

RICOEUR'S TRANSCENDENTAL CONCERN:  
A HERMENUTICS OF DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy attempts to reopen the question of human transcendence in contemporary terms. While his conception of language as self-transcending is deeply Husserlian, Ricoeur also responds to the analytical challenge when he deploys a basic distinction in Fregean logic in order to clarify Heidegger's phenomenology of world. Ricoeur's commitment to a transcendental view is evident in his conception of narrative, which enables him to emphasize the role of the performative in literary reading. The meaning of the self in time provides Ricoeur with a discursive basis for distinguishing his own position from that of Kant and other philosophers in the transcendental tradition.

Paul Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutics provides an essential key to his unique approach to texts, which can be related to the event of the written word in constituting "worlds" of meaning. This paper will investigate Ricoeur's commitment to hermeneutics as an enterprise that is *transcendental* in a way that is related to the role of language in life and experience. The paper is composed of four parts. We will first be concerned with Ricoeur's phenomenological view of how the reading of texts and the "structure" of events can shape our understanding of the self in time. We shall then examine Ricoeur's attempt to recast the phenomenological conception of "world" through a revised notion of reference. This aspect of our exposition will demonstrate how Ricoeur reinterprets the work of Gottlob Frege in maintaining that language is ultimately self-transcending just as it refers to an ontological sphere that is capable of grounding linguistic insight. After examining how the notion of the text is uniquely adopted by Ricoeur as a constitutive aspect of the world-concept, we will discuss Ricoeur's later shift to the problem of narrative in order to clarify the relationship between the world of the reader and that of the text in dynamic terms. The final part of our discussion considers the dual nature of the self as suggested in Ricoeur's understanding of human agency. By distinguishing an identity that changes from mere self-sameness, Ricoeur demonstrates how human beings alter their relationship to the world by constructing alternative discourses through which they define themselves in time.

I

Ricoeur's distinctive contribution as a philosopher is inseparable from his ability to approach texts as sources of interpretive insight. Nonetheless, in approaching some of the great texts in the Western intellectual tradition, Ricoeur does not merely

*interpret* what he reads; in truth he *resituates* texts while exploring them in terms of their broader significance. For Ricoeur, a text is not a self-contained literary object that exists in a detached realm of timeless values. Beginning with Edmund Husserl but moving beyond an eidetic phenomenology of essences, Ricoeur takes up the challenge of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre in arguing that language implicates human beings in a semantic adventure that is irreducible to a predetermined outcome. The historical situation of the speaker is not simply a secondary feature of lived experience. On the contrary, historical reality cannot be expunged from linguistic utterances that “express” our engagement with the world. Moreover, literary texts go beyond the more limited perspectives that language opens up with regard to external reality. Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics surpasses the finitude of *Dasein* that Heidegger extols ontologically as well as the reflexive attitudes that Sartre attributes to human consciousness. While deeply concerned with the whole question of grounds, Ricoeur argues that our knowledge of the world is largely mediated on the basis of “texts” that are not equivalent to a specific literary subject-matter.

In taking up a hermeneutical approach to texts, Ricoeur also provides a new mode of access to historical reality as a largely “linguistic” phenomenon. History is not “verbal” in the sense of taking place in the space of utterances alone. Its special features can be more strictly related to symbolic meaning on the level of what exceeds the scope of a structural analysis. In dealing with a fundamental difference in the way that symbols can be approached, Ricoeur points to an underlying divergence in methodologies: “There are, then, two ways of accounting for symbolism: by means of what constitutes it and by means of what it attempts to say.”<sup>1</sup> Structural analysis is concerned with what constitutes symbolic meaning on the level of phonemic articulation. In contrast, symbolism can be approached in terms of what it attempts to say on the level of expressive manifestation. In this case, expressivity should not be identified with the subjective intentions of the speaker but instead pertains to the manner in which language speaks about being. Hence symbolism allows us to broach the problem of double meaning, which does not emerge unless the equivocal nature of discourse can open up a world that lies beyond the closed universe of linguistic signs.

Ricoeur’s resistance to structuralist closure performs an essential role in his conception of how symbolic meaning involves a dialectical interplay between conscious and unconscious experience. In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay On Interpretation* (*De l’interprétation. Essai sur Sigmund Freud*, 1965), Ricoeur readily admits that a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” engaged primarily in the ideological project of unmasking the disruptive truths that lie beneath the surface of things, should be rigorously distinguished from a hermeneutics that traces the movement of the spirit toward self-knowledge. In short, we should be willing to accept the opposition between Sigmund Freud and G. W. F. Hegel. However, this opposition is also false to the degree that it forecloses the possibility of dialectical understanding. By the same token, while exploring the twofold structure of symbolic awareness, Ricoeur returns to classical Greek drama in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (*Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, 1969) as a key to unlocking

the temporal significance of textual meaning as the meeting-point for different but related perspectives. On the one hand, Freud is adopted as the spokesman for a point of view that would interpret Sophocles's play, *Oedipus Rex*, as a metaphorical attempt to recapitulate the destiny of humankind. From this standpoint, this timeless play is less concerned with a conflict between destiny and freedom than with a *repetition* in which we obscurely recognize our own repressed desires. However, more explicitly than Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze, Ricoeur conceives of repetition in relation to narratives that enable the self to come to terms with inner possibilities that are intrinsic to its own mode of being.

Thus, Ricoeur also observes that Sophocles's drama can be read from the standpoint of tragic realization, as opposed to a series of events *that actually took place* in some exemplary manner. The play in this case would not be grounded in a belated awareness of what happened but in an experience of truth that carries us into future time: "It deals, not with Oedipus's relation to the Sphinx, but with his relation to the seer."<sup>2</sup> This second reading enables us to read the play as intertwined with *Oedipus at Colonus* in which the protagonist assumes responsibilities for his own guilt. Ricoeur contends that Teresias, rather than Oedipus, is the "center" of the play to the degree that he alone represents "the power of truth," which serves to *unveil* the specific guilt of the Theban King. The ultimate meaning of the drama, however, cannot be uncovered until Oedipus has internalized his past history, his unmeasured response to the seer's words and his self-punishment.

