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# RICOEUR'S METHOD AND THEOLOGICAL SELF- UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Paul Ricoeur is a prominent French philosopher and theological thinker whose enormous body of works has exerted influences in what David Tracy calls “theological self-understanding”. An understanding of Ricoeur’s method plays an important role in this regard. This paper, therefore, pays exclusive attention to an effort to understand his method or style of thinking. An overall synthesized picture of the method is given on the basis of analyses and observations of Ricoeurian scholars. The result of the synthesis portrays a picture of Ricoeur’s method as that of mediation through a long and winding detour. It is characterised as being dialectical, hybrid, and grafting. Illustrations are given of how his dialectical style of thinking assists theological self-understanding.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), a distinguished French philosopher and theological thinker, produced many significant works, such as *Freedom and nature: the voluntary and the involuntary* (1966), *The symbolism of evil* (1967), *Freud and philosophy* (1970), *The rule of metaphor* (1977), *Time and narrative*, Vol. I-III (1984, 1985 and

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the support from the Thailand Research Fund (TRF)

1988), *Oneself as another* (1992), *Thinking biblically* (1998), and *The course of recognition* (2005). Modest, charitable, and respectful, he was marked by his serious and sustained dialogical and interdisciplinary engagements. Spanning across continents and disciplines, his influence continues to grow.

In the study of religion, Ricoeur's presence comes in different forms, ranging from his direct contributions to issues in theology and philosophy of religion, to appropriation and application of his thoughts by different scholars (in theology, history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology of religion, for instance) and to his influences that leave marks in these fields. Apart from the reputation of his enormous contribution, his works are well known for their difficult reading.

In what follows, an overview of Ricoeur's complicated relationship with theological thinking is given along with his influences in theology, especially in what David Tracy (1995:202) calls "theological self-understanding", which will draw attention to an important role played by an understanding of Ricoeur's method. The purpose of this paper is to give an overall picture of this method based on analyses and observations of Ricoeurian scholars. Although these scholars rarely cite each other in this respect, their conclusions together point in the same direction and complement each other.

According to David Kaplan (2008:1), it is not easy to read Ricoeur's works. Not only is it because of his vast literature, but it is also due to the characteristics of his philosophical method. Therefore, it could be said that an understanding of his method should help to facilitate readers of his works. In what follows, a picture of Ricoeur's method is given. The focus is on how Ricoeurian scholars characterise his method, while details of his philosophical thoughts are avoided in order to allow readers a quick grasp.

According to Olivier Abel (1993:23), it is not an easy task to analyse Ricoeur's method because of his enormous body of works, a total bibliography that comprise more than 300 pages.<sup>2</sup> Another difficulty stems from the absence of his answer to the big question, "What is philosophy?" from his works (Fæssel & Mongin 2006: 8). Moreover, Ricoeur prefers to call his style "fractured systematicity" (or "systematicité brisée"), intending each work to be a response to a specific question. Therefore, a systematic unity of his works is not apparent (Villaverde 1991:11).

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2 According to George H. Taylor and Fernando Nascimento (2016: 124), it was found in 2008 that the number of pages reached 600.

In addition, as Scott Davidson (2010:2) points out, although Ricoeur's reviews and reflections on his own previous works can be found<sup>3</sup>, Ricoeur himself avoids articulating what unifies them and leaves it for his readers to find a unifying thread, whose fruits are not considered to be superior to his own self-interpretation. This is indicated in Ricoeur's (1988) own words in response to an interviewer's request for an overall picture of his works,

You are placing me here on the terrain of self-interpretation, and my own is of no more value than anyone else's (1988:80).

The purpose of the following sections is to give an overview of what his readers have come up with. The scope is limited to their conclusions about the main characteristics of Ricoeur's philosophical method. Although these readers, who are professional philosophers specialised in Ricoeur's scholarship, are diverse and hardly cite each other in this regard, their conclusions share the same direction and complement each other. Before we proceed, there is a caveat though. Jean Grondin (2013:20) warns us that, despite Ricoeur's great contributions in hermeneutics, his overall philosophy cannot be characterised to be solely hermeneutic. Otherwise, the rich diversity of his work will not only be lost but, also, distorted.<sup>4</sup> This paper adheres to Grondin's words of warning.

