The joy of yes: Ricoeur: Philosopher of hope

by Kevin J. Vanhoozer in the August 23, 2005 issue

Discussions about hermeneutics—the theories and practices of interpretation—are ubiquitous. We all read texts—whether these be histories, novels, musical scores, paintings, playscripts or anything else humans produce that has meaning—and we are all interpreters of texts who argue over their meaning and over our interpretations. The question of our time is: Is there anything beyond our various interpretations?

Paul Ricoeur, the leading hermeneutic philosopher of the 20th century, "disappeared" (as the French say) in May at the age of 92. Of what special significance is his passing to pastors and theologians? Why should we care? We should care about Ricoeur because his philosophy enables us, jaded denizens of a post-Christian world, to care—to believe, to hope, to love—again, and this without sacrificing our intellect. He is the hermeneutical equivalent of John the Baptist, preparing the way for a new hearing of hopeful words.

Ricoeur's central insight is that understanding depends on interpreting texts that mediate the meaning of and nourish our existence—especially poetic and religious texts that foster memory, faith and hope. Understanding comes from situating ourselves "in front of" texts that display the full range of human possibilities and capacities.

"The symbol gives rise to thought" (*Symbolism of Evil*). Ricoeur never tired of insisting that creative language gives to thought something that reason cannot discover on its own. Thus the whole style and substance of Ricoeur's philosophy concerns faith and is colored with a distinctly Christian hue. In contrast to that of Jean-Paul Sartre, his contemporary in postwar France, who described being human as "a useless passion," Ricoeur's philosophy is positively charged: "Man is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite" (*Fallible Man*).

His conviction of the primordial goodness of things also accounts for his charity toward other thinkers. He went out of his way to include others in a conversation oriented to something bigger than any one disciplinary aim or agenda. In *Memory*, *History*, *and Forgetting*, he brought the historian's work of remembering into dialogue with different forms of forgetting: repressed memories (psychology), amnesty (politics) and repentance (religion). He even dealt with what the neurosciences contribute to the discussion, though here too he refused to reduce the rich conversation to one discourse only (the biochemical).

Ricoeur's texts display a conspicuous lack of vitriol; his typical response to attack was: "Thank you for contributing to my self-understanding." He even hoped that those with whom he disagreed were somehow in the truth: "Each time we sense deep affinities between realities, points of view, or disparate personages, we are happy" (*History and Truth*). His instinct was not to dilute differences but creatively to mediate them. This was, perhaps, his special talent. While the rest of us line up on either side—modern vs. postmodern; analytic philosophy vs. continental philosophy; religion vs. atheism; red vs. blue—Ricoeur displayed an astounding ability to discern helpful points from all sides and hence to attain higher ground.

Ricoeur's mediating method also informs the three-part structure in his most important works, as well as his famous "hermeneutical arc." The arc begins with a precritical moment of "naïve" understanding. The second moment involves testing that understanding (testing memory by historical investigation, or testing reading by methods of critical exegesis). The crucial third phase of appropriation culminates in a "second naïveté." This is the moment of truth, of grasping not factuality (the literal truth of things) but existence (the metaphorical truth about human possibilities).

These three parts form a single project. To use a Ricoeurian metaphor: they are three masts that carry distinct but interlocking sails that belong to the same ship setting off on a single itinerary. To set sail on Ricoeur's three-masted ship is to embark on a heady philosophical project: a voyage to new worlds—refigurations of human existence—projected by poetic texts.

Ricoeur is an excellent guide through the present cultural and intellectual inferno, and engages major intellectual figures across a host of disciplines. He confronts critical approaches—Freudian, structuralist and Marxist—by maintaining that there is something in language that survives our critical suspicion.

For years, Ricoeur has inspired and challenged the way I do theology, both my overall method and some of my material concerns. This despite his stated preference to take the exegete, not the dogmatician, as his dialogue partner. (He meant it: he coauthored *Thinking Biblically* with his longtime friend, André LaCocque, an Old Testament scholar.) Systematic theologians, he felt, moved from *sacra pagina* to *sacra doctrina* too fast, reducing the rich feast of biblical literature to a mess of conceptual pottage.

