

*Ricoeur and the Just University*

Panelists: Daniel Boscaljon, Nathan Eric Dickman, Jeff Keuss, Glenn Whitehouse

This panel features four contributors to the forthcoming Lexington book *Ricoeur and the Just University*, including the book's editors Boscaljon and Keuss. Panelists will discuss their own chapters in the book, and follow with a discussion of how Ricoeur's hermeneutics speaks to the intersection of justice, pedagogy and institutional life affecting the contemporary university. This involves reflecting on how Ricoeur might diagnose the issues facing educators within a compromised system, understanding where the parts of the system are currently in a problematic mode of relationship to larger social forces, and finally how educators and administrators can work practically to create classrooms oriented toward a sense of justice for students and for the larger world.

The continuing destabilization of the world, shown in its symptomatic eruptions of violence and the dislocations of humans and all other forms of life, provides a sense of real world urgency to the task of the humanities. It no longer is viable to remain within an ivory tower, idly thinking about speculative possibilities. The question of what form justice takes in the academy is an old one, stretching back to the pedagogy present in Greece, whose teacher/student relationship persists as a privileged version of educational practices today.

The work of Paul Ricoeur provides an important collection of texts, concepts, and practices that can equip students to pursue justice in their own lives as well as within the world more broadly. Ricoeur remains unparalleled in his ability to synthesize a diversity of thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition. His unique gifts as a thinker and hermeneute—his ability to read copiously and generously and to think toward questions of human flourishing within finite, fallible lives creates an important standpoint for teachers to consider.

Dan Boscaljon's chapter, *Fallible Man and Just Pedagogy*: looks at the philosophical anthropology articulated in Ricoeur's *Fallible Man* as a model for how to allow students to experience justice in the classroom. By separating finite skills of concrete understanding (plot, character, dates) with higher order concepts (wonder, integrity, fear, respect, justice), instructors are able to ensure a basic understanding of material in a way that insistently points students toward their infinitude. Along the way, evaluations (tests) can help students become more self-aware of the importance of their imaginative integration of material and ways that this can help develop a stronger sense of self, which seems crucial during the formative years of

college. This chapter examines one approach to reading *Between the World and Me* and one approach to testing that provides one example of just pedagogy.

Jeff Keuss' chapter, "*The Literary Self as Another: Identity Formation in the Liberal Arts through Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Alternative to Rational Religion*" focuses on how we speak of the individual - be it student, faculty, staff - as one transformed and grounded in the liberal arts - what Keuss terms "the Literary self." The rich vision of Paul Ricoeur has provided an alternative to the rational approaches to religion in the Enlightenment, through a theology of symbols placed within the framework of Continental hermeneutical philosophy. One of the primary polemics throughout Ricoeur's large corpus is his repudiation of Cartesian rationalism that continues to shape the pedagogy of higher education and ultimately give priority to identity formation as a reasoned act prior to a vocational repose to the Living God - more than 'thought', the authentic self is 'called out'. Throughout his writing Ricoeur has consistently demonstrated the problematic nature of what he calls "the Cartesian cogito" (1976; 1992: 4-6). Following Heidegger, Ricoeur no longer identifies the self with the subject. The self is distinct from that of the cogito. The self "I am"; is prior to the "I think"; the thinking thing. Moreover, Ricoeur is not preoccupied with a definitive starting point of philosophy, like the autonomous doubting self. For him it is sufficient to commence with language through a meditation on symbols and the meaning that is inherent in language.

The imaginative-narrative character of embodied cognition gives moral significance to the way we experience our bodies and embodied cognitive relations with the world, in that these experiences get shaped by the ethical and political narratives that are part of the social contexts in which cognitive relations occur (e.g., cultural body images). Bringing to the surface the potential moral significance of embodied cognitive relations highlights the possible violence of these relations, and therefore their moral significance, insofar the ethico-political narratives that shape them have a potential for being violent (e.g., racist, essentialist discourses).

The importance of the literary self to the project of the just university is investigated through an appeal to Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenological understanding of the relation between narratives, imagination and morals. The central thesis will be that imagination, understood as the cognitive capacity to understand and recount stories, is central to basic and more complex embodied cognitive relations (e.g., body perception) and therefore essential to the concept

of the Just University as alluded to in this book. Given that this imaginative aspect of embodied cognition also implies a moral aspect, because imagination is influenced by narratives, the 'ethico-political' narratives core to the Just University and therefore necessary to our project.

