

## **The Ricœurian Way: Towards A Critical Hermeneutics for the Human and Social Sciences**

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### **Abstract**

*Focusing on Paul Ricœur's philosophical methodology as practised in his mature speculative work, it is possible to profile a hermeneutical procedural model: that of a critical hermeneutics, methodologically and epistemologically structured, for the most part by following the theory of the arc herméneutique. Ricœur's reinterpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis offers one of the first theoretical and disciplinary bases for this theory and his practice of philosophy offers in itself the model of a philosophy exercised as a practical theory and as a human and social science. Indeed, Ricœur's critical hermeneutics is at once a philosophy, a philosophical approach, and a methodological model for the human and social sciences, which works to coordinate explanation and understanding under the rule of interpretation.*

**Keywords:** methodology, explication/comprehension, hermeneutics, critique ideology, critical hermeneutics.

### **1. Introduction**

The central question of this paper is linked to the possibility of a reinterpretation of Paul Ricœur's philosophy by way of critical hermeneutics. Certainly, this 'critical' determination marks a passage of secondary importance in his hermeneutical evolution, which progressed from the paradigm of an interpretation of symbols to the analysis of text, to narrative hermeneutics, thence to phenomenological hermeneutics of the self, and finally to the hermeneutics of translation and recognition. However, the point of this paper is to see whether the structure of such a critical hermeneutics may be generalised according to the intrinsic possibilities of Ricœur's hermeneutics as a unified speculative discourse and as a philosophical procedure. Hence, critical hermeneutics must be clarified in its methodology, in its epistemological structure and in reference to its field of application. But another, more comprehensive, interest underlies this study, which concerns the place and the role of philosophy and philosophical work within the current cultural, and particularly interdisciplinary, context. What is the role of philosophy in relation to the enormous amount of data and knowledge accumulated by the sciences today? Is it a simple 'cultural' role, or rather a 'scientific' one? Is it possible to conceive of critical hermeneutics as a methodology? This study of Ricœur's philosophy aims to find an answer to the question of the epistemological constitution of the human and social sciences without taking a specific position on his speculative contents and argumentations. Ricœur's work is examined from this perspective, as a potential general model for theoretical research and, more specifically, for the human sciences. It is an analysis free from specific thematic interests, and from positions speculatively angled.

### **2. What is Critical Hermeneutics?**

The diversification of knowledge around the human being in the contemporary sciences has provoked a great increase in complexity of the universe of discourse around the subject. It constitutes a problem that Ricœur identified in the 1960s. I write 'problem' because, despite all of this rich knowledge that 'perhaps for the first time,' makes it possible 'to encompass in a single question the problem of the unification of human discourse,' no one has yet been able to elaborate such a unified synthesis. ('A modern Leibniz with the ambition and capacity to achieve it would have to be an accomplished mathematician, a universal exegete, a critic versed in several of the arts, and a good psychoanalyst;' Ricœur 1970, pp. 3-4). Ricœur never considered himself a 'Leibniz' of our times, even if the dimensions of his work are truly exceptional.

Actually, with his long and winding route of multiple hermeneutic detours, he traverses a considerable part of human knowledge: from phenomenology of the voluntary and involuntary, to empirical psychology and the hermeneutics of symbols; from history to psychoanalysis; from structuralism to linguistics and philosophy of language and action; from rhetoric to narrative theory; from literature to science; from anthropological philosophy to neuroscience, from biblical exegesis to religion; from theoretical philosophy to practical philosophy, from sociology and anthropology to law, and so forth. His ambition to co-philosophise, his aspiration to engage dialogues, the interdisciplinary character of his reflexive feat clearly reveal, among other elements and aspects of his research, a strategy for a comprehensive approach to overcome the disciplinary fragmentation of knowledge. In this sense, he considers the collegial work between scholars and philosophers of central importance. Through his work, Ricœur models the idea that philosophy may play the role of a mediatory discipline on the *plateau* of challenges within sight of the reunification of human knowledge. By its theoretical richness and depth, philosophy reveals flexibility and a capacity to operate transversely, qualities that other disciplines do not have. Ricœur offers an understanding of how peculiar is the potential of critical hermeneutics as a methodology and epistemology for the human and social sciences. However, there are some problematic aspects to resolve before considering this as definitive thesis. Firstly, Ricœur has always underlined the fragmentary character of his research, somehow 'dispersed' in his auto-understanding. In *Oneself as Another* (1990) he tried to use the reunifying thematic key of a phenomenological hermeneutics of the self. But this is a solution of a 'thematic' kind, neither a methodological or procedural solution, nor epistemological. Therefore, it is not sufficient at all. Secondly, the concept of 'critical hermeneutics' seems understandable and useful only if coordinated with two other hermeneutical approaches, with which it was originally in dialectic. This notion, which characterised K.O. Apel's hermeneutical work, as well as Habermas' critique of ideology, is linked to the Frankfurt School.

