

An Ineffable Feeling: Ricouer and Kristeva on the role of Empathy in Hermeneutics and Psychoanalysis

The event of communication is often taken for granted as a fact of utterance. People do indeed speak to one another and the world goes on, but under philosophical investigation communication becomes somewhat enigmatic. For one thing, there is no extra-linguistic position from which to guarantee the meaning of an expression; for another, the transparent and unmediated sharing of a given experience seems like a way of trespassing over the existential solitude and uniqueness of each person's inner life. Words cannot of themselves prove their meaning and my experience cannot directly become yours. And yet, friends continue to share laughter over a joke, grief over the pain of a loss, and a sense of shared meaning can be witnessed in daily life. But how is a shared sense of meaning possible and what, if anything, is the role of empathy in the social production of meaning? In this work I take a Hegelian dialectical approach that produces meaning from the inscriptions by which otherness is always already traced into the communication of our subjective experiences. To represent this view, I offer Paul Ricouer's *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* as a brief introduction to a dialectical understanding of communication as "discourse". In addition to a theory of interpretation, I think it important to illustrate what the practice of discourse actually looks like. For this I turn to Julia Kristeva's *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*. Together, Ricouer and Kristeva help resolve the apparent dichotomy that seems to separate feeling and meaning across an existential abyss by pointing to the ways in which the production of meaning is always already dialogical in nature. I employ Ricouer to outline the function of empathy in language as facilitating the very possibility of discourse, then Kristeva is shown to affirm and apply these principles in psychoanalytic practices.

There is no doubt that modern linguistics has achieved a tremendous amount of insight into the structure and function of language systems. But Ricoeur reminds us by pointing to Plato and Aristotle that, although its instruments and terms are modern, the fundamental philosophical problems of language remain quite old. Plato's early work *Cratylus*, for example, seeks to inquire into the origin and nature of language and meaning. In this dialogue Plato's main interlocuter is a man named Hermogenes – or, Born of Hermes. Yet, this cannot be his real name, Plato seems to think, since this man possesses none of the qualities properly associated with Hermes. Hermogenes therefore is the wrong name for the object of which he is, and therefore cannot be his true name. But what makes a name or word true? Hermogenes seems to think that every name is true simply because naming is a mere act of convention. Socrates or Plato, on the other hand, hold that name-giving requires a technical knowledge of likeness and approximation by which the word imitates the thing. Just as a painter knows which colours and lines to use in their representations, so too do name givers know which sounds to act in place of the object. Plato concedes that the problem of isolated words or names is undecidable because it does not exhaust the powers of language which require something else – an object or an action.

Plato's later more mature works circle the same problem. In the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, Plato's fundamental question is somewhat more elaborated. Rather than considering the representative function of a word, Plato wonders how erroneous words are possible in the first place. That is, how is it possible to say what is not? If words must represent, then they must represent *something*. But then, how is it can we can say that which has no objective reference, or which simply is not the case? Again, Plato ends with the idea that a word or name by itself is neither true nor false, and that only a combination of words may mean something yet grasp nothing. Thus, the burden of language seems not to fall on the word or name itself, but in the

sentence. “Such is the first context within which the concept of discourse was discovered: error and truth are “affections” of discourse, and discourse requires two basic signs – a noun and a verb – which are connected in a synthesis which goes beyond the words”.¹

Aristotle too in *On Interpretation* sees the matter of truth as foreign to the sign because on its own a noun has no meaning without a relation to time and place. Only the conjugation of noun and verb is able to bring forth a Logos by which truth can be known. For Aristotle, the problems of true and false interpretations therefore are simply solved by speaking properly – that is, propositionally. A true arrangement of words are only those arbitrary signs that affirm or deny some proposed event in time accurately. Thus truth, for Aristotle, only pertains to a certain arrangement of words called propositions. “Every sentence has a meaning, not as being the natural means by which a physical faculty is realized, but...by convention. Yet every sentence is not a proposition; only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity. Therefore, a prayer is not a sentence and is neither true nor false”.²

The earliest ideas of Logos as discourse seem to see the truth of the word either as a natural imitation or as a calculated exchange and ignore language as lived, as felt. This idea of the word, however, seems to transform where we find the Word as Gospel. Here, the Word comes to express God itself, and the word becomes Love in the flesh.³ The meaning of this Word exists only through its fleshy works.⁴ With revelation the idea of interpretation is identical with the golden rule. To love our neighbours as ourselves, ourselves as our neighbours and God above all, we must interpret our self as an Other, others as a Self, and Truth above all.

¹ Paul Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 1.

² Aristotle, *On Interpretation*, 17a1.

