

**Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension between Love and Justice**, W. David Hall, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007 (ISBN: 9780791471432), x + 197 pp., Hb \$65, Pb \$29.95

*Reviewed by Cristina Bucur  
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This book offers a well-argued and illuminating discussion of Ricoeur's ethical project, summarized as 'the creative tension between love and justice'. W. David Hall argues that Ricoeur's ethics, articulated explicitly in his later works, is substantially theological, and can therefore only be presented, accounted for, or questioned critically from a theological perspective. He also shows that aside from understanding the various Ricoeurian themes of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, tradition, etc., or the diverse intellectual heritages that chart the critically equilibrated course of Ricoeur's philosophy (e.g. 'between' Husserl and Lévinas; 'between' Aristotle and Kant), a fair understanding of Ricoeur also requires an understanding of his 'hermeneutics of testimony' – that is, his critical engagement with the biblical text understood as 'a testimony to the experience of the absolute or the unconditioned' (p. 77).

Hall shows how the self, understood as originally good (the self's *affirmation originaire*, a conviction that Ricoeur inherits from Nabert) is a possibility in the sense of both immemorial goodness and possibility for (the restoration of) human freedom. While the former is understandable in light of a theology of creation, the latter is a 'passion for the possible' (p. 69), understandable in a logic of superabundance expressive of a theology of redemption.

With theological reflection occupying the center of his philosophical anthropology, Ricoeur sets forth an open and interdisciplinary ethical hermeneutics, governed by distinct philosophical and theological concerns. At the same time, however, as Hall shows, Ricoeur's ethical work is nonrelativistic. Hermeneutical discrimination, guided by a concern for the adequacy of interpretation, is linked to both ethical understanding and action, specifically to the experience of truthfulness in the form of fidelity and moral conviction. In discussing this experience of fidelity and moral conviction, one of Ricoeur's main points of reference is biblical poetics. Biblical poetics, Hall explains, redescribes reality with an imagination superlatively and unexpectedly productive of self-understanding and ethical interaction. For the reader that bears witness to the world proposed by the biblical text, biblical poetics engages and is engaged by a subject whose hermeneutical and ethical experience is raised to the level of testimony. Moral conscience testifies to one's affective receptivity to the love command ('the soul awakened by love

acts on the basis of love' [p. 158]), to the recognition of the love command as source of the ethical life, and to the recognition of the love command as reorienting the all-too-human sense of justice toward benevolent moral action.

Hall's exploration of the way in which Ricoeur blends distinct philosophical and theological concerns into one open ethical hermeneutics is worth a more detailed consideration. Ethical concern goes beyond both ethical description and resolution to practical action, as it exacerbates philosophical and theological reflection on the problem of moral evil, on the biblical theology of creation and redemption, and on the function of the exhortation to love one's neighbor. According to Hall, attention to the Ricoeur's theological concerns offers a more adequate perspective for the philosophical question of agency.

Hall shows that Ricoeur does not reduce or subordinate human capability to the *I think*; human capability reflects, rather, the incarnate freedom in both of its moments, namely those of activity and of (external and internal forms of) receptivity. Hall also discusses in detail Ricoeur's critical reappropriation of the Kantian philosophy of freedom.

The idea of identity, Hall explains, is clarified in the relation between *idem* and *ipse*, which expresses the inseparability between the two dimensions of the identity of the subject: character or sameness, and self-constancy or selfhood. Sameness constitutes the dimension that is recognizable as a set of psycho-physical qualities: in short, it is *the what of the who*. Selfhood, on the other hand, or *the who of the what*, constitutes the dimension of the (potential for) initiative, the 'now' where the self begins to affect history, and maintains itself ('self-constancy') in the course of self-initiated personal history.

Regarding the idea of attestation in Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology, Hall shows how attestation is assurance – as opposed to positive certainty – to be the acting and suffering self. This assurance unveils the profundity of human desire, since, as subject of attestation, one affirms the desire to be a self. Attestation thus signifies both that one is the initiator of the action, the actual self, and that one projects an ideal self in the mode of future possibility. The disproportion between actuality and potentiality gives rise to anxiety.

