

# PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of our text is to explore the ties of Ricoeur's hermeneutics with ontology and epistemology. We have to admit that (1) for Ricoeur, at the beginning of his work, hermeneutics (as one can find it in *Le conflit des interprétations*) was never a main topic (hermeneutics, as hermeneutic intelligence, was always a solution to a certain problem and never a problem in itself), and (2) that when hermeneutics becomes a main topic (as one can find it in *Du texte à l'action*), the purpose of Ricoeur is to suggest a renew ontological hermeneutics, beyond Heidegger and Gadamer, but still tied with his non-hermeneutic intents. Our thesis is that Ricoeur's latest hermeneutics, beyond his epistemological status, can be regarded as ontology. Of course, one cannot find a direct ontology, as we can find it in Heidegger or Gadamer, but one can find what we can call a reversed ontology, an ontology which does not start from the centre of the human experience of understanding but outside of it. In other words, we are going to show that not even his late hermeneutics (the critical moment), better known as textual hermeneutics, is not per se an epistemological hermeneutics beyond its declared intention as being one.

**KEYWORDS:** Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics, epistemology, ontology

## 1. Introduction

For methodological reasons, we have to state what we understand by *hermeneutics*. From the vast literature on this topic we can adopt two main definitions of hermeneutics: hermeneutics as the technique of interpretation (a clear set of rules) applied on texts, facts, history, and so on, and second, hermeneutics as the problem of understanding, or, under the account of Jean Greisch, the problem of understanding the understanding.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the second characteristic of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Greisch, *Herméneutique et grammatologie* (Paris: CNRS, 1977), 25.

hermeneutics responds to what Jean Grondin calls *philosophical hermeneutics* which, in his view, begins with Gadamer and, in some aspects, with Ricoeur.<sup>2</sup>

Even so, if we are going to view Ricoeur's hermeneutics between these two features, some difficulties may occur. I want to emphasize only one key difficulty. The two main volumes that constitute the main core of Ricoeur's hermeneutics<sup>3</sup> are a series of articles shattered on more than thirteen years. This simple fact has an undeniable influence on one's proper understanding of Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Even more, texts as such cannot be viewed as coherent sets of texts answering to a unique problem. Every text has different purposes, different circumstances, different aims, etc. Thus, when we approach Ricoeur's hermeneutics, a methodological decision is required. The critical moment in his hermeneutics (by critical moment we understand the moment in which Ricoeur becomes involved in what we can call a proper hermeneutic debate), and we have to emphasize this as clear as possible, is to be found in no text before the volume *Du texte à l'action* (1986).

The volume *Le conflit des interprétations* (1969), despite of its pronounced hermeneutic character, cannot be viewed as his hermeneutic theory, or, more proper, this volume is (1) neither developing a strict set of rules as any technique of interpretation requires, nor (2) debating on the status of understanding the understanding. With the exception of one article ("Existence et Herméneutique," on which I am going to draw later on, in order to prove its non-hermeneutic intents), Ricoeur is not at all interested neither in point 1, nor 2. Here we have what Ricoeur will later call 'symbolic hermeneutics,'<sup>4</sup> a hermeneutics axed on the double meaning of symbols, more precisely, on the second level of denotation of every symbolical thing. The well-known axiom "the symbol gives rise to thought"<sup>5</sup> will mark entirely his work until the volume *Du texte à l'action*. This is to say that Ricoeur is using hermeneutics as 'hermeneutic intelligence,' a sort of reflexive philosophy, in order to approach the hidden meaning of every symbol, or, in order to approach what symbols raised i.e., something to think about. It is not our purposes to follow here the development of Ricoeur's hermeneutics; it is enough if we state that Ricoeur's hermeneutics develops solitary without any connection with Gadamer's hermeneutics. The inner need to develop a hermeneutics responds to the problem of evil: "L'herméneutique du mal n'est pas une province

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Grondin, *L'universalité de l'herméneutique* (Paris: PUF, 1993), XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), and *Du texte à l'action* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> See Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la volonté. Tome II. Finitude et culpabilité* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 479.

indifférente, mais la plus signifiante, peut-être *le lieu de naissance du problème herméneutique*.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, with the volume *Du texte à l'action* things radically change.