Eric Dickman's chapter *Should Religion-Affiliated Institutions Be Accredited? Ricoeur and the Problem of Religious Inclusivity* asks how religiously affiliated institutions that promote liberal arts can maintain commitment both to their affiliation and to the ideal of religious inclusivity. What principles of accreditation should be used by agencies—such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges—in assessing religiously affiliated yet inclusive institutions? Many religiously affiliated institutions claim to value liberal arts learning and critical inquiry, to prepare students for a diverse world. Yet affiliation often brings with it pervasive structures of religious privilege that inhibit questioning and critical thinking, especially with regard to religions. Dickman brings Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics and the approach to religious inclusivity developed in his essay "Religious Belief" (2010) to bear on these issues. Ricoeur uses the models of translation and multilingualism to promote what he calls religious "hospitality." A Ricoeurian approach can aid us in developing principles of inclusivity for use in accrediting religiously affiliated colleges.

Glenn Whitehouse's chapter, *Ricoeur and Transferable Skills*, takes up current discussions about the role and value of the liberal arts in university education, which often become a debate about skills vs. content. Some faculty and administrators have seized on the idea that "transferable skills" ground the value of liberal arts, within and outside the university. On this account, the outcome of a liberal arts education is a set of skills - critical thinking, communication, problem solving - that are separable from the content of particular disciplines - English, Philosophy, Sociology - and transferable to other contexts, especially professional contexts in the private and public sectors of the "real world." Other academics are suspicious of the transferable skills defense, worrying that it vocationalizes liberal arts programs, and dilutes the primary mission to carry out interpretation, debate and critique emerging from the content objects of our disciplines - books, artworks, arguments, etc. Over the past couple of decades, this debate has played out in forums such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) and publications like the Chronicle of Higher Education. This skills/content debate bears a family resemblance the debate over truth and method in hermeneutical

practice. It is well known that Ricoeur saw a larger role for explanatory methods in interpretation than did his contemporary Hans-Georg Gadamer, for whom truth and method tended to be an either/or. Ricoeur's approach instead saw interpretation taking a "detour" through explanatory and formal methods, on the way to deeper understanding and application.

For Ricoeur, using structuralism, psychoanalysis or contractarian ethics in the interpretation of culture represents not the imposition of an alien method, but a distanciation necessary to the critical appropriation of a text. A Gadamerian, by contrast, might criticize Ricoeur's approach first by claiming that the application of method prevents the truth of being from uncovering itself in dialogue, and second by seeing in explanatory method a manifestation of the project of technological control associated with Enlightenment rationalism.

We can apply Ricoeur's theory of interpretation to the debate over the role of transferable skills in the liberal arts curriculum, using the texts where Ricoeur most directly explains and practices his three-step hermeneutical arc - including *Interpretation Theory* and *From Text to Action*. The curricular debate is examined through AACU publications, Chronicle essays, and the author's own experience as a university administrator. We can claim, on Ricoeurian grounds, that liberal arts advocates are correct to see in the humanities a set of skills relatively separable from the content of academic subject areas, and justified in saying those skills are transferable outside of academia. However, the fear that liberal arts skills may be enlisted to serve agendas of technocratic control is a real one, especially for proposed versions of the liberal arts curriculum that advocate teaching skills in separate courses isolated from content. It's of dubious value to claim that humanities graduates can rule the world with their transferable skills, if they cannot also infuse the "real world" with meaning and justice in the process. A liberal arts curriculum integrating content and skills empowers students to do both.

on an array of core competencies, this movement emphasizes especially a self-regulation by which self-critical understanding makes possible new comprehension manifest in formation and praxis. Here indeed one finds model and content for a just curriculum I conclude by drawing out several pragmatic contributions this approach makes to teaching critical thinking and its usefulness for addressing popular narratives questioning the practicality and relevance of the humanities in higher education.

Discussion will focus on the relevance of Ricoeur's interpretation theory to key pedagogical and institutional issues of the contemporary

university. Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* defines the ethical aim as "living the good life, with and for others, in just institutions." Universities today face the twin challenges of guiding students' development toward the good life, and of being just institutions. The panelists will discuss Ricoeur's relevance to these challenges, and engage the audience in dialogue on hermeneutics and the just university.