ART AND BEYOND...

In Search of Meaning

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Introduction

The questions before us concern the nature of our interpretations of works of art. In this talk I will present my position on this subject with reference to the thought of a twentieth century philosopher who has been my philosophical master and main point of reference: Paul Ricoeur. In one of my books, I attempted to trace the development of his whole philosophy. My focus there was his conception of the human subject and the interpretive processes through which that subject "finds itself." It seems to me that this issue of self-interpretation has a profound relationship to questions about the aesthetic experience and interpretation of art. I will try to explain why in the

following passages. In order to do so, however, I need to introduce some of the basic features of Ricoeur's view of self-interpretation. It will only be at the end that I will be able to say something about the issues of interpretation and objectivity that Prof. Simon raised in his introduction.

Self-Interpretation

For Ricoeur, self-interpretation, the process in which a self aims to grasp or understand itself, does not aim at discovering or describing something which is already there, settled and fixed prior to the act of interpretation. This is not to say that the self is pure fiction. As finite beings, we do not create ourselves but find ourselves in the world. Nevertheless, the processes through which the self finds itself are interpretive processes and they inform (and are reciprocally informed) by what is interpreted. The self-interpreter—and ultimately we are all self-interpreters—can be thought of as a reader who is continually instructed by listening to the text he or she is reading. And, let me say in passing, we should construe "text" here as widely as possible. Not only should we include the texts, written or spoken, that we receive from our historical, artistic, literary, or religious tradition, but we should also include those texts which we ourselves make when narrating our lives, or when in the course of our acting and suffering. In this context, human actions too may be considered and read as texts. We develop as we read: in self-interpretation, we help to produce what we find as we go in search of meaning.

"In search of meaning": the search for meaning and meaning *as* search—this formulation offers something like a summing up of Ricoeur's thought. And what I want to suggest is that in developing an account of this search for meaning he provides nothing less than a general, systematic philosophy of the creative imagination; hence, as we shall see, the importance of works of art for him as well as the interpretation of art.

In Ricoeur's two major works of the seventies and eighties (*Living Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*), the development of such a philosophy of the creative imagination is centered on the power of metaphor to redescribe reality poetically and the power of narrative to imitate action creatively, giving individuals and communities their "narrative identity." The idea of narrative identity that he develops in these writings is then used in an

account of personal identity in his more recent book *Oneself as Another*, a book which Ricoeur himself considers to be a recapitulation of his whole *oeuvre*.

For Ricoeur, metaphor and narrative are two privileged manifestations of the creativity proper to language in general. Language in its creative essence embodies a thrust toward that which lies beyond language and towards a "something further" which always remains to be said. For this reason, our search for meaning is never perfected or completed but always opens up to what one might call a dimension of furtherance. This dimension of furtherance does not, however, signify or foreshow a failure to come to grips with the world; it is rather the condition for an effective theoretical and practical involvement in it. Moreover, even when our march toward the fullness of meaning has advanced a long way forward and would seem about to reach a terminal goal, we remain still a *homo viator*, a traveler. We act and suffer, and in our acting and suffering, our inter-acting and compassion, we are constantly called upon to invent; that is, to find and produce the meaning of our lives (the word "invent" contains this double sense).

In the age of modernity, self-understanding has typically been construed as the attempt of a conscious subject to achieve total self-transparency. For Ricoeur, like many thinkers of more recent times, this is a narcissistic pretension which has to be given up. Ricoeur does not see this as giving up on the project of self-understanding as such. On the contrary, what remains is the on-going search for a finite, partial meaning, a meaning which is, as said before, "invented"—that is "found and produced." What is at issue here is not consciousness making itself transparent, but the interpretive praxis of a living subject immersed in the world and the concreteness of signs and languages. Thus, to use the term favored by Ricoeur, philosophy of consciousness must become a never-ending hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

What then is hermeneutics? Ricoeur states his basic idea in this way: "There is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts." It is thanks to this triple mediation (by signs, symbols, and texts) that self-reflection can be emancipated from the idealistic narcissism of traditional philosophy.

