

Article

Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Symbols: A Critical Dialectic of Suspicion and Faith

Alexis Deodato S. Itao

Introduction

Critical theory, which started in Germany through the members of the Frankfurt School¹ in the early 1920's, has inspired a number of non-German philosophical schools and philosophers to establish their own unique critical theories. Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), who is one of the most celebrated contemporary philosophers in France, is one of those who fashioned a "unique version of critical theory."² David Kaplan reveals that Ricoeur is even "committed to a conception of philosophy as critical theory resulting in personal and social transformation and progressive politics."³ However, Ricoeur's philosophy as a whole has mainly been considered hermeneutical, that is, one concerned mostly with questions involving interpretation. Emerita Quito ascertains, for instance, that "Ricoeur's entire philosophy finally centered on hermeneutics."⁴ Likewise, Don Ihde confirms how hermeneutics eventually became the "guiding thread which unites" all of Ricoeur's diverse interests.⁵ Indeed, Ricoeur devoted much of his writings in

¹ Douglas Kellner relates that "the term 'Frankfurt School' refers to the work of the members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) which was established in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923 as the first Marxist-oriented research centre affiliated with a major German university. Under its director, Carl Grünberg, the institute's work in the 1920s tended to be empirical, historical, and oriented towards problems of the European working-class movement." "From the mid-1930s," Kellner continues, "the institute referred to its work as the 'critical theory of society'... [an] attempt to found a radical interdisciplinary social theory rooted in Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, historical materialism, and the critique of political economy and revolution theory." See Douglas Kellner, "Frankfurt School and Philosophy," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies*, ed. by Constantin V. Boundas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 444-456.

² David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Emerita S. Quito, *The Philosophers of Hermeneutics* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1990), 85.

⁵ Don Ihde, introduction to Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. by Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), ix-x.

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dealing with the problems of hermeneutics. No wonder why he is one of the “giants of hermeneutic philosophy.”⁶

Since Ricoeur has largely been identified with hermeneutics, it is therefore without any surprise that he is very seldom associated with critical theory – a regrettable case since his hermeneutics actually holds the access to his critical theory.⁷ That is why Kaplan himself, who authors Ricoeur’s Critical Theory, laments how until today “very little attention has been given to [Ricoeur’s] conception of the relationship between hermeneutics and critical theory.”⁸

In line with Kaplan’s remark, this paper will explore the critical side of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics within the sphere of his interpretation of symbols. It is hoped that through this venture some of the aspects of the frequently ignored, disregarded, and forgotten relationship between Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and critical theory, will be brought to light.

The Meaning of Symbols and the Need for Interpretation

To better appreciate the totality of Ricoeur’s hermeneutical project, it is important to begin with a brief acquaintance with his conception of man. Following Heidegger,⁹ Ricoeur conceived of man as a linguistic being whereby it is in and through language that man expresses himself and manifests his being; in other words, it is by means of language that man relates with other beings and with the world.¹⁰ “Man then,” Ricoeur contends, “seems to be no more than language.”¹¹ The various linguistic expressions that man creates in a way define him. That is why, in general terms, language serves as the route to self-understanding.¹² And yet, language itself poses some problems. No single language is simple; as it were, language by nature is complex. The vast array of words that constitute a certain language alone are by and large polysemic.¹³ In any case, Ihde recounts that “although every word is already latently rich in polysemy, for Ricoeur the hermeneutics of language centers upon certain

⁶ Don Ihde, “Paul Ricoeur’s Place in the Hermeneutic Tradition,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. by Lewis Edwin Hahn (Illinois: Open Court, 1995), 59.

⁷ Cf. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) is one of the most important contemporary philosophers from Germany, known the world over for his contributions in the fields of phenomenology, metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, hermeneutics, aesthetics, and even theology. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (London: Harper and Row Publishing, 1972); idem, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

¹⁰ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 256.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹² “Language... is mediation; it is the *medium*, the ‘milieu,’ in which and through which the subject (man) posits himself.” *Ibid.*, 256.

¹³ “All words used in ordinary language have more than one meaning.” Ricoeur, “The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem,” in *ibid.*, 76.

privileged words, those of the symbolic word.”¹⁴ So there, “the location of the hermeneutic problem for Ricoeur takes its specific shape in words which have symbolic significance.”¹⁵ That explains why, in Ricoeur’s original¹⁶ usage, hermeneutics is primarily the interpretation of symbols.

