

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Associated with the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education

## ANNUAL REVIEW

ESSAYS: STONE ON ETHICS OF WAR, HADAS ON UNJUST WAR, O'KANE ON UNIVERSALISM & PARTICULARISM, XUEREB ON UTOPIA, KING ON NEOLIBERALISM, AUER ON ROUSSEAU'S INDIVIDUALISM, FORTHMAN ON ARISTOTLE, WALTON ON MIND & THE WORLD, AITCHISON ON NATURALISM, GIBSON ON ARISTOTLE, CONWAY ON BALLET, LONG ON DIRECTED MOVEMENT, LATANSKY ON SELF-RELISATION, SOPER ON ANSELM, WESTERGAARD ON COUNTERFACTUALS, PURKAYASTHA ON AI, REED ON AI, BLASCYK ON SENECCA & EPICETUS, DRĂGHICI-VASILESCU ON PLOTINUS, VECCHIO ON IDENTITY, TOWNSEND ON INDIVIDUALITY & NORMALITY, FLORES ON RICOEUR'S, AND ZABALAWI ON GOOD & EVIL.

LITERATURE REVIEWS: GIBSON ON MICHAEL WALZER'S JUST AND UNJUST WARS, AND JEFF MCMAHAN'S KILLING IN WAR; STARES ON DAVID CHALMERS'S REALITY+ VIRTUAL WORLDS AND THE PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY, AND MERLIN SHELDRAKE'S ENTANGLED LIFE: HOW FUNGI MAKE OUR WORLDS, CHANGE OUR MINDS & SHAPE OUR FUTURES; FISHER ON GARY FRANCIONE'S WHY VEGANISM MATTERS: THE MORAL VALUE OF ANIMALS; KING ON GREGORY COCHRAN AND HENRY HARPENDING'S THE 10,000 YEAR EXPLOSION; HARRIES ON THOMAS REID'S OF THE GEOMETRY OF VISIBLES. IN AN INQUIRY INTO THE HUMAN MIND ON THE PRINCIPLES OF COMMON SENSE; ZABAKAWI ON RICHARD PRUM'S THE EVOLUTION OF BEAUTY: HOW DARWIN'S FORGOTTEN THEORY OF MATE CHOICE SHAPES THE ANIMAL WORLD, AND US

CHADWICK PRIZE ESSAY: FILIPPOS HARLAFTIS, THE BODY IS ABSENT AND MAYBE RIGHTLY SO: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON HEIDEGGER'S PHENOMENOLOGY (FIRST PLACE)

LYCEUM PRIZE ESSAY: ADAM DAVIES, CAN ART BE DEFINED BY A SET OF NECESSARY AND SUFFICIENT CONDITIONS? (BEST SUBMISSION FROM MEMBERS UNDER THIRTY YEARS OF AGE)

STUDENT PRIZE ESSAYS: SIMON DREW, SAM LIVY, DESSISLAVA FESSENKA, ENRIQUE BENJAMIN R. FERNANDO III, JONATHAN COULL, PIET VAN ASSCHE, LINDA HATTERSLEY, GABRIELLA SCIARRONE, CAROLYN BUSS, GRAHAM COOPER.

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# Contents

## Poetry

Khor	6	Searching... through philosophy
------	---	---------------------------------

## Member's Essays

Stone	7	The Ethics and Culture of War: An Ancient Greek Perspective
Hadas	11	Unjust War: Holy, Historic, and Civilising
O'Kane	16	The New context of Universalism and Particularism
Xuereb	19	Philosophy: From Utopia to EUtopia
King	23	The Broken Bowl: A Critique of Neoliberalism
Auer	27	Rousseau's Individualism: A Critical Analysis
Forthman	29	Actuality, Potentiality, and Aristotle's Account of Change
Walton	31	Mind, World, and the Natural Environment
Aitchison	34	Embracing Naturalism: A Rational Perspective on the Supernatural
Gibson	36	Aristotelian Facts and Values
Conway	41	The Philosophical Rudiments of Classical Ballet
Long	46	Directed Movement
Latansky	50	Solving the World's Greatest Challenge of Self-Realisation Through Unlocking People's Inborn Genius
Soper	55	Anselm's Ontological Scalpel
Westergaard	56	Counterfactuals
Purkayastha	58	Do AI Machines Think? A Philosophical Perspective
Reed	61	Artificial Individuality and the Turing Test
Blascyk	67	A Letter to a Stoic: A Fictional Dialogue of When Seneca Met Epictetus
Drăghici-Vasilescu	69	Individuality in the Work of Plotinus
Vecchio	73	What make us who we are? Discussion on the nature of personal identity
Townsend	79	Individuality and Normality: Battle or Balance
Flores	84	Hermeneutics as an Unfolding of Human Understanding: Ruminations of Paul Ricoeur's Linguistic Turn
Zabalawi	88	Can Good Lead to Evil?

