Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and Human Science

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December 8, 2007
Hermeneutics, or the interpretation of texts, is a common methodological approach used in Human Science. Hermeneutic knowledge is an understanding of phenomena according to a particular context. Far from the Enlightenment ideal of objective, universal knowledge, the “science” of interpretation readily admits a certain relativism. In Methodology for the Human Sciences, Polkinghorne (1983) states that “Paul Ricoeur is the most important contemporary writer proposing that hermeneutics is the appropriate methodological position for the human sciences” (p. 233). What is unique about Ricoeur’s approach and how can it be used to further the project of Human Science? Polkinghorne continues, “His position appreciates and incorporates the achievements of the behavioral and social sciences, while presenting an enlarged notion of research that addresses meaningful human action” (p. 233).

This paper relies on the assumption that the work of Human Science is an attempt to understand the meaning of human experience, and for Ricoeur this is done through the study of discourse, both written and verbal. This essay will be an inquiry into what Ricoeur means by ‘text’ and an examination of Ricoeurian hermeneutics.

Texts are products with particular cultural origins and, most importantly, with implications for human relationships and actions. Texts are not groundless or static. The birth and mediation of a text takes place temporally within a community. A reader confined to the limits of a text has no criteria for choosing among conflicting interpretations, hence, so-called postmodern relativism, which accords all interpretations supposedly equal status. However, if texts are understood culturally – as belonging to a particular community – they become grounded and achieve a new level of significance. The text can be distanced from its original context and emancipated from its author, thereby assuming a dynamic life of its own. This autonomy frees
the text to be continually reinterpreted. In this sense the text is living, being constantly re-actualized, re-interpreted, and re-contextualized. In this process the reader, as part of a community, plays the central role, initiating an appropriation of the text and drawing meaning from it.

Inseparable from his discussion of texts is Ricoeur’s notion of hermeneutics, the way texts are interpreted and consequently understood. Knowledge is not representation, as was the case in modernity, but transformation. Ricoeur believes that we are interpreting beings. We interpret in a particular fashion based on the culture and tradition to which we belong. (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 17)

The critics of hermeneutic methodology will often cite the problematic hermeneutic circle: the whole is interpreted in light of the various parts and vice versa, rendering knowledge unobtainable. However, as we interact with texts we develop what Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutical consciousness” (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 306). Understanding may shift and be re-interpreted. Truth (or, knowledge) is dynamic rather than static.

Discourse is not limited to written texts. For Ricoeur, the fact that we say our actions renders them meaningful. Ricoeur’s self is a self that speaks, and speech is the action that renders the rest of human existence intelligible. This is another way out of the hermeneutic circle, rejecting the claim that the knower cannot have access to knowledge while standing at a point within the system. While not strictly objective, this knowledge is nonetheless informative and constructive. “Action and agent belong to the same conceptual schema, containing notions such as circumstances, intentions, motives, deliberations, voluntary or involuntary motions, passiveness, constraints, intended or unintended results, and so on.” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 51). Speaking, as a creative act, is simultaneously self-discovery and self-constitution. This act,
however, is not creation *ex nihlo*, it takes place against the background of language embedded in history, another point of grounding for our threatening hermeneutic circle.

The self enters into discourse by speaking or writing, through narration. This translates into an action that enters into time and space. Language is made up of references, which are the bond between discourse and world. Ricoeur demonstrates the integration of interpretation into the process of signification. The presence of the other is required for interlocution and the whole process is thus placed in a communicative setting. Language is the method of communication and the process by which data acquires contextual meaning.

Note the proximity of the words *communication* and *community*. Language in the context of community functions as the link between human understanding and reality. This is not to say that everything can be reduced to language, nor does it negate the possibility of valid non-linguistic experience. It simply affirms the way humans act and interact and thereby both constitute and understand reality, one of the basic projects of Human Science. “There is no world without a self who finds itself in it and acts in it; there is no self without a world that is practicable in some fashion” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 58). The world, the self, and meaning are all contingent entities.

Ricoeur, in his extensive and prolific career, eventually develops his notion of phenomenological hermeneutics as a way of moving completely beyond both objectivism and relativism. Humans by nature are relational and subjective beings (hence the fault with a purely “objective” approach, as treated in depth earlier in this course) yet philosophy without some sort of grounding would be useless and so-called “knowledge” worthless. Phenomenological hermeneutics embraces the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment values but also seeks to
reconstruct a “theory of inquiry” without preaching complete cultural, intellectual, or spiritual relativism.

When discussing the impact of hermeneutic methodology on Human Science, the underlying assumption is that data is meaningless if not interpreted, that all knowledge is contextualized. Evidence is allowed to be ambiguous, but takes on meaningful shape through interpretation. One reason this is allowed (which distinguishes Human Science from other sciences) is that the goal is not to predict behavior, only to arrive at understanding. The idea of reading texts is fundamental because human actions can also be “read” and interpreted in a similar manner (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 234).

This flexibility in Human Science should be cause for enthusiasm among its practitioners. It is a process; it might be messy and ambiguous, and never finalized. Any accepted interpretation is always open to further scrutiny. Texts are mutable; they change as we change. “Interpretation leads to the understanding of the meaning of human action, the object of human science. However, meaning takes place in a social context…Ricoeur calls for a dialectical movement between looking at the uniqueness of an event and at the social context which forms it.” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 235). Embedded in the practice of Human Science is a call to diligence concerning the way we interpret meaning and significance in social context.
References