³ John 1:14

⁴ Galatians 5:22

The distinct progresses achieved by modern linguistics, Ricouer thinks, allows us to contrast the Logos of discourse, whether Greek or Hebraic, with a new and even contrary term that establishes language as an object of empirical study – *the linguistic code*. “Language here then means something other than the general capacity to speak or the common competence of speaking. It designates the particular structure of the particular linguistic system”.⁵ Ricouer’s contention, however, is that linguistic focus on “code” and “system” has generally eclipsed the problems of discourse and language as it is actually lived and used in dialogue with others. This neglect of language as actually practiced and preference for its systemic functions can be traced to the successes of Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural model for understanding language in *Cours de linguistique générale* where we find a fundamental distinction between *langue* and *parole*. Here, *langue* is the code or set of codes on the basis of which a particular speaker can produce a *parole* as a particular, and corruptible message of its original code. *Langue* is seen as collective, systemic, codified, non-temporal, necessary, and virtual whereas *parole* is degenerated as individual, variable, temporal, arbitrary, and actual. *Parole* therefore seems the lesser scientific of the two and can fall under multiple sciences like acoustics, physiology, sociology, etc., while *langue* falls only to “the synchronic systems of language”.⁶ The unprecedented success of these structural approaches to language is that it gives us a new way of seeing the word. Rather than being externally defined by the relation of a word and a thing, which would make language depend on something extra-linguistic, the word or “sign” is determined by two contrary aspects immanent to the sign itself – “the signifier – for example, a sound, a written pattern, a gesture or any physical medium – and the signified – the differential

⁵ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 2.

⁶ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 3.

value in the lexical system”.⁷ According to this structure, no unit of the system has a meaning of its own. Instead, meaning occurs only from the opposition to other lexical units of the system such that there are no substantial identities but only differences. According to structural linguistics, meaning is not dependant on anything external to itself as if it mediated minds and things, of subjects and objects. “It constitutes a world of its own, within which each item only refers to other items of the same system, thanks to the interplay of oppositions and differences constitutive of the system...At this extreme point language as discourse has disappeared”.⁸

Admittedly, *parole* is individual, heterogenous, and contingent. For structural linguistics, the temporal dimension of the events of communication indicate its epistemological weakness since events vanish but systems remain. “But *parole* also presents a structure that is irreducible in a specific sense to that of the combinatory possibilities opened up by the oppositions between discrete entities”.⁹ A sentence, Ricouer insists, is not one big word but is irreducible to the sum of its parts such that its function does not derive from its words. While every word and its combinatorial possibilities precede any given fact of utterance, the sentence is in and of itself the actual *event* of meaning, it is what actualizes the otherwise pure virtuality of language as code or grammar. The dialogical or discursive nature of speech grounds the very existence of meaning because each time the code is actualized in a message it is said by an actual person, and therefore in an idiosyncratic and irreducible way. Meaning is thus *interesting* because it can only be produced between interlocutors.¹⁰ Yet, while temporal, the event of expression is not transitory since it can be identified and reidentified so that we can return to it or say it in other words.

⁷ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 6.

⁸ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 6

⁹ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 7

¹⁰ The Latin etymology of interest breaks down into *est* (is) and *inter* (between).

Despite its variability, the said as such maintains an identity of its own. Thus, while discourse has a structure it is not that of an analytical structuralism that combines discretely opposed units. Instead, it possesses a structural logic in the synthetic sense, that is “as the intertwining and interplay of the functions of identification and predication in one and the same sentence”.¹¹ In this intertwining and interplay, a dialectic of discourse unfolds between *event* and *meaning*.

“The supressing and the surpassing of the event in the meaning is a characteristic of discourse itself...if language is a *meinen*, an intending, it is so precisely due to this *Aufhebung* through which the event is canceled as something merely transient and retained as the *same* meaning”.¹² *Event* here should understood as the immediate feeling by which an expression is compelled or stimulated, and *meaning* as the transference of the event as it resonates between interlocuters. In this light, we cannot know what we mean until we say it, until the immediacy of the event is transformed through discourse into sense or meaning. So it is “because the sense of a sentence is, so to speak, “external” to the sentence it can be transferred; this exteriority of discourse to itself – which is synonymous with the self-transcendence of the event in its meaning – opens discourse to the other. The message has the ground of its communicability in the structure of its meaning”.¹³ Thus, for Ricouer, language and the production of meaning is a process through which the inner is made outer, and the outer is made inner. “Language is the exteriorization thanks to which an impression is transcended and becomes an ex-pression ... Exteriorization and communicability are one and the same thing for they are nothing other than

¹¹ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 11.

¹² Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 12. *Aufhebung* is a central Hegelian concept which literally translates to “lifting-up” yet preserves a double sense of preservation and negation. Dialectics are thus processes of *Aufhebung* in which a concept is negated and lifted up to a higher plane in which it is otherwise conserved.

¹³ Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 13.

this elevation of a part of our life into the *logos* of discourse”.¹⁴ It is precisely this continuity between the inner and the outer, the private and the public, that illustrates how empathy functions as the essential principle of communication. My words, my thoughts, and my feelings only produce meaning when the immediacy of imposition is simultaneously canceled and elevated into the structure of dialogue through which the affects of expression resonate between minds and attain a meaning. It is precisely this necessity for resonance and interpretation that establishes the impossibility of meaning without dialogue, and the impossibility of dialogue without empathy. For, empathy is nothing but the faculties of communication through which the bonds of community are facilitated. Where there is no community there is no communication since the immediacy of the event is only canceled and elevated through its return from the other.