Javier Recas Bayón's *Hacia una hermeneutical crítica* (2006) offers a good perspective from which to characterise a critical hermeneutics. In effect, he tries to generalise this concept opening up a broader perspective in working with Gadamer, Habermas, Apel, Vattimo, Rorty, Derrida, and Ricœur's thought. Bayón considers certain productive consequences comparing their respective theories; but he too mostly focuses on Apel's and Habermas' perspectives. He underlines how, 'for Apel as well as for Habermas, hermeneutics cannot remain a mere description of the felt, as the Gadamerian mode does, but rather it has to mediate these results with the critical auto-cognition of the interests underlining comprehension. (...) We may characterise Apel and Habermas' critical hermeneutics through the fundamental characteristics which constitute the essence of its detachment from Gadamer and ontological hermeneutics' (Bayón 2006, p. 193). Effectively, it is possible to consider critical hermeneutics as an extensive articulation of ontological hermeneutics, but in this way, its theoretical potential to be generalised as a universal procedure and as an epistemology is condemned to lose its strength, meaning, and value. Furthermore, its 'genesis' is more closely connected to quarrels over the methods of the social sciences than over philosophical speculation, as John Brookshire Thompson's *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricœur and Jürgen Habermas* (1981) shows. Through a comparative approach to Wittgenstein, Ricœur, and Habermas, Thompson not only reveals the underlying structural difficulties of conceptualisation of action, of interpretation as methodology (for the social sciences), and of a theorisation of reference and truth, which are some of the critical aspects of Wittgenstein, Ricœur and Habermas' philosophies, respectively; but, in seeking to differentiate considerations of what must be a procedural and an epistemic structure in the natural sciences and in social sciences, and in pursuing a specific procedural model for the social sciences, he proposes a critical-linguistic hermeneutics rereading and readdressing Wittgenstein, Ricœur, and Habermas' theories and their respective problems and solutions. Language is a key-concept and a central domain of analysis and research in his study. Following the different perspectives of Wittgenstein, Ricœur, and Habermas, it becomes clear that this research is directly involved in the epistemological question by various ways.

In fact, 'Ricœur views language as a medium of objectification and assigns hermeneutics the task of unfolding the dimensions of being which are expressed in, and disclosed by, the semantic structure of symbols and texts. Habermas conceives of language as the locus of ideology, suggesting that the distortions effected by the exercise of power can be criticised through a reconstruction of the presuppositions of speech. (...) Whereas ordinary language philosophers tend to treat this field as the ultimate ground of inquiry, both Ricœur and Habermas view it as a region through which in the end it must surpass' (Thompson 1983, p. 214). Bayón's view and theoretical approach is different; epistemologically, it is weaker than Thompson's. But this perspective offers help in reconstructing and understanding Ricœur's attempt to profile a critical hermeneutics in dialectic between Gadamer's hermeneutics of tradition and Habermas' critique of ideology.

In fact, he uses more than any others, Ricœur's essay '*Herméneutique et critique des idéologies*,' 1973 (republished in *From Text to Action*). Unfortunately and unreasonably, this central passage of Ricœur's on critical hermeneutics has been underestimated or even disregarded. As David M. Kaplan writes in his remarkable study on *Ricœur's Critical Theory* (2003): 'the critical dimension in Ricœur's works has been generally overlooked in the secondary literature. Very little attention has been given to his conception of the relationship between hermeneutics and critical theory, his theories of ideology and utopia, and the normative basis for a critique of society' (Kaplan 2003, p. 2).

