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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

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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.

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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.

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'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.

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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,[1] 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).

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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.[2] 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.[3] 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).

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In 1948 Ricoeur was elected to a chair in the history of philosophy at the University of Strasbourg. Each year he committed himself to read the collected works of one great philosopher, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. This immersion in the tradition of Western philosophy turned Ricoeur away from the preoccupations of 'existentialism' or 'existential phenomenology', which was then being popularised by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. For on the one hand, Ricoeur became increasingly concerned with the development of a *reflective* philosophy, a philosophy which seeks to disclose authentic subjectivity through a reflection upon the means whereby existence can be understood. On the other hand, he became more and more convinced that *necessity*, no less than freedom, is an integral aspect of human existence. Ricoeur's ambitious and highly original project on the philosophy of the will expresses this welter of influences on his thought. In the first volume of the project, *Le Volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950) (*Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*), Ricoeur employed a phenomenological method to explore the volitional dimension of what Marcel called 'incarnate existence'. The second volume of the philosophy of the will, a volume entitled *Finitude et culpabilité* (*Finitude and Guilt*), was published in 1960 as two separate books: *L'Homme faillible* (*Fallible Man*) and *La Symbolique du mal* (*The Symbolism of Evil*). In these two books, Ricoeur moved away from a strict phenomenological method and pursued the problem of the will into the opaque domain of human fallibility and fault. At the beginning of his project on the philosophy of the will, Ricoeur outlined the task of a third and final volume which would be dedicated to the 'poetics of the will'. He did not, however, undertake this task immediately, embarking instead upon an interrogation of two disciplines which had become a *succès de scandale:* psychoanalysis and structuralism.

Ricoeur was appointed to a chair in general philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1957. The intellectual milieu in Paris was changing rapidly: the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger were being eclipsed by those of Freud and Saussure. Ricoeur did not follow this trend; his inclinations were too distant from the fashions of Paris, his views too deeply rooted in the tradition of phenomenology. Yet Ricoeur could not ignore the change, since psychoanalysis and structuralism offered radical approaches to problems which he had been led to in his work on the philosophy of the will, problems concerning guilt, symbolism and the subject. Ricoeur met the challenge thus presented in a direct and cogent manner. His well-known and justly acclaimed study of Freud, *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud* (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*), was published in 1965. A collection which includes many of the essays he wrote on psychoanalysis and

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structuralism was published in 1969 under the title of *Le Conflict des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (*The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*).

In 1966 Ricoeur chose to teach at Nanterre, where he was appointed Dean in March 1969. Following the student occupation of the University in 1970 and the subsequent intervention by the police, Ricoeur resigned as Dean and moved to the University of Louvain. In 1973 he returned to Nanterre, combining his appointment there with a part-time professorship at the University of Chicago. At the same time, he assumed the directorship of the *Centre d'études phénoménologiques et herméneutiques* in Paris. It was during this period that Ricoeur became preoccupied with problems of language and entered more deeply into the dialogue with hermeneutics. His masterly study of metaphor, *La Métaphore vive* (*The Rule of Metaphor*), was published in 1975. He also wrote, and continues to write, many essays on related issues. Such prolificity is amply attested to by Ricoeur's bibliography, which now includes more than a dozen books and several hundred essays. In the next two parts of the introduction, I should like to draw out some of the central themes of this substantial corpus, beginning with the original project for a philosophy of the will.

II

Philosophy of the will

The aim of Ricoeur's philosophy of the will is to reflect upon the affective and volitional dimensions of human existence. This philosophy thus focuses on issues like action and motive, need and desire, pleasure and pain. Ricoeur initially approaches such issues from a phenomenological perspective, that is, from a perspective which attempts to describe the ways in which phenomena appear and to relate these modes of appearance to subjective processes of consciousness. In approaching the dimensions of the will from a phenomenological perspective, Ricoeur distances himself from the work of existentialists, as well as from the position of Husserl himself. For Ricoeur is critical of those authors who plunge too quickly into a vivid portrayal of everyday experience: 'in the early stages at least', he insists, 'phenomenology must be structural'.[4] Yet Ricoeur criticises, with equal force, Husserl's tendency to treat perception as a paradigm of the operations of consciousness. In rejecting this 'logistic

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, translated by Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 215.

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prejudice', Ricoeur seeks to develop Husserl's method beyond its idealistic origins, applying it to those regions of human experience which lie on the very boundaries of conscious life.

