Introduction to the Study of Religion

Discussion I: Ricoeur

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Oct. 8, 2013

"Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" (1975)

Key Themes: Provisionally speaking, Paul Ricoeur's approach to religion is both phenomenological and hermeneutical. At one and the same time, he wants to get at the lived experience of religion in a way that's based on interpreting religious texts. Ultimately, he'll want to interpret them in such a way that—without being totally severed from the past—they can still be re-activated in experience today. (See: "What is a Text?") Here, his main goal is to suggest that you can't have phenomenology without hermeneutics or hermeneutics without phenomenology. They mutually presuppose each other.

Phenomenology: Ricoeur comes from a background in the philosophy of 'phenomenology' as it was developed by the early twentieth-century thinker Edmund Husserl. Husserl's main goal had been to develop a rigorous, even scientific approach to the most 'un-doubtable' basis of human experience.

> *A thought experiment which may or may not help:*
> Someone says, 'I see a cardinal.'
> *This statement is open to doubt at both ends:*
> (1) What is the status of the 'I' who sees? (Is she who she says she is? Is she dreaming? Etc.)
> (2) What is the status of the object seen? (Is it really a cardinal? Or some other kind of red bird? Or does it just look red from here? Etc.)

To oversimplify, Husserl wanted us to focus on the *'sees'* part of the statement, not the 'I' (subject) or the 'cardinal' (object). His claim was this: whether or not 'I' am who I think I am, whether or not that object is what it appears to me to be, it is true that some kind of 'seeing' (even 'seeing as') is taking place. This is the indubitable basis of experience. That's what makes it like 'scientific evidence' for a science of lived experience.

> *Another way of phrasing it:*
> Even if I am not who I think I am, even if that cardinal is not a cardinal, it is true that an appearance (*phenomenon*) of some kind is taking place.
> *We can now express it this way*:
> ('Whoever I am') *sees* ('what appears to be a cardinal').
> The 'scare quotes' here tell us that it's no longer a question of existence; it's merely a question of experience. We no longer ask: 'But, wait, is it really a cardinal?' Instead, the phenomenologist asks: 'Does an appearance take place?' And the answer—for phenomenology defined this way—is 'Yes, even if that appearance does not correspond to something that actually exists.'
> The task of phenomenology is then to give an account (*logos*) of these appearances (*phenomena*) that treats them as the basic evidence of life-experience.

Now it didn't take long for Husserl (and generations of followers) to figure out that this search for a basic core of experiential evidence soon leads to the question of *meaning*. The fact that I see something and take it—interpret it—*as* a cardinal raises the question of what cardinal *means*. (This is tied into all sorts of related issues: the role of language in perception; the way that inherited 'meanings' condition my expectations about the world; etc.) Phenomenology, as a 'science' of experience, then turns out to be about the 'interpretation' of experience. That leads us to…

… Hermeneutics(!): Hermeneutics is the study of and reflection on interpretation (in the broadest possible sense). Ricoeur is convinced that phenomenology needs to do justice to hermeneutics if it wants to understand how meaning relates to experience. Accordingly, any phenomenology of religion—any attempt to get at what it's like to experience life in a religious way—would have to depend on a hermeneutics of religion. That is: we would have to look at how meanings are put together and passed down through texts over time.

Mutual Dependence: Ricoeur's goal, though, is not to replace phenomenology with hermeneutics. He's not saying that a phenomenology of religious experience is totally impossible, and so we should only re-read religious texts. Instead, he's saying that we have to interpret those texts in order to then bring them back to bear upon 'religious' experiences in real life. So: phenomenology needs hermeneutics to get at *meaning*; hermeneutics needs phenomenology to get at *experience*.

"What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding" (1970)

Key Themes: But to really understand why hermeneutics 'needs' phenomenology, we have to look back to this earlier essay. Here Ricoeur makes the argument that a systematic *explanation* of a text (e.g., a myth) does not give us an *understanding* of that text. To have an 'understanding,' in his sense, is to interpret the text in such a way that we can reactivate it in our own socio-historical context. That is: we have to bring the meaning of the text to bear upon our own lived experience. This is how hermeneutics comes back to phenomenology. Without this *fulfillment* of textual meaning, we would have only the *suspension* of the text: it would hang there, dangling all its possible meanings, not being brought back down to earth and into contact with the realm of actual experience.