In discussing *Oedipus Rex*, Ricoeur is able to identify two aspects of textual meaning that can be contrasted but also productively combined in a unified reading. These two ways of approaching the text can be paired to two kinds of hermeneutics. One type of hermeneutics is concerned primarily with the repetition of archaic symbols that may have their home in unconscious motivations, which can become the theme of psychoanalytic investigation. This type of hermeneutics accepts a static form of repetition as its basic point of departure. However, the second kind of hermeneutics is oriented toward the emergence of new symbols and figures that ultimately result in a lasting experience of knowledge. Ricoeur contends that these two approaches to the problem of meaning bring to light the dual nature of the symbol. A symbol points back to a childhood that somehow evades the reality of time, but it also points ahead to an adult life that teems with conflicts and responsibilities.<sup>3</sup> The unity of the symbol permits us to move in either direction but it also provides a basis for interaction between different points of view.

At the same time, Ricoeur in developing this model is also able to explain how the opposition between conscious and unconscious mind can be overcome in a dialectical phenomenology. The worst methodology would be one that succumbed to the dangers of eclecticism. It would be incoherent to merely "combine" Freud and Hegel after having come to the conclusion that the materials of the unconscious can be understood from a higher standpoint. However, in seeking to overcome a purely abstract opposition, Ricoeur argues that the two sets of figures that constitute symbolic understanding are actually one and the same.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore possible to envision a hermeneutics of consciousness as "the ability to retravel the figures of the spirit."<sup>5</sup> Such a journey would be "phenomenological" in a manner that recalls

Hegel but would not be controlled by a dialectical method that forecloses the meaning of a *possible* existence. The role of the unconscious in this process would not be opposed to consciousness but would function as the other to a more progressive hermeneutic. In providing a hermeneutical basis for reading the story of Oedipus in quasi-dialectical terms, Ricoeur demonstrates how interpretation itself can free the mind from the limited perspectives of unconscious life.

## II

Ricoeur's investment in hermeneutics was crucial to his increasing preoccupation with the question of language, particularly as a linguistic phenomenon, as he began to explore the importance of texts to philosophical work. Unlike many of the structuralists, who were also preoccupied with this same question, Ricoeur never adopted the assumption that the scientific approach to language was adequate in and of itself. While conceding that language possesses a structure and semiotic core, he was not partial to the view that verbal utterances should be approached as unrelated to truth claims about the world at large. In this regard, we might briefly examine the basic argument of Ricoeur's important work, *The Rule of Metaphor (La métaphore vive, 1975)*, in order to better understand how the task of interpretation came to assume an increasingly transcendental significance in a series of linguistic inquiries that focus on the production of verbal meaning. It has long been acknowledged that, as both mathematician and philosopher of meaning, Gottlob Frege was important to Husserl's initial efforts to surpass the intellectual limitations of psychologism. While this encounter certainly provides a partial explanation for why Husserl came to revise a strongly genetic account of arithmetical cognition, we might contend that this early exchange testifies more to the importance of the transcendental motif to *both* Frege and Husserl, instead of arguing that Husserl was enlightened by Frege in a manner that drew him closer to a purely referential or perhaps even empirical theory of symbolic meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, in attempting to ground verbal utterances along Fregean lines, Ricoeur proceeds as a phenomenologist who works in the transcendental tradition by adopting a concern for what provides immediate experience with a framework within which meaning can be grasped as a whole. The fact that Ricoeur is concerned with verbal rather than mathematical meaning certainly does not annul the transcendental nature of his approach, nor does it necessarily imply that what is being said about words has nothing to do with physical existence. However, the question of what exactly defines "transcendence" in Ricoeur's inquiry into the role of metaphor in verbal expression cannot be resolved long strictly Kantian lines. The distinction between semiotics and semantics, as well as the inadequacies of strictly Saussurean accounts of linguistic functioning, support the notion that a phenomenological understanding of the complete sentence, rather than the individual word, allows the speaker to *transcend* the immanence of language in assertions of reference. Hence, in arguing that language provides us with a basis for transcendence, Ricoeur as a phenomenologist does not presume that the "object" that is verbally projected is

equivalent to the Kantian thing-in-itself, nor does he maintain that the meanings intended through any sentence are fundamentally unknowable. On the contrary, while the object that is verbally intended *transcends* the immanence of language in a way that exceeds the sphere of both signifier and signified, this same object could be located in a "world" that is ontologically constituted.

The phenomenological model that Ricoeur adopts in his account of language therefore includes both Frege and Husserl, just as it implies a view of reference that remains linked to intentions but cannot be reduced to the deliberations of a self-contained human subject. Ricoeur readily concedes that "there is no reference problem in language" to the degree that linguistic signs always refer to other signs in constituting verbal statements as systemic unities. However, the signifying intention that animates any sentence escapes the closure of the sign in constituting language as a saying that is *about* something: "In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language."<sup>7</sup> Émile Benveniste provides Ricoeur with a rigorous basis for relating the semantics of the sentence to the world of the speaker and the situation to which the speaker belongs. Moreover, in focusing on the semantic aspects of language use, rather than on the purely semiotic features of linguistic constructs, Ricoeur can explain how the transcendence-function that is implied by the Husserlian concept of the intended can be understood as a deepening of Frege's notion of reference. Thus, while contending that the moment of transcendence in ordinary language use has its "linguistic" home in the complete sentence, Ricoeur also returns to Husserl in reminding us that "language is intentional par excellence; it aims beyond itself."<sup>8</sup>

