The Hope of Remembering


Along the route of his long philosophical journey, a journey that, sadly, ended in the spring of 2005, Paul Ricoeur provided a number of major studies that stood as milestones in relation to his many essays, lectures, and conference presentations. Though this final work sometimes follows paths that are well trodden and explores side trails into fairly narrow fields, it delivers, in the end, a powerful reworking of his major themes: human finitude, the power of narrative imagination, temporality, historiography, historicity, self-identity, attestation, justice, and love.1 Most of all, Ricoeur provides us with a grand testament to his belief in the inherent complexity of such fundamental human questions, and thus also to his stubborn resistance to the opposing vices of hubris and skepticism. The threat of forgetting that haunts memory and history can be seen, after a long journey, to be the source out of which the immediate joy of happy memory (“I recognize her!”) arises, and of the hope for a renewed happiness through the unbinding from guilt that comes through the difficult but not impossible labors of forgiveness. As such, it testifies to his central belief in the limited yet real capacities of human being.

The examination of the intersection of history, truth, and our lived experience of our self and other selves is not a new one for Ricoeur. As early as 1949, he undertook to examine the role of history in the constitution of the self’s relation to others in Husserl,2 and in 1955 he published a collection of essays entitled, Histoire et vérité. Over the next half century, the question of history frequently resurfaced in Ricoeur’s various investigations. In fact, one can note a pattern. Though Ricoeur famously “renounced” Hegel, his appreciation for the power of the dialectic between the formal and the material, of the subjective and the objective, never waned.3 One can see this dialectic (though never an absolute one) in the alternation of his major works. The eidetics of the will found in the Philosophy of the Will is followed by the examination of the science of the unconscious in his book on Freud. The
general discussion of the nature of metaphor and its imaginative “imper-
tinence” is “paired” with the poetic power of narrative in its encounter
with demands of truth posed by the historian. Along these same lines,
*Memory, History, Forgetting* may be read as a reworking of the question
of history and temporality that arises out of the powerful account, in
*Oneself as Another*, of the self that comes to recognize itself only in the
“passivity of being enjoined.” A passivity consisting “in the situation
of listening in which the ethical subject is placed in relation to the
voice addressed to it in the second person. To find oneself called upon
in the second person at the very core of the optative of living well, . . . ,
is to recognize oneself as being enjoined to live well with and for others
in just institutions and to esteem oneself as the bearer of this wish.”4 Rather
than the problem of history and temporality being a mere entanglement
with the past taken as a speculative problem—*quid est enim tempus*
(St. Augustine)5—as we find it in *Time and Narrative*, in *Memory* it becomes
a matter of the testimony that one’s actions in the present and one’s
plans for the future are, and will remain, faithful to the intentions and
convictions of the past. And the possibility and direction of this inten-
tion is to be found in memory; for “to memory is tied an ambition,
a claim—that of being faithful to the past.” The investigation of mem-
ory, history, and forgetting thus aims at filling the “lacunae” of both
*Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another* (xv).

*The Phenomenology of Memory*

Despite his persistent argument for the necessity of supplementing phe-
nomenological investigation with hermeneutics, Ricoeur has through-
out his life relied on descriptive or phenomenological analysis for two
very different reasons. On the one hand, phenomenology remained for
him the most convincing way of resisting speculative attempts to avoid
engaging in certain fundamental questions. On the other hand, it is
precisely by way of a rigorous analysis of what is available for inten-
tionality that the necessary inadequacies of any such investigation
appear. In his phenomenological analysis of memory both of these rea-
sons are justified.

What is the distinctive character of memories? From the very begin-
ning, with Plato, the question of memory can be examined from two
sides: the object of memory, that is, memories (*mneme*); and the act of
remembering (*anamnesi*). Ricoeur begins his investigation with the “what”
of memory (*memories*) in light of the historical debate between Plato