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Re-figuring Ricoeur

Ricoeur is one of the most widely appropriated philosophers, but the problem is that he is often appropriated piecemeal, that is, certain ideas are snatched up from his wider philosophical project, with the result that the rich background that he provides is lost. Examples of particular conceptions are 'a post-critical naïveté', a 'surplus of meaning', a 'hermeneutical arc', a 'phenomenological hermeneutic', or the 'ontological vehemence' of metaphor, not to mention the appropriation of broader, but not complete, aspects of his thoughts on phenomenology, on the symbolism of evil, on structuralism, on Freud, on metaphor, on narrative, and on ideology critique. Sometimes these run far afield from Ricoeur's meaning, for instance, James Fowler's (1981) appropriation of a post-critical naïveté for a higher stage of faith that likely occurs only in one's thirties or forties (187). At other times, his conceptions are appropriated without regard for his later development, such as current references to Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc without regard to his later re-working of it in his three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984–88) in terms of a three-fold mimesis.¹

The latter issue is the one on which I want to focus in this essay. It is easy to assume a one-to-one correspondence between Ricoeur's three-fold hermeneutical arc, emphasized in the seventies, (Ricoeur 1976, 71–88; 1981, 197–221) and his three-fold mimesis, elaborated in the eighties. Ricoeur fosters this assumption at times by emphasizing the correlation between the third 'moments' of each. On the other hand, they cannot simply be overlaid, but Ricoeur does little to disentangle them. In fact, several ambiguities are contained in each taken by itself, which are only accentuated when they are uncritically assimilated. It is moreover striking that, given the importance and use of these conceptions, little comment about their ambiguity has appeared.² One reason may be that it is difficult just to keep up with what Ricoeur is saying, much less to analyze it or to compare it with other works!³

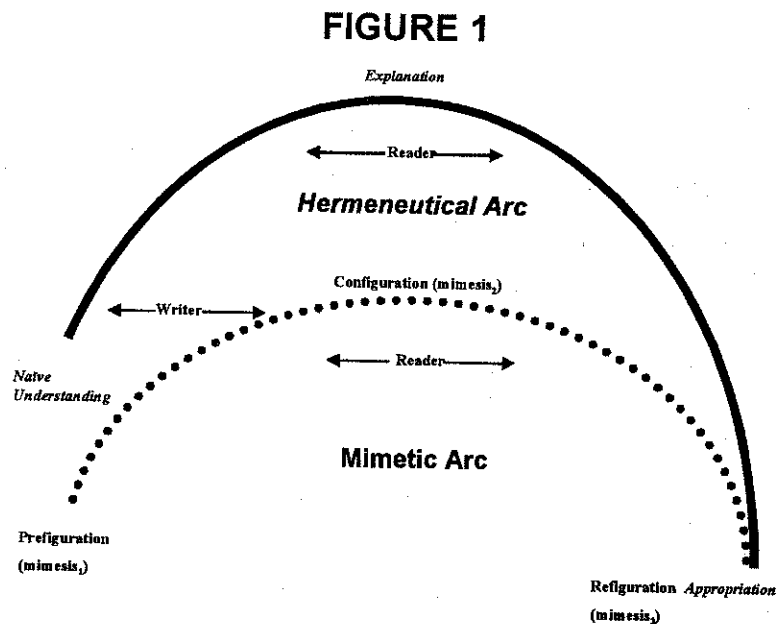
In any case, it is imperative at some point to submit Ricoeur's suggestive ideas to an 'explanatory moment', as he might put it. Such explanation may not only clarify but itself enrich his ideas. Moreover, Ricoeur's later work, *Oneself as Another* (1992), suggests an important postmodern epistemology based on his major religious epistemological category, namely, 'attestation' (23). In this work, Ricoeur brings together a category that he previously had used in his reflections on religion with his general philosophical reflection. This connection is unusual since he generally keeps his philosophy and his religious reflection separated. The problem is that his notion of 'attestation' is more suggestive than filled out. I propose that 'attestation' is a significant postmodern epistemological category, but one that needs elaboration, an elaboration that is fostered by placing it alongside Ricoeur's hermeneutical arc.