Ricoeur's insight into the value of the sentence as the primary mode of connecting the speaker to the world underlies his detailed study of metaphor, which takes issue with both the structuralist neglect of subjective intentions and the poststructuralist indifference to questions of verbal meaning. While structuralism posits the sign as the basic unit of linguistic inquiry, Ricoeur argues that the generation of meaning cannot be understood unless the complete sentence is approached as a semantic event that occurs in human time. In going beyond poststructuralism as well, he also contends that semantics can be identified with a creative definition which contests a basically semiotic interpretation of the linguistic sign. Ricoeur emphasizes the temporal character of the verbal utterance in order to retain the possibility of recovering intentionality, without, however, restricting linguistic meaning to the notion of an "origin" that remains either pure or inaccessible. His unique position allows him to assert the difference between speculative and poetic thinking, but it also prevents him from reducing verbal tropes to symbolic gestures that allude to the invisible at the expense of concrete experience.

It is therefore necessary to place Ricoeur's approach to language in a broader philosophical context before his specific contributions to metaphor theory can be seriously appraised. Phenomenology provides him with a basic tool for exploring how language alters our relationship to the world on the level of both perception and cognition. Metaphor in the phenomenological tradition is irreducible to a series of logical operations that might resolve a contradiction in relation to conceptual schemata. The re-adjustments that metaphor prompts are brought about through a

moment of insight that allows a new structure to emerge in place of a prior conceptual arrangement. Ricoeur discusses how thinking through metaphor involves what Gilbert Ryle calls a “category mistake” that replaces one system of classification with another more appropriate one.<sup>9</sup> This movement toward readjustment, however, is not merely semiotic but semantic in its motivation and outcome. Moreover, Ricoeur identifies a *non-verbal* element in metaphorical thinking that can be understood in terms of Kant’s notion of the productive imagination: “Treated as a schema, the image presents a verbal dimension; before being the gathering-point of faded impressions, it is that of emerging meanings.”<sup>10</sup> Metaphor makes visible in discourse an interplay between identity and difference, which registers the bringing together of image and conceptual schemes.<sup>11</sup>

In defending the value of resemblance to the life of metaphor, Ricoeur begins to suggest how figurative language functions in a concrete manner, rather than as the servant of an invisible order. The way that metaphor can bring us into contact with reality informs his defense of reference in opposition to a tendency prominent in mid-century Anglo-American criticism to treat the literary work as a self-contained verbal icon. The writer who suspends descriptive reference in constructing poetic texts is also engaged in projecting a “world” of indeterminate meaning: “The metaphor of a concrete object – the poem itself – cuts language off from the didactic function of the sign, but at the same time opens up access to reality in the mode of fiction and feeling.”<sup>12</sup> When defined in this manner, however, “reality” as a form of reference should not be identified with scientific denotation. The hermeneutics of double reference that applies to works of art can be applied as well to the analysis of metaphorical statements. At the same time, Ricoeur’s attention to what lies on the other side of verbal constructs can be assigned an ontological meaning that does not deprive symbolic language of its perceptual immediacy.

The reformulation of reference along ontological lines also suggests the influence of Heidegger on Ricoeur’s existential hermeneutics. Frege’s classic distinction between “sense” (*Sinn*) and “reference” (*Bedeutung*) is not only important to the way that language surpasses itself and grounds our relationship to the world, but it can provide the basis as well for an ontology of the work of art: “The structure of the work is in fact its sense and the world of the work is its reference.”<sup>13</sup> This claim, however, would be misunderstood if it were to be interpreted as an attempt to ground artistic contexts in a narrowly objective relation to the world. The term “world” in this case builds on Heidegger’s phenomenological explorations in *Sein und Zeit*, where the situation of Dasein is contrasted to that of the Cartesian subject.<sup>14</sup> In adapting Frege to a cultural subject-matter, Ricoeur undoes the restriction of reference to statements that have only scientific validity. Moreover, his employment of the world-concept in contrast to structure allows us to glimpse a quasi-transcendental aspect in what the work of art projects as its existential horizon. Unlike the first-order references that define scientific statements, the horizon to which the work of art refers constitutes a *possible* world. However, this world compares in its interpretive powers to what verbal metaphors can provide in the way of insight and knowledge. The “ideal” nature of this world does not argue against its moral or cognitive value.

While drawing on Heidegger in developing the world-concept as a form of reference, Ricoeur also departs from his philosophical predecessor when opposing language to *writing* as a key to worldhood. Verbal conversations communicate to those who listen, but written discourse no longer coincides in its current meaning to what the author originally intended. Particularly in his late work, Heidegger emphasized the role of language in constituting the world that human beings inhabit in time. Ricoeur, however, offers a more substantial role to forms of expression that go beyond the intentions of individual speakers in constituting the world as such. In a short but highly compact discussion of modern hermeneutics that is presented in *Interpretation Theory*, Ricoeur contrasts the special role of writing to what normally occurs in verbal dialogue: "Thanks to writing, man and only man has a world and not just a situation."<sup>15</sup> Writing has "spiritual implications" that emerge when material marks are substituted for oral discourse. While denying that speech *as such* can constitute a world, Ricoeur emphasizes the public aspect of writing and thus foregrounds the complex process through which meaning is socially negotiated.