### 3. *Between Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology*

Although Ricœur had not taken part in the tense debate between Gadamer and Habermas, collected in *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (1971), he did not follow it as a distant observer. His '*Herméneutique et critique des idéologies*,' demonstrates his active interest, and his intention to carefully check the different positions and argumentations in order to find a position of synthesis and mediation. This middle-way-angled theory is precisely how Ricœur conceives of 'critical hermeneutics,' a theory that is intended to mediate between interpretative work (polarised on tradition, historicity, and authority), and critical work (polarised onto anti-ideological issues). Certainly, Ricœur finds in Gadamer and Habermas' dialectical exchange some important elements from which to profile a third hermeneutical way, which will not simply be a 'middle way' but will constitute a (third) dialectical 'bridge.' In fact, Gadamer and Habermas' debate underwent an evolution, as Gadamer reveals in his addendum to the 1972 edition of *Truth and Method*, underscoring what was contemporary hermeneutics' *methodological* evolution. The reference to his disputation with Habermas is clear, as is the impact of this dialogue on Habermas' research around the logic of the social sciences. If Gadamer's work in the sixties marked an important turning point for Ricœur's practice of philosophy as a reflexive phenomenology (but, after Gadamer, as a reflexive-phenomenological hermeneutics), then Habermas' achievement of a *critical philosophy*, as an alternative to the Frankfurt School's *critical theory*, further impacted Ricœur. In reality, a narrow correspondence can be found between Ricœur's use of psychoanalysis as a productive example for the humanities, as a discipline with a bifacial epistemology (with a register of force and a register of meaning), and Habermas' modelling of critical philosophy as an emancipatory critical procedure to work at a personal and social level as psychoanalysis does at the level of psychological therapy. Without the Gadamer-Habermas debate of the seventies it would be difficult to understand Ricœur's about-face in criticising Freudian psychoanalysis, previously condemned as an imbalanced, weak science unable to coordinate its double epistemological register through its biologicistic, theoretical view. In fact, psychoanalysis plays an important role in the Gadamer-Habermas debate, and directly or indirectly in the redetermination of the difference between the natural and the human sciences, and what the social sciences must be. The hermeneutics of Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as others disciplines and theories (such as history, and the theories of text and action), prompts Ricœur to develop the idea of a methodological and epistemological model transversally disposed between *explanation* and *understanding*. This model is precisely implemented in his critical hermeneutics, which comprise not only a philosophical whole, but also an analytical-interpretative procedure.

Gadamer's re-actualisation of the concept of 'authority' and 'tradition' constitutes his reaction to the unilateral, universalistic centralisation of 'objectivity' as a paradigmatic term for all the sciences, as positivism taught. Not only does this perspective deny the role of historicity, which is central in the humanities (since historicity is the constitutive characteristic of the human being), but it also fails to recognise that tradition as well as prejudice offers a possible way of knowledge. Unilaterally, it denies any articulation and differentiation of the sciences (only natural sciences should be considered sciences). Habermas too develops his critical theory targeting positivism. This becomes clear in his work *Knowledge and Interest* (1968). But, in fact, this book was realised after a decade of research and dispute around and against the positivist approach to sociology. Habermas has been one of the protagonists of the *Positivismusstreit*. In a 1961 conference in Tübingen, he represented – along with Theodor W. Adorno – the Frankfurt School's perspective on the social sciences, opposing the neo-positivist perspective of Karl Popper and Hans Albert. (See, Adorno, Popper, Dahrendorf, Habermas, and Albert 1969). He counter-proposes a critical epistemology, characterised as *dialectic* and founded on the concept of 'human interest,' to positivist epistemology, defined as *analytic*. At the time, the concept of human interest was central in Habermas' theorisation. He used this same concept criticising Gadamer, for whom the root of misunderstanding the specific character of the human and social sciences lies in a lack of understanding of the centrality of historical knowledge.

