Studies in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur

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Studies in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur, a series in conjunction with the Society for Ricoeur Studies, aims to generate research on Ricoeur, about whom interest is rapidly growing both nationally (United States and Canada) and internationally. Broadly construed, the series has three interrelated themes. First, we develop the historical connections to and in Ricoeur’s thought. Second, we extend Ricoeur’s dialogue with contemporary thinkers representing a variety of disciplines. Third, we utilize Ricoeur to address future prospects in philosophy and other fields that respond to emerging issues of importance. The series approaches these themes from the belief that Ricoeur’s thought is not just suited to theoretical exchanges, but can and does matter for how we actually engage in the many dimensions that constitute lived existence.

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Paul Ricoeur and the Lived Body

Edited by
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The idea of publishing a collection of essays on Paul Ricoeur and the lived body was initially conceived by Cyndie Sautereau and Gonçalo Marcelo. I am grateful to Cyndie and Gonçalo for setting in motion an endeavor that for me has proven to be intellectually enriching. Although the shape this project ultimately took differs from its original outlines, the themes and topics addressed by this volume’s contributors advance new insights into how engaging critically with a reflection on the body as one’s own enhances our understanding of our mode of incarnation in the world. From the way the body figures in the construction of identity to a consideration of how feelings and passions weigh on our dispositions and deeply held beliefs, the chapters in this book attest to the enduring power of Ricoeur’s reflections and analyses of the body as lived through extending the critical reach of their explorations into the connections between our incarnation as flesh and ethics, affects, our cultural and social condition, and ideology critique.

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Foreword

The Swing Door of the Flesh

Richard Kearney

Although Ricoeur never devoted a single full-length study to the body, his work makes significant contributions to our understanding of the subject. In the 1950s, Ricoeur developed a phenomenology of embodiment as part of his investigations into the relationship between freedom and nature, or more precisely between the voluntary and the involuntary (to cite the early titles of his overall philosophy of the will). But before this early phenomenology could develop into a full diagnostics of carnal signification, Ricoeur took his famous “linguistic turn” in the 1960s refocusing his attention on a hermeneutics of the text. There are however some fascinating insights into the role of the body throughout Ricoeur’s explicitly hermeneutic period—as several essays in this volume attest—and in his later writings, most notably Oneself as Another (1990), Ricoeur reopens a dialogue between his initial phenomenology of the flesh and his mainstream hermeneutics of language.

Let me offer some prefatory remarks on Ricoeur’s formative analysis of the body in Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1950) before returning to his late study of flesh in Oneself as Another, published shortly before his death. The three particularly relevant sections of Freedom and Nature are “Motivation and the Corporeal Involuntary,” “Bodily Spontaneity,” and “Life: Structure, Genesis, Birth.” What interests Ricoeur here—as he makes his way beyond Cartesian dualism—is what he terms the “incarnate cogito.” What, he asks, is the corps propre (proper body), announced by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty? Starting with the phenomenon of “affectivity,” he notes that “[t]o feel is still to think” [sentir est encore penser].1 Carnal affectivity is thus a mediating sensation between our flesh and blood existence, on the one hand, and the thinking order of interpretation, evaluation, and understanding, on the other. So while Ricoeur appears to start from a Cartesian
model, asking how the two sides come together, he soon discovers that what he calls the flesh is already thinking in the sense of discerning and evaluating.

Ricoeur's diagnostics of the lived body begin with an analysis of need. Need, of course, is often thought of (in Levinas, for instance) as an object, as something that can be satisfied, as biological or natural, in contrast to desire, which operates on the ontological level. Ricoeur replies that in fact there is already a hermeneutics of interpretation at work in need. He explains, "No longer is consciousness a symptom of the object-body, but rather the object-body is an indication of a personal body (corps propre) in which the Cogito shares as its very existence." Affectivity and thought are thus connected from the outset by a tie of mutual inherence and adherence. The two bodies (inner and outer, Leib and Körper) are not separate relations but are two ways of "reading" the same flesh—externally (as nature) and internally (as incarnation). Need thus cannot simply be placed on the side of external nature and reduced, naturalistically, to a mere reflex sensation transmitting an organic defect in the form of a motor reaction. Need expresses itself in terms of pleasure with motivating values and tendencies that are not imposed by rational consciousness but are already present in the most basic relations. As Ricoeur notes, it is not a "re-action but a pre-action"—an "action towards." In other words, need reveals me not as a mere mechanism of stimulus-response but as "a life gaping as appetition for the other." To have needs is not to be determined by them; we are continually discerning between needs and pre-reflectively evaluating when best to realize or to suspend them: "It is because the impetus of need is not an automatic reflex that it can become a motive which inclines without compelling and that there are men who prefer to die of hunger than betray their friends." Human beings have the ability to choose between hunger and something else. Think, for example, of Gandhi or Bobby Sands choosing hunger strike over food. That we have this freedom means that our sensations and appetites are already a savvy of life, a basic carnal sapiencia or savoir-faire. As Ricoeur states, "Through need, values emerge without my having posited them in my act-generating role: bread is good, wine is good. Before I will it, a value already appeals to me solely because I exist in flesh; it is already a reality in the world, a reality which reveals itself to me through the lack." In short, evaluation is already at work at the most basic levels of our everyday existence. Values are meaningless unless they touch me; thus, ethics itself requires the mediation of flesh. In this way, though Ricoeur does not actually use the word "hermeneutics," what we might call his early "corpo-hermeneutics" already offer a sort of proto-hermeneutics of flesh to which he will not return for some sixty years.