What, then, are symbols?

In his own definition, Ricoeur stresses:

I define ‘symbol’ as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first.¹⁷

At the outset, a symbol is any structure of signification because every symbol is a sign or a particular linguistic expression that expresses, conveys, or communicates a meaning.¹⁸ However, while every symbol is a sign, “not every sign is a symbol.”¹⁹ Whereas mere signs hold only manifest meanings, symbols on the contrary carry much deeper, latent meanings behind the patent ones. This is why opacity characterizes all symbols because their latent meaning is not directly manifested and hence, not immediately discernible. In any event, “this opacity constitutes the depth of the symbol”²⁰ and indicates that every symbol is “an enigma” in the sense that they are something like a puzzle which challenges the interpreting intelligence to penetrate into its depth “slowly and with difficulty.”²¹

Moreover, a symbol’s indirect, secondary, and figurative meaning can be apprehended only through the first because its primary meaning is what serves as the gateway towards its secondary meaning.²² That means that symbols are those signs possessing double or even multiple meanings but whose latent meanings are accessible only by means of the patent ones.

¹⁴ Ihde, introduction to Ricoeur, *ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur later in his writings redefined hermeneutics from symbolic interpretation to textual interpretation. The over-all presentation of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics in this paper, however, covers only his earlier conception of hermeneutics as “the interpretation of symbols.” Hence, this paper does not discuss hermeneutics as “the interpretation of texts.” For details on his later conception of hermeneutics, see Ricoeur, *From Text To Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. by John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 13. All the words and passages rendered in italics in this paper are italicized by Ricoeur himself in the primary texts.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 18.

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Going further, Ricoeur's treatment of symbols eventually and inevitably leads to his treatment of interpretation because "where symbols are involved, interpretation becomes necessary."²³ Symbols and interpretation, so to speak, are "correlative concepts"²⁴ inasmuch as "the symbol gives rise to thought."²⁵

So what is interpretation?

Highlighting his very own definition, Ricoeur declares:

Interpretation... is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.²⁶

In plain language, interpretation is simply the process of deciphering the meaning of symbols. It arises out of the need to make sense out of symbols. Its goal is therefore to have the hidden meaning of symbols uncovered, brought to light, deciphered, and understood. That is why Ricoeur himself "decided to define, i.e. limit, the notions of symbol and interpretation through one another."²⁷

The Hermeneutic Conflict: Suspicion versus Faith

Albeit every symbol calls for interpretation, no single method of interpretation is sufficient to completely uncover the real meaning of a symbol. "There is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis," Ricoeur claims, "but only disparate and opposed theories concerning the rules of interpretation."²⁸ As a result, there arises a conflict of interpretations.

This conflict of interpretations represents two opposite polarities: on one pole, there is the hermeneutics that demystifies and reduces any form of illusions that cloud over the real meanings of symbols; on the other, there is the hermeneutics that seeks to recover and restore the real meanings of symbols. These two opposite polarities provide for hermeneutics as a whole a "double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience."²⁹

Consequently, it is by virtue of their underlying motivations that the two opposite polarities are called the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith respectively. Thus on the whole there is in hermeneutics

²³ Quito, *op cit.*, 85.

²⁴ "There is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest." Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 13.

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 347.

²⁶ Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 13.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

this double possibility: the possibility to interpret symbols with suspicion on one hand, and the possibility to interpret the same with faith on the other.³⁰

The first possibility in hermeneutics then is to proceed with an “exercise of suspicion.”³¹ But which particular symbol are we going to take as our starting point?

Ricoeur avers that we begin our suspicion over consciousness itself, or more precisely, over the “so-called immediate consciousness.”³² The foremost reason behind is that immediate consciousness represents the problematic cogito or the self-asserting subject in the metaphysics of Descartes.³³ The cogito, Ricoeur relates, is “mediated by the entire universe of signs.”³⁴ Naturally, it is necessary to first take into account these signs before the cogito can assert itself. In other words, the only way for the cogito to fully comprehend itself is by “deciphering its expressions.”³⁵ This means “that the short path of the intuition of the self by the self is closed... only the long path of interpretation of signs is open.”³⁶

The main problem is that the cogito is a solipsistic and narcissistic subject. It claims that it can directly understand itself even if it bypasses its expressions.³⁷ But as Ricoeur argues,

the pure act of the *cogito*, insofar as it posits itself absolutely, is only an abstract and empty truth, as vain as it is invincible. This positing of the *cogito* remains to be mediated by the totality of the world of signs and by the interpretation of these signs. This long detour is, precisely, suspicion.³⁸

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 18.

