

Ricoeur and the Limits of Critique

Sophie Vlacos

Abstract

Critique plays a central role in Ricoeur's system of thought. Its role is no less crucial than that somewhat louder, wholly triumphant account of the productive imagination in *The Rule of Metaphor*. But critique in recent years has fallen into disrepute, along with the post-Kantian heritage of Critical Theory. Recent turns to realism within literary studies and Continental Philosophy register this rejection of, or at least fatigue with, the post-Kantian worldview; a view potently summarized by the Speculative Realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux as "correlationism" (the inability to countenance a mind-independent reality beyond the correlate of thought and world). This position, directly attributed by Meillassoux and other contemporary realists to Kant and Kantian critique by extension, is commonly associated with the ills of cultural postmodernism, including the rise of conspiracy theory and post-truth culture in general.

In this essay, I bring the post-critique arguments of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Bruno Latour into dialogue with Ricoeur's distinctive hermeneutical reading of Kant. My contention here is that critique, read through Ricoeur's Kantian-ontological lens, should not be viewed as a scourge on contemporary thinking, but as a helpful and philosophically germane resource with which to counter the challenges of post-truth culture. This focus on critique also helps us to appreciate aspects of Ricoeur's philosophical method and disposition that are sometimes overlooked, I claim. Ricoeur is, by rights, a highly syncretic philosopher, but on account of his dialectical method, he is often also viewed as a programmatic thinker. This reputation for programmatic plurality belies the critical rigor subtending Ricoeur's dialectical orchestrations. It also conceals Ricoeur's acute attunement to the contingency of our understanding in the absence of such rigor and, by extension, his profound respect for the contingency of our predicament more generally.

Introduction

Ricoeur's mature philosophy is closely identified with the linguistic turn of his so-called "hermeneutical detour," whereby competing discourses and expressions of understanding are subjected to critical analysis and a form of speculative recuperation. With its emphasis upon signification and the production of meaning, the Ricoeurian detour operates within the ambit of linguistic and imaginative mediation and a tradition broadly construed—from the outside at least—as a form of anti-realism. It would be far-fetched to suggest we reappraise Ricoeur as a realist, but what I wish to foreground in what follows is an important point of consensus and convergence between Ricoeur's philosophy and the neo-realist arguments of some recent Continental thinking. The concept of critique, integral to Ricoeur's system of thought yet regularly maligned in Continental defenses of realism, is an important point of cleavage for these seemingly conflictual positions. Critique's fall from favor is symptomatic of a larger turn away from Kant and the post-Kantian heritage of Critical Theory. Addressing recent critiques of critique in light of Ricoeur and his distinctive, ontological reading of Kant, I present critique as an ally, rather than a scourge, of contemporary realist modes of thinking.

Critique and Post-Critique

Critique and the liberal adage of critical thinking have declined in prestige in recent years, with the presumed rationality of their operations coming under scrutiny. "Ours," Kant memorably asserts in the first Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected" (Kant, 1781/2018, p. ix). But it is precisely the dogma of this Kantian "everything" to which contemporary commentators of critique object. "Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage?" asks Rita Felski in the introduction to her 2015 polemic *The Limits of Critique* (Felski, 2015, p. 5). Felski's argument in fact builds upon a 2003 essay by the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick entitled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"; an essay which takes its terminological cues from Ricoeur's well-known description of a "hermeneutics of suspicion." Critical suspicion is now uncritical orthodoxy according to Sedgwick—a canon of, I quote, "infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling" determined not through reason, but through a contagion of paranoid affect (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 143).

