

Boyd Blundell

Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return.

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One of the problems affecting the current state of theology as an academic discipline concerns how secular discourse has directed the way theologians respond to provocations from their critics. An ‘either/or’ dilemma emerges: Do theologians attempt to maintain the integrity of theology by refusing to compromise on terminology, concepts, and practices? Or, do they make an attempt at some type of revision through which theology can accommodate and respond directly to these criticisms? The former maintains integrity with the risk of remaining parochial and irrelevant to secular concerns. The latter allows for the application of theology but with the danger of reducing theology to something it is not.

This is the historically defined situation that motivates Boyd Blundell’s study of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur and how his philosophical hermeneutics contributes to the resolution of this dilemma. Though he limits his analysis to ‘North American theological conversation’ (13), the book’s scope clearly has significant and broader ramifications for any scholar interested in theology and philosophy of religion. Blundell, in this sense, makes his position clear—namely, that theology can maintain its integrity and be relevant without compromising itself. Yet to see this as a possibility, it is necessary to set theology alongside Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, which in part clarifies and explains problems in order to gain a better understanding. This process of clarification and explanation is by no means straightforward since the history of Western thought is constituted by a complex adoption and adaptation of concepts and traditions. Blundell therefore sets out to elucidate how Ricoeur tackles such problems through a process of reflective ‘detour and return’ (2) and how this applies to the North American theological conversation gathered around Karl Barth’s work. The former aim can be seen as providing a much needed contribution to Ricoeur scholarship where the breadth of Ricoeur’s thought is presented in a unified and coherent form. The latter aim is both an attempt to break a stalemate within theological debate over the role of theology and to show how Ricoeur contributes to this debate (and how subsequently he has been misunderstood by some of his critics).

The book consists of seven chapters (not including the introduction and conclusion) and is divided into three main sections. These deal, respectively, with the ‘main road’ of theological conversation in North America, the ‘detour’ from this conversation via the philosophy of Ricoeur, linking in particular his theory of narrative

identity to his ethics, and the ‘return’ by which theology employs the conceptual and critical language of philosophy (i.e., Ricoeur’s) to refigure how theology can be ‘appropriated back into the lives and practices of Christians’ (130).

The first two chapters constitute the main road and deal with the central interlocutors in the theological conversation and how Ricoeur’s work has been linked to this conversation. The critical focus is on David Tracy’s use of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and how Tracy’s revisionist theology conflicts with the duo of Jürgen Habermas and Stanley Hauerwas (as well as other postliberal theologians). The purpose of linking Habermas with Hauerwas involves the similarity of criticism leveled against Tracy—namely, that a revisionist position attempting to utilize neutral methods and correlative discourse inevitably compromises theology because ‘it voluntarily surrenders its distinctive identity’ (27). Chapter 2 accounts for the development of hermeneutics, which is no easy task. Yet Blundell manages to pack quite a bit in with concision, and so the shift from this history to the present situation is quite elucidating. Blundell argues that Ricoeur is closer to Tracy’s critics—e.g., Hans Frei—and therefore has been mistakenly taken to be a philosopher seeking some reconciliation between theology and philosophy. Ricoeur’s relevance for theology is made possible because he refuses to conflate the two, thus leading a ‘double life’ (51).