Hence, to the degree that it can be interpreted and reinterpreted, writing frees us from the limitations of situational encounters that limit us to the relatively unambiguous utterances that constitute personal expression. In a brief aside that echoes Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the classical, Ricoeur reminds us of how various texts allow us to speak of a Greek "world" that does not correspond in its deeper meanings to what is historically past.<sup>16</sup> The specifically *literary* meaning of Ricoeur's phenomenology of world is evident in his appreciation of texts as historically mediated documents that acquire meaning only through a series of interpretations. The world of the reader is a social one to the degree that texts depend on communities in order to be interpreted. On the most basic level, writing and reading must be distinguished from verbal dialogue. Whatever comes down to us from the past has been mediated in a way that cannot conceal a basic discrepancy between an original situation and meanings that have been read into it. Moreover, this irreducible difference foregrounds the emergence of an underlying discontinuity: "The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading."<sup>17</sup>

Ricoeur, nonetheless, interprets the separation of the written word from authorial intentions as the precondition for *textual* interpretation. Interpretation becomes textual when the text becomes subject to further interpretations, that is, when an interpreter mediates between the sign and the object to which the sign refers. Ricoeur invokes this Peircean term and distinction in discussing how texts are interpreted according to the traditions of an entire community that assumes a dynamic relation to future time. Once again, in discussing the story of Oedipus, Ricoeur provides an interpretive model that goes beyond structuralism in suggesting how the whole narrative of origins can shape our response to what would otherwise be assigned a purely analytic meaning. From this standpoint, the story of Oedipus becomes a myth that is oriented "toward limit situations, toward the origin and the end, toward death, suffering, and sexuality."<sup>18</sup> The Oedipus myth is therefore more than the symbolic enactment of a peculiar fate but constitutes a sign that differently engages us as we interpret the outcome of both error and self-knowledge.

## III

In clarifying Ricoeur's argument that language surpasses itself in a moment of self-transcendence, and then in discussing further how the concept of world can serve ontologically as a grounding principle that includes references but is not restricted in its scope to a delimited set of meanings, we have come to a moment in our exposition when the theme of temporality must be taken up as a challenge to what might otherwise be identified with a static view of human knowledge. Ricoeur's modification of Heidegger's view of world to evoke texts, rather than purely verbal encounters, begs the question of how readers are implicated in consensual situations that define them existentially and also how the experience of truth is temporally situated. Ricoeur's interest in narrative was a logical outcome of his recognition that the link between language and world cannot be fully considered apart from the question of temporality. Moreover, while the phenomenological tradition offers rich if somewhat conflicting accounts of how temporality structures life experience, Ricoeur demonstrates through his reading of well-known sources how both Husserl and Heidegger strain the limits of phenomenology in setting forth dissimilar conceptions of time that prepare us for the "narrative turn" that his own work strongly exemplifies. Furthermore, after presenting us with a critical overview of this tradition in *Time and Narrative 3* (*Temps et Récit 3. Le temps raconté*, 1985), Ricoeur then proceeds to discuss how the literary reader provides us with a unique perspective on a peculiar world that *differs* from that of the text and, in this way, places a limit on the "fusion of horizons" that ideally occurs between text and reader. Finally, the importance of the narrator to the formation of narrative provides Ricoeur with an ontological basis for distinguishing personal identity from the identity of things, when conceived merely in terms of unchanging self-sameness.

Ricoeur's critical assessment of Husserl's work demonstrates that phenomenology arrived at the threshold of a hermeneutical approach to the problem of time, just as it provided a profoundly original basis for thinking about temporal experience. Ricoeur contends that in his analysis of a single tone that figures prominently in the lecture series, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Husserl provides a basis for conceiving of duration as something other than the point-like instant that would prevent us from grasping the role of "before" and "after" in a single continuum.<sup>19</sup> While implying that Husserl is already the precursor to a hermeneutical approach to time, Ricoeur also criticizes him for failing to recognize "the irreducibly metaphorical character of the most important terms upon which his description is based," so that the resources of ordinary language that only begin to emerge in the phenomenological account might have been more fully explored, if only they had been noticed.<sup>20</sup> However, there can be no doubt that Husserl achieves a great advance in demonstrating how the gaze converts the instant from a source-point into a limit, and in this way provides a basis for thinking the present as inseparable from the past: "The instant, considered apart from its power to begin a retentive series, is merely the result of abstracting from the continuity of this process."<sup>21</sup> Husserl's second major advance in this context is to explain how the past can be retained in memory *as if* it were a source-point, that is to say, as the



re-production of an earlier moment that is "produced" in time. "The result is that any moment in a series of present instants can be represented in the imagination as a source-point in the mode of 'as if'."<sup>22</sup> What this means is that a simple melody, for instance, can be retained in a quasi-present that becomes the center of its own set of retentions and protentions, and thus repeats a first hearing in its own time. The phenomenological structure of this quasi-present allows Ricoeur to discuss how the past can be maintained in historical consciousness, which enables us to remember and interpret what has already occurred.

However, Ricoeur's strongly positive overview of Husserl's contribution to the problem of time does not prevent him from turning to Heidegger for a very different account that also casts light on the traditions of phenomenology. In the former discussion, Ricoeur acknowledges that Husserl seems to run up against a certain limit when the question of expectation emerges as a counter to the system of protentions and retentions that constitutes temporal consciousness. Hence, expectation becomes an "event" that apparently exceeds the framework that defines phenomenology as a rigorous discipline: "It cannot be the counterpart of memory, which 'reproduces' a present experience, both intentional and retentional."<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur indicates that the role of language in *Sein und Zeit* offers the key to what is most original in that document, particularly as an attempt to surpass previous approaches to temporality. However, this special alternative to Husserlian method also encounters two basic difficulties when it comes to define itself as hermeneutical ontology. Ricoeur first contends that Heidegger's conception of being-as-a-whole strictly depends on the distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of being, which his own approach only permits us to affirm as a secondary phenomenon. While Heidegger seems well-equipped to include expectation in a conception of time that is open to the future as a privileged sphere of understanding, Ricoeur emphasizes that hermeneutical ontology is no less obligated to accept the present as a basic locus of concern: "As for the present, far from engendering the past and the future by multiplying itself, as in Augustine, it is the mode of temporality possessing the most deeply concealed authenticity."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Heidegger's indebtedness to phenomenology cannot conceal the gap between an internalized sense of time and a cosmological sense that becomes evident in the discourse on traces, marks and memorials that runs through his philosophical text, almost to the point of rupturing its precarious unity.

