

Paul Ricoeur: From Aesthetic to Ethical Experience?*

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Since Paul Ricoeur's death in 2005, a number of important conferences have already begun the long task of identifying what might prove to be the lasting contributions in his voluminous work. As one of Paul Ricoeur's many former students and friends, and as someone working on questions in the philosophy of art and in ethics, I would like to offer here a few comments on what some have called "Paul Ricoeur's aesthetics." My intention is both in some small way to honor his memory and to call attention to just one of the still latent suggestions for further philosophical reflection on important matters that Paul Ricoeur has left us with as part of his rich personal legacy.

Paul Ricoeur on "Aesthetics"

Just what the expression, "Paul Ricoeur's aesthetics," may refer to, remains vague. Despite the extended reflections in several of his books that touch on aesthetic matters, for example in his books on metaphor (*La métaphore vive* [1975] and on time and narrative *Temps et récit* [3 vols. 1983-1985]), some philosophers might believe that there is no such thing in Ricoeur's work as a whole that we might properly call his aesthetics. These beliefs contrast with the usual views about, for example, the work of a different but related kind of phenomenological thinker than Paul Ricoeur, Roman Ingarden, or that of a still more closely related hermeneutic phenomenologist, H.-G. Gadamer.

Broadly speaking, aesthetics is "the branch of philosophy devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry into art and aesthetic experience"

[including nature and the natural environment.]”¹ More narrowly, aesthetics is “the branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste.”² Strictly speaking, aesthetics is “a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty.”³ But, to my knowledge, nowhere in Ricoeur’s very substantial work⁴ do we find any sustained philosophical treatment either of “art and aesthetic experience,” or of “questions of beauty and taste,” or of any “set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty.” So one can appreciate the occasional observation that Ricoeur has no aesthetics to speak of. That is, Ricoeur did not develop any sustained account of philosophical aesthetics as such.⁵

¹ J. Levinson, “Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3. Cf. C. Janeway, “Aesthetics, History of,” and “Aesthetics, Problems of,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. T. Honderich, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9-13 and 13-16 respectively, and S. L. Feagin, “Aesthetics,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. R. Audi, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For various individual topics in aesthetics, in addition to the works cited, see also M. Kelly, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

² *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The most complete bibliography, which already needs substantial supplementation in view of the work Ricoeur published over the last ten years of his life, is to be found in L. E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. The Library of Living Philosophers (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 605-881. See however the extensive more recent bibliography although on a particular theme in F.-X. Amherdt, *L’herméneutique philosophique et son importance pour l’exégèse biblique* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), pp. 655-805. Among the most important late works that the Hahn bibliography could not include are *La critique et la conviction: Entretien avec F. Azouvi et M. de Launay* (1995), *L’Idéologie et l’Utopie* (1997), *Penser la Bible avec A. LaCocque* (1998), *Ce qui nous fait penser: La nature et la règle* with J.- P. Changeux (1998), *La mémoire. l’histoire. l’oubli* (2000), *Le juste 2* (2001), *Sur la traduction* (2004), and *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2005). A brief summary of most of Ricoeur’s important works can be found in L. Fevre, *Penser avec Ricoeur* (Paris: Chroniques sociales, 2003), pp. 185-208.

⁵ For many years Paul Ricoeur himself liked to speak of his “poetics” rather than of any “aesthetics.” He used the expression, “poetics,” most often to refer to a number of reflections in his extensive work where he commented on certain works of art. Thus, if one speaks of “Ricoeur’s aesthetics in this non-standard way, then surely there is an “aesthetics” in his work.

Paul Ricoeur on "Aesthetic Experience"

François Azouvi and Marc de Launay, however, in their extended interviews with Ricoeur in October–November 1994 and in May and September 1995 at "Les murs blancs," the small, private park in Chatenây-Malabry (where Ricoeur as well as the families of the personalist philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier and of the historian of ancient education, Henri Marrou, lived), make the following important remark. «Dans votre vie, l'art a toujours tenu une place éminente: vous fréquentez régulièrement les musées, vous écoutez beaucoup de musique. En revanche, dans votre oeuvre, cette dimension de l'expérience humaine est singulièrement absente, si l'on excepte vos analyses de la littérature, dans *Temps et récit*.»⁶