Now that I have outlined how and why Ricoeur understands communication as discourse, I aim to show how Kristeva illustrates this idea in her approach to psychoanalysis. Differences remain, however, between how the two see and understand language. Kristeva, for instance, does not privilege language as the center of unconscious activity but sees affects or *semiotic traces* as playing a much more important role in the formation and expression of psyches. Yet, dialectical thinking is still fundamental to her practice and, in this way, retains a Hegelian influence. Kristeva’s thesis in *Psychoanalysis and Faith: in the Beginning was Love* is that psychoanalysis, and indeed all genuine communication between minds, necessarily proceeds only from positions of love. That communication as community begins and ends in love and is therefore the means to its own end – even when that love involves trauma.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, pg. 19.

For Kristeva the object of study is not any given unit, whether psychic or linguistic, but rather an *exchange*. “The object of psychoanalysis is simply the *linguistic exchange* – and the accidents that are a part of that exchange – between two subjects in a situation of *transference* and *countertransference*”.¹⁵ And it is through this notion of transference and countertransference that the hidden depths of our feelings attains a meaning through which it can be engaged, and wielded. The subject of analysis, or the analysand, can be thought to seek the analyst as other on whom an injury can be displaced and examined through an alternative perspective that proximity otherwise prohibits. This distance afforded by the displacement of transference allows the analysand to return to a relation to herself which is not dominated by the immediacy of the affects. “This mobilization of two people’s minds and bodies by the sole agency of the words that pass between them sheds light on Freud’s famous remark, in *The future of an Illusion*, that the foundation of the cure is “Our God Logos”. It also recalls the words of the Gospels: “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) and “God is love” (John 4:8).”¹⁶ It is want of love and revelation that establishes the covenant of discourse – this is why it is called *the talking cure*.

Kristeva holds that psychoanalysis cannot be understood in terms of the models of structural linguistics because its elements are prelinguistic and so cannot be divided into “signifier” and “signified”. Rather, “the point is to go beyond the theater of linguistic representations to make room for pre- or trans-linguistic modalities of psychic inscription, which we call semiotic in view of the root meaning of the Greek *semeion*: trace, mark, distinctive feature”.¹⁷ These pre-linguistic emotional traces of semiotics are otherwise called “affects” and this emphasis on affect is necessary, Kristeva argues, due to the heterogenous nature of

¹⁵ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 1.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 3.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 5.

conscious and unconscious representation. One can “observe in the clinic a psychic modality in which desire, anxiety, or narcissism leads to an eclipse of signification in the subject without thereby robbing his or her language of instinctual *meaning*”.¹⁸ In this way, the analyst never looks upon symptoms and fantasies as aberrations but as immanent truths experienced by the speaking subject, even when these truths seem otherwise delusional. “I take them seriously, then, but as references to the past; by reviving them in therapy, I immolate them. They do not disappear, however, but at best assume a new configuration, one that we hope is more beneficial for the subject and those around him”.¹⁹

Analysis reveals the strange and paradoxical nature of subjectivity. “We are no doubt permanent subjects of a language that holds us in its power. But we are subjects *in process*, ceaselessly losing our identity, destabilized by the fluctuations in our relations to the other, to whom we nevertheless remain bound by a kind of homeostasis”.²⁰ The function of analysis then is to revive a sort of intersubjective dialogue otherwise obscured by affect. Its purpose is to show the analysand that she always already had an inexhaustible otherness inscribed within her own subjectivity with which she can play and perform in her relations without ever being totalized and played by them. And, in this way, the analysand can become whoever she needs to be in order to better understand and navigate herself and the planes in which she exists. Hence, the end, both as reason and conclusion, of analysis is to carry its discourse outside the clinic, off the couch and into our lives in our relations to others. “Analysis ends...with the realization that I cannot expect anything in return unless I am willing to give myself to my benefactor, that demands and even desires make the subject the slave of its object. Once analyzed, I continue to

¹⁸ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 5.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 6.

²⁰ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 9.

make demands and to feel desires, but in full awareness of cause and effect”.²¹ We can expect nothing in return without giving ourselves to our interlocutors because it is only in this act of giving that we receive any semblance of true meaning outside the specters of our fantasies. Thus, without the ontological mirror of the Other, we are incapable of clearly seeing the meaning of our own utterances. Discourse or the production of meaning therefore is the action by which we see ourselves seeing ourselves through the eyes of the other. Through this distancing act of transference, the relations established and connected between interlocutors are called the meanings of the expressions.

I began this short work asking how a shared sense of meaning is possible and what role empathy plays in the production of meaning. Admittedly, these questions could spill all the ink in the world with still more to write, but I believe we have adequately satisfied them in an introductory way. For, given Ricoeur’s and Kristeva’s valuable theoretical perspectives we can clearly see that words do not attain an actual meaning *until they are shared* and that, therefore, discourse is itself facilitated by a kind of empathy. We do not know the meaning of our feelings and desires without the dialectics of discourse through which we *displace* the immediacies of affect through the other who *replaces* and elevates the privacy of the event with the inter-esting construction of a shared meaning.

Work Cited

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²¹ Kristeva, *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, pg. 52.