In confronting this second difficulty, Ricoeur is able to develop an argument in favor of a "third path" that would build upon previous advances and insights but would go beyond the aporias that encumbered all previous phenomenologies of time. In short, Ricoeur's reading of Heidegger enables him to identify hermeneutical ontology with a certain crisis and also to explain how this crisis might be resolved in a manner that opens up a new, and previously overlooked, philosophical option. On the one hand, Heidegger's notion of primordial temporality can be related to the possibility of a more authentic mode of being and requires a decisive confrontation with the ordinary conception of time that allegedly dominates everyday life. What this means, however, is that two conceptions of time are placed next to one another in an analysis of Dasein that does not initially privilege authentic over inauthentic

modes of existence. Ricoeur calls attention to the fact that *Sein und Zeit* integrates a hermeneutics of the trace that is hard to dissociate from a cosmological sense of time, which has a quasi-public significance just as it testifies to the enduring power of ordinary time in all spheres of human measurement.

It might be assumed that Heidegger should be able isolate the phenomenological conception of time through the exposition of the three *ek-stases*, and to preserve this conception as relatively uncontaminated when compared to what dominates everyday life experience. However, Ricoeur not only questions that this state of separation can be maintained but argues that the opposition between the two kinds of time is only intensified when Heidegger tries to displace “ordinary time” in his elevation of primordial time over inauthentic existence. Ricoeur often seems to contend that the concept of ordinary time is almost impossible to sustain to the degree that the single instant cannot be considered on its own, whereas original temporality always runs the risk of being contaminated.<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur significantly acknowledges the role of language in this act of displacement, which requires that we recognize “the fundamental distinction between an anonymous instant and a present defined by the instant of discourse that designates the present reflexively.”<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, what turns out to be decisive is the way that cosmological time, particularly as registered in scientific chronologies, continually threatens to interrupt the continuity of lived time, considered in phenomenological terms.

Having broached the question of language, Ricoeur then contends that Heidegger’s inability to reconcile these dissimilar conceptions of time is precisely what prevents him from taking up the problem of history as a special concern that offers the most credible basis for moving beyond a basic opposition within which *Sein und Zeit* unfolds. For Ricoeur, however, history is not reducible to either the subjective deliberations of a free subject or to the commemorative signs that testify to public order. In discussing the notion of the trace as it begins to emerge as a physical sign in a hermeneutical ontology, Ricoeur prepares us for the idea that history itself is not primarily a totality but more crucially a series of events that cannot be assimilated to a systemic whole. Just as the physical trace of another being can disrupt the settled topology of a country path, the traces of history are somehow “other” to whatever seems to be predetermined from a cognitive standpoint. Ricoeur pays homage to Emmanuel Lévinas in acknowledging that the trace must be opposed to what is radically self-contained and therefore constitutes an evasion of difference, dialogically conceived. Instead of expressing this difference in ultimately theological terms, however, Ricoeur predicates the existence of “a relative Other, a historical Other,” in terms of which “the remembered past is meaningful on the basis of an immemorial past.”<sup>27</sup> It remains to be considered how this relative other can produce a rift in a larger totality and prepare the entry of the historical into what otherwise would emerge as a mere break in the order of appearances.

We should not be surprised to discover that Ricoeur, at this point in his argument, should have recourse to the example of literature as a special discourse that clarifies the concept of “world” in terms of ideal meanings. The rift that is produced by the trace of writing constitutes the condition for the possibility of narrative itself, which cannot be encountered in the sphere of pure nature. Literature is not co-extensive

with narrative but celebrates the human capacity to invent temporal sequences that are imaginatively re-enacted whenever the reader approaches the text as a transformative occasion. Ricoeur describes the world-concept as an "event" that cannot be grasped mentally apart from the sense of time: "Each fictive temporal experience unfolds its world, and each of these worlds is singular, incomparable, unique."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in recounting how Wolfgang Iser adapts the phenomenology of Roman Ingarden in formalizing the act of reading as a "wandering viewpoint," Ricoeur introduces perpetual instability into the heart of textual experience, without, however, undermining the difference between the world of the text and that of the reader.<sup>29</sup> The opposition between both worlds returns us to the ontological version of Frege's concept of reference that Ricoeur presented earlier in his theory of metaphor.

Nevertheless, before more clearly stating how reference is rearticulated in this later, more hermeneutical context, we might consider for a moment how the world of the text and that of the reader approximate one another while remaining different. The ultimate horizon for considering the quasi-dialectical link between these two worlds is existential rather than literary in the narrow sense. While the world of the text is an ideal one that neutralizes the reader's relationship to practical life, reading provides only a temporary position within the fictive world that allows us to detach ourselves from the immediate concerns of everyday life: "Reading then becomes a place, itself unreal, where reflection takes pause."<sup>30</sup> In contrast to this scene of neutralization, whenever readers allow an original relationship to the world to be transformed through the act of reading, they themselves acquire a heightened sense of the real at the precise moment that reading becomes "something other than a place where they come to rest; it is a medium they cross through."<sup>31</sup> What this model of reading clearly provides is a framework for differentiating the world of the reader and that of the text so that the two worlds can be placed in relation to one another, rather than merged in a single identity. The crucial term here is temporal experience, since the opposition between the two worlds is only overcome when the life of the reader is animated with intentions that are analogous to those that the narrator has inscribed in the literary text.