## 2. RICOEUR'S WAY OF PHILOSOPHISING

This section aims to show Ricoeur's philosophising method based on analyses and observations by Ricoeurian scholars. Therefore, no details of Ricoeur's thoughts are delved into. An advantage of this approach is that readers are given the opportunity to grasp an overall picture of Ricoeur's style without being distracted by his complicated philosophical thoughts.

Charles E. Reagan (2002:4) remarks that Ricoeur's style exemplifies above all his being a "*teacher* of philosophy" in that he carefully read philosophical texts based on the most extensive application of the principle of charity and, also, gave due credit to their authors, from whom he learned. Likewise, Davidson (2010:1-2) states that Ricoeur's method can basically

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3 For example, in Ricoeur (1981: 32-40), (1988), (1995) and (1991: 1-20).

4 Grondin's point is easy to appreciate when we think of the term, "hermeneutic turn", which characterises a phase in the development of Ricoeur's philosophical trajectory. Apart from Grondin (2013: 72), see Don Ihde (1971: 6) and Steven H. Clark (1990: 90), for example. And, even Gonçalo Marcelo (2010: 344), despite his preference for hermeneutic terminology, draws attention to Ricoeur's identification of himself as belonging to the traditions of reflective philosophy, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. See also Ricoeur (1991: 12ff).

be classified as textual exegesis, which requires a close reading in order to gain a deeper understanding of a text. This observation is in line with Abel (1993:26) labelling Ricoeur as the “philosopher of reading”.

According to Davidson (2010:2), even though the exegetical style is common among philosophers, Ricoeur’s way is unique in its extensive coverage of texts of more than a single author, as it is commonly done. Working with the selected texts representing different perspectives on the same specific issues, Ricoeur paid close attention to discordance among them and made an effort to provide mediation. His original contributions usually came from such efforts. According to Gonçalo Marcelo (2010:344, 345), such a way of working shows that Ricoeur’s thinking was rooted in tradition, which provided him a springboard to go beyond the tradition itself. In other words, his thoughts were similar to other philosophers – many of whom were his predecessors – to go beyond them.

The mediation in question is made possible through a method of dialectic, which Reagan (2005:309) concisely describes as being applied by establishing that there are two incompatible or contradictory poles, and then providing a middle ground to mediate them. However, David Pellauer (2002:187-188) notes that, when applying the dialectical method, Ricoeur did not always start with two opposing poles. At times, he started with a middle ground and then proceeded to establish polarity. Marcelo (2010:355) arrives at a similar observation. That is why he remarks that the role of polarity is to show that the overall framework developed from an introduction of the third term can go beyond the clash of two opposing poles. Meanwhile, Reagan (2002:30) warns that this is not a method of “lazy eclecticism”, which simply combines components from these poles. Rather, it is, in Reagan’s words, “*reading through* from one pole to the other in order to show their interdependence” (2002:30 – in original, the italics is enclosed in quotation marks). Pellauer (2002:187) gives a similar description that the mediation allows movement from one extreme to the other.

Ricoeur’s dialectic differs from those of Hegel and Marx. Although he too makes an effort to find a third term to mediate a thesis and its anti-thesis, unlike in Hegel and Marx’s methods, his third term does not nullify the conflicting poles. These poles remain essentially as they are to provide a symbiosis, only at the heart of which the third term can be meaningful (Reagan 2002:30). According to Kim Atkins’ (n.d.) explanation of the method that he describes to be “tensive”, heterogeneous terms are interwoven by a third term, which gives new meanings to these terms and yet preserves their specificity.

