

Not the Whole Story: Another Response to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*

Part I

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*It is the province of knowledge to narrate
and the privilege of wisdom to listen.*

With apologies to Oliver Wendell Holmes

Introduction

It is already ten years since John Milbank published *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Its impact was immediately apparent, the journals *Modern Theology* and *New Blackfriars* dedicating entire numbers to discussing some of the many issues arising from it. For it is unquestionably a daunting achievement: a relatively simple thesis elaborated at considerable length and taking on in the process a whole range of authors from a variety of disciplines and across history. To do the book justice in a few words is almost impossible; but it surely remains the case that whatever one's views of Milbank's conclusions, it is difficult not to respect both the scholarship and ambition which it represents.

A number of the many issues raised in the course of the book have already been addressed by subsequent reviewers and authors¹. It might seem curious that there is still something left to be said fully a decade later; and yet there is so much meat contained in the book that it remains a banquet of inspiration and controversy in many ways. In this paper I wish to focus my engagement with Milbank's ideas by considering his account of the work of Paul Ricoeur. Although he discusses Ricoeur only very briefly—a few pages (pp. 263–8) out of more than four hundred—I hope to show how dealing with this small part leads us to engage with a central element of Milbank's thesis. Before embarking in earnest on this task, there are two points which need to be declared.

First, the general outlook which informs my response is the same as that of Ricoeur namely, philosophical phenomenology. This clearly contrasts with the post-structuralism to which Milbank is substantially indebted. Consequently, much of what will be debated reflects basic differences between these two approaches: while Milbank's motto might be Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, 'there is nothing outside the text',

mine could be Husserl's *zu den Sachen!*, 'to the things themselves!'. For while I agree that all articulations of existence are situated and therefore perspectival, and that being is knowable only through cultural expression, I wish to insist on the transcendence of language by being. Existence 'is the *transcendens* pure and simple' (Heidegger 1962: 62); I take this to mean that, to an attentive comportment, being may modify (if not overthrow) conventional cultural 'codes' through the fundamental and inexhaustible metaphorical latency of existence. The language of 'coding' will therefore be notable by its absence in this paper as it offers a rather poor metaphor for the foundational openness given in existence. Instead, I will be guided by Heidegger's insight of existence as projection, certainly, but a projection which is thrown: a condition which has as its primordial vocation the allowing of being to come to cultural presence.

Second, it is only fair that I locate such criticism as will follow in the context of a profound gratitude to John Milbank for having the ability to muster his argument so capably and to present it with such vigour. I find myself in almost wholesale agreement with his overall aim of rebutting the taken-for-granted hegemony of secular reason; what is questionable is the form this rebuttal should take. As will become apparent, my position differs from that of Milbank because I do not believe that affirming the primacy of Christian narratives entails the rejection of all other traditions of thinking and living which are not demonstrably developments of Christian orthodoxy. I take this difference to be due not to theology but to philosophy; specifically, his adoption of an inadequate description of existence and its cultural forms.

What follows is in two parts. In this first part, attention will be given to Milbank's insistence that Ricoeur's use of the categories of explanation and understanding are reducible to the single category of narration. In the second part, to follow in the next number, two further issues will be discussed: the question of the positioning of theology by other discourses and Milbank's reducing of the synchronic to the diachronic through his monothematic use of narration as a category. Throughout these discussions, the idea of distanciation introduced by Ricoeur will be seen to feature repeatedly as a means of elucidating a phenomenon which Milbank's account significantly ignores.

Distanciation and appropriation

The prime target in Milbank's assault on Ricoeur is the *Erklären-Verstehen*, or explanation-understanding, binary. Both categories, Milbank insists, are artefacts of the specious secular rationality which he seeks to overthrow: in their place he proposes a single category, that of narration. In order to appraise this proposal we must first establish how

Milbank uses the terms which he wishes to debunk and compare this usage with those of his declared adversaries.