Much of Sedgwick's essay is devoted to the illustration of this irrationalism which she claims borders on the tautological. Her illustration, exemplary in its orchestration of a single concept, is a study of carcerality, in

which the author draws upon culture and society to furnish an abstracted and extended conception of the carceral, which they then use to diagnose an endemic condition of social carcerality. So it is that a flexible and accretive relation to terminology rebounds in a deterministic reading of the culture it surveys. This theory is paranoid because it sees the so-called enemy everywhere, marshaling a wide array of phenomena under its aspect. For this tendency, Sedgwick also terms it “strong theory.” In contrast to this theory of paranoid inexorability, Sedgwick espouses a weak theory, characterized, as she quite beautifully puts it, by “a heartbeat of contingency” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147). In what follows, I suggest that Ricoeur’s philosophy, with its capacious dialectics and apparent syntheses (unfashionably programmatic and architectonic from the outside, one must concede), in fact pulses to a similar beat of contingency, illustrating a laudably weak—or to use the more Ricoeurian term “fragile”—mode of theory. But in order to connect this claim for Ricoeurian fragility to Ricoeur’s reading of Kant and Kantian critique, it is first necessary to incorporate a further interlocutor of the post-critique landscape.

In the 2004 essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” Bruno Latour extends Sedgwick’s analysis of the paranoid liberal enclave to the populist realm of conspiracy. What’s the difference, Latour asks, between post-truth conspiracists and the kind of social critique taught in universities? Both strategies entail suspicion and an appeal to what he describes as “powerful agents hidden in the dark” (Latour, 2004, p. 229). Whilst the names for these agents differ, ideology or the unconscious, or a secret cabal of the global elite, the mode of the reasoning behind these names and the paranoid flavor of the conclusion are ultimately the same. Latour also draws attention to the way parties from both camps vacillate uncritically between appeals to social constructivism on the one hand and appeals to putatively hard science or brute fact on the other. “A certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path,” Latour claims, and he explicitly names Kant’s transcendental philosophy—with its bifurcation of knowledge and the in-itself—as the source of this fateful misdirection.

For Kant, of course, critique is immanent and transcendental. Our *a priori* intuitions and concepts are objective, Kant claims, to the extent that they are formal and universal, but they are subjective to the extent that they originate and dwell solely within us. In this way, Kant forecloses on the possibility of mind-independent knowledge, restricting knowledge (and the post-Kantian tradition) to the limits of what the Speculative Realist Quentin Meillassoux describes as a thought-world “correlate.” Latour holds correlationism responsible for our naïve handling of facts, as if facts were themselves beyond interpretation and critique and as if realism could only ever amount to the assertion of these brute facts. Critical thinking must renew itself, Latour claims, through “the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude*.” A realism or

“renewed empiricism,” defined not by “matters of fact” (a phrase redolent of naïve realism and its false neutrality), but by what Latour terms “matters of concern” (Latour, 2004, p. 231).

This is how critique comes to prominence within the ontological context of recent philosophical realisms. Latour’s ontological model, the sociology of associations or Actor Network Theory, is inspired by A. N. Whitehead’s process philosophy and involves the deposition of subjects, objects, facts, and suspicious fancies, all to the status of “gatherings,” by which he means complex, dynamic, intra-categorical relations. “Objects,” according to Latour, “are simply a gathering that has failed” (Latour, 2004, p. 246); an intra-active complexity reduced via the correlationist *Gestell* to that lumpen and inert status. But if we cease to reduce the non-human to simple matters of fact and stop the dualistic division between discursivity and materiality, our uncritical and paranoid flip-flopping between constructivist arguments and appeals to brute scientific fact would also stop. Latour ends his essay on a similar note to Sedgwick when he writes that

[T]he critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism [...] but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (Latour, 2004, p. 246)

The shadow of Kant’s transcendental solution to the laws of nature looms large over Latour’s analysis. By this account, the path from suspicion to paranoia completes a process begun in the early bourgeois Enlightenment, when, according to Seyla Benhabib (citing Reinhardt Kosseleck), the terms “critique” and “criticism” lost the sense of an earlier etymological connection between subjective judgment and objective processes (Benhabib, 1986, p. 19). This connection was rediscovered, Benhabib tells us, in the 18th century, when the art of criticism was called on to question the legitimacy of the absolutist state and to name the limits of its authority. But Benhabib points out that for Kant—as indicated in the infamous assertion from the 1781 Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* quoted earlier—no such *objective* limits apply to reason itself.