Moreover, another difference from Hegel and Marx's methods is that Ricoeur's third term is always fragile and provisional. Thus, Ricoeur did not only return to reconsider and reinterpret it himself, but also invited his readers to do so (Marcelo 2010:356). It is now not difficult to see, as Kaplan (2008:2) points out, why Ricoeur half-jokingly described himself to be a "post-Hegelian Kantian", who "both mediate(s) and not-mediate(s), overcome(s) limits and accept(s) limits" (2008:2). His faith in the mediation makes him Hegelian while his belief makes him Kantian in that those aporias are inevitable and subjected not to theoretical solution, but practical treatment.<sup>5</sup>

William C. Dowling (2011:x) indicates that Ricoeur's close attention to polarity is embedded in his dialogical engagement with diversity and differences. This mark of Ricoeur's unique style expresses itself in the form of his detour across vast fields of different and diverse philosophical texts, a detour so long and winding that it gives his readers "a feeling of having somehow been set adrift on a sea of endless analysis" (2011:x). According to Dowling (2011:xi), an important goal of the detour is to disclose aporias. Ricoeur's analysis painstakingly strips down well-established ideas until critical issues that are left unresolved are revealed. Because the detour and analysis are inseparable, John van den Hengel (2002:73) labels it as an "analytical detour". Although, as Dowling (2011:xi) points out, even François Wahl, one of Ricoeur's most sympathetic readers, found the detour to be too much. Di Vinicio Busacchi (2013:26, 31), by contrast, reminds us that Ricoeur's approach is pursued with rigorous logical and argumentative verification. Bussacchi wants to stress this point because rigorous logic and argumentation are key features that mark off philosophical discourse. Busacchi (2013:26-27, 30) also reminds us that Ricoeur did not restrict his dialogue to other philosophers but extended it to non-philosophers in other domains, such as science, religion, literary studies, culture, and politics, which reflects his active engagement in the world.

Boyd Blundell (2010a:2; 2010b:158) draws attention to the detour in question and indicates that it should instead be re-described as a detour and a return, a journey "from conviction to conviction by way of critique" (2010b:158). This pattern of movement is so constant that Blundell (2010a:2-3) believes it can be a general framework for understanding Ricoeur's oeuvre as is evident in his starting point from an analysis of human will through a detour across analyses of sign, symbol, metaphor, and narrative before a return to a deeper understanding of

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5 Robert Piercey (2007: 30) sees that this half joke should be taken seriously and, contrary to Kaplan and others, Piercey thinks that Ricoeur applied the post-Hegelian Kantian approach to only three issues, namely God, self, and world.

human identity. Focusing on Ricoeur's study of suspicion, Alison Scott-Baumann (2009:4-5) sees this trajectory in a different light and describes it as being developed through three philosophical devices, namely linguistic analysis, methodological dialectics, and philosophical anthropology.<sup>6</sup>

By "linguistic analysis", Scott-Baumann means an analysis of different forms of language, such as metaphor, text, and narrative, which Davidson (2010:2) prefers to call "philosophy through language" a term used by Domenico Jervolino (2004:14). According to Scott-Baumann (2009:4-5), all three devices are interwoven. Firstly, Ricoeur analysed and learned from the nature of language, which provides a basis for his application of a dialectic method to mediate opposing poles. Results of the dialectic, in turn, contribute to philosophical anthropology. Seen in this light, the detour is made across the linguistic analysis and methodological dialectic to philosophical anthropology.

Abel (1993:24) calls attention to the result of the confrontation with aporias, that is, an impasse. For Ricoeur, impasses have a bright side, since they offer opportunities for reorientation and discovery of new directions. According to Abel (1993:25), Ricoeur's aporetic awareness puts on centre stage the philosophical activities of questioning that is conducted against the background of diverse responses to particular aporias. The long detour across a plurality of perspectives is, therefore, required. However, it is not promised that complete mediation among these diverse views will ever be achieved.

According to Able (1993:26), Ricoeur's approach focuses on a clear formulation of questions and a presentation of other philosophers' perspectives in response to the questions. Marcelo (2010:345, 362) gives us another explanation, namely that the formulation of questions is required because questions are not readily available. They are embedded in the history of philosophy. Therefore, to discover these questions, it is necessary to study their history. In these histories, the questions are entangled with previous philosophers' efforts to formulate questions and propose answers. According to Able (1993:26), Ricoeur used this process to disclose what questions or aspects of the questions were left out by these philosophers, and what questions were further raised by these philosophers' responses, before attempting to tackle these questions. The detour across other philosophers' perspectives leads to their integration

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6 Piercy (2010) notes that Scott-Baumann's use of the term "philosophical anthropology" differs from the general usage. Commonly meaning a philosophical domain of inquiry into human nature and conditions, the term does not denote a method.

into Ricoeur's thinking and, therefore, improves and revises Ricoeur's questions and outlook.

