

RICOEUR

A Guide for the Perplexed

David Pellauer

RICOEUR: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

GUIDES FOR THE PERPLEXED AVAILABLE FROM CONTINUUM

- Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Alex Thomson
- Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Claire Colebrook
- Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, B. C. Hutchens
- Sartre: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Gary Cox
- Wittgenstein: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Mark Addis
- Merleau-Ponty: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Eric Matthews
- Gadamer: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Chris Lawn
- Husserl: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Matheson Russell
- Quine: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Gary Kemp
- Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Stephen Earnshaw
- Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Clare Carlisle
- Rousseau: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Matthew Simpson
- Hobbes: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Stephen J. Finn
- Hegel: A Guide for the Perplexed*, David James
- Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Claire Colebrook
- Hume: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Angela Coventry
- Kant: A Guide for the Perplexed*, T. K. Seung
- Leibniz: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Franklin Perkins
- Marx: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Martin McIvor
- Nietzsche: A Guide for the Perplexed*, R. Kevin Hill
- Plato: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Gerald A. Press
- Spinoza: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Charles Jarrett

RICOEUR: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

DAVID PELLAUER



continuum

CONTINUUM International Publishing Group
The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704
New York NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

© David Pellauer 2007

First published 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-10: HB: 0-8264-8513-8
PB: 0-8264-8514-6
ISBN-13: HB: 978-0-8264-8513-7
PB: 978-0-8264-8514-4

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

This book is for Mary and Michael

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
1 Reading Ricoeur	1
2 Freedom and Nature	5
3 Ricoeur's Turn to Hermeneutics	42
4 The Fullness of Language and Figurative Discourse	64
5 Selfhood and Personal Identity	90
6 Memory, Recognition, Practical Wisdom	109
<i>Notes</i>	139
<i>Bibliography/Further Reading</i>	145
<i>Index</i>	151

ABBREVIATIONS

C&C	<i>Critique and Conviction</i>
CI	<i>The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics</i>
CR	<i>The Course of Recognition</i>
FM	<i>Fallible Man</i>
FN	<i>Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary</i>
FP	<i>Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation</i>
FTA	<i>From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II</i>
HHS	<i>Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences</i>
HT	<i>History and Truth</i>
IT	<i>Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning</i>
J	<i>The Just</i>
LLP	<i>The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur</i> , Library of Living Philosophers, 22
MHF	<i>Memory, History, Forgetting</i>
OAA	<i>Oneself as Another</i>
RJ	<i>Reflections on the Just</i>
RM	<i>The Rule of Metaphor</i>
SE	<i>The Symbolism of Evil</i>
T&N	<i>Time and Narrative</i>

CHAPTER 1

READING RICOEUR

Students may well feel perplexed encountering the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur for the first time. There is so much of it, if one is just counting the number of books and essays. Moreover, if they look at his books in chronological order they will find that Ricoeur keeps adding new topics. He even makes adjustments in how he does philosophy as he finds new problems and new challenges to what he is doing. Since many contemporary philosophers confine themselves to a single question or problem the new reader may wonder whether he really has a significant philosophical lesson to teach us. In fact, there is an overall unity to his work and a common problem or at least set of problems that runs through it. This has become clear since his death in 2005, which closed the canon, so to speak. There will not be another book, on another apparently new topic, even if he was considering one when his health began to fail for the last time.¹ That almost all of his major published work is now available in English translation means that we can look at his work as a whole and trace themes through it, knowing where it ends. When we do that, we see not only that he had many significant things to say on a wide range of topics, but that his many books and essays do hold together as a single philosophical project, even if this project was left incomplete in the end. But he also said that such incompleteness is not necessarily a bad thing. Philosophy, he maintained, applies itself to something it cannot exhaust, so philosophical questions can always be reopened and refined. His death, in this sense, leaves us with work to do ourselves based on what he was able to accomplish. To do that, however, we must first begin to grasp what he was about as a philosopher.

This book is written to help students get started on that task. It is an introduction to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur for those who

may not know much, if anything, about it, but who do have some commitment to philosophical inquiry. It can also serve as a contribution to understanding and better appropriating his thought for those who are already familiar with it to some degree. Because there is so much material to consider, my perspective is not critical but rather expository. One could call it a philosophical narrative, given Ricoeur's own contributions to the theory of narrative discourse. As such, it proceeds in a basically chronological fashion to present an overview of his major writings in terms of a few central themes that run through them and tie them together.

Of course, any exposition must reflect a perspective and some interpretive choices. Mine reflect decisions about what is centrally important to understanding his thought and its contribution to philosophy. Such an approach must also inevitably leave things out. Ricoeur, for example, was very knowledgeable about the writings of the major figures in history of philosophy and returned to these figures again and again both in his teaching and in his writing. But I have chosen to ignore his detailed discussions of other philosophers except insofar as they contribute to seeing how his work unfolds over time. I realize that this means there really is not sufficient discussion here of how and why the history of philosophy was important to Ricoeur – and how this contributed to his own understanding of what he is about as a philosopher. This is a question, therefore, that any serious reader of Ricoeur who decides to pursue his work further will consider. I believe what I have said about it here will be sufficient to show why this is so, but also that it was not necessary to do so in greater detail here.