The claim I am making for Ricoeur’s philosophy is that it is precisely *his* interpretation of the transcendental deduction, of critique’s transcendental limits, that enables his text to respond to Latour’s and Sedgwick’s affiliated calls for a weak or fragile mode of critical theory.

The Limits of Critique

Key to this justification is an appreciation of Ricoeur's ontological reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Whilst Kantian critique sanctions its own operations, this rational autonomy is not to be confused with a form of idealist self-founding. Concepts and intuitions are *a priori* properties of the subject, but they are objective to the extent that they are universal, the basis for shared experience: this formal unity of experience grounds Kant's claim to a mode of empirical realism.

In his 1966 essay on "Kant and Husserl," Ricoeur qualifies Kant's distance from idealism proper via a comparison of Kant's transcendental deduction with Husserl's phenomenological reduction. Ricoeur's central thesis is characteristically dialectical: using Husserl as a guide, he claims, we can deduce an implicit phenomenology within Kant's immanent critique. Whilst the Husserlian reduction (developed in *Ideas 1* and *Cartesian Meditations*) was, in Ricoeur's words, the "flowering" of this implicit phenomenology, it also marks a fateful point of departure into the realms of epistemological idealism, one that Kant's text corrects (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 147).

Ricoeur claims Husserl to be subject to an illusion: having deposed the illusion of naturalistic perception (the naïve *Cogito* which takes the outside world as given), Husserl institutes a second illusion when he elides the intentional focus of the reduction with a metaphysical claim for the centrality of the *Cogito*. Key to this false conversion, as Ricoeur defines it, is Husserl's failure to acknowledge the Kantian distinction between intentions and intuitions (appearances): eliding our relation to something with its intuition, Husserl presumes the object's total fulfillment within appearance, and forecloses considerations of a being beyond appearance.

The glory of Husserl, Ricoeur writes, was "to have raised to the dignity of science, by the 'reduction,' the investigation of appearance" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 167). Contrastingly, the glory of Kantianism was "to have known how to co-ordinate the investigation of the appearance with the limiting function of the in-itself and to the practical determination of the in-itself as freedom..." (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 167). The key issue for us, with regards to this analysis of Husserlian idealism, is the contrary emphasis Ricoeur places, by means of a corrective to Husserl, upon the ontological orientation of Kantian critique.

Too much stress, Ricoeur claims, has been placed upon Kant's epistemological concern to establish the unity of apperception. Kant's *Critique*—and this is where Ricoeur's interpretation of Kant clearly diverges from Latour and other caricatures of correlationism—is, he writes, much "more than a simple investigation of the 'internal structure' of knowing: it is even more so an investigation of its limits" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 156). This thought of limits gives the *Critique* its properly ontological dimension, according to Ricoeur.

By the current interpretation, it is the thought of this critical-ontological limitation that sanctions Ricoeur's dialectical methodology, vouchsafing it in terms of its epistemic legitimacy and the wider hermeneutical claim for interpretation to reflect something of the structure of the being that interprets. My claim, therefore, is that critique, read through Ricoeur's ontologized lens, is the methodological pivot upon which his dialectic turns, bequeathing its twin orientation towards rationality and ontology. Ricoeur writes that

The rooting of the knowledge of phenomena in the thought of being, not convertible into knowing, gives to the Kantian *Critique* its properly ontological dimension. To destroy this tension between knowing and thinking, between the phenomenon and being, is to destroy Kantianism itself. (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 156)

Drawing on the idiom of Heidegger, Ricoeur emphasizes the axiomatic and productive tension within Kant's critique between knowing and those conditions which stand behind the movement of thought itself. Ricoeur would evidently disagree with those contemporary realists who hold Kant directly responsible for philosophy's ontological forgetfulness, for constraining metaphysics to a hinterland of appearances and false antinomies between subject and object. Latour in his essay calls for a "renewed empiricism" to counter these false antinomies and what he takes to be the parlous state of critique to have issued from it. My suggestion here is that Kantian critique, as read and developed by Ricoeur, is consistent with and useful to this agenda.

