



AN INTRODUCTION TO PAUL RICOEUR'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND HERMENEUTICS

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ABSTRACT

'Hermeneutics,' the word, is derived from Greek 'hermenus', which means 'an interpreter'. Historically, it comes from Greek mythology, which refers to the messenger, Hermes, who was an interpreter of Zeus' messages. Hermeneutics, in general, is a method or a science of interpreting sacred texts. It covers both orders- the theory of understanding and the interpretation of linguistic and non- linguistic expressions.

In Renaissance and Middle ages hermeneutics emerged as a crucial branch of biblical studies, later it also included the study of classical culture. After the emergence of Greek Romanticism and Idealism, the nature and status of Hermeneutics changed and turned quite philosophical to the conditions of possibility for symbolic communication. Thus, Hermeneutics being a theory of text interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, philosophical text, research of the meanings of the texts, art, culture, social phenomena and thinking moves from the approach "how to read?" to the approach "how do we communicate at all?"

After further developments, Hermeneutics rendered not only on symbolic communication, but also becomes more fundamental to concern with human life and human existence as well. Amidst of all these conceptual expansions, Hermeneutics reaches to a status of an interrogation into the deepest conditions for symbolic interpretation to gain an in-depth understanding of researched phenomena in general. At present, Hermeneutics has provided a critical horizon for many of the most intriguing discussions of contemporary linguistic and non linguistic and interpreting philosophy.

Recently, Hermeneutics has been concerned with the interpretation and understanding of human action, which includes, 'what people do,' 'say' and 'create.' For literature, it is to do with the way textual meaning is communicated.



In brief, Hermeneutics, from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Wolfgang Iser, Hans Georg Gadamer, E. D. Hirsh and Stanley Fish, reaches to one of the most influential 20th century French philosopher Jean Paul Gustave Ricoeur (1913-2005), a Honorary Member of the International Institute for Hermeneutics who was a “son of a victim of the First World War” as well as a prisoner of war for five years during the Second World War. Ricoeur, the poststructuralist hermeneutician was a remarkably interdisciplinary scholar, a philosopher of dialogue. He acknowledged his indebtedness to several key figures in the tradition, most notably, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. There are two closely related questions that animate all Ricoeur’s works which are to be fundamental to the philosophy of – “Who am I?” and “How should I Live?” Academically, in recent scholarship, Ricoeur has been one of the most important representatives of phenomenology and hermeneutics. In Ricoeur’s Critical Theory David M. Kaplan comments that:

Paul Ricoeur is widely regarded as among the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. His ability over the last fifty years to enter into dialogue with a wide range of philosophers and philosophies and to offer even-handed, balanced judgments on the most important debates of the day is nothing less than remarkable. One of Ricoeur’s many strengths as a philosopher is his “passion for mediation,” an ability to reconcile seemingly antithetical philosophies like phenomenology and structuralism, hermeneutics and phenomenology, narrative theory and hermeneutics, deontological and virtue ethics, liberalism and communitarianism, hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. He tends to think in terms of opposites, pairs, and contrasts juxtaposed in such a way that highlights and preserves differences, while resisting the temptation to synthesize a new unity. Instead he claims only to draw a “hermeneutic arc” between opposites, a metaphor that suggests a chastened, mitigated mediation. A hermeneutic arc, drawn between two antithetical positions, shows how they could go together by linking them together in a way that marks the place of one position in the context of the other. Ricoeur mediates philosophical debates like a good referee calls a game: he does not get in the way of the play and he usually makes the right call. His unique method of nonsynthetic mediation testifies to the uniqueness of his philosophical spirit. He respects the plurality of voices and questions of others while honoring the original philosophical impetus to find unity, reason, and clarity in history. Ricoeur is a thoroughly modernist philosopher for whom philosophy and reason are synonymous. (1)

