

Review

A Companion to Ricœur's Freedom and Nature, Ed. Scott Davidson,  
New York, Lexington Press, 2018.

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## Review

A Companion to Ricœur's *Freedom and Nature*, Ed. Scott Davidson, New York, Lexington Press, 2018.

Paul Ricœur's *Freedom and Nature* was his first significant and original contribution to philosophy. As a result, scholars on his thought have often looked to the book as a source for his later developments, and only rarely as a work worthy of consideration on its own. This is unfortunate because the book addresses significant philosophical problems, including how cognition is embodied, mind-body dualism, freedom of the will, and responsibility. It also develops several points of interest to the broader tradition of Continental philosophy, including a new account of intentionality and a new approach to the philosophy of life. It is to correct for this neglect that Scott Davidson, the editor of the volume, thought the book was needed (p. viii.)

This double motivation, one which is "internal" and takes as its focus the state of Ricœurian scholarship and phenomenological hermeneutics, and one which is "external" and addresses the broader problems of philosophy, thus sets a basic standard for evaluating the success of the volume: can it meet its own stated goals?

I think it does, and so anyone who is interested in Ricœur's thought or the problems noted above, mind-body dualism, freedom of the will, embodied cognition, or the character of conscious intentionality, will be well served by consulting these essays. The contributions to the volume are uniformly excellent, addressing key topics and historical sources to inform analysis at each turn.

There is always something which a single volume cannot address, and at the end of this review I assess what I wish could have been included in the volume, but since the subject matter is complex, I think it most helpful to begin with a review of its structure. As the title suggests, this is a companion volume so that it is divided into three parts: Part I: Historical Influences, meant to situate *Freedom and Nature* among its relevant philosophical sources, Part II: Key Themes, which reviews several of the primary problems which the work addresses, and Part III: New Trajectories, which takes up how Ricœur's thought may bear on contemporary philosophical discussions. My review follows exactly this path.

### Part I: Historical Influences

One might be forgiven for thinking that Part I might be of interest only for scholars of Ricœur or the tradition of phenomenological hermeneutics, but that would be a mistake. In chapter one, "Ricœur and Merleau-Ponty: From Perception to Action," Marc-Antoine Vallée assesses how Ricœur develops Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception by taking that approach into a phenomenology of the will and action. "I want to show," he writes, "that this change in perspective requires a broadening of our primary understanding of intentionality" (p.

3.) The problem, in brief, is that the intentionality of an action just cannot be of the same sort as that involved in perception or contemplation. The latter characterizes our consciousness *of* a matter, but the former is consciousness *to* do something or other. Beyond providing a nuanced account of the historical influences on Ricœur's thought, then, Vallée's essay provides the phenomenological grounds for the difference between theoretical and practical reason. At the same time, it suggests why projects, such as Merleau-Ponty's early work, are not the right sort of model for all of human consciousness, and why they are likely to result in mistaken conceptions of human freedom.

Jean-Luc Amalric's contribution, "Act, Sign and Objectivity: Jean Nabert's Influence on the Ricœurian Phenomenology of the Will," is the second chapter of the volume. His aim is to uncover how Nabert's distinction between act and sign informs the content and method of *Freedom and Nature*, but he also provides an argument against naturalistic, monist positions with respect to the mind-body problem. With respect to the point of influence, recall that for Nabert the act of existing always produces an object, which is meaningful, i.e. as, indicated by signs. Because our conscious acts are completed in their objects, they are constitutively signified. As a result, the understanding of our own acts must always proceed by way of interpreting the signs into which they are objectified. This insight, Amalric shows, informs both the content of Ricœur's discussion of motive, which starts in consciousness and yet is prompted by objects in our natural environment, and Ricœur's method in *Freedom and Nature*, which follows a ternary process that addresses what is voluntary, what is involuntary, and their synthesis (p. 29.) The upshot of the discussion is to articulate a new argument against simple accounts of mind-body monism, what might be called the symmetrical explanation problem: any (naturalist) causal argument that intelligibly connects to the lived experience of the will must, by virtue of this connection, allow one to take up the reverse course in explanation. It is this insight that stands at the heart of Ricœur's claim that it is only the relation of the voluntary and involuntary that is intelligible, and not the terms themselves.

