

Anthropology of Homo Interpretans

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Abstract:

Paul Ricœur is rightly regarded as one of the greatest representants of the hermeneutical tradition, at the crossroads of epistemological filiation from Schleiermacher and Dilthey and the ontological filiation of Heidegger to Gadamer. Johann Michel's bias in this article is to explore a third way of hermeneutics under the guise of an interpretative anthropology. Before being a set of scholarly techniques (philological, legal, historical...) applied to specific fields (symbols, texts, actions...), hermeneutics derives originally from ordinary techniques of interpretation (unveiling, clarification...) at work in the world of life. The purpose of the contribution is to show how Ricoeur's hermeneutics can give serious directions for elaborating such an interpretive anthropology, in which case it also needs to be supplemented by other intellectual traditions to achieve this goal.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Anthropology, Self-technologies, Pragmatism, Schematism.

Résumé:

Paul Ricœur est considéré à juste titre comme l'un des plus grands représentants de la tradition herméneutique, au carrefour de la filiation épistémologique venant de Schleiermacher et Dilthey et de la filiation ontologique de Heidegger à Gadamer. Le parti pris de cet article est d'explorer une troisième voie de l'herméneutique sous le mode d'une anthropologie interprétative. Avant d'être un ensemble de techniques savantes (philologiques, juridiques, historiques...) appliquées à des champs spécifiques (symboles, textes, actions...), l'herméneutique dérive de manière originaire de technique ordinaires d'interprétations (dévoilement, explication, clarification...) à l'œuvre dans le monde de la vie. L'objectif de la contribution est de montrer en quoi l'herméneutique de Ricoeur peut donner des pistes sérieuses pour élaborer une telle anthropologie interprétative, en quoi également elle nécessite d'être complétée par d'autres traditions intellectuelles pour parvenir à cette fin.

Mots-Clés: Herméneutique, anthropologie, technologies de soi, pragmatisme, schématisation.

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When Jérôme Porée and I edited the third series of *Ecrits et conférences*¹ in 2013—of which David Pellauer’s English-language version has been published²—we wondered whether it really made sense to assimilate Paul Ricœur’s entire work to a kind of philosophical anthropology held together by a narrative thread, namely, an attempt to answer Kant’s famous question: What is man? For one thing, the term “anthropology” is not part of Ricœur’s core lexicon; it never features in the titles of his books, and only very rarely in the actual title of his essays, with the notable exception of a conference paper delivered in Milan in 1960 bearing the evocative title: “The Antinomy of Human Reality and the Problem of Philosophical Anthropology.” It is in the first part of his work, and particularly in the second volume of his *Philosophy of the Will*,³ that the notion of anthropology is more visible and more overtly used, with a very Kantian slant. Admittedly, however, in the rest of his work, the notion itself is largely absent from his dominant conceptual framework. And yet for all the radical evolutions and variations in his thinking, Ricœur’s entire oeuvre seems to be drawn like a magnet to this question, this recurrent theme. The will, fallibility, language, symbols, texts, memory, history, recognition, imagination—to cite only a few examples—are all, in one way or another, part of a process of thinking about the human condition. Not for nothing does Ricœur, in his intellectual autobiography, look back on his life’s work as a “project of philosophical anthropology.”⁴ A philosophical anthropology, which—needless to add—is in constant dialogue with the human sciences. But whereas the latter have a tendency to disperse into so many specialized disciplines, philosophy has the task of rethinking what it is to be human in all of its underlying unity.

Ricœur’s anthropology could therefore be described as direct when it is overt and consciously conceived of as such (notably in the first part of his work) and as indirect when all of the problems and themes that it touches upon converge, at least implicitly, on an examination of the multiple facets of the human condition.

If I want to reopen this discussion today, it is so that it can be extended and refined, as well as probed in greater depth. The question that motivates me is this: in what way and to what extent can Ricœur’s anthropology be described as hermeneutic or interpretive? What part does interpretation play in his description of mankind? I will try to address this in two stages. First, I will try to show that while Ricœur’s philosophy offers precious insights into what an anthropology of Homo interpretans—the self-reflective human being—might look like, these insights are only partly hermeneutic. Second, I intend to pursue, and also begin to systematize, the path opened up by Ricœur to sketch the outlines of an analysis of Homo interpretans.