What I suggest therefore is after laying out the basics of his earlier three-fold hermeneutical arc and later three-fold mimesis to indicate the tensions in these notions and a constructive proposal for relating them to each other. Then briefly I will utilize such a revised or re-figured hermeneutical arc to show how it deepens Ricoeur's notion of attestation.⁴

Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Arc

In a series of articles in the seventies, Ricoeur laid out the idea of a hermeneutical arc that consisted of a first, rather innocent act of understanding; a second moment of explanation; and a third moment that he variously characterized as a second immediacy, a post-critical naïveté, a moment of appropriation, or application (see fig. 1).⁵ As he intimates, the figure might better be called a hermeneutical spiral since one may return again and again to a text (Ricoeur 1981, 171). These three stages also are sharply distinguished as discrete moments more in analysis than in reality.

In the background were Continental debates about the Diltheyan dichotomy between the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the humanities or social sciences), which relied on understanding, and the *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences), which relied on explanation (Ricoeur 1981, 209). Ricoeur characteristically desired to integrate the two, while giving priority to the more holistic 'understanding'. As he saw it, thinking particularly of a work of fiction, there is upon a first reading an initial, holistic grasp of the meaning and its import. This amounts, he said, to a "first guess" (211). This initial understanding is then tested by critical methodologies. At the time, the methodology that Ricoeur stressed was structuralism, although he implies the use of ideology critique and other critical methodologies.



He also related this hermeneutical arc to the philosophical distinction between sense and reference, sense paralleling explanation and reference paralleling appropriation. This meant that one might analyze the sense contained in the structure of the text, whereas reference is how the text relates to reality. Drawing upon Hans-Georg Gadamer (1991), the reference is where the 'fusion of horizons' occurs (306). In yet another terminology, sense relates to a semiotic analysis, whereas reference relates to semantic analysis. A parallel relationship is between the world of the text, which relates to the explanatory moment, and the world in front of the text, relating to the text's reference.⁶ The latter notion is intended as a critique of historical-critical approaches that focus on the world *behind* the text (Ricoeur 1981, 218).

As one can see, Ricoeur has synthesized a motley collection of academic apparatuses into his hermeneutical arc, some of which do not fit comfortably together. For example, in his focus on structuralism, it is not clear that structural analysis rises to the level of establishing an actual world of the text. It can establish deep structures and even semiotic relationships to words, but it does not necessarily yield a narrative world. If it does, there is some tension with seeing his middle moment as explanatory and analytical. Is the kind of holistic understanding involved in constructing a literary world of the text possible in the more analytic, critical mode? Ricoeur (1981) says, "To explain is to bring out the structure, that is, the internal relations of dependence which constitute the statics of the text; to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the *orient* of the text" (161f). Is not the construction of a narrative world more than "constituting the statics of the text"?

Moreover, is there not a need for a post-critical construction of the world of the text as well as a post-critical world in front of the text? In other words, reading with a post-critical naïveté is not necessarily symmetrical with appropriation of the text. In terms of Gadamer's thought, does not a fusion of horizons occur even in understanding the world of the text? In fact, the implication of Gadamer's work is that a fusion of horizons must occur at every stage of the arc in order for any understanding to occur at all, not just at the last stage, thus calling in question the adequacy of Ricoeur's appropriation of Gadamer. Ricoeur's later conception of a three-fold mimesis deepens his reflection on hermeneutical issues, but it does not resolve these questions.

Ricoeur's Three-fold Mimesis

In his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, published in French in the early eighties, Ricoeur (1984-88) developed the idea of a three-fold mimesis, also called prefiguration (mimesis₁), configuration (mimesis₂), and refiguration (mimesis₃) (see fig. 1; Ricoeur 1984-88, 1:52-87 and 2:157-79).