The first stage of Ricoeur's philosophy of the will is presented in *Freedom and Nature*. In this study, Ricoeur attempts to unfold the basic structures of the will at the level of 'essential possibility', that is, at a level which abstracts from the accidental features of everyday life. What is revealed at this level is that the structures of the will are characterised by a fundamental reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary. The dualism of subject and object, of freedom and nature, is not primary, but is rather an attitude which phenomenological description must delve beneath. Through long and intricate analyses, Ricoeur shows how, in the act of willing, consciousness adheres to the elements of involuntary life, and how in turn the elements of involuntary life adhere to the 'I will'. Thus the act of willing involves a decision designating a future action which lies within the agent's power; but the decision is based upon motives, the action is mediated by bodily organs, and the act of willing as a whole is conditioned by character, the unconscious and life, to which the agent must consent. The reintegration of consciousness into body and body into consciousness is not, however, harmonious. The unity of the voluntary and the involuntary is a 'drama', a 'polemic', anticipating a reconciliation which is less a reality than a limiting idea. In the light of this limiting idea, our freedom truly appears for what it is, 'a freedom which is human and *not* divine'.[5]

In *Finitude and Guilt*, the second volume of the philosophy of the will, Ricoeur removes some of the methodological parentheses which restricted his earlier analyses to the level of essential possibility. The first book of this volume, *Fallible Man*, initiates the movement towards that feature of human existence which constitutes the locus of evil. This feature is 'fallibility'; it can be conceived as the line of fault, as the constitutional weakness which gives rise to an interruption or distortion of the basic structures of willing. Hence fallibility is not continuous with the characteristics disclosed in *Freedom and Nature*, wherein 'we sketched', as Ricoeur recalls, 'the undifferentiated keyboard upon which the guilty as well as the innocent man might play'.[6] To grasp hold of this new dimension requires,

5 Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, translated by Erazim V. Kohák (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 486.

6 Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, translated by Charles Kelbley (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), p. xvi.

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therefore, a transformation of method. The object of analysis is no longer an essential structure accessible to phenomenological description, but rather an internal aberration that must be approached regressively through reflection on unstable syntheses. Reflection reveals, for example, that the primary passions of possession, power and worth are suspended between a finite pole of pleasure and an infinite pole of happiness, so that each bears the threat of endless pursuit. By means of such reflection, Ricoeur seeks to specify those aspects of human existence which harbour the possibility of evil, thereby preparing the way for an inquiry into the actuality of fault.

The transition from possibility to actuality, from fallibility to fault, is accomplished in *The Symbolism of Evil*, which is the second book of *Finitude and Guilt*. Once again, the movement demands a methodological shift. For the actuality of fault cannot be apprehended directly, in the fullness of experience, but can be approached only through the language in which that experience is expressed. Description of essential structures and reflection on unstable syntheses thus give way to a hermeneutics of symbols and myths. Ricoeur begins his inquiry with the most primitive expressions of the confession of evil, that is, with the 'language of avowal'. This language is thoroughly 'symbolic', in the sense that it speaks of sin or guilt in an indirect and figurative way which calls for interpretation. Although the interpretation of symbols and of the myths constructed from them is not identical with philosophical reflection, nevertheless interpretation paves the way for reflection. For as Ricoeur submits, 'I am convinced that we must think, not *behind* the symbols, but starting from symbols, . . . that they constitute the *revealing* substrate of speech which lives among men. In short, the symbol *gives rise to* thought.'[7] Hermeneutics is thus the route to philosophical reflection, to reflection premissed on the assumption that by following the indication of symbolic meaning one will arrive at a deeper understanding of human existence.

Examination of psychoanalysis

The emergence of interpretation as a central moment in the study of the will leads Ricoeur into an examination of psychoanalysis. For if hermeneutics is the route to philosophical reflection, then reflection cannot escape from the conflict of interpretations. As Ricoeur explains at the outset of

7 Paul Ricoeur, 'The hermeneutics of symbols and philosophical reflection: I', translated by Denis Savage, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 299.

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Freud and Philosophy, 'there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis, but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation. The hermeneutic field ... is internally at variance with itself.'[8] Thus, according to one view, hermeneutics is construed as the restoration of a meaning addressed to the interpreter in the form of a message. This type of hermeneutics is animated by faith, by a willingness to listen, and it is characterised by a respect for the symbol as a revelation of the sacred. According to another view, however, hermeneutics is regarded as the demystification of a meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of a disguise. This type of hermeneutics is animated by suspicion, by a scepticism towards the given, and it is characterised by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real. Ricoeur suggests that it is the latter type of hermeneutics which is practised by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. All three of these 'masters of suspicion' look upon the contents of consciousness as in some sense 'false'; all three aim to transcend this falsity through a reductive interpretation and critique.