For Habermas, the critical point does not lie in this lack of a sense of historicity, but rather within ideologically-determined distortions, which occur under the influence of specific, variable human interests. Only positive intentions for emancipation may help a philosophy formed as a critical theory and as a critical social science to operate properly (as 'sciences' do) and productively (as 'critique' does). In pursuing the intention of emancipation, a philosophy may be exercised as an auto-reflexive critique of the sciences, whereas a critical social science may be exercised as a critique of social distortions in communication and action, or, as a kind of social psychoanalysis. Inserting himself in this debate, Ricœur, firstly, does not recognise a narrow connection between psychoanalysis and critical sociology. He speaks reflexively of a parallelism between the two disciplines: between, from one side, the ideological mechanisms of distorted communication, which corresponds to the social unconscious; and, from the other, the unconscious psychological mechanisms, which work on a subjective level. However, beyond this parallelism he recognises that a similar procedure wedged between explanation and understanding, must work within a critical sociology in order to obtain a critical diagnosis of ideology, while at the same time facilitating their critical dissolution. But he critiques Habermas' proposal for not advancing a theoretical way through which would transpose explanatory and meta-hermeneutic schema from psychoanalysis to ideology.

It is important to underline here that Ricœur and Habermas (as well as Gadamer), share a similar re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis as a 'depth hermeneutics.' It is from this point of view that all parallelisms are possible; and, then, that somehow it becomes possible to exercise Freud's theory as one of distorted communication. Habermas may connect psycho-physiological distortion of communication to the ideological and social distortion of communication via hermeneutics; so too, Ricœur may consider some theoretical aspects of this operation since, generally, he recognises as correct Habermas' hermeneutical transposition of psychoanalysis. In fact, in *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), Ricœur reconsiders Freudian psychoanalysis as a hermeneutical discipline or, more specifically, as a discipline having a large connection with hermeneutics. In this essay, he reads psychoanalysis as an *expérience-limit* because of the explicative force connected to the 'reconstruction' of the 'primitive scene.' In order to understand the *cause* of a certain symptom it is necessary to explain its *reason*; and it is within this explanatory passage that meta-psychological apparatus effectively treats the conditions of possibility of the explication and reconstruction. Ricœur seems closer to Habermas because he seems to accept his re-reading of the three psychoanalytical apparatuses of ego, id, and superego as connected to the communicative sphere by the progressive intermediation of dialogue (through which neurosis is re-conducted to the reflexive sphere).

However, he counter-poses to (Gadamer and) Habermas' perspective the different epistemological perspectives of a discipline which is considered to be founded 'energetically' and 'hermeneutically' (because psychoanalysis works with an explicative and a comprehensive register). This is the central thesis of *Freud and Philosophy*, and marks a peculiar key of Ricœur's interpretation of Freud's psychoanalysis as a depth hermeneutics. The only major difference is that, for Ricœur, this thesis plays the role of a generalised multi-epistemological theorisation and presents a procedure able to be considered as a general model for critical philosophy (in contrast to Habermas) and for the human and social sciences (again, in contrast to Habermas). This so-called 'theory of the hermeneutic arc' forms the core of Ricœur's critical hermeneutics, where the example of its functioning is discoverable within Ricœur's philosophy itself if considered in general terms, which is to say in terms of a general model of analysis and interpretation, of the diagnosis and exercise of criticism; of the construction of speculations and theorisations, etc. More analytically, but following another 'logic' of discourse, David Kaplan resumes Ricœur's relation with hermeneutics of tradition and ideology critique, respectively indicating four critical aspects for both. For him, Gadamer's hermeneutics would: (1) 'substitute discourse for dialogue as the model of communicative understanding' (Kaplan 2003, p. 38); (2) 'overcome the dichotomy between explanation and understanding in order to account for our capacity for criticism' (*ibidem*); (3) consider that 'the world of the text, the referential dimension opened for the reader, contains a potentially subversive force in the imagination' (p. 39); (4) consider that 'a thematic connection exists between the transformation of subjectivity in interpretation and the critique of false consciousness' (*ibidem*). With regard to Habermas' critical theory, Ricœur offers these subsequent remarks: (1) 'the Habermasian theory of interests function like Heideggerian existentials. As quasi-transcendental categories they are neither empirically justifiable nor theoretically posited' (*ibidem*); (2) 'the distinction between an interest in emancipation to the interest in communication is illegitimate' (p. 40); 'the practical task of the critique of ideology is identical to the goal of hermeneutics: to enlarge and restore communication and self-understanding' (*ibidem*);