In addition, Able (1993:26) stresses that Ricoeur's approach demands a close investigation of aporias through different perspectives offered by different thinkers and, at the same time, requires that not a single perspective be excluded. More than that, Ricoeur believed that we owe even to those who we may not learn about, but have made possible, the philosophical endeavours to tackle the aporias in question. It is not surprising that Ricoeur always respected his predecessors. Brian Treanor (2010:173) notes that, because of this, Ricoeur tried to delineate to whom he owed his ideas so much that many believe he had no originality.

Abel (1993:27) further describes Ricoeur's method as being a hybrid of perspectives and methods – such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and analytic philosophy – across which he made a detour. In other words, Ricoeur grafted these perspectives and methods onto issues under study, such as will, evil, metaphor, narrative, and ethics. This hybrid approach does not only highlight limits of these perspectives and methods, it also goes beyond them, though not completely. Regarding this incompleteness, attention was drawn to Ricoeur's words that part of his later works addressed questions that had not been resolved, or even rejected, in previous works (Villaverde 1991:1); or questions that re-emerged despite Ricoeur's own responses in previous works (Marcelo 2010:346). In addition, the grafting style reminds us that there is more than one perspective or method that can be grafted onto particular issues and that each of them can leave some residues that cannot be grafted. This further reminds us of Dowling's metaphor of readers being adrift at sea. Ricoeur's awareness of there being some residues drove him to work endlessly to discover and cover them.

## 2.1 Methodological explanation

According to Scott-Baumann (2009:116), methodology is “the discussion around the use of methods”, based on which a decision is made to choose particular methods to work with. The goal of this section is methodological in this sense. It is to provide a methodological explanation of the rationale behind Ricoeur's choice of the philosophical method delineated above.

Reagan (2002:4) points out that Ricoeur basically believed that ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophers find parts or angles of the truth and yet make claims to absolute truth. Therefore, he considered it to be his task to integrate all of these parts or angles in order to get closer to the truth. Dowling (2011:x-xi) argues that the basis of such belief is Ricoeur's perception that the long history of philosophical thinking has taught us that aporias or paradoxes are part of human experiences, and philosophy can

never solve them. As long as humans exist, the paradoxes exist. Therefore, Ricoeur always resisted a temptation to make an absolute claim. However, despite philosophy's failure, Ricoeur saw that the value of philosophical thinking lies in its very endeavours to make sense of these paradoxes.

Meanwhile, Busacchi (2013:25) draws attention to Ricoeur's engagement with non-philosophers. To make the point, Busacchi cites Ricoeur's words in his *Autobiographie intellectuelle* (1995: 62) that "philosophy dies if we put a halt on our millennium-long dialogue with sciences..." (author's translation). According to Busacchi (2013:25), in Ricoeur's view, philosophy needs to address specific rather than general issues. The interdisciplinary approach is vital in this regard for it allows exposure to progress and debates in other fields, especially the sciences. What Ricoeur learns from such exposure and dialogue was, of course, integrated into his philosophical thinking and questioning.

Atkins (n.d.) identifies Ricoeur's philosophical-anthropological idea as the basis for his extensive method. It is the idea that, due to its own ambiguities (for instance, humans belong both to the natural and social worlds), human existence in itself contains tension. Ricoeur believed that philosophy should find a way to articulate and cover these tensions. Therefore, Atkins (n.d.) adds, it is not a surprise to find Ricoeur in constant dialogue with different and diverse philosophical approaches, European traditions, and disciplines (such as history, literary studies, etc.) in order to learn from their analyses of, insights on, and responses to, specific issues. These differences and diversity contributes to an overall understanding of human beings. Atkins (n.d.) believes that "intersection" is a good metaphor for describing Ricoeur's work, which focuses on the spots where all of these different and diverse views overlap.

