

Barnabas Aspray^{a*}

^aFaculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Pembroke College, St Aldate's Oxford, OX1 1DW, United Kingdom

barnabas.aspray@pmb.ox.ac.uk

A Companion to Ricœur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, ed. Scott Davidson, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020, xix + 225 pp., \$95, ISBN 978-1-4985-8714-3.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur, Evil, Symbolism

This volume comprises twelve essays which variously explore Ricœur's 1960 landmark work, *The Symbolism of Evil*. They illuminate the book's background influences (Plato, Augustine, Luther, Barth, Eliade), analyse the consistency of Ricœur's method (how can philosophy make use of religious symbols?), and apply his thought to new areas (race, criminology, theopoetics). The essays vary in quality. Some of them ramble, making it difficult to grasp their central point. Some spend much of their length presenting the content of *The Symbolism of Evil*, and by the time I reached the fifth chapter I was tired of being told once more about the three ancient symbols for evil and the four ancient myths that recount evil's primordial origin. But most of the essays offer genuinely fresh insights into Ricœur's thought, revealing his ongoing fruitfulness and relevance for both philosophy and theology. This review cannot be comprehensive, but instead focuses on key themes which appear repeatedly throughout the volume.

Many of the essays discuss Ricœur's treatment of Augustine. In *The Symbolism of Evil* Ricœur notoriously accuses Augustine of over-rationalising evil in his doctrine of original sin rather than leaving it as a mysterious symbol without full conceptual clarity. Recent scholarship has shown this to be a misreading of Augustine (see Isabelle Bochet, *Augustin dans la pensée de Paul Ricœur* [Editions Facultés jésuites de Paris, 2004]), but unfortunately not all the contributors seem aware of this. Jerome Porée not only accepts Ricœur's caricature, but takes it to new extremes, blaming Augustine for the whole Western history of punishment (4-6). According to Porée, Ricœurian hermeneutics shows us a way of moving beyond the model of retributive justice that began with Augustine (10-11). Dan Stiver likewise applies Ricœur's critique of

Augustine to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement (177). Stiver argues that we must avoid over-rationalising the atonement into a single univocal concept; instead, following Ricœur, we should see the many atonement theories as symbols pointing to a reality beyond our conceptual grasp (179).

Other contributors recognise Ricœur's concept of the 'servile will' as thoroughly Augustinian. Adam Graves praises Ricœur for this, showing how 'flesh' is an Augustinian symbol for 'our post-lapsarian mode of existence' (32), and arguing that the flesh is also the centre of gravity for all Ricœur's thought on evil, due to its ambiguity as both what is and is not ourselves, both what we have control over and what moves us with temptations and desires; the flesh is the site of the complex relationship between freedom and nature (19-34). Christina Gschwandtner, on the other hand, offers a strident critique of Ricœur and Augustine jointly from an Orthodox Christian perspective; for her, the individualism of the servile will is an 'Augustinian aberration that contradicts the Christian message' (101). Finally, Daniel Frey observes that, even if the servile will is Augustinian, it is a Lutheran reading of Augustine. Ricœur named the concept after Luther's famous treatise against Erasmus, which is titled *The Servile Will (Du serf arbitre)* in French translation (53).

Another common theme of this volume is the new relationship between religion and philosophy proposed by Ricœur's use of symbols. Petruschka Shaafsma asks why Ricœur needed to turn to specifically *religious* symbols for his analysis of evil; her answer is that the ancient symbols for evil are bound up with religious worldviews for which evil is only revealed as such by God: 'it is in the confession of evil before God that evil comes to light and is acknowledge as originating in human beings' (78). Gschwandtner's illuminating essay exposes a hidden tension in Ricœur's methodology of symbols. She points out that Ricœur wants both to return to the primordial pre-

philosophical myths and rituals and yet also to supersede them by articulating them in philosophical language. But to see philosophical language as superior to myth and ritual is a Protestant and modernist assumption, whereas in Eastern Christianity the liturgical rituals survive comfortably alongside philosophical reflection (98-99). Stiver, however, defends Ricœur from this last accusation, claiming that Ricœur's later work reveals that he does not mean to 'exhaust' symbols and leave them behind; they retain a certain inscrutability (170). Brian Gregor observes a tension between Karl Barth's and Mircea Eliade's influence on Ricœur. Barth taught Ricœur to be suspicious of philosophical conquests of religion and to humbly submit to the revealed Word of God; yet Eliade taught Ricœur to see the sacred everywhere. Gregor then shows that, in his unique capacity for mediation, Ricœur 'attempts a bold merger of Barth and Eliade', of the proclamation of the Word and the manifestation of the Sacred (109-116). In the final essay, Keith Putt compares Ricœur with John Caputo. While Caputo accuses Ricœur of being 'too metaphysical' (201), Putt argues that Caputo has learnt more from Ricœur than he realises. Ricœurian symbolism, like Caputo's deconstruction, disrupts the hegemony of univocal closed systems, undermines the idolatrous pretensions of absolute knowledge, and instead leaves multiple possibilities open in the multiple genres of religious language and ways of naming God.

Overall, this volume testifies to the fecundity of Ricœur's early thought and its applicability to so many areas of discourse. The best of these essays, (in my view, chapters 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9) will be essential reading for future scholarship on Ricœur's concept of the symbol, his reflections on evil, and his proposal for a second naïveté.