Having situated psychoanalysis within the field of hermeneutics, Ricoeur undertakes a systematic reading of Freud's work. The reading consists of three basic cycles, each of which isolates a distinctive problematic. The first cycle begins with the 'Project' of 1895, encompasses the interpretation of dreams and neurotic symptoms, and ends in a state of the system which Ricoeur calls the 'first topography': unconscious, preconscious, conscious. In this cycle, the principal concern is with the structure of psychoanalytic discourse, which presents itself as a mixture of statements of force and statements of meaning; and as Ricoeur repeatedly proclaims, 'this mixed discourse is not an equivocal discourse for want of clarification: it grips firmly the very reality we discover when we read Freud and which we can call *the semantics of desire*'.[9] The second cycle of the reading is concerned with the extension of Freud's ideas to the sphere of culture, an extension which reacts back upon the original model and results in the 'second topography' of *ego, id, superego*. Finally, in the third cycle, Ricoeur explores the upheaval effected by the introduction of the death instinct. This instinct completes both the theory of culture and the interpretation of the reality principle, but in so doing it propels Freud into a mythological realm dominated by the figures of Eros, Thanatos and Ananke.

8 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, translated by Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 26–7.

9 Paul Ricoeur, 'The question of the subject: the challenge of semiology', translated by Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 263.

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The notion of a semantics of desire provides the parameters for Ricoeur's approach to the epistemological status of psychoanalysis. In reply to those critics who contend that Freud's theory does not satisfy the most elementary criteria of scientificity, and in contrast to those authors who attempt to reformulate the theory in order to accord with these criteria, Ricoeur maintains that all such contentions and reformulations betray the very essence of psychoanalysis. For the latter is not an observational science dealing with the facts of behaviour; rather, it is an interpretative discipline concerned with relations of meaning between representative symbols and primordial instincts. Thus psychoanalytic concepts should be judged, not according to the exigencies of an empirical science, but 'according to their status as conditions of the possibility of analytic experience, insofar as the latter operates in the field of speech'.[10] The recognition of the irreducible role of language and meaning in psychoanalysis brings Ricoeur close to the position of Jacques Lacan and his followers. Ricoeur is critical, however, of the Lacanian attempt to interpret condensation as metaphor and displacement as metonymy. Such an attempt disregards the energetic dimension of psychoanalysis, thus failing to account for the barrier, for the *bar* of repression, which separates ordinary language from the quasi-language of the unconscious. In Ricoeur's view, therefore, neither the behaviourist nor the Lacanian conception does justice to the peculiarity of psychoanalysis as a semantics of desire.

The final phase of Ricoeur's examination of the writings of Freud occurs at the level of philosophical reflection. The question which dominates this phase is twofold: (1) how does the mixed discourse of psychoanalysis enter into a reflective philosophy? and (2) what happens to the subject of reflection when the guile of consciousness is taken seriously? The answer to this question is crystallised in the claim that 'the philosophical place of analytic discourse is defined by the concept of an archaeology of the subject'.[11] This concept concedes the dispossession of immediate consciousness to the advantage of another agency of meaning, namely the emergence of desire. Yet desire is accessible only through the disguises in which it manifests itself; it is only by interpreting the signs of desire that one can capture its emergence, and thus enable reflection to regain the archaic heritage which it has lost. Ricoeur builds upon the implicit teleology displayed by the expansion of reflection, proposing to complement the regressive analysis of Freudianism by a progressive synthesis of the

10 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, p. 375. 11 Ibid., p. 419.

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figures of the mind. Indeed, the internal dialectic of archaeology and teleology, of regression and progression, is itself rooted in the overdetermined structure of the authentic symbol. Ricoeur thus concludes his philosophical reflection on Freud with the suggestion that the complex constitution of the symbol contains the key to the resolution of the conflict of interpretations.