This is true that Ricoeur is widely viewed as one of the most influential philosopher of the 20th century. He has published many important books and articles which have made an impact almost on all the areas of humanities, including, history, literary studies, theology, philosophy and linguistics. Ricoeur’s works include a multi-volume project on the philosophy of “free will” in Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary (1950, Eng. tr. 1966), Fallible Man (1960, Eng. tr. 1970), a major study of Freud: Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation (1965, Eng. tr. 1970), The Rule of Metaphor (1975, Eng. tr. 1977); Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning (1976); the three volume of Time and Narrative (1983-85, Eng. tr. 1984-88); Lectures on Ideology and Utopia (1986); the published versions of his Gifford lectures: Oneself as Another (1990, Eng. tr. 1992); Memory, History, Forgetting (2000, Eng. tr. 2004); The Course of Recognition (2004, Eng. tr. 2005).

Apart from these influential works of Ricoeur, there also appear more than 500 essays. Many of them appear in the collections like- Phenomenology (1967); The Conflict of Interpretation: Essays in Hermeneutics (1969, Eng. tr. 1974); Political and Social Essays (1974); Essays on Biblical Interpretation (1980); Hermeneutics and Human Sciences (1981); From Text to Action (1986, Eng. tr. 1991); Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination (1995); The Just (1995, Eng. tr. 2000); On Translation (2004, Eng. tr. 2004); and, Reflection on the Just (2001, Eng. tr. 2007). In the "Introduction" of Falible Man Walter J. Lowe writes that:

Rich in texture, expansive in scope, and indefatigably exploratory in character, Ricoeur's is not a philosophy that lends itself to tidy summary. Still it may be possible, by way of introduction, to retrace something of the pathway along which his thought has moved: to indicate a few of the most basic concerns and then to show how those concerns, and the interaction between them, came to generate the particular works which he did in fact write. As a means of interpreting the institutions and works of art which constitute our culture, Ricoeur has often sought, in and through those various expressions, an underlying human act, a generative "affirmation" of effort and desire. Without pressing the point unduly, we may ask to what extent Ricoeur's own thought, and particularly his early work, may be interpreted in the light of such an originary affirmation. (vii)

Human beings are distinct from other beings in the sense that they use language, they make meanings, they interpret meanings; in other words they live their life by the meanings that language creates for them.

The nature of language has become the most significant issue in the interpretation of human life. In fact it is not the text that is weaved in language, but the human life that weaves and is viewed in language. To be human means to be linguistic. In the later part of the twentieth century the thinkers of language have made radical understandings of the nature of language. One of the ways to understand the nature of language is that it is metaphorical in every sense of the term. According to Nietzsche, all words are dead metaphors. Language is metaphorical because it relates itself to the objects that it describes only as an image, or the relationship of language with its objects is not synthetical but imaginary. As the metaphor cannot relate itself in synthetical manner with the objects that it describes. If we assign some concrete meaning to the metaphor, such an attempt is rooted in the ideological thinking of the views of metaphor.

Time in relation to Metaphor is the context that creates the possibilities of stable meaning. Language being one of the fictional entities always seeks the support of time to generate stable meaning. However time itself is slippery and unstable, and difficult to hold as the future is yet to come, which will remain forever in future. Language that makes meanings in relation to such temporalities is doomed to create unstable meaning.

There, in The Rule of Metaphor, he argues that language belongs to, and is expressive of extra-linguistic reality. Despite this apparent concession to realism, Ricoeur insists that the objective cannot be known as such, but merely grasped indirectly and analytically. David

Wood observes that:

When we lift the veil however, we find Ricoeur's The Rule of Metaphor in front of us, and we recall that the study of metaphor and narrative are for Ricoeur integral parts of a general poetics, 'one vast poetic sphere', both instances of the productive imagination. We have already seen him describe narrative in terms of production; we know that Ricoeur, following Aristotle who thought of plot as the mimesis of an action, allows the poetic a role in the narrative refiguring of action; we know that Ricoeur ultimately seeks to harness the poetic for speculative and eventually practical ends. (6)

Ricoeur's philosophy is driven by the desire to provide account that will do justice to the tensions and ambiguities which make us human, and which underpin our fallibility. Here, Ricoeur's interest is noted in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, drafted during his years as a prisoner of war. There he emphasizes the involuntary constraint to which we are necessarily subject in virtue of our being bodily mortal creatures, and the voluntariness necessary to the idea of ourselves as the agents of our actions.