The remark is, I think, important. For it suggests — and Ricoeur's detailed responses confirm — that, despite the admittedly little evidence in his published work, Ricoeur had extensive personal knowledge of, and experience with, numerous works of literature, painting, music, and sculpture.⁷ (The tragic suicide of his son, Olivier, a film artist, substantially darkened his experiences with cinema.) And part of that knowledge and experience with art works, we may reasonably assume, involved the appreciation and aesthetic experience of works of art.⁸

Moreover, perhaps the most central theme of Ricoeur's extraordinarily variegated work over many years — the nature, kinds, roles, and problems of interpretation — touched in many places not just on philosophical questions about morality, politics, law, and religion; Ricoeur's also considered some specific works of art, especially works

⁶ *La critique et la conviction* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), p. 257; hereafter I refer to this book as "Entretiens" and cite it as "CC." Further page references directly incorporated into my text are to this edition of CC.

⁷ See for example his comments about viewing once again in Venice in 1995 some of Chagall's paintings in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. "J'ai une véritable passion pour Chagall: devant ses toiles, j'éprouve à chaque fois le *sentiment* d'une révérence; révérence devant ce mélange, *qui n'est propre qu'à lui*, de sacrée et d'ironie..." (257; my emphases).

⁸ Besides Ricoeur's extended remarks on "aesthetics" in CC (pp. 257–278), see also the French revised and expanded version of his autobiography, first published in English in the Library of Living Philosophers Series (see note above). *Réflexion faite. Autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Esprit, 1995), *passim*.

of literature.⁹

Thus, although there may be properly speaking no “aesthetics” in Ricoeur’s voluminous work, Ricoeur certainly made many occasions over the course of his long life both to open himself to various kinds of aesthetic experience and to reflect on those experiences.¹⁰

Indeed, one major theme Ricoeur continued to evoke in his work, if not analyse across the years, is the proximity of aesthetic and moral experience. If we focus on this general theme, then I believe we can identify for further philosophical discussion elsewhere at least three particular issues, if not in Ricoeur’s aesthetics at least in his continuing aesthetic experiences with and philosophical reflections on works of art. Allow me, then, briefly to highlight several only of Ricoeur’s many suggestive reflections on the relations between aesthetic and moral experience with respect to three points only: judgments, discourses, and truths.¹¹

Paul Ricoeur on Aesthetic and Moral Judgments

The first set of issues — aesthetic and moral judgments — is historical and speculative. Ricoeur seemed to believe, certainly in his late and very carefully considered *Entretiens*, that some moral philosophers

⁹ See especially the narrative analyses of Virginia Woolfe, Thomas Mann, and Marcel Proust in *Temps et récit*, and in his *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (Paris: Stock, 2004).

¹⁰ The notion of “aesthetic experience” is difficult partly because of its ambiguities. The main ambiguity involves the distinction between what it is like to be in a distinctively aesthetic state of mind (a phenomenological conception of aesthetic experience) and a distinctive non-inferential way of coming to know something (an epistemological conception). See G. Iseminger, “Aesthetic Experience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. J. Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 99–116, with excellent, mainly English language bibliography. Moreover, as Philippe Capelle has pointed out, especially in the “Introduction” to his recent collection, *Expérience philosophique and expérience mystique* (Paris: Cerf, 2005, pp. 7–16) as well as in discussion, the overly general notion here of “experience” needs still further qualification if we are to pursue these analogies more critically.

¹¹ Jean Greisch, whose work, *Paul Ricoeur: L’itinérance du sens* (Grenoble: Millon, 2001) is a benchmark in the mature understanding of Ricoeur’s work, has underlined in discussion the importance of a fourth very important theme which I am not able to discuss here, namely the analogous roles of imagination in aesthetic and ethical experience.

today may legitimately extrapolate the Kantian notion of “reflective judgment” from the aesthetic sphere to the moral sphere. This idea depends, of course, on the Kantian distinction between reflective judgments that, roughly speaking, move from singular cases to general rules, as opposed to what Kant called “determinate judgments” that move from general rules to singular cases. Although Kant uses this distinction in several places, his main discussions are to be found in his *Critique of Judgment*.

Ricoeur was, of course, a superb reader of the history of philosophy generally and of Kant’s works among several others especially. If Ricoeur is right, then questions about judgments might turn out to be one fruitful area for further specific philosophical inquiry about the general relations between aesthetics and ethics.

Now it may be the case that I have misunderstood Ricoeur’s claims here or that I have overstated them. However some Ricoeur scholars would adjudicate such a possibility, Ricoeur’s apparent claim as I have put it here deserves some critical attention. Perhaps we might then focus some of that further attention in the form of a critical question for further sustained discussion.