Confrontation with structuralism

The growing importance of language in Ricoeur's thought is the stimulus for his critical confrontation with structuralism. The term 'structuralism' refers to an assortment of doctrines which have been prevalent in France since the early 1960s, and which have been associated with such authors as Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser. The diverse contributions of these and other authors are united by an underlying linguistic model, the presuppositions of which define the limits of the structuralist approach. The model was originally constructed by Saussure, but Ricoeur finds a more trenchant formulation in the work of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. Drawing upon Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Ricoeur summarises the presuppositions of the linguistic model as follows. First, structuralism assumes that language is an object that can be investigated scientifically. Second, structuralism distinguishes between a science of states of the system and a science of changes, and it subordinates the latter to the former. Third, the structuralist model presupposes that in any state of the system there are no absolute terms but only relations of mutual dependence, so that language 'becomes a system of signs defined by their differences alone'.[12] Fourth, structuralism treats the collection of signs as a closed and autonomous system of internal dependencies. It follows from these presuppositions that for structuralism a sign must be defined not in terms of some object for which it stands, but rather in terms of its relation to all other signs of the same level within the system of which it is part.

In the writings of 'structuralist' authors such as Lévi-Strauss, the linguistic model is transposed into other object domains. Lévi-Strauss justifies this transposition with the assumption that the relevant domains are themselves systems of communication and hence comparable to language. Kinship relations, for example, constitute systems of oppositional pairs in which women are circulated between families or clans in a manner

12 Paul Ricoeur, 'The question of the subject', p. 250.

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analogous to the way in which words are exchanged between individuals. Similarly, myths can be conceived as systems of constituent units or 'mythemes' which are interconnected by laws resembling those of linguistics. In *The Savage Mind*, however, Lévi-Strauss goes well beyond these cautious transpositions and applies the linguistic model to a whole level of thought. The level is that of 'savage thought', of thought, as Ricoeur remarks, 'which orders but which does not think itself'.[13] According to Lévi-Strauss, therefore, savage thought is an 'unconscious' order which can be analysed objectively as a pure system of differences.

Ricoeur develops his critique of structuralism through a reflection on the limits imposed by the presuppositions of the linguistic model. He argues that in founding itself upon these presuppositions, structural linguistics excludes from consideration a number of important phenomena. It excludes, for instance, the act of speaking, not only as an individual performance but as the free creation of new expressions. History is also excluded, for history is more than the passage from one state of a system to another: it is the process whereby human beings produce themselves and their culture through the production of their language. Structuralism excludes, moreover, the primary aim or intention of language, which is to say something about something. Language has both an ideal sense, to say something, and a real reference, to say it about something. In one movement of transcendence language leaps across two thresholds, and thereby takes 'hold of reality and expresses the hold of reality on thought'.[14] The exclusion of such phenomena leads Ricoeur to question the initial presupposition of the linguistic model, namely that language is an object which can be investigated scientifically. For it is too readily forgotten that the object is relative to the theory and method of the structuralist approach. Language is absolutised as an object and structuralism exceeds the limits of its validity, thus occluding the communicative process whereby someone says something to someone about something.

The tendency to overstep the limits of validity of structuralism is characteristic of Lévi-Strauss. Ricoeur attempts to demonstrate such transgressions by arguing, to begin with, that the transition from the linguistic model to the savage mind is accomplished by means of a privileged instance. The examples adduced by Lévi-Strauss are drawn from a particular range of

13 Paul Ricoeur, 'Structure and hermeneutics', translated by Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 40.

14 Paul Ricoeur, 'Structure, word, event', translated by Robert Sweeney, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, p. 84.

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ethnographic material, a range which lends itself with exceptional ease to the reshufflings of the *bricoleur*. However, if one were to draw examples from a different tradition of thought, from the Semitic, pre-Hellenic or Indo-European tradition, it seems unlikely that the examples could be analysed without remainder by the structuralist method; and that remainder, that irreducible residue of meaning, would be the legitimate object of a hermeneutic inquiry. A similar transgression of the limits of validity is evident in the implicit movement, made by Lévi-Strauss and others, from a structuralist science to a structuralist philosophy. Ricoeur maintains that this movement is bound to fail. For structuralism, insofar as it precludes the possibility of self-reflection, can never establish itself as a philosophy. 'An order posited as unconscious can never, to my mind, be more than a stage abstractly separated from an understanding of the self by itself; order in itself is thought located outside itself.'[15] A genuinely reflective philosophy must nevertheless be receptive to the structuralist method, specifying its validity as an abstract and objective moment in the understanding of self and of being. This imperative forms one of the principal guidelines for Ricoeur's recent work on the theory of language and interpretation.