In positing the co-existence of the world of the text and that of the reader, Ricoeur provides a more phenomenologically based conception of Gadamer's "fusion of horizons," which can be interpreted as a mediatory principle as well as a contribution to the hermeneutical critique of Absolute Idealism.<sup>32</sup> It is important to understand that the notion of a fusion between past and present does not occur without a remainder. On the contrary, Ricoeur no less than Gadamer contends that the past as revealed in any historical horizon can be thought as different from the present at the very moment that it is fused with it: "This idea of a temporal horizon as something that is both projected and separate, distinguished and included, brings about the dialecticizing of the idea of traditionality."<sup>33</sup> Tradition as the meeting-point between past and present is not to be understood as a mere "handing down" but as an appropriation that allows the past to work through the present. What is dialectical in this movement should not be confused with dialectics in the narrowly Platonic or modern Hegelian sense: hermeneutics is not based on a pre-ordained system of gradations that the subject must surmount as it ascends to a higher sphere of knowledge.

Tradition is conceived hermeneutically as a scene of language in which the experience of plurality comes before the question of truth. The nature of transmission from past to present does not allow us to position ourselves as the absolute origin of what we inherit. Tradition now has the significance of referring to many traditions to the degree that language itself opens up the possibility of both interpretation and reinterpretation: "For language is the great institution, the institution of institutions, that has preceded each and every one of us."<sup>34</sup>

The plurality of traditions suggests that our role as individuals in any conceivable narrative is strictly limited, just as it helps demonstrate that the meaning of narrative cannot be limited to the reading of literature. The question remains as to the identity of the narrator in any case, since the question of how narratives are constructed can only be asked if the possibility of free improvisation is in some sense available to us. The identity of the narrator, therefore, must be founded on the possibility that human beings can change in a manner that does not preclude constancy in time. While David Hume's refutation of substance allowed him to argue against the reality of the self as a unified entity, Ricoeur distinguishes the identity of the same (*idem*) from the identity of the self-same (*ipse*) in order to counter the view that this reality is no more than a substantialist illusion. Moreover, this crucial distinction allows us to articulate the identity of the narrator as ontologically distinct rather than as abstract and unclarified: "The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than a difference between a substantial or formal and narrative identity."<sup>35</sup> The identity of the narrator helps us understand how the gap between the world of the text and that of the reader can be reduced, if not overcome, since narratives are part of ordinary life experience as well as an essential aspect of literature.

#### IV

Ricoeur's approach to the meaning of narrative has taken us to the threshold of an issue that is central to the hermeneutical account of identity as it emerges in an ontological sense. We have learned how, in the phenomenological tradition, language involves self-transcendence and also that the concept of world can be interpreted as a transcendental one insofar as it involves more than an empirical familiarity with concrete objects. The need to move from the reading experience back to an experience of the life-world motivated us to inquire into the nature of tradition as a realm where interpretation engages "linguistic" understanding in an on-going process that both confirms the difference between past and present and also mediates between them. When tradition emerges in the form of many traditions, we become more aware of how the meaning of the past can be renegotiated, rather than simply presented to us as a settled body of interpretations that must be uncritically accepted. Particularly in such cases, the actual identity of the narrator might become a cause of dispute to the degree that intentions cease to be transparent in written documents that are subject to multiple interpretations, thus generating an "effective-history" that should not be confused with originally intended meanings. This situation of hermeneutical instability might seem to foreclose the possibility of ontological grounding. However, in

inquiring into the identity of the narrator, Ricoeur returns to the issue of grounds in broaching the question of "who" speaks in any narrative that concerns the mediation of past and present.

While Ricoeur's conception of the narrator presupposes the distinction between two forms of identity, we need to focus more strictly on the phenomenology of the self in order to determine how this distinction operates on the level of human action. In *Oneself as Another* (*Soi-même comme un autre*, 1990), Ricoeur discusses how analytical approaches to narrative might be critically assessed and then related to a hermeneutics that is indebted to Aristotle and Kant as well as to phenomenology. After providing an overview of how the Aristotelian tradition attempts to link action and agency on a practical basis, Ricoeur exposes the basically aporetic structure of this nexus in the modern debate on ascription and attribution, and then goes on to propose an alternative that evokes Kantian principles but also goes far beyond them. This alternative is "dialectical" in the broad sense and consists of two stages. The first stage is "disjunctive" and can be clarified in terms of Kant's distinction between the causality of nature and that of freedom. Kant specifies that the appearances of the world do not entirely derive from empirical reality but suggest how a departure from the order of nature occurs whenever free acts spring into being: "To explain these appearances it is necessary to assume that there is also another causality, that of freedom".<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur contends that versions of this dichotomous phase can be found in the analytical tradition when G. E. M. Anscombe, Donald Davidson and Arthur Danto present conceptions of agency that cannot be traced back to naturalistic assumptions concerning how human events begin.

In following through on Kant's argument, Ricoeur does not contend that human actions involve an "absolute" beginning but that they begin as "relatively first," which means that they entail the partial interruption of a continuum without, however, breaking with the order of nature itself. It is true that, from the standpoint of empirical causality, human actions involve a spontaneous attempt to introduce a new series of appearances that does not derive from nature. Nevertheless, Ricoeur reminds us that Kant basically operates in the privative mode when he gives us the example of a man rising from his chair in a single moment in order to explain how our actions are *not* reducible to the course of nature. Thus, it is only "in respect of causality though not in time" that human actions can be said to be absolutely free.<sup>37</sup> As long as the perspective of time is firmly held in place, human actions only admit of having relative independence and the broader context within which they unfold must be taken into account whenever we attempt to understand their mundane significance. Ricoeur introduces the perspective of finitude at the precise moment that human actions acquire a relative meaning that refutes the radical originality of whatever we succeed in doing: "The distinction between a beginning *of* the world and a beginning *in* the world is essential to the notion of a practical beginning taken from the point of view of its function of completeness".<sup>38</sup> The perspective of human finitude is opposed to that of an absolute beginning and therefore functions as the antithesis in a basic antinomy. Once the stated opposition is presented in a way that qualifies the reach of each term, we can maintain that the thesis and the antithesis are true on different levels without being contradictory.