First, there is mediation by means of signs: the recognition that all human experience, made up of perceptions, desires, emotions, encounters with the other, is articulated linguistically. Second, there is mediation by means of symbols. According to Ricoeur, in his works of the 1960s such as *Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations*, symbols concern expressions with a twofold meaning, where the evident meaning is the vehicle for the hidden meaning. At this time Ricoeur had defined hermeneutics simply as the interpretation of symbols. He now sees this definition as too narrow. Nevertheless, we can still acknowledge that the passage through mediation of symbols is a crucial factor enabling us to ground our self-understanding in the inheritance of those cultures and traditions where our roots are located. Third, and last: mediation by means of the text. In the text, discourse has relative autonomy with respect to the intentions of the speaker, the reception of the original hearers, and the circumstances governing the first utterance. The text, one can say, can do without (can function in the absence of) its author and its intended recipient. Thus placed before the text, one has an experience of distancing, a taking of one's distance that allows one to gain a different understanding of oneself and the world.

Even this very brief outline of the triple mediation should dispel any suggestion that Ricoeur's hermeneutics presumes a hermetically sealed "universe of texts," a world closed in upon itself with "nothing outside." For Ricoeur, the characteristic of living discourse is that it always opens beyond itself towards the future, towards other communicating subjects, and towards the world. This openness is perhaps most evident in the use of metaphor and narrative. In metaphor, there comes to light an unsuspected power for restructuring and re-describing the world. An equivalent power is also manifest in the capacity for narrative to remold and transfigure human action. Ricoeur uses the Greek term *mimesis*, in the sense of a creative imitation, to capture the creative power of "*con*figuration" and "*re*figuration" at issue here: configuration by giving order and form to the work; refiguration by opening a new approach to the world through the work and thus disclosing new aspects of the world. Thanks to this power of *mimesis*, textual works can produce in us a new praxis, a new life.

According to Ricoeur, then, to understand oneself is to understand

oneself through a triple mediation—through the signs, symbols, and texts in which we live. And what is "arrived at" by way of this interpretive process is not self-transparency but a self *other* than that which undertook the reading. The movement of hermeneutics is thus circular or spiraling. Or, again, the movement that belongs to the self-interpreter's "search for meaning" is a hermeneutic circle.

The idea of a hermeneutic circle has been developed by various philosophers and belongs to a very ancient tradition. Ricoeur puts the idea in the following way:

> The polysemy of a text invites multiple readings. This is the moment of the hermeneutic circle between the understanding initiated by the reader and the proposals of meaning offered by the text. The most fundamental condition of the hermeneutic circle is the sense that all interpretation places the interpreter *in media res* and never at the beginning or the end. We suddenly arrive, as it were, in the middle of a conversation which has already begun and in which we try to orientate ourselves in order to be able to contribute to it. (*From Text to Action*, 32-33)

I have given you Ricoeur's words, but in doing so I do not simply deliver a *meaning* to you, as if in giving you his words I were giving you a kind of object. Rather, through what I give you, you are thrown into his text, and you bring to it an understanding which initially orients you and which can further develop as you listen. The hermeneutic circle exists wherever there is interpretation—that is, everywhere.

To summarize, when the self-interpreter has shaken loose from the narcissism of complete self-transparency and travels the spiraling road of hermeneutics instead, what is found is not something which was simply there already. What is found has been "invented"; that is, it is a self both "found and produced" in the act of interpretation. And through the triple mediation of signs, symbols, and texts the meaning that is revealed by such interpretation is never something finished and complete, but always infinite, partial, and historical. As I said above, the processes through which the self finds itself in the world are interpretive processes, and they are constantly informed by the world and languages of the time that make them possible and which they can, in turn, transform.

Interpreting Art

As should be clear from this sketch of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, the power of language (and in particular the power of creative imitation or *mimesis*), is central to it. It's not surprising, then, that he attaches considerable significance to literary and poetic works of the imagination. But what of non-linguistic, non-narrative works of the sort we find in this exhibition? What light can Ricoeur's hermeneutics cast on our appreciation and understanding of, for example, painting and sculpture? What role do such events play in forming and reforming ourselves and our world? Does Ricoeur really provide a *general* philosophy of the creative imagination as I claimed at the beginning?

