

## Philosophy in Review



# Brian Gregor, "Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Religion."

Darren Dahl

Volume 40, Number 3, August 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071523ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071523ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dahl, D. (2020). Review of [Brian Gregor, "Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Religion."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40 (3), 115–117.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071523ar>

Copyright ©, 2020 Darren Dahl



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

**Brian Gregor.** *Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Religion*. Rowman & Littlefield 2018. 240 pp. \$95.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781498584739).

Brian Gregor's important and illuminating book provides a discussion of Ricoeur's lifelong engagement with Jewish and Christian religious sources under the concept of hermeneutics of religion. Gregor shows that, for Ricoeur, the 'symbols and narratives of the Jewish and Christian biblical texts contain distinctive modes of thinking' (3). He goes on to show that what is at stake in a philosophical engagement with this mode of thinking is the work of 'bringing the religious to thought' through what Ricoeur himself calls a 'philosophical approximation' (3). Gregor notes how such an approximation is particularly inspired by 'the theology of the Word that comes out of Luther's understanding of the *verbum efficax*, the efficacious word that creates and brings radically new ontological possibilities into being' (xiv). Thus, by this philosophical approximation, Ricoeur expands biblical insights 'into a larger account of the way that religious discourse—and discourse in general—works to disclose new possibilities for being and acting in the world' (xv). Finally, Gregor shows how, for Ricoeur, these new possibilities pertain to human action and, thus, how his hermeneutics of religion directly informs the philosophical anthropology that is 'the enduring theme of [Ricoeur's] work as a whole' (4). According to Gregor's interpretation, 'the religious word addresses the human being—in imagination and desire—to regenerate the will that is bound by radical evil. The hermeneutics of religion is therefore concerned with the rebirth of the capable self' (xv).

Gregor's book, however, seeks to do more than describe Ricoeur's thought. From the beginning he makes his critical interests clear and they pertain precisely to the idea that hermeneutics of religion should take the theme of human capability as its centre. He asks: 'What exactly does it mean to say that religion regenerates human capability? And is this the best way for philosophy to understand religion' (xv)? Furthermore, a few paragraphs into the Preface he broadens these critical interests to include reservations concerning Ricoeur's understanding of the 'revelatory aspect of the Bible,' his 'revisionary interpretations' of key Christian themes such as sin and forgiveness and, once again, the primacy of the concept of regeneration (xv). In fact, on the basis of such reservations, he worries that Ricoeur's decision to adopt a 'Kantian category [of regeneration] as the hermeneutical key to understanding religion... misconstrues our understanding of Christian faith' by subordinating the more fundamental themes of 'reconciliation, union, and communion of humanity with God' to the theme of capability' (xv).

After setting out his basic approach and critical concerns in the Preface and Introduction, Gregor develops his analysis within four basic units. Chapter 1 sets the context of Ricoeur's early work by describing the currents of thought that influenced him in mid-twentieth century French philosophy. The next two chapters treat topics in Ricoeur's work that point toward religious themes, particularly his early discussions of fault, the bound will, and a biblical symbolics of evil (chapter 2) as well as transcendence, poetics, and the formation of the concept of capability (chapter 3). These two chapters together serve to prepare the reader for the exploration of the connection between Ricoeur's hermeneutics of religion and human capability in chapter 4. Finally, the last five chapters test Ricoeur's work of philosophical approximation in relation to specific theological themes ranging from the authority of biblical revelation (chapter 5) and Ricoeur's philosophical approximation of the Lutheran doctrine of justification (chapter 6) to eschatology (chapter 7), the personhood of God (chapter 8), and, finally, (chapter 9) the 'central Christian ideas of sin, the cross, resurrection, judgement, and forgiveness' (183).

Chapter 1 provides an excellent discussion of the primary influences on Ricoeur's early thought. Gregor's treatment of Ricoeur's relationship to the tradition of reflexive philosophy (including not only Jean Nabert, but also Léon Brunschvicg and Jules Lagneau) merges seamlessly with his discussion of more widely known influences such as Marcel, Jaspers, and Merleau-Ponty. It is worth noting that Gregor's analysis of these figures extends beyond Ricoeur's own reflections on their influence to include a discussion of their own works and their relationship to earlier philosophers such as Fichte. Along with these philosophical influences, Gregor notes the presence of Karl Barth in Ricoeur's early thought and the 'unlikely alliance' between Barth's focus on the alterity of the divine word and the 'immanent working of history, culture, or human consciousness' proper to reflexive philosophy (4).