Abel (1993:23) identifies two dimensions, ethical and philosophical-anthropological, in Ricoeur's methodological choice. The first ethical dimension has a personal element. Usually, Abel (1993:25) points out, methods and ethics are separate. Methods are for pursuits of goals. Consideration about methods, therefore, focuses on issues in questions and the methods' suitability or effectiveness to respond to the issues. However, that is not the case for Ricoeur. His method is not a means to an end or a solution. Its application constitutes an ethical exercise to practice his responsibility (and ability to respond) to issues and other scholars. Therefore, Abel (1993:23) states that ethics is "the soul of Ricoeur's method".

Busacchi (2013:26) also draws a similar conclusion. He calls Ricoeur's approach a "theoretical practice", in the sense of practicing philosophy in different and diverse domains. In addition, referring to Bernard P.

Dauenhauer (1998:213), who summarises in his study of Ricoeur's political thoughts that practical wisdom is "achieved only by way of an interminable dialectic between criticism and conviction" (1998:213), we can see Abel's highlighting the ethical dimension of Ricoeur's philosophical practice in another light. That is, applying his method, we can see that Ricoeur practiced practical wisdom, the foundation of virtues. That is because, as Blundell (2010b:158) puts it, he journeyed "from conviction to conviction through critique".

The philosophical-anthropological dimension is related to implications that Ricoeur's thoughts about human nature have on his way of doing philosophy. According to Abel (1993:28), Ricoeur's anthropology of language or the philosophical-anthropological idea of the human being as a speaking subject was a factor that led him to focus on questioning with the aim to better understand questions to which other philosophers responded and to derive new possible questions from these responses. As a speaking subject, Ricoeur was engaged in relentless dialogue with others. Another philosophical-anthropological idea that has an important influence on his method, according to Abel (1993:28), was that of the human being as an acting subject. The feature of hybridisation and a quest for residues after grafting in Ricoeur's mediating approach reflects the idea of "an anthropology of praxis, of work, of poetic making, of work making, of action".

## 2.2 Characteristics of Ricoeur's method: a conclusion

The synthesis of different Ricoeurian scholars' analyses and observations yields a portrayal of Ricoeur's method that conforms with Grondin's warning against a reduction of Ricoeur's approach to its hermeneutic dimension. Moreover, these scholars' conclusions point to the same direction, namely that Ricoeur's method is basically that of mediation, which can be metaphorically characterised as a detour-and-return movement from conviction to deeper conviction by way of criticisms. In this back-and-forth process, issues are formulated and reformulated; ideas are interpreted and reinterpreted.

Based on rigorous analyses of language and arguments, the process is worked through close readings of texts by, and dialogues with, both philosophers and non-philosophers who offer responses to particular questions or issues. Mediation is, then, developed through discovery of a third term, hybridisation of different approaches or grafting of diverse responses onto the issues in question. Ricoeur's method has both ethical and philosophical-anthropological bases. Ricoeur always gave credit to other scholars, both past and contemporary. This was done in his very

way of practicing philosophy. In addition, due to Ricoeur's ideas of the inevitably paradoxical nature of human existence and of human beings as speaking and acting subjects, his method aims to clarify, establish, and make sense of aporias through an act of careful questioning and mediating different responses to the aporias. It should be noted here, after Marcelo (2010:361), that Ricoeur's method does not proceed in a formal mechanistic manner.

Among the three characterisations of Ricoeur's method of mediation – dialectic, hybridization, and grafting, Scott-Baumann (2013: 126) calls attention to a shift that eventually makes prominent the dialectic dimension. According to an excellent survey by Scott-Baumann (2013:126-127), in the 1950s Ricoeur stated that dialectic was a working hypothesis in *Histoire et vérité* (1955);<sup>7</sup> in the 1960s he explicitly practiced dialectic to tackle issues in *L'homme faillible* (1960);<sup>8</sup> in the 1970s he gave a lecture, *Le lieu de la dialectique*, to assert the necessity to use the dialectical method; in the 1980s he described how to use the method of dialectic in his paper, *Irrationality and the plurality of philosophical systems* (1985); and later in the same decade, he offered in his *Love and Justice* – given on the occasion when he received the Leopold Lucas Prize in 1989 – the latest definition of dialectic that he had developed so far<sup>9</sup>. The majority of the views on the characteristics of Ricoeur's method, as shown above, resonate well with Scott-Baumann's analysis.