For Ricoeur, capability, identity, and attestation are hermeneutic-phenomenological questions. As Hall explains, hermeneutical phenomenology insists on the detours to the understanding of agency, and on the way in which discrete events or actions, and, ultimately, life itself, become intelligible as we claim for each a compositional whole and an order both chronological and logical. Experience is configured narratively in an intelligible whole that produces concordance among the discrete discordant elements entering the narrative. Aside from showing how narrative configuration renders experience intelligible, Hall also shows how the logic of narrative configuration reflects the

teleological character of human existence. The primary affirmation (*affirmation originnaire*) informs existence with a deepest desire for the good, the 'not yet'. This affirmation of the fundamental good is an affirmation of a horizon of possibility. Ultimately, the narrative unity of life is the horizon of possibility for the self as meaningful existence. The narrative unity of one's own life is inseparable from the ethical unity of life. The horizon of possibility is happiness. In the Aristotelian vein, Ricoeur does not understand happiness as actual self-satisfaction procured as an act, or as a state desirable and achievable only at the very end of a lifetime, but as 'total aim of meaningful action aim', as 'horizon', and 'destiny' (p. 48). The self is thus the being that perseveres in *being* – according to Spinoza's *conatus essendi*, as reappropriated by Ricoeur – or, rather, the being that perseveres in the hope for the good life. Hall formulates the idea of self as a narrative and ethical project as follows: 'To exist is to aim at a complete life that I am always *on the way* toward' (p. 61).

Agency is not some theoretical or transcendental content, it is practical experience. To understand agency as practical experience is, according to Ricoeur, to understand responsibility. Hall explains that Ricoeur understands responsibility in a twofold way, as responsibility for one's own actions and responsibility to the other. He notes that Ricoeur's understanding of responsibility occupies a median position between those of Husserl and Lévinas. Rather than Husserl's idea of egological perspective on others (which risks rendering unlimited one's own responsibility) and Lévinas's idea of the other who puts one's responsibility in perspective (which risks rendering unlimited the responsibility of the other), Ricoeur proposes an account of ethical agency in which both one's own ethical initiative and the initiative of the other who solicits my response are necessary. Thus, Hall argues, the self is not merely the being that is affected by the soliciting other, but also the being that recognizes the demand for moral responsibility, and, at the same time, based on this recognition, initiates the moral response. Recognition is what makes the self a subject of conviction and fidelity, insofar as the self perseveres in being responsible for the other. The responsible subject of practical life is both active and receptive to the other's soliciting power, and the subject of conviction and fidelity. The practical life is characterized by the interplay between the dimension of the ethical aim, on the one hand, and the deontological, moral, or prescriptive dimension, on the other. The golden rule mediates between these two dimensions by establishing a demand of reciprocity in order to prevent the asymmetry between the agent and the patient, which lies at the heart of social interaction, from degenerating into violence.

Ricoeur's philosophy of responsible agency cannot be understood, Hall argues, without an immersion into the biblical text, for it is the biblical discourse that opens up Ricoeur's reflection on capability,

identity, or attestation. To the biblical discourse belong poetic configurations of enigmatic experiences such as moral evil or the source of moral conscience. Ricoeur's recourse to biblical poetics refers to the following: (i) the possibilities of redemption, (ii) the revelation of the gift of love – which calls to the perpetuation of the giving of the gift of love to the other – in the expression of the poetic imperative (the love command), (iii) the affirmation of value in creation, and (iv) a reorientation of our daily lives in social relations of asymmetry. The latter is the impetus for an ethical rethinking of the value of justice. Justice filtered through the sieve of the poetic imperative ('justice reared in the economy of the gift' [p. 158]) – which reveals the logic of excess and superabundance – produces justice in the true sense of benevolent moral action, rather than an egoistic sense of justice.

Our daily experience abounds with limit-situations. If biblical poetics redescribes reality for us, if we engage the biblical text in order to bear witness to the unconditioned, and if we reappropriate it for our own meaningful existence, it is because the meanings disclosed by the biblical text are always already meaningful for us.