³³ René Descartes (1596-1650), regarded as the Father of Modern Philosophy, considers metaphysics as the core philosophical discipline upon which all the other sciences are rooted. His entire metaphysical project is encapsulated in the Latin expression he popularized: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (literally “I think, therefore I am” but sometimes also translated as “I think, therefore I exist”). This assertion implies that insofar as the activity of thinking is present, there is existence. In other words, the existing individual is a thinking subject. That is why, in later references, the word *cogito* has simply come to mean “the thinking subject.” Now as a thinking subject, the *cogito* is at the same time a conscious subject, that is, one conscious of the fact that it exists. Consciousness is therefore characteristic of the *cogito*. Hence where there is the *cogito*, there is consciousness; similarly, where there is consciousness, there is also the *cogito*. That explains why consciousness represents the *cogito*.

³⁴ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 265.

³⁵ Ricoeur, “Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture,” in *ibid.*, 149.

³⁶ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *ibid.*, 264-265.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

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The hermeneutics of suspicion, then, invalidates the cogito's solipsistic claim of self-understanding. It likewise renders as "false consciousness"³⁹ immediate consciousness because immediate consciousness is representative of the pretentious cogito. So what suspicion does is not really to deny the existence of consciousness but its immediacy, that is, "its pretension to know itself completely from the very beginning, its narcissism."⁴⁰

Three renowned thinkers, namely, Marx,⁴¹ Nietzsche,⁴² and Freud,⁴³ had already considered immediate consciousness as false consciousness. Ricoeur hails them as "the three masters of suspicion" because they wanted "to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness."⁴⁴ The first master of suspicion was Marx. One of Marx's goals was that of liberating the people from the bondage of religion. "Religion," he argues, "is the opium of the people."⁴⁵ Because religion is such, it creates multifarious illusions in the minds of the people, making them believe that the miseries in life must be borne with resignation and serenity because salvation and glory await those who suffer without qualms. But in Marx's belief, there is no glory in living a miserable life; it is an illusion to wait for a salvation that will never come. As such, life's miseries must not be taken in kindly; rather, miseries are supposed to be eliminated from life and so, religion must be eliminated.⁴⁶ Second was Nietzsche. Like Marx, Nietzsche also made his own critique against religion. "What Nietzsche wants," Ricoeur remarks, "is the increase of man's power, the restoration of his force."⁴⁷ For this reason, all that Nietzsche had for religion was contempt because all it does is to discourage men from attaining power and encourage them to be contented in weakness and fragility instead. Moreover, Nietzsche made it known that the so-called "virtues" that religion promotes like meekness, gentleness, humility, submissiveness, etc. are all plain reflections of "slave morality."⁴⁸ "Thus Nietzsche unmasked religion," attests G.D. Robinson, "to reveal it as the refuge of the weak."⁴⁹

³⁹ Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II," in *ibid.*, 324.

⁴¹ Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) was an eminent German political philosopher whose writings inspired the main ideas of 20th century communism that first arose in Soviet Russia and subsequently in different parts of the world.

⁴² Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) was another German philosopher who became a huge influence to the tradition of existentialism. He was also popular for his criticisms against Christianity, most markedly for his widely-quoted dictum "God is dead."

⁴³ Sigmund Schlomo Freud (1856-1939) was an Austrian neuropsychologist most famous throughout the world as the founder of psychoanalysis or the psychoanalytic theory.

⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx quoted by G.D. Robinson, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique," in <<http://www.gongfa.com/robinsonlike.htm>>, 23 February 2008.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 35.