Prefiguration refers to the preunderstanding that one brings to writing or reading a text. It is akin to Gadamer's (1991) 'prejudices' (235-74). Configuration refers on the one hand to the imaginative construction of a text and on the other to the reading of a text. Though not without ambiguity, Ricoeur seems to mean by configuration the rendering of a world of the text along the lines of Wolfgang Iser's (1974) reader-

response theory. Thus he seems to go beyond the analytical, critical middle moment of explanation in his hermeneutical arc. In fact, it is not quite clear where such critical explanation should be placed in what I will call his 'mimetic arc'.

Finally, refiguration replaces the term 'reference', which he now thinks is too foreign a category for his use, but it still parallels appropriation or application. *Time and Narrative* is a study of both historiography and fiction that suggests an intimate interweaving of the two. Appropriation in fiction, he therefore suggests, parallels 'standing-for' or 'taking-the-place-of' in historiography. By the latter he means the way in which historiography involves a debt to be true to the past but cannot simply recreate the past or tell history 'as it actually happened'. In other words, he maintains that historiography itself involves a fictive or figurative element that nevertheless attempts to represent or 'stand-for' the past.

Tensions

With this background, it is apparent how easy it might be simply to lay the later mimetic arc over the early hermeneutical arc. Just a little reflection, however, shows that they are not exactly parallel and yet represent points of contact where Ricoeur has refined his thinking. The result is in many ways a positive development of his thought. At the same time, several tensions or discrepancies arise.

One is a tension between the writer and the reader. The hermeneutical arc appears to imply only readers, whereas the mimetic arc includes both. The mimetic arc begins with a writer and reader in prefiguration, then with a writer and reader in configuration, and seems to end with a reader in refiguration.

A second tension is between the first understanding and prefiguration. Prefiguration is a category that precedes a first understanding, so these seem to be discrete realities, yielding at least four points on a synthesized arc.

A third tension lies between the analytical mode of explanation and the synthesizing mode of configuration. As indicated above, the semiotic mode of explanation does not appear to allow for a configured narrative world of the text. Thus there seems to be a distinction between an explanatory moment and a configurative moment. If we stop at this point, we now seem to have at least five points on a synthesized hermeneutic-mimetic arc!

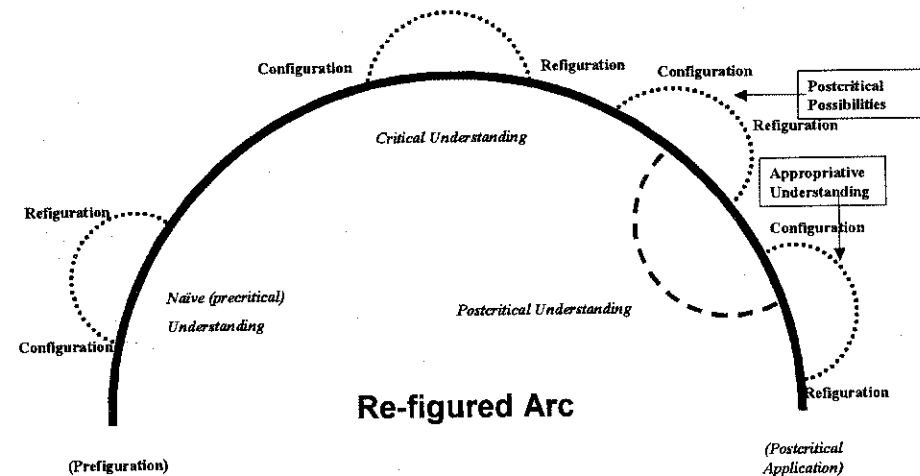
A fourth tension is one that may afflict both arcs. Ricoeur recognizes the significance of placing a work in its historical context, but he does not seem to note the ambiguity between thinking of the refigured world in front of the text at the time of the text and a contemporary refiguration of the world in front of the text. This is especially important in the case of fiction. What was the intended and actual appropriation of, say, *Huckleberry Finn* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, roughly in the time in which they appeared? Is not that reception significant in appropriating these words today? At least one can make a relative distinction between the earlier reception and one's own critical reception. One would, of course, have to add the history of reception, bringing to mind Gadamer's (1991) 'historical-effective consciousness' (300-7).