However, the “conjunctive” phase of Ricoeur’s analysis demonstrates how the rather conventional dichotomy between Kant and Aristotle, or deontology and teleology in matters of ethical experience, is difficult to sustain to the degree that a movement back into the broader context of life necessarily follows this earlier, more detached phase. Kant helps us understand how the practical concept of freedom is founded on transcendental freedom, which in the sensible world is the cause of appearances and can be regarded from two points of view: “Regarded as the causality of a thing in itself, it is intelligible in its action; regarded as the causality of an appearance in the world of sense, it is sensible in its effects”.<sup>39</sup> Kant’s notion of an intelligible character brings together both types of causality in a practical field that Ricoeur identifies with the term *initiative*, which is conceived as the unity of the phenomenon in the field of acting: “Initiative, we shall say, is an intervention of the agent which effectively causes changes in the world”.<sup>40</sup> Initiative is already implicit, if not explicit, in Aristotle’s conception of how an agent becomes the contributing cause to the forming of disposition and character. It would seem, therefore, that the return to a more classical notion of causality might be combined hermeneutically with the Kantian notion of bi-causal intervention, which links internal and external causality in a single constellation.

It might be objected that hermeneutics has traditionally opposed explanation and understanding in a manner that would relegate external causality to the sphere of scientific cognition in contrast to the inner sphere of pure knowing. Ricoeur, however, develops the hermeneutical aspects of initiative as the confluence of two types of causality in revisiting Georg Von Wright’s model of causal intervention in the operation of dynamic systems. Instead of envisioning intervention as an external affair, Von Wright proposes that we interpret the moment of contact that alters the flow of a given system as the outcome of a practical engagement, rather than as the result of a purely conscious deliberation. In such a situation, two types of causality are at work, but the interweaving of system and teleology during the moment of intervention cannot overcome a basic separation as long as we remain within the limits of a certain discourse. Ricoeur nonetheless contends that in order to express the possibility of this active confluence, we have to resort to “a type of discourse different from the one we employ here,” so that an affirmation of human agency can be combined with a bodily sense that informs the act of volition in each and every case.<sup>41</sup> This very different discourse would have its basis in the preontological apprehension of being that informs our practical comportment in the world: “The passage from the disjunctive to the conjunctive phase of the dialectic has no aim other than to carry out on a reflective and critical level what was already recomprehended in this assurance of being able to do something”.<sup>42</sup>

Ricoeur’s hermeneutical recasting of the Kantian problematic can be related on a fundamental level to the theory of narrative that enabled him to develop an original approach to the phenomenology of time. Ricoeur uses the term “discordant concordance” in attempting to capture the contradictory aspects of narrative, which are present whenever a story is devised to synthesize a heterogeneous subject-matter. The role of the plot in literary works clearly illuminates a contradictory situation: “It is a source of discordance inasmuch as it springs up, and a source of concordance

inasmuch as it allows the story to advance."<sup>43</sup> Narrative demonstrates how certain contradictions can be resolved in a manner that recalls Kant's method for resolving the third antinomy, which addresses the thesis that an event can begin in time and an equally plausible antithesis that an event can have infinite duration. Works of literature most clearly show us how a certain character can initiate a series of actions that are personally definitive, just as the plot structures the literary work according to beginning, middle and end in a manner that is entirely consistent with the emergence of free initiatives: "By making the initiative belonging to the character to coincide in this way with the beginning of the action, narrative satisfies the thesis without violating the antithesis".<sup>44</sup> Of course, the function of initiative in the actions of characters is not something that we discover in literary works alone; on the contrary, the conjunctive aspect of our quasi-dialectic should remind us that initiatives are already part of life before they are embedded in narratives that assume the form of writing.

We still need to determine whether or not the agent who is capable of taking specific initiatives might be capable as well of acting in relation to others, perhaps even in concert with others in the space of a shared world. Ricoeur approaches this problem from two different standpoints in suggesting how ethics must integrate mutuality and reciprocity in achieving validity.<sup>45</sup> Aristotle and Lévinas provide us with partial insights into what constitutes an ethical life, since the classical conception of friendship and the religious idea of justice contribute in different ways to a balanced understanding of human agency. On the one hand, Ricoeur derives from Aristotle the idea of an ethics of reciprocity which, through the example of friendship, offers a positive conception of living together. Friendship places us on the path of justice insofar as it entails reciprocity, which is linked to the achievement of equality that must be present whenever human beings form a plurality in any historical and political setting. From Lévinas, Ricoeur adopts a concern for goodness that is perhaps more implicit than explicit in the religious perspective that is introduced when an asymmetrical relationship between Self and Other opens up the possibility of a "summoning to responsibility" that constitutes the meaning of ethics itself. The singular being who hears and receives a divine injunction would not be capable of responding to the call if it did not presuppose a dialectic of give and take in a face-to-face encounter. If the agent's "capacity for giving in return were not freed by the other's very initiative," the injunction would fail to inspire responsible action.<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur argues in this same context that the agent must be able to draw upon an available "resource of goodness" in order to respond in a positive manner to an injunction that comes from the outside.