⁴⁸ G.D. Robinson, "Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique," in <<http://www.gongfa.com/robinsonlike.htm>>, 23 February 2008.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Last was Freud. Not unlike Marx and Nietzsche before him, Freud also lambasted religion. In his demystification of religion, Freud disclosed that it is no more than a mere outward show of men's inner "nostalgia for the father"⁵⁰ – for a father image who is always there to run to – and which indicates a deep-seated "desire for protection and consolation."⁵¹ In other words, Freud believed that religion does not really offer something supernatural but only a natural "compensation for the harshness of life."⁵²

And so Ricoeur touched upon the three masters of suspicion not for their forthright criticisms against religion per se, but more because behind their criticisms, "all three begin with suspicion concerning false consciousness, and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering."⁵³ Ricoeur thus credited Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud for having given birth to the hermeneutics of suspicion. All three uniquely developed the hermeneutics of suspicion.

Moreover, the hermeneutics of suspicion is also considered as a hermeneutics of demystification. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in fact "represent three convergent procedures of demystification."⁵⁴ But what the hermeneutics of suspicion demystifies and puts to light is not only the falsity of immediate consciousness but also the very thing which accounts for this falsity itself. By and large, what falsify consciousness are the layers of illusions and prejudices that mask the genuine cogito or the "ego of the ego cogito."⁵⁵ For this reason, the hermeneutics of suspicion involves "unmasking", "reducing", and "destroying" these various illusions "to deconstruct the false cogito, to undertake the ruin of the idols of the cogito."⁵⁶ As such, the hermeneutics of suspicion is also a form of "iconoclasm," that is, the destruction and elimination of the presence of idols.⁵⁷

All in all the whole point of this laborious exercise of suspicion is to show that immediate consciousness, the false cogito, "is at the same time true symbol."⁵⁸ "Thus the idols must die," Ricoeur insists, "so that symbols may live."⁵⁹ Here, at end of suspicion, is the possibility of the hermeneutics of faith which aims at the recollection and recovery of meanings in symbols.

The hermeneutics of faith, standing opposite to the hermeneutics of suspicion, is characterized by an attitude of openness and willingness to listen

⁵⁰ Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 459.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 458.

⁵³ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 17.

⁵⁶ Ricoeur, "The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology," in *ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

⁵⁸ Ricoeur, "Original Sin: A Study in Meaning," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 270.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 531.

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to what the symbols say.⁶⁰ Ricoeur's use of the word "faith" to designate this particular hermeneutics is intentional. As he explains,

The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith. What faith? No longer, to be sure, the first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has gone criticism, postcritical faith... It is a rational faith, for it interprets; but it is a faith because it seeks, through interpretation, a second naïveté. Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, of recollection, of restoration of meaning. "Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe" – such is its maxim; and its maxim is the "hermeneutic circle" itself of believing and understanding.⁶¹

Ricoeur thus clarified that the hermeneutics of faith is a hermeneutics whose operation is basically governed by the act of believing, or simply, by the belief that the symbol which calls for interpretation is saying something truthful, meaningful, and worthwhile. Obviously, no meaning can be recovered without the prior act of believing. That is why, the hermeneutics of faith is also known as the "hermeneutics of belief" because it is a hermeneutics that "hears", or better yet, "listens to" the meaning given out by the symbol.⁶²

Furthermore, this believing that is the mark of faith signifies not only listening and openness, but also "obedience" to what the symbol says.⁶³ Thus it proceeds by restoring, recovering, and recollecting the real meaning of the symbol. This makes this hermeneutics in a way akin to the phenomenology of religion which deals with sacred symbols which are believed to be carriers of truth.⁶⁴ The phenomenology of religion's task includes the "restoration of the sacred;"⁶⁵ as such, it demands faith in order to fulfill its task. Indubitably, it is solely by faith that the sacred symbols become the pathway to the Sacred, to the Wholly Other.⁶⁶ Hence, the sacred symbols always call for belief.

Aside from the phenomenology of religion, Ricoeur also modeled the hermeneutics of faith upon Rudolf Bultmann's⁶⁷ style of Biblical exegesis, that

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶² Ihde, introduction to Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, xxv.

⁶³ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 331.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 530-531.

⁶⁷ Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884-1976) was a noted German Protestant theologian and New Testament scholar. He was Heidegger's colleague at the University of Marburg where both taught together in the early 1920's. Bultmann remained in Marburg until 1951 while Heidegger transferred to Freiburg in 1927.

is, upon the hermeneutics of demythologization⁶⁸ which “consists in a new use of hermeneutics... [by means of] boring under the literal meaning [of mythical symbols].”⁶⁹ Primarily intended as a method of Biblical exegesis, demythologization is essentially an endeavor to capture the “kerygma” or the divine message found in Sacred Scriptures that needs proclamation.⁷⁰ Essentially, the kerygma always demands to be listened to. For that, there is always a need for faith in order to fully heed its message.

