

Towards a “Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness”? Questioning Ricœur

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Abstract

In the present text I address some problems regarding the hermeneutical project developed by Paul Ricœur. Hence, I attempt (1) to highlight three issues which confine the difficulty in understanding Paul Ricœur’s hermeneutics, and (2) to point out, as an example, that Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of historical consciousness” addresses a non-hermeneutic debate. The indirect thesis of my text is that one always has to consider Ricœur’s hermeneutics as a “work in progress” even when he clearly emphasizes that “the text” must be regarded as the centre of hermeneutics and my main thesis is that one always has to pay particular attention to Ricœur’s non-hermeneutic insights when he addresses a hermeneutic problem.

Keywords: Paul Ricœur, hermeneutics, non-hermeneutic intent, text, history

In a recent study written by the Canadian philosopher Jean Grondin there is a slightly ambiguous footnote concerning a well known thesis of Paul Ricœur; it is the only critical stance concerning the French philosopher in an article that is rather eulogistic (Grondin 2008, 37-72). What is all that about?

Ricœur’s stance, according to which “in contrast to the tradition of the *cogito* and to the pretension of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition, it must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works” (Ricœur 2007, 143),

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Grondin replies with the following question: "what can we then say about the comprehension of the self (by the self) and of those who live in extreme poverty and often illiterate and who do not spend their time as intellectuals reading the great works of culture?" (Grondin 2008, 52). This kind of critique must be carefully contextualized. It is not just a simple (rather prosaic) outburst against those who, like Grondin, waste their time assiduously reading their entire lives. Moreover, I do not even think it is a critique against Ricœur for having forgotten about the smaller actors of history in his analysis. On the contrary, let us think about the immense energy resources that Ricœur calls into play while trying to include the situation of those forgotten by history into a philosophy of history (Ricœur 1965, 63-81). Therefore, irrespective of the angle from which we examine this incrimination, it seems unfounded¹.

However, in this article, Ricœur is given by the Gadamerian exegete a status comparable to that of the German philosopher. When we talk about hermeneutics, *not choosing* between Gadamer and Ricœur becomes the only adequate possibility any researcher should adopt when addressing the "two titans". This is the conclusion at the end of this Gadamerian exegete's investigation. But if we carefully read the text that purposes such a conclusion, things are different². My thesis is that we always have to choose between Gadamer and Ricœur when we refer to hermeneutics. Two reasons impose such a thesis: first of all, hermeneutics for Ricœur was never a discipline per se, it was never his goal to develop "the guiding lines of a philosophical hermeneutics", but, contextually and fragmentarily, hermeneutics was always a solution to certain problems (the problem of evil being the primary catalyst of Ricœur's hermeneutical discussions). Secondly, even when hermeneutics, understood through the lens of Gadamerian thought, becomes for Ricœur a subject analysis, the motives he aims for are other than per se hermeneutical ones. Using this as my starting point, here I attempt (1) to emphasize three problems that circumscribe the difficulty in understanding the hermeneutics developed by Ricœur and (2) to analyze the possibilities of a hermeneutics of historical consciousness (as we find it in the last chapter of the *Temps et Récit* trilogy), with the purpose of showing that his analyses go beyond an exclusively hermeneutical debate to develop what we may call a hermeneutics of action or, more accurately, an anthropology of action.

Paul Ricœur never wrote anything that was hermeneutical per se: either an introduction in hermeneutics, a history of hermeneutics or, most importantly, a hermeneutical theory³. The aforementioned thesis should not be disquieting. I do not state that Ricœur does not have a hermeneutics, but merely that, simply put, *his hermeneutics demands to be constantly discovered*. This is the extremely difficult part whenever we talk about Ricœur's hermeneutics. The fact that we have to talk about a permanent discovery, maybe even a rediscovery of his hermeneutics is not due to an active intention from his part to disguise it in the discourse, on the contrary, the exigency of clarity is one of the fundamental principles of his writings (although this clarity sometimes becomes distressing). This is rather about a permanent emplacement and re-emplacement of his hermeneutical principles that give away the sensation of an unstoppable perpetual movement which could never be clearly understood. When we speak of a permanent re-emplacement of the way in which Ricœur understands hermeneutics, we must of course have in mind the chronological display of the studies where he speaks of hermeneutics. But starting from here, we do not have the possibility to identify an internal connection that connects these studies evolutionarily and follow the ever clearer development of his theory. The references from one text to another and in fact from one work to another create this permanent recoil movement. Its nebulosity is given precisely by this nearly endless reiteration of the intrinsic hermeneutical undertaking which does not respect a gradual disposition.