So on this first point: supposing we come to agree on the interpretive issues of exactly what Kant meant by a “reflective judgment” and a “determinate judgment” and of what were the main contexts in which he made use of these notions, then just how would it be constructive to extrapolate this notion from the aesthetic to the ethical? Would not such a move make many moral judgments overly subjective, overly relative, even arbitrary? Moreover, even if we could defend moral judgments from the arbitrariness affecting many although not all aesthetic judgments, would we not have to deal with a new problem? That new problem would be that at least some general moral norms would now have merely a singular extension while others would have a general extension, and still others a universal extension?

Here then is a first set of preliminary questions about the proprieties of drawing out possible analogies between aesthetic and moral experience, questions about aesthetic and moral judgments.

I would now like to sketch a second set of questions, this time about aesthetic and moral discourse.

Paul Ricoeur on Aesthetic and Moral Discourse

At one point in the *Entretiens*, Paul Ricoeur alludes to how he has most often pursued his reflections on his aesthetic experiences with various works of art. Summarizing some of his previous work in *Temps et récit* Ricoeur writes: «L'oeuvre d'art est... pour moi l'occasion de découvrir des aspects du langage, que sa pratique usuelle, [sa fonction instrumentalisée de communication] dissimulent ordinairement. L'oeuvre d'art met à nu des *propriétés du langage* qui, autrement, resteraient invisibles et inexplorées... C'est en effet par le thème du narrative que j'ai abordé l'esthétique jusqu' à aujourd'hui» (259; my emphases).

Just as with his imaginative suggestion of extrapolating the distinction between reflective and determinate judgments from Kant's aesthetics to our own contemporary reflections on the nature of moral judgments, so too Ricoeur's suggestion here about reflection on some works of art being the occasion for grasping as yet unexplored "properties of language" is equally imaginative. In fact, this capacity for imagining new directions for philosophical inquiry about important matters is, I believe, one of the salient features that marked Paul Ricoeur's distinctive ways of doing philosophy. But, however imaginatively suggestive, Ricoeur's idea about unexplored properties of language becoming "visible" in our aesthetic experiences with certain works of art stimulates reflection and invites criticisms.

With respect, then, to our general concern with the fruitfulness of Ricoeur's reflections on relations between aesthetics and ethics, can we properly take it here that some of these "unexplored properties" of language that we come to glimpse in our aesthetic experiences with works of art can also be glimpsed in our moral and ethical discourse? Could we legitimately extend Ricoeur's overly programmatic remarks about still unexplored "properties of language" to considerations about moral discourse?

Take the American southern novelist, William Styron, and his still much appreciated novel of some years back about slavery, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Would Ricoeur have us consider seriously the idea that aesthetic and moral experience can be fruitfully explored not just in terms of different roles for Kantian reflective judgments, but also in terms of different kinds of figurative discourse? If so, then one

question here might go: can philosophical reflection on the peculiar kinds of figurative discourse one finds in moral experience open up fruitful understanding of usually unnoticed properties of language in moral discourse in the ways that philosophical reflection on kinds of figurative discourse in dealing with aesthetic experience can disclose usually unnoticed properties of language in aesthetic discourse? Here then are a few more questions about possibly fruitful analogies to be drawn between the aesthetic and the moral, this time between aesthetic and moral discourse.

I come now to a third, and for here final, final set of issues, this time about aesthetic and moral truths.

Paul Ricoeur on Aesthetic and Moral Truths

Commenting at one point in the *Entretiens* on the works of the twentieth-century painters, Pierre Soulages and Piet Mondrian, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes how a proper understanding of *mimesis* became possible paradoxically only after painting become more than merely figurative in the twentieth century. After the discoveries of the non-figurative, the proper function of mimesis could be understood «...non pas de nous aider à reconnaître des objets, mais à découvrir des dimensions de l'expérience qui n'existaient pas avant l'oeuvre. C'est parce que Soulages ou Mondrian n'imitent pas la réalité, [au sens limitatif du terme] parce qu'ils n'en font pas une réplique, que leur oeuvre a la puissance de nous faire découvrir, dans notre propre expérience, des aspects encore inconnus» (260).