In "Ravaisson and Ricœur on Habit," the third chapter of the volume, Jakub Čapek takes up this reciprocal relationality in a specific case: habit. The essay addresses not only how Ravaisson's work *Of Habit* influences Ricœur, but the challenge it poses for *Freedom and Nature*. For Ravaisson, habit has absolute autonomy, which entails that habituated activity may occur without our being aware of those activities. It follows, *a fortiori*, that habituated activity may occur without guidance by reasons. Ricœur develops Ravaisson's observations in a way that habit has only a relative autonomy. This entails that all actions that are habitual can be guided by reasons. At base, for Ravaisson, habit is a model for being, while for Ricœur habit is a capacity, something that we have and not something that we are. Given these differences, Čapek tentatively concludes that Ricœur might have done better to take up Ravaisson's approach, rather than limit habit to the side of the involuntary, since in that way habit might have been the relation itself between the terms of the voluntary and involuntary. Ricœur, of course, resists this suggestion because then the fundamental relation that we are would not be a reasonable one. Čapek's essay nevertheless points out an interestingly different way one could develop Ricœur's own stated project.

Michael Sohn's chapter "The Influence of Aquinas's Psychology and Cosmology on Ricœur's *Freedom and Nature*" serves as the last contribution to part one. It argues that all three

projected volumes of *The Voluntary and Involuntary* offer “a contemporary philosophy of the will that retrieves the classical problem of the voluntary and involuntary, particularly as it was elaborated by Aquinas” (p. 64.) *Freedom and Nature* more specifically fits questions 6 to 17 of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa Theologiae*, and *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil* follow the problematic after question 18, which introduces the problem of evil. Within this general retrieval, Sohn shows how Ricœur, who follows Jean Laporte’s interpretation of Aquinas, criticizes Aquinas’ general cosmological view of the will. This is the view, which supposes that the end of the will, the good as God, is naturally given, so that there is a natural hierarchy of ends for human life. This view is, for Ricœur, a theological sort of determinism. Nevertheless, Ricœur retrieves Aquinas’ conception of the will in its deliberation about indeterminate means to that end. The external interest of this discussion should be clear even for the non-theologically inclined, for it bears directly on the contemporary discussion of natural goodness, as one finds it, e.g., in Philippa Foot (2001) or Rosalind Hursthouse (1999.)

## Part II: Key Themes

The second part of the anthology addresses a few of the key topics in *Freedom and Nature*, and Michael Johnson’s “The Paradox of Attention: The Action of the Self upon Itself,” provides a nice transition into this systematic discussion by drawing on some of the same historical sources Sohn uses, namely Aristotle, Aquinas and Descartes. The problem addressed is an old one: how are we to understand deliberation’s role in practical reason? Specifically, is there a pattern of reasoning to explain all intentional action? Moreover, what does it mean to act for a reason? The intellectualist tradition (from Aristotle) argues both (1) that our decision or choice is responsive to reasons, and that (2) the choice itself is nothing other than being maximally responsive to reasons. The existentialist tradition argues that (1) choice is not responsive to reasons (in fact, choosing for reasons is inauthentic for Sartre), and (2) that choice is its own sort of activity, a positive event. Johnson shows how Ricœur successfully integrates insights from both traditions, holding (1) that choice is responsive to reasons, and (2) that it is still its own sort of event. He does this by showing how in both cases it is a sort of attention: attention to reasons, and attention to see the reasons through, i.e., as effort. The discussion shows Ricœur’s novelty in this field, and since it is overlooked by even careful contemporary accounts of practical reason (e.g. Audi 2006), it deserves to be considered more broadly.

Chapter six, Johann Michel’s “The Status of the Subject in Ricœur’s Phenomenology of Decision,” not only provides an enviously clear account of the whole structure of Ricœur’s *Freedom and Nature*, but also tackles perhaps *the* question of human subjectivity: how do I know that I am, that I exist? At least that might be the Cartesian formulation of the question. In Ricœur’s terms, the problem is that I do not appear to my own conscious intentions as their object, since I am always aware of something else. The Cartesian tradition attempts, as a result, to catch the subject as the object of its intentions in some special cases, say in labor (Marx) or the struggle for recognition (Hegel), or simply gives up on the notion (Hume.) Ricœur instead argues that at “the moment of decision, I am part of what I project, or rather, I am what I project” (p. 116.) Although my decision is absorbed in its objects, i.e., possible courses of action, in its execution it is I who act. The “I” is both pre-reflexively implicit in this activity, and is appropriately imputed to the action if it is a voluntary action. The Ricœurian subject, then, is the

subject of imputation, one that we know in our actions and the meaning of those actions, rather than a substratum supposedly underlying my conscious activity. This is why Ricœur will later write (in *Oneself as Another*) that its unity is a task, not a given. Michel's essay brings out the fundamentally different approach Ricœur takes in answering the basic question of human subjectivity, and its relevance to the discussion of personal identity ought to be clear from just these few remarks.

