

Book Review, submitted copy, JBV. November 2010. S. Bigger.

Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion, by Alison Scott-Baumann
Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy, 2009.
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The works of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) have become more accessible recently thanks to reasonably priced reprints by the University of Chicago Press. His *Biblical Hermeneutics* of 1975, *From Text to Action* of 1986, and *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* of 1995, bring his work firmly into the orbit of this journal. Living through the 20th century creates “an existential sadness” and yet “the supposedly empty space between the opposites we create is in fact teeming with our desires, fears, illusions and fantasies *and* our enormous potential to do good” (p.170). He opposed French imperial actions in Algeria, and ridiculed the rigid secularism in France that forbade *hijab* dress code for Muslim girls in schools so denying some of them an education. The “masters of suspicion” he discussed were Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, who were sceptical about economics, psychoanalysis and genealogy. Ricoeur wished to learn from this but in a balanced way, since he argued that out of control scepticism is self defeating, as nothing thereafter can be meaningful. These three writers cannot make meaning for us: “we have to do it ourselves” (p.176). For Ricoeur, suspicion has to balance negative with positive. He used the term “hermeneutics of suspicion” (in the title) for a while, but then referred to hermeneutics and suspicion separately as ambiguities began to emerge. Suspicion is important because it is iconoclastic, and it holds no hostages.

Scott-Baumann introduces her study with Cartesian doubt; then she covers the archaeology of suspicion, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the “masters of suspicion”, ending with the use and abuse of the phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion”. Following this, Scott-Baumann covers the theory of interpretation, linguistic analysis, methodological dialectics and philosophical anthropology. In ‘Linguistic Analysis’, Ricoeur denies that critique from outside (notably by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) is hermeneutic at all but better described as critique, especially ideological critique, since ‘hermeneutic’ presumes an insider view and some sort of belief. Suspicion can be debilitating, so he explored the balance between distance and closeness, between the text and the world, between violence and language, and between reader and writer. Time in narrative is artificial: before, during and after are three structural dimensions. In fact, the temporal drive is

not so simple and few of us properly understand the past or glimpses the future, let alone understanding the present. This leads on to a questioning of the self. Scott-Baumann deals with this in "methodological dialectics". Ricoeur challenges the dualism of two opposites: to him, the dialectical relationship between the two is more both/and than either/or, which opens up a "third place" between them (p.115), a self-questioning "hiatus of undecidedness" (p.117), and complementarities (p.133). There is in this "a challenge to the self" and "a critique of reflection as a means to self-knowledge" (p.117). The concept of self is regarded as too tentative, ambiguous, turbulent. Scott-Baumann describes this dialectic as "creative space for deliberating about choices" (p.132) in place of destructive sceptical hermeneutics. Dialectic reasoning promotes a philosophical conversation between different perspectives which provides "a pause in time and a sort of vacuum in space which by its very activity displaces from the centre any hegemonic violence" (p.133). Scott-Baumann contrasts Ricoeur's approach as *philosophical anthropology* (chap. 8) to Levi-Strauss's structuralism. She identifies three strands in an essentially interdisciplinary project: the first, labelled 'the self who acts' is a phenomenological and hermeneutical interest in the self; the second strand focuses on relationships, 'oneself as another'; the third strand is theological, featuring tensions and dialogue between self and others, and expressed by the language of evil. The agenda is not new, and is reminiscent of John Macmurray in Britain: Ricoeur however engages in deep philosophical discussion rather than Macmurray's sermonising. The final section deals with recovery, interesting not least for linking Ricoeur's positivity with the international journalism of Robert Fisk, seeking a balance between justice and forgiveness to prevent the paralysis of negativity.

This is an important book by a writer in full control of her material and with a clear and readable writing style, on a topic that is significant for both education and religious studies. It goes to the heart of Ricoeur's thinking, the need for suspicion so that our understanding and knowledge is not subject to other people's honest or dishonest persuasiveness. However, if that suspicion is total, its negativity will be paralysing and we are left only with despair and absence of meaning. Ricoeur sees this as a symptom of post-modernity, and argues that the only route out of this is by giving a fair place to love and justice. That he allows religion, and Christianity in particular as it is his

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tradition, to be part of this mix does not make him a Christian apologist. Here too, the principle of suspicion gives him a critical edge, and his theology is far from naive. In a sense he lines up with the humanistic and Marxist Frankfurt School of critical studies, but with Husserl's assistance through phenomenology, leaves Marxism well behind, as just one brick in a complex philosophical edifice but not the edifice itself. Scott-Baumann's topic in this book is an essential introduction to Ricoeur's thinking over a long life; but Ricoeur's work was vast, leaving her much work still needing to be done on his wide ranging and multi-disciplinary philosophy. I look forward to further volumes which, since his philosophical writing is dense, will help us all. I fully recommend this book. It is priced as for library purchase, and well worth ordering. For further reading, I also recommend the official Ricoeur website in French and English, <http://www.fondsriceur.fr>.

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