manifests how fruitful is the relationship between philosophy and theology, between faith and culture” (Zenit, 2017).

Ricoeur was educated at the University of Rennes and was grounded in the Neo-Kantian tradition and the French influence on Descartes (Musser & Price, 1996, p. 387). He admits to being influenced by Bergson’s *Two Sources on Morality and Religion*, and Barth’s *Commentary on Romans* (p. 388). “Ricoeur acknowledges his indebtedness to several key figures in the tradition, most notably, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger” (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017). In his significant works on anthropology, Ricoeur will answer his objections to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and present challenges to their interpretations of anthropology that pertain to economic conditions of production, the will to power, or the unconscious (Musser & Price, 1996, p. 392).

**Significant Theological Themes and Contributions**

Ricouer begins his work with taking up the issue of the philosophy of the will with his initial concern of the problem of freedom and its possible limitations, nature, and misuse (Musser & Price, 1996, p. 389). His initial work in 1966, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and Involuntary* was intended to be three volumes. The first volume assessed that freedom always requires an aspect of consent to that which is beyond and prior to freedom, which lead him to theological conclusions in the same vein of Christian theologians’ bondage of the will conclusions (pp. 390-391). In this theological turn, Ricoeur’s second volume in 1967 of *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and Involuntary* initially addresses “fallible man” and posits the term “affective fragility” which is the human condition in a constant synthesis between being and nothingness, between the concrete and universal (p. 390). Ricouer follows this with the need to address human’s universal need for embracing “symbolisms of evil” and confessional reasons of myth for faults of defilement, sin, and guilt (p. 390). An important part of Ricoeur’s work assessed numerous collective origins of myth of faults, mostly identifying with a form of the Adamic myth of sin (p. 391). This was a significant turning point in Ricoeur’s work, as he posited that the interpretation of myths are necessary in philosophy to analyze concepts and logical deductions of self-understanding (p. 391).

Ricoeur abandoned his three-volume set *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and Involuntary* at the midway point of volume two due to his conclusion of the necessity of the interpretation of myths. At this point in 1970 he wrote *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, which was ultimately a response against Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Musser & Price, 1996, p. 392), particularly Freud’s hermeneutics of suspicion and structuralism. Ricoeur presents that Freud’s structuralism **may** lead to understanding, yet it is only part of the whole regarding hermeneutics, and Freud’s view does not exhaust all that there is to know (p. 392). What is needed is deepened relationship between explanation and understanding that incorporates objectivity rather than the finiteness of Freud’s structuralism (pp. 392-393). Additionally, Ricoeur presents the need for new understandings that goes beyond finite structures, and brings forth the idea of a living metaphor which continues to give new meanings in new contexts (p. 394). Ricoeur next applies the living metaphor and hermeneutics to religious language, which in a timely manner attacks the dying historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation (p. 395). Ricoeur’s living metaphors outlives the original authors, settings, and audiences, which puts Ricoeur at the head of post-modernism (p. 395). Ricoeur’s works over the next decade consisted of hermeneutics and metaphors with both philosophy and theological implications. In 1984, Ricoeur wrote *Time and Narrative,* which posits that through the narrative we make sense of time, history and fiction weave into the narrative and ultimately, understanding of time must fail (p. 396). In the move from the re-descriptive of the metaphor to the re-figuration of the narrative, humans begin to make sense of their place in time (p. 396). Whether histories are fiction or not, they interweave together to form their own narrative, and thus inform temporal existence and experience. (p. 396). Ricoeur applied this specifically to the Gospel of Mark in his follow-up work, *Figuring the Sacred,* in 1995 (p. 396). Thus again, Ricoeur’s work walks between theology and philosophy.

**Paul Ricoeur’s Current Relevance**

I believe that Ricoeur stands as an important link today in anthropology between philosophy and theology, particularly between the claims of Freud and postmodernism. His work brings together both the theologian and the philosopher. Additionally, Ricoeur’s work is important in postmodernism within the discipline of theology in challenging the historical-critical method of hermeneutics with his presentation of hermeneutics, metaphors, and the use of the narrative. I see Ricoeur as a steadying influence from an abandonment from theology to Marx, Nietzsche, or Freud, or from the abandonment from the social sciences to premodern faith claims alone. In Blundell’s book on Paul Ricoeur, *Between Theology and Philosophy,* he discusses the challenges between the academies of theology and philosophy, and concludes that “a potential solution to this problem is found in the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur” (Blundell, 2017, p. 2). For me personally, as I have experienced a significant shift from Christian evangelicalism to Unitarian Universalism over my lifetime, I welcome Paul Ricoeur as a significant voice of reason regarding anthropological understandings.

# References

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