Constructing an interpretive anthropology derived from Ricœur

There are different ways of looking at interpretation: from a methodological and epistemological perspective (the place of interpretation in the human sciences, and even in the natural sciences, when it comes to descriptive or explanatory methods), from an ontological perspective (the place of interpretation in understanding the meaning of existence), or from an anthropological perspective (the place of interpretation in the ordinary activities of the everyday world). The first perspective generally belongs to a philosophical tradition associated with methodological hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher to Dilthey: the aim being to ground the humanities on a firm foundation of understanding, as a counterpoint to the natural sciences. We know just how seminal a role Ricœur played in a tradition that he, more than any other contemporary philosopher, helped to renew by contrasting it with the ontological hermeneutics inaugurated by Heidegger and continued by Gadamer. It is not this first perspective, nor the second, that I want to address here today, but the third, which centers specifically on a social and philosophical anthropology of man as an interpreting being.

If we refer to Ricœur's first published works—say, up to the first volume of his philosophy of the will—we would have a hard time to characterize his thought as a “direct anthropology,” let alone as “interpretive anthropology.” The dominant matrix of his work was still strongly attracted to phenomenology, enriched by the existentialist heritage of Marcel and Jaspers. The anthropological motif was even less direct in that Husserlian phenomenology (used as the core method in the development of the philosophy of the will), despite being centered on the phenomenon of intentionality, does not step across the line into the examination of the human condition. It took the daring of a Hans Blumenberg to clearly open an anthropological window onto the phenomenological project.⁵ But even though there is no direct anthropology in Ricœur's early phenomenology, there is most certainly an indirect anthropology, covering the whole area of the human will, especially when the philosopher leaves behind the terrain of the pure description of volition to venture—before even the end of the first volume—into the realm of the absolute involuntary, of consent, and of hope: the contours of human finitude are already visible.

It is in the second volume of the *Philosophy of the Will, Finitude and Guilt*, that we find a decisive double shift. The first shift comes in the opening book of the volume—*Fallible Man*—where Ricœur clearly takes an anthropological perspective focused precisely on finitude: on man's “disproportion of the self to itself,” which makes moral error possible. The philosopher lays the foundations both of an anthropology of vulnerability (Human being torn between his own finitude and his aspiration to the infinite, between the limitations of this own character and the prospect of happiness) and of human fallibility (the possibility of moral error). This anthropology of vulnerability would remain present, to varying degrees, from one end of Ricœur's work to the other, at least up until *Oneself as Another*, which developed an anthropology of capability (speaking, acting, narrating, assuming responsibility) that speaks directly to the incapacities that constitute the human condition.

The second shift, introduced by the second volume of the *Philosophy of the Will*, lies in the hermeneutic turn taken by Ricœur's anthropology. And not only, in this case, from the methodological and epistemological perspective, which concerns the way in which knowledge,

exegesis or the science of religion relate to myths and symbols—although this is, of course, central to Ricœur's first major hermeneutic system. What is of greater interest to us here is that this hermeneutic also leaves room for an anthropology of human being as an interpreting being, as an ordinary person faced with symbols and signs with double meanings (stain, sin, guilt). The scope of Ricœur's interpretive anthropology is beyond the resources of a pure hermeneutic approach. Ricœur highlights an ordinary technique of interpretation—though it is also found at a more elaborate level in the field of religious studies and philosophy—namely the capacity for symbolization, and for unveiling the meanings in polysemic signs.

I refer to these ordinary techniques of interpretation as ethnointerpretations or interpretatials, halfway between Kant's transcendentals and Heidegger's existentials. In one sense, interpretatials are like ways of being-in-a-situation or ways of interacting from which understanding develops, but whose scope cannot be reduced to the meanings of being, facticity, or finitude contained in Dasein. In another sense, interpretatials are like conditions of possibility of knowledge, like prerequisites for the mediated understanding of any problematic sign, but whose constituent parts cannot be reduced to any scientific knowledge (which is, after all, a derivative and sophisticated form of knowledge). In other words, interpretatials are the ways of being and forms of ordinary knowledge that constitute any mediated understanding of a set of problematic signs.