The works that form the basis of his hermeneutical theory and that are used sometimes excessively in the literature in the field⁴, and that emphasize the extreme difficulty in understand Ricœur's hermeneutics, are *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1968) and *From Text to Action* (1986). But not even these works, which no one would hesitate in calling hermeneutical, can be fitted into the aforementioned registers. These are indeed texts that deal, in one way or another, with hermeneutics, but cannot be regarded as coherent works that can take a subject from the beginning to the end and that can be called in philosophical terms the hermeneutical problem; the texts (historical, theoretical, critical, etc.) in these volumes could be fitted into the mentioned registers, but not the volumes as a whole; hence the subtitle: *Essays in Hermeneutics*. It is important to notice from the very beginning this triviality because there is a permanent misunderstanding

regarding Ricœur's hermeneutics.⁵ But the very fact that we must talk about *essays* written over twenty years enormously complicates the adequate placing of Ricœur's hermeneutics. The essays are not homogenous, they do not answer to one problem, and they do not have as sole purpose the formulation of a possible hermeneutical theory. But it is not the lack of homogeneity (in the sense of a singular subject discussed on more levels) that explains the considerable difficulty of coherently understanding his hermeneutics, but the fact that the texts per se, read in parallel, confuse.

There are three difficulties that must be avoided from the beginning when we discuss Ricœur's hermeneutics.

Between symbolic hermeneutics and textual hermeneutics

The first difficulty we faced when reading these volumes is the fact that they use *different reading grids*. Each time we must insist upon this mandatory condition to clearly understand Ricœur's hermeneutics. *The Conflict of Interpretations* demands a separate reading and we would be committing a serious error if we transposed Ricœur's view on hermeneutics from this volume to that in *From Text to Action*. There are very few instances of continuous undertaking that would implicitly connect the two volumes.⁶ There is an easily noticeable distance between the two at least when it comes to methodology. If the former volume uses hermeneutics without questioning its fundamental implications, the latter takes precisely these implications seriously. Secondly, the direct continuity of this difficulty lies in the fact that the texts in question are built on the basis of previous works. It is sufficient to give several relevant examples. No one would question the fact that in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, the essay "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning" as much as the essays "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection I" and "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflections II" (1961) are inspired by *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), or that the corpus of texts on Freud must be seen as prospective and cumulative interpretations in relation to *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). Moreover, the article "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (1975) is nothing more than a rigorous application of the seventh study of *The Rule of Metaphor*.⁷ These simple identifications, easy to make and without exaggerated exegetic claims highlight a

remarkable fact: *Ricœur does not produce a hermeneutical theory per se, but an evolutionary one* and, if we can speak of a theory of hermeneutics, we must always do it with discovery in mind. In fact, it is not very clear what Ricœur understands by hermeneutics when he talks about it in the first volume. *The Conflict of Interpretations* bears in its articles this permanent misunderstanding of what hermeneutics means for Ricœur. In other words, hermeneutics in *The Conflict of Interpretations* is not thematized for itself, but always in relation to something else: hermeneutics and structuralism, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and religion. Obviously, we could note the fact that it is about what Ricœur calls “hermeneutic comprehension” (Ricœur 2004, 53). But nowhere in this volume will we find an accurate definition of what “hermeneutic comprehension” means.

