

Critical Hermeneutics

*A study in the thought of
Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas*

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Introduction

The following study is concerned with the philosophy of social science. This sphere of philosophical inquiry remains an arena of deep-rooted dispute. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, many authors have argued that the methods of the social sciences are identical in essential respects with those of the natural sciences. The latter disciplines provide, by virtue of their very success, an exemplar of what all knowledge should be: empirically grounded, universally binding, value-free. However, during the same period, many writers have rejected this view, maintaining that there is a radical discontinuity between the natural and the social domain. For the social world consists of speaking and acting subjects who constantly make sense of themselves and others, and whose meaningful and wilful activities cannot be comprehended by the methods of the natural sciences. The study of the social world requires, these writers contend, a fundamentally different approach.

The two opposing positions are reflected in the recent philosophical literature of the Anglo-Saxon world. In the 1940s and 50s, authors such as Hempel and Nagel sought to analyse the methods of the humanistic disciplines in a manner which concurred with the positivistic programme of a unified science. There has since been a strong reaction to this earlier aim, a reaction propelled by the work of the later Wittgenstein, Austin and other 'ordinary language philosophers'. Writers such as Peters, Winch and Louch have called for an account of social science which is no longer constrained by the positivistic model, and which recognises the unique and ineradicable meaningfulness of human phenomena. The analyses offered by the latter writers are penetrating and provocative, raising questions about the character of social science which cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, these authors have generally pursued their investigations within an unduly narrow perspective. The problems which they pose are trapped in traditional antinomies, and many important issues are excluded from consideration. Moreover, the investigations are commonly conducted in terms which bear little relation to the actual practice

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of the social sciences. Indeed, it could be said that as a reaction to the reductionist doctrines of logical positivism, the recent Anglo-Saxon writings have resulted in their own form of reductionism. For just as the positivists of the Vienna Circle regarded philosophy as a logical arm of science, so too the followers of the later Wittgenstein have treated social science as a conceptual extension of philosophy.

It is with the aim of overcoming this pair of opposing positions, alternately assumed and rejected by Anglo-Saxon philosophers, that I have turned towards Continental traditions of thought. Among the latter, there are some traditions which have been deeply concerned with the nature of social inquiry. The exponents of these traditions have frequently opposed the unqualified use of naturalistic methods in the social sphere; and yet some of these authors have argued nonetheless that the study of the social world requires the use of objectifying concepts. One such tradition is that of 'hermeneutic phenomenology', which was formed through the fusion of the discipline of interpretation with the procedures devised by Husserl. The synthesis was originally effected by Heidegger and subsequently developed by Gadamer and others. A current and outstanding contribution may be found in the writings of Paul Ricoeur, who defends this approach in an intellectual milieu dominated by the ideas of Freud and Saussure. Another Continental tradition which has addressed itself to problems of social science is that of 'critical social theory'. Anchored in the writings of Kant, Hegel and Marx, this tradition was fostered by Horkheimer, Adorno and others, who sought to construct a theory of society which preserved a moment of critique. The project has been pursued by Jürgen Habermas, whose work is currently in the forefront of critical social theory.

One of the striking features of recent and widely differing contributions to the philosophy of social science is the extent to which they are infused with an interest in language. Among earlier Anglo-Saxon philosophers, the interest in this phenomenon was generally confined to the question of how the language of science could be clarified through the application of logical techniques. However, in the wake of the writings of the later Wittgenstein and others, philosophers have become increasingly concerned with the ways in which linguistic activities are constitutive of social life. Language is no longer seen as a formal structure which stands over and above the world, and which merely depicts states of affairs; rather, language is viewed as a practical medium through which individuals participate in the world. This new conception of language underpins many of the philosophical writings which have appeared in English

during the last thirty years. Yet whatever the merits of this conception, its consequences for the philosophy of social science have not been wholly salutary. In the work of authors influenced by the later Wittgenstein, there is a persistent neglect of phenomena which lie beyond the linguistic realm and a pervasive tendency to treat language as the basic component of the social world. If positivistic accounts of social science have erred by giving insufficient attention to the role of language in social life, then their post-Wittgensteinian successors have been led astray by an over-emphasis on this role.

The Continental contributions which I examine are closely linked to particular conceptions of language. In this respect, the choice of the work of Ricoeur and Habermas as focal points for the study is not fortuitous. Unlike many of their predecessors, these authors have made a remarkable effort to bring the resources of their traditions to bear upon the phenomenon of language; and in so doing, they have encountered some of the recent results of Anglo-Saxon thought. However, neither Ricoeur nor Habermas has appropriated these results uncritically, and the accounts of language which they offer attest to the originality of their work. In the perspective elaborated by Ricoeur, language is conceived as a medium in which aspects of being are expressed and disclosed. The linguistic realm is therefore the first but not the final point of inquiry, for phenomenology must strive towards ontology through the interpretation of symbols and texts. In the writings of Habermas, language is regarded as one among several dimensions of social life, a dimension which may be deformed through the exercise of power. Accordingly, critical theory must seek to unveil the ideological distortions of everyday speech, contrasting the latter with a presupposed ideal of communication free from constraint. Both Ricoeur and Habermas are thus concerned with the phenomenon of language; yet unlike many Anglo-Saxon authors, these Continental thinkers stress that language is neither the ultimate object of philosophical analysis nor the only modality of social life.