Ricœur extends the scope of these particular modalities of interpretation—symbolization and unveiling (*dévoilement*)—by revealing other structures of signs with dual meanings, in his later discussions with structuralism, and even more so with psychoanalysis. The output of the unconscious is expressed in symbols, the paradigmatic form being, of course, dreams, whose latent meaning can only be unencrypted by trying to interpret the manifest meaning (the day's residues). At this level, Ricœur is undeniably talking about sophisticated interpretation techniques, more specifically those encountered in Freudian metapsychology. Ricœur's problem is mainly an epistemological one, in as much as he is seeking to recruit the psychoanalytic method into the fold of a hermeneutics derived from the exegetic sciences. But the psychoanalyst, after all, though he lays claim to a knowledge that the analysand does not possess, does not have a monopoly on the interpretation of dreams. By which I mean that the first interpreter of dreams is the analysand himself, who attempts, with varying degrees of success, to bring some order and legibility (if that is what he wants) to the confused, scrambled paratext of the day's residues. Without himself being an analysand, i.e. without necessarily lying on the analyst's couch, the ordinary subject can perfectly well draw on ordinary unveiling techniques to decode the productions of his own unconscious; just how truthful they may or may not be is not relevant here.

One can adopt a similar reading strategy when it comes to the proposal to extend hermeneutics to longer sequences than symbols, namely to actual texts. Although Ricœur is heir to the long hermeneutic tradition that grew out of the textual sciences, going back to Schleiermacher, it was really the encounter with Gadamer that gave decisive impetus to the later version of his theory of interpretation. Of course, it was mainly within a specific methodological and epistemological framework that Ricœur sought to add a new stone to the edifice of textual hermeneutics, that of professional and scholarly techniques, which owe as much to philology as they do to structuralism. But his philosophy, via that of Gadamer, cuts an anthropological furrow

through the place attributed to the application or refiguration of the text relative to the reader. Because the reader of a text, be it history or fiction, is not only the professional reader—the philologist, the literary critic or the philosopher—but any subject who can read and grasp the meaning of a text, even if there are, of course, sophisticated techniques—for example philological (grammatical and psychological) or structuralist (correlations between functions, roles, characters in a story)—for explaining a text.

However, if the refiguration of the world of the text onto the world-model of the reader reaches beyond the professional reader to include all readers, then the methodological hermeneutics of textual analysis clearly leads to an interpretive anthropology (at least for societies with writing; it might be worth thinking about extending the concept of refiguration to media other than texts: to pictograms, for example, or painting, or music, and so on). The key factor, in my view, being that the lay reader also mobilizes a whole gamut of interpretive techniques (including the movement of understanding from the whole to the part and back to the whole) when confronted with an inability to understand a section of text, with an obscure or puzzling passage, with difficulty in following a plot or identifying a character in a story. Once again, there is no guarantee that these techniques do actually make the meaning of a text any less problematic or enable the reader to “get at the truth” of it: anthropologically speaking, the important thing is to be able to identify the ordinary techniques that individuals, societies and cultures draw upon when they are faced with an impediment to understanding.

One might also grant the existence of a third reading strategy when Ricœur proposes to extend hermeneutics to the world of action. Admittedly, it is again within the framework of a particular epistemology that Ricœur seeks, in *From Text to Action*,⁶ to transpose the model of the text to the social sciences, by considering deliberate action as a text to be interpreted. Action—rendered autonomous, like a text, from the author’s intentions—becomes an open book that can be appropriated, refigured and transformed. But this epistemological issue, which concerns the methodological foundations of the social sciences, can lead on to a genuinely anthropological issue. This happens when social agents are confronted, in the course of ordinary interactions, with situations that are atypical, unfamiliar, or disturbed: the meaning of the action is no longer self-evident. Social agents, when they can, will then apply interpretive techniques to restore order, coherence, and legibility to the world of action: for example, by asking for clarification from their interlocutor or interactant about what they meant by their action, or by placing an action that is hard to comprehend within a wider context, a history of past practice. It is here that we see Homo interpretans at work in his ordinary activities, at least when these activities come up against obstacles to immediate understanding.