Ricœur’s Hermeneutics without Gadamer

The affirmation that Ricœur did not make an autonomous hermeneutics, besides being imprudent, means to try and understand its own hermeneutical undertaking in relation to the philosophical hermeneutics developed by Gadamer. But this exact misunderstanding seems harmful to us. To think the philosophical undertaking particular to Ricœur’s philosophy in a comparison to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics produces a permanent misunderstanding because it is fallaciously attempting to overlap two completely distinct undertakings. We do not state that Ricœur completely disregards Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, but that understanding Ricœur in a well-defined paradigm, that of a classic of contemporary philosophy, is at least deleterious. The very danger of subsuming under a well-defined paradigm must be avoided because it produces a permanent reference to a tradition for which “the hermeneutical problem” is assumed from the very beginning, which does not happen in Ricœur’s case. We therefore state that we should be at least suspicious when Ricœur is hastily included in the tradition of classical hermeneutics. It would be much easier to understand that the hermeneutical undertaking in Ricœur’s philosophy is born out of an imminent necessity (Ricœur 2009, 566-577) so that it later becomes an autonomous theory. The central subject that gives birth to his hermeneutics is not, as in Gadamer’s case, “the hermeneutical problem”, and once this fact is understood, the entire understanding of his

hermeneutics fundamentally changes. But we are not out of the woods yet; if *The Conflict of Interpretations* can and must be read without Gadamer, *From Text to Action* can only be read together with Gadamer. The various interpretations his philosophy "enjoys" are undoubtedly also due to this permanent misunderstanding. Thus we are compelled to strongly state that, at the beginning, Ricœur *does not do hermeneutics for hermeneutics's sake*. It does not matter that later on Ricœur changes his view on hermeneutics, what is clear is that the beginning of Ricœur's hermeneutics must be found somewhere other than in the texts of the two volumes in question⁸.

Biblical hermeneutics

Ricœur's special relations to the tradition of Christian theology complicate the issue very much. The multitude of texts we have to call *theological* against Ricœur's wish, and that directly pose the hermeneutical problem have to be considered. In fact, the only clear systematization of a possible hermeneutical theory brings into discussion this very problem. "The Task of Hermeneutics", "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" and "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics" (all written in 1975) make up a front and cannot be regarded separately. In fact, in these studies we find Ricœur's entire hermeneutical theory; what happens after these studies, meaning *Time and Narrative*, are just practices of this theory. There is a double complication: (1) the three texts owe a lot to *The Rule of the Metaphor* and the relations between them must be emphasized; (2) the theological descriptions only complicate the issue. This is how: if the *theme of distanciation* "gives me the chance to mark my personal contribution to the phenomenological-hermeneutical school" (Ricœur 1986, 7), we also have to take into account "the theological hermeneutics that presents such original features that the relation is slowly reversed, so that it finally subordinates philosophical hermeneutics, as its own *organon*" (Ricœur 1986, 133). We can see how the problem of hermeneutics explodes at this point. To subordinate philosophical hermeneutics to biblical hermeneutics means to compromise for the third time and most severely of all, any understanding of his hermeneutics.⁹ I cannot stress enough the massive complications that Ricœur's implicit transformation into a theologian disguised as philosopher brings about. Such statement blocks onwards any philosophical attempt on his work. We can only speculate the

philosophical implications of this theological aperture, always stressing that we are dealing with “a philosopher who adheres to the trend called hermeneutics” (Ricoeur 2002, ix).

Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness or towards an Anthropology of Initiative?

Of course, from Ricoeur’s claim to belong to the trend called hermeneutics we can understand many things. First of all, the fact that hermeneutics, as we already know, is not an exclusively Gadamerian affair, and if we are to understand that Ricoeur is a hermeneut, than we will always understand hermeneutics as text interpretation or philosophical variety from other philosophical varieties (structuralism, psychoanalysis and so on), when we take on a subject like, for example, *meaning* (Ricoeur 1970a, 3-59). That is, we will always understand, strictly following the Ricoeurian undertaking, various senses of hermeneutics in distinct contexts.

However, no one will go so far as to consider that Paul Ricoeur does not offer us a hermeneutics, and the clear example of “textual hermeneutics”,¹⁰ where *text* replaces *dialogue*, is already commonplace in the interpretations of his philosophy. Even if, at this point, some objections can be found regarding the building and the effectiveness of such hermeneutics, it is clear that from the beginning of the 70s Ricoeur understands to always relate to Gadamerian hermeneutics when he talks about a certain aspect of philosophical hermeneutics¹¹. Things are just as clear regarding the last part of the trilogy *Temps et Récit*, “Vers une herméneutique de la conscience historique” (Ricoeur 1985), where Ricoeur seems to build a reply, or at least a continuation of the first chapter of the second section of the work *Truth and Method*, called “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding to the Status of Hermeneutic Principle” (Gadamer 2004, 267-305).

