The Search for a Postmodern Ethics


The Ricoeur-Derrida debate. That is what this volume seeks to stage, and precisely on the question of ethics in the wake of modernity. After the wounding, indeed shattering of the cogito, as Ricoeur puts it, and after the critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence, as Derrida puts it, how are we to understand responsible selfhood? The thesis is that “by understanding deconstruction as a philosophy of limit and taking into account its positive element, it is possible to advance an alternative, more viable ethics at the limit-boundary, both taking into account deconstructive reading as well as passing beyond it” (4).

The positive element in deconstruction is its emphasis on alterity. The more viable alternative, of course, is Ricoeur.

There is a second, more specific thesis. “The role assigned to the imagination in recent philosophy is either central, in which case the productive imagination and semantic innovation are paramount, as they are for such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur; or it is not at all central, in which case chance replaces the productive imagination in its centrality, as is the case for Jacques Derrida.” Moreover, these positions, it will be argued, are “mutually exclusive” (xiv; cf. 109). There can be little doubt that in his treatment of symbol, metaphor, and narrative, Ricoeur emphasizes productive imagination to a degree not found in Derrida and that Derrida emphasizes the aleatory elements in language to a degree not found in Ricoeur. But Bourgeois’ language of “centrality” suggests that the matter is one of emphasis, and there is another way of reading the difference of emphasis than as “mutually exclusive.” Perhaps one accentuates the positive and says that the glass is half-full, while the other stresses the negative side and says it is half-empty. These differences of focus and tone, so far from rendering the two positions mutually exclusive, point to an exact agreement about how much water is in the glass. Neither party denies what the other affirms.

One need not insist on “exact agreement” between Ricoeur and Derrida to find this analogy useful in avoiding the conclusion that they are “mutually exclusive.” Derrida hardly denies that there is semantic innovation. He just points to the fact that the “authors” of linguistic novelty are not fully in control of the process by which it is...
generated. Like Barthes and Foucault, he insists that human authors are not God, creating all and only the meaning they intend to create. On the other hand, it can scarcely be argued that Ricoeur denies the aleatory element and gives to productive imagination the powers of divine omnipotence over its polysemic productions.

Again, Bourgeois grants that every logos “has openness-closure as an aspect, that is, an openness to and as such [emphasis added] a closure from,” but he complains that deconstruction gives “priority” to the closure, making it “intrinsic to all openness,” a point he seems just to have granted with his own “as such.” Once again, the language of “priority” seems to suggest a difference of emphasis, but he tries to turn this into mutual exclusion and speaks of “the option between the priority of the logocentric or the priority of the antilogocentric; between sense and nonsense” (10). But if the claim that every logos closes off our vision at the same time it opens it reduces language to nonsense, surely Ricoeur is in big trouble with his assault on the cogito and its clear and distinct ideas. To say that the glass is half-empty is not at all to say that it is empty, as the either/or between sense and nonsense suggests.

Perhaps there are points on which the positions of Ricoeur and Derrida can be shown to be mutually exclusive. But to show this convincingly would require a fair staging of the debate between them, and we do not find that here. Ricoeur is quoted extensively, in writings from the fifties through the nineties, including, of course, the most important statement of his ethics, *Oneself as Another*. By contrast, Derrida’s writings are rarely cited, and the merely quantitative imbalance is overwhelming. To make matters worse, with the exception of a note in which Drucilla Cornell quotes from a 1986 text, I can find no citation of a Derrida text later than 1972. This means that the texts in which his ethics is most fully developed do not come into view. It is a bit like staging a debate between Ricoeur and Levinas over ethics and restricting the former to *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. The presence of Levinas in the background of this debate is acknowledged, and “Violence and Metaphysics” is mentioned, if not cited, but the reader will be disappointed if hoping to find a critical comparison of the Levinasian ethics of Derrida’s writings in the eighties and nineties with *Oneself as Another*.

Derrida continues to call his work deconstruction and does not seem to see any incompatibility between his earlier and later writings. Perhaps the most charitable way to read Bourgeois’ resting his case on the