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur describes how the complexity of the "Who" opens directly on to a certain way of articulating the question of personal identity as:

... How the self can be at one and the same time a person of whom we speak and a subject who designates herself in the first person while addressing a second person... The difficulty of will... understand how the third person is designated in discourse as someone who designates himself as a first person. (34-35)."

Drawing on Heidegger's notion of 'dasein,' Ricoeur goes on to write that "To say self is not to say myself", what he means by this is that each person has to take ones selfhood as one's own; each must take Oneself as who one is; one must "attest" to one-self (*Oneself as Another*, 180), furthermore he adds:

The first task is to carry to a higher level the dialectic of sameness and selfhood implicitly contained in the notion of narrative identity. The second is to complete this investigation of the narrated self by exploring the mediations that narrative theory can perform between action theory and moral theory. This second task will itself have two sides to it. Returning to our triad — describing, narrating, prescribing — we shall ask first what extension of the practical field is called for by the narrative function, if the action described is to match the action narrated. We shall then examine in what way narrative, which is never ethically neutral, proves to be the first laboratory of moral judgment. The reciprocal constitution of action and of the self will be pursued on both sides of narrative theory, in the practical as well as the ethical sphere. (140)

In *Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur explored the problem that how to account for the existence of 'evil'. There, he argues that people have tried to come to terms with their inability to make sense of the existence of evil by using language that draws on the great symbols and myths

that speak of its origin. Ricoeur says this is the language that always conveys more than a single meaning that can always be read in more than one way; here it always needs to be interpreted.

In *Time and Narrative* of all three volumes, Ricoeur writes that historical present is the time of actions, the time of the inaugurations of new sequences and arguments of things. It is also the moment by the agents' space of experience and horizon of expectation. To give expression to this complex historical present one must use a kind of discourse that can articulate both strings of actions and events and their human contexts. The kind of discourse that can do this is 'narrative'. Thus historical time becomes human time "to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode and narrative attains its full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" (*Time and Narrative*, Vol., 52). David wood who is one of the well known Ricoeurean scholars writes that:

Ricoeur's Time and Narrative is one of the most impressive attempts ever made to address and resolve the paradoxical nature of time, one which gives us an original and illuminating reading of many of the important way-stations, from Aristotle to Heidegger, and one which sets out to test a hypothesis—that the resources of narrative remedy a fatal deficiency in any purely phenomenological approach to time.
(1)

In *The Course of Recognition*, his last book, Ricoeur turns to the topic of personal identity. Here he develops his position through an analysis of the fundamental capabilities and vulnerabilities that are constitutive of human existence. He focuses more on these capabilities in their existence and not simply in their potentiality, in this regard Ricoeur offers three major senses in his *The Course of Recognition*:

1. To grasp (an object) with the mind, through thought, in joining together images, perceptions having to do with it; to distinguish or identify the judgment or action, know it by memory.
2. To accept, take to be true (or take as such).
3. To bear witness through gratitude that one is indebted to someone for (something, an act). (12)

Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* gives his fullest argument for this life-long conviction. The argument begins with an account of things purportedly remembered, as for, without memories there could be no history involving people. There is the individual's memory of what he or she has encountered or done or suffered.