Ricœur’s philosophy may also offer a final pathway toward an interpretive anthropology in the form of what he calls the hermeneutics of the self, introduced mainly in *Oneself As Another*.⁷ Once again, the hermeneutics of the self—defined as the subject’s reflexive and interpretive ability, half way between Descartes’ “exalted cogito” and Nietzsche’s “humiliated cogito”—is a form of self-technology, to use Foucault’s term, practiced by those professionals of interpretation, the philosophers. The hermeneutics of the self belongs to a twofold practice (self-concern and self-knowledge) whose historical origins, as Foucault showed,⁸ can be traced back to technologies of the self that are Hellenistic as well as Christian (notably through the verbalization of confession). From this angle, these technologies are historically

esoteric, learned in particular institutions (schools of philosophy, monastic communities, etc.) and intended for an initiated audience. It is possible, however, to extend the hermeneutics of the self to any practice by ordinary individuals who indulge in lay self-interpretation in one form or another, especially if, like Charles Taylor, we adopt the anthropological standpoint, viewing “man as a self-interpreting animal.” Philosophers and penitent monks, in other words, do not have a monopoly on the hermeneutics of the self. And it is the task of interpretive anthropology to characterize the range of self-interpretations that ordinary agents use when confronted with the issues that surround the meaning of their existence, particularly when faced with a set of discordant events, such as biographical events, which permanently affect a life that can no longer be taken for granted. Stories, in particular—as ways of embedding oneself in a narrative—can serve as valuable interpretive technologies for restoring self-continuity where the event generates disruption, dissonance, or dissolution of the self.

Ricœur’s hermeneutics provides useful resources (the hermeneutics of symbols, the hermeneutics of texts, the hermeneutics of action, the hermeneutics of the self) for developing an interpretive anthropology, but a certain reading—and therefore a certain degree of interpretation—is required to make it into a gateway for easier access to such an anthropology. In other words, while there certainly is an anthropology (whether direct or indirect) in Ricœur’s work, it is not entirely and immediately interpretive when one considers his published writings as a whole. And even if one can discern an interpretive anthropology, it sometimes suffers from being too closely pegged to the model of the text, and more generally to permanently fixed expressions of life, whereas an interpretive anthropology also needs to be attentive to problematic, unfamiliar action in the making, as revealed to us in all its event-driven, indexical glory. An anthropology of *Homo interpretans* additionally presupposes a more systematic treatment of historic, cultural and social conditions—as well as variations—that have brought *Homo interpretans* about. I would like, at this point, to begin to trace that path by taking Ricœur’s initiative further.

Homo interpretans: between the universal and the particular

The project of an interpretive anthropology requires that we look in two directions. On the one side, at the universal and invariable conditions of interpretation without which the concept of *Homo interpretans* would lose all relevance. This is where philosophy is at its most pertinent. On the other, at the particular (historic, social, cultural) conditions under which interpretive activity is manifested. This is where the social sciences come into their own.

Let’s start by reminding ourselves that interpretation refers to a mode of understanding in which the intended object is relatively indeterminate (an image, a text, a trace, an action, a sign, a situation), but it always has to do with an understanding that resists any immediate grasping of meaning. Interpretation is a mediate or mediated understanding where the meaning does not spontaneously make itself intelligible. Interpretation—and this is what gives it its reflexive, suspensive dimension—then takes the form of a search or an inquiry. Under these conditions, interpretation is indeed peculiar to mankind—which is not to equate the animal world with mere machines—even if human beings, as they go about their business, are not constantly interpreting everything just because they happen to be semiotic animals that dwell in a world of meaning and

symbols. As Wittgenstein said, we interpret things only when we do not understand them. Of course, there is no clear dividing line between immediate understanding and mediated or interpretive understanding: there are plenty of gray areas between the clear and the unclear, the obvious and the obscure, the familiar and the foreign, the straightforward and the problematic.

