

**SITUATING RICOEUR WITHIN THE
HERMENEUTIC TRADITION: AN OVERVIEW OF
HIS LIFE AND WORKS**

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Paul Ricoeur, a giant of contemporary continental philosophy, passed away on 20 May 2005 at Chatney-Malabry, France, at the age of 92. One of the most distinguished and prolific philosophers of the twentieth century, with over 30 major works and more than 500 articles to his credit, Ricoeur left an indelible mark on contemporary history and philosophy. He published extensively on phenomenology, structuralism, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, ethics, religion, politics and theory of language. He will be fondly remembered for dealing with the greatest philosophical theme—the meaning of life.

This essay, developed in two parts, will try to situate Paul Ricoeur in the hermeneutic tradition. Hence I shall present the key figures in the history of hermeneutics, especially those of the modern and contemporary times, who have influenced the thought of Ricoeur and with whom he constantly dialogued. These interlocutors include Schleiermacher and Dilthey of the modern era, and Heidegger and Gadamer of the contemporary age. This will be presented in the first part of the essay. Herein Schleiermacher and Dilthey mark the shift from regional hermeneutics to a general theory of hermeneutics. Heidegger and Gadamer, on the other hand, inaugurate the transition from epistemology to ontology. This opens the way for the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur. The second part of this essay is dedicated to the study of Ricoeur. Beginning with a brief overview of Ricoeurian corpus, followed by examining the grafting of phenomenology onto hermeneutics, it will conclude with a brief exposition of the hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur and a short evaluation of its relation with hermeneutics and phenomenology.

1. From Regional Hermeneutics to General Hermeneutics

Before the modern period, hermeneutics was treated as an unsystematic and ancillary discipline. In fact there were many ‘special hermeneutics’, especially theological, having their own limited scope. Schleiermacher claims to have been the first person to envision the development of a universal hermeneutics. In the modern era there is an overwhelming desire to extend hermeneutics to all disciplines of knowledge and thus make it the fundamental basis for all disciplines. The protagonists of this approach claimed that hermeneutics/interpretation as such belongs not only to some theological texts and difficult scriptural passages but also to the very basis of natural languages. This is because our words are polysemic by nature. Therefore the aim of hermeneutics at this point was to rise above the particularity of texts and the limitations of rules to a methodology (*Kunstlehre*) applicable not only to certain texts but to language in general.

1.1 *Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)*

Schleiermacher makes a shift from the particularity of texts and rules to a general problematic of understanding. His hermeneutic programme has a double filiation—romantic and critical. It is romantic by its appeal to a living relation with the process of creation (of texts and other art forms) and by its proposal “to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself.” It is also critical by its wish to elaborate universally valid rules of understanding and by its constant effort to struggle against misunderstanding.¹

For Schleiermacher the basic task of understanding (interpretation) consists in tracing an expression back to the intent that animates it, that is, to understand the meaning of another person’s expression or thought. Further, it has to do with language, and language can be viewed in two ways: as the means of communication of a language-community having a prescribed syntax and usage, and also as the manifestation of an individual mind. Based on this double nature of language, Schleiermacher

formulates two types of interpretations, grammatical and technical.²

Grammatical interpretation is based on the characteristics of discourse that are common to a cultural group. It is regarded as 'objective' since it deals with the linguistic code as distinct from the author, but it has limited scope. Technical interpretation, on the other hand, aims at understanding the special art that an author employed in his works. It refers to the singularity and the genius in the author's message. It is also called 'psychological' because it seeks to understand the mind of the author.

According to Schleiermacher, therefore, hermeneutics has two tasks, grammatical and technical. The grammatical is occupied with the use of language, while the technical is concerned with the creativity and genius of the author. But both these forms cannot be exercised at the same time. To consider the common language is to forget the writer, whereas to understand an individual author is to forget his language. The real purpose of interpretation, in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, is to reach the act of thought that produced a particular discourse, that is, technical interpretation.

Finally, traditional hermeneutics considered understanding as normal and natural; misunderstanding or non-understanding was an exception, and hermeneutical rules had to be employed in such cases. Schleiermacher instead universalizes misunderstanding. He requests all interpreters to guard against the misunderstanding that can arise due to our own interference with the real content of the text. Hence the fundamental operation of hermeneutics is the act of reconstruction of the viewpoint of the author.³

1.2 Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)

Dilthey was caught in the struggle between two great cultural movements of the Enlightenment age, historicism and positivism. Historicism sought the coherence of history, showing its importance in the understanding of human beings. History is the greatest document of humankind and the most fundamental expression of life. Positivism demanded that the model of

intelligibility be based on empirical explanation as practiced in the natural sciences.⁴ Dilthey therefore undertook the project of endowing the human sciences with a methodology and epistemology that would be acceptable to the natural sciences. Thus we see a constant struggle in Dilthey to join history with science.