In my view, the answer to this question is: Yes. It is true that Ricoeur devotes hundreds of pages to literary works and only a few pages to non-linguistic works of imagination. Moreover, what references he does make do not come in his central works, and in most cases what he does say only mentions or alludes to painting and sculpture, music, photography, and architecture. Nevertheless, the crucial point is that he wants to apply his ideas about texts, about *mimesis*, and about refiguration to every kind of work of human creativity.

In fact, it is not so much a matter of applying the idea of *mimesis* to non-textual creations as of enriching our understanding of it through reflection on non-textual art works, particularly non-figurative art works. Thus, in Ricoeur's view, by looking at non-figurative art we can come to understand that the real function of *mimesis* as creative imitation is not simply to produce *copies* of things. Rather, it is to give us a new and unfamiliar view of them. And it does so primarily through the way the work of art reveals, not things, but emotions and moods. Paradoxically, therefore, it is the non-figurative art which helps us to understand the mimetic function of language and texts, and not the other way round.

The non-figurative art also shows what Ricoeur calls the "double nature of sign" better than traditional figurative art: the double movement of withdrawing from the world and irrupting into it. That is, it is in virtue of a work's capacity to break away from the everyday world that it can refigure. Think here of the difference between art-photography and the ordinary use

of photography. Clearly, the difference here is not a matter of figurative accuracy. Rather, it is precisely those respects in which artistic photography is not simply a matter of the pure reproduction of things, but that it reveals the deepest facets of an object.

The point is that truth in non-figurative art is clearly not a matter of its adequacy to reality but always something like revelation. Ricoeur's claim is that this function of "going beyond" representation is actually the character of every kind of art, including figurative art. Again, *mimesis* is not a matter of "copying reality," but always something like "productive revelation." Moreover, what is thus revealed by art is never simply things or an image of things. Beyond representation, every work of art expresses a mood, or state of attunement that is a singular and unique experience. Now, "to *express* a mood" here means to give *form* to it—a form that is itself something singular and unique, to give form to it in such a way that what is expressed can be *communicated* by the work, or in the work, to *all*. In this way, the work of art is a unique conjunction of singularity and universality. To use the language of Kant's philosophy we could say that the work of art is not the result of a *determining* judgment (a judgment which applies a rule to a particular case) but of a *reflective* judgment (it is the particular case that looks for its rule and finds it in a capacity for universal communication).

It is perhaps at this point that we can begin to see the deeper connection between the experience and interpretation of works of art and the quest for self-understanding. Indeed, in the conjunction of unique singularity and universal communicability that characterizes the work of art, we are given a privileged model for thinking about the singularity and universal value of the person. Just as every work of art, so also every self is a unique and singular connection of singularity and universality.

We can speak of universality in a dialogical sense. As I have indicated, the search for meaning always arrives in the middle of a conversation which has already begun. The meaning of our life must be communicable to other people and in turn becomes evaluated by them. There is no place for solipsism or arbitrariness in this conception of interpretation and personal identity. Indeed, in a certain way we can speak of objectivity in this context too. But objectivity here is of the same kind as we might speak about in relation to the production of literary, plastic, figural, chromatic or musical forms;

that is, where we say that the work "says" or "tries to say" something to others. Objectivity is grounded on inter-subjectivity and it makes no sense outside the living processes of communication and dialogue.

Objectivity here concerns the interpretation of "what is said" in or through a work's production. And since we have in our communicative processes many methods to distinguish and evaluate statements, we can also speak of good and bad interpretations. Of course, in everyday life and language it is relatively easy to assess and criticize what people are saying. If I say "It is raining" we will typically take this as a remark about the weather, and we know what to do to establish whether it is raining or not. Unfortunately, the task is never so easy in art criticism or in our talk about personal identity—but it is not impossible. We always bring something to our engagement with a work of art and we are never simply alone. We have traditions of criticism and assessment and so on, traditions which can inform, and be transformed by, our experience and appreciation of a work of art.

We can speak, then, of bad interpretations, and, in fact and in principle, the only remedy against a bad interpretation is a new and better interpretation. Of course, this seems to hold out the promise of a final, completely correct interpretation or perfect translation. And that is an illusion. What hermeneutics teaches us, however, is that although there is no definitive interpretation of a work of art, no final and perfect translation of a text, this does not mark a shortcoming or failure on our part, but a condition of possibility that these things can take place and have any meaning at all.