So like the phenomenology of religion and Bultmann’s demythologization, the hermeneutics of faith is a hermeneutics that is constantly attentive to symbols in order to recover, restore, and reinstate their real meanings. It is a hermeneutics that does not cease in believing and understanding that symbols continually offer a truth that needs to be obeyed, embraced, and cherished.

Reflection, Dialectic, and the Resolution of the Hermeneutic Conflict

Deeper into his study of symbols, Ricoeur realized that,

the interpretation of symbols is worthy of being called a hermeneutics only insofar as it is a part of self-understanding and of the understanding of being; outside this effort of appropriating meaning, it is nothing. In this sense hermeneutics is a philosophical discipline.⁷¹

Hermeneutics, therefore, is not all about interpreting symbols; rather, “starting from symbols,” hermeneutics is a philosophical enterprise that aims at self-understanding.⁷² Hence, symbols call not only for interpretation, but also for “philosophic reflection”⁷³ which seeks out an understanding of man

⁶⁸ In his brief account of Bultmann’s hermeneutics, Richard Palmer laments that demythologization is quite “an unfortunate choice of term” because it somewhat suggests that in interpreting the Sacred Scriptures, one has to “bypass the mythical elements” therein when in truth demythologization considers in these mythical elements the original meaning of the Scriptures. That is why, Palmer emphasizes that demythologization, notwithstanding the unfortunate name it has come to be called, fulfills its true goal not in bypassing, not in doing away with, but in restoring, in recollecting, the real meaning of Scriptures mediated by means of various mythical symbols. See Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 48-52;

Ricoeur for his part was equally aware how the word “demythologization” might easily be misunderstood. For that reason, he readily distinguished demythologization from demystification and clarified that the task of demythologization is the “restoration of the myth’s intention” rather than its destruction which is the task of demystification. See Ricoeur, “Preface to Bultmann,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 381-401.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁷¹ Ricoeur, “Structure and Hermeneutics,” in *ibid.*, 30.

⁷² Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I,” in *ibid.*, 299.

⁷³ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 38.

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himself “according to symbols,”⁷⁴ that is, in terms of the “signs [which] are the means, the milieu, and the medium thanks to which a human existent seeks to situate, project, and understand himself.”⁷⁵ For that reason, Ricoeur maintains that “the intermediary step, in the direction of existence, is reflection, that is, the link between the understanding of signs and self-understanding.”⁷⁶

To be specific, however, how does Ricoeur really define reflection?

Highlighting its importance, Ricoeur asserts: “Reflection is the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be, through the works which bear witness to that effort and desire.”⁷⁷

So reflection is primarily an appropriation, that is to say, an act of making one’s own, or simply, an act of owning, claiming, or taking hold. Ricoeur elucidates further:

The concept of appropriation signifies that the original situation from which reflection proceeds is “forgetfulness”; I am lost, “astray” among the objects of the world, separated from the center of my own existence... Whatever may be the secret of this separation, this diaspora, it signifies that I do not originally possess that which I am.⁷⁸

From the explication above, the “effort to exist” and the “desire to be” appropriated in reflection mean only one thing: the ego, its truth, or its existence which the cogito has covered up and hidden. According to Ricoeur, “we term it effort in order to stress its positive energy and its dynamism; we term it desire in order to designate its lack and its poverty.”⁷⁹ So “effort and desire” are two sides of the same coin. Reflection, therefore, is the process of grasping the ego “in its effort to exist or in its desire to be.”⁸⁰ The most important point, however, is that

reflection is not intuition; or, in positive terms: reflection is the effort to comprehend the ego of the ego cogito in the mirror of its objects, its works, and ultimately its acts. Now, why must the positing of the ego be recomprehended through its acts? Precisely because the ego is not given in psychological evidence or in intellectual intuition or in mystical vision. A reflective

⁷⁴ Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 299.

⁷⁵ Ricoeur, “A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud,” in *ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁶ Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 46; idem, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 329.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 328-329.