In rather poetic terms, Ricoeur elaborates on this tensive orchestration of appearance and its limits, which we could describe in terms of our finitude, as instituting "a sort of disappointment at the heart of Kantianism" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 156). But rather than condemn thought to quietism or an absolute idealism, the impossibility of knowing Being operates in Kant "in some active and even positive sense." He goes on to state that

In the face of the impossibility of knowing being, *Denken* still posits *Being* as that which limits the pretension of the phenomenon to constitute ultimate reality [...] One can trace throughout the *Critique* this connection between a *disappointment* (with regard to knowledge) and a positive act of *limitation*. (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 156)

What Ricoeur is of course describing here, through the lens of Kantian disappointment and productive limitation, is the very ethos of philosophical hermeneutics, an ethos of enlightened finitude, one might say, and a position stated most explicitly and succinctly via Ricoeur's figure of the *wounded cogito*: this is the figure of the understanding denied transparency and apo-

dicticity (a denial symbolized by the suspicious triune of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche), but capable of rationality and self-understanding nonetheless. Ricoeur's patient, wide-ranging mode of analysis, his dialectical methodology, describes the indirect, interpretative means by which the understanding can come to know itself. It thereby instantiates hermeneutic's ontological orientation towards being-as-interpretation.

In the 1969 essay collection *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricoeur outlines his mature philosophical position and methodological program via a series of analyses and critical appropriations of key thinkers and schools. As a collection of interlocking essays, the edition brings Ricoeur's dialectical philosophy and the formative interpretations grounding this methodology into sharp relief. Ricoeur's critical appropriation of Heidegger, via an "ontology by degrees"; his legitimation and philosophical limitation of the Freudian unconscious; and his justification, via the discussion of the symbol and double meaning, of a dialectical philosophy entailing both the subject's "archaeology" and a regulative and hopeful "teleology," are all key to the substantiation and the orientation of Ricoeur's onto-hermeneutical mode of philosophy.

What Ricoeur also conducts in this work is his own bit of Kantian orchestration, between appearances, in this case the stated claims of other discourses and positions and their philosophical limits. But what, beyond that formative critique of Husserlian idealism or of Heidegger's direct ontology or the general claim for a hermeneutical questioning backwards, sanctions the highways and byways of Ricoeur's hermeneutical detour? By what means does he sanction his own epistemic restrictions on other systems of thought?

The legitimation, when we find it, appears modest and fleeting, but the answer is definitive, and the answer is critique, understood, as Ricoeur describes it in the essay "Consciousness and the Unconscious," "in the Kantian sense of the term, as a reflection on the conditions and limits of something's validity" (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 98). This reflection on conditions and limits circumscribes a thing's epistemic validity, but it must also be understood—following Ricoeur's reading of Kant—as ontologically invested, as if bringing the grounds conditioning those contours into something like negative relief.

This dual orientation informs Ricoeur's reading of the Freudian unconscious in "Consciousness and the Unconscious," where the question of their philosophical relationship to one another is framed in terms of a critique of Freudian realism. What kind of being comes to understand itself through the positing of an unconscious, we may ask. A philosophical appreciation of the unconscious's role in understanding first requires the dismantling of its naively psychologistic interpretation as a kind of hidden agent. Ricoeur describes this critique of Freudian realism as being

epistemological in the Kantian sense of a “transcendental deduction” whose task is to justify the use of a concept through its ability to organize a new field of objectivity and intelligibility. (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 101)

So, a false Freudian realism will be supplanted, via critique, with what is effectively a Kantian mode of realism. The distinction Ricoeur draws here between a naively psychologistic unconscious and a rationalistic interpretation of the unconscious as a valid concept, in fact resonates with that earlier distinction drawn between a Kantian objectivity founded in the apprehension of limits and that false conversion following the Husserlian reduction of method into metaphysics: from intentionalist methodology to an absolute and self-founding perception. Kantian critique is the remedy to Husserl’s false conversion with its false immediacy, and likewise, critique is the remedy for the unconscious as it is falsely converted or substantialized in its psychologistic treatments as a kind of substratum of agency. “Against this naïve realism,” Ricoeur writes, “we must continually emphasize that the unconscious does not think” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 105).