Some Questions for Discussion:

1. What is the difference between explanation and understanding in Ricoeur's terminology? More important: what is *at stake* in that distinction? Why does it matter? What is he getting at?
2. What do you think Ricoeur means when he suggests that phenomenology and hermeneutics mutually presuppose one another? What does hermeneutics offer that phenomenology doesn't? What does phenomenology, in turn, offer that hermeneutics doesn't?
3. Does Ricoeur's approach—both phenomenological and hermeneutical—have anything specific to do with the study of religion in particular? Or, from the opposite direction, what might the study of religion have to gain from including phenomenological or hermeneutical insights? What kind of content is a 'phenomenology of religion' looking for? A 'hermeneutics of religion?'

4. Ricoeur's claims about re-activating a text from the past—bringing it to a kind of 'fulfillment' in and for our era—are contentious (as we saw in class). Is there a way to 'appropriate' or 'receive' a text that interprets out of it a meaning that speaks to current concerns without violating the historicity of the text? (By 'historicity,' I'm grouping together concerns about the original authorial intent, the historical use of a text by specific communities, etc.)
5. To make that last question briefer: is there a 'zero sum game' being played between authorial intent and new, contextually interpreted meanings? Or is there a way both can somehow be accommodated? What do you think Ricoeur's stance is on this?

The Symbolism of Evil (1967)

The Phenomenology of Confession

Introduction: Ricoeur uses his introduction in a somewhat unusual way. Instead of merely laying out the steps of his argument, he writes a mini-essay on the experience of 'confessing' one's evil or badness (within certain historical, cultural, and intellectual parameters). In his attempt to develop a philosophy of religious consciousness and its experience, he wants to begin with the idea that 'confessing evil' is a key component of that experience. Philosophy would then ask the confessing consciousness: 'well, what do you mean by evil?' Ricoeur then tries to lay the groundwork for his argument—what a symbol is, what a myth is, etc.—while also using this topic of 'confession' for an introductory thought-exercise. He calls this a propaedeutic: it's meant to 'instruct' (Greek *paideu-ō*) us 'in advance' (*pro-*), so that we will be in the right frame of mind to receive his arguments about particular symbols and myths.

Speculation, Myth, Symbol: As a philosopher, Ricoeur remains interested in *speculation*, or a systematic approach to thinking through problems (e.g., the problem of evil). However, given that he sees philosophical enquiry as embedded in a historical tradition of meaning (cf. hermeneutics), he thinks that there are some topics that must first be addressed within that tradition itself, before they are 'elevated' to the level of abstract analysis. Before we speculate about 'what evil is,' then, we'll have to look at how evil has been talked about within some specific historical cultures. We'll have to look at a tradition's *myths*: the stories we tell ourselves about evil. These myths, in turn, are narratives that string together smaller units of meaning: *symbols*. These symbols are obviously related to hermeneutics, since they are what we interpret when we read myths. But, for Ricoeur, they also have a phenomenological component: they connect us, almost immediately, to certain experiences in ourselves (a feeling, a 'sense' of something).

Not Just Allegory: By symbol, then, he does not just mean that we see a symbol (*x*) and, running it through some translation software, figure out that it stands for something else (*y*). The interpretation of symbols would then just be doing a 'find/replace' on the myths we read: wherever we see an *x*, we know that it's really a *y*. The End. Ricoeur associates this 'find/replace' function with allegory (and we could challenge him on that, but let's grant it for now). What he wants to aim at when we think of symbols is instead a transition from textual interpretation to lived experience. So when I encounter the symbol *x*, I don't think *y*, but instead feel

something different in my own lived experience. Symbols should 'light up' some aspect of that lived experience; otherwise, they're dead symbols.

Contingency of Historical Symbols: At the end of his introduction (p. 19-24), Ricoeur acknowledges that there's a fundamental contingency in his project. That contingency comes out of the fact that he has to start from within a certain historical tradition of symbolism. His happens to be 'Western,' which he takes to be a kind of encounter between philosophy as it was practiced by the Greeks and ancient Jewish culture. He is not saying that all humans from every possible background must be held up to some standard of Western symbolism. Instead, he is trying to get from a historically situated position—the symbolism of evil in 'Western' texts—to a broader understanding of the experiences those texts can evoke.

It may seem awkward that he puts historical contingency side by side with a description of human experience, but his procedure here is related to how he sees phenomenology and hermeneutics intersecting (see above). Phenomenology's openness to meaning also opened it up to history, culture, contingency. The 'bare evidence' of lived experience was then made slightly less bare, since it comes to us dressed in historically and culturally influenced clothing. If we want to get at meaningful experience, then, we have to start with specific historical traditions and then try to go through them to reach out at something more broad-ranging. In other words, we have to start with *symbols* and go through *myths* before we get at abstract or universalizing *speculation*.