IN MEMORIAM
PAUL RICOEUR (1913–2005)

Paul Ricoeur died in his sleep at the age of ninety-two at his home in Châtenay-Malabry (Hauts-de-Seine outside Paris) on May 20, 2005. Ricoeur was one of the most challenging, hospitable, and enduring thinkers of the twentieth century. Born in Valence, France, in 1913, he taught as professor of philosophy at the universities of Strasbourg, Paris (IV and X), and Louvain and served as director for the Center of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics in Paris in the seventies and eighties. He also taught for almost thirty years in North America, notably as John Niveen Chair at the University of Chicago and as visiting professor at Yale, Toronto, and Duquesne. He also served on many doctoral dissertation committees in the United States, received numerous honorary degrees, and served on several editorial boards (including the board of the present journal).

Ricoeur published over thirty major works during his lifetime, ranging from existentialism and phenomenology to psychoanalysis, politics, religion, and the theory of language. But Ricoeur was much more than a brilliant intellectual negotiator between competing schools of thought. He also, and most significantly, developed his own particular brand of philosophical hermeneutics. Determined to find a path between a) the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Gadamer and b) the more radical hermeneutics of the deconstruction (Derrida, Caputo) and critical theory (Habermas), Ricoeur endeavored to chart a middle way that combined both the empathy and conviction of the former and the suspicion and detachment of the latter. He himself never gave a name to this third path (he was wary of founding a new ideology or -ism). But I think we would not be far wrong in naming it dialogical or diacritical hermeneutics. There were not many major figures in contemporary thought—Husserl, Freud, Rawls, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Austen, Arendt, Jaspers, Marcel, Habermas, Levinas, Derrida—with whom he did not engage in robust debate.

Taking his tune from such German hermeneutic thinkers as Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, Ricoeur elaborated a complex set of inquiries
into what he called the enigma of ‘semantic innovation’. How does new meaning come to be? And do we reconfigure the meanings of the past? These basic hermeneutic questions were guided by the thesis that existence is itself a mode of interpretation (hermeneia). Or, as the hermeneutic maxim went: Life interprets itself. But where Heidegger concentrated directly on a fundamental ontology of interpretation, Ricoeur advanced what he called the “long route” of multiple hermeneutic detours. This brought him into dialogue with the human sciences where philosophy discovers its limits in what is outside of philosophy. It prompted him to invigilate those border exchanges where meaning traverses the various signs and disciplines in which being is interpreted by human understanding. Ricoeur thus challenged Heidegger’s view that Being is accessible through the “short route” of human existence (Dasein) that understands itself through its own possibilities. He argued instead that the meaning of Being is always mediated through an endless process of interpretations—cultural, religious, political, historical, and scientific. Hence Ricoeur’s basic definition of hermeneutics as the “art of deciphering indirect meaning.”

Philosophy, for Ricoeur, was hermeneutical to the extent that it read hidden meanings in the text of apparent meanings. And the task of hermeneutics was to show how existence arrives at expression and, later again, at reflection, through the perpetual exploration of the significations that emerge in the symbolic works of culture. More particularly, human existence only becomes a self by retrieving meanings that first reside “outside” of itself in the social institutions and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is objectified.

One of the first critical targets of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics was the idealist doctrine that the self is transparent to itself. In two of his earliest works—The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1950) and The Symbolism of Evil (1960)—Ricoeur exploded the pretensions of the cogito to be self-founding and self-knowing. He insisted that the shortest route from self to self is through the other. Or to put it in Ricoeur’s felicitous formula: “to say self is not to say I”. Why? Because the hermeneutic self is much more than an autonomous subject. Challenging the reign of the transcendental ego, Ricoeur proposed the notion of oneself-as-another in an influential work that carried this same title (1990 in French; 1992 in English). Here he spoke of a soi that passes beyond the illusory confines of the moi and discovers its meaning in and through the linguistic mediations of signs and symbols, stories and ideologies, metaphors and myths. In the most positive hermeneutic scenario,