Starting from this volume we want to interrogate the epistemological and, at the same time, the ontological status of Ricoeur hermeneutics.

In a series of articles Ricoeur asks himself if it wouldn't be more plausible to call the fundamental work of Gadamer *Truth OR Method* and not *Truth AND Method*.<sup>7</sup> Of course, here we have, among other critical approaches of Gadamer's philosophy to which we are going to come back later in our study, the fundamental charge that Ricoeur brings on Gadamer. That is to say, in more or less Ricoeur's words, that Gadamer's hermeneutics is too ontological and it almost breaks the ties with epistemology. Choosing between *alienated distanciation* and *appropriated experience* is the fundamental error (*aporia*) of the gadamerian hermeneutics. If, on the one side, we are going to follow the path opened by epistemology, we must give up our proximity to truth; if, on the other side, we remain on the level of *appropriated experience*, i.e., ontology, we are losing from sight the methodological aspect. This is the reason why Ricoeur urges us to understand that Gadamer should name his work *Truth OR Method*. The disjunction *OR* emphasises better the brake between ontology and epistemology. The conjunction *AND* presupposes a sort of equivalence between ontology and epistemology, an equivalence that is, in Ricoeur's eyes, nowhere to be found in Gadamer's work.

Thus, starting from this point we want to address the same question to Ricoeur. Although we cannot find in Ricoeur's work, like in Gadamer's, a single book (and as simple as it might appear this fact creates an on-going debate among exegetes) that is treating the hermeneutic problem, we have nevertheless a compact series of articles that are treating in a coherent manner the hermeneutic problem. I want to emphasise, as strongly as possible, that, here, at the level of *Du texte à l'action* we have the main core of Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Here we will find his hermeneutic debate with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer. Here we have his hermeneutic theory from where we can talk, in the strong sense of the word, about Ricoeur's hermeneutics. Here we will find his criticism to the hermeneutic tradition, and, once again, his version of hermeneutics. But, in the same time, here as well, we will observe his non-hermeneutic intents.

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<sup>6</sup> “The hermeneutics of evil is not an indifferent region but the most significant one, perhaps, *the birth place of the hermeneutic problem in itself*.” (Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 313, my translation & my emphasis.)

<sup>7</sup> See Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 97, 101. For the same purposes see his *Écrits et conférences 2: Herméneutique*, (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 134.

Hence, starting from the middle of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, we can deploy our question, our approach and our answer. The question: how can be regarded Ricoeur's hermeneutics: as an ontology or as an epistemology? Our approach: from the middle of the volume *Du texte à l'action* moving backwards to his work where hermeneutics is strongly tied to ontology, and forward to *Temps et récit*, where hermeneutics, in spite of its epistemological character, is still linked to ontology. Our answer: even if Ricoeur denied or, better, refused the ontological nature of hermeneutics, he is proposing a new hermeneutic ontology or, in a more suitable manner, a reversed ontology.

## 2. Hermeneutics between the *Cogito* and understanding

The critical approach of what we know today as *philosophical hermeneutics* in Ricoeur's case does not start with Gadamer, but with Heidegger. Even if we can agree that the epistemological moment of Ricoeur's hermeneutics can be found in a text like "Existence et Herméneutique," I want to establish that the main purpose of Ricoeur's argumentation is not related entirely to hermeneutics, but to anthropological philosophy. But before that, I will make a short comment on the role of structuralism in the Ricoeur's thought regarding hermeneutics. We will find that structuralism plays a double role in Ricoeur's thought: firstly as an opponent and later as an ally. I think this is important due to the fact that his critical hermeneutics, or more properly, his epistemological hermeneutics, relies entirely on structuralism. In a text like "Herméneutique et structuralisme," Ricoeur debates on the status of a structural approach to "a general theory of sense" (*théorie générale du sens*).<sup>8</sup> What we have to emphasize here is the fact that Ricoeur is using 'hermeneutic intelligence' (*intelligence herméneutique*)<sup>9</sup> as a valid method to enter the world of 'sense.' The failure of structuralism is that it cannot explain the 'surplus of sense'<sup>10</sup> that we find in any myth or symbol. This is the reason why we need a hermeneutic intelligence: so that we should be able to access the surplus of meaning. His argumentation follows in a critical manner an on-going debate on the temporal status of myth (diachronic or synchronic) emphasizing the need to adopt another view (other than structuralism) when we deal with the diachronic status of myth. It is important to stress here the refusal of structuralism. Of course, Ricoeur is not denying any relevance to structuralism<sup>11</sup> but, in 1963, for him, hermeneutic intelligence is the proper way to enter the 'world of sense.' In other words, it is