III

Discourse and creativity

The philosophy of the will, the examination of psychoanalysis and the confrontation with structuralism have all raised fundamental questions concerning the nature of language. In response to such questions, Ricoeur seeks to develop a theory of language which would provide the springboard for a hermeneutic philosophy. The theory is premissed upon a fundamental distinction between system and discourse. Although this distinction is related to the Saussurian dichotomy between *langue* and *parole*, it is more directly indebted to the work of the French linguist Emile Benveniste. According to Benveniste, language is a totality that can be articulated into a series of levels, each of which is characterised by a distinctive and constitutive unit. The transition between these levels is not, however, a continuous one. Whereas the phoneme, the morpheme, the semanteme and so on are all signs defined by their internal and oppositive relations, the sentence is not itself a sign but rather an indeterminate and unlimited creation. The sentence 'is no longer the unit of a

15 Paul Ricoeur, 'Structure and hermeneutics', p. 51.

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language [or system], but of speech or discourse'.[16] The transition to the level of discourse creates the possibility of a genuine semantics of the sentence, as distinct from a semiotics of the sign.

Ricoeur unfolds the features of discourse in terms of an internal dialectic between event and meaning. Discourse has an eventful character, insofar as to speak is to realise an event which immediately disappears. Yet although the utterance of a sentence is an ephemeral phenomenon, nevertheless a sentence may be reidentified as the same on subsequent occasions; in other words, 'if all discourse is realised as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning'.[17] Ricoeur suggests that, on first approximation, the notion of meaning may be analysed into two basic dimensions, comprising both an objective aspect or that which the sentence means, and a subjective aspect or that which the speaker means. In discussing these two dimensions, Ricoeur draws upon the work of philosophers well known in the English-speaking world, most notably the work of J.L. Austin, P.F. Strawson and John R. Searle. Ricoeur further distinguishes, following Frege, between two components of the objective aspect of meaning: the sentence has both an ideal sense and a real reference. It is only at the level of the sentence that language can refer to something, that the closed universe of signs can be related to an extra-linguistic world. The referential relation is thus a crucial characteristic of discourse and one in virtue of which the semiotics of the sign must be regarded as a derivative discipline.

The semantics of discourse sheds light on the primitive processes of creativity and interpretation in ordinary language. The basic condition of creativity is the intrinsic polysemy of words, that is, the feature by which words in natural languages have more than one meaning. The boundaries of polysemy can be defined by a semiotics of the sign, since the potential uses of a word are accumulated and codified in the lexical system. Ricoeur maintains, however, that the actual functioning of polysemy can be grasped only by a semantics of the sentence. For words have meaning only in the nexus of sentences, and sentences are uttered only in particular contexts. Polysemy thus depends on a contextual action which filters out some of the surplus meaning, so that a univocal discourse can be produced from polysemic words. To grasp this filtering effect is to exercise interpretation in its most primordial sense. 'The simplest message conveyed by the means of natural language has to be interpreted because all the words are polysemic and take their actual meaning from the

16 Paul Ricoeur, 'Structure, word, event', p. 86.
17 Paul Ricoeur, 'The hermeneutical function of distanciation', in this volume, p. 134.

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connection with a given context and a given audience against the background of a given situation.'[18] Polysemy, by endowing the word with a surplus of meaning that must be sifted through interpretation, provides the basis for the creative extension of meaning through metaphor.

Ricoeur develops his ideas on metaphor through a detailed analysis of earlier views. In traditional rhetoric, metaphor is regarded as a type of trope, that is, as a means whereby a figurative word is substituted for a literal word on the grounds of an apparent resemblance. Metaphor, so conceived, tells us nothing new; it is merely a decorative device which embellishes a language that is otherwise austere. In an attempt to go beyond this static view, Ricoeur turns to the work of certain Anglo-Saxon authors, such as I.A. Richards, Max Black and Monroe Beardsley. What these authors have shown is that metaphor operates primarily at the level of the sentence rather than that of the word; or more precisely, it operates between these two levels. Metaphor, according to Ricoeur, presupposes the establishment of a tension between two terms in the sentence through the violation of a linguistic code. The metaphorical statement then appears as a reduction of this tension by means of a creative semantic pertinence within the sentence as a whole. Hence Ricoeur suggests that 'metaphor is a semantic innovation that belongs at once to the predicative order (new pertinence) and the lexical order (paradigmatic deviation)'.[19] The emergent meaning can be grasped only through a constructive interpretation which makes sense of the sentence as a whole, building upon and extending the polysemy of the metaphorical terms. The emergence of sense is accompanied by a transformation of the referential dimension, endowing metaphor with its power to redescribe reality. The nature of this transformation, which affects not only metaphor but literary works in general, is clarified by the concept of the text.