## Literature Reviews

Gibson	90	The Ethics of War: A Review of Two Famous Books
Stares	93	If We are Brains in a Vat, Is Life one Big Deepfake or Our Reality?
Stares	96	Is the Cognitive Capacity to Think a Prerequisite to Solving Problems?
Fisher	99	To Eat, Or Not To Eat, That Is The Question
King	100	Does the Human Mind Evolve?
Harries	101	How Thomas Reid Anticipated the Theory of Relativity.
Zabalawi	102	Sexual Drive and the Evolution of Humanity

## Chadwick Awards

### Chadwick Prize: 2023

Harlaftis	105	The Body is Absent and Maybe Rightly So: An Analysis Based on Heidegger's Phenomenology
-----------	-----	--

### Lyceum Prize: 2023

Davies	109	Can Art be Defined by a Set of Necessary and Sufficient Conditions?
--------	-----	---

## Talbot Student Awards

### Trinity Term: 2022

Drew	113	Assess any – one or more – of the criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy made by Schiller, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel or Marx. (First Prize)
Livy	115	Discuss critically Kant's arguments for his claims that the good will has unconditional value and that only actions motivated by duty have moral worth. (Second Prize)
Fessenka	117	Describe and explain why Gettier-style cases demonstrate that the tripartite account of knowledge (the "TAK") is unsustainable. How should one go about offering a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases, do you think? Can one offer a theory of knowledge that is immune to Gettier-style cases? (Third Prize)

### Michaelmas Term: 2022

Fernando	120	Is structural realism the best of both worlds? (First Prize)
Coull	122	Mathematically Equivalent Formulations and Structural Realism (Second Prize)
Assche	124	What is the difference between science and pseudoscience? (Third Equal Prize)
Hattersley	127	The Oxford Riots Legal Case (Third Equal Prize)

### Hilary Term: 2023

Sciarrone	129	Non-cognitivists believe that when we act morally, we must act to satisfy a desire of our own. Can such an action be truly moral? (First Prize)
Buss	131	Strawson doubts that the question of whether determinism is true is a significant one for morality. What are his reasons, and is he right? (Second Prize)
Cooper	133	Quasi-Realism Rescues Moral Truth (Third Prize)

# Hermeneutics as an Unfolding of Human Understanding: Ruminations of Paul Ricoeur's Linguistic Turn

*by Niño Randy C. Flores* Philippines

## **Preliminaries**

Language is the repository of meaning which emerges from human experience. From this ground of experience, presuppositions affecting how a person understands him- or herself, others, and the world around him, arise. For Ricoeur, the function of language must be examined to situate better the human person as having the capacity to say something. All meaning is realized and communicated in language as discourse. Whether written or oral, discourse always offers an opening of a new perspective to anyone who can read, listen, and communicate. For this reason, language is through and through hermeneutical because it is the medium through which sense and meaning are passed on, either through the event of speaking or of the written text.

In his linguistic turn, Ricoeur has become convinced that genuine philosophy must start with the fullness of language because reflection begins from the vantage point of human experience (Pellauer 2007: 40). This paper endeavors to present a brief analysis of the interpretive activity of hermeneutics as an unfolding of understanding through the examination of these three important themes identified in Ricoeur's major works, namely: the notion of perspective, understanding as appropriation, and interpretation as metaphorical. Seen as one, these three themes present a holistic overview of the human person who, despite being limited in his or her perspectival parameters, can transcend human fallibility by gaining an enhanced capacity for knowing oneself through an open and transformative encounter with other person and with the world of the text being read.

