

In the Laboratory of the Imagination with Ricoeur and Lonergan

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*“By it’s word, religion enters the world mediated by meaning and regulated by value. It endows that world with its deepest meaning and its highest value.”<sup>1</sup>*

If theology mediates between culture and religion, the world mediated by meaning needs to be more fully understood. Fr. Lonergan lays out the reasons for his affirmation that this world exists in his chapter on meaning in *Method in Theology*. The theologian needs to be able to recognize the word of religion within the world mediated by meaning in order to reflect on it regarding the cultural context. Theological work includes progress in understanding religion through the world mediated by meaning in order to answer questions stemming from a cultural milieu. This operation is central to Lonergan’s notion of theological method.

How do we go about this? I think Paul Ricoeur’s work in the realm of imagination and fiction can help us understand more specifically what this work can actually be in practice. I want to make two points concerning imagination and fiction in this paper. First, Ricoeur’s notion of productive imagination may provide an ontological basis for the world mediated by meaning in the reformulation of language. Secondly, Ricoeur’s thinking on *fiction* provides a forum to ask questions, anticipate questions from others, and work out answers through action, and with a purpose for action. Fiction, or narrative as Ricoeur develops it, provides the

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<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran, vol. 17, *Self-transcendence: Intellectual, Moral, Religious* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 327.

framework for new experiences offered by the productive imagination. This paper will argue for a fruitful addition to Lonergan's theological method in Ricoeur's writings concerning the function of the productive imagination and fiction.

### **Productive Imagination**

What is the productive imagination? Ricoeur develops this theory in response to what he believes is too narrow of a framework concerning a theory of imagination in the history of western philosophy. He generally refers to this narrow view of the imagination as reproductive imagination. George Taylor lists four domains of productive imagination that can be found across the whole of Ricoeur's writings. These include utopia, epistemological imagination, poetic imagination, and imagination concerning religious symbols.<sup>2</sup> I will focus on poetic imagination. But first, I will clarify productive imagination on its own by briefly comparing it with reproductive imagination.

What is the distinction between reproductive and productive imagination? The main difference is image. Reproductive imagination considers *images* in the mind. On the other hand, productive imagination considers language, and the use of language within fiction. I will come back to that point in discussing fiction.

There are three basic problems with the image for Ricoeur that drive him to argue for the productive imagination. First, in what sense are these images real? Second, how trustworthy are they? Third, reproductive imagination is only "creative" upon reflection. Productive imagination will be shown to be creative in the act within fiction itself. I want to stress the fact that Ricoeur does not deny that

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<sup>2</sup> See George H. Taylor, "Ricoeur's Philosophy of Imagination," *Journal of French Philosophy* 16, no.1 and no. 2 (2006): 94.

what he calls reproductive imagination **is** how we think about many things. But, he thinks that if this is our only theory of imagination, it limits us in knowing and discovering meaning.

So, to summarize according to their function: The reproductive imagination gives new possibilities about the data as given in the senses. The productive imagination gives new data not gained directly through the senses, from which other possibilities may be considered. It is creative from the start, not reflective. It produces an image without an original. So, how is this new data produced, and what is this new data? How is it creative from the start? Depending on what point in Ricoeur's career you are reading, he offers two ways in which new data is produced.

First, Ricoeur argues that the act of metaphor produces new meaning and data for consideration. Metaphor transfers meaning based on the relations taken into account between sentences, not between words. According to Aristotle, "Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy."<sup>3</sup> But, I will focus more on Ricoeur's later development of fiction and narrative to give momentum to the theologian's task of mediating between religion and culture.

The second way new data is produced, the way I will focus on, is through fiction. Perhaps the most important thing to know about fiction for Ricoeur is that fiction is crafted, it is told, it is written. Imagination produces new experiences

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Basis Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1457b7-10.

through the acts involved in making fiction. In order to craft good, creative, and helpful fiction, the narrator needs to be able to accomplish two tasks.