Chapter seven is Eftichis Pirovolakis' essay "*Volo, ergo sum: Ricœur Reading Maine de Brian on Effort and Resistance, the Voluntary and the Involuntary,*" which presents a critique of Ricœur's goal in *Freedom and Nature* from the Derridian point of view. Ricœur's general purpose in *Freedom and Nature* is to provide an account of the relationship of the voluntary and the involuntary, such that the latter is constitutive of the former by playing a mediating role; they are not opposed but complementary notions for Ricœur. Following Derrida's reading of Maine de Brian in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, Pirovolakis provides what is, I think, the standard Derridian critique of Ricœur, which is that it is not radical enough. Ricœur, he argues, is not willing to acknowledge that "something involuntary and radically other ... could disrupt the unity and certitude of the ego's transcendental sphere" (p. 132.) The decision to include the criticism is thus useful to the reader to appreciate how the volume contributes to an ongoing discussion in Continental philosophy about the aims of metaphysical reflection, and Pirovolakis makes the case clearly (for those frustrated by Derrida's style.) Having written several pieces on this debate myself, I (still) think that the Derridian response misunderstands Ricœur's purpose in important ways (cf. Purcell 2010, 2012, 2013.) Nevertheless, the debate is a good one to include in the volume, as it continues to be relevant to the broader discussions of Continental philosophy.

Habit plays a significant role in *Freedom and Nature* because Ricœur treats it both as an involuntary feature of the human will and as the point of connection between the voluntary and the involuntary. Grégori Jean's essay "On Habit," which is the eighth chapter of the volume, addresses the topic in a careful way. Initially, the essay takes up the way in which habit might be a model for the relation of the mind and body. Are habits mechanical, i.e., fully autonomous and unguided by reasons, or not? But Jean leads this question back to the broader backdrop, which underpins the "hermeneutics" of *Freedom and Nature*. No, Jean shows, habits are not fully mechanical, and Ricœur's reasons for this claim largely turn on the way that habits enact our motives but do not create them. Yet this account of habit, one which functions as a ground for our capacities, ends up changing our understanding of nature as a result. On this new sense, nature must be understood both as mystery, since our bodies are not fully comprehensible, and as the broader horizon in which we must act, as *natura naturans* in Spinoza's thought, since our bodies are but part of nature. What a focus on habit shows, then, is not only that we are not unreasonably determined by our bodily situation, but also that our capacities nevertheless emerge from a pre-comprehensive mystery, nature, as our final horizon of action. What is at stake, then, is the meaning of the hermeneutics, since on Jean's approach it is nature, which is our final horizon and not Heidegger's world. His conclusion, in short, is that we are Beings-In-Nature, and not Beings-In-The-World.

The ninth chapter, "The Phenomenon of Life and Its Pathos," rounds out the second part of the volume and develops the topic of nature in Ricœur's thought. In the essay Scott Davidson notes that a variety of philosophies of life, of vitalisms, have received a renewed attention in

contemporary Continental philosophy, in the work of Henry, Barabaras, Jonas, Foucault, or Agamben for example. Yet Ricœur has not been included in this discussion. What Davidson proposes, then, is to show both that Ricœur has a robust philosophy of life, especially as one finds it in part III of *Freedom and Nature*, and that it is a significant contribution to the discussion. With respect to this last point, Davidson makes the case that unlike many other approaches, Ricœur refuses to define life by its freedom alone, but rather proposes a notion that takes life to be defined through a relationship with what necessitates our actions, the involuntary. As a result, Ricœur's account is not only more aptly fit to our lived experience, but it avoids the paradoxes that might emerge from a one-sided approach to human freedom. Here again the implications for broader discussions in Continental philosophy, those views on the philosophy of life, are especially pertinent.