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<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 57.

about a clash: *hermeneutic intelligence* against *structuralism*. We will draw later on the positive role that structuralism plays in his critical hermeneutics.

Hence, in "Existence et Herméneutique," we find for the first time Ricoeur's disapproval on Heidegger's direct ontology of understanding. We cannot follow the path opened before us by Heidegger, Ricoeur tells us, because we are going to lose from our sight the methodological features of hermeneutics.<sup>12</sup> We have to maintain a close contact with the methodological trains of hermeneutics if one wishes to establish a valid set of rules of the human sciences, especially the historical sciences.<sup>13</sup> In other words, and much closer to Ricoeur's debate, one cannot follow Heidegger's ontology of understanding if he wishes to fully understand the conflict of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> It seems that in 1965, when the article was written, Ricoeur is emerging himself without any doubt in the classical problems of hermeneutics regarding the problem of understanding as such, and the problem of a methodology required by the human sciences. But if we are going to closely follow his entire argumentation, we can notice a slight change of subject. The entire second part of the article is concerned on what is known as *anthropological philosophy*. His main interest is the *Cogito* as a debatable problem for structuralism, psychoanalysis and phenomenology of religion. Appealing to the 'semantic knot,'<sup>15</sup> or in a more proper way, to the symbol, as the center of all hermeneutics particular or general,<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur denies any attempt to knowledge that starts from the center of the human subject. We need, in his words, an archaeology of the subject and not an ontology of understanding.<sup>17</sup> We can never begin from the center of the *Cogito*, but always from the long route of symbols. *Thus, Ricoeur's main objection to Heidegger is not, even if it seems so, the problem of understanding as such, but the problem of the Cogito, the problem of understanding the Cogito.* It is true that we have here an intercalated problem, but for Ricoeur the problem to solve is an anthropological one and not a hermeneutic one. But, for the moment, it is important to notice the double task of Ricoeur's analysis: hermeneutic at the beginning, anthropological at the end. Better yet, so as to fully understand the anthropological task of his endeavor, in Ricoeur's eyes the ontology of understanding proper to Heidegger is similar to the vain pretention of Descartes' *cogito*.<sup>18</sup> Because reflexion (as

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<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 21.

understanding or as *cogito*) always is ‘our effort to exist;’<sup>19</sup> this is to say, reflexion is never given but always acquired. What we have here is a double critique: firstly towards the pretention of knowledge of the Cartesian *cogito*, and, secondly, to the pretention of a direct ontology of understanding. We always must have a detour, a route, a path to follow, so that we should be able to understand the *cogito* or the understanding. Ricoeur’s interest is not the problem of understanding, but the problem of the *self* which knows himself and discovers himself. Bluntly, Ricoeur’s main interest is the construction of the self and not the construction of understanding.

Of course, we cannot deny and we are not denying the hermeneutic debate offered by Ricoeur in this article. The fact is that, indeed, Ricoeur is defending here the epistemological status of hermeneutics, asking to maintain a close contact to the main trains of hermeneutics, understood as methodology, but the core of his argumentation is not to offer us the ‘dreamed’ methodology of the human sciences, but to argue against a direct path to the *cogito*. Again, we have to insist on the fact that for Ricoeur, at the level of *Le conflit des interprétations*, hermeneutics, understood as hermeneutic intelligence, plays an almost indefinable role. With hermeneutic intelligence we are able to enter the world of the sense, beyond structuralism or psychoanalysis.<sup>20</sup> But, in the same time, when we adopt an ontological position, such as Heidegger’s, we have to refuse the direct access to understanding (because it is similar to the direct access to the *cogito*) only to propose an alternative way, a long route, an indirect ontology. This indirect path to the problem of *cogito* will have a dramatic influence on what we can call his hermeneutic theory.

