Paul Ricoeur. *Lectures on Imagination*. Ed. George H. Taylor, Robert D. Sweeney, Jean-Luc Amalric, and Patrick F. Crosby. University of Chicago Press 2024. 400 pp. $45.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226820538); $44.99 USD (eBook 9780226820545).

In 1975, Paul Ricoeur taught a course at the University of Chicago called "Imagination as a Philosophical Problem." The course combined a survey of various philosophers' treatments of imagination with a sketch of Ricoeur's own view of the topic. The imagination is a crucial theme for Ricoeur. At the heart of his work is a concern with the emergence of novelty, particularly linguistic novelty—a concern embodied in his well-known slogan, 'The symbol gives rise to thought.' Throughout his career, Ricoeur argued that this sort of novelty is possible because the imagination is—to use the self-consciously Kantian language he favoured here—"productive" rather than just "reproductive" (9). It does not just copy what already exists, but actively organizes experience in a way that makes it possible to "open and change reality" (220). The present volume consists of Ricoeur's lectures for his course on the imagination, and its appearance is the most important event in Ricoeur studies in quite some time. In addition to fleshing out Ricoeur's views on an important topic, the *Lectures on Imagination* provoke new questions about how we should understand the development of his thought. In particular, the book will spur discussion about why Ricoeur's work took the trajectory it did during the 1980s and after, and whether there are promising paths in his thought that remain untaken.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first is an excellent editor's introduction by George Taylor. Taylor gives an immensely detailed overview of the lectures, summarizing their main arguments and drawing connections with Ricoeur's other work. (Especially valuable are the connections made with Ricoeur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, also delivered in 1975.) The remaining three parts of the book consist of the lectures themselves. Part One contains one introductory lecture and five lectures on "classical" (v) treatments of the imagination. There is one

lecture on Aristotle, one on Pascal and Spinoza, one on Hume, and two on Kant. According to Ricoeur, Aristotle inaugurates a tradition of linking the imagination to the topics of perception and truth—specifically, to treating imagination as an "intermediary" (18) between sensation and thought. Aristotle also stresses imagination's "arbitrariness" (22), its freedom to conjure things that do not actually exist. The subsequent thinkers in Ricoeur's history continue these tendencies and work out their implications. Pascal expresses an "ethical prejudice against imagination" because of its "deceptive powers" (34), while Spinoza struggles to reconcile imagination's link to the non-existent with a philosophy of "pure presence" (38). Hume raises the stakes of these debates by trying to derive "all the features of the image… from the most actual and most present of all experience, what he calls the impression" (50). Hume conceives of images as decaying sense, a mere residue of sense experience, while also reinterpreting imagination as a "synthetic power" (49) that actively connects ideas with one another. Kant pushes this dynamism even further, arguing in the first *Critique* that there is a transcendental, productive form of imagination that, by performing a "synthetical function within perception" (63), is a necessary condition for the cognition of objects. Kant's innovation comes at a price, however, since as Ricoeur puts it, "the problem of imagination is now swallowed up by the problem of objectivity," and imagination's "creative power" (63) must be relegated to a different domain—namely, the free play found in aesthetic experience.

Part Two contains Ricoeur's lectures on "modern" (v)—that is, twentieth century—theorists of imagination. There are two lectures on Gilbert Ryle (one of which also engages briefly with H.H. Price), one on Wittgenstein, two on Husserl, and three on Sartre. It is striking that Part Two engages with both analytic and continental thinkers; this sort of ecumenicism was not nearly as common in 1975 as it is today. But Ricoeur insists that "there is a correlation between these