(4) 'no antinomy exists between the prior consensus to which we belong and an anticipation of freedom in an ideal of unconstrained communication, or between an ontology of understanding and an *eschatology of freedom*' (p. 41).

#### 4. Paul Ricœur's philosophy as an interdisciplinary procedure

Without a doubt, Ricœur's work must be defined as non-systematic, for if it is true that he conducted his research with the idea of intersubjectivity as the essential character of truth (see, P. Ricœur 1965), and therefore positing philosophical work as the communitarian work of philosophers, then it must also be true that the thematic fragmentation of his work [i.e. voluntary and involuntary, finitude and guilt, symbolism of evil, unconscious, discourse, text, action, narrative, self, memory, recognition], as well as his evolutionary reference to different methodologies, schools and traditions [i.e. spiritualism, phenomenology, philosophy of reflection, hermeneutics], together form his philosophy into an heterogeneous and non-unified open whole. There are scholars that consider Ricœur's work rhapsodically, strong in his reflexive, specific application yet weak as a comprehensive philosophy and general methodology. For them, there is no methodology. Ricœur himself recognised the prominence of fragmentation in his enterprise, as opposed to synthesis and unity. He also has underlined how the differentiation, specialisation, and enrichment of disciplines and knowledge not only constitutes a real challenge for the human being, but, actually, has consistently transformed the philosophical work in its nature and approach.

In his *Autobiographies intellectually* he explicitly declares that philosophy dies if it interrupts its millennial dialogue with the sciences (whether mathematics, the natural sciences or human sciences; see, Ricœur 1995, p. 62). In our own times, a complete, comprehensive synthesis of all of human knowledge is impossible for just one man, as we read in *Freud and Philosophy*. Thus, Ricœur's interdisciplinary work, his sense of collegiality, and his *engagement* in constant dialogue must be interpreted as a coherent and deliberate response to this state of things. The fragmentation or even 'explosion', of his area of research is an inescapable, 'structural' consequence, which does not necessarily weaken the role of philosophy. In fact, in many ways, interdisciplinary work is becoming more and more central and essential among the sciences, sometimes pressing them to evolve and develop in terms of problematisation, approach, methodology, and procedure. Within such a context, philosophy may play a central, mediatory role; but, first, it must evolve from its own fragmentation in different schools, conceptions, procedures, etc. The entire oeuvre of Ricœur represents the sum of his diagnosis, as well as his choice in selecting questions, approaches and way to treat and solve problems. Stephen H. Clark is right in saying that Ricœur develops a 'comprehensive philosophy,' and that he is 'a genuinely interdisciplinary thinker [...] always addressing himself attentively to the question in hand with a courteous rigour,' (Clark 1990, p. 1) and that 'his is a rationality genuinely inclusive, kinetic, in constant internal evolution: the Socratic inheritance in its most positive form' (p. 4).

