

Colluding Perspectives in Two Hermeneutes

AGNES G. PONSARAN

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical project, as explained in *Truth and Method*, was to elaborate on the concept of philosophical hermeneutics.¹ His goal was to uncover the nature of human understanding. He criticized any attempt to use natural science as the prototype for the humanities.

Like Gadamer, Ricoeur belongs to the tradition of Dialogical Hermeneutics. Philosophy remains a hermeneutics, that is, reading of the hidden meaning inside the text of the apparent meaning. Every interpretation is a deciphering of some covert meaning, an unfolding of the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.² Likewise, he believes that Hermeneutics is not a method similar to that of the Natural sciences which is objective, rigid and structured.

The following discussions will present the core ideas of Gadamer and Ricoeur, following the rule of three. A summary will be provided to account for the possible points of convergence in their philosophical perspectives.

¹ Gadamer writes that the overall intention and claim of *Truth and Method* was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above wanting and doing. See Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Wiensheimer and Donald Marshall. (NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989), xxviii.

² Cf. Emerita S. Quito. *The Philosophers of Hermeneutics*. (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990), p. 85.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer

Truth of Self-Understanding

Gadamer argued that we can never recover the intention of the original author who wrote the text because we have a “historically affected culture” and history that shaped them. The world does not present itself to us as neutral and value-free scientific objects of investigation. We recognize the authority of a text by engaging with it in a textual explication and interpretation. This is what Gadamer referred to as the fusion of horizons. In this dialogical relationship, a richer and fuller context of meanings becomes a possibility.

Legitimate Prejudices

Gadamer advanced that there can be no presuppositionless interpretation.³ A biblical, literary or scientific text is not interpreted without preconceptions. Understanding, since it is a historically accumulated and historically operative structure, underlies even scientific interpretation... The past-present-future temporality applies to both scientific and nonscientific understanding; it is universal.⁴

For Gadamer a prejudgment is not always erroneous but which in fact could either be positive or negative. There is what he calls “legitimate prejudices”.⁵ The prejudices of an individual constitute the historical reality of his being. Being, for Gadamer, is more than a conscious being of Husserl. Being (*Sein*) is a historically conditioned being. Taking a cue from Heidegger, we find ourselves thrown into the world to realize our own-most possibilities.

Understanding of the world is mediated by language

He argued that the human being is a being in language. It is through language that the world is unveiled to us. We can not

³ Cf. Richard E. Palmer. *Hermeneutics*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 182.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quito, p. 65.

understand ourselves unless we see ourselves as situated in a linguistically mediated, historical culture. He echoed Heidegger's statement that Language is the house of being. Inasmuch as our understanding of the world is mediated by language Gadamer expounded four humanistic concepts⁶ – *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, *judgment* and *taste*.

a) *Bildung* is commonly translated as culture. Dr. Quito contends that "*Bildung* is a richer term than culture because it contains the word *Bild* which in German can mean both "image" and "model." She clarifies that when a person reads any text belonging to human sciences such as history, literature and philosophy, his entire background of experience is brought to play.⁷

b) *Sensus communis* has the correct equivalent in French *le bon sens*, the good practical judgment. Basically, it is the sense that found communities and is therefore of capital important for living.⁸ It is living in community that we develop a sense of what is the right and general good. *Sensus communis* is the virtue of social intercourse.⁹

c) *Judgment*. Quito quoting Gadamer writes, "The difference between a fool and a sensible man is that the former lacks judgment; i.e. he is notable to subsume correctly and hence cannot apply correctly what he learns and knows."¹⁰

d) *Taste*. In the Gadamerian sense, taste, as explained by Quito, has nothing to do with personal preferences; on the contrary, it is rising above them. There are no general criteria to determine it.¹¹ Moreover, Gadamer approximates it as "something like sense." In its operation it has no knowledge of reason... Taste is practically defined by the fact that it is offended by what is tasteless and thus avoids it.¹²

⁶ Cf. Ibid., p. 53.

⁷ Cf. Ibid., p. 54.

⁸ Cf. Ibid., p. 55.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹² Cf. Ibid.

All these four concepts are essential in interpretation. Quito explains their relationships in the following:

Life is not static but oscillates over a range from the good to bad, noble and ignoble, lofty and lowly, crucial and ordinary, etc. It is a part of *Bildung* to determine which to commit to memory and which to discard. *Sensus communis* is sensitive to human relationships which characterize a community of persons. Judgment and taste discriminate against the opposites of the beautiful and good.¹³

Paul Ricoeur

Understanding as compenetration

We learn from Plato that knowledge is anamnesis. Knowledge takes the form of reminiscences or remembrance. It is a matter of identifying what confront us in the world of senses with what exists in the world of ideas. There is no mediation or room for interpretation. Knowledge is direct as it is intuited from the ideal world. However, Ricoeur claims that all knowledge, including the knowledge of our own existence is mediate; hence, calls for interpretation. Self understanding cannot be grasped by anamnesis or by a kind of introspective immediacy set out by Descartes. For him, the human subjectivity is primarily linguistically designated and mediated by symbols. Human subjectivity is anchored to the idea of the human body and the material world. Language serves as second order of expression of this subjectivity.

Ricoeur avers that the task of the hermeneute is to "read into the text without interposing himself."¹⁴ This means that the interpreter must simply allow the text to speak for itself instead of projecting meanings into the text. In the words of Ricoeur, "openness to the text means allowing the text to take hold of the interpreter in an objective manner."¹⁵ He speaks in terms of *compenetration* of understanding, explanation and interpretation.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 91.