Number one, the narrator must read, and practice the use and manipulation of language, including metaphor. Number two, the writer or speaker needs to construct events and actions that produce contexts for the sentences. So, productive imagination draws from language and reconfigures language in a new context. Older concepts are reformed in order to deal with new language and action that is experienced as a possibility through the act of writing or telling a narrative. That context is created by the narrator in the construction and ordering of events and action, much like the way Aristotle describes tragedy in the *Poetics* (book 6 is one place).

Ricoeur thinks this notion of crafting a fiction broadens the framework enough to allow for a productive imagination through language. Language is not an image in the mind. I acknowledge that letters or words can be “seen” as images, but I don’t think whole sentences can be compared in an image. We can’t find tension between sentences in an image. The sentence is what a productive imagination produces, given the context of fictional events and situations. We think differently through sentences, and even through words than we do with material objects, or images of material objects. Thinking back to what a metaphor is can help us affirm this viewpoint. When one grasps the meaning of a metaphor, he or she may utilize the productive imagination to speak about relations between meanings of material objects in a novel way. The discovery and passing on of language gives us the key we need to unlock our productive imagination, and hypothesize within a world of

relations dictated by meaning, emotion, and action. Narrative has no object the way an image does in the reproductive imagination. Rather, narrative gives it's own goal, and eventually it's own outcome. This is the world of narrative, the most helpful type of fiction for Ricoeur.

Narrative is further understood in a broad sense as the “what” of mimetic action. In Ricoeur’s thinking, mimesis is generally a creative imitation that divides and connects ethics (as real) and poetics (as imaginary). It is important to point out here that poetics are considered to be universal in a way that history is not. Poetics, poetry, narrative are more philosophical than history because stories anticipate and reveal possibilities rather than simply recounting what happened. Ricoeur relies here on Aristotle’s Poetics to indicate an important difference between the reality of history and poetics. History is understood a little differently now than it was for Aristotle. But, the distinction between what happens in ethics from what could happen in poetics is a very important point for Ricoeur. There is a difference between imagination and reality. The common element between these two domains is the fact that both ethics and poetics concern action.

According to Richard Kearney, narrative has four main tasks. Narrative is meant to realize debt to history, respect rival claims of memory and forgetfulness, cultivate a notion of self-identity, and persuade and evaluate action.<sup>4</sup> It is the imagination that directs each of these tasks of narrative for Ricoeur, and in so doing, leads to the fulfillment of these acts through intelligible acts in the material world. I will focus on the persuasion and evaluation of action. Again, my concern is with the

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 99.

acts of the theologian that mediate between religion and culture. I will now turn to Ricoeur's three forms of mimesis in order to explain the crafting of a narrative.

### **Mimesis**

In *Time and Narrative* Volume 1,<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur describes and explains three steps of mimesis. He simply calls them M1, M2, and M3. Mimesis is a creative imitation that divides and connects ethics (in the material world) and poetics (in the imaginary world). The bond between ethics and poetics is found in the acts of the narrator. Praxis also maintains the continuity between the three types of mimesis. In other words, this is what the narrator does, this is what we do when we work things out according to questions of action. For example, what do I do if this happens, what do I do if she says this, or he does that? Those are the types of questions that direct characters in narrative relating to events and action.

Mimesis1 is the beginning of the crafting of narrative. It is meant to designate the act of intelligent imitation. Not a parrot's imitation. This imitation implies a logical coherence with the act or words imitated. Logically coherent imitation itself occurs chronologically.

Mimesis2 is the mimesis of creation, the pivot point within the narrative. This is where the narrator organizes and orders actions and events in the narrative. Ricoeur names this key act EMPLOTMENT. The context is fluid, continually worked out in order to anticipate understandings and acts of others, as well as oneself as related to events and other people.

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 31-87.

Mimesis<sup>3</sup> is the effect that differing outcomes of considered narratives have on the narrator, or even the spectator (hearer). The effects will many times evoke emotions like pity or fear as Aristotle speaks of regarding Tragedy. Even a negative outcome is good in the sense that the narrator now understands the inadequacy of the narrative constructed. If that is the case, the narrator may reform his or her narrative.

