

PAUL GYLLENHAMMER

Finding a Place for the Universal in Hermeneutic Theory

Hermeneutics is a philosophical position which addresses the conditions and limits of understanding. Often *the limits* are stressed as means to overcome a metaphysical *hubris* which seems to be a natural pretension of consciousness: the view from nowhere. Although this paradoxical perspective is to be avoided, we do think that the notion of *universality* which underlies the conceit should be questioned. The goal of this paper is to show how a person can accept the limits of understanding without giving up the idea of a *universal* grasp of reality. How can we make sense of this position?

Our analysis takes place within the context of Edmund Husserl's theory of *meaning*, where the term *meaning* refers to a subject's recognition that the object of experience is the same for all people (a universal insight), and Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative*. Husserl clearly succumbs to the view from nowhere when he does not stick true to his own claim that humans never have a total grasp of the external world. Such a finite perspective should lead Husserl to a more cautious stance regarding an individual's insight into the world. Husserl never really embraces a cautious tone; rather, the idea that an individual can have a *universal grasp* of the world is taken in a very strict sense. And the central problem for Husserl, as we see in the first part of the paper, is his tendency to *hypostatize* meaning.

We shall see how Ricoeur's appeal to socially constituted narratives, where the term *narrative* refers to any discipline which is circumscribed by a literary tradition, overcomes this concern by actually remaining faithful to Husserl's idea that *meaning* is always bound to an intentional act.¹ Ricoeur avoids attributing to meaning an existence beyond the intentional capacities of individuals by grounding meaning in narrative frameworks. Although limiting the notion of meaning in such a way does not honor the Husserlian concept of *universality* (i.e., that meanings neither come into being nor pass away), Ricoeur does not simply accept a rampant relativism. Ricoeur questions the notion of relativism by incorporating the idea of universality *into* each individual's grasp of his or her own narrative framework. What occurs here is an important correlation between the notions of *universality* and *legitimacy*: each person, as sustaining a particular *claim* on reality, claims that it is *legitimate* to stand the world in such a way. Each person, then, is responsible for defending his or her particular *view* of the world against potential assailants. Through a mediation of this act, the universality of meaning is something which *occurs* in a subject's *commitment* to a particular way of life. However, if such a conflict dismantles a person's insight, then meaning is something to be gathered and the universal is like a goal to which a subject is committed.

1. The Problem of Hypostatization

We can quickly locate the problem of hypostatization which faces Husserl's theory of meaning by recalling the change in focus from the *Logical Investigations* to *Ideas I*. Recognizing that a subject's *meaning-giving* act always contains more than what is actually given in a discrete perceptual encounter, since objects are only given through highly limited perspectives, Husserl reformulates the notion of *fulfillment* from a theory of total *certainty* to a theory of *progressive* insight.² Anticipations of the object are confirmed by continual experiences with the object. And this process of anticipation-fulfillment is a potentially limitless one given the complexity of some objects of experience.

Husserl, however, is at odds with himself at this point. On the one hand, he wants to retain the thesis, developed in the *Logical Investigations*, that meanings "are an ideally closed set of general objects, to which being thought or being expressed are alike contingent" (Husserl 1970, 333). In this sense, meanings are *universal* and as such there is "no intrinsic connection between the ideal unities which in fact operate as meanings, and the signs to which they are tied, i.e., through which they become real in human mental life" (ibid; see Husserl 1982, 296). Indeed, it seems that Husserl must deny a productive role to human expressions or else the strict universal status of meanings would be jeopardized by contingent experiences. If meanings were essentially linked to real signs, then meanings would only be relevant for the people who use those signs.

On the other hand, Husserl is clearly concerned with how humans *gain* insight into the world. This interest is made plain in the employment of the teleological framework, where the object is something *to be* understood, alongside the notion of *productive constitution*, where *new* insights into the object are gained.³ Herein lies the problem. How can Husserl retain the thesis regarding the universality of meaning within this progressive, potentially limitless, framework? As we explain below, by attempting to retain both the theory of teleological fulfillment and the notion that meanings neither come into being nor pass away, Husserl commits the fallacy of hypostatization.⁴

Husserl makes several claims which cannot be easily reconciled. The key assertions are as follows. First, there is no intrinsic connection between a subject's capacity to express a meaning and the *meaning itself*. The expression is, in other words, unproductive. Second, meanings do not exist anywhere else than *in* an intentional act. Third, human subjects *gain insight* into the world, i.e., they become aware of meanings which were previously unknown to them. Fourth, meanings neither come into being nor pass away. The question which concerns us: where *are* meanings which have not been brought to human awareness?

A question of consistency regarding Husserl's (1970) theory of meaning becomes apparent when he says, "Whenever a new concept is formed, we see how a meaning becomes realized that was previously unrealized" (333). From one

perspective, this claim makes perfect sense and it poses no real trouble for Husserl. But from another perspective, Husserl can be seen as uncritically positing the *existence* of meaning thereby committing the fallacy of hypostatization. Let us explain these two perspectives in turn.

When Husserl says that a "meaning becomes realized that was previously unrealized" he could be referring to the experience of a child, student, or novice. Obviously, for this one individual, the subject gains an insight into the world which he or she did not previously have. And there is nothing suspicious about claiming that this one person gains insight into a meaning which preexisted him or her. (We explain how to make sense of this claim within Ricoeur's account.)

Given Husserl's theory of the universality of meaning, however, this is clearly not the limit to his insight. Husserl does mean that humans become cognizant of meanings which precede *any* personal awareness. The universal precedes all human expression. As Husserl (1970) says, "There are . . . countless meanings which . . . are merely possible ones, since they are never expressed, and since they can, owing to the limits of man's cognitive powers, never be expressed" (ibid). Although we can sympathize with Husserl's appeal to pre-articulate meaning, this claim commits the fallacy of hypostatization for it demands that we give *existence* to meaning outside human intentionality.⁵ Appealing to meanings which are not only *possible* but beyond the current limits of human cognition gives an existential status to an entity which can only have a hypothetical one. By positing a universal prior to and beyond the scope of all expressions, Husserl adopts a viewpoint which cannot really be had by anyone.

2. Narrative and the Maintenance of Meaning

Within the context of this problem, Ricoeur's theory of narrative becomes quite relevant. Perhaps the easiest way for him to overcome Husserl's tendency to hypostatize meaning is by giving up the strict notion of universality. Indeed, this is the move Ricoeur makes by turning to the individual's place within a narrative tradition. Meaning is only relevant from within the framework of a realm of discourse.⁶ Ricoeur, however, does not just give up the idea of a universal meaning. In fact, the notion of universality guides Ricoeur's theory. Let us first show how Ricoeur's theory of narrative answers the question of the existence of meaning. We shall then be prepared to show how he incorporates the notion of universality into the narrative framework.

The first step Ricoeur takes in overcoming the problem of hypostatization is in giving to linguistic expression a *productive* role. Before analyzing how an *individual's* expression can be productive, we must understand that we belong to a *community* of articulations. The *linguistic* community is seen, within Ricoeur's theory, as a necessary condition to speak of *existing meanings*.

At one level, the linguistic community, as a community of *speakers*,

maintains the existence of meaning by using language in the accomplishment of goals. Here Ricoeur takes a decisive step in refocusing the framework of phenomenology from Husserl's concern for perception to an interest in the practical dimension of intentionality. Expressing this practical focus, Ricoeur (1978) says, "The world is such that it can be the object of prevision and of projects. . . . I inhabit a world in which there is something 'to be done by me;' the 'to be done by me' belongs to the structure which is the 'world'" (68).

This *world* Ricoeur speaks of is not a personal construct; rather, it is an intersubjectively constituted horizon which governs an individual's capacity to meaningfully act. The term *world*, then, points to a narrative construct as much as it points to what people really *do* with things at hand. And meaningfulness *occurs* in the correlation between a narrative structure and the ability to act. It is the symbiosis which exists between the rules and norms which govern the direction of a people's actions and the actual ability to perform the action which reveals the notion of meaning-fulfillment within Ricoeur's account of narrative.⁷

Now, if we focus our attention on the notion of the *apprentice*, i.e., the student who gains insight into a particular field of activity through close work with a master, we can appreciate how a level of significance *precedes* any single person. Insofar as any one individual is taught by the community, a previous strata of meaning exists. Within this context, it makes sense to say that the individual's grasp of this strata of meaning—a level which is certainly prearticulate for this one individual—is a contingent event and does not impact the social horizon (i.e., the community of participants within a field). At this level, the apprentice's expression is indeed unproductive.

But this level of meaning is not prior to all expression, as Husserl maintains, nor does it spring from the genius of the masters who are currently living. This level of meaning comes from a history of sedimented and accepted standards or *constitutive rules* which have been articulated and preserved in a literary heritage. Ricoeur (1992) says, "These constitutive rules . . . come from much farther back than from any solitary performer; it is from someone else that the practice of a skill, a profession, a game, or an art is learned. And the apprenticeship and training are based on traditions that can be violated, to be sure, but that first have to be assumed" (156).

The student, we maintain, is able to trust the master because of this dimension of experience. That is, the student realizes, at some point, that the master maintains a *tradition* which preexists both of them. It is at the level of a *narrative tradition* that one aspect of the fallacy of hypostatization is avoided. Meanings do not just preexist. Meanings can be said to preexist because they are retained by a linguistic community of individuals. And a tradition (specifically, the tradition of a *practice* or *discipline*) offers a *stabilized* framework to individuals who develop according to the norms laid down by the tradition.

Although Ricoeur does give a tremendous weight to the *narrative tradition*, as a stabilized and normative field, the weightiness is always curbed by the necessity

for an individual's interpretive act. Ricoeur, in other words, fully avoids the problem of hypostatization by maintaining that individual's must *speak for a community* in order for that community to have any significance whatsoever. What Ricoeur reveals at this junction is the individual's role in keeping a tradition *alive* by gathering its coherence into his or her intentional capacities. The tradition's meaning *depends* upon an individual's ability to narrate.

3. Commitment to the Universal

Ricoeur explains that individuals are both beholden to a narrative framework, in that they grow up within an already functioning horizon of meaning, and the center for maintaining the significance of that tradition. We should realize, then, the tremendous *responsibility* individuals have in becoming as conversant as possible—to become *experts*—with the field of discourse which circumscribes their membership. Individuals should strive for this level of expertise for at least two reasons. First, if the practice is to survive across time, there must always be experts to pass on the very structure which guides the activity. Accordingly, an imperative to *write* hangs over the community so the expert's insights are not lost at the point of death. Second, the very existence of one's practice may depend upon the knowledge of its goals, weaknesses, and limits. Here we must appreciate the fact that some practices will be attacked by other narratives asking for a claim to legitimacy.

We would like to focus the rest of our study on this second point. For it draws our attention back toward the issue of universality, via the notion of *legitimacy*, which seems to have been totally relativized in Ricoeur's appeal to *social* narratives. We hope to show that it is in the very *confrontation* of narratives that the notion of universality finds its proper place.

The concept of the universality of meaning is a problem: is there any sense to this concept if meaning depends upon an individual's acculturation into a social horizon? Ricoeur shows that the issue of universality is important; indeed, it is perhaps the most important issue within his theory of narrative.

To begin, Ricoeur (1984-88) explains how every narrative context is also related to the notion of *truth*: "Every proposal of a meaning is at the same time a claim to truth. What we receive from the past are, in effect, beliefs, persuasions, convictions; that is, ways of 'holding for true,' to use the insight of the German word *Für-wahr-halten*, which signifies belief" (3: 222-23). Yet this perspective on the truthfulness of a tradition cannot stand alone; it must be qualified by moments of *critical awareness*. So, Ricoeur continues:

Tradition, as an instance of legitimation, designates the claim to truth (the taking-for-true) offered argumentation within the public space of discussion. In the face of criticism that devours itself, the truth claim of the contents of traditions merits being taken as a presumption of truth, so long as a stronger reason, that is, a better argument, has not been established. By a "presumption of truth," I mean that credit, that confident

reception by which we respond, in an initial move preceding all criticism, to any proposition of meaning, any claim to truth, because we are never at the beginning of the process of truth and because we belong, before any critical gesture, to a domain of presumed truth. (3: 227.)

Ricoeur makes two points in this passage. The first relates to the necessity of critical engagement with other narratives and the second point concerns the acceptance of one's claim on the truth. The second point follows from the first in that one's *presumed grasp of the truth* is only *legitimate* if it stands the test of critical engagement by other, potentially counter, narratives. The point to stress, however, is that if one's narrative does not crumble under the weight of argumentative attacks, then the relativistic notion of a *presumed truth* loses its sting.

What provides strength to Ricoeur's theory of a *presumed truth* is that such a position is a *result* of critical engagement. So, what supports Ricoeur's theory of legitimation is a pragmatic criterion: a willingness to both listen to and seek out other view points. This stands almost as an *imperative* since individuals do become engrossed by their own discourse. It is as if we must try to *explode* our own awareness by a competing discourse. But this attempt at explosion is not a game without purpose. The goal is twofold. First, we seek out other accounts to help refine the sense of perspective from which we speak. The issue, then, is to reveal one's social horizon as much as possible.⁸ Second, we can look to competing discourses as means to help solidify the *commitments* to which we find ourselves already involved.⁹ Indeed, we may even become aware of something unique in our ability to accomplish goals in a way no other perspective can.

We can see that the first pragmatic criterion (to seek out the limits of a discourse) is circumscribed by a second. Here the confrontation among discourses is kept in check by a basic correlation between narratives and the ability to act for a purpose. What we must appreciate is that any sustaining narrative tradition *works* because it both survives the critical advances of opposing narratives and grants the participants access to something.¹⁰ The tradition is more, therefore, than a coherent framework. The framework allows the members to teach others how to become engaged in a meaningful life.

Now, these two pragmatic criteria must be seen as grounded in the individual. For the only place where the correlation between a narrative and world of practical concerns is maintained—where meaning can *exist*—is in the subject's *recognition* that the narrative does coincide with a particular aspect of what it means to be engaged in a meaningful existence. Such an insight gains more relevance when it comes from the recognition of an expert, i.e., the one who knows not just the contours of his or her own perspective but the competing ones. Insight, we must appreciate, is honed through moments of struggle between one's tradition and other narratives.

It is Ricoeur's underlying assumption that this awareness—that we come to know ourselves thorough a mediation of otherness—will drive each of us to become

more competent in our grasp of the narratives which implicate us in sustaining a way of life. If our commitments survive the conflict, then our insight is universal to the extent that there is no reason to suspect a discrepancy between narrative and world. In other words, if no discrepancy is revealed there is no reason to suspect that how I take the world to be will change.

However, if we are not able to uphold our previous claims, then at this juncture a proposal for a new way of understanding makes us committed to change our view.¹¹ And we are committed to change our view because the insight which once grounded our action is now lost. Although there is a distinct sense of groundlessness in a moment of defeat, the universal remains as a guiding ideal which never ceases to be with a person committed to a better understanding of the world. Just as the apprentice rightly pays heed to a master's account—given that the master will help the student gain a firm hold of reality—so too a master must respect the limits of a perspective when those limits are revealed by another.

Notes

1. By linking meaning to intentional acts, Husserl denies the absurd position that meanings exist somewhere else, outside of the field of intentional experience. However, Husserl does not want to say that meanings are relative to individual intentional acts for this would commit him to the kind of psychologistic position which he is trying to overcome. Husserl attempts to account for the difficult notion that meanings are both universal (ideal objects which neither come into being nor pass away) and relative to intentional acts (see Husserl 1970, 1: 146-154).

2. One dimension of Husserl's (1970) notion of fulfillment is centered on the idea that an object of experience can totally satisfy an intention (762). It is this idea of perfect adequacy which leads Husserl to the more progressive theory that intention and object never actually meet. The idea of an object becomes a regulative ideal guiding a cognitive interest (Husserl 1982, 342). For an excellent critique of Husserl on this topic, see Bernet (1979).

3. Eugen Fink (1933) expresses how central the issue of productive constitution is for Husserl (373). Ricoeur (1967) finds productivity or creativity as one of the central problems in Husserl's phenomenology (21, 27).

4. It is ironic to find Husserl denying a position to which he ultimately succumbs. Regarding the question of the existence of meanings, Husserl (1970) says, "They are not . . . objects which, though existing nowhere in the world, have being in a topos uranous or in a divine mind, for such metaphysical hypostatization would be absurd" (330). Meaning only relates to an individual's capacity to intend objects—only in the subject's intentional act can meanings be said to exist. But it is precisely this claim which is at odds with the universality of meaning.

5. We should also point out that Husserl's transcendental perspective, in Ideas I, does not solve the issue. Husserl's turn to the transcendental ego simply assumes that intentionality is an already structured field. By denying to expressions a productive role, all that Husserl allows is a personal awareness of structures which are already contained and operative within the mind. But this position commits a kind of fallacy since these structures are given a weight which must be proven and not assumed. And once we enter the realm of argumentation it becomes quite apparent that expressions are a necessary component to the acquisition of knowledge.

6. Ricoeur even reflects this position on his own theory of narrative. He resists, in other words, the temptation to establish an exclusively ontological theory of narrative—as if the term narrative is not as much a solution to a problem as it is a statement of our being. Ricoeur accepts an ontological aspect but

always connects the ontological approach with a literary history. For example, Ricoeur (1981) explains that there is a "mutual belonging between the act of narrating (or writing) history and the fact of being in history, between doing history and being historical" (288). And again: "If it is possible to write a book on 'the nature of narrative,' it is because there is a narrative tradition. . ." (286). In this way, all arguments take their place within a literary history of argumentation. In other words, narrative, as a subject of discourse, grows out of an inherited tradition of problems.

7. We are expressing, as succinctly as possible, Ricoeur's account of the correlation between the first two levels of his theory of narrative: actions as prefigured and actions as configured (see Ricoeur 1984-88, 1:52-87).

8. Because this social horizon can be revealed the idea of relativity is modified by a notion of enlightenment (see Ricoeur 1981-88, 3: 157-79).

9. Here Ricoeur (1992) changes focus from a theory of truth guided by an empirical criterion—where a believing that reigns—to a theory of truth where a believing in dominates (299-302). Ricoeur draws out the necessity of suspicion in relation to an ontological commitment. John van den Hengel (1996) captures the essence of this view when he says, "At one level attestation resembles witnessing, inasmuch as in witnessing the equilibrium is easily disturbed by doubt and suspicion cast upon it by more progressive theories, other action and stories. . . . In attestation the self expresses the assurance that, in spite of suspicion, meaning and the self are possible. Truth here is not necessarily verifiable truth. Attestation is the self in its commitment to the world" (247). (Cf. Sweeney 1988.)

10. Hubert Dreyfus (1991) has clearly explained the connection between hermeneutics and the idea that different frames of reference can give the subject access to different aspects of reality. No one perspective can claim that it has grasped the ultimate reality (a metaphysical realist position) since perspectives strive for different goals. But denying this ultimate insight does not disallow the possibility that different frameworks access different aspects of reality. (See 251-265.)

11. Herein lies the possibility of finding new meanings. Ricoeur does not appeal to a universal which exists prior to any awareness; instead, Ricoeur develops a theory of progressive insight which works off of a fusion of frames of reference. Most importantly (and what truly signals the uniqueness of Ricoeur's theory), it is the individual subject who can plot out the course toward engaging life differently thereby making the occurrence of new meanings possible.

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