Understanding is taken by Milbank to refer to the dimension of 'human' meaning of a phenomenon surplus and irreducible to explanation as used in, for example, the natural sciences. He does not however elaborate on the difference between Ricoeur and Wilhelm Dilthey in their use of understanding. These are twofold and can profitably be identified at the outset of this discussion. First, they differ in the *content* of understanding: for Dilthey it is the subjectivity of others in other historical cultures (Dilthey 1979: 180ff.); for Ricoeur, the origins of a text being directly unavailable, understanding refers instead to accessing the world unfolded by the text itself, as a range of ontologically dense existential possibilities (Ricoeur 1971: 557–8). Second, Ricoeur explicitly affirms the role of explanation in opening up the world of the text as a space to be inhabited (Ricoeur 1971: 546–8). Both Dilthey and Ricoeur conceive understanding as the location of a phenomenon within an intentional context; that is, understanding pertains to final causes rather than the nexus of efficient causation (cf. Daniels 1997: 45–6). However, they differ in that Ricoeur takes the intentions uncovered to be those which pertain implicitly to the text rather than to the author. This hermeneutic articulation of the text's latencies is aided, in Ricoeur's view, by explanation. Ricoeur generally means by this the method of structural analysis, although it is commonly used to refer also to the nexus of efficient causation, wherein a phenomenon is explained with regard to its origins or its functions (see e.g. Kepnes 1986; Segal 1990). Ricoeur's approach therefore simultaneously emphasises both the personal involvement of the student and the value of impersonal explanatory devices in a dialectical manner which is considerably more sophisticated than that of Dilthey.

This dialectical element is at the root of Milbank's accusation that Ricoeur is enmeshed in a Cartesian matter-spirit dualism: explanation pertains to the former realm and understanding to the latter since, for Ricoeur, understanding is 'a matter of re-animating an essentially dead text or artefact' (Milbank 1990: 264). Milbank urges this to be a false dichotomy since the meanings recovered in understanding 'continue to inscribe in some medium, and they remain as bound by codes of signification as any book or portrait' (Milbank 1990: 265). Cognition, whatever its form, remains informed by the categories it employs, so the ambition of gaining an ethereal understanding divorced from the culturally inscribed codes of the interpreter proves to be forlorn.

Now it must be freely admitted that this is not an inaccurate statement of Ricoeur's position (see e.g. Ricoeur 1988: 101). But what does Ricoeur

mean when he refers to the text returning to life through reading?

A key binary which must be grasped at this point is that of distanciation and appropriation. These two categories, which exist as dialectical counterparts, are integral to the phenomenon of reading. In his paper 'The hermeneutic function of distanciation', Ricoeur argues that truth and method, as referred to in the title of Hans-Georg Gadamer's seminal work, need not exist in opposition but rather as mutually entailed parts of the interpretational process. Method is needed in as much as it gives rise to a moment of distanciation—one 'stands back' from the text and engages with it as a relatively abstract entity: this may be through subjecting the text to structural analysis, seeking to establish its historical provenance, etc. In each case the immediacy of the text as that which has a potential claim on one is bracketed. Ricoeur points out that distanciation is inevitable since the very process of writing introduces a fundamental threefold distanciation—from author, discourse situation and original audience (Ricoeur 1978a: 305). A critical reading of a text, whatever its nature, serves additionally to distance the text from the reader. The central thrust of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* was to recover the immediate encounter with the message of the text, its application—or, in Ricoeur's terms, appropriation—from those analytical readings which lose sight of this. However Ricoeur offers a somewhat more nuanced account in pointing out that distanciation, far from being a merely negative impediment to hearing the text, is in fact necessary in creating a space for authentic appropriation freed from misunderstanding and ideology.

Ricoeur takes a rather more eirenic view of Gadamer's programme in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, in which he reads Gadamer as inveighing against a philosophical methodologism which is ignorant of the inevitable priority of tradition rather than against method, or research, in itself (Ricoeur 1988: 223–4; cf. Gadamer 1989: 291–300). However valid this reading of Gadamer, Ricoeur sees research as intrinsic to the hermeneutical circle: it is that moment by which the text is made strange, by which it becomes alien to itself, by which its natural or obvious meaning is suspended by the application of a method which 'explains' it in some manner or other; yet just as a distanciated stance cannot be the initial attitude of the reader, neither can it be the last, leading as it does to a fertile 'open region', in Heidegger's terms, within which new meanings may arise. This issues in an appropriation of the reader by the text, thus (partly) freed from the contingencies of the interpreter's idiosyncratic presuppositions, a process which may fairly be regarded as a 'distanciation of self from itself' (Ricoeur 1981: 113).

