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Philosophy as hermeneutics. The world of the text concept in Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to bring into discussion the articulations of Paul Ricoeur’s concept regarding philosophy as a hermeneutic exercise. We aim to show that Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics expresses a radical direction of reflective philosophy, starting off from reformulating its foundations. Philosophy as hermeneutics is a justified concept, especially with regard to defining the concept theme of the world of the text and the self-understanding, the reflection acting as a force, not only over the unfamiliar, but also on the self as subject matter of knowledge, creation and value acts.

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Before approaching the subject suggested in the title of the paper, we need to add a few preliminary specifications, which take on the role of a sketchy introduction, though necessary in Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics. In the following writing, we will try to describe the hermeneutic context in which the ricoueirian text interpretation theory started taking shape. This process is necessary not only in order to understand the specifics of the French philosopher’s thinking but also the theoretic significance of his vision. In the second part of the study, we shall discuss the ricoueirian concept specific to the world of the text in correlation

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with the one regarding interpretation, as in the final notes to be able to draw a few conclusive appreciations pertaining to the meanings of philosophy as hermeneutic exercise.

1. Phenomenological and ontological presuppositions of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics

According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics and phenomenology articulate the most radical direction of reflective philosophy, referring to the fact that they both renounce the ideal of a transparency of self, for a fundamental self-creation. Not to diminish the importance of phenomenology as a description method of the interpretation experience in the ricoeurian hermeneutics, the most decisive concept is the concept of intentionality, in the most rigorous husserlian sense, according to which the action of focusing in on something entails the identifiable and re-identifiable sense of the focused subject – given the term noema. Thus, we define a new hermeneutic direction, starting from reformulating its foundations: a transcendental hermeneutics, able to clarify the nature and conditions of interpretation. Ricoeur’s project to renew hermeneutics intends not only to define the methodological character of interpretation, subject matter in explanation and understanding dialectics, but also to bring forth the ontological presuppositions of interpretation, in other words, the ontological involvement of self as an individual that actively interprets and interprets itself in textual or non-textual symbolic systems.

The phenomenological method is explicitly transposed by Ricoeur in the context of his hermeneutics. As a gateway to access the original source of sense, we have distanciation, which at a minimum of approximation, proposes bracketing the exterior of the text and focusing on its content, its original signification. However, according to Ricoeur, we not only see an eidetic reduction, but a transcendental reduction, only retaining the immanent reality of the text, by identifying the conditions of a possibility of interpretation. Distanciation as a theme is correlated with the hermeneutic relativism criticism but also with the unilateralism of positive dogmatism, especially through a re-signification of the interpretation act which entails the emergence of a new concept of textuality, where the stress falls on the intention of the text and on the world of the text [1]. Thus, starting off from the phenomenological opening towards intentionality, Ricoeur shall discuss a stripping down of the interpretation concept and rebuilding the link between self-understanding and the world of the text.

Opened here, we find the problematic of a new understanding ontology which entails the articulation on three levels: semantic, reflective and existential, all of them displaying the behaviour of interpretation epistemology and all being found at the level of text hermeneutics. To engage the ontological foundation of understanding, Ricoeur will initiate the project of semantic detour, a detour done by means of human symbolic creation, started from the presupposition that the human being, as self, does not directly know its purpose of existence, but only understands it through the means of creation in which it is expressed. We discuss a self-understanding stemmed from symbolic expressions [1], aiming to explain their semantic polyvalence and also to understand the world expressed at the level of reference.

The existential level of hermeneutics relies on the discovery of the sense of the existence of self elevated after the self-understanding through textuality. Symbols and text are mediums of our existence in the world, they are ways by which the self institutes itself as a comprehensive subject and at the same time, are manners of meeting another comprehension. Self-understanding is always indirect, mediated by language, history and culture. This mediation does not constitute an alienation, but the exact opposite – a more authentic ratio of the self, because the world referred to by symbolic creations expresses the most profound possibilities of human beings. The aim of interpretation of a text – of a symbolic expression – is understanding something different from self, thus understanding the self.

The reflective plan of hermeneutics will aim to articulate the interpretation of symbolic signs with the self-understanding of the subject in question, having as a consequence the reshaping of the problematic of self. Reflection is necessary in order to integrate semantics in ontology and to reestablish the relationship between understanding symbolic language and self-understanding.
The possibility of philosophy as phenomenological hermeneutics is confirmed by Ricoeur in a philosophy of symbolic forms of self. The self is not isolated from another – which can also represent the text – and neither loses itself among others; it has the possibility to self-rediscovery by an exercise of closeness which implies a critical act of interpretation. Reflective philosophy, phenomenological and ontological presuppositions lead to an idea of mediation of self-understanding through signs, symbols and texts.