Nevertheless, Ricoeur is the quintessential Protestant philosopher: his life and work are a positive witness (*pro* + *testare*) to "the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite." Indeed, his entire philosophy is a profession of faith in the meaningfulness and transforming power of creative language. The words on which Ricoeur wagers—symbols, metaphors and stories—are those that nourish existence. They conjure up imaginative possibilities—the "world of the text"—and invite us to discover truth by appropriating and indwelling them: "In imagining his possibilities, man acts as a prophet of his own existence" (*History and Truth*).

Ricoeur recovered the cognitive significance of forms of language like metaphor (*The Rule of Metaphor*) and of forms of literature like narrative (*Time and Narrative*). This recovery is potentially as important as the Reformers' recovery of the original languages of the Bible.

A second contribution is more subtle. It has to do with Ricoeur's personalism, his treatment of persons in terms not of substance but of "capability": the power to choose, to do and to suffer. Ricoeur marveled at this, our "only human freedom" (*Freedom and Nature*). Embodied and hence embattled, we finite creatures persistently harbor infinite desires and wishes. Narratives matter precisely because they recount and enjoin those actions that unite human projects and worldly events. We begin to grasp the measure of human freedom, then, in the stories and histories that record human-being-as-act.

The artist Paul Klee wanted to see the world anew, like a child: "I want to be as though new-born, knowing nothing." The apostle Paul, reborn, wanted to know nothing but Jesus Christ. Ricoeur, like his namesakes, found a way of seeing that meaning and hope restored to an age marked by what yet another Paul (Tillich, Ricoeur's predecessor at the University of Chicago) called the anxiety of meaninglessness.

The world, for Ricoeur, was made up of all the books he had read, known and loved. It was this world, projected or refigured by these texts, that was the object of his second naïveté—not the present world (that way lies madness—the frenzy of market and media and militarism) but a prospective world in which we may hope.

Ricoeur presented a new grammar of assent in a world where criticism and cynicism held sway. Fostering the ability to affirm and to attest to something one can believe in with all one's heart is a prodigious accomplishment. Ricoeur was a philosophical Moses who traveled through and beyond the desert of modern criticism and who enjoyed not only a glimpse but a long look at the promised land before dying. But how far did he see?

When relating philosophy to theology, Ricoeur typically preferred to respect boundaries rather than attempt a creative mediation. His philosophy begins in wonder but stops just short of worship. His philosophical discourse approximates a number of Christian doctrines: creation, fall, even redemption. His recent work on forgiveness comes breathtakingly close to the notion of justification by faith. What finally intrigued him about the Bible was not its morality (he rejected the economy of retribution typical of the first naïveté) but its eschatology, its hopeful expectation of something other, and better, yet to come. Ricoeur's Pauline, Protestant philosophy bears witness to a more-than-moral order characterized by an economy of the gift and a "logic of superabundance"—in a word, *grace*.

Yet at one point—for confessing Christians, the crucial point—Ricoeur's approximation falls short, even flat. Easter, he thought, means that Jesus conquered death by serving others, who by serving others in turn become his historical "body" (*Critique and Conviction*). Here, as a witness to the resurrection, Ricoeur the philosopher can muster only a lisp rather than an exultant cry ("He is risen!").

Still, Ricoeur's thought takes us to the very threshold of theology. His "second Copernican revolution" dethrones the autonomous knowing subject and directs us to listen to those creative words that form us. Humility is the soul of his philosophy, and eschatology its horizon. Philosophical reflection, as Ricoeur well knew, thus stands under both judgment and promise.

As Ricoeur was fond of saying toward the end of his life, there is forgiveness and, with it, the possibility of new beginnings. This possibility cannot be the object of science or speculative philosophy; it can be spoken of only in the optative mood, subsidized by the currency of the imagination ("may be"). In the eschatological

world of the Bible we hear this word of forgiveness: “You are better than your works.” Ricoeur proclaimed this word to all who had ears to hear: to the discouraged and the disenchanted, to theologians and philosophers, psychologists and politicians. There is reason to hope that despite the uncertain sound of his testimony to the risen Christ, this Protestant philosopher too is in the truth.