Talking about universal and invariable conditions of interpretation brings us back to what I have called interpretals or ethnointerpretations, as ordinary ways of being and ordinary modes of knowledge when faced with situations where meaning is problematic. An anthropology of Homo interpretans, such as the one I am proposing, tells us about the ordinary techniques used by men and women to cope with the opacity of the signifying world. They employ these ordinary methods (asking for clarification, putting things in context, placing them within a narrative) to dispel the obscurity. I use the term ethnointerpretations to qualify the type of ordinary interpretive techniques employed to cope with unfamiliar, atypical situations (as opposed to typical ways of doing things—often the preferred focus of the ethnomethodology that emerged from the sociology of Garfinkel—in situations that have themselves become routine). By way of example, let me list a few of the ethnointerpretations that we all use in our day-to-day lives:

The technique of **clarification** consists in shedding light on a meaning that was initially fuzzy, murky, or confused. Some philosophers, notably Wittgenstein, might profess that the goal of philosophy is to clarify thought or language, but it's fair to say that clarification—which is never guaranteed to succeed—also functions as an ethnomethod when we are looking to piece together the syntax of a manifestly ill-formed, and therefore meaningless, sentence, or when we try to reconstruct the meaning of an incoherent argument, or strive to redefine an initially bewildering situation of interaction (Who did what? Why? In what circumstances? etc.);

Simplification, in its positive sense, aims to break down, into meaningful elements, a set of propositions, a theoretical or practical problem, a narrative plot, or a situation so complex as to make spontaneous comprehension difficult. Problematicity, in this case, is linked not to a lack of meaning, but to a profusion of relations between signifying elements;

Explicitation is a form of ethnointerpretation that seeks to uncover a meaning assumed to be contained in an expression or proposition. It is found everywhere in ordinary practice when light needs to be thrown on the unspoken implications of a proposition, an intention, or a situation where the meaning could give rise to ambiguity or misunderstanding;

The technique of **unveiling** consists in exposing, behind the literal or manifest meaning, another meaning which is, voluntarily or involuntarily, hidden, latent, or prefigured. The masters of suspicion elevated it to a fully-fledged scientific method, in which interpretation is necessary because the manifest meaning is seen as illusory; the real meaning has to be uncovered on each occasion. Similar procedures can be found—with no such scientific or philosophical pretensions—in ordinary interpretations: unmasking the deception of an outwardly sincere attitude, hidden intentions, the hypocrisy of a decision that claims to be fair, or the demagogic ulterior motives of a seemingly generous political speech;

Symbolization pursues a very different end to that of unveiling, although the approach—uncovering the hidden meaning behind a manifest meaning—is much the same. But instead of deconstructing a meaning that is assumed to be illusory or deliberately mystifying in

order to get at the real (contrasting) meaning, symbolization unpackages the surplus of meaning contained within the literal meaning of an expression, or of a symbol, a myth, a situation. This interpretive technique has proved its heuristic value, notably in religious hermeneutics, in the exegesis of sacred texts that Ricoeur includes under the hermeneutics of reconstruction (as opposed to the hermeneutics of suspicion). This form of ethnointerpretation is found in most societies, in the popular exegesis of stories, songs, legends, and myths, for children or for adults, during religious rituals, wakes, public readings, and so on;

Contextualization is perhaps the form of ethnointerpretation most frequently employed both in the academic world and the ordinary world. It is used to address a partial lack of meaning, a gap in meaning, a truncated meaning. It does so by replacing the meaning of a proposition, or the grammar of an artwork, in an appropriate context, i.e. in a broader or more relevant configuration of signification.

To speak of a suspensive or reflexive attitude of meaning with regard to interpretation does not mean we are giving free rein to a kind of sovereign consciousness, at liberty to interpret a text or problematic situation as it chooses. There are, in other words, historic, social and cultural conditions on individual interpretation just as there are on the collective process of interpretation, our interpreting together.

Reading Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays*⁹ we are, to begin with, invited to think about the historical conditions of interpretation. The Czech phenomenologist's concise, dense writing provides a useful framework for thinking about the "problematicity of meaning," in the telling phrase that he coined. The heart of the philosopher's approach lies in the slant he gives to the Husserlian thesis of the natural world, which is no longer simply assimilated to the pre-scientific world (as is the case in *Krisis*) but to the prehistoric world, in a specific sense, far removed from the historiographical notion of prehistory. Paradoxically, the prehistoric world, as envisaged by Patočka, is not bereft of myths, stories and histories. Quite the contrary: these narrative forms serve to keep mankind within the prehistoric, i.e. within a life-sustaining social cycle, transmitting and receiving worlds of meaning that are never really questioned. The prehistoric world, as a natural world, is fundamentally a "non-problematic" world: "life simply as it is contained in the self-evidence of received meaning, in the traditional way of life, its forms and modes."¹⁰

While this description offers a powerful illustration of the process by which meaning is naturalized, it could be reproached for its underlying historicism, evident in the way the historic world as such is defined. With perfect consistency, the historic world is characterized by the "problematicity of meaning": history begins when Man stops accepting the meaning transmitted by tradition; history begins when, as meaning is denaturalized, Man goes in quest of new meaning; history begins, ultimately, when Man starts interpreting. For Patočka, in other words, interpretation, in the strictest sense, is by no means an anthropological universal disposition—merely a contingent historical possibility.