## **The Notion of Perspective**

Ricoeur's understanding of perspective is grafted on his reflections on character as the summary of one's horizon of perspective. The perspective of a person, for instance, serves as the receptacle which holds his or her set of values, affections for oneself, aspirations, and ideals for happiness. It is what he called the "perspectival orientation of the total field of motivation" (Ricoeur 1978: 28). Character is the generalization of a person's horizon of understanding which means having a particular point of view of something. It is what individualizes a person as having been born into a particular language, historical setting, and culture, making up the framework of one's understanding of oneself and the world (Dagmang 2013: 160). By this, perspective is rendered as the cognitive process which manifests as a person's way of thinking about something. This is to say that while a person is open and receptive to what he or she could learn from the world, he or she is limited to his or her vision of the world.

That perspective is a limitation of perception is acknowledged; however, it is not the limitation of the human person in all aspects. It is rather what at once contracts and expands a person's horizon of understanding. Analogously speaking, perspective is the window through which we view the world from a certain angle – hence, we see things as we are. This renders having a point of view as a form of seeing-as. It is also simultaneously a trap that hinders us from seeing more. For Ricoeur, perspective is simply the cognitive limitation of the person because perceiving something is the "initial narrowness of my openness to the world" (Ricoeur 1986: 23). Hence, reflection is always partial because one does not attain full understanding through being conscious about the world around us alone. As the world is something alien to me, there would always be episodes in which I would be overwhelmed by the surplus of meaning. Due to this limited vision, the human person could not help but tend to have a one-sided viewpoint.

The notion of perspective gives the impression that it is the point of tension between finitude and infinitude. On one hand, its infinite side propels us towards a greater openness with the world by transgressing our perspectival limit by immersing ourselves with others' viewpoints. On the other hand, its finite side presents desire and habits as the factors which affect the way one's perspective expands or contracts. As desire is both an experience of a lack and drive towards attaining something, a person is either led towards clarity or confusion (Ricoeur 1978: 25). With a blurred vision for further understanding, one is prevented from encountering the other people meaningfully and from developing the value of listening to what they have to say. The same is true with habits – they indeed assist the human will towards a responsible and maximized use of freedom, but one's capacity for action reach an impasse when these become heavily routinized.

The preceding insights on perspective further emphasize that our general understanding of the world is essentially a journey toward self-understanding. Self-understanding is further stretched when one considers other possibilities of looking at things. Creativity occurs when there is a "breakthrough" in one's existential orientation by thinking and doing something beyond what is conventional. A transformed and expanding perspective, so to say, can take up other viewpoints alien to one's field of understanding. Each person, as a point of view, is an opening to the world. Thus, to open ourselves to the other means welcoming his or her perspective and readily listening to whatever he or she has to say. Understanding of oneself and the world is never completed – always unfinished and fragmented, and this necessitates pushing against one's perspectival borders to expand one's horizon of understanding the self and the world.

## Understanding as Appropriation

Ricoeur's conception of discourse can be summarized as follows: "If all discourse is actualized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning" (Ricoeur 1976: 12). As an event, it has sense because it speaks about something meaningful, and it has reference because it involves someone who communicates to another at a certain time and setting. In the event of discourse as something spoken of, its sense and reference lie in the speaker's intended meaning and context about what is being said. The event itself may vanish, but its meaning remains and can still be taken up by new subjects who may recontextualize it based on how they perceive its meaning – that is what Ricoeur understood as appropriation. Appropriation is "to make one's own what was initially alien" (Ricoeur 1981: 185). Centering his reflections on enduring meanings, Ricoeur then shifted his attention to the textuality of discourse. As in the spoken discourse, the written text transmits meaning upon reading, and this is possible because it says something meaningful, and it points out to something beyond itself.