### 3. RICOEUR AND THEOLOGICAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING

In this section, the focus is on Ricoeur's role in the field of theology. The following passage clearly articulates Ricoeur's stance toward theological speculation.

[T]he philosopher can hardly discover or learn much from a level of discourse organized in terms of philosophy's own speculative categories, for he then discovers fragments borrowed from his own discourse and the travesty of this discourse that results from its authoritarian and opaque use. On the other hand, he may discover and learn much from nonspeculative discourse...because it had not yet been illuminated by the philosophical logos. (Ricoeur 1980:74-75)

7 Translated into English in 1965 with the title, *History and Truth*.

8 Translated into English in 1965 with the title, *Fallible Man*.

9 The definition is as follows: "...by dialectic I mean, on the one hand, the acknowledgment of the initial disproportionality between our two terms and, on the other hand, the search for practical mediations between them - mediations, let us quickly say, that are always fragile and provisory". (Ricoeur 1996: 23).

Therefore, despite his biblical faith, he insists on bifurcation of philosophy and theology. However, the relationship between Ricoeur's philosophical and theological thinking has been a subject of debate mainly due to the incongruence between Ricoeur's own insistence on their separation and many scholars' different reading of his oeuvre. Here is a good example. In *Oneself as another*, readers find his clear articulation of the separation,

If I defend my philosophical writings against the accusation of cryptotheology, I also refrain, with equal vigilance, from assigning to biblical faith a cryptophilosophical function. (Ricoeur 1992: 24)

However, in response to this, Pamela Sue Anderson wrote

Philosophers of religion who have read Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, or any of a number of his essays written during the past thirty years, may well be astonished that in his *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur remains adamant in bracketing the question of the existence of God. (Anderson 1994: 65)

Therefore, it is not surprising to find that some scholars describe Ricoeur, despite his own insistence, as a theologian, and also to discover some others who point out Ricoeur's double or triple identity. For instance, in his *Biblical narrative in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer (1990:166) argues that Ricoeur is a theologian. Meanwhile, Mark I. Wallace (2000:302) identifies Ricoeur as a hermeneutical phenomenologist and biblical exegete. This duality is based on Ricoeur's characteristics as a hermeneut, phenomenologist, and theological thinker. Regarding the latter, Wallace emphasises, against Vanhoozer, that Ricoeur is not a theologian per se, but a theological thinker within the biblical tradition. Furthermore, Boyd Blundell (2010a: 4-5) delineates three "Ricoeurs", that is, Ricoeur as a biblical hermeneuticist, philosopher of religion, and hermeneutic philosopher.

Apart from the topics of his philosophical analysis themselves (such as hope, evil, scripture, experience of the sacred etc.), a source of this complication comes from his philosophical argumentation being driven by faith, "the profound motivation of my philosophical engagement and of my personal and communitary existence" (Ricoeur 1998:150). His shift of stance can also be another source. As James Carter (2014:12-13) points out, Ricoeur's insistence on the separation between philosophy and religion became weaker later in his career due to his realisation of the connection between his religious thinking expounded in his *Thinking biblically* (1998, with André LaCocque) and his analysis of philosophical-anthropological ontology. As a result, Carter (2014:13-14) continues, Ricoeur referred to his

work as “philosophical theology or theological philosophy” in an interview by Richard and Anne Kearney and Fabrizio Turoldo, and his later works are interpreted by some scholars “as an explicitly Christian, theological turn”.