⁷⁹ Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II,” in *ibid.*, 329.

philosophy is precisely the opposite of a philosophy of the immediate. The first truth – I think, I am – remains as abstract and empty as it is unassailable. It must be “mediated” by representations, actions, works, institutions, and monuments which objectify it; it is in these objects, in the largest sense of the word, that the ego must both lose itself and find itself.⁸¹

So self-understanding does not come via the direct route “of the intuition of the self by the self”⁸² because “understanding the world of signs is the means of understanding oneself; the symbolic universe is the milieu of self-explanation.”⁸³ Reflection then operates by way of interpreting these signs, these various symbolisms that define man himself. This is the reason why “reflection must become interpretation” because the only access open to man in understanding himself is the pathway of symbolism.⁸⁴

But then again, if reflection is to be equated with hermeneutics, the conflict of interpretations presents itself anew. On a positive note, however, “reflection will provide the structure for handling any hermeneutic conflict.”⁸⁵ This structure is the triadic structure of “dispossession, antithetic, and dialectic”⁸⁶ which represents the three stages of reflection based on the dialectic method of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).⁸⁷

Dispossession – or “disappropriation”⁸⁸ as Ricoeur would also say – parallels to Hegel’s notion of “thesis” although it holds a totally different meaning. At any rate, dispossession proceeds by shifting the “place and origin of meaning” from consciousness to the unconscious.⁸⁹ The stage of

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 32; idem, *Freud and Philosophy*, 43.

⁸² Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 264.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 46.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 495.

⁸⁷ Hegel’s dialectic of triads holds that every thesis – that is, any positive claim – always stands opposed by an antithesis – that is, a negative claim – so that there is always a resulting clash of opposites: thesis versus antithesis. In reality, however, Hegel maintained that it is only in its antithesis that a thesis finds its true meaning; similarly, it is only in its thesis that an antithesis can be fully understood. What Hegel was saying in effect is that a thesis and an antithesis are bound to each other by an underlying reciprocal relationship. Subsequently, the conflict between thesis and antithesis has to be reconciled by taking both as two inseparable parts of a whole. Thus a thesis and an antithesis are united to each other in a synthesis which ties them both together as one. In summary, Hegel’s dialectic of triads is the process by which a thesis is related to its antithesis, an antithesis to its thesis, by a synthesis which ends their opposition in their reconciliation. The meaning of dialectic hence, from Hegel’s perspective, is the bringing together of opposites into a relationship with each other. For a concise discussion of Hegel’s dialectic, see William S. Sahakian, *History of Philosophy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), 188-197.

⁸⁸ Ricoeur, “A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 172.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 494.

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dispossession makes use of the hermeneutics of suspicion where false consciousness is demystified and is no longer taken as the source and origin of meaning. On the other hand, in dispossession the hermeneutics of suspicion is employed for another task: that of going back towards the ego of the ego cogito by way of regression. As such, the stage of dispossession signifies a return to the arché, the original subject, the forgotten ego. Thus the hermeneutics of suspicion becomes “archaeology of the subject” in the stage of dispossession.⁹⁰

The second stage of reflection is the antithetic stage which likewise parallels to Hegel’s “antithesis” from which Ricoeur obviously derived the name. If dispossession is the stage of suspicion, antithetic is also the stage of faith and concerned with “the return to the simple attitude of listening to symbols.”⁹¹ Notably, this stage shows how reflection truly runs contrary to intuition because it takes symbols as the starting point in its “reconquest of the truth of the concrete subject.”⁹² In other words, it carries on without losing “respect [to] the original enigma of symbols.”⁹³ That is why this stage literally reinstates the real meanings of symbols. Then starting anew from symbols, it makes progression towards the “reappropriation of the true subject.”⁹⁴ So this stage assigns another task to the hermeneutics of faith: that of bringing to the surface the telos of the subject according to the real meaning of the symbol by which it is deciphered. Hence in the antithetic stage, the hermeneutics of faith becomes “teleology of the subject.”⁹⁵

The third stage of reflection is the stage of dialectic which holds “the key” to the resolution of the conflict of interpretations.⁹⁶ This stage is so much like Hegel’s “synthesis” that brings about the reconciliation of the opposition between thesis and antithesis by taking both opposites as intimately related to each other, as a unity. “This dialectic,” Ricoeur reveals, “is the philosophical ground on which the complementarity of rival hermeneutics... can be established.”⁹⁷ Such is the importance of dialectic in that Ricoeur even gave this warning: “Outside the dialectic of archeology and teleology, these interpretations confront one another without possible arbitration or are juxtaposed in lazy eclecticism which are the caricature of thought.”⁹⁸

Through a process of dialectic then, the dichotomy between the two polarities in hermeneutics is finally overcome by relating the two to each other,

⁹⁰ See Ricoeur, “A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 171-176.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 494.