Influenced by the cultural movements mentioned above, Dilthey poses his fundamental question: *how are the human sciences possible?* In the attempt to answer this question Dilthey is engulfed in the great trap between explanation and understanding. Explanation is a methodology used by the natural sciences, where we grasp only phenomena distinct from ourselves. Understanding, on the other hand, is a tool employed by the human sciences to understand human beings by transposing into their mental life. We can always know other human beings because 'however alien another man may be to us, he is not alien in the sense of an unknowable physical thing.' Human beings are not radically alien to human beings because they offer signs of their own existence. To understand these signs is to understand the human being. Ricoeur explains Dilthey's position in the following way:

Knowledge of others is possible because life produces forms, externalises itself in stable configurations; feelings, evaluations, and volitions tend to sediment themselves in a *structured acquisition [acquis]* which is offered to others for deciphering. The organised systems which culture produces in the form of literature constitute a secondary layer, built upon this primary phenomenon of the teleological structure of the productions of life.⁵

Thus Dilthey drives home the point that objectification is the only way of knowing oneself. All self-knowledge is mediated through signs and works. We come to know ourselves only through the mediation of our acts. Human beings learn about themselves only through their acts, through the exteriorization of their life, and through the effects it produces on others. We come to know ourselves only by the detour of understanding, which is, as always, interpretation. We cannot grasp the mental life of others

in its immediate expressions; rather we can reconstruct it by interpreting the signs that they produce. But in the final analysis, Dilthey maintains the position of Schleiermacher that the ultimate aim of hermeneutics is to understand the author of the text rather than the text itself. The *who says it* is more important than *what a text says*.⁶

Ricoeur criticizes both Schleiermacher and Dilthey for remaining within the limits of Romantic epistemology which considered all forms of objective knowledge as a negation of self-understanding. They succumbed, he says, to ‘psychologism’ and ‘historicism’, treating cultural artifacts as alienated expressions which can only be salvaged by an empathetic reliving of the original spirituality of their authors.⁷

2. From Epistemology to Ontology

The hermeneuts of the modern era were quite successful in pulling out hermeneutics from its limited domains and assigning it a more universal task, popularly known as the move from regional hermeneutics to general hermeneutics. For them, hermeneutics was a technique of understanding, and they aimed at the construction of a methodology for the human sciences. However, later philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer claimed that the programme of making hermeneutics into a general theory of understanding remained at the merely epistemological level. These contemporary philosophers take hermeneutics a step further to the ontological level, where understanding ceases to be a mere mode of knowing and becomes a way of being. This calls for a further radicalization of the project: now hermeneutics becomes not only general but also fundamental. The question is no longer ‘how do we know?’ rather it is ‘what is the mode of being who exists only in understanding?’

2.1 Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)

With Heidegger, hermeneutics is elevated to the centre of philosophical concern. The grand project of producing a systematic

theory of hermeneutics is almost forgotten by Heidegger, in his concern to give an ontological grounding to hermeneutics. In him we notice a clean shift from epistemology to ontology.

For Heidegger hermeneutics is not so much a reflection on the human sciences as an explication of the ontological ground that forms the basis of all the human sciences. In *Being and Time*, the term ‘understanding’ is at variance with the Diltheian concept of understanding as ‘grasping the mind of the other’. Understanding, in Heidegger’s view, consists in getting familiar with one’s situation and grasping one’s position within being. It is the ability to find ourselves, be comfortable with ourselves and then orient ourselves. Cryptically, it means being at home with something. Thus, understanding is not so much a kind of knowledge but more of “knowing one’s way around, guided by care.”⁸ In Heideggerian terminology this is called forestructure, and the understanding that guides all other understanding is called fore-understanding or pre-understanding.

Pre-understanding is something that is constantly operating in us but almost always remains implicit. It is not consciously thematised. Grondin explains: “We live too much within it for it to need to be made explicit. Nevertheless, all the ‘things’ and events that we deal with in our life-world are preinterpreted by this anticipating understanding ‘as’ things destined for this or that use.”⁹ Thus our understanding is basically a projection. But this projection is not a matter of choice. It is conditioned by the situation in which we live and there is no possibility of getting out of this web, for we always stand somewhere, in fact we are thrown into it. This is what Heidegger means by ‘facticity’. Our pre-understanding shadows all our understanding, we find ourselves in pre-given perspectives that guide our expectation of meaning. But this should not be considered as something negative; it is, in fact, the way that makes understanding possible. We are not at the mercy of this forestructure. The goal of hermeneutics is to make this forestructure explicit. Heidegger’s notion of understanding stands in opposition to the hermeneutic tradition that regarded understanding as a purely epistemological category. For Heidegger, such epistemological understanding is secondary to and is derived

from a more universal hermeneutic understanding. This more universal hermeneutic understanding consists, as we have stated earlier, in being at home with something; it is a sort of practical or existential understanding.

Heidegger shifts the focus of hermeneutics from interpretation to understanding. In traditional hermeneutics, interpretation was aimed at promoting understanding; it was a means to understanding. Heidegger reverses this order. For him, understanding is something primary and is constantly operating in us. Interpretation consists in merely cultivating this primal understanding, in making more explicit or transparent what is already present. Interpretation helps the fore-understanding achieve transparency by appropriating our situation in understanding and by grasping the presuppositions that determine our knowing. But does this not lead to a subjective interpretation, since one hardly pays any attention to the text under consideration? Heidegger quickly brushes off such objections by claiming that in order to understand a text it is necessary to make our own situation transparent so that we can appreciate the alterity and otherness of the text. Self-transparency is necessary for a critical appropriation of the text. There are no models and methods to attain self-transparency, instead it is the task of each individual to open up his/her path to self-transparency.¹⁰ Thus with a single stroke Heidegger rejects the view propounded by Schleiermacher and Dilthey that hermeneutics is an art or technique of understanding or interpretation that is necessary for the human sciences.

Paul Ricoeur appreciates the great shift brought about by Heidegger, but he does not go with Heidegger all the way. He poses a question: *How can a question of critique in general be accounted for within the framework of a fundamental hermeneutics?*

2.2 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

Gadamer, a disciple of Heidegger, pursues the debate between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The Enlightenment upholds *alienating distanciation*, a presupposition that sustains the

objective conduct of human sciences, while Romanticism upholds a primordial relation of belonging and nostalgia for the past. In his celebrated work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer carries forward the debate between *alienating distancing* and the experience of belonging.¹¹ Gadamer's creativity lies in the fact that his theory of interpretation is historically conscious but without having the Romantic intention of grasping the mind of the author.