*Distanciation* (i.e., distancing) occurs in discourse as an inscribed text because its meaning endures even after the event has passed. Divorced from the author's original intention, audience, and psycho-sociological milieu, the text gains autonomy of meaning that allows it to create a world of its own, letting itself be taken up by the present readers. This is precisely why the Harry Potter series means differently to different generations of people because as an audience, they perceive its meaning not only according to the author's intention in presenting the characters, but also how the meaning they have perceived in the movie addresses them. This is productive and creative for Ricoeur because it allows the text to be understood differently by new readers (Simms 2003: 40). The point here is, *distanciation* makes the text intelligible in every era, and because of the text's independence, it is readily available to anyone who can read them. Hence, the text is pregnant with meaning because it can be understood by anyone who can read. It only recedes into obsolescence when it can no longer be read by anyone. The text thus addresses us because it possesses an element of otherness – that is, it offers itself to be understood.

Understanding involves a play of meaning that affects one's perspective on cognitive, affective, and practical aspects. To interpret is to enter the world of the text so that the reader could grasp it, regardless of the temporal gap – I understand because I can basically relate with what the text says. For instance, in a theatrical play, the actor must assume the role of the character to represent it well. To do so, he must 'set aside' his or her original self to think and act like the character he or she portrays. A good theatrical performance is measured by how the actor did well in embodying the character's persona. In reverting to his or her original self after the performance, he or she would no longer feel the same way as before the acting. In entering the world of the character and embracing it as one's own to portray it, the actor did somehow change – the way he or she sees him- or herself and the world has improved. This is what is meant by Ricoeur when he spoke of the author and the reader as playful figures – to make sense of the world of the text, the person must surrender him- or herself before it and let it affect him or her to deepen his or her understanding of life (Ricoeur 1986: 191).

All our understanding is colored by prejudices, which are conditioned by culture and society. Most people are generally not aware of where their biases originally come from. They are often inclined to act with hidden interests and motives – this is what engenders "false consciousness." Ricoeur does not necessarily see prejudices negatively; he takes them as the starting point of understanding. The task of interpretation as the unfolding of understanding involves clearing away this false consciousness by acknowledging whence one's prejudice is coming from. Such perceptual awareness is the beginning of a breakthrough in which the person arrives at relinquishing the ego. One must dispossess his or her ego to receive an amplified capacity for self-understanding. To grasp the text is to inhabit the world it presents to our consciousness. Hence, understanding as appropriation works in a way that the unfolding world of the text before the reader is relevant to his or her background, needs, and experiences (Quito 1995:91).

In other words, appropriation is the reader's internalization of the meaning perceived from reading the text. The textual meaning is not dominated by the present readers who interpret it; thus, it is not about the possession of an idea (Ricoeur 1981: 178). What is being made as one's own is neither the author's intended meaning nor the comprehension of the original audience, but the projection of a world by the text. To borrow Gadamer's idea of "fusion of horizon," we can say that the text's world and the subject's self-understanding intersect to regenerate a new sense of meaning. However, this does not denote a fullness of understanding of the text. Instead, it demonstrates that despite differences, understanding is possible, despite its incompleteness. The actualization of this possibility is what expands one's own horizon of meaning. Thus, to open up to the other is not to impose our point of view, but to assume the disposition to listen and let oneself be affected by what the text or the other person could share with us. Appropriation transforms the reader in the process, and it enables us to gain new capacities for self-understanding. To interpret is to think with the text to bring about a new way of looking at oneself – "to receive a new mode of being from the text" (Ricoeur 1981: 192).

## Interpretation as Metaphorical

The meaning of the text unfolds in front of the text. Meaning appears in a manner of revelation because it points out to a possible world that the text projects. Ricoeur hereby relates discourse and metaphor to show that the latter reveals the sense of meaning that is inherent in the former. The meaning of the word, so to say, is not strictly confined to its lexical meaning. In this sense, its meaning is polysemic as it contains various possible ways of perceiving it (Ricoeur, 1981:

169). Words acquire meaning when they are used in a sentence. The interplay of meaning between sentences reveals the sense that the text offers. Thus, metaphor provides the contextual change of meaning as it concretizes one of the possible meanings of a word.