The love command, as gift of love, is the unconditioned or the absolute, testified to by the biblical text itself; 'thus, to engage the text is to engage a testimony to the experience of the absolute or unconditioned' (p. 77). The experience of attestation to the unconditioned gift of love for love reveals the depth of the meaning of attestation and the depth of the meaning of conscience. Conscience is preoccupied with the perseverance in the good things; it protests against evil, it hopes in the good life, it responds here and now to the moral solicitude of others in the interplay between the logic of excess and the logic of justice. The meaning of attestation, placed in theological perspective, shows us that the affirmation of the good is the conscience of being self, dependent upon the source of being, and capable, because called, of responding to the love command. In the relation between God and human beings, and between the self and the other, both revealed by the love command, the ethical project of selfhood becomes possible and intelligible.

To sum up, the main claim of this book is that at the core of Ricoeur's philosophy lies the creative tension between love and justice. Hall argues that the biblical imperative by which the person is commanded to love is not a Kantian imperative but rather a poetic imperative. The poetic imperative – an understanding that Ricoeur formed by reading Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* – has both a revelatory and a productive function. At the limit of philosophical reasoning, Hall argues, are the questions of the advent of moral evil and of hope in redemption. These are not questions of justice. If, in Ricoeur's work, the question of justice can and should receive an understanding according to 'human logic', namely the logic of equivalence, the question of love, by contrast, make little sense when approached in the same way. The question of

love, which the poetic imperative sets before for the 'listening' witness (rather than as the object of philosophical discourse), is not produced by our logic, but instead produces sense, giving itself to us as a 'logic' of excess or superabundance. This logic reveals the 'place of the good', the meaning of which exceeds the good of creation even while being present in creation. Moreover, the biblical logic puts philosophical experience in a place of its own, a place that is neither opposed to, nor simplistically subordinated to, theology.

Hall's explorations in Ricoeur's ethical phenomenology is well-structured, clear, and insightful. The overall discussion of Ricoeur's basic theological concerns as they inform his ethics and morality is very detailed and well supported, and presented in an accessible and pleasant prose.

Some points of criticism are in order at this juncture. Hall describes mutuality and reciprocity as interchangeable. However, mutuality and reciprocity do not mean the same thing. In *Oneself as Another*, mutuality, or the esteem for the being that the other is, is a recognition of value that may go unreciprocated. Ricoeur stresses the fact that this recognition does not belong to the psychological but to the ethical order. Hence, mutuality does not characterize the intimacy of the shared life, but the ethical relation that extends to any other. Without a social preoccupation for justice, however, which involves a work with (which implies an involvement with) institutions, laws, and values, a work that follows the logic of reciprocity, mutuality cannot actually be experienced. The interplay between mutuality and reciprocity is an essential aspect of Ricoeur's phenomenology.

Second, regarding friendship, Ricoeur does not simply follow Aristotle, as Hall seems to believe. Ricoeur reappropriates some aspects of the Stagirite's philosophy: the idea of friendship as *ethical* idea, the understanding of the need for the other, which lies at the core of subjectivity, of aspiration to actual reciprocity in friendship. But in his treatment of mutuality, Ricoeur makes Aristotle more Levinassian: the gratuity of esteem for the other (mutuality) recenters *philia* toward the understanding of love as poetic imperative. For Ricoeur, *philos* (which can be translated not only as 'friend' but also 'loving one') is the initiator of a relation in which reciprocity is not demanded with any exigency, but is rather experienced as a call, an opening, or an aspiration. This understanding, articulated in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), reappears in the posthumous *Vivant jusqu'à la mort*.

W. David Hall's substantial contribution to Ricoeurian scholarship is especially relevant for readers interested in Ricoeur's theological ethics, ethical hermeneutics, and dialectics of experience. More broadly, however, this book will be welcome by students and scholars interested in the phenomenology of love, ethics, and the intersection of theology and philosophy.

*Response to Cristina Bucur*  
By W. David Hall  
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Cristina Bucur has offered very detailed and insightful review of *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative* that accomplishes what any author hopes for: it both makes the book sound better than it probably is and indicates ways in which it could be better. In responding, I will first offer some clarifications to her analysis of the main arguments of the book and then I will try to give some answer to her criticisms.