Highly influenced by Heidegger's concept of historicity and facticity, Gadamer reinstates the positive dimension of tradition, prejudice and authority that had been overthrown by the Enlightenment. Every act of understanding is conditioned by prejudices. Prejudices or fore-understanding should be considered almost like transcendental 'conditions of understanding.' Our historicity is not a restriction or a burden but the very principle of understanding. Far from setting aside one's prejudices, one must recognize them and work them out interpretively. Thus Gadamer carries out a rehabilitation of prejudices; still, he warns us to be critically aware of our biases, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.¹²

Gadamer's demand for a new kind of understanding is elucidated in the principle of 'historically effected consciousness.' This principle requires that one's own situatedness be raised to consciousness in order to monitor the way it deals with texts and tradition. Gadamer refers to this principle as *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, which literally means the *consciousness of the history of effects*. It is the consciousness of being exposed to history and to its action, but this action upon us cannot be objectified, because it is part of the historical phenomenon itself. Gadamer highlights the simple but profound truth that history is very much a part of us and cannot be removed or wished away. In his own words:

By this I mean, first, that we cannot remove ourselves from historical becoming; we cannot place ourselves at a distance from it in order to make the past an object for ourselves... We are always situated in history... I mean that our consciousness is

determined by real historical becoming in such a way that it does not have the freedom to situate itself over against the past.¹³

History determines the background of our values, cognitions, and even our critical judgements. Therefore our prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being more than our judgements. But Gadamer would add that this belonging to effective history also contains an element of distance. Although history is present in us by its effects, it is also away from us by its distance. The history of effects is precisely what occurs under the condition of historical distance. The concept of the *fusion of horizons* bridges the gap between the near and the far, between what is one's own and what is alien. Communication between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons. Further, understanding and application are indivisibly fused. Understanding involves the application of meaning to our situation, to the question we want answered. It is for this reason that we understand differently. To understand a text from the past means to translate it into our situation, to hear it answer the questions of our time.

Paul Ricoeur indicates that the above insights from Gadamer become a springboard for the development of his own thought—a philosophy similar to Heidegger and Gadamer and yet different from them. We proceed now to a panoramic view of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur.

3. Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005)

*3.1 Life*¹⁴

Jean Paul Gustava Ricoeur was born on 27 February 1913 at Valence near Lyons, France. He lost both his parents at the age of 3, and was brought up by his paternal grandparents in a strictly Christian (Protestant) atmosphere. In 1934 he began his studies for the *agrégation* at the Sorbonne, and in 1935 received a teaching position. In the same year he married his childhood friend, Simone Lejas, and 5 children by her. Between 1935 and 1940, Ricoeur was

zealously engaged in writing on Christian socialism. He was called to active military service in 1939, and was taken prisoner of war by the Germans in 1940. During the 5 long years of his imprisonment, he read the works of the German existentialist Karl Jaspers. Ricoeur's first book *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* draws heavily upon Jaspers existential philosophy.

After his return from the war, Ricoeur engaged himself whole-heartedly in intellectual work and was greatly influenced by his friend and teacher, Gabriel Marcel. Another strong influence was Husserl. Ricoeur was, in fact, the first person to translate Husserl's *Ideen I* into French. He also wrote a book analyzing the phenomenology of Husserl and offering a critique of it. This book, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, gave Ricoeur the reputation of being the leading proponent of phenomenology in France. In 1948 he was appointed to the Chair of History of Philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. In 1956 he was honored with the Chair of General Philosophy at the Sorbonne, but soon left this job to join the University of Nanterre. In Nanterre he was appointed dean. His task was to deal with the unhealthy situation between the students and the university authorities, but he failed and so resigned from the post. This event had a great impact on Ricoeur and he completely withdrew from the French University system. However he continued writing books and accepted offers to teach at the Universities of Louvain and Chicago. In 1970, he left France to take up a teaching post at Chicago University and also taught at Haverford, Columbia and Yale. He took a keen interest in American philosophy and social sciences and published several works including *Time and Narrative*. Even after retirement in 1985 he continued his philosophical research in the fields of justice and law, memory and history. One of his last works, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, bears testimony to this interest.

Ricoeur's work has been widely translated not only into English and other European languages but also into Chinese and Japanese. He received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Chicago, Northwestern, Columbia, Göttingen and McGill. He has also been the recipient of many awards like the Dante Prize

(1988), the Karl Jaspers Prize (1989), the Leopold Lucas Prize (1990) and the French Academy Grand Prize for Philosophy (1991). But the crowning moment of his life was in November 2004 when he was awarded the Kluge Prize of a million dollars along with the American historian Jaroslav Pelikan. This award was set up in 2003 to honour achievements in fields not covered by the Nobel Prizes. At the presentation, the Librarian of Congress, James Billington, said that Ricoeur had drawn on the entire tradition of Western philosophy to explore and explain common problems. Ricoeur is, in fact, a constant questioner, always pressing to understand the nature and limits of what constitutes our humanity. He published, as we have mentioned already, about 30 major works and more than 500 articles. He passed away at the age of 92 on 20 May 2005 at Chatney-Malabry, France.