### 3. Hermeneutics as/or reversed ontology

We have to assert that Gadamer plays a fundamental role on the development of Ricoeur’s critical hermeneutics. Despite the fact that Ricoeur acknowledges that his hermeneutics develops ‘step by step,’<sup>21</sup> always discovering another problematic aspect of hermeneutics, and despite the fact that his initial encounter with hermeneutics has no connections with Gadamer’s, the critical moment in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics is, undoubtedly, an on-going debate with Gadamer. We are not going to deal here with all the problems raised by this fact; even more, we are not

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<sup>19</sup> “La réflexion est l’appropriation de notre effort pour exister et de notre désir d’être à travers les œuvres qui témoignent de cet effort et de ce désir.” (The reflexion is our effort to exist and our desire to be through the works that confine this effort and this desire.) (Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 21, my translation.)

<sup>20</sup> See Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 101-195.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences 2*, 17.

interested in establishing the inner connections between Gadamer and Ricoeur or the main differences between them. However, in order to grasp the indirect ontology that Ricoeur is proposing, we cannot exclude Gadamer. Obviously, Ricoeur's ontology does not fundamentally change with his encounter with Gadamer, but it receives a new insight, a new determination. Thus, his commitment to the 'long route' into the world of symbols, monuments and written works in order to have access to the *cogito*<sup>22</sup> or, into the world of understanding, is kept. Even if the debate is moved from the *cogito* to *understanding*, or even if Ricoeur is fully committed to a hermeneutic debate, his non-hermeneutic insights regarding the possibility of knowing the self remains the same.

The fact is that his engagement to the epistemological characteristics of hermeneutics explodes in a critical manner in three consecutive texts, that we can call the center of Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in "La tache de l'herméneutique," Ricoeur is renewing his commitment to the epistemological insights of hermeneutics, accusing Gadamer that he is too close to the claims of Heidegger. In other words, as we saw, that his hermeneutics is too ontological. In order to be able to have an epistemological hermeneutics, the first thing that we must do is to restrict hermeneutics to the text. After all, the text is the main center of all hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup> Second, we have to give the text a sort of full autonomy, so as that we should be able to approach it as strictly as possible: autonomy regarding its author, autonomy regarding its destination, autonomy regarding its socio-economic factors.<sup>25</sup> This triple autonomy confines the text with the much needed objectivity. Freed from its philological, historical and sociological elements, the text presents itself in front of us as an autonomous object. Our hermeneutic effort or, more precisely, our epistemological effort will respect this autonomy of the text by applying the fundamental set of laws offered by structuralism. We do not have to borrow the methods from the natural sciences, but we have to look within our own (humanistic) field towards structuralism. Thus, hermeneutics will be able to adopt an epistemological status.

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<sup>22</sup> See Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 10. The same statement appears also in *Du texte à l'action*, 116.

<sup>23</sup> The first critical text in which Ricoeur is proposing a 'new concept of interpretation' – "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?" – is written in 1970. Together with "La tache de l'herméneutique," "La fonction hermeneutique de la distanciation," and "Hermeneutique philosophique et hermeneutique biblique," all written in 1975, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?" can be viewed as his theoretical and critical hermeneutics.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 111,112, 114, 116.

Here structuralism plays a positive role. If, for instance, as we saw, confronting structuralism Ricoeur is proposing hermeneutic intelligence as a valid method in order to enter the world of the sense, confronting ontological hermeneutics, structuralism functions as a valid method in order to offer the text a much needed autonomy. Bluntly, we can find a dialectical movement within Ricoeur's hermeneutics: the refusal of structuralism (the impossibility to accede to the sense) as a first movement, but, in a second movement, the refusal of ontological hermeneutics as a vain pretention to have access to the sense. Of course, we have here two very different utilizations of the same concept: firstly an anthropological usage of hermeneutics and secondly a proper hermeneutic usage of hermeneutics.