The proof is that history, for Patočka, only really begins with Greek civilization, which suspends and challenges the political, cosmological and natural order. It is with the Greeks that the great denaturalization of meaning takes root. Such is the legacy of the "problematicity of meaning" at the very foundations of European civilization. By contrast, other civilizations (if we

can still call them that)—those that preceded “the Greek miracle” or have not yet been directly influenced by its aura—are relegated to the prehistoric world.

Without disputing the existence of the “Greek miracle,” it is surely a safe bet that Patočka’s eurocentrism would not stand up to more detailed research on the historical anthropology of non-European civilizations. The confusion stems, in fact, from the status accorded to the “problematicity of meaning” correlated with the historic world. When Patočka describes the world as problematic, he has in mind a meaning that is more philosophical than anthropological, and in a register that is more meta-interpretive than interpretive. The problematicity of meaning, from the philosopher’s perspective, concerns the totality of being, i.e. “the whole of existence.”

And yet the notion of the problematicity of meaning can be given a much broader conceptual status: an anthropological and social status. In this context, the problematicity of meaning as expressed by Patočka is just one variant of interpretation, and a radicalized one at that, not only because it concerns the whole of being, but because it is presented in a philosophical mode, i.e. in a meta-interpretive register. The problematicity of meaning takes on a much wider scope, however, if it is seen as an ordinary human activity when people are confronted with anything that disrupts the orderly flow of the immediate understanding of meaning, without precluding the possibility of questioning. The notion of problematicity of meaning can then be decontextualized from the framework of the philosophy of history, in which Patočka was still working, and recontextualized into the framework of the sociology and anthropology of ordinary activities.¹¹ We can then speak of an ordinary epoché—which is not that of the phenomenologists, and does not have the same ambition—when subjects suspend their judgment about whether the meaning of a behavior, a situation, or an utterance is “natural,” in so far as that meaning has ceased to be self-evident.

The expression “prehistoric world” can then be replaced by “ordinary epoché” or by G. H. Mead’s “immediate experience.”¹² Mead uses the term immediate experience to refer to a relationship with the world that proceeds without problems, without conflicts, without tensions, when the responses of social agents are adapted to the situations in their environment. But when unprecedented events occur in “the world that is there,” when the environment undergoes changes, when elements of doubt or uncertainty creep in, immediate responses are not enough. A certain attitude is required, which Mead calls cognitive thought and Dewey calls inquiry, if we are to adjust our responses to a new environment, and reassure ourselves about the existence of objects and about the value and meaning of things.

This interpretive process is dual-faceted: one facet is a form of undergoing, where a social agent experiences a “disruption,” in Dewey’s sense, of its immediate understanding of the meaning of just such a denaturalized situation—in other words, the suspensive and reflexive attitude—the other facet is a form of doing, or “inquiry,” when agents go in search of a new meaning better suited to the understanding of a situation, when they try to establish new relations of meaning between strange or unknown phenomena, or when they resolve ambiguities about the meaning of a text or conversation. There is no way of knowing when, if ever, this circling around meaning will come to an end, given that any new occurrence of a strange and discordant meaning is liable to once again trigger the process of inquiry, and set people off once more on the interpretive journey in order to adjust their responses to the environment.

In this pragmatist context, the hypothesis of the universality of Homo interpretans can be defended. In other words, whatever culture or civilization they belong to, people can experience the strangeness of the proffered meaning (of an action, utterance, text, etc.), without necessarily having to question (scientifically or philosophically) the whole of existence, or the general order of things. Even in what Patočka would call “prehistoric” societies, traditions of meaning are never received passively; they are interpreted so as to re-inscribe them in the next generation, to compare and contrast them with other traditions of meaning, or to cope with upheavals in the cycles of life. The symbolic worlds of human societies are never entirely fixed and intemporal, even in the societies that least resemble our own. In this respect, Greek civilization clearly invented an entirely new way of questioning meaning, in the form of the reflective suspension of all signifying orders.