This final moment corresponds to the re-animation of the 'dead' text which Milbank finds objectionable. The reason for this objection is that

critical readings do not deal with 'dead' texts but rather constitute their animation in ways particular to the metaphysical codings of each method. However, while this much may be granted, Milbank fails to register the significance of the metaphors of life and death in this context. By using these metaphors, Ricoeur identifies the truth that certain ways of reading abstract the text from full confrontation with the reader by introducing a distancing which renders it less vividly present or 'alive'. This is obvious to all who have been obliged to subject a dearly loved poem, say, to critical analysis. Whether this involves a literary analysis of its vocabulary and syntactic structure or the psychological profiling of its author, the life of the poem itself is temporarily suspended. Expressed differently, the ontological density, or degree of existential engagement of the student with the poem, is truncated for the duration of the research interval.

By simply regarding various readings as different cultural interpretations, Milbank overlooks a basic phenomenon of reading which Ricoeur identifies by means of the explanation-understanding binary. This simple binary account can of course be criticized for offering an oversimplified picture of what happens: readings can vary according to degree and character of existential engagement². For example, considerations of factors motivating a poet entail the use of categories of purpose, personal experience, emotional condition, and so on. Such categories carry a greater ontological density than the abstract concepts used in describing the internal structure of the poem; though equally, venturing into the poet's biography distances one more from the text itself than does structural analysis. In different ways, distanced readings of a text have the effect of opening up an enlarged space within which the significative potential of the text—and so, also, its appropriative possibilities—are enhanced.

This readily leads to suspicion of Milbank's advocacy of narration as an all-sufficient category subsuming explanation and understanding (Milbank 1990: 267). Narration is a centrally important category for him and his use of the term will be analysed at greater length in the following section. Finally in this section, however, some remarks concerning Milbank's use of another binary, that of sense and reference, are appropriate.

He makes the observation that the criteria governing intra-textual sense are none other than those which govern cultural existence *per se*. 'Reference', then, rather than be understood as implying an extra-textual reality, should be taken instead to reflect the contingent rules governing the use of the qualifiers 'real' and 'pretended'. So, he gives the example of distinguishing watching a performance of *Henry V* from 'really' being at the Battle of Agincourt by considering the attendant circumstances, such as the presence or lack of a stage, etc. (Milbank 1990: 265–6).

Certainly, Milbank helpfully corrects the impression left by

Ricoeur, in considering structural analysis, that language can be taken to exist in essential isolation from being, an universe of pure 'sense' governed exclusively by semiotic rules (e.g. Ricoeur 1969: 66). Phenomenologically, we would be better advised to follow Heidegger in speaking of language as the expression of being itself in and through existence (e.g. Heidegger 1993a: 230). Being is linguistic; yet equally it *transcends* language. The thrownness of existence, in Heidegger's phrase, means that one can and must speak of truth not as a metaphysical condition but as an existential comportment which allows being to come to unconcealment in all its multicoloured grandeur (Heidegger 1993b). The notion of reference, then, while misleading in the strictly conventional sense of an essentially extra-linguistic other, does nonetheless testify to the transcendence of language by being and the consequent demand that truth be allowed to come forth and be that which forms linguistic sense. Ricoeur himself elsewhere gives a more satisfactory account of the matter when he speaks of language as 'that which raises the experience of the world to its articulation in discourse' (Ricoeur 1978b: 304).

Similarly, Milbank's critique of the structuralist doctrine of universal semiotic structures is quite valid so far as it goes (Milbank 1990: 266); Ricoeur's preoccupation with structuralism was no doubt a reflection of the high profile it enjoyed as a movement in 1960s and 70s France. However the critique need not issue in Milbank's implied conclusion—the rejection of structuralist insights *tout court*. Another option would be to acknowledge their non-absolute yet still potentially fruitful, heuristic application³. The latter move is typically Ricoeurian and Milbank's poststructuralist strictures, while they discredit a thoroughgoing structuralist reading of Ricoeur, leave unaddressed an alternative which surely better captures the spirit of the Ricoeurian *oeuvre*.