Evidently the refusal of a direct ontology assumes as a counterweight a clear methodological position. But a peculiar position that, at the end, will become an ontological position. What we are arguing is that Ricoeur, in his debate with Gadamer, has a similar position, as that assumed in his debate with Heidegger. In other words his anthropological position is to be found in his hermeneutic position. That is to say the refusal of Gadamer's ontology implies the proposal of another type of ontology.

Thus, we have to follow closely Ricoeur's argumentation against Gadamer. The fact is that Ricoeur is engaging in a direct debate with Gadamer's main concepts: *distinction alienante* (*Verfremdung*) and *raport primordial d'appartenance* (*Zugehörigkeit*).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, if for Gadamer *Verfremdung* makes one to lose the contact with the things to be understood for Ricoeur, the same *Verfremdung* has a positive role.<sup>27</sup> To give an example, perhaps the most important one, historical conscience enrolls in the same time *Verfremdung* and *Zugehörigkeit*; the need to understand a historical fact is possible due to the fact that I am a historical being (preceded by historical facts), but the impossibility to understand the fact is given by the temporal distance. How can we understand critically a historical fact if we are preceded by the fact itself? Or, better, how can we understand ourselves between *Verfremdung* and *Zugehörigkeit*? In Ricoeur's eyes, *Zugehörigkeit* with its ontological structure obstructs the critical position of hermeneutics.<sup>28</sup> *Zugehörigkeit* can never be abolished but also its negative character cannot be abolished. But in this manner we will never be able to introduce a critical hermeneutic position. This is why Ricoeur argues for a more positive understanding of *Verfremdung*.

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<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Du texte a l'action*, 101- 102. See also his "Herméneutique et critique des idéologies," in *Du texte a l'action*, 333-378.



Yet, we may ask, how this positive understanding of *Verfremdung* can be achieved? Ricoeur's answer is: by appealing to the text, or, more clearly, to the *world of the text*. The work of the text is able to defeat *Verfremdung* in which our understanding loses itself.<sup>29</sup> What we must understand is that Ricoeur offers to *Verfremdung* a positive character. In this way, historical distance does not become an impediment to our understanding. But what exactly means positive side of *Verfremdung*? In fact, what we have here is a shift of view. In the center of our act of comprehension we are not going to find the human subject with his constitutive prejudices but the self, formed and informed by the text. The world opened by the text, its work, shapes the human subject. In fact, the world of the text is the center of all comprehension. The work of the text which shapes my conscience is the center of all hermeneutics. We can here observe better why Ricoeur stipulated the full autonomy of the text. In interpreting a text we are not searching for the author, we are not searching for the hidden intention, we are not searching to understand the text better than the author himself, we are not searching for its socio-economic factors, but we are searching for the *sense* of the text which forms the self. In this moment, a critical question may be introduced. How can we control in an epistemological manner the world of the text? The internal structure of Ricoeur's epistemology may at the end be reduced to a simple and single operation; to be affected by the text, to find yourself in front of the text. However, isn't it safe to affirm that in this manner we are losing the contact with epistemology and we enter a different type of ontology?

We can restrict the entire tension created between epistemological and ontological implications of Ricoeur's hermeneutics to the following citation:

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<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in this way hermeneutics keeps a close contact with its epistemological trends. We have to understand that, in Ricoeur's eyes, the experience of *Zugehörigkeit* still holds to a philosophy of cogito. See for instance his critique towards Gadamer that he did not overcome the romantic status of hermeneutics (*Du texte à l'action*, 97). Of course, we can observe here the same critique as in the case of Heidegger: abolishing the pretention of a foundational cogito. See *Du texte à l'action*, 52, where Ricoeur asserts: "*Une manière radicale de mettre en question le primat de la subjectivité est de prendre pour axe herméneutique la théorie du texte. Dans la mesure où le sens d'un texte s'est rendu autonome par rapport à l'intention subjective de son auteur, la question essentielle n'est pas de retrouver, derrière le texte, l'intention perdue, mais de déployer, devant le texte, le 'monde' qu'il ouvre et découvre.*" ("A radical way of placing the primacy of subjectivity in question is to take the theory of the text as the hermeneutic axis. Insofar as the meaning of a text is rendered autonomous with respect to the subjective intention of its author, the essential question is, not to recover, behind the text, the lost intention but to unfold, in front of the text, the world it opens up and discloses.") (my translation, emphasis original.)