Texts and the theory of interpretation

Ricoeur makes the transition from semantics to hermeneutics proper with the formulation of a concept of the text. The text is a work of discourse, and hence in the first instance a *work*. To say that a text is a work is to say that it is a structured totality which cannot be reduced to the sentences

18 Paul Ricoeur, 'Creativity in language', translated by David Pellauer, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, edited by Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 125.

19 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, translated by Robert Czerny (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 156–7.

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whereof it is composed. Such a totality is produced in accordance with a series of rules which define its literary genre, and which transform discourse into a poem, a novel, a play. At the same time as a work belongs to a genre, so too it has a unique configuration which defines its individual style. The production of discourse as a work is thus displayed in its composition, its genre and its style. These categories are categories of production and of labour; 'to impose a form upon material, to submit production to genres, to produce an individual: these are so many ways of treating language as a material to be worked upon and formed'.[20] As a work of discourse, the text preserves the properties of the sentence, but presents them in a new constellation which calls for its own type of interpretation.

In addition to being a work of discourse, the text is a *written* work. Ricoeur emphasises that the text is not merely the inscription of some anterior speech, as if speaking were the oral fount of every written work. On the contrary, speaking and writing are alternative and equally legitimate modes of the realisation of discourse. The realisation of discourse in writing nevertheless involves a series of characteristics which effectively distance the text from the conditions of spoken discourse. Ricoeur encapsulates these characteristics in the key notion of 'distanciation', a notion which displays four principal forms. The first form of distanciation is the surpassing of the event of saying by the meaning of what is said. It is the meaning which is inscribed in writing, and this inscription is rendered possible by the 'intentional exteriorisation' of the speech-act; that is, the constitutive features of the speech-act can be realised in writing by means of various grammatical and syntactic devices. The second form of distanciation concerns the relation between the inscribed expression and the original speaker. Whereas in spoken discourse the intention of the speaking subject and the meaning of what is said frequently overlap, there is no such coincidence in the case of writing. 'What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies.'[21] The third form of distanciation introduces a similar discrepancy between the inscribed expression and the original audience. In contrast to spoken discourse, where the hearer is specified by the dialogical relation, written discourse is addressed to an unknown audience and potentially to anyone who can read. The text thus 'decontextualises' itself from its social and historical conditions of production, opening itself to an unlimited series of readings.

20 Paul Ricoeur, 'The hermeneutical function of distanciation', p. 136. 21 Ibid., p. 139.

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The fourth and final form of distanciation concerns the emancipation of the text from the limits of ostensive reference. Whereas the reference of spoken discourse is ultimately determined by the shared reality of the speech situation, in the case of writing this shared reality no longer exists. The possibility arises, therefore, that the text has a referential dimension which is of a different order from that of speech, a dimension which is unfolded in the process of interpretation.

The theory of interpretation elaborated by Ricoeur is closely connected to the concept of the text. This connection reveals a shift away from Ricoeur's earlier work, in which interpretation was linked to the complex structure of the authentic symbol. It is no longer the symbol but the text, written discourse as such, which defines the object domain of hermeneutics. Accordingly, the principal features of Ricoeur's theory of interpretation can be derived from the characteristics of written discourse. The first two forms of distanciation – the eclipse of the event of saying by the meaning of what is said and the severance of the latter from the intentions of the speaking subject – imply that the objective meaning of a text is something other than the subjective intentions of its author. From this Ricoeur concludes, in direct opposition to the views of literary critics like E.D. Hirsch, that 'the problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author'.[22] Just as the resolution of the tension established by a metaphor requires the construction of a new sense, so too the meaning of a text must be guessed or construed as a whole. The construal of meaning may indeed result in more than one interpretation of a text, in which case the imminent conflict must be subsumed to a process of argumentation; but this is a process, Ricoeur firmly insists, in which the alleged intentions of the author have no privileged role.