Of course, we can find the core of this last section of *Temps et Récit* in the article “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideologies” written in 1973, where Ricoeur remains faithful to hermeneutical debates or, as he himself states, to the debate between the critique of ideologies and the hermeneutics of traditions. The most important consequence that “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideologies” develops, mediating between Gadamer and Habermas, is that it is “the point of departure for a new phase of hermeneutics” (Ricoeur

2007, 79). It is about a "new phase of hermeneutics" where the "hermeneutical consciousness", as much as "the critical consciousness", is mediated by the hermeneutics of the text. Therefore, the "new phase of hermeneutics", according to Ricœur, is given by the text. The text has the role of diminishing the demand to universality of the Gadamerian hermeneutics as well as introducing the necessary critical instance required by Habermas.

But if we take a closer look at the article in question, beyond the topic regarding the issue of a debate between Gadamer and Habermas, it is easy to see the central point of the Ricœurian argumentation can be reduced to the critique that Ricœur formulates in front of Gadamer. With the question "how can there be critique within hermeneutics?" (2007, 88), Ricœur in fact confesses his epistemological intention against the Heideggerian and Gadamerian ontology regarding hermeneutics. Here we find Ricœur's contribution to the hermeneutical problem, that is no longer visible in "Vers une herméneutique de la conscience historique". The introduction of the text as a primary point of hermeneutics operates, according to Ricœur, several fundamental changes in relation to the ontologized version of Gadamerian hermeneutics. Although in this article Ricœur seems to mediate between Gadamer and Habermas, there are a few pages where Ricœur retraces the guidelines of a philosophical hermeneutics. I would like to linger on these four pages (Ricœur 2007, 91-94). There is one prominent thing in this very technical discussion: the dismissal of the subject. In short, it is a *hermeneutics without a subject*.

Let us repeat the terms of the problem following Ricœur: 1) a hermeneutics centered on the text dissolves the tension between the "alienating distanciation" and the "relation of belonging" (2007, 92); 2) the text as a central axis of hermeneutics dissolves the harmful tension between "explanation" and "understanding" (2007, 92); 3) the hermeneutic of texts emphasizes the "world" opened by the text, and in this way "the power of the text to open a dimension of reality implies in principle a recourse against any given reality and thereby the possibility of a critique of the real" (2007, 93); 4) and, finally, the most important thing in my opinion, the hermeneutics of the text compels the dismissal of the subject: "in reading, I *unrealize* myself" (2007, 94).

Consequently, of the four points, only the third directly answers to the Gadamer-Habermas debate, the others answer directly and exclusively to the Ricœurian hermeneutics. Of all

these, the last seems to me the most important because it indirectly compels the suspension of the subject as center of hermeneutics, to make room for the world that the text opens within the subject. What this type of hermeneutics under the urge of epistemology brings anew is in fact the dismissal of the subject and its replacement with the “world of the text”, a world in which the subject can find herself/himself. If we asked about the direct consequences for the hermeneutical debate and if such a proposal were indeed functional, we would answer together with Jean Grondin that things are still debatable¹². But in this way we better understand Grondin’s incrimination in a “marginal” footnote. This incrimination aims for the very “centre” of Ricœurian hermeneutics.

On the other hand, in “Vers une herméneutique de la conscience historique” things change dramatically (Ricœur 1985, 374-433). One of the things worth noticing is that this is a place where Ricœur cannot be accurately included in what we may call a hermeneutical debate. The reason is very simple: his intention is to elaborate a philosophical anthropology (of philosophy of action) and not an exclusively hermeneutical philosophy. Even the first sentence of this last chapter confirms this interpretation. History, or better said, the issue of a possible hermeneutics of historical consciousness refers less to the theorizing of history within hermeneutics, and more to the possibility of acting in history:¹³ “to be affected (*être affecté*) by the past (...) has no meaning and force except opposite to the act of *making history*”. Because to ‘be affected’ is a category of the fact of making (Ricœur 1986, 374). For Ricœur, moving forward towards a hermeneutics of historical consciousness means moving forward towards a time of initiative (of the fulfilled promise), of the ethical and political action. His analysis aims for action and not hermeneutics. Thus, we have to talk about “a new historical experience marked by a new proportion between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation” (Ricœur 1986, 377), a historical experience situated at the level of action rather than knowledge.