⁹² Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 244.

⁹³ Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I,” in *ibid.*, 300.

⁹⁴ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *ibid.*, 244.

⁹⁵ Ricoeur, “A Philosophical Interpretation of Freud,” in *ibid.*, 174.

⁹⁶ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 494.

⁹⁷ Ricoeur, “A Philosophical Reinterpretation of Freud,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 161, 175.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

by taking them as one “profound unity.”⁹⁹ And so this stage marks the resolution of the conflict of interpretations: where two interpretations stood previously as rivals and opposites, now they are one and complementary. In any case, the dialectic stage always remains a call of necessity. As Ricoeur himself admits, “[the] two hermeneutics, opposed as they are, coexist... [because] each is legitimate within its own context... [ergo] it is necessary to set up a dialogue between them and demonstrate their complementary functions.”¹⁰⁰ More than anything, dialectic is the culmination of reflection and the hermeneutics of symbols. So here, after passing through the rigorous test of suspicion and the penetrating gaze of faith, the subject who was dispossessed and reinstated, put to death and restored to life, now finally stands with hope at the threshold of “the promised land” of ontology¹⁰¹ where he shall be at home again, no longer alienated from himself.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The questions that call for answers at this point are these: Does the hermeneutics of symbols contain a critical side? If yes, how does it relate to the ongoing conversation that is critical theory?

Ricoeur’s revelation is telling. For him, the peculiar trait of the hermeneutics of symbols is its being “in the line of critical thought.”¹⁰³ As such, its function is therefore also critical. This critical function, however, is made “more authentic and more perfect” by no other than its very own “appropriative function.”¹⁰⁴ So simply put, reflection is the critical side of the hermeneutics of symbols inasmuch as appropriation is an act that is proper only to reflection. But in what sense is reflection critical or a critique? Ricoeur explains: “Reflection is a critique in the sense that the cogito can be recovered only by the detour of a decipherment of the documents of its life.”¹⁰⁵

By all accounts then, dispossession denotes a critical moment in reflection, “the critique of the false cogito, the deconstruction of the ego ideals

⁹⁹ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 322-323.

¹⁰¹ The term ontology, etymologically derived from the Greek words *ontos* (ὄντος) – which means “being” – and *logos* (λογος) – which means “study” – literally and traditionally refers to the “study of being *qua* being.” Ricoeur, however, veers away from this literal and traditional understanding of ontology. Still following Heidegger, Ricoeur conceived of ontology as a particular state of being wherein the subject is getting hold of a more meaningful existence. Thus in line with Ricoeur’s conception of ontology, the dialectic stage represents the stage of eschatology where reflection points to “an *eschaton*, an ultimate end toward which” the subject is headed to. Ontology, therefore, as the “promised land” of the subject, is also its very own *eschaton*. Cf. Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection,” in *ibid.*, 332-334.

¹⁰² Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰³ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 350.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Ricoeur, “Existence and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 17-18.

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which form a screen between the ego and myself.”¹⁰⁶ This is why dispossession literally signifies “destructive criticism.”¹⁰⁷ Conversely, however, dispossession does not connote a totally negative criticism. This critical moment points to another critical moment: the moment of “the recovery of meaning.”¹⁰⁸ “Thus,” Ricoeur relates, “the time of restoration is not a different time from that of criticism; we... seek to go beyond criticism by means of criticism, by a criticism that is no longer reductive but restorative.”¹⁰⁹ Yet as expected, the ultimate critical moment in reflection is dialectic, the moment where a critical suspicion is conjoined with a critical faith to decipher the various symbolisms through which the final goal of self-understanding is reached.