Ricoeur proposes a phenomenological interpretation of symbolic works, of texts as intentional objects, as they present themselves to the interpreting subject, beyond any contingent aspects, overtaking thus the antagonism specific for the interior-exterior relationship of the act of interpretation. Philosophy as reflection on self is possible, according to Ricoeur, through the hermeneutic approach of symbolic or multiple signification expressions which mediate any self-understanding. In the second series of the Essays, the role of interpretative model is cast to the text, as fundamental linguistic unity, the central intent being to progressively transpose the textual interpretation model into the human science analysis field, from where we especially miss the problematic action. Discussing the textuality criteria will allow the philosopher to identify the link between the text – as significant system, world, as signified and self, as interpreter. Ricoeur targets the text as general notion as well, but here he often quotes different origins of text: philosophic text, narration, myth, poetic text and religious text.

2. The world of the text concept

The ricoeurian process aims to define the concrete traits of interpretation which are correspondently set off by text analysis. What the author intends to represent is not yet another case of inter-human communication, but a paradigm of distanciation in communication. Any text can be characterized by the criteria: as structured work, as intention, as having a referential function and as being intended for an unlimited audience [1]. From this perspective, the hermeneutics of the text suggests an interpretation exercise of each of the aforementioned criterion. The central hermeneutic problem targets what Ricoeur names world of the text, understanding this world by opening self-understanding, as a final aspect of interpretation.

As a structured work which can be analyzed from a compositional perspective, a literary genre in which it is placed, and judging by its stylistic dimension, the text is understood as a temporal event created in the present, expressing the intentional exteriorization of a meaning. The stylistic dimension for a text is a mark of its uniqueness. The interpretation of the stylistic dimension does not refer to the author’s singularity, but to the discourse shape itself – moreover to the author’s intention – as a text level intent which thus does no longer have the appearance of a sensitive idea. This intentional exteriorization already imposes a distancing aspect as semantic autonomy towards a third party: author, reader (interpreter) and original reference. This type of distanciation becomes for Ricoeur the condition of meaning detachment.