It is worth noting that the picture can be different among North American theologians for whom, according to Blundell (2010a: 4-5), Ricoeur is perceived undoubtedly as a theologian because of his affiliation with the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. Another reason is the publication in English collections of Ricoeur’s essays by Lewis Seymour Mudge, *Essays on biblical interpretation* (1980), and by Wallace, *Figuring the sacred: religion, narrative and imagination* (1995), the latter of which does not only contain essays on biblical exegesis but also cover topics and issues in philosophy of religion such as religious language, relation between experience of the sacred and scriptural words, or Kant’s and Levinas’ philosophical approaches to religion.

What should be clear now is the intertwining of Ricoeur’s philosophical and religious thinking. Among his identification of the three Ricoeurs, Blundell (2010a: 5) argues that Ricoeur as the hermeneutic philosopher is the most important because his philosophy is the ground for his engagement in the fields of biblical hermeneutics and philosophy of religion. While Blundell focuses on Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology of detour and return, Tracy (1995: 202) draws attention to Ricoeur’s post-Hegelian Kantianism, a return to Kant through Hegel, as a basis of Ricoeur’s “strictly philosophical contribution to theological self-understanding”. However, while Tracy (1995:202) stresses that the influences are from Ricoeur’s side, Wallace (2000:302) reminds us that Ricoeur also draws upon biblical resources to assist his philosophical reflection.

In the remaining part of this section, an illustration is given of how Ricoeur’s philosophy and its characteristic method assist, in Tracy’s terms, “theological self-understanding”. To begin with, illustrations are drawn from the works of Dan Stiver (2006) and William Schweiker (2010), who regard Ricoeur’s contribution in the light of St. Augustine’s understanding of theology as faith seeking understanding (Stiver 2006:159; Schweiker 2010:48). These scholars draw upon Ricoeur’s hermeneutical ideas to show how theological thinking can strike a middle ground between fideistic and rationalist approaches. Even though these two scholars mainly refer to Ricoeur’s hermeneutical thoughts, their application of these thoughts clearly show the characteristics of Ricoeur’s dialectical strategy, with which polemics are posited, and the third term that is introduced to mediate these polemics and present a new perspective.

Stiver (2006:159) situates systematic theological thinking with the help of Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc, which comprises a move from naïve understanding through critical explanation to post-critical understanding. Stiver (2006: 159) argues that theological thinking should not be understood as a foundationalist enterprise relying on indubitable religious experience or Scripture, since, as Ricoeur points out, both of the latter are not self-evident but already interpreted and embedded in the naïve understanding. As a result, when a foundationalist approach is not tenable, theological thinking cannot avoid being situated in the stage of critical explanation, which Stiver (2006:160) considers to be in line with a modern trend to see theology as "the acme of the reflective task".

However, Stiver (2006:160) states that another problem follows. An assumption of this explanatory approach is that the religious experience or Scripture can be exhaustively explained by, or reduced to, a rational system of propositional truths. Ricoeur's final stage in the hermeneutical arc prevents this drawback, because it reminds us that, after explanation, one needs to return to an understanding that is holistic, deeper, and more critical than the naïve understanding in the first stage. Therefore, it can be understood that the value of theological thinking lies in its mediation between naïve and deeper understanding. In this light, the theological thinking has a supportive role to assist in a process towards a mature affirmation of faith.

Schweiker (2010:45) goes beyond common theologians' acceptance of Ricoeur's philosophy as a resource of methodological support for theological reflection, and argues that his philosophy can throw a light on the nature of a certain type of theological thinking. Against a background of the widest sense of theology means "God-talk"— Schweiker (2010:47) focuses on theology as a distinct intellectual enterprise pursued by specifically trained individuals, and points out three types of theology, which have their own approaches to thinking.

The first type, confessional theology, was developed in response to a demand that is intrinsic to the life of religious believers and communities. It is the demand for articulation and interpretation of the meaning and truth witnessed by the church. Therefore, the task of theology is to think within the context, or symbolic world, of a believing community. Apologetic theology is the second type, which addresses demands and questions from the outside. The meaning and truth of religious beliefs are no longer presupposed. The task of theological thinking is, therefore, to develop a rational system of univocal and abstract ideas that clarifies the meaning, justifies the truth, and answers questions arising from human conditions. The third type of theology, mediating theology, aims to respond

to demands both intrinsic and extrinsic to the believing community (Schweiker 2010:47-48).