In developing his critique of the sense-reference binary, Milbank urges that reality can better be regarded as 'serious fiction' as opposed to its 'ironic' counterpart. It is only in the modern period that our culture has learned to distinguish 'fact' and 'fiction'—or, rather, to associate the trope of irony with the reading of some of our texts. In true poststructuralist style, Milbank seeks to re-cast a metaphysical distinction in purely literary-critical terms. Now, it may freely be admitted that 'real' life is always located within stories; we do indeed 'only exist, as "characters", in the framework of an emplotment' (Milbank 1990: 265). Yet a phenomenological account of existence would go further in uncovering varying levels of seriousness and playfulness embodied in our cultural practices. The account of the work of art given by Hans-Georg Gadamer proves salient in this regard.

Play, suggests Gadamer, 'is the mode of being of the work of art itself' (Gadamer 1989: 101). This is true in the sense that the spectator actually participates in the work as a player, such that his or her usual purposes become significantly modified for the duration of the 'play'. The game becomes 'reality' for a limited period only, yet participation can leave a lasting effect through the transformation of the player. Although the reality opened up by the work of art should not be taken *too* seriously in the sense of being confused with the reality pertaining on either side of participation, yet 'one who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport' (Gadamer 1989: 102). Ultimately there does exist a ground for distinguishing 'reality' from the game. The former always retains the character of open-endedness deriving from the temporality of existence, while each game has a basically self-enclosed character in the sense that it has a beginning and an end: it is already a complete, meaningful whole in which the open future does not feature in its radical fulness.

Gadamer's account can readily be integrated and augmented by means of Alfred Schutz's account of the differentiated structure of Husserl's *Lebenswelt* or life-world (Schutz 1962a, 1975). I have summarised this elsewhere (Daniels 1997) and the main conclusions which pertain to the present discussion are as follows:

1. the life-world comprises a complex of sub-universes, or finite provinces of meaning, each of which carries a specific cognitive style or noetic mode;
2. each finite province of meaning is quasi-autonomous;
3. 'everyday life' presents itself as the paramount reality, the basis upon which all finite provinces of meaning rest and from which they are derived.

Play, therefore, names temporary immersion in a given finite province of meaning. While engaged with the world according to the noetic modes of that province, the rules of the game are entirely serious and only become qualified when the actor returns to the paramount reality of everyday life.

Pace Milbank, therefore, I would maintain that writing *does* 'suspend' life, presence and reference (cf. Milbank 1990: 266), provided always that such a 'suspension' be understood as a metaphor which names the shifting hierarchy of relative significance constituting the life-world. A simple distinction between 'serious' and 'ironic' fiction, then, reflects only poorly the phenomenology of the life-world. There is a sense in which each province of meaning has its own specific seriousness, as well as its own specific irony. This may even be said to be true of everyday life which we habitually (and inauthentically) live as if it were going to continue forever. That mortality is assured is ground for the ultimate irony, yet the precise character of such irony is determined by one's attitude

towards this final horizon which definitively qualifies the reality of everyday life.

It follows also that the sense-reference binary cannot so easily be dismissed: in the same way that each province of meaning 'refers' to a reality greater than itself, so each text 'refers' to a reality which, while dependent on textuality for its coming to presence, yet transcends each and every attempt to delimit its being through language. Transcendence, then, is the key idea here, yet it is notable by its absence from Milbank's treatment of explanation and understanding. This state of affairs is apparent also in his treatment of theological method, a discussion of which will be offered in the second part of this paper.

- 1 See Ayres (1995), Rose (1993), Lyon (1992), Roberts (1993), *Modern Theology* 8 (1992), *New Blackfriars* 73 (1992).
- 2 What is termed here the phenomenon of truncated existential engagement with the world is also discussed helpfully by MacIntyre in considering the 'minimal presuppositions' which he takes to characterise the 'internationalized languages-in-use of late twentieth-century modernity' (MacIntyre 1988: 384).
- 3 This is true not only of structuralist accounts but also—and notably in the case of Ricoeur—Freudian ones also (Milbank 1990: 268). However Milbank goes on to accept in principle the 'suspicions' of Freud as potentially applicable to Christianity; this move is discussed in the following section.

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