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Paul Ricoeur , Edited and translated by John B. Thompson  
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## Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences

# Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences

## Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation



**Paul Ricoeur**  
*Edited, translated and introduced by*  
**JOHN B. THOMPSON**



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## Preface to this edition

CHARLES TAYLOR



The move of the term ‘hermeneutics’ from its original home in textual (at first Biblical) interpretation to its new application to history and human science owes a great deal to two outstanding twentieth-century philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

The move can be understood in the light of two crucial insights. The first is that ‘understanding’ can have a quite different sense applied to human affairs from that which it has in natural science or technology. Understanding why you made that surprising move involves something rather different from understanding why my car broke down. Thus we often say things like (1) ‘I can’t understand him. He seems to be sabotaging, undermining his most cherished goal’; or (2) ‘That reaction seems totally over the top, uncalled for’; or (3) ‘He seems to be deliberately provoking opposition’; or (4) ‘Why did she put her demand in those terms, which almost guaranteed refusal?’ In all these cases, the actor is (provisionally) opaque to us; we cannot understand him or her.

We explain properly, we make sense of the action/response, when we add to or complexify the range of meanings or motivations actually operating here. It was Dilthey who made this point most forcefully, and he influenced some important twentieth-century sociologists, like Max Weber.

The second point is that there are important features in common between making sense of human beings and understanding texts. In particular, a certain kind of circularity attaches to both types of account. The aim, in the original context of Bible interpretation, was often to clarify a particular passage which was uncertain or enigmatic. But the reading offered of this passage or verse had to make sense within the presumed overall meaning of the entire chapter, book, and ultimately, of the whole Bible. One could thus use the sense of the whole to make sense of the part. But a question can always be raised: do we understand fully the meaning of the whole?

There is a circle here, but not a vicious one. It doesn’t involve the notorious ‘circular argument’, where one assumes the conclusion among the premises. On the contrary, the attempt is to bring the arguments in both directions into an equilibrium in which one makes maximum sense of the text. But a similar circularity applies to making sense of action. The

sense we make of a certain passage of history or biography has to fit with our reading of what came before and after. Now from this similarity between text interpretation and making sense, a third one arises. Biblical hermeneutics aims to make better sense of text than we have up to now. But this brings us to an impossibility of claiming closure. No matter how convincing our present reading, it is always possible that someone could propose a better one. And the same applies to human action in history.

This interesting collection illustrates not only Ricoeur's contribution to the translation of hermeneutics to the new fields, but also some of the extraordinarily creative uses he made of it.

## Acknowledgements



I began work on this volume while I was a research by-fellow at Girton College, Cambridge. A grant from the SSRC/CNRS research exchange scheme for social scientists enabled me to spend time in Paris, where most of the translation was done. The volume was completed during the first year of a research fellowship at Jesus College, Cambridge. I wish to thank these institutions for their support.

I have benefited greatly from the comments and criticisms of others. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellauer and Michel Audet read all or most of the manuscript and made many valuable remarks. I also received helpful suggestions from David Held, Susanne Kappeler, Mike Barfoot, and Alison Hendry. I am grateful to Anthony Giddens for his sound advice at every stage of the project. Above all, I offer my thanks to Paul Ricoeur, who so willingly and generously provided the material which forms this book. Any errors that may remain in the translation are, of course, my own.

All of the essays are reprinted with permission. Details of the original publication are as follows:

- ‘La tâche de l’herméneutique’, in *Exegesis: Problèmes de méthode et exercices de lecture*, edited by François Bovon and Grégoire Rouiller (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1975), pp. 179–200. An English translation of this essay appeared in *Philosophy Today*, 17 (1973), pp. 112–28.
- ‘Herméneutique et critique des idéologies’, in *Démythisation et idéologie*, edited by Enrico Castelli (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1973), pp. 25–64.
- ‘Phénoménologie et herméneutique’, in *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, vol. 1, edited by Ernst Wolfgang Orth (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1975), pp. 31–77. A partial translation of this essay appeared in *Noûs*, 9 (1975), pp. 85–102.
- ‘La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation’, in *Exegesis: Problèmes de méthode et exercices de lecture*, edited by François Bovon and Grégoire Rouiller (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1975),