approaches both at the level of the problems they address and at the levels of their methods" (93). He also sees both camps as compromised by the habit of thinking that an image must have "a referent that already exists" (219)—in other words, that imagination is purely reproductive. The lectures in Part Two are, it must be said, a mixed bag. Ricoeur is surprisingly sympathetic to Ryle's thesis that the language we use to discuss imagination has unhelpfully been constructed "according to the model of the picture" (99), but he has doubts about Ryle's attempt to reconstruct it on a model of "pretending" (101). The lecture on Wittgenstein is uneven: it contains some extremely valuable remarks on the role of 'seeing as' in imagining, but also contains passages where Ricoeur seems at a loss to know how to deal with him, to the point where he is reduced to counting and listing the different kinds of examples Wittgenstein uses (129). The lectures on Husserl meander, though Ricoeur does credit him with recognizing that images and perceptions involve distinct modes of givenness (161). But it is Sartre who gets the most sustained attention in Part Two. Ricoeur is ambivalent about Sartre's treatment of the imagination, applauding his efforts to delineate the "particular mode of intentionality" (169) involved in images, while criticizing him for blurring several important distinctions, such as that between "absence" and "existing elsewhere" (183). Above all, Ricoeur objects to Sartre's characterization of imagining as an irresponsible "escape from the task of dealing with things in action, in praxis" (202-203). He argues that such conclusions stem from the narrowness of Sartre's approach, and from his refusal to consider that imagination might disclose new realities, rather than just replicating the existing one.

Part Three, "Imagination as Fiction," presents Ricoeur's own view of imagination. It advances two theses that would seem to be in tension. The first is that the imagination is productive rather than just reproductive, in that it does not simply copy what already exists, but can reveal what is genuinely new. The second is that although the imagination does not merely copy—or rather,

because it does not merely copy—it is capable of referring to reality. Ricoeur calls this phenomenon "productive reference" (219), describing it as a process through which imagination "builds its own referent and therefore opens up new ontological possibilities that were blocked by the already existing" (219). Ricoeur admits that his theory of productive reference is sketchy, calling it "a problem for which I offer a name" (219). His account revolves around what he calls "fictions" (5), which he defines as images that combine "absence" with "critical distance" (12). Unlike portraits or pictures, fictions do not copy something that pre-exists them; unlike hallucinations, they are not confused with reality as it currently is. Lecture 15 describes in general terms what fictions are and what they do. The remaining lectures of Part Three then describe the role of fictions in specific domains: respectively, in metaphor, painting, scientific models, and poetic language. All the lectures in Part Three contain valuable insights. Lecture 16, on metaphor, is an interesting counterpoint to Ricoeur's book *The Rule of Metaphor*, published in the same year as these lectures. Lecture 18 provides welcome detail on Ricoeur's understanding of natural science, a topic about which he wrote less than one might have hoped. But it is lecture 17, on painting, that gives the clearest account of how Ricoeur thinks fictions can refer to reality. He notes that at certain points in the history of painting, artists have renounced the task of producing accurate representations of reality. Impressionism, for instance, strikes Ricoeur as an attempt to reinvent painting in the face of the new technology of photography. Impressionism "tried to beat photography where the latter cannot work by creating a new alphabet of colours capable of capturing the transient and the fleeting with the magic of hidden correspondences" (254). As it did so, "reality was remade, with an emphasis on atmospheric values and light appearances" (254). Impressionism might look like a simple abandonment of the task of depicting reality accurately. But Ricoeur argues that while it is indeed an abandonment of first-order reference, or the direct

reference to objects, it makes possible a new, second-order reference to reality. This new reference is a disclosure of certain pervasive *aspects* of our encounters with objects that would otherwise have gone unnoticed—in the case of impressionism, the "transient," "fleeting" (254) character of perception. Impressionist paintings do not refer to these aspects directly. They do so through the detour of a kind of quasi-representation of objects, the kind that makes it possible to look at a Monet and identify, say, bridges and haystacks. But anyone who thinks Monet's paintings are paintings *of* bridges or *of* haystacks has missed the point.