The meaning of the word changes as its context changes. As an illustration, consider this verse from the Gospel of Matthew 17:20, which says: “If only you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could tell the mountain from here to there, and the mountain would obey. Nothing would be impossible to you.” Certainly, the verse is not addressing the reader or the listener in a literal sense. It is neither a mere direct comparison of the attribution of faith with the characteristics of a mustard seed. But within the Gospel context of praying to God in a general sense, it is shown to be an admonition to persistence and perseverance in praying no matter the adversities that one may encounter along the way. The point of the text speaks to the readers or listeners, and they can relate to it vis-à-vis their circumstances which may be analogous to the message of the text. Compared when the same ideas therein are said as follows: “In praying, have strong faith and persevere!” This is hardly likely to move the addressees into action. The point of metaphor is to actively enrich the human capacity for expression and comprehension through language.

The metaphorical admonition of that Gospel verse about persistent perseverance in faith elevates the quality of its discourse which evokes understanding to those who read or listen to it. Discourse, in its metaphorical appeal, moves those who read and listen to it because they are affected. Ricoeur highlighted in this point the meaning of mimesis which he borrows from Aristotle: “it makes human actions appear higher than they are in reality” (Ricoeur 1981: 191). The meaning is not duplicated, rather, it is generated in a novel way. The relation between mimesis and metaphor can be expressed in a more general way: “Why should we draw new meanings from our language if we have nothing new to say, no new world to project? The creation of language would be devoid of sense unless they served the general project of letting new worlds emerge by means of poetry...” (Ricoeur 1981, 81).

To understand something metaphorically is to be able to “read in-between the lines.” Language, whether written or oral, leads one to arrive at what Ricoeur called the “heuristic play of the discourse” (Ricoeur 1981: 180), that is, the discovery of something that brings about an “Aha!” moment for the one who understands. Thus, understanding is a result of tension between sameness and difference, originating from the attempt to understand what is being said, and grasping the world projected by the text. Things are not often said in a clear and direct way, and so figurative language provides the force of new meanings to fill in the gap for expression. Taylor’s (2011: 115) commentary on Ricoeur’s concept of metaphor elucidates the points presented above: “Understanding as metaphoric allows for an understanding that is more limited and tentative, an understanding that helps mediate distance and difference even if it does not overcome them.”

Metaphor, as a form of figurative language, is more than substituting a term to make a direct allusion to a literal meaning. It is rather a tool to construct meaning within the discourse to let a creative form of understanding be unraveled as it is communicated. It can open new insights, and this manifests that any form of language can be metaphorical in its expression. This showcases human inventiveness in the free use of words, and it demonstrates the free action of discourse as meaning-generation. Figurative language is not just an embellishment nor a description of an image or idea. It is instead a re-description that speaks something new about the world in a novel way (Simms 2003: 75). Ricoeur’s reflection on interpretation as metaphorical affirms that language is essentially dynamic. Its dynamism is something that vivifies the human thought and imagination to think and understand more creatively. Understanding metaphor is an invitation to do hermeneutics since it moves a person to think, and essentially to interpret them. The basic purpose of language is to communicate ideas, and the act of interpretation guides the process of understanding what is being communicated.

## Conclusion

The ruminations of Ricoeur on the interpretive characteristic of language shows that interpretation begins from one’s point of view, that is, from what one perceives. It is from this viewpoint that we come to know about the world around us, and yet it is the very same thing which set the limits of our intellectual vision. Nonetheless, this perspectival limitation does not impede us from seeing how others perceive the world as they experience it. So, the interpretive character of language indicates the dynamism of our human ability to understand and our capacity to take in others’ understanding of what the world is. In other words, our efforts to interpret and to understand meaning opens us to a disposition to dialogue with the other. After all, all acts of interpretation occur within the very process of a dialogical conversation.

The linguistic turn of Ricoeur further points out that hermeneutics is essentially relational and ethical. It is relational because understanding only becomes dynamic and inclusive only when people strive to get out of the perspectival parameters to see how others perceive the world within their realm of experience. This emphasizes a sort of what I am calling an “ontological hospitality” that seeks to cultivate oneself to encounter what is foreign openly and respectfully. Hermeneutics as an art of dialogical interpretation is also ethical because it engenders commitment to respect and recognize others. To live and understand with meaning is a manner of existing which exercises human freedom with the aim of actualizing one’s possibilities of becoming better and gaining greater self-understanding. The conscious effort to understand and to make oneself understood is what makes hermeneutics as an act of unfolding oneself through communication – and this is what makes the act of interpretation as an unfolding of human understanding.

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