In confronting the social implications of an ethics of responsibility, Ricoeur demonstrates how self-transcendence occurs through a process that involves language in a complex movement that engages the other person. Aristotle's notion of mutuality already contained elements of substitutability, reversibility and similitude that constitute the heart of this process, but the importance of discourse to this three-fold unity cannot be underestimated. Ricoeur contends that the basis for this discursive unity lies in the sphere of practical activity, rather than in the realm

of pure thought, and that the encounter with the other person that it entails is not incidental to a process that might be considered on its own:

What language teaches, precisely as practice, is verified by all practices. The agents and patients of an action are caught up in relationships of exchange which, like language, join together the reversibility of roles and the nonsubstitutability of persons. Solicitude adds the dimension of value, whereby each person is *irreplaceable* in our affection and our esteem. In this respect, it is in experiencing the irreparable loss of the loved other that we learn, through the transfer of the other onto ourselves, the irreplaceable character of our own life. It is first for the other that I am irreplaceable.<sup>47</sup>

Mortality thus becomes a source of solicitude when my own self-esteem is experienced as similar to my feeling towards the other. A paradox arises when I consider how an exchange is possible at the place where the other becomes irreplaceable. What seems to be problematic from a certain standpoint, however, becomes less so when I consider how my ability to take initiatives and value my own deeds can be extended to the other by way of comparison. The analogical nature of the relationship between self and other thus produces a keen sense of reciprocity. This peculiar equivalency entails the mutual esteem of self and other that preserves alterity without undermining the possibility of relative accord.

Finally, we might wonder if this analogical relationship between self and other is simply established on principle or on the basis of some internal mechanism that operates in separate regions, which could be bridged only on an occasional basis. In dealing with this problem, Ricoeur refers us to Greek tragedy in order to underscore the role of feeling in solicitude. Tragedy instructs us by demonstrating that the pain of others can be shared, and it achieves this most effectively when it reminds us that the friend's weakness can offer us something that is greatly in excess of our own reserves of strength. What Aristotle evoked in using the term "disposition" applies to feelings when interpreted as affects, which merge with the specific motivations that give life its depth and wholeness. It is through feelings, rather than on the basis of an abstract sense of duty per se, that the relationship between self and other acquires a spontaneous quality that allows for genuine solicitude: "For it is indeed feelings that are revealed in the self by the other's suffering, as well by the moral injunction coming from the other, feelings spontaneously directed toward others."<sup>48</sup> The tragic poets who provide us with spectacles of human suffering do not simply chronicle a vanished past; on the contrary, they invite us to witness aspects of our own lives in the actions of characters and in the broader forces that shape the human world, both near and far.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1989. *The conflict of interpretations*, 77. London: Athlone Press.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 115.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Sluga has argued that the basic context for reading Frege's seminal paper, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," is not empirical in the narrow sense but broadly Kantian. According to this somewhat revisionary account, Frege's crucial paper was originally written with regard to a transcendental argument that has been overlooked in recent intellectual history:

The claim that after 1891 the name/bearer relationship is the paradigm of Frege's semantics and that his theory of sense and reference is primarily meant as a theory of referring expressions has the effect of assigning a basic role to empirical objects. But it seems doubtful that such objects could ever have played an important role in Frege's thought. He does not regard empirical objects as items of acquaintance that can be simply named or described.

See Sluga, H. 1980. *Gottlob Frege*, 159. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. This reading is particularly important when applied to Ricoeur's adaptation of Frege to the task of clarifying Heidegger's notion of world. If Frege was never *primarily* interested in the question of the object's external existence, then the interpretation of world as reference does not have to be devoid of transcendental import.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1977b. *The rule of metaphor*, 74. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 199–200.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and time*, 83–91. Albany: State University of New York Press. In contrasting his own concept of world to that of Descartes, Heidegger develops the basis for a phenomenological hermeneutics that takes Dasein as the starting-point for an original inquiry into the meaning of being. Ricoeur's adaptation of the world-concept would be hermeneutical as well, but it would emphasize how the question of being allows the self to inhabit the world ontologically. Moreover, in the long run, Ricoeurian ontology is less concerned with the difference between being and beings, or with the way that being has been sent to us historically, than with the question of how human identity negotiates the interface between being and time.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. 1976. *Interpretation theory*, 36. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 288–90.

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. 1991. *From texts to action II*, 107. London: Athlone Press.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 120–21.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1985. *Time and narrative*, vol. 3, 26. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur's reading of Heidegger's masterwork compares in some ways to that of Derrida, Jacques. 1982. *Ousia and Gramme: Note on a Note from Being and Time*. In *Margins of philosophy*, 29–67. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Both philosophers contend that Heidegger's attempt to isolate a "vulgar" conception of time from a more "authentic" conception is problematic both methodologically and on the level of hermeneutical consistency. Derrida, however, argues that Heidegger reinstates presence after attempting to reduce Aristotle's time to the metaphysics of a punctual present, whereas Ricoeur contends that Heidegger's acceptance of conflicting conceptions of time is what prevents him from grasping the mediatory potential of narrative.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 3, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 179.
- <sup>32</sup> Gadamer argues that historical consciousness, thoughtfully considered, is never a simple reflection occurring within the closed horizon of the present but that it is always already a listening that accepts the past on its own terms. Listening is the basis for tradition, properly conceived, which allows the past to be interpreted as a “text” that cannot be assimilated to the present any more than it can serve as a substitute for the past. The hermeneutical “fusion of horizons” is thus an accomplishment of historical consciousness that should not be confused with either Hegelian modes of dialectical assimilation or late nineteenth-century positivism. For details, see Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1991. *Truth and method*, 304–307. New York: Crossroad.
- <sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* 3, p. 221.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 221.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 246.
- <sup>36</sup> Kant, Immanuel. 1965. *Critique of pure reason*, 409. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 414.
- <sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1994. *Oneself as another*, 105. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>39</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 467.
- <sup>40</sup> Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 109.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 111.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 112.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 142.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 147.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 180–194.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 189.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 193.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 191–92.

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