The second two forms of distanciation have equally important consequences for the theory of interpretation. Ricoeur observes that the emancipation of written discourse from the interlocutors and circumstances of the dialogical situation engenders two possible attitudes towards the text. On the one hand, the reader may suspend any judgement concerning the referential dimension of the text, treating the latter as a wholly worldless and self-enclosed entity. On the other hand, the reader may abandon this *epoché* and seek to unfold the non-ostensive references of the text. The first attitude is adopted by the structuralist approach, which attempts to

22 Paul Ricoeur, 'The model of the text: meaningful action considered as a text', in this volume, p. 211.

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explain the text in terms of its internal relations. Structuralism thereby offers a novel and fruitful type of explanation, a type which comes not from the natural sciences but from the field of language itself. Yet Ricoeur argues, echoing his earlier critique of Lévi-Strauss, that any such explanation presupposes a form of understanding which cannot be reduced to structural analysis. The presupposed form of understanding is the concern of the second attitude that the reader may adopt towards the text. For the reader may seek, not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it; not the internal constitution of the text, but that which points towards a possible world. To understand a text at this level is to move from its sense to its reference, from that which it says to that which it says it about. In Ricoeur's theory, therefore, explanation and understanding are no longer contradictory attitudes, as has often been assumed in the history of hermeneutics. On the contrary, with the mediation of structural analysis 'it seems possible to situate explanation and interpretation along a unique *hermeneutical arc* and to integrate the opposed attitudes of explanation and understanding within an overall conception of reading as the recovery of meaning'.[23]

Action and history

Although formulated with respect to texts, Ricoeur's theory of interpretation can be extended to other domains. The extension to the sphere of the social sciences is rendered possible by the claim that action may be regarded as a text, insofar as it may be objectified in a way that embodies the four forms of distanciation. For example, just as the inscription of discourse involves the surpassing of the instance of saying by the meaning of what is said, so too the objectification of action is marked by the eclipse of the event of doing by the significance of what is done. On the basis of such considerations, Ricoeur enters into the methodological debate concerning the relative roles of explanation and understanding in the interpretation of action, a debate which Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber and others initiated in the context of the social sciences. For if indeed action may be regarded as a text, then it is plausible to propose that 'the paradigm of reading, which is the counterpart of the paradigm of writing, provides a solution for the methodological paradox of the human sciences'.[24] An action, like a text, is a meaningful entity which must be construed as a whole; and a conflict of interpretations can be resolved

23 Paul Ricoeur, 'What is a text? Explanation and understanding', in this volume, p. 161.
24 Paul Ricoeur, 'The model of the text', p. 209.

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only by a process of argumentation and debate, in which the intentions of the agent may be relevant but are not decisive. Moreover, the structuralist mode of analysis can be transposed into the social sphere, providing an explanatory moment which mediates a depth interpretation of action. For Ricoeur contends that human action, no less than literary texts, displays a sense as well as a reference; it possesses an internal structure as well as projecting a possible world, a potential mode of human existence which can be unfolded through the process of interpretation.

The extension of the theory of interpretation to the domain of action is all the more plausible in that action itself is the referent of many texts. Aristotle tells us that tragedy seeks to imitate human action in a poetic way: 'the *mythos* of tragedy – that is, both its fable and its plot – is the *mimesis*, the creative imitation, of human action'.[25] Tragedy does not merely describe action but presents it in a more favourable light, making it appear higher and nobler than it is in reality. The emphasis on the creative character of tragedy points to a further and more profound affinity with action, for the latter too is animated by the creative power of imagination. The role of imagination is evident both on an individual level, where action is projected in accordance with an anticipatory schema, and on a social level, where individuals relate to one another and to their collective tradition through the figures of ideology and utopia. These figures are not mere distortions of social life, but rather are, according to Ricoeur, constitutive of the social bond itself. If utopian thought expresses a critical distance from social reality, such distance is possible only because that reality is first integrated through an ideology which precedes critical reflection and which transmits a collective tradition.

The complex interplay between belonging to a tradition and distancing oneself from it forms the matrix for extending the theory of interpretation to the sphere of history. Historical experience is fundamentally the experience of belonging to a tradition that is received from the past. Yet as Dilthey, Husserl and others have stressed, experience is essentially expressible: it can be externalised in signs that demand to be understood. Thus distanciation is the counterpart of belonging, from which it follows that 'historical experience and writing share the same fate. Historical experience as inscribed is put at a distance, and so history is a science

25 Paul Ricoeur, 'Explanation and understanding: on some remarkable connections among the theory of the text, theory of action, and theory of history', translated by Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, p. 161 (translation modified).

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