3.2 *Works*

Paul Ricoeur belongs to the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the child of two great philosophical traditions namely, hermeneutics and phenomenology. The hermeneutic tradition is headed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and all those who have gone before them; whereas the school of phenomenology has Husserl as its main proponent. It was Heidegger who first tried to create a synthesis of these two traditions; he was followed first by Gadamer and then by Ricoeur. But Ricoeur's version of hermeneutic phenomenology is more indirect than that of Heidegger and Gadamer. We shall deal with this later, but first we need to understand Ricoeur.

Ricoeur is not a static philosopher who takes up a position and defends it to the end. His philosophy has therefore to be constructed out of the context of his entire corpus. His thinking is evolutionary in nature, it develops and builds on what has gone before. For this reason we need to study the key ideas and developments in the thought of Paul Ricoeur.

Philosophers, analysts and students have struggled to understand the thought of Paul Ricoeur and classify his works into comprehensive categories. Bernard Dauenhauer, in the *Stanford*

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, has classified the philosophical programme of Ricoeur into two broad categories namely, pre-hermeneutic anthropology and hermeneutic anthropology. The pre-hermeneutic period spans the first 20 years of his philosophical career, while the hermeneutic period refers to Ricoeur's contribution in hermeneutics, narrativity, ethics and politics. Richard Kearney speaks of the progressive development in Ricoeur's hermeneutic trajectory as a series of reflections upon the primary sources of cultural interpretation and presents it in six categories.¹⁵ Don Ihde¹⁶ instead proposes that the philosophy of Ricoeur be broadly classified into three periods, early, middle and late.¹⁷ In his response, Ricoeur accepts this as a fitting introduction to his entire corpus.

Taking the cue from Don Ihde, I shall present Ricoeur's thought in three periods. My presentation will follow Ihde for the most part, keeping in mind that there is no strict compartmentalization and that the boundaries are sometimes blurred.

3.2.1 *Early Ricoeur*

The period of the 'Early Ricoeur,' in my opinion, refers to the first 15 years of his philosophical career, from 1950 to 1965. It is marked by 3 major works and some other books. The major works include: *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), *Fallible Man* (1960) and *Symbolism of Evil* (1960). The other works by Ricoeur in the early period include: *Karl Jaspers et la Philosophie du paradoxe* (1947), *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers: Philosophie du mystère et philosophie du paradoxe* (1948), *History and Truth* (1955)¹⁸. The prime concern in this period is to develop a philosophy of the will, and the central role is played by phenomenology. The project of the philosophy of the will was a sequential study consisting of three parts.

The first part of the sequential study, *Freedom and Nature*, studies the structural phenomenology of the will as both a realization of one's freedom as also a reception of the necessity of our nature. The voluntary acts—the 'I will'—are influenced by

the involuntary aspects. There is reciprocity between the voluntary and the involuntary. This implies that our decisions, actions, projects and consent are heavily influenced by our needs, motives, values, skills, emotions, habits, character, and the unconscious. The involuntary expresses the boundedness of our will, but does not imply that we are not free. Our decisions, actions and consent manifest our freedom, only it is a freedom that is human and not divine.¹⁹ Each person has to struggle with the conflict between the two complementary dimensions. But this is what makes freedom genuine and in turn promotes the distinct identity of the person.

The second part is a synthetic phenomenology of the will and is composed of two books, *Fallible Man* and *Symbolism of Evil*. *Fallible Man* concentrates on those features of human existence that constitute the possibility of evil. Here already we see a shift in the method used. The stress is no longer on the essential structure of the will but on the internal aberrations that must be approached through reflection. In it Ricoeur argues that there is a basic disproportion between the finite and the infinite dimensions of a human being. The disproportion is heightened by the gap between one's spatiotemporally located life (*bios*) and one's reason that can grasp universals (*logos*). This disproportion is manifested in every aspect of human existence: in perception, in thought, in speech, in evaluation and in action. Due to this disproportion we can go wrong and are therefore fallible.

Symbolism of Evil studies the symbolic phenomenology of the will—still another shift—a shift from the possibility of evil to the actuality of fault. But the actuality of fault is not found directly in experience, rather it is seen through the language in which this experience is expressed. Symbols are expressions of double meaning where the primary meaning refers beyond itself to a second meaning, which is never given directly.²⁰ Hence there arises the need of a hermeneutics of symbols and myths, which contains the enactment of the confession of evil. Here Ricoeur deals with the primary symbols of stain, guilt and sin; the secondary symbols of wandering, decline, fall and blindness; and the tertiary symbols of the servile will.

The third part of the project, with the aim of a poetics of the will, never reached its actualization. This is because Ricoeur shifted his attention to other pressing problems that occupied the France of his times, namely psychoanalysis and structuralism. Gradually he was less inclined to limit hermeneutics to the discovery of hidden meaning in symbolic language and would prefer to link hermeneutics to the more general problem of written language and texts. But the ‘Early Ricoeur’ marks the setting of questions that constantly occupy Ricoeur—one such interest being the analysis of human action. The concentration on human action and history is something that never leaves the attention of Ricoeur so much so that he even uses the paradigm of text-interpretation as a model for the interpretation of human actions.

3.2.2 *Middle Ricoeur*

‘Middle Ricoeur’ refers to the crucial years of Ricoeur’s philosophy and includes some of his most important works: *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1965); *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies in the Creation of Meaning in Language* (1975); *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (1976), with a collection of essays, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics* (1969), mediating between them. A lesser known work of this time is *Political and Social Essays* (1974).

Freud and Philosophy stretches into three parts—problematic, analytic and dialectic. The ‘problematic’ consists in the awareness of a false consciousness that Freud brings to our attention. Our false consciousness makes our self-understanding not only limited but also deceptive. In the ‘analytic’ we do a reading of Freud; here Ricoeur presents Freudian explanation as a mixed discourse, mixing together the language of force (drive, cathexis, condensation, displacement, repression, and so on) and that of meaning (thought, wish, intelligibility, absurdity, disguise, interpretation, interpolation, and so on). In the third part we study the dialectic between the archaeology of the subject and the teleology of hope. Archaeology is a regressive movement, oriented

toward the infantile and archaic, while teleology is a progressive movement directed toward a *telos* of signifying fulfillment. This gave rise to a ‘conflict of interpretations,’ a conflict between the archaeology of consciousness and the teleology of meaning. From this Ricoeur concludes that psychoanalysis is not an observational science, but a hermeneutical one that studies the semantics of desire.²¹

Next Ricoeur confronts structuralism.²² This is one of his main concerns in *The Conflict of Interpretations*. Structuralism displaced the primacy of the subject and reduced language to an object—a collection of signs in a closed autonomous system of internal dependencies. Paul Ricoeur exposes the limitations of such views but does not denounce them; instead he makes a very bold statement that a reflective philosophy must include a structural model in its programme. Ricoeur proposes the semantics of discourse as a solution to the problem of interpretation and for this reason some scholars would classify him as a post-structuralist.²³

In *Interpretation Theory*, one of his most significant books, Ricoeur begins by showing how a written text enjoys a certain autonomy as compared to spoken utterances with regard to the author’s original intention, the audience’s original reception, and the original situation and reference in which the discourse took place. His interpretation theory reconciles the method of the natural sciences with that of the human sciences by incorporating explanation and understanding in the hermeneutic arc. The initial guess of the interpretative process is substantiated, enlarged, challenged or even reconstructed with the help of explanatory tools which in turn shed more light on the text. We discover the deeper meaning of the text by surrendering ourselves to the text and by letting ourselves be challenged and transformed by it.

In his seminal work, *The Rule of the Metaphor*, Ricoeur studies various theories in the linguistic field, which treat the metaphor as a decorative device or a figurative word that adds color to language. Ricoeur rejects these theories and proposes his own theory of metaphor, called the ‘tension theory.’ Metaphorical words in a sentence, due to the absurdity in meaning, produce a

semantic shock and thus generate a metaphorical meaning or a new sense built on the ruins of the literal meaning.²⁴ In literal terms the metaphor looks absurd and sounds nonsense, but this absurdity has a positive function: it invites us to make sense out of nonsense. It is the job of our imagination to make sense out of semantic incongruity, depending on the context of the statement/sentence.

One could sum up the middle period with these remarks: a heightened awareness that there is no direct mode to self-understanding, except through a detour of signs, symbols and language.

3.2.3 Late Ricoeur

'Late Ricoeur' begins by 1980 and extends up to the author's last work. It is marked by the extensive three volume work called *Time and Narrative* (1983-85). This period also includes some interesting works such as *Oneself as Another* (1990), *The Just* (1995)²⁵ and *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000). But in between these major works, we find collections of some of Ricoeur's essays, such as *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (1986) which received wide reception both in Europe and America. This period marks the extension of Ricoeur's hermeneutics to action and history.

Time and Narrative is divided into four parts. The first two parts are contained in the first volume. This is an independent study of time according to Augustine and also an inquiry into emplotment and mimesis in Aristotle. Here Ricoeur develops the theory of narrative and tests it against the narrative of history. Volume two contains the third part of the study concerning the function of fictional narratives, and explores the limits of narratives. Narratives have a creative power to say the not yet said, to reveal a world yet to be opened. Hence narratives, far from having no connection with our world, constantly aim at remaking reality. The third volume examines the debate between Augustine and Aristotle concerning time. Augustine is the proponent of phenomenological time while Aristotle is the defender of cosmological time. Ricoeur

maintains that both these times are synthesized in historical time or narrative time.²⁶

In *Oneself as Another* we find three converging themes: a reflexive mediation of the subject, a dialectic in the meaning of the word 'same' and a dialectic between the self and the other. Here Ricoeur rejects the foundationalism of Descartes and Husserl as also the nihilism and skepticism of Nietzsche. His reflective and hermeneutic philosophy is contrary to the philosophy of the immediate. He says that the 'I am, I think' is abstract, empty and invincible, and has to be mediated by actions, works, institutes and monuments that objectify it. He battles against the classical notion of consciousness as the 'veridical mirror of nature' and affirms the truth that the only way to self-knowledge is through the longer route of interpretation of texts, monuments and cultural forms. Here, again, Ricoeur distinguishes the type of certainty appropriate to hermeneutics in contrast to the philosophy of the *cogito*. He introduces the notion of 'Attestation' as a middle ground between apodictic certainty and perpetual suspicion. The real task of philosophy, then, is to avoid the skepticism that doubts everything while at the same time abandoning the ideal of total certainty.²⁷

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, considered to be his parting gift to philosophy, Paul Ricoeur speaks of history and historiography. Here he claims that memory and history are necessary for representing the past in the present. Memory is essential, for without it there is no history involving people. While there is the individual's memory of what he/she has encountered, there is also 'collective memory' which is a set of memories that individuals share with other members of the group and through it they have access to the past. In fact, our individual memories are formed under the influence of collective memory. Nevertheless, collective memory presupposes an individual's report that is accepted by others to be true. Historiography, the task of writing history, supports, corrects or even refutes collective memory. This collective memory is constituted of three inseparable parts, all of which are interpretative activities. The first activity is the building up and use of archives that contain, in some form, traces of the

past. The second constituent element is that of explanation-comprehension, through which historians relate facts to one another. The third element is the activity of producing a verbal representation of some part of the past in a text. Due to the interpretative nature of this operation, historical knowledge has the character of likelihood or credibility rather than certainty. Ricoeur has consistently opposed any claim that historical knowledge can be or even rightly aspire to be definite or absolute knowledge.²⁸

At the end of this brief sketch of the evolution of Ricoeur's philosophy, one can conclude that his thought develops in constant contact and confrontation with other philosophers and trends in philosophy. We find him engaged in a continual dialogue with structuralism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and his constant interlocutors are Descartes, Husserl, Hegel, Kant, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas. In this interdisciplinary and dialogical nature of his approach lies his strength, and this makes him more open than most of his contemporaries.

4. Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur

The above reading of the Ricoeurian corpus may perhaps leave a reader more confused than clear. One finds oneself wondering, what exactly is Ricoeur's philosophical position? Some call him a post-structuralist, others refer to him as a hermeneut, while still others look at him as a phenomenologist. Where then does he stand? We might perhaps best turn to Ricoeur himself for an answer, in his influential essay, "On Interpretation":

I should like to characterize this philosophical tradition [to which I belong] by three features: it stands in the line of a *reflexive* philosophy; it remains within the sphere of Husserlian *phenomenology*; it strives to be a hermeneutical variation of this phenomenology.²⁹

We shall spend some time studying this statement.

4.1 Reflexive Philosophy³⁰

Ricoeur picks up the concept of reflection and reflexive philosophy from Jean Nabert, a French philosopher. According to Nabert, reflection is not an epistemological justification; instead it is the “appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be by means of the works which testify to this effort and this desire.”³¹ Therefore it is not grasped in intellectual intuition but seen through the objects in the world. This effort to exist involves interpretation because one cannot grasp the act of one’s existence except through the signs scattered in the world. Ricoeur explains:

A reflexive philosophy considers the most radical philosophical problems to be those that concern the possibility of *self-understanding* as the subject of the operations of knowing, willing, evaluating and so on. Reflexion is that act of turning back upon itself by which a subject grasps, in a moment of intellectual clarity and moral responsibility, the unifying principle of the operations among which it is dispersed and forgets itself as subject.³²

Reflection thus becomes a link between the understanding of signs and self-understanding. The self that guides interpretation is able to recover itself only as a result of interpretation. The *cogito ego sum* of Descartes is a vain truth. Reflection is blind intuition if it is not mediated by the expressions in which life objectifies itself.

4.2 Phenomenology

The question of the subject and reflection leads us to the next question: *how does the subject recognize itself?*

Reflective philosophy has a great desire for absolute self-transparency. Here phenomenology and hermeneutics come to its rescue. Phenomenology (not Husserl’s idealistic phenomenology), speaks of the priority of the consciousness of something over self-consciousness. This is called ‘intentionality.’ Intentionality is the act of intending something. We can safely say that Ricoeur’s version

of hermeneutics is different from Husserl's. Therefore Husserl's project of radical self-grounding fades away and the original project of phenomenology is lost, but for a better cause.³³ Ricoeur suggests that we graft hermeneutics onto phenomenology, but how do we achieve this task?

4.3 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Both hermeneutics and phenomenology have the same fundamental question, the relation between sense and self, between the intelligibility of the first and the reflexive nature of the second. Heidegger gives priority to ontology. Ricoeur summarizes Heidegger thus:

It is because we find ourselves first of all in a world to which we belong and in which we cannot but participate that we are then able, in a second movement, to set up objects in opposition to ourselves, objects that we claim to constitute and to master intellectually. *Verstehen* for Heidegger has an ontological signification. It is the response of a being thrown into the world who finds his way about in it by projecting onto it his own most possibilities. Interpretation, in the technical sense of the interpretation of texts, is but the development, the making explicit of this ontological understanding, an understanding always inseparable from a being that has initially been thrown into the world. The subject-object relation—on which Husserl continues to depend—is thus subordinated to the testimony of an ontological link more basic than any relation of knowledge.³⁴

Thus Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian hermeneutics constitute a revival of Husserlian phenomenology. The consequences of this shift are vast. Paul Ricoeur draws up his own position from these traditions. He says, "I can sum up these epistemological consequences in the following way: there is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts; in the last resort understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms."³⁵ However we must note that Ricoeur's position is not going against Heideggerian thought,

perhaps the only difference is that Ricoeur makes more explicit the way of knowing mediated by the 'other.'

A summary statement by Paul Ricoeur would be fitting here: "A hermeneutical philosophy is a philosophy that accepts all the demands of this long detour [of signs, symbols and texts] and that gives up the dream of a total mediation, at the end of which reflection would once again amount to intellectual intuition in the transparency to itself of an absolute subject."³⁶

5. The Hermeneutic Arc: Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation

Ricoeur's hermeneutical model of the text is arguably his most original contribution to contemporary thought as well as to hermeneutics. He challenged the semiological approach to language with the semantic theory of discourse. While the former reduces language to signs, the latter moves beyond signs to show that language is necessarily made up of sentences. Again, structuralism reduces language to a system, while discourse sees language as an event that continues to remain through meaning. Further, in every utterance there is a dialectic of sense and reference—a dialectic between the *what* of discourse and the *what about* of discourse.

Ricoeur further distinguishes between discourse (written text) and dialogue (hearing and speaking). Discourse surpasses dialogue in many ways; the written text is distanced from the intentions of the author, the original circumstances in which it was produced, the original addressee, and the ostensive reference. However, distanciation should not be considered as a negative moment, instead it is a necessary and unavoidable moment in the life of the text. It is a positive element because the different forms of distanciation give autonomy to the text to open itself to an unlimited audience and to any situation. Indeed the text has a life of its own.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics has two distinct phases. The first phase is from existential understanding to explanation while the second phase is from explanation to an enlightened existential understanding. In the first hermeneutic arc, subjective guessing

needs to be objectively validated. To the process of validation, there is also a process of invalidation. This dialectic of validation and invalidation gives rise to a multiplicity of interpretations as also a competition between them. For an interpretation to be valid, it must be more probable than another interpretation. Explanation is of much help to validate such claims. This takes us to the second arc, where we move from explanation to an in-depth understanding of the text. Ricoeur integrates structural analysis into the broader programme of hermeneutics by suspending references to the world behind the text and focusing on the interconnections of parts within the text. Structural analysis brings out a surplus meaning of the text. The depth meaning of the text is not only what the author intended to say, but also what the text says to us, that is, the world opened by the text. Now it is no longer a human subject that aims at understanding the text, rather it is a reader who is enlarged by receiving a new way of being opened by the text. Thus interpretation no longer remains a subjective activity of positing one's ideas on to the text but is an objective activity wherein one lends oneself to the text and lets oneself be transformed by the text.

Interestingly, Ricoeur also extends the paradigm of text-interpretation to the study of the social and human sciences, to action, narratives and history. This is possible because human actions have characteristics that correspond to the model of the text. Like a text, actions (1) have a prepositional content that could become the object of interpretation, (2) can be detached from their agents, (3) transcend initial reference and gain wider significance, and (4) are available to a wider range of interpreters. The methodology for the interpretation of actions is the same as that of the text. The interpretation of action finally ends with appropriation which takes the form of personal commitment.

6. Conclusion: Critique of Ricoeurian Hermeneutics

Ricoeur's mature exposition of the hermeneutic model of the text required not only a revision of the original project of phenomenology but of the hermeneutic tradition itself. Following Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, he argued that

hermeneutics is not to be limited only to biblical exegesis but should be raised to the level of universal philosophy by moving from textual exegesis to the general problem of language as a whole. But he criticized Schleiermacher and Dilthey for remaining within the limits of a Romantic epistemology which saw all forms of objective knowledge as a negation of self-understanding. Romantic hermeneutics, no less than idealist phenomenology, tends to view the historical distancing of meaning as a threat to reflective subjectivity. But Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics restores the priority of historical symbolization of understanding over the pure interiority of consciousness.

As against Romantic hermeneutics, Ricoeur chooses to raise interpretation from the level of epistemology to that of ontology. Together with Heidegger and Gadamer, Ricoeur considers interpretation not on the basis of a psychological self-consciousness, but against the historical horizon of a finite being-in-the-world. However, while Heidegger takes the 'short route' to Being, where interpretation culminates, Ricoeur opts for the 'long route' which examines the various inevitable detours which interpretation undergoes through language, myth, ideology, unconscious and so on before it arrives at the ultimate limit of Being.³⁷

Ricoeur responded to the semiological challenge by privileging the concept of the text as the guiding thread of his investigation into the creation and recovery of meaning. He aimed to show how the text is the exemplary level at which the structural explanation of the scientific approach and the hermeneutic understanding of the phenomenological approach confront one another. He also resists the temptation to reduce hermeneutics to a purely linguistic analysis of meaning. Instead of adopting the structuralist ideology of the absolute text, Ricoeur prefers to speak of phenomenological ontology of *possible* worlds opened by the text. Thus he reduces the structuralist cult of the text as an end-in-itself.³⁸

Ricoeur's interpretation theory appears to be a tightrope walk, a mean between two extreme approaches to hermeneutics. He does this through his hermeneutic arc of explanation and

understanding, which incorporates the objective as well as the subjective dimensions of interpretation. The hermeneutical enterprise no longer consists in the Romantic 'getting to know the mind of the author' nor in the structuralist treatment of the 'text as a system of signs and codes', now it is a matter of surrendering oneself to the text and allowing oneself to be transformed by it. The text demands that the reader transcend his own subjective intentions and be open to a world of 'possible' meanings, to new modes of being-in-the-world and of being-interpreted. Ricoeur radically alters the concept of subjectivity—by distancing the self from its original ego, the interpreter can hope to recover a new sense of subjectivity: enlarged, decentred, and open to novel possibilities of self interpretation.³⁹ If the goal of hermeneutics remains 'self-understanding', this must be seen as understanding oneself *in front of the text*.

In the Ricoeurian corpus we find a consistent approach to the criterion of truth. Right from his early works Ricoeur has rejected the idea of mathematical certitude, but this does not mean that he gives in to skepticism. He says that the text invites us to a multiplicity of readings, an open horizon of interpretations. However, this does not mean that all interpretations carry equal value. In fact Ricoeur speaks of methods of validation which help us to argue that a certain interpretation is more probable than others. Again, in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur speaks of the type of certainty appropriate to hermeneutics. He uses the notion of 'Attestation' as a middle ground between apodictic certainty and perpetual suspicion. Our search for truth should avoid the skepticism of Nietzsche that doubts everything as well as Descartes' ideal of total certainty. Finally, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur opposes the claims of historical knowledge to be absolute. While on the one hand he rejects Hegel's and Marx's idea of one universal history, on the other, he rejects the positivist notion of bare and uninterpreted facts being available to a historian. Nevertheless, he still holds that there can be objective historical knowledge that deserves to be called true. In all this, Ricoeur accepts that truth exists, but contends that we are rarely in full possession of it. While he proposes a methodology of text-

interpretation, he accepts the possibility of reaching truth without the use of method. Yet, method could be of help to seek the validity of our claims over truth.

But several scholars express their reservations about Ricoeur's interpretation theory, especially the criteria for evaluation and assessment of interpretations. As Jeanrond and Thompson point out, the process of distancing is elaborately explained in the concept of writing, but the theory appears to neglect, to some extent, the process of appropriation in the act of reading. If interpretation is a creative act involving both the text and the reader, then the act of reading needs to be thought out more clearly in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. The unlimited series of interpretations brings us to terms with interpretive pluralism. This implies that there can be no interpretation of a text that is correct for all times and for different cultures. Ricoeur does not explicate sufficiently the notion of correct interpretation, neither does he suggest ways of dealing with interpretive pluralism. He does not give a final word on some of these important issues, and thus his theory is found wanting from these aspects.

However, all said and done, Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory links the epistemological preoccupation of Schleiermacher and Dilthey with the ontological concerns of Heidegger and Gadamer. And besides taking the hermeneutic debate a step higher, he opens the discipline to a wider horizon of actions, history and narrative. In this lies the creativity and strength of Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

Notes

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, tr. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 56.

² Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. Joel Weinsheimer, with an introduction by Hans-Georg Gadamer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 68-69.

³ Grondin 71.

⁴ Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *From Text to Action* 58-59.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 50.

⁶ Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *From Text to Action* 62.

⁷ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) 21.

⁸ Grondin 93-94.

⁹ Grondin 94.

¹⁰ Grondin 96-99.

¹¹ Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *From Text to Action* 70-71.

¹² Grondin 112.

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophie Hermeneutic: Kleine Schriften, I* (Tubingen; Mohr, 1967) 158, as cited in Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," *From Text to Action* 72.

¹⁴ This biographical note on the life of Paul Ricoeur is a summary of the biography written by Charles Reagan, a close disciple of Ricoeur. For a better understanding of the life and works of Ricoeur, cf Charles Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 4-51 passim. Also cf Paul Ricoeur, "Intellectual Autobiography," *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. 23 (Chicago: Open Court, 1996) 3-53 passim.

¹⁵ The progressive development can be presented in the following manner: (1) the symbols of religion and myth, (2) the dream images of the unconscious, (3) the signifying structures of language, (4) the social and political imaginary, (5) the function of narrative time, identity and action, and (6) the workings of remembrance and mourning. See Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) 14-15.

¹⁶ Don Ihde is a leading scholar in Ricoeurian hermeneutics. In fact he is the first English language interpreter of the works of Paul Ricoeur. His doctoral thesis on Ricoeur in 1964 was entitled "Paul Ricoeur's Phenomenological Methodology and Philosophical Anthropology." He also has a book published in 1971 entitled *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1986). Besides, he has written several articles on Ricoeur.

¹⁷ Don Ihde, "Paul Ricoeur's Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition," *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* 64-67 passim.

¹⁸ These dates are of the original French publication. The same is the case with the year of publication of books mentioned later.

¹⁹ John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 41-42.

²⁰ Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics* 43.

²¹ Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* 19.

²² Structuralism is a philosophical movement that began in 1950-60's in France and was primarily associated with Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Structuralism will be compared with Ricoeur's discourse theory in the latter part of this paper.

²³ Structuralism and semiotics treated language as a system and structure but Ricoeur proposes semantics of discourse. In this sense he is a post-structuralist, but his post-structuralism is definitely different from Derrida's Deconstruction. For further details refer Mario Valdes, "Introduction: Paul Ricoeur's Post-structuralist Hermeneutics," *Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario Valdes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 21-30.

²⁴ Valdes, "Introduction: Paul Ricoeur's Post-structuralist Hermeneutics," *Ricoeur Reader* 12-15 passim.

²⁵ *The Just* (1995) is a collection of essays that expounds on the 'little ethics' proposed by Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another*. Here Ricoeur offers a teleological perspective of justice, drawing from the work of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, John Rawls, and other contemporary authors. Ricoeur contends that justice does not spring primarily from a deontological sense of duty, but is an integral part of the ethical intention "to live a good life with and for others in just institutions." Secondly, Ricoeur claims we have lost sight of the primary goal of justice, which is peace—not vengeance or compensation as is commonly believed and practiced. Besides this, he also deals with the concepts of 'responsibility', 'just' and the like. In this collection, Ricoeur illuminates his readers on the real meaning of justice, and that peace should be the final goal of the just. This work challenges the contemporary notions about what it means to attain justice.

²⁶ Valdes, "Introduction: Paul Ricoeur's Post-structuralist Hermeneutics," *Ricoeur Reader* 18-21 passim; also see Ihde, "Paul Ricoeur's Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition," *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* 66.

²⁷ Reagan, *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and His Work* 74-78 passim.

²⁸ Bernard Dauenhauer, "Paul Ricoeur," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ricoeur/> on 30 July 2005.

²⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, tr. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997) 12.

³⁰ The translators, following Ricoeur's advice, have chosen to keep the word 'reflexive' to emphasize that this philosophy is subject oriented; it is reflexive in the subject's act of turning back on itself.

³¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 18.

³² Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action* 12.

³³ Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action* 13-14.

³⁴ Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action* 14-15.

³⁵ Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action* 15.

³⁶ Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," *From Text to Action* 18.

³⁷ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* 21-22.

³⁸ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* 20, 24.

³⁹ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* 32.