Now Ricoeur's view here has certain affinities with those of the distinguished American philosopher and art critic, Arthur Danto. For some years, Danto has promoted the importance of understanding the invention of photography in the middle of the nineteenth century as forcing conceptual reconsiderations about the nature of representation in traditionally realistic painting. With photography available, persons no longer required verisimilitudinous sketches or paintings as representations of things. The photographer could deliver a more accurate representation of what was really there than the painter could. Yet some painters continued to represent things realistically. Danto's point is that they did so with at least what we should take, even if they themselves did not yet do so, as a new understanding of just what

realistic representation could now be.¹²

Still, Ricoeur's view is distinctive in strongly accenting the metaphysical. For just after some remarks on the non-figurative painting of Pierre Soulages and Piet Mondrian, Ricoeur claims that: «Sur un plan philosophique, cela [the fact that Soulages and Mondrian «n'imitent pas la réalité»] conduit à remettre en question la conception classique de la vérité comme adéquation au réel; car, si l'on peut parler de vérité à propos de l'oeuvre d'art, c'est dans la mesure où l'on désigne par là sa capacité à se frayer un chemin dans le réel en le renouvelant *selon elle*, si l'on peut dire» (260-261; Ricoeur's emphases).

Once again with respect to our single concern here with promoting further philosophical discussion of Ricoeur's suggestive reflections on the proximity of aesthetic and moral experience, could we legitimately transpose some of Ricoeur's remarks here about truth and what realistic representation might be in the aesthetic domain of painting to what truth and realistic representation might also be in the ethical domain of moral values? That is, could at least some moral realisms, like some aesthetic realisms, require reconceptualizing in the light of certain historic developments of such a magnitude that some basic things afterwards, perhaps even our understandings of what is real, could not be understood exactly as they were previously?

If photography and non-figurative painting changed our understandings of what imitating reality actually comes to, could one properly argue that the literally unspeakable experiences of the

¹² Some of the insights that the developments of photography and non-figurative painting made possible into traditional ideas of representation and even of the real as what is represented are not at all as new as they may sometimes appear. In Roman art, for example, the passage from the third to the fourth century C.E. already marked a movement from the earlier realistic representation, notably of the human body in Hellenistic work, to a much different kind of representation we can see today in the celebrated "Tetrarques" in Venice. Paul Veyne, for example, has remarked a movement from an "art de la ressemblance à un art de la reconnaissance par analogie" that already anticipates some early medieval work (cited in M. Sartre, "Toute l'histoire d'un monde," a review of Veyne's *L'Empire Gréco-Romain* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), *Le Monde des Livres*, October 28, 2005, p. i). [Cf. M. Sartre's review of H. Inglebert, *Histoire de la civilisation romaine*, Collection Nouvelle Clio (Paris: PUF, 2005) in the same issue where he speaks of the city of Rome, as it were, inviting its citizens to set aside their taste for "une sorte de musée de l'art grec" for something very different (Ibid., p. vii)].

immensities of evil in the last century must change our understandings of what moral reality actually comprises? (This last set of issues, I might add, I have myself tried to explore in a preliminary way only in my book, *The Negative Sublime*, Heidelberg: Carl Winter Verlag, 2003.)

Envoi

Here then for further philosophical discussions of his legacy are three particular topics that may help us appreciate part of the historical reach, the imaginativeness and the fruitfulness of Paul Ricoeur's late philosophical reflections on the general theme of the proximities of aesthetic and moral experience. Perhaps by way of summary we may now reformulate each of these topics more simply.

If one of Paul Ricoeur's general suggestions about aesthetic experience is the fruitfulness of exploring analogies between aesthetic and moral experience, then what particularly might we reasonably take him to have in mind? I have been proposing here briefly at least three such particular items.

The first particular theme might now be put as the question, what substantive changes would be required were one to thematise not just some aesthetic judgments but also some moral judgments as Kantian reflective judgments?

The second particular theme we might perhaps put now in some such terms as these. If indeed there are still unexplored "properties of language" to be discovered in our philosophical reflections on the workings of language in some works of art, then are there still other, similarly unexplored "properties of language" to be discovered in our philosophical reflections on the workings of language in some of our ethical talk of our experiences with one another?

And, finally, if indeed some of the historical developments of non-figurative works of art force changes in our traditional understandings of what the real actually is, can one properly support the claim that historical developments in our experiences of the immensities of evil ought to force changes in our traditional understandings of what moral realisms need to look like?

With at least this much already on our work tables, I presume that I am not the only one to wish that Paul Ricoeur himself were here again to set us straight on at least some of these speculations. I suppose we

will just have to wait a bit to find out whether we will finally have the happy chance to talk some of these things through with him again — even perhaps in the way Socrates looked forward to talking things through with Odysseus?¹³

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¹³ Plato, *Apology*, 41c.