In a genuine encounter with the text, one does not distinguish between the three. But the interplay of these three makes fuller and richer meanings possible. Ricoeur likewise distinguished between the three levels of understanding.¹⁶

- ⇒ Semantic-level of sheer linguistic disciplines; one fails to see beneath the symbols;
- ⇒ Reflexive-level of ontology; one is able to extract meaning and derive intelligent interpretation from it;
- ⇒ Existential or ontological level, which is on the level of being itself.

Following Heidegger, Ricoeur states that consciousness is not the first reality that we can know but the last. It is necessary for us to arrive at consciousness, not to begin with it.¹⁷ Consequently, understanding is no longer a mode of knowledge but mode of being. An existential experience indeed is its own evidence for being. No other proof is needed or necessary because the experience involves the entire being of a person.¹⁸ Ricoeur echoes Heidegger's words "the authentic *Dasein* whose openness to being renders him at par with Being."¹⁹

Distancing from prejudices

Ricoeur writes that "the purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself."²⁰ Like Gadamer, every reading of a text for Ricoeur, always takes place within a community, a tradition or a living current of thought.²¹ Nevertheless the text has to be interpreted in a language laden with the interpreter's prejudices.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, ed. Charles Reagan. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 101.

²¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

According to Ricoeur, one of the aims of hermeneutics is to “struggle against cultural distance.”²² However, we can not altogether rid ourselves of pre-conceived prejudices. When an interpreter distances from some cultural and historical event, he still carries what Heidegger calls forehaving (*forehave*), foresight (*vorsicht*) and the fore-conception (*vorgriff*).²³

Reflection for him is always partial. There is always an excess of meaning which reflection cannot reach; only hermeneutics can.²⁴ Furthermore, Ricoeur contends that a pre-judgment is not always erroneous but which in fact could either be positive or negative. These are what he calls “legitimate prejudices.”²⁵ The prejudices of an individual constitute the historical reality of his being.²⁶

Language as the instrument by which we understand and misunderstand

From the foregoing considerations, we have established Ricoeur’s concept of self-understanding. The problem of subjectivity is mediated by symbols which are anchored to the concrete human situation. As such, our self-understanding about the world is hermeneutical. In interpreting an experience, Ricoeur holds that we have a kind of “double allegiance” to different worlds – the material world and to the phenomenal world. These worlds are distinguishable from each other though neither of them should to be taken in isolation. Ricoeur was influenced by Marcel’s concept of the embodied subjectivity. The subject-object duality does not exist in Ricoeur. Man is an integrated entity. Neither body nor spirit has primacy over the other.

As Ricoeur explains, words, in a way, are symbols because they designate another meaning which is “indirect, secondary and

²² Ibid., p. 88.

²³ Cf. Ibid.

²⁴ Cf. Ibid., p. 87.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

²⁶ Ibid.

figurative which can only be apprehended through the first.”²⁷ The problem of symbolism has turned out to be coextensive with the problem of language itself.²⁸ There seems to be no end in interpretation.

Each word is a symbol. Symbols, he says, invite one to think. Hermeneutics simply uncovers the real meaning. Quito elucidates the complexity of symbols in the following example:

A simple word such as tree can have several layers of meaning whether the speaker is a woodcutter, a horticulturist or ecologist or poet or genealogist. Ricoeur, at the early part of his philosophy ha reduced hermeneutics to mere interpretation of symbols.²⁹

Man, says Ricoeur is language.³⁰ Language is the primary condition for all human experience. While it is by language that we understand, it is also by language that we misunderstand. There is always the possibility of misperception and miscomprehension.³¹

Summary

1. For Gadamer, the world does not present itself to us as neutral and value-free scientific objects of investigation. He argues, that the “truth of self-understanding” is the only particular kind of truth claim we can have. This is proper to the human sciences alone. In the same token, Ricoeur contends that even if one places oneself at a distance, the effects of history would not escape the interpreter’s consciousness.³² We can only keep distance from our prejudgments but we can never totally dissociate ourselves from the text. Hence, discourse is viewed by Ricoeur

²⁷ Ibid., p. 85-86.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Paul Ricouer. *The Conflict of Interpretations*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) x.

³¹ Quito, p. 89.

³² Ibid., p. 74.

primarily an “event that is realized temporally and in the present.”³³

2. Being, for Gadamer, is more than a conscious being of Husserl. Being (*Sein*) is a historically conditioned being. Reflection for him is always partial. We also find these statements true in Ricoeur when he declares: “there is no overview which enables us to grasp in a single glance the totality of effects.”³⁴ There is no overarching principle that can account for all events and occurrences at any one time. For both hermeneutes there is always an excess of meaning, which, only hermeneutics can reach.

3. Finally, Gadamer affirms that the human being is a being in language. It is through language that the world is unveiled to us. We can not understand ourselves unless we see ourselves as situated in a linguistically mediated, historical culture. We engage with the text in an event described as a fusion of horizons.³⁵ In addition to what has been established by Gadamer, Ricoeur is convinced that whenever there is a situation, there is a horizon which may contract or expand. No horizon is closed since it is possible to place oneself in another point of view and in another culture.³⁶ □

³³ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Human Sciences*, ed. & Trans. John B. Thomson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 133.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gadamer defines horizon as the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. The word has been used in philosophy since Nietzsche and Husserl to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determination, and the nature of the law of the expansion of the range of vision. See *The Hermeneutics Reader*. Ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer. (NY: The Continuum Publishing Co., 2002), p. 269.

³⁶ Ricouer, *Hermeneutics of Human Sciences*, p. 74-75.