Ricoeur was a philosopher who was involved in the world beyond professional philosophy to a unique degree. Scholars outside the philosophy guild across a wide variety of disciplines have perceived his work as important. Besides philosophers, it has been discussed by historians, literary critics, legal theorists and jurists, biblical exegetes and theologians, who see in it resources that can help them in their own efforts. They see that he often addresses challenges to their work that call for a response on their part, while, at the same time, they recognize how seriously he takes their fields and has incorporated them into his own project. I have not had the space to pursue these influences here or to discuss how Ricoeur is read by scholars in other fields. I do hope, however, that those coming at Ricoeur from other disciplines will find the account of his work presented

here helpful to their understanding and appropriation of what is valuable in his work.

Ricoeur also had a public influence beyond that of most university professors of philosophy. Anyone who looks at his complete bibliography and his biography will see this. He spoke often to groups of influential people in the churches, society and politics. He wrote regularly for French newspaper opinion pages and well-known journals, such as *Esprit*, with which he was associated for many years. Interviews with him that were published and those broadcast on radio and television would fill a large book, maybe two. He knew many leading figures and politicians. The Pope invited him to dinner. Václav Havel wanted him to speak at his inauguration as president of Czechoslovakia following the fall of communist rule.² This is also material I have ignored in this volume. The bibliography listed at the end of this book will point the way for those who wish to explore his public side further.

Ricoeur did present accounts of his intellectual biography several times over the years. Because all this material is available in English, I have chosen not to dwell on it here.³ Charles Reagan has written a convenient short biography of Ricoeur that also includes a more personal memoir of their friendship for those who wish to know more about Ricoeur's life and experiences (see Reagan 1996). He was raised by his grandparents, following the death of his mother shortly after his birth and that of his father in World War I. He lost a dear sister to tuberculosis in his youth. He himself spent five years as a prisoner of war of the Germans during World War II. During this time, with a colleague, Mikel Dufrenne, he taught philosophy to other prisoners in the camp – and did it so well that the French government agreed to grant degrees to his students following their release at war's end. His life was threatened during the Algerian War because of the stand he took against it. He was actually assaulted by a student who dumped a waste basket on his head in the aftermath of the student riots in Paris in 1968. He endured a number of vicious verbal attacks by French intellectuals who did not like what he was saying. He lost a son to suicide and saw his beloved wife die before him. In a word, he knew life can have a tragic dimension because he experienced the ups and the downs of the twentieth century. He did not seek to avoid allowing this to influence what he was about as a philosopher, even while he committed himself to its autonomy and goal of speaking truth to everyone. The many translations of his

work, in later years into more than twenty different languages, as well as the prizes and honorary degrees he received, show that he found a large audience already during his lifetime.⁴ Yet he always maintained that he would rather that people discuss his work rather than talk about him. Through this book I hope the reader will find encouragement to enter into that conversation. That would be one gift I could return to Professor Ricoeur in gratitude for all he taught me and for his friendship over the years.

CHAPTER 2

FREEDOM AND NATURE

Freedom and Nature was Ricoeur's doctoral dissertation. It was meant to be the opening volume of a projected three-volume philosophy of the will. In it Ricoeur presents 'something like' an eidetic phenomenology of the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary in human existence. That is, his goal is to grasp these two central notions, which make freedom meaningful, in terms of something like their essence, or as conceptually as possible, beginning from a pure phenomenological description. He acknowledges that there are inherent limits to such an approach, however, because human existence is an embodied existence. This raises the problem of motivation as influencing any act said to be freely chosen. What is more, human existence is temporal. But the eidetic approach of phenomenology in seeking an intuition of essences abstracts from the unfolding of action over time, by dividing it into atemporal stages. The question arises therefore how we are to make sense of the overall unity in time of these separate stages. Finally, there is the sheer event aspect of any act of choice to consider. Something happens when we act, but a free act is not just another natural event. It is a new beginning, one that we will, that we chose. So what makes it a voluntary act for which we are responsible and not just another predetermined occurrence in the sequence of natural events? This is the underlying issue of human freedom that Ricoeur wants to address in his philosophy.

WHY DOES HE START WITH THIS QUESTION?

A major assumption of Ricoeur's thought is that while philosophy has its autonomy, it is always dependent on something that precedes

it, which it never fully absorbs or exhausts. Philosophy does have its autonomy in that it chooses its starting point, the question from which it begins. But this question already is situated and motivated by something problematic outside of – and prior to – all philosophy: the non-philosophical or perhaps life, being, or reality. Philosophy arises therefore in response to this non-philosophical reality that precedes it, seeking to make it intelligible in ways that are adequate to what is at issue concerning our experience of it. This idea of an autonomy without independence for philosophy runs throughout Ricoeur's work, setting limits to what philosophy can achieve without ever denigrating or denying its achievements. Ricoeur's is an understanding of philosophy, therefore, that implies that philosophical questions are always capable of being reopened, and also that there may be unrealized resources in earlier philosophers' works that can be taken up and developed further. This is one reason why he will reject all talk about an end of philosophy in the sense of philosophy having exhausted itself. It also accounts for the tension between continuity and discontinuity that runs through his later constructive formulations, particularly his theory of narrative discourse but also his 'little ethics' and his philosophical anthropology of the capable human being.