Secondly, interpretation involves the dissociation between the author’s subjective intention and the intention of the text. Given its placement, the objective meaning of the text tends to be autonomously analyzed compared to the intentions of the author. Overtaking the event character of meaning, the “autonomy of the text” concept [2] implies that a text must be interpreted based on its signification intent, its relation between noem and noesis. The interpretation of a text, of a cultural creation in general, must be detached of psycho-sociological conditions of production. As opposed to the romantic hermeneutics tradition, Ricoeur claims that it would be advised not to reduce the signification of the text to what the author would have wanted to say, to prevent potential distortions or relativity of signification to the sum of the revealed significations by approaching the text as structural work, the latter being a necessary moment but a sufficient one in interpretation. Studying the exterior circumstances, the author’s biography is not dismissed, but these aspects alone cannot entirely clarify the signification of a text; they pertain more to process of creation, subject which does not prove any relevance in the context of text phenomenological hermeneutics. We find a similar view from Eco [3]: the author’s intent is not relevant regarding text interpretation, because, as a work of art, the text out-does as initial project, and it cannot be deciphered because it would involve presumptions impossible to verify. Eco will use the expression “intentio
operis” [3] to refer to the intention of the text, deduced from the semantic analysis of the text, independent from
the intention of the author.
Reconsidering Ricoeur’s idea, we can ask ourselves if this interpretation criterion can also be applied to a
special category of text, strongly marked by the author’s personality. We refer here, of course, at
autobiographical and biographical texts as the most direct expressions of the author’s conscience, of the manner
one relates to life. The answer is affirmative, in the fashion in which texts can be looked upon as being
expression objects of a foreign life, of a historical past; their interpretation involves the comprehension of the
object expression, comprehension possible when it needs a distancing from the conditions of one’s life to get
closer to the world of text. However, understanding the intentions of the author, converting personal values into
human general values, also leads to self-understanding, in this case, interpretation of both competing to a
signification of the text as a whole.
Anticipating possible objections [4] which could be voiced for this vision – Ricoeur warns – does not mean
that the relation between discourse and locator is abrogated, or that we could analyze a text without making any
reference to its author, but the mere fact that primordial significance is the one which the reader manages to
solidify from the text without any exterior influence. This does not mean that the author’s intent is void of
importance, but only that it is difficult to discover; on the other hand, the significance of the text can, most of the
time, overtake the initial pertinence, configured by the author. Furthermore, Ricoeur will voice against the
subjectivism of the interpreter’s intention, against the principled non-limitation of the arbitrary interpretation
exclusively configured by subjective ideological interests.
Ricoeur’s view in the context of his phenomenological hermeneutics, presents itself as follows: besides the
intention of the author and the intention of the interpreter, there is a third possibility: the intention of the text,
targeting on one hand its semantic and stylistic aspects (text as structured work) and on the other, the ontological
fundaments of interpretation, meaning the extra-textual references – the text’s disposability towards the world
(world of the text), which moulds the signification sphere and at the same time allows for justified interpretation.
In essence, the interpretation should not rest on the intention of the author nor on the intention of the reader; the
signification of the text presents a common language for both, well known because it pertains to their mutual
world and situation. Actually, this disposibility of the interpreter towards the language of the text is the
primordial condition of a hermeneutic knowledge, of a hermeneutic type truth.
Thirdly, the text reveals a series of non-ostensive references, meaning it refers to a world which it describes, it
expresses or it represents in a symbolic manner. So we bring the truth value of the text into discussion, its
function of expressing an extra-linguistic reality. The text reference can be direct, of the ‘first degree,’ when it
depicts mundane or empirical reality, or it can be of the ‘second degree’ if it depicts a world belonging to a more
profound ontological level. To interpret a text actually means to understand the world that it refers to (similar to
the Husserl’s Lebenswelt concept and the Being-in-the-world concept - Heidegger) [1]. All types of texts,
whether fiction, imaginative, symbolic, are signs of a tear from the mundane language, and entail a configuration
of a reality, essentially different from the perceived reality, when we do not target the modality of the given being
but possibilities of “a new way of being, that is, of disclosing a possible world” [4]. If the oral discourse entails a
situation known to the listener and an ostensive reference, in the written discourse, the references are “non-
situational,” they express possible ways of being or symbolic dimensions of our being in the world [5].
Ricoeur argues that, freeing itself from the author and from the narrowness of the dialogue situation, the text
reveals the intention to project a world. At this level of the discourse we find the most fundamental hermeneutic
problem which is explicitly stated by Ricoeur. The reviewer that text gives to interpret is, thus, the world.
Interpreting the world our text has opened coincides with finding an answer to our own situation. As we have
seen, the term world has a very general meaning, signifying the ontological dimension of uttered word - the total
references opened by the text, the actions, things, situations – but also a transfiguring aspect of another spoken
about in the text, meaning non-situational references understood as symbolic dimensions of our existence in the
world.
Fourthly, the text is intended for an unlimited audience. If, in the dialogue situation we address a present interlocutor, the written speech reveals the universality of its addressability. In this context we bring forth the problem of narrowing the space between the signification of the text and the reader’s subjectivity, opening the way towards the last dimension of understanding – meaning the self-understanding – as dialectic of appropriation and distanciation. Ricoeur conveys new significations to the hermeneutic concept of appropriation, starting off from the way in which the text addresses the subjectivity of the reader. The dialectic of appropriation and distanciation is present, firstly, at the level of the written word. The positive epistemological consequence is that this dimension of the interpretation act does not imply an emotional link with the author’s intuition, but an understanding through distanciation. Secondly, the dialectic of appropriation and distanciation is manifested at the level of objectifying the text as structured work, which as a consequence, turns the focus of interpretation from the author, directly – what Ricoeur calls semantic detour: we understand ourselves not by unjustified intuition, but by interpreting humankind’s cultural symbols in which we shape ourselves, striving to transpose the meaning of another world, mostly understood as difference, to our own.

The attitude we display towards the text becomes a moment of reflective philosophy, as much as interpreting a text mediates self-understanding. We have, thus, arrived at the fundamental theme of ricoeurian hermeneutics: self-understanding entails as pre-existing condition of its development – this being the aim of hermeneutics – the distance between the world of the author and the world of the text, the intention of the author and the intention of the text. With regard to hermeneutics, determining the truth value of a text, in the sense of its actuality, means assisting a radical tear facing everything that determines the production of the text (author, context) to research the ratios between its significations and reference, as world sent to by these significations.

In his works titled From text to action. Hermeneutic essays [1], Ricoeur highlights that the new interpretation concept must be taken in context with the concept of distanciation, as objectifying the human being in his discourse. Postulating the autonomy of the text, signification and reference, has as hermeneutic consequence being responsible for the distanciation not as a result of methodology, as for Gadamer, but as true interpretation condition, as explanation and understanding dialectic. Ricoeurian hermeneutics, thus, stands out from the diltheyian hermeneutics – where interpretation is just a derived psychological notion of understanding – as well as from the gadamerian one, which excludes the methodological moment of explaining by means of the interpretation process. Henry Isaac Venema writes that interpretation “is an open understanding of the meaning and significance of existence” [5] which discovers possibilities to be described in the text, projecting them as possibilities of existing in the world.

