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978-1-316-50820-6 — Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences
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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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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316508206

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First published 1981

Reprinted 1982 (twice), 1998

Cambridge Philosophy Classics edition 2016

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Names: Ricoeur, Paul, author. | Thompson, John B. (John Brookshire), editor.

Title: Hermeneutics and the human sciences : essays on language, action
 and interpretation / Paul Ricoeur ; edited, translated and introduced
 by John B. Thompson.

Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Originally published:
 New York : Cambridge University Press, 1981. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015049718 | ISBN 9781107144972 (Hardback : alk. paper) |
 ISBN 9781316508206 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Hermeneutics. | Social sciences—Philosophy.

Classification: LCC BD241 .R48413 2016 | DDC 121/.686—dc23 LC record available at
<http://lcn.loc.gov/2015049718>

ISBN 978-1-107-14497-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-50820-6 Paperback

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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