His explicit stake is not to introduce a new critical (or epistemological) instance in the “hermeneutical consciousness”, but to dismiss the “immobility” that a hermeneutics of tradition imposes. The plane of debate changes: from knowledge to action. The fact of “being affected by history must be thought of as the correlative of action” (Ricœur 1986, 392). Therefore we must acknowledge the shift in emphasis: from a hermeneutics of comprehension to a hermeneutics of action. The fundamental

landmark is no longer Gadamer, but Nietzsche. Together with the "master of distrust" for a philosophy of life or action against the monumental history appointed by the human of knowledge: "The man of life must judge the man of knowledge" (Ricœur 1986, 426). But, in this context, to what extent does "a new hermeneutics of historical consciousness" truly aim for a hermeneutics of comprehension? Is it not more plausible to talk about the path that leads towards an "anthropology of action"?

NOTES

¹ Nevertheless, the article that gives Grondin the possibility to produce this kind of critique in a minor footnote is not unimportant. We are referring to "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (Ricœur 2007, 131-145).

² As Jean Grondin himself confesses, the "truth" of this conclusion is possible only in what Jean Greisch calls "the hermeneutical era of reason" (Grondin 2008, 72).

³ We cannot conceive any differently Jean Grondin's decision not to give even one page to Ricœur's hermeneutics in his excellent *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Grondin 1994b) (the princeps edition, written in German dates from 1991). Certainly, Grondin will come around to his initial decision three years later, allotting Ricœur an entire subchapter in *L'herméneutique positive du Paul Ricœur: du temps au récit* (Grondin 1994a, 169-172).

⁴ For example, J. Bleicher (1990). The English author speaks of a theory of interpretation particular to the French philosopher's starting exclusively from two texts: "What Is a Text?" (Ricœur 1970b) and "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" (Ricœur 1971).

⁵ American exegesis, as we know, will almost exclusively bet on the hermeneutics of Ricœur's late philosophy, without trying to adequately convey the initial resources of his hermeneutics.

⁶ Only one text from *The Conflict of Interpretation* takes into consideration the problems that pertain to a philosophical hermeneutics: "Existence and Hermeneutics" written in 1965. Here Ricœur announces: "the graft of the hermeneutic problem onto the phenomenological method" (Ricœur 2004, 3). As we well know, ten years later Ricœur picks up the project of a hermeneutical phenomenology in the text "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" (written in 1975) and the first footnote of this second text proclaims "the balance of a change in method involved by my own evolution" (Ricœur 1986, 44). Beside this direct link *The Conflict of Interpretation* is marked by what we call "symbolic hermeneutics", hermeneutics that cannot be found in *From Text to Action*. In fact, together with Ricœur we can stipulate that "this definition of hermeneutics by symbolic interpretation seems narrow to me today" (Ricœur 1986, 34).

⁷ For a comparison see *The Rule of Metaphor* (Ricœur 2003, 255-261), respectively *Le temps raconté* (Ricœur 1986, 113-131).

⁸ I try to discuss the beginning of Ricœur's hermeneutics in another text. See Cătălin Bobb. 2011. "From the problem of 'evil' to interpretation". *Journal for the Study of Religion and Ideologies*. 10 (30): 299-317.

⁹ "The Task of Hermeneutics" as much as "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (the center of the textual hermeneutics developed by Ricœur) is more often read separately as they are self-sustaining studies and not one study that proclaims a singular thesis. Obviously, subordinating the thesis developed in "The Task of Hermeneutics" as well as "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" to the unique thesis from "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics" can be a risk, from a philosophical point of view.

¹⁰ Developed for the first time in the article: "What is a Text?". See "Towards a New Concept of Interpretation"(Ricœur 1986, 169-178).

¹¹ To simplify, we may state that in fact the textual hermeneutics developed by Ricœur is a reply to Gadamer's hermeneutics of dialogue.

¹² "Has Ricœur managed to answer the methodological dilemmas of humanities? (...) This is not for sure" (Grondin 2008, 52).

¹³ If Gadamer asks what the direct consequences in our understanding are when we admit that we can never escape history, Ricœur seems to ask something else: what are the consequences of the historical effects on our actions?

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