During an international symposium in Granada in 1987, he clearly described the problematic of a speculative or scientific construction as an objective impossibility because of our times; which he calls 'post-Hegelians,' an era of non-synthesis, without a system, or an era of 'blessed systematises' (see Ricœur 1991, pp. 26-42). Now it becomes possible, as well as interesting and useful, to consider what elements may be generalised in Ricœur's philosophy, and whether there is any possibility of synthesising his work in terms of methodology and approach. We find encouraging the central function of critical hermeneutics in Ricœur's enterprise, his attempt in *Oneself as Another* to reorganise and readdress his work in a more unified way, and the recurrences of certain technical and procedural aspects of his analysis and his 'speculative style' as subsequently summarised. *From the non-philosophical to the philosophical*. The first point that seems to be typical in Ricœur's methodology is the beginning of speculative reflection from a non-philosophical or a pre-philosophical point of departure. The idea of 'non-philosophical' has different implications. Primarily, Ricœur makes reference to the spheres of the empirical and symbolical; essentially, to the sphere of applied hermeneutics (applied to interpretation of symbols [*The Symbolic of Evil*, 1960], to psychoanalysis [*Freud and Philosophy*], and to religion [*L'Herméneutique biblique*, 2001]). Second, he applies philosophy to the social sphere, not as sociology of a particular kind, but as a practical philosophy engaged toward and interested in society. In the same manner, philosophy operates in relation to politics, justice, and law (see, *Le Juste*, 1995; *Le Juste 2*, 2001). Third, 'non-philosophical' is the domain *aux frontières de la philosophie* as one of his collection of articles is subtitled (*Lectures III*, 1994), which is the domain of literary and cultural projects, where philosophy is enriched by the exercise of reflection and (again) hermeneutics (see, for example, the interlude within *Oneself as Another*). Finally, non-philosophical dimension represents the sphere of all non-philosophical disciplines, above all sciences.

This implication is already evident in Ricœur's first speculative work, *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), where he thematised Freudian psychoanalysis as well as empirical psychology. As Stephen Clark writes, 'there is no hostility to scientific fact but rather a diagnostic relation towards it: a series of complex antinomies are established between intentional analysis and the data of the empiricist and objectivist sciences. The cogito [i.e., the subject] can only be known through the outward detour of interpretation' (Clark 1990, pp. 22-23). Other examples include *Freud and Philosophy*, dedicated to psychoanalysis; *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays on Hermeneutics* (1969), dedicated to structuralism and psychoanalysis; *The Rule of Metaphor. Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning* (1975), a philosophical study between linguistics and rhetoric; and a 1998 book of dialogue with the neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux (*Ce qui nous fait penser. La Nature et la Règle*); *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), a vast philosophical study in dialectic with historians and working around historiography; *The Course of Recognition* (2004), in which Ricœur's work is developed in dialectic with cultural anthropology and other disciplines.

*Between theory and praxis.* Another typical Ricœurian way of spreading and developing speculative research is through a multi-levelled argumentation disposed according to different discursive degrees, levels, and registers. Ricœur's dynamic passage from the theoretical plan to the practical plan is intertwined to this disposition. Clearly, it is because there is a general 'discipline of method' that a similarly complex and dynamic operation is possible, as *Oneself as Another* reveals providing an example of a general synthesis of Ricœur's philosophy and methodology. In fact, through its ten studies, a hermeneutical phenomenology develops a philosophy of the self progressing from a linguistic level of analysis to a pragmatic one; thence to a speculative-anthropological level; and, finally, from a practical-ethical level to a juridico-political level. The result is never a discourse that is theoretically and practically juxtaposed or mixed, because, constitutively as well as dynamically, Ricœur's discourse is a transversal discourse, able to articulate theoretical analysis and interpretation onto or into a practical dimension. Moreover, it is generally configured as a 'theoretical practice,' like sciences (see, Ricœur 2003). Therefore, a critical hermeneutics operates as an applied critical theory, as well as a practico-theoretical discipline. In Ricœur's work, critical hermeneutics is an interdisciplinary theoretical practice, with a descriptive, interpretative, and reflexive methodology.