### **Lonergan**

At this point, I will point out some similarities between Ricoeur's productive imagination and narrative with Lonergan's cognitional theory. Following up on this, I will suggest three specific ways that Ricoeur's narrative and productive imagination are helpful for theological method as conceived by Bernard Lonergan. These include new language for the reformation of concepts, heuristic structures specifically concerned with meaning and action, and a technique for investigating intersubjectivity. Ultimately, I think Paul Ricoeur's productive imagination and narrative can help theologians rearrange and understand meaning within the world mediated by meaning in order to answer the questions that come from religion and culture.

So, there is a real similarity in the structure of compound knowing between the three forms of mimesis and Lonergan's cognitional theory. Mimesis<sup>1</sup> draws from sense experience (language, text), mimesis<sup>2</sup> seeks understanding of the experience by working through questions and possibilities, and mimesis<sup>3</sup> confronts that understanding with an emotional response and judgment that returns the narrator to the material world that the productive imagination refers to. We can detect here a

regulation of world by value as Lonergan speaks of it. There is a return to the material world of action, or Lonergan's decision in his cognitional theory. It is all connected with the productive imagination and narrative. Now, three specific contributions.

First, the imagination laboratory could possibly be expanded to include both the reproductive and productive forms of imagination as Ricoeur construes them. I think the focus on language in productive imagination is helpful insofar as new angles of experience may be offered up to both the reproductive and productive imaginations. I can think of no reason why the reproductive imagination cannot draw from linguistic insights such as metaphor. After all, metaphor may reveal attributes about material objects, just as it does about the concepts that dictate the relation and transference of meaning. Images for the reproductive imagination will arise with new language describing familiar objects. This is at least one connection between the productive and reproductive imaginations.

Second, I have noticed a similarity between something like a scientific hypothesis and the structure of events and actions in narrative. Ricoeur's emplotment acts as the crafting and re-crafting of heuristic structures that help the narrator/spectators/readers choose the best course of action. In other words, the narrator's emplotment, as act, is a building up of a heuristic structure. This heuristic structure is formed within the framework of narrative, and draws from the reformulation of concepts by the productive imagination. The third contribution follows from this notion of heuristic structure.



Within Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative, we have the theory to investigate intersubjectivity through something like heuristic structures. The narrator assigns statements and actions to characters. The narrator also assigns events within the narrative that affect the statements and actions of the characters. These assignments may reveal insights going forward not only for the narrator's personal deliberation regarding a particular question, but for the narrator's actions regarding relationships with others. The narrator can come to understand the positions and possible actions of others through emplotment.

### **Conclusion**

How does all this help the theologian? Lonergan speaks of the world mediated by meaning in terms of a cognitive function, an effective function, and a constitutive function. He speaks of this world as a "larger world" because horizons and meaning are discovered through experience, understanding, judgment, and decision. That is the cognitive function. The effective function is the world we work out, the world we organize. The constitutive function refers to the transformation that takes place. He writes: "All such change essentially is a change of meaning – a change of idea or concept, of judgment or evaluation, of order or request."<sup>6</sup> This is exactly what Ricoeur's theory of productive imagination and narrative is meant to clarify and accomplish.

Ricoeur's productive imagination and narrative is a method of discovery within the world mediated by meaning. It coordinates new experiences of meaning that arise from language and concepts given by the acts of the productive

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<sup>6</sup> *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran, vol. 17, *The World Mediated by Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 109.

imagination. The heuristic structures set up under the broad framework of narrative provide the where with all to consider, work out, and determine meaning within the world mediated by meaning. I suggest that the theologian may utilize the productive imagination and narrative in order to locate and consider the religious word found in the world mediated by meaning.

This way, questions coming from religion and culture alike may be considered and answered within the shifting world mediated by meaning. I will end with a quote from Fr. Lonergan that seems to be open to Ricoeur's theory: "To reflect on the world mediated by meaning is to come to appreciate the importance of language, to discern that it fulfills cognitive and effective and constitutive functions as well as the obvious function of communicating, to learn that there are radically different techniques in which human consciousness operates, to understand that to master all these techniques calls for an almost lifelong educational program, to comprehend, finally, the great variety of human mentalities that have developed down the ages and coexist at the present time."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, 118