In her opening paragraph, Bucur suggests that I argue that Ricoeur's ethics is 'substantially theological, and can therefore *only* be presented, accounted for, or questioned critically from a theological perspective' (*my emphasis*). While I do believe that Ricoeur's ethics rides heavily on a certain Christian theological sensibility, and while I might suggest that a *full* accounting of Ricoeur's ethics requires recourse to his religious and theological writings, I would want to make much more humble claims about the autonomous status of Ricoeur's philosophical ethics. I would point the reader to my statements in the introduction where I characterize Ricoeur's theological writings as an 'interpretive key' to understanding the overall coherence of his thought. I suggest that religious texts and theological discourse offer 'figurative resolutions' to philosophical impasses, and that Ricoeur's moral thought is an important place to trace these kinds of 'poetic crossings' between philosophy and theology (p. 11). I would follow Ricoeur's own lead here and argue that one absolutely can approach Ricoeur's philosophical ethics independently of his religious sensibilities, but that his moral thought is profoundly transformed, perhaps deepened, by reading his philosophy in light of those sensibilities.

I would also offer some correction to Bucur's treatment of 'the logic of superabundance' and its close attendant the 'economy of the gift'. These are two central ideas that take up residence in the second half of the book and carry much of the weight of the argument, so she is right to draw attention to them. In her treatment, however, Bucur tends to see these ideas as functioning primarily at the level of redemption in Ricoeur's thought. I would argue rather that these ideas are important ones that undergird not just his understanding of the idea of redemption, but also creation and, perhaps more importantly, revelation. In my estimation, the logic of superabundance and the economy of the gift are necessarily tied to Ricoeur's understanding of 'the poetic use of the imperative', which is itself grounded in his reading of Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*. In this sense, superabundance, gift, and biblical poetics, as Ricoeur understands them, are articulated through the tripartite structure of Rosenzweig's 'new thinking': ever-enduring

creation, always-renewed revelation, ever-approaching redemption. Superabundance and gift are at play in all three.

Bucur offers two very cogent criticisms of the book: (i) that I describe mutuality and reciprocity as interchangeable, and (ii) that Ricoeur's account of friendship is not as moored to Aristotle as I suggest. With regard to the first of her criticisms, I think this is not exactly right. Rather, I talk about mutuality and reciprocity as two configurations of equivalence that bend Ricoeur's account of responsibility in the direction of relations of exchange. Indeed, my treatment of mutuality is largely limited to my treatment of Ricoeur's adoption of the Aristotelian aim of the good life with others while the condition of reciprocity arises in my treatment of Ricoeur's adoption of a Kantian moral norm. In my understanding, both are important for articulating a broader sense for responsibility than Ricoeur offers. But I have not done as good a job of distinguishing the two concepts as I should have.

Bucur's second criticism is certainly right; I have not done an adequate job distinguishing Ricoeur's account of friendship from Aristotle's and have not drawn out the nuances entailed in this difference. I think she and I disagree about whether Ricoeur has made Aristotle 'more Levinassian' in *Oneself as Another*, but he clearly has offered in later works an account of friendship that does not succumb to the criticisms I level. In a recent review in *The Journal of Religion* (v. 88, n. 4, October 2008), David Pellauer suggested that my treatment would have benefitted greatly by including analysis of *The Course on Recognition* (Harvard, 2005; originally published as *Parcours de la Reconnaissance* [Éditions Stock, 2004]). Here, Ricoeur reaches many conclusions that anticipate my criticisms. In this text he gives a much deeper account of friendship, and, as Bucur indicates, he does so in *Living Up to Death* (Chicago, 2009) as well. While I could not have foreseen the conclusions in the last volume, I clearly should have devoted some time to the 2005 volume. All I can offer by way of apology is that *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative* was in the process of production with SUNY, and inclusion of a treatment of this material would have required costs in time and money that I felt I could not afford. In hindsight, I may have reached the wrong conclusion.

I would like to thank Cristina Bucur for the care and diligence she has dedicated to articulating the central arguments of the book and for her generosity in assessing its value. I would also like to thank CRT for the opportunity to respond to her comments.