The reality of the Freudian unconscious for Ricoeur, by contrast, is a diagnosed reality, and one to which the principle of critique is axiomatic:

We define [...] the reality of the unconscious [through the] exercise [of] a *critique* of the concept of the unconscious [...], i.e., as a justification of the concept’s meaningful significance and a rejection of all claims to extend the concept beyond the limits of its validity. [...] The unconscious is an object in the sense that it is “constituted” by the totality of hermeneutic procedures by which it is deciphered. Its being is not absolute but only relative to hermeneutics as method and dialogue. (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 104)

What Ricoeur’s methodological relativization of the unconscious is not, of course, is a statement upon relativism in general. Psychoanalytical theory, as with its critique, reflects the reality of the operations which stand behind the positing, testing, and application of a concept and the consistency or reciprocity of concepts within the general economy of a given theory or a wider constellation of discourses and theories. In the humane sciences, Ricoeur reminds us, “‘theory’ is not a contingent addition but, in fact, constitutes their very object.” “Doctrine,” he goes on to state, “is method” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 98). Crucially, the reality of the methodological object is, for Ricoeur, no different to the reality of physical objects “whose reality is [also] relative to the set of scientific procedures by which it is constituted.” “Psychoanalysis,” he concludes, “depends upon the same ‘rationalistic approach’ as the natural sciences” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 104). In Ricoeur’s hands, critique is thus a rationalism of relations: a constituting method correlative to the procedures of science.

What we therefore gain from this illustration of Ricoeurian critique in the context of the unconscious, is an indication of both critique's methodological centrality, of how it vouchsafes Ricoeur's epistemic credibility, and of Ricoeur's critical and rationalistic mode of realism—one which chimes harmoniously with Latour's call for a renewed realism framed, not by naive "matters of fact," but by the full panoply of constitutional operations implicit to objectivity, which Latour summarizes as "matters of concern."

Ricoeur's Fragile Theory

I started this essay by drawing attention to recent post-critique arguments and by foregrounding the similarities between Sedgwick's diagnosis of paranoid reading and Latour's condemnation of conspiratorial critique. Both thinkers hone in on the peculiar irrationalism of postmodern critique, calling for revised, less deterministic, or tautological modes of cultural engagement.

In Sedgwick's case, she laments the paranoia of the so-called strong theory, which, following our discussion of Ricoeur, looks like a distorted or monomaniacal Kantianism, whereby the very narrowness and force of the conceptual analysis leads not to the application of constructive limits but to their erosion, and to a concomitant expansion of the concept which works to undermine its credibility. By contrast, Sedgwick calls for a reparative reading practice "no less acute than a paranoid position," but one which "undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" in order to learn "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture" (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 150–51).

In apparent contrast to Sedgwick's critical-emancipatory agenda, Latour's ontological corrective to Kant involves what he terms "a second empiricism," attunement to the microscopic complexity and macroscopic entanglements of a modern scientific lens, under which objects rarely conform obediently, and generally resist being treated as lumpen matters of fact. To this new empirical attunement, one must also add appreciation for the historicity of objects and for the methodologies of their constitution. We must, therefore, replace the old opposition between interpretation and factual matter for an ontology of associations, entanglements, and process.