- pp. 201–15. This is a modified version of an essay which appeared in English in *Philosophy Today*, 17 (1973), pp. 129–43.
- ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un texte? expliquer et comprendre’, in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, vol. 2, edited by Rüdiger Bubner et al. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1970), pp. 181–200. An abridged version of this essay appeared in English on pages 135–50 of David Rasmussen, *Mythic-Symbolic Language and Philosophical Anthropology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971).
- ‘La métaphore et le problème central de l’herméneutique’, *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 70 (1972), pp. 93–112. English translations of this essay appeared in *New Literary History*, 6 (1974), pp. 95–110; and *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 3 (1973–4), pp. 42–58.
- ‘The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text’, *Social Research*, 38 (1971), pp. 529–62.
- ‘Science et idéologie’, *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, 72 (1974), pp. 326–56.
- ‘The question of proof in Freud’s psychoanalytic writings’, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 25 (1977), pp. 835–71.
- ‘La fonction narrative’, *Etudes théologiques et religieuses*, 54 (1979), pp. 209–30. A shorter version of this essay appeared in English in *Semeia*, 13 (1978), pp. 177–202.

**J.B.T.**  
 Cambridge  
 May 1980



## Editor's introduction



The nature of language and meaning, of action, interpretation and subjectivity, are issues of increasing concern to a wide range of contemporary disciplines. For philosophers, linguists, literary critics and social scientists, the clarification of such issues has become an urgent and inescapable task. In the English-speaking world, however, the pursuit of this task remains hindered by both an institutionalised respect for disciplinary boundaries and a long-standing insularity with regard to Continental traditions of thought. There can be no doubt that the growing familiarity with the work of Paul Ricoeur will help enormously to overcome these obstacles. As one of the leading philosophers in postwar France, Ricoeur has written with originality and authority on an astonishing variety of topics. During the last few years, he has turned his attention more directly to problems of language, entering into a sustained dialogue with the tradition of hermeneutics. The dialogue with this tradition, whose members have focused for centuries on the process of interpretation,<sup>1</sup> forms the backcloth for the contributions contained in this volume.

In order to appreciate fully the significance of Ricoeur's current work, it is necessary to have some perspective on his writings as a whole. My aim in this introduction is to provide such an overall view. I shall begin with a brief synopsis of Ricoeur's career. In the second part, I shall trace the evolution of Ricoeur's thought, from his early project for a philosophy of the will, through his encounters with psychoanalysis and structuralism, to his recent preoccupation with the theory of the text. In the third part, I shall sketch the central themes of Ricoeur's current work. Finally, in the fourth part, I shall summarise some of the main arguments of the essays

1 For a short history of hermeneutics from classical Greece until the nineteenth century, see W. Dilthey, 'The development of hermeneutics', in *Selected Writings*, edited and translated by H.P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 246–63. A survey of developments from the nineteenth century until the present day may be found in Ricoeur's essay on 'The task of hermeneutics', in this volume, pp. 43–62. For an introduction to some of the key figures in modern hermeneutics, see Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

which appear in this volume. It should be said at the outset that no attempt will be made to give a comprehensive survey of Ricoeur's work. Certain contributions will be emphasised at the expense of others and some of his writings, for example those dealing with educational and theological issues, will largely be left aside.<sup>2</sup> It should also be said that, however important Ricoeur's ideas may be, I do not believe that they are without difficulties; but this is not the place to express my reservations, which I have developed in detail elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Here my aim is to present a short and thematic exposition of Ricoeur's views, in the hope of facilitating the sympathetic reception of his work in the English-speaking world.

## I

Born in Valence in 1913, Ricoeur began his philosophical career at a time when European thought was dominated by the ideas of authors such as Husserl and Heidegger, Jaspers and Marcel. Gabriel Marcel was working in Paris when Ricoeur registered at the Sorbonne as a graduate student in the late 1930s. Marcel had a deep and lasting influence on Ricoeur's thought, directing it towards the formulation of a concrete ontology which would be infused with the themes of freedom, finitude and hope. However, Ricoeur believed that the pursuit of this goal demanded a method more rigorous and systematic than that which Marcel and his disciples employed. Ricoeur discovered the requisite method in the phenomenological writings of Edmund Husserl. As a prisoner in Germany during the Second World War, Ricoeur was allowed to read the work of Husserl, as well as that of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. He was impressed and attracted by Jaspers's thought, which he found close to Marcel's in many respects. Following the war, Ricoeur and Mikel Dufrenne – a friend and fellow prisoner – published a lengthy sketch of *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (1947); and in the same year, Ricoeur published his own study of *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers*. In the early post-war years, Ricoeur also completed a translation of, and commentary upon, Husserl's *Ideen I*, thereby establishing himself as a leading authority on phenomenology.

- 2 For a detailed discussion of Ricoeur's work in the 1950s and 1960s, see Don Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971). A review of Ricoeur's contributions to educational and theological issues may be found in Michel Philibert, *Ricoeur ou la liberté selon l'espérance* (Paris: Seghers, 1971).
- 3 See my *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).