The ricoeurian hermeneutics involves a double task: first a reconstruction of the structure and semantics of the text, and second, the capturing of the text’s capacity to project to the outside through presenting a world (text reference) [1]. Interpretation becomes dialectic of explanation and understanding at the immanent sense of the text; here as consequence we find a shift of the hermeneutic problem towards ‘existence in the world,’ towards participative appearance first to the subject-object relationship. It is also important to mention that Ricoeur will try to convey an analytical precision to the concept of interpretation by detailed study of the referential ways of the discourse, capable to restore the epistemological aspect of hermeneutics. This action will be correlated with the intention of rejecting an idea of immediate understanding irrationalism, specific, according to Ricoeur, of romantic hermeneutics, but also of the criticism in the positivity of interpreting a text as a system of signs, not as a discourse.

3. Conclusions

One of the notable contributions of Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics consists of stating the concept of world of the text. Understanding the text supposes an intentional act of consciousness with a plenitude of meanings referring to the concept of the world. Consequently, interpretation of the text will start from the primordial fact of original belonging to a world as represented at text significance level. The concept of world of
the text does not regard a technical meaning of the interpretation, but deciphers the ontological meaning of understanding as appropriation of the interpreter to this world. The correlative concept, of distanciation, has a positive epistemological significance, being the critical condition both for interpretation of symbolic signs as well as for self comprehension. Thus, distanciation supposes assimilation by interpretation of cultural differences – that is, the interpretation brings closer and makes contemporary that which initially seems otherness.

The significance of discourse, of a work in general, is not reduced to stating the intention of the text, because text for Ricoeur is far from being regarded as a static entity, immune to the interpreter’s subjectivity. In fact, the interpreter is granted a great initiative, as he needs to discover authentic text significance through his world lens, to fill the semantic hollows, and not last, to do something with detached significances. So the ultimate moment of understanding coincides with self-understanding of him who nears the world of text as well as the opening of this comprehension to the understanding of the other.

We have observed that the task of interpretation is to decipher the world of the text, the reference projected by it becoming explicit in world existence shown by the text reference. Thus the act of self-understanding can be seen as an ultimate moment of interpretation, to the extent to which self-understanding requires assuming the fact that understanding yourself means ‘understanding in front of text,’ by an attitude of distanciation, of deconstructing the prejudices, illusions, a transparency of knowledge, but also a critique of ideology, as an epistemic moment of this understanding. In fact, the interpretation of text expresses Ricoeur’s intention to transgress a whole hermeneutical tradition, pre-Heidegger and post-Heidegger, by subordinating the epistemological grounds of the ontology of understanding, in which the semantic space gives the occasion for self-understanding by returning to the privileged place of interpretation: the symbolic systems that remake the world. Thus we can state that hermeneutics of the text determines Ricoeur to show that the ultimate function of the language is to configure the relation between self and world.

By assuming the dialectical interpretation, the phenomenological hermeneutics becomes radical, a critical reflection of historical knowledge; at the same time it re-becomes fundamental – a discourse of the being. The ultimate place of understanding is the self, to the extent to which self-understanding is based on understanding the world of the text. This subordination of epistemological preoccupation to the ontological brings about a more fundamental concept of truth, as a relationship between us and the world and with the other. Interpretation is not reduced to a pedant practice of checking the semantic content; so by understanding the text I will understand the other, I will connect with him. In addition, returning the text to the speech means constantly sharing the deciphered meanings with the other.

The concept of world in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics refers to Husserl’s concept of life-world (Lebenswelt), understood as an original ground for meaning, a prior ontological context, which supposes the direct experience of daily phenomena and its natural practice. Ricoeur nuances this concept, especially related to the concept of world of text. The world has the meaning of a vast horizon, a whole of cosmological, historical, cultural, anthropological and ethical meanings. The world of the text is a projected world symbolically transfigured, a reality of the possible, in relation to the immediate reality. Interpreting the world of the text means suspending the first grade referential function of the text, that is the world as an assembly of objects, and releasing a second grade reference – the world as a life and being project reference. Hermeneutics becomes explicitly a deployment of in-world existence expressed by text reference. The daily, common language, cannot express this world's specifics, thus Ricoeur will plead for the imaginative variations of the symbolic, poetic, literary, religious and philosophical discourse, able to express the situation and original destination of the self.

The symbolic texts project new dimensions of in-world existence, and the reader is determined to reveal the indicated meaning proposals, on the critical condition of nearing that which can be expressed as otherness. The apparent paradox, consists of the fact that this otherness expressed in the text shares a common situation with the reader’s self, the same cultural-historical world; thus, relating to other is not only a condition for intersubjectivity, but is also assumed as an inevitable moment of self-understanding. Any experience of the world of the text is an experience of the self by recognizing what is owned by the other, revealing thus a meaning potential that requires
one and the same interpretation. In fact, it is about one of the undoubted presuppositions of any hermeneutics, to proceed to a nearing by annihilation of the cultural distance, by making equivalent what is past with what is present, what is near with what is far, what is self and what is otherness.

References