In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur attempts to overcome the Freudian problematic aspect of desire by the way of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Ricoeur writes discussing about psychology and language that:

This book is a discussion or debate with Freud. Why this interest in psychoanalysis, an interest justified neither by the competence of an analyst nor by the experience of having been analyzed? The purpose of a book is never entirely justified. In any event, no one is required to display his motives or to entangle himself in a confession. To attempt it would be self delusion. Yet, more than anyone, the philosopher cannot refuse to give his reasons. (3)

In *The Conflict of Interpretation: Essay on Hermeneutic*, Ricoeur delineates as a non-totalizing yet subjective like system of interpretative restoration that allows him to overcome what he takes to be the annihilating experience of a subject haunted by the “productions of the unconscious” and the “immense empire of signs.”

Thus we can observe that how Ricoeur is one of the most celebrated contemporary philosophers in French, according to David M. Kaplan he has fashioned a “unique version of critical theory.” Ricoeur is a recipient of numerous awards, including the Hegel Prize from Stuttgart in 1985, the Karl Jasper Prize from Heidelberg in 1989, the Grand Prize of the French Academy for philosophy in 1987, the Nietzsche Prize from Palermo, Italy, 1987, and the Dante Prize from Florence in 1988. He is the holder of many honorary doctorates from more than thirty leading academic institutions in thirteen different countries.

Ricoeur’s philosophy of language and most of his scholarly contributions as a whole is mainly considered “hermeneutical”, concerned, mostly with the questions involving interpretation. According to Emerita Quito- “Ricoeur’s entire philosophy is finally centered on hermeneutics”. Ricoeur has devoted much of his writing in dealing with the problem of hermeneutics in modern time.

Under the shadow of Kaplan’s remark, who has authored Ricoeur’s *Critical Theory*, observes that until today- “Very little attention has been given to Ricoeur’s conception of relationship between Hermeneutics and Critical Literary Theory.” In the same line my observation, on the basis of my limited knowledge, about Ricoeurian philosophy, for instance, is that, on Ricoeur not enough work has been done yet, especially on his philosophy of language and literary hermeneutics.

Therefore, the age old question and problem remains the same, as Albrecht Wilmer Habermas argues that “future logos of final and absolute truth” is unattainable clearly in practices but also in theory, if communication is between people with slightly different view point, as cultural objects are shared ways in which a community understands itself as communities change and how do we arrive and how should we arrive at the proper interpretation of objects and objects from past civilization. Ricoeur’s search for the text is itself for the complex relationship between explaining and understanding. Here, the intention is at Roman Ingarden’s concept that texts preserve the act of consciousness on the parts of their writer, which are then reanimated in various ways by the reader. In general experts distinguish four levels in a text-

- a) Word Sounds
- b) Meaning Units
- c) Perspectives Controlling States of Affairs; and,
- d) Represented Objectives.

The last two levels are gaps which the reader fills with his/her own creativities. According to Wolfgang Iser such gaps are not filled in an uncontrolled fashion, they are accomplished through a process of retrospection and anticipation that can overturn the text's "pre-structure," the coding of the readers usual habit and expectations.

In conclusion, Ricoeur's philosophy revolves around some of the key concept i. e. 'Language,' 'Metaphor,' 'Symbolism,' 'Time,' 'Narrative,' 'Reality,' 'Self' and 'Identity' for present and current understanding of existing reality. Ricoeur's Philosophy of language and hermeneutics opens so many new dimensions for modern day scholarship hermeneutical perspectives of meaning.

The problem of the complex relationships between explaining and understanding a text while reading, deciphering and the questions such as what will happen if the "theory of text reading" be the "theory of reading life" will be taken in other study in near future very soon. I would confront present day concerns with Ricoeur's fruitful insights in order to help envision a future for literary hermeneutics. If possible, the thesis would be open to the concern of any new finding of Ricoeurian philosophy of language and hermeneutics. I, once again, positively believe that through projects proposed for near future study some of the aspects of frequently and deliberately ignored, disregarded and forgotten relationship between Ricoeur and current understanding of the 'worlds' will be brought to light.

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