Ultimately Latour's objective is not so very different from that of Sedgwick; his re-orientation for critique being likewise focused upon thoughts of openness, plenitude, multiplicity, and community. "The critic," he writes,

is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The [...] one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather [...] and [...] the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (Latour, 2004, p. 246)

Careful assemblage, and meticulous reflection upon the hermeneutical constitution of the object, the assemblage itself, are exactly what Ricoeurian critique entails. A method—inherited from Kant no less—sensitively attuned to the limits of objectivity and to the interpreter's co-implication and co-constitution.

Kant's empirical realism, as contemporary realists are keen to point out, was really a form of intersubjectivity anchored by the universal, transcendental structures of the understanding. It was not a concern for things as such. Framing Kant's transcendental method, of course, was the need to square Newton's deterministic laws of physics with our moral and God-given freedoms. This project necessitated a starkly divided framework between the blind determinism of nature on the one hand, and the anthropos, with its questioning and dynamic autonomy on the other. However, a Ricoeurian appropriation of Kantian critical realism need not be constrained in the same manner. The parallel Ricoeur draws between the unconscious and the scientific object, with their shared dependency upon procedure, confirms this.

Secular suspicion and post-Newtonian physics present rather different challenges to autonomy than God and Newton; indeed, the challenge to autonomy today is not determinism so much as complexity, but there is nothing incommensurate about the call—à la Latour—for a renewed empiricism of entanglement, even a Whiteheadian entanglement, and the spirit of Kantianism conceived following Ricoeur, as an orchestration of appearance and limit, the positing of an unknown Being “as that which *limits* the pretension of the phenomenon to constitute ultimate reality” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 156). Indeed, Ricoeur is keen to illustrate how this non-totalizing interpretation of critique implies Kant's refutation of dogmatic naturalism and the positing of “the empty position of an impossible science of creation” (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 157). This impossible science finds its positive expression within the immanent framework of process ontology and a vision of the world, such as Ricoeur himself depicted in later years, as somehow unfinished or still in the making (Reagan & Ricoeur, 1996, p. 123).

To conclude, Ricoeur's ontologized mode of critique illumines the limits of a concept's usefulness, the co-ordinates of its reality, but it also illumines the process of structuration and, indeed, the limits of its own operations without presuming to name the Being which sets those limits. Hence the open or unfinished nature of the Ricoeurian dialectic. Hermeneutical understanding, like Whitehead's process ontology, is always in the making. We can therefore characterize Ricoeur's philosophy—contrary to how one might describe it based on an external description of his dialectical methodology—in terms of openness and contingency and in terms of a philosophical invitation, in which regions of thought are very carefully constellated, in the Latourian manner of an arena, in which we can gather.

Ricoeur has never been a particularly fashionable philosopher. Yet as his presence in Eve Sedgwick's work confirms, he exerts a profound and enduring influence, usually eliciting the utmost respect. This respect and enduring influence are borne of his rigorous, patient, and wide-ranging mode of critical philosophy, coupled with a pedagogical generosity that can occasionally be mistaken for neutrality.

This is the strength, perhaps also the weakness, of Ricoeur's fragile mode of critical theory; one less concerned with the discovery of new theoretical objects than with the testing and limiting of their conceptual validity, with their constellation, and with speculation upon the type of being that they imply.

References

- Benhabib, S. (1986). *Critique, norm and utopia: A study of the foundations of critical theory*. Columbia University Press.
- Felski, R. (2015). *The limits of critique*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Kant, I. (1855 / 2018). *The critique of pure reason* (John Miller Dow Meiklejohn, Trans.). Digireads.com Publishing (original work published 1781).
- Latour, B. (2004). Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern, *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2), 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday196610312>
- Reagan, C. (1996). Interview with Paul Ricoeur, Chicago, May 17, 1990. *Paul Ricoeur; His life and his work*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1966). Kant and Husserl, *Philosophy Today*, 10(3), 147–168. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday196610312>
- Ricoeur, P. (1969/2004). *The conflict of interpretations; Essays in hermeneutics* (Don Ihde, Ed.). Continuum.
- Sedgwick, E. (2003). Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you. In: E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Duke University Press.