We need also to note that there are a number of assumptions and influences operative in the way Ricoeur poses his initial philosophical question and project. These can be taken as sources of his thought without taking away from the originality of his starting point. First, drawing on the philosophies of Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Ricoeur sees that the subject–object model that has characterized philosophical thinking since Descartes is problematic. It does not finally make sense of our experience of ourselves, others, or the world we live and act in. This subject–object model presents itself as a theory of knowledge, but Ricoeur sees that it is based on what really is a metaphysical model in which a subject is related to an object through being conscious of that object and representing this object to itself as subject. This model is metaphysical because it presupposes that the subject and the object in question, or the two of them in relation to each other, are and must be real. Descartes' famous discovery of the *cogito* – our lived experience of our inability to deny our own existence – thus involves both epistemological and metaphysical aspects. The epistemological aspect is seen in that fact that in the *cogito* I know something for certain, that I exist, hence

some knowledge is possible and therefore, according to Descartes, we can establish a basis for recognizing what else can count as knowledge: anything equivalent to the self-evidence of the cogito or derivable from it.¹ Furthermore, since we experience our existence as real, this experience presents an initial example of what reality must mean for us. But because Descartes first formulated this as the discovery of an epistemological model, he did not really develop its metaphysical side. His philosophy sought to account for the very possibility of knowledge, over against the threat of scepticism, by 'showing' us such knowledge. When something is known in this way, because it cannot be doubted, and hence is certain, then it can rightly be said to be the *object* of knowledge and hence known 'objectively'. Yet at the same time, this known object is always an object for a knowing *subject*, the one who performs and experiences the cogito. In this sense, for the Cartesian model there is no objectivity without subjectivity, no objective knowledge without subjectivity, without some knowing subject to whom it is known. Correspondingly, there is apparently no objectivity without subjectivity, a point that Ricoeur will take very seriously in formulating his own philosophical method. However, he also sees that this subject is as yet no one in particular; it is any one at all insofar as that person is a knower.² Paradoxically, because it is no one, it can also be everyone; hence it is both everyone and no one, at a price that has to be considered.

Two further problems set the framework for Ricoeur's initial philosophical question. The Cartesian subject knows itself; at least it knows itself as existing, because as long as it thinks, it cannot doubt its own existence. But if what a subject knows is always an object, there is a problem about its knowledge of itself. Does it know itself as an object, and hence no longer as a subject? Or is there another kind of knowing, which we might call subjective knowing, which is also a kind of knowledge, but not objective knowledge? Secondly, there is a question of how one subject knows another subject. When he discovered the cogito, Descartes already puzzled over this question. How can we recognize another human mind, since all we see are objects standing over against us however intelligent their behaviour may seem to us? These problems raised by this Cartesian model continued to be a major topic for Ricoeur, to the point that in the end he came to see the model as 'broken' and in need of reformulation as the problem of selfhood, the selfhood of a capable human being.

Another factor influencing Ricoeur to pose his initial question as he does was Kierkegaard and what we label as existentialism. As Kierkegaard forcefully argued, given Descartes' model, the subject is not and can never be an object, for the very subject-object model divides the two into separate categories at the same time that it relates them through what Descartes called consciousness, particularly that specific form of consciousness we call knowing. For Kierkegaard, and for existentialism in general, this leads to a major problem. The model calls for a subject, but the subject as already stated is no one in particular. It is me only in the abstract sense that I can be, am a knower. But this seems to leave something important out, whatever it is that makes me, me – and you, you – and not someone else. Yet, at the same time, without such subjectivity, can I really say that I am me, that I exist? This is another reason why, in the long run, Ricoeur will propose that what is at issue is the nature of the self, where this self is more an agent than a knower, but an agent who has a specific identity and who is responsible for his or her actions.

I will label this emphasis on the uniqueness, the singularity of individual existence – what Ricoeur will subsequently call our selfhood – the existential thread in Ricoeur's philosophy. The three twentieth-century thinkers already mentioned, Marcel, Heidegger and Jaspers, all influence how he takes up this existential critique of Descartes and questions the subject-object model. For Marcel, the subject, the existing individual, is always incarnate. But this leads to the puzzle that we say both that I have a body and that I am a body. How are we to account for the unity of the I and its lived body? Marcel tried to make sense of this through a practice of concrete reflection, which he sought to illustrate dramatically through writing plays as well as philosophy. For Ricoeur, this unity of the incarnate subject is most evident in human action, hence his concern for the question of freedom.

For Heidegger, at least in *Being and Time*, Dasein, which names the existence each one of us is, has to be understood as existing as being-in-the-world rather than as a subject who objectifies over against itself what the world contains from a position itself not located inside this world. Hence Dasein has to be described in terms of a model or structure of finite, worldly existence rather than simply as some form of purely subjective existence that stands over against the world and even outside it. Heidegger's critique was also