### Part III: New Trajectories

In chapter ten, Natalie Depraz begins the discussion for the use of Ricœur's thought in new philosophical research. In "A Descriptive Science of First-Person Experience: For an Experiential Phenomenology" she makes the case that Ricœur's "descriptive method" as outlined in the general introduction to *Freedom and Nature* is neither an existentialist method, nor an hermeneutical method—whether one understands "hermeneutics" in a exegetical sense (for Biblical scholarship), as a result of human facticity (Heidegger), or as the condition for intersubjective dialogue (Ricœur's late work.) What she proposes is that his approach might be used to develop an experiential phenomenology, one which is *radically* first-personal. She explains that by "radically" in the first-person she means "to speak on the basis [for example] of the position of the researcher who takes him or herself as the subject" (p.183.) Her approach thus includes the entire first person, abandoning the ideal of producing claims that would pass the Kantian test of universality and necessity. As a result, claims made in this fashion would be subject to more rigorous testing by including these "accidental" features in the account itself. As a new method in Continental philosophy, Depraz thus suggests an exciting new program for research, one that—though she does not develop the notion much here—might do better than authors have traditionally in accounting for the peculiarities of race, gender, and other "contingent" social categories that characterize how we must all lead our lives in social space.

If Depraz's essay makes a case for the utility of Ricœur's thought for Continental philosophy, the final two essays make the case for Ricœur's utility to Anglo-American discussions. Chapter eleven, Geoffrey Dierckxsens' "Ricœur's Take on Embodied Cognition and Imagination: Enactivism in Light of *Freedom and Nature*" argues that Ricœur's work may be understood as a contribution to the field of cognitive research. The questions at play here include the following: How are we to understand cognition? What role does embodiment play (if any) in characterizing our thoughts? Just how is human cognition different from (or like) that of animals? Dierckxsens makes the case that Ricœur develops an account of embodied cognition in *Freedom and Nature* which is best characterized as "enactivist," that is, it is one which defines cognition as an interaction between body and the physical world, and not in terms of inner mental representations. What Ricœur's account adds to this discussion is that he develops the role of imagination in a way that accounts for the non-linguistic features of thought. Thus, his approach makes better sense of animal cognition than rival accounts.

In the twelfth and final chapter “Freedom and Resentment and Ricœur: Toward a Normative-Narrative Theory of Agency,” Adam Graves argues for a critical integration of Ricœur and Strawson’s work on freedom and responsibility. The question “Are humans free?” is usually approached metaphysically and later tied to questions of responsibility. Many approaches thus prefer to change the metaphysical picture to allow for a notion of responsibility which is compatible with some sort of determinism. Strawson argued that it would be better instead to understand responsibility on purely normative grounds, ignoring its relation to metaphysical claims. He does this by arguing that certain sorts of claims are directly second-personal (rather than merely third-personal.) Graves argues that this approach is helpful for avoiding metaphysical traps in Ricœur’s thought. Yet, Ricœur’s thought is needed to make sense of second-personal appeals, since the contexts of imputation are not vacuums, but parts of a larger narrative. In this way, Ricœur’s sense of the imputability of actions develops Strawson’s account to make sense of responsibility without appealing to metaphysical conceptions of freedom.

## Final Thoughts

I would like now to note an ongoing wish that I had in reviewing the volume, a sort of unreasonable moment that asks for too much. I wish only that the volume had reached out a bit more to the ongoing concerns the philosophy of race and gender, or non-Western philosophy, such as Latin American or African philosophy. Davidson himself, of course, is no stranger to this sort of endeavor, having already edited volumes that do work in this vein, and he has developed his own proposal for an “Intersectional Hermeneutics” which aims to take hermeneutics down exactly this path (2016.) Even in this volume Depraz suggests some developments in this direction. What I suppose I wanted was to see the ways in which the project of *Freedom and Nature* could be completed through a dialogue about, for example, raced embodiment or the concerns that Gloria Anzaldúa raises about leading a life in the borderlands, split by geographical circumstance—perhaps a different sort of involuntary than that which Ricœur takes up.

Nevertheless, what I hope the above review does show is that Davidson’s volume turns out to be more than a companion to Ricœur’s *Freedom and Nature*; it is a sort of referendum on the continued relevance of Ricœur’s thought to contemporary philosophy. For it not only provides ample resources to understand the arguments in the work, an “internal” interest for scholars of Ricœur and hermeneutics, each essay also appeals to interests in our broader philosophical discussions. With respect to this latter “external” set of interests, moreover, its goal is not narrowly conceived, since the essays in the volume address ongoing concerns both in Continental philosophy, including discussions of embodiment, habit, life, and subjectivity, and in Anglo-American philosophy, including problems concerning intentionality, embodied-cognition, mind-body dualism, freedom of the will, and responsibility. It would be unreasonable to ask for anything more from a single volume, and the result stands as a tribute to the collective efforts on the part of all the contributors.

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