With the so-called " textual turn" in the 1960s, Ricoeur moves from a phenomenology of the body to a hermeneutics of the text. But there is a very interesting essay published in 1964, "Wonder, Eroticism, and Enigma," in which the question of eros returns with striking urgency. In this particular essay, Ricoeur opposes eros to language. Wary of what he calls the "immediacy" of the "flesh-to-flesh" relationship, Ricoeur contrasts it with the "mediation" of language and interpretation. Stated simply: "Sexuality demediatizes language; it is Eros not Logos." Anticipating Jacques Derrida's critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in Le Toucher, Ricoeur suspects eros of haptic closure. For him, eros is something that "mobilizes language" only insofar as "it crosses it, jostles it, sublimates it, stupifies it, pulverizes it into a murmur." In a way, flesh-to-flesh relationships, erotic relationships, are unmediated, unruly, somewhat mad. Eros does not conform to either an ethic of marriage or a technique of sexual behavior. It is what he terms "mythical." Of course, Ricoeur is not against eros, but he does not yet consider it eligible for hermeneutic understanding. Ultimately, says Ricoeur, two persons in the grip of eros have no idea what they are doing, what they want, what they are looking for, or what it all means. If you ask what the purpose of the drive is, you will not find an answer. Eros participates in a network of powers whose cosmic connections we have forgotten, and the closest we can get to the "truth of sexuality," concedes Ricoeur, is through indirect readings of ancient texts and myths. Like a lost Atlantis sunk within us long ago, it has left sexuality as "flotsam (épave)" in its wake. Hence, the enigma of eros. The meaning of this submerged, dislocated universe is no longer available to us in terms of immediate participation, and the best we can do is have a hermeneutics of texts that can take us to eros après coup, indirectly, via mediation—which is not going to enlighten anyone in the throes of erotic passion. The only real kind of love is l'amour fou! In this curious essay, first published in the journal Esprit, there is, for Ricoeur, a marked divide between the hermeneutics of the text and the lived experience of eros.

This particular opposition between eros and logos is overcome in Oneself as Another (1990), which is essentially a reprise of the phenomenology of the body of the 1950s in the light of Ricoeur's thirty-year hermeneutic detour. In the final chapter, he defines flesh as "the mediator between self and a world which is taken in accordance with its various degrees of foreignness." As such, it reveals a certain lived passivity where the body, in the deepest intimacy of flesh, is exposed to otherness. Husserl and Levinas are Ricoeur's two main interlocutors in this text, where he proposes that flesh can mediate between the immanence of Husserl's Körper and the transcendence of Levinas's visage.

The dialectic of passivity-alterity that he identifies in the experience of the flesh signals the enigma of one's own body. To say it phenomenologically (as Ricoeur does), how can we fully experience the human body if it is not "a body among others" (Körper) and "my own" lived body (Leib), at one and the
same time? We need both. Namely, to understand how we can experience the intimacy of the body from within, as Leib, and also to understand it in terms of the externality of the world, as Körper.

Here Ricoeur makes the striking point that it is not, as might be expected, in Heidegger’s existential phenomenology that we discover the great ontology of the flesh. Heidegger’s Dasein has no real body, no sexuality (as Sartre was the first to point out in Being and Nothingness). It is rather Husserl who offers the “most promising sketch of the flesh that would mark the inscription of hermeneutical phenomenology in an ontology of otherness.” In the Cartesian Meditations—written ten years after Idees II—Husserl had argued that in order to constitute a “foreign” subjectivity, one must formulate the idea of “ownness”—namely, flesh in its difference with respect to the external body (of others seen by me or of myself seen by others). Flesh opens up a realm of Leibhaft (immediately embodied givenness), excluding all objective properties. It is the pole of reference of all bodies belonging to this immanent nature of ownness. And it is by pairing one flesh with another that we derive the notion of an alter ego. But here we return to the deeper paradox: flesh as a paradigm of otherness. Flesh is what is both most radically mine and most radically other, what is closest to me and furthest from me at the same time. This enigma of far/near is revealed most concretely as touch. Commenting on Husserl, Ricoeur explains that as the center of pathos, our flesh’s “aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch.” In this, Husserl and Ricoeur are (at least implicitly) going back to Aristotle’s De Anima. Flesh precedes and grounds both the “I can” and the “I want”; it precedes even the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary. As Ricoeur explains, “flesh is the place of all the passive syntheses on which the active syntheses are constructed, the latter alone deserving to be called works (Leistungen); the flesh is the matter (hule) in resonance with all that can be said to be hule in every object perceived, apprehended. In short, it is the origin of all ‘alteration of ownness.’”