Moreover, do we not have to consider also the original reader's configuration of the world of the text in any contemporaneous configuration? In other words, Ricoeur's placement of a fusion of horizons only at the point of refiguration conceals the actual Gadamerian point that a fusion of horizons already occurs at the point of configuration.⁷ In fact, going back to Ricoeur's earlier hermeneutical arc, there must already be at least a tacit sense of appropriation at the first, pre-critical understanding, for Gadamer contends that one cannot separate appropriation from any of the other moments of hermeneutics.⁸ Bringing in the history of reception of both configuration and refiguration is certainly not foreign to Ricoeur's approach, but it adds complexity to an arc that has already been complicated quite behind his original three points.

A Re-figured Arc

With these tensions and ambiguities in mind, is it possible, so to speak, to re-figure Ricoeur's arcs in terms of a helpful synthesis, creating a more adequate hermeneutic arc? My proposal begins with several assumptions in light of the previous discussion. One is that I will adopt the standpoint of the reader. A second is that a distinction will be made between a semiotic analysis and a narrative configuration. Another distinction is that between the original world of the text and world in front of the text and contemporary renditions of both. A final assumption is, following Gadamer, that a fusion of horizons must occur at every point but is more thematic and pronounced at the last stage (see fig. 2).⁹

FIGURE 2



The resulting arc assumes the prefiguring horizon of assumptions and expectations that a reader brings to the text, drawn from Ricoeur's mimetic arc. Conversely, there is value in retaining, it seems to me, Ricoeur's earlier distinction between a precritical, critical, and postcritical understanding from his hermeneutical arc, so the first moment *per se* of this re-figured hermeneutical arc is the precritical or naive understanding. It includes both a naive configuration of the world of the text and a naive, probably tacit, appropriated world in front of the text.

A second, critical stage of analysis includes the use of any and every critical tool. This applies most easily to an analytical breakdown of the text into its components, but it can also apply to a critical analysis of the possible configurations of the world of the text and possible implications of the text, that is, possible refigurations. For example, a possible world *in front of* the text needs ideological critique as much as the literary world of the text. This critical stage would also include an effort to grasp the 'effective history' of the text, that is, its original and later receptions.¹⁰

A third postcritical stage would include a reading of the text in a holistic, receptive way, yet with all of the critical analysis in the background, rather like hearing a piece of music for enjoyment or reading a novel for edification, *after* studying them, rather than attending to all the critical questions while engaging in these activities. The appropriation of the text in terms of its truth for me, its application, must occur in this postcritical phase, yielding the world in front of the text. The critical phase can open up a variety of possible applications. Likewise, the postcritical phase opens up possible applications. The reduction of those options, however, to one judgment that I choose for myself is a step that properly belongs to a postcritical moment (see fig. 2).¹¹ In reality, as Ricoeur says of his arc, these distinct moments exist more in conception than in reality, and the last, postcritical phase would often lead to further critical reflection, and then to further postcritical appropriation, in a hermeneutical spiral rather than an arc.

Such a revised arc, as one can see, is much more complex than Ricoeur's images suggest, but it is helpful nonetheless. It helps one educe implications of Ricoeur's thought that often get lost in the vividness of his imagery, and at the same time it helps one avoid misleading simplifications.

Application to Attestation

How does such a refigured arc relate to Ricoeur's epistemological category of attestation, or is this just a model that applied to literary criticism and not to epistemology in general? Although Ricoeur has not specifically brought these together, he comes close to doing so in *Oneself as Another* (1992) in connecting the general category of attestation with narrative identity. Beyond this connection, they can be related in a mutually enriching manner.

First of all, Ricoeur's notion of attestation goes back to the category of witness in his more religious writings.¹² *Oneself as Another* (1992) represents his bringing together these religious categories with his general epistemology. Even in *Oneself as Another*, however, he does not develop attestation to any great extent. He says little more than the

following, "As credence without any guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion, the hermeneutics of the self can claim to hold itself at an equal distance from the cogito exalted by Descartes and from the cogito that Nietzsche proclaimed forfeit" (23).

He therefore conveys a postmodern type of epistemology, meaning that it is not classically foundationalist or objectivist. As he put it in an earlier work, "It is because absolute knowledge is impossible that the conflict of interpretations is insurmountable and inescapable. Between absolute knowledge and hermeneutics, it is necessary to choose" (Ricoeur 1981, 193). Ricoeur also, however, retains a cautious affirmation of warranted truth. Fleshing out attestation in terms of his hermeneutical reflections has much to commend it. For one thing, it develops Ricoeur by means of Ricoeur. These are all Ricoeur's ideas, even if he himself, as he acknowledges, often fails to synthesize his ideas.

Second, one might question whether a hermeneutical theory of fiction can be generalized to a full-blown epistemology. In response, one can say that Ricoeur himself expands his hermeneutic in several ways. He believes that the interpretation of actions is akin to interpreting texts. He also relates his hermeneutic of fiction to historiography. There is not an exact parallel, but he identifies a basic hermeneutical, configurative (or fictive) element in historiography. The same movement from a prefiguration, through critical analysis, to postcritical evaluation is relevant. Interestingly, Ricoeur does not apply his hermeneutical methodology self-referentially to philosophy, but if it can apply to historiography, there is no reason why it cannot be applied to philosophy. In fact, it may relate more easily to philosophy.

The philosophical vision that a philosopher has configured must be critically analyzed and then evaluated or appropriated. A truth claim, to be more specific, may engender an initial claim upon oneself in a first reading. A philosophical perspective is itself an imaginative construct that often involves a root metaphor and consequently productive imagination.¹³ After critical analysis, one still needs to adjudge, more holistically, its truth. Such claims often cannot be 'proven' or demonstrated, but they can be attested. As Ricoeur suggests, like a witness on a witness stand, the testimony can also be *contested*, but at some point a decision is made about its veracity. This connects with Ricoeur's sometime writing of philosophical judgments as a kind of wager, which can only be 'eschatologically' confirmed (Ricoeur 1967, 357; 1965, 54-55).

Applying a re-figured Ricoeurian hermeneutical arc to other kinds of 'texts', such as philosophy, or even scientific claims, points to a philosophy that does not require absolute foundations. With its reliance on first naive readings, it implies that philosophy always comes too late for foundations. It also realizes that most truth claims are underdetermined and involve personal judgment. They are postcritical attestations. At this point, attestation reflects its genesis as a religious category of witness. In a sense, these postcritical attestations become postcritical 'wagers'. At the same time, attestation does not give up testing, thus avoiding relativism or fideism. Critical evaluation is essential. Attestation would then be open-ended, also, in that it is open to any critical

methodology. It is just that no methodology is finally sufficient to ground such a postcritical attestation.

Conclusion

Such a proposal of re-figuring Ricoeur represents a way of integrating several trajectories of Ricoeur's thought: his earlier hermeneutical arc, his later mimetic arc, his general epistemological category of attestation, its earlier appearance in his religious reflections, and his cautious approach to philosophical truth. It also may well sort out some of the ambiguities and tensions that remain in Ricoeur's different writings on hermeneutics. I will leave to the judgment of the listener, however, whether a re-figured Ricoeur is a better Ricoeur!