The convergence on the phenomenon of language provides a point of departure for the critical comparison of different traditions. In undertaking a comparative study, I hope to break down some of the barriers that continue to stand between diverse orientations and disciplines of thought. This does not mean that my aim is to produce a swift and facile synthesis: three cups of meaning, two spoons of interpretation and a pinch of power would indeed be a recipe for intellectual eclecticism. Moreover, in drawing together the work of Ricoeur and Habermas against the backcloth of ordinary language philosophy, I do not wish to denigrate the latter

perspective and to treat it as a mere repository of Anglo-Saxon error. On the contrary, by adopting a comparative approach, I seek to show that each of the traditions offers valuable insights into a series of problems which are common to them all. These problems provide the criteria of selection for the expository sections of the study, as well as the basis for initiating a critical dialogue. Thus the critique which I develop is not purely 'immanent', in the sense of examining only the extent to which a tradition resolves the problems it has posed to itself; it is also 'comparative', in the sense of assessing the relative merits of the contributions offered by different traditions. So if I use ordinary language philosophy as a backcloth for this study, it is because I believe that shedding light on the limitations of this perspective will bring out the strength and relevance of hermeneutics and critical theory.

The problems which are common to the different traditions are centred on three principal themes. These themes pertain to the conceptualisation of action, the methodology of interpretation and the theory of reference and truth. I argue that while ordinary language philosophers have rightly stressed the meaningful and social character of human action, they have disregarded considerations such as power and repression, history and social change. The writings of Ricoeur and Habermas confront these and other issues more directly. For both authors seriously struggle with the question of the unconscious; and each makes some attempt to situate action within an historical and institutional context, even if in the end these attempts do not fully succeed. On the level of methodology, I endorse the Wittgensteinian emphasis on the problem of understanding, an emphasis which is shared by certain writers within the traditions of hermeneutics and critical theory. Yet the problem of understanding cannot be divorced from considerations of explanation and critique, as both Ricoeur and Habermas insist; and while I dispute the detail of the latter authors' views, I defend the general programme of depth interpretation which they espouse. Finally, on the epistemological plane, I maintain that the literature of ordinary language philosophy deals inadequately with various issues in the theory of reference and truth. I suggest that, although Ricoeur and Habermas do not resolve these issues, they nonetheless offer some intriguing ideas which are worthy of being pursued.

At the horizon of this comparative inquiry, there lies a constructive project. I call this project 'critical hermeneutics': the elaboration of a critical and rationally justified theory for the interpretation of human action. In this study, I do no more than sketch the barest outlines of this

theory. After assessing the various contributions to the analysis of action, I try to develop an alternative account which relates action to the institutional and structural dimensions of the social world. The account forms a framework for reconsidering the questions of power, ideology and history. I then employ this framework to reformulate the methodological programme of depth interpretation. It is proposed that action may be interpreted by recourse to institutional and structural conditions, in such a way that understanding and explanation may be united with a moment of critique. I conclude by offering tentative solutions to some of the epistemological problems which are raised by this account. I indicate a few considerations which are relevant to the analysis of reference and objectivity; and I attempt to clarify the conditions under which a statement can be claimed to be true, in the hope that these conditions may provide a rational basis for a critical theory of interpretation. In every case my constructive remarks are of a programmatic character, forming nothing more than a rough guideline for further research.

The study is divided into two principal parts. The first part contains expositions of the three traditions with which I am concerned. Since the doctrines of ordinary language philosophy are familiar to many English-speaking students, the exposition of this tradition is brief. I sketch the genesis of Wittgenstein's later views and underline certain continuities with the ideas of Austin, Winch and others, with the aim of identifying some of the major contours of ordinary language philosophy. The two Continental traditions of thought are then presented. Since these traditions remain relatively unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world, I have considered it necessary to discuss their doctrines in greater detail. The second chapter opens with a short account of the origins of hermeneutic phenomenology, and then traces the evolution of Ricoeur's ideas from his early philosophy of the will to his recent theory of the text. In the third chapter, I offer an exposition of the writings of Habermas, placing his work within a tradition of thought that stems from Kant, Hegel and Marx. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the second and third chapters focus primarily on the writings of Ricoeur and Habermas. I point to some of the connections with the views of other authors in their respective traditions, but I do not pursue these connections in any depth. In all three chapters, considerable space is devoted to a discussion of the theory of language; and in the final sections of each chapter, I summarise the contributions of the relevant authors to the three themes mentioned above.

The second part of the study offers a critical and constructive analysis of the contributions presented in Part I. The fourth chapter examines the

views of the authors concerned on the conceptualisation of human action. Most of the chapter is devoted to criticising these views, and I conclude by outlining an alternative approach to this theme. In the fifth chapter, the contributions to the methodology of social science are explored. At the end of the chapter, I introduce several concepts in an attempt to reformulate the programme of depth interpretation. The sixth chapter concentrates on certain questions of epistemology. I evaluate the views of ordinary language philosophers as well as those of Ricoeur and Habermas, and then offer some suggestions as to how the most pressing problems might be resolved. Each of the chapters in Part II is thus concerned with a particular set of problems which are common to the three traditions. This way of organising the study, whereby contributions presented in Part I are critically examined in Part II, runs the risk of repetition. I try to minimise this risk by a change of emphasis: in the final three chapters I pursue in depth certain issues which, in the first three, are merely situated within a broader theoretical context. I believe, moreover, that this mode of organisation has advantages which outweigh any such risks. For the reader unfamiliar with the traditions and thinkers concerned will find a systematic overview in Part I; while those well versed in this material may wish to proceed directly to the critical analyses of Part II. It is my hope that this study will thus be of interest and assistance to students of differing expertise and persuasion.