Ricoeur concludes accordingly that flesh is the support for selfhood’s own “proper” otherness. For even if the otherness of the stranger could be derived from my sphere of ownness—as Husserl suggests—the otherness of the flesh would still precede it. The otherness of the other is preceded by the otherness of my flesh. Otherness appears most strikingly precisely in its uncanny intimacy: it is so buried within us that it appears to us as foreign and scares us, even horrifies us—but it is actually our own otherness. We are strangers to ourselves, as Julia Kristeva reminds us. Ricoeur therefore departs from Husserl when the latter seeks to derive the objective world from the primordial space of immediacy that he calls the flesh, for such an attempt ignores that flesh is not just mine but is equally a body among other bodies—both Leib and Körper at once. To make flesh part of the world (mondanéiser), one has to be not simply oneself but oneself as another—a self with others, a body with others. And it follows that the otherness of others as “foreign” relates not only to the otherness of my flesh (that I am) but also exists prior to any reduction to ownness.

Here one recalls Freud’s notion that eros blindsides us by coming from within, from behind, and from outside us—the first trauma. In phenomenology too, it comes from the depths of our own uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit), our own inwardness, our own flesh—and yet also from the otherness of the other person, whom I will never know fully and who will never know me fully. The flesh can appear in the world as a body among bodies only to the degree that I am already an other among others, a self-with-another “in the apprehension of a common nature, woven out of the network of intersubjectivity—its own founding selfhood in its own way.”

Ricoeur concludes this highly intricate and enigmatic analysis by observing that although Husserl recognized the primordiality of subjective flesh and the necessity of intersubjective language, he could not reconcile the two. He remarks, “It is because Husserl thought of the other than me only as another me, and never of the self as another, that he has no answer to the paradox summed up in the question: how am I to understand that my flesh is also a body.” In short, Husserl could not adequately account for both the flesh’s intimacy to itself (in the absolute immediacy of immanence) and its opening onto the world (through the mediation of others). He had a carnal phenomenology but lacked a carnal hermeneutics—and only the latter, Ricoeur suggests, can provide a full account of the ontological relationship between flesh and world.

Ricoeur criticizes Levinas for an error opposite to Husserl’s: traversing flesh too quickly toward alterity. According to Levinas, the face of the other is a trace, not flesh, and, observes Ricoeur, “[n]o middle ground, no between, is secured to lessen the utter dissymmetry between the Same and the Other.” Flesh for Levinas is in the realm of the sensible, which for him is related to the feminine, the obscure, the pre-hermeneutic in every sense of the word, not to the face. Levinas, says Ricoeur, needs Husserl in order to become more enfleshed. The face of the other needs the language of touch. The face cannot be only the discarnate voice of the master that solicits and commands us; it must also come to us through sensibility. To be clear, Ricoeur is not anti-Levinas; he is trying to bring Levinas and Husserl together and is grappling with the question of how to have both radical alterity and the flesh as givenness. He sees a half-open door in both Husserl and Levinas—and true to his chosen role as hermeneutic mediator, he pushes the door open to find a middle way.

What, then, does Ricoeur’s analysis of the body mean for the hermeneutic relationships between self and other? It means first that the other who is a
stranger is also a counterpart who, like me, can say “I.” To cite Oneself as Another again, the transfer of sense shows how “she thinks” signifies “she says in her heart: I think,” and at the same time, it reveals the inverse movement of “she thinks and feels in a way that I can never think or feel.” I am called by the other who comes to me in a way that I cannot fully assimilate or reduce to my immanence. I can respond only by “reading” his or her transcendence in immanence, across distance and difference. Ricoeur in fact speaks of a hermeneutic interpreting of the body by the body that precedes the work of “inference” through formal linguistic signs. This is where he seeks to go deeper than both Husserl and Levinas. He refers to such inference as a primal “relation of indication in which the interpretation is made immediately, much as the reading of symptoms.” And the “style” of confirmation to which this reading of indication belongs involves “neither primordial intuition nor discursive inference.” It entails rather a special grammar of what one might call a carnal hermeneutics across distance, gaps, and differences—carnal hermeneutics as diacritical hermeneutics. But if there is a language of the body, a language of sense and sensibility, of savvy and tact, what language are we talking about? One not only of words, writing, and texts but also of sensing and touching. One not only of intellectual understanding but also of tangible orientation. Thus does the simplest phenomenon of touch lead to the most complex of philosophies—for the simplest is the most complex and remains the most enigmatic? In posing such questions, Ricoeur opens a way where hermeneutics and phenomenology may cross at the swing door of the flesh.

NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY