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*Ricoeur's Philosophy of the Social Sciences in  
Hermeneutical Philosophical Tradition*

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**Abstract**

The present article is an attempt to critically examine the relationship between the hermeneutical philosophical tradition and the nature of the social sciences within the framework of the Ricoeur's philosophical system. It tries to show how Ricoeur considers a total philosophy of understanding simultaneously as a theory of method, epistemology, and ontology; and how he shares certain principles with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Freud; and how at the same time he distinguishes himself from them by presenting his own certain original and unique insights. And finally there are certain concluding critical comments on Ricoeur's peculiar hermeneutical philosophy.

**Keywords:** 1- Social Sciences 2- Hermeneutics 3- Language  
4- Interpretation 5- Explanation

**1. Introduction**

The hermeneutical position in philosophy of science was first formulated by Wilhelm Dilthey, but Dilthey himself took his point of departure from the earlier discussions of the problems of meaning and understanding in Schleiermacher and beyond (2, p. 76). In fact it is at the hands of Schleiermacher that understanding becomes a general or philosophical problem and not merely a technical or procedural issue (5, p. 132).

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Ricoeur had always expressed his appreciation of the tradition of hermeneutics going back to Schleiermacher and Dilthey. As far as Schleiermacher is concerned, Ricoeur sees his essential contribution as giving the problem of understanding a Kantian or transcendental turn. Dilthey also is significant in so far as he clearly demarcates the nature and methodology of the human sciences from the sciences of nature. A second contribution of Dilthey consist in his insight that social and cultural facts are constituted by meanings, and hence only a method of understanding and not merely a method of causal explanation would be relevant in their case.

Ricoeur inherits both these insights, but yet with a certain critical reservation. Basically Ricoeur's own hermeneutical reflections differ from the founders of the hermeneutical tradition in two respects, i. e. he recognizes the intimate and necessary relationship between interpretation and language. Particularly in hands of Dilthey the centrality of language was somewhat marginalized. With the result of that, interpretation was not closely related to the linguistic medium. On the other hand, every psychological detail, linguistic as well as non-linguistic, became the direct object of a theory of interpretation. Ricoeur, on the other hand, recognizes that the point of departure for hermeneutics must be language, and hence the importance of a theory of language is much more clearly seen by him than by the founders.

A result of minimizing the role of language was that interpretation was given a mentalistic turn in both Schleiermacher and Dilthey. The object of interpretation was taken to be the recovery of the intentions in the mind of the actor or the author. With the turn to language the authority of the author is somewhat minimized. The meanings that we have to recover are not necessarily the meanings in the mind of the author, but the possibilities revealed by the text itself, and so the direction of hermeneutics shifts from the mind to the text.

## **2. Understanding: as a Theory of Method and an Epistemology and Ontology**

Ricoeur has always recognized that a total philosophy of understanding must be at once a theory of method, epistemology, and ontology (8, p. 73). The philosophical dimensions of the

hermeneutical project are essentially a review of some aspects of the phenomenology of Husserl and the fundamental ontology of Heidegger. Here again, like in the case of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, there is both, a recognition and a critical judgment by Ricoeur on the contributions of Husserl and Heidegger.

With Husserl, Ricoeur appropriates the basic idea that interpretation is two – sided. It at once reveals the world as well as the subject for whom the world exist as a meaningful phenomenon. This duality of interpretation is traced by Ricoeur to the structure of the intentionality of consciousness itself. To that extent it could be said that a basic form of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory is inspired by Husserl's doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness. But Ricoeur accepts this phenomenological insight only after two basic qualifications: on the one hand, Ricoeur modifies the Cartesian implications of the phenomenological method. Unlike the method of reflection, the method of interpretation can not start from consciousness as self evident and unquestionable. The self is not the absolute starting point, but rather it is one of the terminal points of interpretation. It is this idea of displacing the primacy of the subject that Ricoeur describes as the necessity of a second Copernican turn, from the self to the world (19, p. 134). The second qualification of Husserl has to do with the substitution of expressions in the place of experiences. In basic intention phenomenology was non-linguistic or prelinguistic. It is an attempt to describe experiences as they are given, prior to any formulation in language.

But following the Wittgensteinian tradition of philosophy, Ricoeur has doubts about the possibility of any such prelinguistic meanings. For him, meaning is constituted by language, and hence, hermeneutics has concerned with meanings must take its departure from expressions rather than from experiences. It does not mean that experience is necessarily denied, rather the point is that experience itself as something meaningful and shareable is constituted by language. Therefore, it is only in language that we can even raise questions about meaning, knowledge, and truth. In a sense, towards the last period of his work, Husserl himself came to recognize the centrality of language. But what is original about Ricoeur is the systematic implications which he draws from the necessity of this linguistic turn. With this recognition of language,

classical phenomenology is transformed into the hermeneutical phenomenology (6, p. 93).

Such a hermeneutic phenomenology is not merely a theory of knowledge, but is also a theory of being, and this brings Ricoeur into relationship with Heidegger (9, p. 47). Along with Heidegger, Ricoeur also recognizes that understanding is a mode of being of the human subject itself, and hence any theory of understanding that is an adequate hermeneutical theory is also a disclosure of human nature. In this sense hermeneutics necessarily has an existential foundation. Also with Heidegger, Ricoeur too would insist that hermeneutics reveals and discloses the subject not as isolated from the world, but precisely as involved in the world. Heidegger's concept of Dasein as being in the world is also a theme of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory; but as with Husserl, so also in the case of Heidegger the acknowledgment is made on the basis of a critical judgment. The rejection of an immediate grasp of the subject is prominent in Ricoeur's idea of the tentativeness and unendingness of interpretation.

The uniqueness of Ricoeur does not consist merely in his capacity for synthesis; on the contrary, he is able to bring together different philosophical ideas and traditions. Precisely because he reinterprets the philosophical tradition in the light of certain distinctive and original insights of his own.

We could mention certain original themes in Ricoeur's reflections on hermeneutics:

1) The first is concerned with the necessity of a prolonged dialogue between philosophy and psychoanalysis (11, p. 82). In this dialogue both philosophy and psychoanalysis are modified. As far as hermeneutics is concerned, the contact with Freud serves two purposes: Firstly, it functions as an affective safeguard against the temptations of the Cartesian tradition. Secondly, it also makes us realize that every interpretation is questionable, and can be disputed by other interpretations. In other words, the conflict of interpretations is an unavoidable feature of human understanding.

2) The second unique theme of Ricoeur is the application of the logical theory of Frege, regarding sense and reference, to the question of interpretation itself (15, p. 119). Using Frege, Ricoeur is able to give a new content to the idea of the validity or truth of an interpretation.

3) Thirdly, Ricoeur extends the scope of hermeneutics to narratives, and by way of his theory of narratives is able to relate hermeneutical understanding to historical experiences.

4) The last level of Ricoeur's contribution consists in extending hermeneutics to a theory of action.

In Ricoeur, therefore, the traditional ideas and the principles of the hermeneutical tradition enter into new relationships and form new conceptions under the influence of certain original insights of Ricoeur himself. We shall, therefore, here attempt to sum up Ricoeur's own formulation of a distinctive hermeneutical perspective.

### **3. Ricoeur's Certain Original Insights**

Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of the social sciences has been inspired by a complex set of interactions between the demands of philosophy and the methodological requirements of the sciences. On the philosophical side itself, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is complex in its origins. The immediate sources of inspiration behind his philosophical efforts are the phenomenology of Husserl, and the fundamental ontology of Heidegger. But behind these more contemporary sources, there are also background influences such as the hermeneutical theories of Dilthey and Schleiermacher, and larger still, the critical philosophy of Kant (14, chapter 7). But what is significant about Ricoeur's philosophical efforts is that although it is situated in the context of the contemporary continental philosophy, yet he has also been profoundly influenced by Anglo – American philosophy, particularly in his later developments in philosophy of language. In this context the ideas of Wittgenstein and more specifically the “speech act theory” of Austin have been prominent. But the philosophical context is only one part of Ricoeur's systematic efforts. The two other parts relate to the human sciences on the one hand, and religion and theology on the other. Ricoeur has always been sensitive to the demands of the human sciences (12, p. 101). His work on symbolism is largely inspired by certain cultural anthropological theories as well as the sights in Freudian psychoanalysis. In the context of language the influence of structural linguistics, particularly of Ferdinand de Saussure, has been profound. In fact, if one wants to generalize the two most significant influences on Ricoeur from the side of the

sciences, would be Sigmund Freud and Levi-Strauss. But beyond anthropology, psychology and linguistics, in his very last stage, the influence of history is also quite evident. But Ricoeur does not merely receive a number of insights and ideas from other philosophers and scientists. What he attempts to do in almost every work is to organize these several ideas and principles, and to bring them into relationship with each other, with the hope as a result of this dialogue between philosophy and human sciences, a new perspective may possibly emerge. This dialogue Ricoeur situates in the area of hermeneutics.

When Ricoeur took up the problem of hermeneutics there were two major oppositions. On the one hand, there was the perspective of thinkers like Dilthey who essentially saw hermeneutics as a framework for understanding the nature and methodology of the human sciences. Here Dilthey was a paradigm. For Dilthey the task of hermeneutics is an epistemological task, i. e. to explain the possibility of the cultural sciences. On the other hand, there was the ontological view of Heidegger (9, p. 123), who regarded that understanding is the very structure of being of the human subject. In this sense hermeneutics belongs to the ontology of the human Dasein. The field of hermeneutics was between these two perspectives of method and ontology. Ricoeur accepts the basic Heideggerian claim that the fundamental task is to understand the nature of the world and of the human subject. To this extent hermeneutics does have an ontological dimension. But, he differs from Heidegger in holding that this ontology cannot be grasped immediately. Neither the self nor the world could become objects of an immediate ontological knowledge. Only by way of an interpretation of symbols and actions can we know the world and the subject. In this sense, For Ricoeur, ontology is possible only as hermeneutics.

More importantly since the human sciences constitute a very important source of knowledge about the human condition, a hermeneutical philosophy cannot ignore the contributions of the human sciences. Therefore, in his hands the dialogue between ontology and the human sciences takes place. In this dialogue Ricoeur tells us we must be sensitive to both, “the way up” and “the way down”. The way up is the ascent from the sciences to philosophy. The results of the sciences and the method do make

ultimate presuppositions. And the task here is to formulate the presuppositions of the sciences and examine them for their consistency and adequacy. On the other hand these philosophical presuppositions must be made concrete and we must show how they are operative in the work of the sciences. This is what Ricoeur meant "the way down". In this dialogue our perspectives change as a result of this interaction between philosophy and the human sciences. Therefore, at no stage can be claimed to be in a position of a final philosophical understanding of the human sciences. Our understanding is always provisional and changing. But the sciences are not merely sources of stimulation for Ricoeur. They also serve as critical controls upon our philosophical understanding (12, p. 133). This critical function of the sciences with regard to philosophy may be illustrated with two examples:

Firstly, although Ricoeur would not accept structuralism as a final or total theory of language, yet the insights of structuralism provide a necessary foundation for hermeneutics, because structuralism prevents the arbitrariness of our interpretations. It is in this way that Ricoeur uses structuralism to overcome the dilemmas of romantic hermeneutical theory like that of Schleiermacher (14, p. 154).

The other example is that of Sigmund Freud. Here Freudian theory is used by Ricoeur as a way of overcoming the subjectivism of Husserlian phenomenology; for, psycho-analysis gives us a critic of consciousness.

It will be extremely difficult to undertake a critical examination of a complex and highly original work like that of Ricoeur. But any such examination may possibly proceed along two lines. On the one hand, Ricoeur appropriates the different scientific theories that he refers to by means of a certain interpretation. We may illustrate this with the example of Ricoeur's use of Freudian theory (17, p. 144). Ricoeur first argues for a certain interpretation of psychoanalysis; for him, we cannot understand psychoanalysis properly, if we take it as Freud himself did as a natural scientific theory of human experience. This was Freud's illusion, according to Ricoeur. Psychoanalysis is properly a hermeneutic or interpretative science, and not an empirical or observational science. What we must note here is that Ricoeur is able to incorporate psychoanalysis into his framework only by way

of this interpretation of Freud (17, p. 148). Similar remarks may be made with regard to his use of other theories. In this connection, one may raise questions about the acceptability of such interpretations. Here again psychoanalysis provides a neat illustration; for, one may ask whether Ricoeur does not minimize and underestimate certain other aspects of Freud's work.

With regard to the cultural sciences also Ricoeur stimulates the symbolic or meaning component of such theoretical frameworks. Be certainly true that the human condition does have the symbolic dimension, and hence approaching them by way of hermeneutics is a very wise and sound way. But there is also the other dimension of power and one may raise the question that Ricoeur's hermeneutical framework does not give the power dimension, the place it deserves (7, p. 189). In this connection one may outline a critic of Ricoeur along the lines of Foucault, who was particularly sensitive to this aspect.

#### **4. Concluding Comments**

Apart from such critical observations concerning the use Ricoeur makes of the human sciences, one may also critically examine certain broader principles and features of his enterprise as a whole. And as a way of indicating such possible large scale critical observations, we could make a few remarks in conclusion:

The first, Ricoeur, we may say, is essentially concerned with the structures of meaning that have been produced, either in the speech or in the text or in human behavior. But one may consider not merely the produced meanings, but also the processes by which such meanings emerge. From this point of view, Ricoeur's hermeneutics emphasizes the product of the results more than the processes, or in philosophical terminology, Ricoeur's hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of being or existing more than a hermeneutics of becoming or process. One of the results of this emphasis on product and outcome to the relative neglect of processes is that: in Ricoeur we do not have a very clear picture of social change. From the point of view of a philosophy of human sciences this neglect of the change is probably the most significant one. A consequence of this marginalization of social change is that unintentionally Ricoeur's philosophical perspective becomes Eurocentric.



The second, since he does not consider the very different processes of change which are taking place in the non – European world, it appears, as if, the hermeneutics of a contemporary European condition would be universally applicable to other societies also (20, p. 234).

In this context, one may refer to Ricoeur's claim that basically there are only three forms of understanding symbols, i. e. the archaeological, the teleological, and the eschatological. The archaeological may interpret symbols in terms of the desire or instincts, which is the way of Freud. The teleological interpretation is in terms of what is anticipated and implicit in the symbols, which is the way of Hegel. And the eschatological is an attempt to understand human history in terms of the theological truths and principles, which is the perspective of St. Augustine in Christianity (18, p. 142).

What is interesting to note is that, all the three hermeneutic ways recognized by Ricoeur belongs to Europe. The question of non-European ways of understanding human experience is not seriously pursued, and hence a certain unexamined universality is implicitly present in Ricoeur's final formulation. However, there is nothing in principle, which prevents us from freeing Ricoeur's theory from these particular historical or cultural limitations. Hence unlike many other sociological or anthropological frameworks, Ricoeur's theory is available to the experiences of other cultures also. To that extent, one might justifiably state that Ricoeur's philosophy of the human sciences is a genuine platform on which there could be an interaction between different philosophical and cultural perspectives. Anyway, for us who come from other part of the world this promise of a possible dialogue is the most significant and important contribution of Ricoeur's theory.

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