



Paul Ricoeur is a philosopher who believes in the duty to explain and to comprehend, to understand questions such as: "What makes us human"? He insists on the centrality of interpretation for humanistic learning. Arguing against both the materialist and the idealist positions, he stresses active creative thought and its roles in memory, narrative, history, law, culture and belief. He rehabilitates the Western humanistic tradition as an interconnected fabric of meaning. In Ricoeur's own words, his insights "have to be painfully won on the field of battle of a reflection carried to its limits."

Ricoeur purposefully questions in order to understand. Drawing upon both English-language analytical philosophy and 19th and 20th century European philosophy, Ricoeur presses for intelligible discourse -- for language that illuminates meaning and furthers explanation and understanding. For example, how is it meaningful to assert simultaneously that "I am a different person than I was 40 years ago" and yet "I am the same person"? "In what ways different and in what ways the same"? "What is the nature of personal identity"?

Ricoeur often conducts his exploration through the interrogation of the work of others through discussions, seminars or colloquia. He engages an extraordinary range of philosophers, writers, historians and legal theorists. In the case of those who have died, he explicates and interprets and extends their work, always explaining the links between imaginative language, including narrative and symbolic language, and reality as we live it.

"I believe in the efficacy of reflection," Ricoeur has said, "because I believe that man's greatness lies in the dialectic of work and the spoken word. Saying and doing, signifying and making, are intermingled to such an extent that it is impossible to set up a lasting and deep opposition between 'theoria' and 'praxis.' The word is my kingdom and I am not ashamed of it."

According to Ricoeur, language is crucial -- in the narrative of the historian, in the decision of the judge, in the imaginative creations of the great novelists -- because "man is language." "Through the capacity of language to create and re-create, we discover reality itself in the process of being created . Language in the making creates reality in the making." We create our sense of self through language; it is our work, our promise, which ensures our identity through time, although the physical self may change significantly.

Ricoeur explores polarities, issues where interpretive positions are at odds with each other, in order to "restore a complex unity." His refusal to let the polarities stand as the end of the matter demonstrates the importance of continual effort, the affirmation of humanistic inquiry: "to explain more in order to understand better." For instance, he explains the act of judging as "the fragile equilibrium between two elements of sharing."

Explaining further, Ricoeur says: "It is the just distance between partners who confront one another, too closely in cases of conflict and too distantly in those of ignorance, hate and scorn, that sums up rather well, I believe, the two aspects of the act of judging. On the one hand, to decide, to put an end to uncertainty, to separate the parties; on the other, to make each party recognize the share the other has in the same society, thanks to which the winner and the loser of any trial can be said to have their fair share in that model of cooperation that is society."

Paul Ricoeur was born in 1913 in Valence, a small city south of Lyons. His mother died when he was 7 months old, and his father was killed in 1915 in the Battle of Marne. Ricoeur and his older sister, his only sibling, were raised by paternal grandparents who were strict Protestants. His sister, always in frail health, died in 1932 of tuberculosis at the age of 22. Ricoeur married Simone Lejas, a close friend of his sister, and they had five children. Having done obligatory military service in 1935-36, Ricoeur was mobilized in September 1939. The next year he was captured by the Germans and spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner in Pomerania. During these five years he helped create a camp "university" and worked out some of his basic philosophic ideas.

Ricoeur studied philosophy, first at the lycée in Rennes with Roland Dalbiez, a neo-Thomist who published on psychoanalysis, and then at the University of Rennes. He received a Licence-ès-Lettres in 1933. In 1934 he enrolled at the Sorbonne to study for the "agrégation." Once in Paris he began to attend the Friday gatherings held by the philosopher Gabriel Marcel, who introduced him to the philosopher Edmund Husserl. Having passed the "agrégation," Ricoeur became a professor of philosophy at the lycée in Colmar in Alsace. From 1935 to 1940, he began his prolific career as an author, arguing mostly for Christian socialism and pacifism. As the war approached, he became active in the SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière) and pacifist movements under the influence of André Philip, a Protestant socialist intellectual.

In 1945 Ricoeur began his teaching career at the international Protestant College Cevenol (where he met American Quakers, who invited him to Haverford College 10 years later) and moved in 1948 to the University of Strasbourg. In 1956 he was appointed to the chair of general philosophy at the Sorbonne.

For the next decade Ricoeur wrote continuously as a professional philosopher ("Fallible Man," "The Symbolism of Evil," and "Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation.") He was also an activist, both against the French war in Algeria and as a reformer of the French university system. In 1967 he left the Sorbonne to assume the deanship of the new experimental university at Nanterre. Student and community disruption and unrest forced him to resign in 1969. He then taught for two years at Louvain in Belgium before moving to the United States, first to Yale and then to the University of Chicago. There he succeeded Paul Tillich as the John Nuveen Chair in the Divinity School and was jointly appointed to the Department of Philosophy and the Committee on Social Thought.

Ricoeur remained at the University of Chicago until 1991, writing during those years a number of key books: "The Living Metaphor" (1975); "Time and Narrative" (three volumes, 1983-1985); and "Oneself as Another" (1990), drawing upon the Gifford Lectures he delivered in 1986. Upon his return to France in 1991, Ricoeur has continued to write crucial studies extending his concerns into new fields: justice and law ("The Just," 1995); neuroscience ("What Makes Us Think," 1998); and a return to the study of time ("On Memory, History, and Forgetting," 2000).

As a younger colleague commented: "Ricoeur's profound insight is that a human being is a fallible yet capable creature always aiming at wholeness, a completion, never attainable in time. ... Our lot is to be an incomplete project. More exactly, human existence is always open both to the ever-present possibility of death and yet in imagination and hope to a horizon of meaning that exceeds finitude and death."

Ricoeur's continuing reflection across the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences at a time of proliferating diversity of religious and cultural forms has rejuvenated philosophical discourse for the unending work of interpreting. "What do we mean by our use of language"? "What are the ethical consequences of the ways we conceive of ourselves and others"? This continuing examination of differing ways of thinking, which Ricoeur still undertakes "with the humility necessary to the pursuit of truth," is honored by the award of the Kluge Prize. He died in May 2005