This framework, inspired by pragmatism (a tradition with which Ricoeur had little contact, despite the central role it played at the University of Chicago, mainly through the figure of Mead), represents a valuable resource for channeling our thoughts about the ordinary mechanisms of self-interpretation, but it is insufficient for thinking about the cultural conditions that govern the act of interpreting, whether performed by individuals or by groups. The detour via social and cultural anthropology is, a useful relay for highlighting both the diversity of symbolic systems and the universality of Homo interpretans. Despite all the individual variations, it would be a mistake to see interpretation as being free from all constraints and predispositions. Indeed, nothing could be further from the truth. Cultural anthropology teaches us just how important are the symbolic frameworks, forms and structures by which we give meaning to the world, to others and to ourselves. It makes sense, then, to start out from the Kantian legacy of schematism, revisited both by the philosophy of symbolic forms, initiated by Cassirer, and by an anthropological tradition that runs from Levi-Strauss to Descola, via Bourdieu.

The whole point of using the idea of schematism in structural anthropology is to extrapolate the schema as a representation of a class of situations, a representation that enables subjects to act in an orderly way whenever they are faced with analogous situations. Like Durkheim before him, Levi-Strauss sought to “sociologize” the Kantian schemata, while maintaining the idea that such an operation remains an “art hidden in the depths of the human soul.” Levi-Strauss pushes this perspective to its logical conclusion by locating schematism in the structural unconscious, along with the elementary structures of kinship which, like a system of linguistic signs, cannot be modified without redefining a whole set of oppositions.

This finally brings us back to the realm of the “savage mind (*pensée sauvage*)” and to its hypothetical universality. For Levi-Strauss, recognizing the cultural diversity of symbolic systems is not incompatible with the existence of a fundamental structure of the human mind. These partly innate dispositions can best be assimilated to the receptor structures or “structures d’accueil” (the term used by the biologist François Jacob), which enable the child to react to stimuli from its environment. These receptor structures, as potential schemas of practice, can only be filled, enriched and oriented through contact with the symbolic systems in place in each individual society.

Certain schemas of practice have a longer learning curve, due to the quantity of information that needs to be processed and ordered. The practice of hunting among the Achuar

of the Ecuadorian Amazon offers a good example, in as much as men over forty statistically bring back more game. And yet Descola observes that the adolescents already have an admirable degree of know-how and a highly trained eye (being able to identify several hundred types of animal, to imitate their calls, and to describe their habitat). However, it will be another twenty or so years before they bring back game from every hunt.

Following Descola, one can distinguish between cognitive schemas that are assumed to be natural and universal, and cognitive schemas that are acquired through contact with cultural systems. Among the former—although this continues to be debated among biologists and psychologists—one would include schemas covering expectations about human actions (ascribing intentions to others), covering the mode of being of physical objects, and covering the nature of non-human organisms. Anthropology, however, focuses on collective schemas that serve to construct culturally shared meanings: “first, to structure the flow of perception in a selective fashion, granting a preeminence in signification to particular traits and processes that can be observed in the environment; second, to organize both practical activity and the expression of thoughts and emotions in accordance with relatively standardized scenarios; and third, to provide a framework for typical interpretations of patterns of behavior and events—interpretations that are acceptable and can be communicated within a community in which the habits of life that they convey are regarded as normal.”¹³

What does this use of the idea of schematism—revisited by structural anthropology—teach us about interpretive activity? Cultural schematism principally comes into play in any form of immediate understanding of symbolic or natural worlds: cultural schemas define the frameworks by which we identify ourselves, connect ourselves, categorize ourselves, classify ourselves, and make clear to ourselves the distinctions between natural beings, social beings, and artificial objects. This isn't the place to discuss the systems of ontological classification based on cultural areas that Descola proposes; simply take the example of Achuar totemism, of which Descola has intimate knowledge, and where animals are classified by human attributes and by their degree of proximity to the human way of life. Cultural schematism can be seen at work, for example, in the way Achuar women see garden plants as children that need to be guided to maturity, while the men see each animal they hunt as a brother-in-law, “an unstable and tricky relationship that demands mutual respect and circumspection.”¹⁴