*Between conflict and mediation.* As a third general characterisation of Ricœur's approach, it should be underlined how consistent is his tendency to be attracted by conflict and, at the same time, to exercise mediation. This maintenance of tension is evident everywhere, for example in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, where 'in an impressive variety of contexts, (...) the process of understanding involves a double movement of the recovery of meaning and of an exercise in demystification: opposing perspectives which complement each other in an open-ended and productive contest' (Clark 1990, p. 3). However, this discourse does not entail that Ricœur's philosophy is a philosophy of 'happy ends.' At its core, in fact, is conflict, which explains the necessity of a mediatory work. For Ricœur is focused on theoretical, practical, speculative, and ideological conflicts, though with a temperate, equitable, rational approach which is oriented to rebalancing and resolving problems. Clark is right in writing that, 'Ricœur never picks a fight. One of the most impressive traits of his work is his respectful, almost grateful, assimilation of criticism: there is nothing in his work remotely comparable to Derrida's altercation with Searle. At times we may lament the absence of 'blistering refutations' (...), but these would run counter to the values that Ricœur's whole intellectual enterprise seeks to promote: humility, mutual respect, the truth of charity' (p. 4). At the same time, François Dosse is also correct in assertion That 'contrairement à l'image souvent répandue d'un Ricœur toujours consensuel, c'est une pensée du conflit, du dissensus' (Boltanski, Dosse, Føessel et al. 2006, p. 52).

## 5. Conclusion

The primary question of this paper has been whether it is possible to comprehensively interpret Ricœur's philosophy as a critical hermeneutics, assuming the idea of 'critical hermeneutics' as a methodology and epistemology of 'a third kind,' neither a speculative construction, nor a 'doctrine.' This is a different perspective compared to John Thompson, Javier Bayón, and David Kaplan's interests and works, even as they contribute to re-orienting the focus onto this undervalued aspect of Ricœur's thought and enterprise.

In his *Critical Hermeneutics*, Thompson elaborates a new critical-theoretical perspective for the social sciences focused on a specific re-interpretation of human action. Meanwhile, Bayón stays on the philosophical field looking for the foundation of a 'critical hermeneutics' as an autonomous *philosophical* hermeneutics (ontologically, epistemologically and speculatively founded).

And Kaplan presents Ricœur's critical hermeneutics as a 'critical theory,' as if it was a parallel, alternative or dialectical 'response' to Habermas' challenges connected to positivist approach to the social sciences and to the problematic aspects of the Frankfurt School's 'critical theory.' However, this paper considers Ricœur's critical hermeneutics in the most generalised terms, searching for a new methodology and epistemology for the social sciences. At the end of this quick 'journey' through Ricœur's work, we come to understanding that such a critical hermeneutics must have an epistemological structure similar to Freudian psychoanalysis and to disciplines like history (as described and formalised by certain philosophers such as von Wright, for example, or even Ricœur), one that is dynamic and transversal, working between explanation and understanding under the control of interpretation (and under a controlled interpretation). Moreover, we have discovered other elements, variously connected to epistemology and methodology: the collegial work of experts, scientists, and interpreters; an interdisciplinary approach in studying a particular phenomenon or problem; the focus on critical argumentation; the dynamic passage from a theoretical level to a practical level of discourse, and vice-versa; the dialectic between theoretical and speculative, between non-philosophical/non-scientific and philosophical/scientific; the exercise of science and philosophy as a 'theoretical practice,' and as an engaged work (*engagement*); the transversal and tensional disposition of an approach which may work between (theoretical and practical) conflict and mediation; the multi-levelled articulation of this approach, from different levels, degrees, and registers of discourse (i.e., multi-doctrinal, multi-theoretical, multi-procedural approach).

Certainly, there is a large and concrete risk in reading, interpreting and transforming critical hermeneutics into a collapsed methodology with a disordered, rhapsodic, and 'subjective' procedure, where almost anything is possible, everything is relative and provisory, and all truths are well accepted and welcome. This negative procedural spiral constitutes a real problem and an effective challenge. But, at the same time, the possibilities of a positive procedural spiral are similarly concrete, as the example of Ricœur's work, among others, demonstrates. Finally, this attempt at rendering critical hermeneutics as a technique finds its justification and reason within urgent aspects and issues of our times: the diversification and growing complexity of knowledge, which has already shut the doors on a comprehensive understanding of the human being; and the impossibility of adopting a general perspective that could be defined as synthetic and unified. The consequences could be undetermined, potentially ruinous. If we have diffusion or dispersion without centre, then where is its meaning and function? If we have a centre without confines, where is its order and articulation? If we have knowledge without understanding, then where is concrete progress and emancipation? If we have division without unity, then where is the work of the community of scientists?

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