Notes

1. Originally published as Ricoeur 1983–85. What is most striking is to see Ricoeur himself implying such a parallel, even when, as we shall see, there are significant differences between the two. Ricoeur (1995) is speaking of a schematism of feelings, when he says, "But this is only one aspect of the triple *mimesis* mentioned at the start of *Time and Narrative* 1 and which must be considered as coextensive with the general theory of metaphoricality suggested by *The Rule of Metaphor*" (257).

2. See, for example, the lack of attention to this issue in the Library of Living Philosophers series on Ricoeur (Hahn 1995).

3. The interpreter may take comfort in the fact that Ricoeur himself has famously confessed to inability to keep up with himself in terms of a coherent synthesis. In Ricoeur 1980, he says, "Lewis S. Mudge attempts to provide the reader with a coherent overview of my writings. It is precisely this attempt which requires my heartily felt thanks, because I am unable to draw such a sketch on my own, both because I am always drawn forward by a new problem to wrestle with and because, when I happen to look backward to my work, I am more struck by the discontinuities of my wanderings than by the cumulative character of my work" (41). He may have been able to make such a 'sketch', however, in his later book, Ricoeur 1992.

4. The title of this paper of a "re-figured Ricoeur" comes, as we shall see, from the third moment of his narrative arc, which he terms 'refiguration'.

5. The idea of a 'second naïveté' that is a second immediacy and postcritical is found earlier in Ricoeur 1967, 352.

6. Ricoeur is not always clear about this distinction. In one article in the seventies, he seemed to equate the world of the text with the world in front of the text. On the other hand, it seems clear in his later *Time and Narrative* that he distinguishes between the world of the text as referring to the enclosed 'narrated world' of the text and the fused horizon of the world in front of the text. For the earlier equation, see "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation" (Ricoeur 1981, 141–142); for the later distinction, see Ricoeur 1984–88, 2:88, and "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader" (Ricoeur 1984–88, vol. 3, ch. 7).

7. Ricoeur aligns reader response with refiguring a world in front of the text and tends to neglect its role in terms of configuration. Ironically, the emphasis in Wolfgang Iser's (1974) reader-response theory is on the role of the reader in configuring the text. In other words, there is no self-enclosed world of the text apart from the configuring construal of a reader.

8. See Gadamer 1991:

In the course of our reflections we have come to see that understanding always involves something like the application of the text to be understood to the present situation of the interpreter. Thus we are forced to go, as it were, one stage beyond romantic hermeneutics, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising

one unified process. This is not to return to the traditional distinction of the separate 'subtleties' of which pietism spoke. For, on the contrary, we consider application to be as integral a part of the hermeneutical act as are understanding and interpretation. (274–75)

An interesting example of this difference between Gadamer and Ricoeur is illustrated by Mario J. Valdés' analysis of Ricoeur in Mario J. Valdés, "Paul Ricoeur and Literary Theory," in Hahn 1995. Valdés identifies the hermeneutical dimension of interpretation only with the very last moment of appropriation. Gadamer sees it as occurring at the first understanding as well as in explanation. I agree with Gadamer at this point. Valdés edited an important recent collection of Ricoeur's writings (Ricoeur 1991).

9. In fig. 2, this Gadamerian emphasis results in an element of configuration and then refiguration at each stage: the precritical, critical, and postcritical. The effect is of smaller arcs embedded within the larger hermeneutical arc. What I have done then is to meld Ricoeur's mimetic arc of configuration and refiguration at every point onto his hermeneutic arc.

10. For Gadamer's notion of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, translated as 'effective history', see Gadamer 1991, 301–2.

11. In effect, in fig. 2 this yields two 'sub-arcs' as an aspect of the postcritical understanding, one that deals with possibilities and one that deals with a personal judgment of which of those possibilities is the best.

12. For example, see "The Hermeneutics of Testimony" in Ricoeur 1980.

13. In Ricoeur 1997, Ricoeur seems to imply that philosophy strives to move beyond metaphor, which seems to contradict everything he had written before in the book (295–313). On the other hand, he may be suggesting a milder notion that philosophy strives towards explanation and prose in a way that poetics does not.

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