So again, reflection is the critical side of the hermeneutics of symbols. One important implication it carries is that, through a critical dialectic of suspicion and faith, reflection can eventually emancipate the subject “from abstraction, idealism, solipsism, in short, from all the pathological forms of subjectivism.”¹¹⁰ Incidentally, this implication is to some extent similar and related to critical theory. As David Rasmussen writes, “critical theory rests on the... assumption that reflection is emancipatory.”¹¹¹

Of course, the meaning of Ricoeurian reflection is not totally the same with critical theory’s meaning of reflection – that’s a given. But I argue that if we dig deeper into Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols, we will find that the similarities are larger underneath than the differences on the surface between Ricoeur’s notion of reflection and the notion of reflection in critical theory.

As stated earlier, for Ricoeur reflection is a tool that can emancipate man from all pathological forms of subjectivism. Similarly, in critical theory reflection has also the same function, i.e., the emancipation of every individual member in the society from various “rational pathologies” or “ideological infections” that can give rise to “social pathology.”¹¹² Moreover, Rasmussen also describes this reflection in critical theory as “critical reflection.”¹¹³ As noted earlier, for his part Ricoeur sees reflection as critical because it is suspicious about the claims of consciousness. In the same way, reflection is critical in critical theory precisely because of its mistrust of consciousness. As

¹⁰⁶ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰⁷ Ricoeur, “Original Sin: A Study in Meaning,” in *ibid.*, 270.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 350.

¹¹⁰ Ricoeur, “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 245.

¹¹¹ David Rasmussen, “Critical Theory: Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas,” in *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 8, *Routledge History of Philosophy*, ed. by Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 1994), 212.

¹¹² As individual rational pathologies tend to accumulate and build up into social pathology, critical theory is thus ultimately employed as a tool of emancipation from social pathology and, in effect, as a tool of social transformation. See Axel Honneth, “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. by Fred Rush (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 336-360.

¹¹³ Rasmussen, “Critical Theory: Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas,” in *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, 211.

Julian Roberts notes, “consciousness projects systems, deductions, and conclusions, but reflection is always ready to relativize those conclusions once more.”¹¹⁴ In other words, critical theory itself also makes use of the hermeneutics of suspicion.¹¹⁵

But since critical theory is essentially a social theory, Ricoeurian reflection can truly claim affinity with critical theory only in view of its potential advantage for society. And so in keeping with the objectives of critical theory, one particular social problem that Ricoeur gave attention to is “the enigma of political power.”¹¹⁶ Ricoeur saw it as a problem because the appropriation of political power can either create a tyrant or a “true magistrate.”¹¹⁷ How does reflection resolve this problem? In appropriating political power, Ricoeur counsels that it is important to begin by “mistrusting political passion and seeing in it an escape or disguise.”¹¹⁸ On the other hand, it is always wise to combine mistrust with openness because this political passion could also be an “authentic political vocation.”¹¹⁹ Now what about our political leaders? Do they merely have a political passion or do they really have an authentic political vocation? That’s something that calls for reflection.¹²⁰

Finally, Hegel, Marx and Freud who are the main inspirations of critical theory – and, to some degree, Nietzsche – are also the very same men from whom Ricoeur derived the critical ideas of his hermeneutics of symbols. This fact alone speaks that there are still several areas where the critical side of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols intersects with and relates to critical theory. Whatever these areas are, that remains an open field for other researchers to explore.

At this point, I would like to conclude by acknowledging that, while critical theory itself aims to revolutionize society in order to realize social transformation, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols does not immediately aspire for social transformation by any direct means. Nevertheless, through a patient and continuing reflection, I am sure that Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols holds a great potential of its own in realizing future social transformation.

Rogationist Seminary College-Cebu, Philippines

¹¹⁴ Julian Roberts, “The Dialectic of Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, 69.

¹¹⁵ See Stephen K. White, “The Very Idea of a Critical Social Science: A Pragmatist Turn,” in *ibid.*, 317.

¹¹⁶ Ricoeur, “Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 144.

¹¹⁷ Ricoeur, “Consciousness and the Unconscious,” in *ibid.*, 112, 114.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Leovino Ma. Garcia contends that for Ricoeur, “political reflection is not an optional detour but an obligatory route in an ontology of the person.” See “The Political Structure of Society: Paul Ricoeur’s View on Politics and the State,” in *Contemporary Social Philosophy*, ed. by Manuel B. Dy, Jr. (Quezon City: JMC Press, 1994), 37.

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