When cultural schematism operates in ordinary, non-problematic situations, it is indeed a meaning-giving activity, but one that we might call proto-interpretive or pre-interpretive. This is the case with the collective schemas that Descola rightly calls “non-reflexive,” which can be compared to Charles Taylor’s sensorimotor level of proto-interpretation, to Levi-Strauss’s pre-interpretive, pre-propositional level of classification systems in *Pensée sauvage* and to Bourdieu’s bodily knowledge, practical sense or habitus, i.e. embodied know-how, and the informed eye of *savoir-voir*.

When, however, individuals and groups are faced with distortions of meaning, and with the failure of their typical responses to the social or natural environment, a genuinely interpretive activity is required in order to restore continuity of meaning, resolve ambiguities, and resituate an event inside a symbolic system. Cultural schemas come into play at this reflexive level of interpretation. There are schematically cultural ways of dealing with the problematization of meaning. When we are faced with micro-distortions of meaning, the interpretive schemas that

already exist—by which I mean the typical ways of responding to problematic situations—are enough to restore continuity of meaning within a system of signifiers. In this case, the schematic operation is akin to Kant’s “determinative judgment” in that it subsumes the disruptive event (such as tracks left by an animal that do not have the usual characteristics of tracks left by an animal of the same category, or a painting attributed to a master that differs from his usual style) into a pre-existing schema. These micro-distortions of ordinary meaning have no impact on the relative homology between, on the one hand, existing schemas and mental structures and, on the other, cultural systems and natural orders. All it takes is a “makeshift” interpretation—a spot of interpretive “bricolage”—to integrate and recombine the events coherently into symbolic systems that ultimately undergo only minor modifications.

It is a very different configuration when societies are faced with a “problematicity of meaning” so extreme that it is totally incommensurate with pre-existing cultural schemas. For example: serious disruption of ecosystems; continual wars; political, economic and cultural revolutions; colonial invasions; culture clashes. What we find here is a significant disconnect between the existing schemas and the new world order, a disconnect that reflects the sudden powerlessness of determinative judgment and the usual interpretation procedures. In the worst-case scenarios, the gap between schemas and worlds can persist, expand, and trigger the collapse of the interpretive process, or even the progressive destruction of cultural universes, as we have seen with so many animist or totemic societies, powerless to generate renewed meaning given the sheer magnitude of the disruptions affecting them. Especially, as Levi-Strauss demonstrated, in the case of societies whose predominantly synchronic structures are more sensitive to events.

In more favorable scenarios, by contrast, one can observe new schemas being invented in order to overcome a problematicity of meaning of unprecedented intensity—an operation rather like the role played by the imagination in “reflective judgment.” This invention may take the path of a brand new combination of existing schemas, or of the translation and transposition of existing schemas into other cultural worlds in order to construct new schemas capable of adapting to new configurations of the world and of nature. Such is the magnitude of these changes of meaning that single individuals are incapable of producing new cultural schemas on their own; these schemas are, by nature, collective. Such, indeed, is the magnitude of these changes of meaning that is not any one particular cultural schema that proves to be unsuited: it is the whole range of schematic structures that make up a cultural universe. For example, the imposition and penetration of naturalism in the totemic world, via colonization, means that—in these societies—the non-human can no longer even be seen as the psychic and social continuity of the human. Here we are not far (were it not for his Eurocentric bias) from the narrower sense that Patočka gives to the problematicity of meaning, when the entire political, social and natural order is suspended and brought into question. In such historically rare cases, interpretation emerges in its most reflective form.

When it is not defeated by the sheer magnitude of the collapse of meaning, when it manages to invent new schemas and to reconfigure cultural worlds of meaning in new ways, interpretation also serves to give them a history. A history that is not just that of everyday accidents in which the diachronic has only a minor impact on the synchronic, but another history, in which the destabilizing power of the diachronic totally subverts the coherence of the synchronic, reconfiguring it into a new symbolic structure. That is the one of the lessons to be

learned from an anthropology of Homo interpretans, halfway between the universal and the particular, in a still exploratory line of enquiry for which Ricœur's philosophy offers us—in more than one way—valuable insights that remain to be pursued and systematized.

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