The next example given in lecture 17 is even more extreme: Piet Mondrian. Mondrian's best-known paintings are not figurative at all: they depict no recognizable objects, containing only colours and simple geometrical elements. But through them, Ricoeur says, "some nonobjective qualities of reality… are depicted"—specifically, a "peaceful intertwining of lines and colours" through which viewers are "directed toward a peaceful way of dealing with people, with things, and toward living according to the peaceful message of the painting" (255). This is an ontology, but a "subtle, indirect ontology, not the kind of direct and still pictorial ontology of figurative painting" (255). In describing this ontology, Ricoeur flirts with phenomenological language, suggesting that non-figurative painting shows the *world* or perhaps our *worldhood*. For Husserl and Heidegger, the term 'world' denotes not a collection of things, but the framework or context in which things are encountered as meaningful. This context, Ricoeur suggests, is what non-figurative paintings can show. He further suggests that such paintings reveal a mode of being that is prior to the distinction between subjects and objects, showing us "our relationship to reality before its objectification, before it is objectified in the form of the recognition of objects that we can control" (256). These are intriguing suggestions, and they recall claims that Merleau-Ponty makes about Cézanne. (See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt,' in *Sense and Non-Sense*,

trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Northwestern University Press 1964.) But overall, Part Three gives the impression that Ricoeur is not quite sure how to describe the way productive imagination discloses reality through fictions. Exploratory language is, of course, perfectly appropriate in a lecture. But it is worth recalling that the works Ricoeur allowed to be published tend to use language that is more guarded.

Even readers with a casual interest in Ricoeur will find the *Lectures on Imagination* interesting. The lectures cut an original path through the history of philosophy, uncovering connections among figures one might not initially think of as related. For serious readers of Ricoeur, the lectures present his most direct treatment of a topic that is central to his project. They are also his most ambitious treatment of that topic, advancing especially strong claims about imagination's ability to remake reality. In his introduction to the volume, George Taylor expresses appreciation for this aspect of the lectures, saying that he admires their emphasis on "those moments when—as in the *shattering* brought both by metaphor and the utopia—the text's power leads the reader to an experience of *seeing as*, of inhabiting a new world" (xxxviii). As Taylor notes, Ricoeur would backpedal from these strong claims in the 1980s, moving away from "the language of reference" and toward a more modest language of "figuration" (xxxvii). From this later perspective, articulated especially in *Time and Narrative*, an imaginative work does not shatter us on its own, but affects us only in conjunction with other factors that constrain it. Poets and painters *configure* experience by representing things in one way rather than another, but their attempts to do so are conditioned by the ways experience is already *prefigured* by the structures of action and temporality, and by the way readers will later *refigure* these works by interpreting them in specific ways. Ricoeur's work of the 1980s therefore offers a "more optional and more modest" view of what imagination can do, and Taylor regrets the "significant cost" (xxxviii) associated with this

shift.

Fair enough. But the flip side of this point is that the *Lectures on Imagination* risk depicting the imagination as *so* powerful in its ability to remake reality that little, if anything, constrains it. And surely there must be *some* limits on imagination's power, if we are to take seriously Ricoeur's claim that images can refer to reality. Reality is that which pushes back against us, and a presentation of reality, even a second-order one, is precisely one where not just anything goes. How, then, can we reconcile imagination's creative power with the obvious fact that it cannot just make up whatever it likes and still claim to be disclosing reality? Ricoeur's shift to the language of figuration strikes me as a reasonable response to this question. If imagination's ability to configure is reined in by prefiguration and refiguration, we have a way to distinguish imaginings that reveal reality from imaginings that invent out of whole cloth. Without some such constraints, it seems, the imagination is playing tennis without a net.

I present these thoughts not as criticisms of Taylor, or of Ricoeur, but as an example of the kinds of questions that are made possible by the appearance of the *Lectures on Imagination*. These lectures invite us to reassess a thinker whom many of us thought we already knew well. If there is anything to the idea that a text's value lies in its ability to give rise to new thought, this volume is a resounding success.

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