At the beginning of Ricoeur's *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Northwestern University Press 1966) he indicates that his philosophy of the will requires an abstraction or phenomenological *epoché* of two experiential realities: the fault and transcendence. In the second and third chapters of Gregor's book he focuses, in turn, on the basic concepts in Ricoeur's work that align with these two realities. Chapter 2 follows the trajectory set by Ricoeur's study of the fault and human fallibility through to its early hermeneutic expression in a biblical symbolics of evil. He notes the way this ongoing theme contributes to Ricoeur's alignment with Kant's own treatment of radical evil and concludes the chapter with a discussion of fragility and suffering from *Oneself as Another*. Chapter 3 explores a similar chronological trajectory but from the perspective of transcendence. Here Gregor moves from a treatment of Ricoeur's early notion of transcendence (explored in more depth in Chapter 8) to his concept of poetics and its connection with human capacity. Such a connection serves as the occasion for a lengthy treatment of self-formation in Ricoeur's thought, arguing that while he favours textual models of formation his early work gives evidence of more embodied instances of 'spiritual discipline' (67). While the importance of Kant in Gregor's reading of Ricoeur has been indicated, this chapter also initiates an emerging discussion of Spinoza's influence. This comes to light in Gregor's connection of Ricoeur's poetics and his use of Spinoza's concept of the *conatus*. Here and through the book, Gregor shows how important it is to connect Ricoeur's notion of possibility (at the heart of his poetics) and the 're-appropriation of the desire to exist and the effort to be' at the heart of his reading of Spinoza's philosophy. Such a connection, Gregor continues, 'is a discovery and recovery of the ultimate origin of subjectivity, which is not a self-positing ego but a transcendent source' (63).

Chapter 4 brings us to the heart of Gregor's argument and, therefore, to the crucial issue of Ricoeur's relationship to Kant. There is no doubt that Gregor is right to draw attention to this crucial question and he handles the relationship with care. While he recognizes the manner in which Kant's approach to religion informs Ricoeur's treatment, he also notes Ricoeur's influence by thinkers critical of Kant's thought (Hegel and Heidegger) and Ricoeur's own disagreement with Kant (e.g., on the issue of 'testimony' as a category superior to 'example,' 86-88). Nevertheless, a more sustained treatment of this relationship awaits development. Ricoeur's engagement with Kant tends to proceed according to a dialectical questioning where there are always questions of retrieval (what is alive in Kant?) and cancellation (what is dead?). When it comes to issues related to religion, Ricoeur typically argues that Kant's anti-speculative philosophy appropriately reorganizes the key questions to focus on the human subject as an acting and suffering person and not merely a thinker. On the other hand, Ricoeur commonly eschews Kant's formalism and failure to take seriously the concrete realities of history, language, and the other person. Furthermore, in *both* the retrievals *and* the cancellations, Ricoeur reads between the lines of Kant's text to draw out unforeseen consequences and latent possibilities. All of this means, at least, that on the question of a hermeneutics of religion more

needs to be said than that Ricoeur is inspired or guided by Kant, even if the appropriate qualifications are noted.

The final five chapters of the book focus on and seek to measure the success of Ricoeur's work of philosophical approximation. As a result, they offer rich food for thought for those interested in the relationship between philosophy and theology. Essentially, Gregor's argument is that a successful philosophical approximation must delve deeply into the richest and most developed expressions of the religious tradition under investigation. He fears, however, that Ricoeur's approximation tends to thin out and neutralize the claims made by the religious traditions. On this point Gregor's analysis in these five chapters is full of insight and lively critical engagement with the whole of Ricoeur's project. Nevertheless, as the chapters progress a more and more explicitly theological measure seems to overwhelm the philosophical test of the approximating gesture. For example, while chapters 5 and 6 seek a robust account of alterity from a philosophical approximation of theological claims concerning revelation in Christian scripture and the doctrine of justification, by chapter 8 Gregor openly argues that 'a Trinitarian conception... should be central to any hermeneutics of Christian religion' (162). As a result, he proceeds to assess Ricoeur's retrieval of Spinoza and engagement with Schelling in light of possible indications or non-indications of such a trinitarian conception in Ricoeur's work (171-179). Such a move shifts the argument from an assessment of Ricoeur's philosophical engagement with Jewish and Christian biblical thinking to a theological assessment that measures Ricoeur's conclusions against a previously established and particular doctrinal standard. For those readers with theological commitments this analysis will be of lively interest.

**Darren Dahl**, Briercrest College