Non point imposer au texte sa propre capacité finie de comprendre, mais s'exposer au texte et recevoir de lui un soi plus vaste, qui serait la proposition d'existence répondant de la manière la plus appropriée à la proposition de monde ... *La compréhension est alors tout contraire d'une constitution dont le sujet aurait la clé. Il serait à cet égard plus juste de dire que le soi est constitué par la 'chose' du texte.*<sup>30</sup>

Not only the understanding of the text as an object of hermeneutics is advanced here, but, more important, the text itself has direct implications in understanding as such. This position can be confusing for one who is searching for the epistemological fundamentals of Ricoeur's hermeneutics. 'The world of the text' or 'the work of the text,' overturns the connections between epistemology and ontology. Thus, the proposition of sense specific to the 'world of the text' cannot be eradicated into an epistemological endeavor. The ontological status is here evident: the sense is pre-given, there is a world of the text that informs my conscience, but exactly this proposition of sense cannot be epistemologically analysed. The sense of the text, its world, becomes the center of the hermeneutic experience specific to Ricoeur's theory.

We can at this moment draw a general conclusion. *Verfremdung* can be viewed in its positive aspect due to the fact that it produces a shift from our pre-judgments to the world of the text. Or, more clearly, from the *cogito* to the text. But, in this way, the autonomy of the text has a relative, if we can put it like this, autonomy; until the moment we have to accept that the sense of the text has a direct implication to my understanding. At this point, any epistemological endeavor cannot be produced. In front of a direct ontology of understanding, as we can find at Heidegger and Gadamer, a reverse ontology is asserted. We are not going to start from the inner conscience of the self but from the *sense* outside of it. We are not going to start from the pre-comprehension but from the center of the *sense* of a text. Hermeneutics is the theory which has its main tasks to discover the proposition of sense given by any text into the conscience of the self.<sup>31</sup> A last

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<sup>30</sup> „We cannot impose to the text one's own capacity of understanding but exposing himself to the text and receiving back a self more vast ... *Understanding is then divergent to a constitution where the subject is the key. It is, then, more correctly to say that the self is constituted by the 'work' of the text.*”(Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, 117, my translation & emphasis).

<sup>31</sup> 'Narrative identity' as the central concept of *Temps et récit* will elaborate on this, as we called it, reversed ontology. It was beyond my intention to follow Ricoeur's narrative identity. Even more, it was not my intention to follow here the inner connection between the theory of text, action and history in Ricoeur's thought. For a critical approach see Jean Grondin, "L'herméneutique positive de Paul Ricoeur. Du temps au récit," in *Temps et récit de Paul Ricoeur en débat*, ed. Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 111-121. For the

remark is required. The problem of understanding is for Ricoeur, even if the fact as such is not declared, similar to the problem of *cogito*. How can one understand the *cogito* or how one can understand understanding – these are, in Ricoeur's eyes, similar questions. If in the first place we will never begin from the vain pretensions of the *cogito*, in the second instance, we will never begin from the core of understanding. Neither understanding nor *cogito* stand as our departing points. On the contrary, we always arrive at them, never begin with them. Nevertheless, if one strives to find Ricoeur's ontology he will have to understand that:

“L'ontologie est bien la terre promise pour une philosophie qui commence par le langage et par la réflexion; mais, comme Moïse, le sujet parlant et réfléchissant peut seulement l'apercevoir avant de mourir.”<sup>32</sup>

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epistemological or ontological status of narrative identity, see David Carr, “Epistemologie et ontologie du récit,” in *Paul Ricoeur. Les métamorphoses de la raison herméneutique*, ed. Jean Greisch and Richard Kearney (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 205-214.

<sup>32</sup> „The ontology is the Promised Land for a philosophy that begins with language and with reflexion; but, like Moses, the human subject can only perceive it before dying.” (Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations*, 28, my translation.)