According to Schweiker (2010:48-49), Ricoeur's idea of hermeneutical thinking can provide a model to understand the latter type of theology. Schweiker (2010:46) explains that hermeneutical thinking enables human beings to make sense of their existence full of tensions and conflicts so that they can understand the world and orient their lives. In other words, hermeneutical thinking makes tensions productive. Common tensions in human conditions are, for instance, between biological and logico-cultural existence, literal and figurative meaning, and discordant events in life. Therefore, Schweiker (2010:48-49) explains, adopting Ricoeur's idea of hermeneutical thinking as its model, mediating theology is able to render productive the tensions overlooked by the other two types of theology. Because of its dialectical nature, hermeneutical thinking can mediate tensions between inside and outside, faith and rationality, believing and thinking, or the figural world of the believer and the literal meaning of the rational system.

Another illustration comes from William Myatt (2013) who calls for critical theological self-understanding to revive the dual nature of religious tradition, which is defined by sedimentation and innovation. The balance between the historic and innovative aspects has been lost in many theologians' uncritical and conservative religious expressions. He expresses a concern over the present situation facing theologians, whose sense of call drives them to communicate with society. Acknowledging that religion is undeniably pertinent in today's secularized world, as is evident in its influences widely present in conversations on political and social issues, Myatt (2013:329, 330) draws attention to a need for theologians to resist an extremist tendency as it is observed that faith-based expressions become more and more extreme while fundamentalisms are expanding.

According to Myatt's (2013:331-332) analysis, amidst the rapid changes in today's global secular society, the extremist and fundamentalist attitudes develop out of fear and a resulting sense of urgent need to preserve religion. Consequently, many return and cling to the past, which gives them a sense of security. In addition, in the secular context where society, academy, and church are increasingly isolated from each other, theologians' exposure to critical responses is hindered, especially those who are not sensitive to the hermeneutical nature of theology. As theologians tend to adjust their discourses in response to different audiences, those who are addressing their extremist and fundamentalist addressees consequently cannot hear critiques from people outside of their target audiences.

The polarisation of the extremist and fundamentalist against the secular does not only affect the moving culture, but also the church itself. It makes the church unable to respond to the social changes in the present era. Thereby, the church becomes obsolete. Worse still, the attachment to the past to maintain the status quo blocks imagination of the future and hampers the inherently eschatological nature of religious language and symbol. Referring to Moltmann (1965), Myatt (2013) elaborates on the latter point stating "In biblical terminology, time is moving toward a messianic (and thus ultimately open) end" (2013:331).

Based on the above analysis, Myatt (2013:330-331) proposes that an appropriate theological self-understanding should be based on mediation between the past and the future to avoid the extremist, fundamentalist tendency and maintain the eschatological aspect. This type of self-understanding is reflected in critical theology. As it is indicated above, religious language and symbols are inherently eschatological. Therefore, using religious symbols as leverage, Myatt believes that Ricoeur's analysis of religious symbols can provide a model for understanding critical theology, that is, to mediate between the past and the future. Accordingly, he points out that Ricoeur (1970), in *Freud and philosophy*, presents a dialectic of archaeology and teleology to explain the power of religious symbols to coordinate fear and hope. On the one hand, religious symbols revive "archaic meanings belonging to the infancy of mankind" (1970:496). On the other hand, they give rise to "figures that anticipate our spiritual adventures" (1970:496).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It can be seen that, in their attempts at theological self-understanding, Stiver, Schweiker and Myatt do not only benefit from Ricoeur's ideas but also his dialectical style of thinking. Before finding the third term between the two polemics, a detour is made through the foundationalist and the rationalist approaches to systematic theological thinking in the case of Stiver, the confessional and the apologetic ways of theological thinking in the case of Schweiker, and the historic and the innovative nature of theological expression in the case of Myatt. As a result, the tensions become productive and dialectical syntheses emerge. The overall picture of Ricoeur's method helps to identify the mediating frameworks used in these theological reflections.

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### Key words

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