Chapters 3 through 5 concern the detour and develop Blundell’s understanding of Ricoeur’s corpus, focusing on narrative identity and its relation to his ethics. Along this detour, Blundell engages with various relevant debates, perhaps most instructive of which is his comments on the intellectual debt Ricoeur owes to Gabriel Marcel, who is an often neglected figure in Ricoeur’s intellectual history and the history of philosophy in general. The content of these chapters is once again concisely articulated and provides a clear line of continuity in which fundamental philosophical questions concerning ontology and phenomenology are developed by Ricoeur in terms of language and agency. This pushes toward a new conception of identity that is narrative-based and forms Ricoeur’s well-known mediation between the ‘*cogito* and anti-*cogito*’ (95) which, in turn, constitutes the hermeneutics of the self and, in particular, Ricoeur’s ingenious account of selfhood through the dialectic of sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). From narrative identity comes its ethical comportment—that is to say, an analysis of the self is viable only with an ethics in which one accounts for and is imputable to an Other. In the end, the ethical detour into the nature of selfhood never escapes its relation to the Other, and it is here where Blundell finds a link between Ricoeur’s philosophy and theology as an academic discipline. While the ethical sphere of human reflection and agency seeks an appropriate relation to the Other, by virtue of the tension between a never fulfilled teleological aim and moral norms that are always under fire from tragic situations, the Other is that which escapes the philosopher but not the theologian. ‘It remains to be seen,’ writes Blundell, ‘what kind of discourse can take up the conversation where Ricoeur leaves off’ (128). Yet even if this is the case, Blundell maintains that theology cannot do this by itself.

Chapters 6 and 7 develop the return, seeking to establish an amicable relation between Ricoeur and Barth in order to show how Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and its ethical orientation critically supplement Barth's theological anthropology. This return is specific to the North American theological conversation, but also paradigmatic of the way in which theology can practice its academic pursuits. Philosophy and theology should not be conflated, but rather their tension should be held in suspension in order that philosophy can provide a 'corrective detour' (168) to the risks and interpretive dangers inherent to the narrative form upon which theology relies.

In this respect, one of Blundell's most original concepts is that of 'narrative anesthesia' which is developed in Chapter 7 and accounts for the act of taking 'what was keenly desired and attempts to render it undesirable, thus functioning as an anesthetic that dulls the pain of disappointment' (161). Blundell discusses this anesthesia in view of theological problems of understanding sin and the self (166), but it has most force in the transition from narrative identity to ethics. This is because narrative tends to reify identities in terms of sameness (*idem*), drawing a hard line between insider and outsider. Moments, persons, and institutions which challenge such narrative sedimentation can then give rise to narrative anesthesia, translating an encounter with the Other of ethical relations as something to be avoided or ignored. Blundell isolates the problem of evil as one such area in Barth which remains intelligible 'only in terms of the person and work of Christ' (167). For Ricoeur, on the other hand, the problem of evil when philosophically construed remains at the limit of any final reconciliation, resisting various narrative and theoretical attempts to translate and understand it, especially narrow eschatological ones. Seen from this perspective, the engagement with evil in the Christian narrative fails to immerse itself wholly in the problematic, perhaps avoiding a 'pain of disappointment' in being incapable of meeting tragic situations.

This book is well written, concise, and clear. It provides a cogent account of theological debates while at the same time making Ricoeur accessible. Philosophers and theologians interested in the relation between their disciplines will find that this book sets forth a definitive exposition of the main disciplinary and theoretical problems pervading current thinking. Those involved with Ricoeur scholarship will no doubt find Blundell's study a valuable resource for drawing a clear line of intellectual development in Ricoeur's thought. In addition, with regard to the ever-present debate on Ricoeur's position on the philosophy-theology split, Ricoeur scholars will find Blundell's insistence on maintaining the division between theology and philosophy illuminating, if provocative. At times, the number of detours and returns may be difficult to keep track of, but Blundell generally summarizes key points after his excursions and forays. More could have been said of the author's turn toward Ricoeur and Barth as a beginning for 'disciplinary clarity' (129). The book is not modest in its aims, and this way of characterizing the concluding section strikes one as a retreat, or at least as an anticipatory note concerning a more thorough study of Ricoeur and Barth. What appears to lurk beneath and therefore underwrite the pairing of the two is itself an interpretive practice whose pay-off resides in a refiguration

of how we think on either side of the theology-philosophy split. While this remains implicit in the book, it would have benefited from a stronger discussion tying together the exigencies of our historical situation with a particular way of thinking. But this point is minor and in no way detracts from the quality of Blundell's exposition and critical thought.

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