

**University of East Anglia**

Philosophy Department

David Standen

**Textual Hermeneutics, Interpretive  
Responsibility and the Objectification and  
Interpretation of Action: Paul Ricoeur and  
“The Model of the Text”**

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD  
Thesis supervisors – Dr. Rupert Read and Dr. Davide Rizza  
March 2013

© This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude to the many and varied individuals, particularly my supervisors and the staff and postgraduate community of the School of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia, whose time, intelligence, conversation and support have been vital to me over the past few years and throughout the process of writing this thesis. Thank you for your patience and your kindness.

## **Paul Ricoeur and "The Model of the Text": Textual Hermeneutics and the Objectification and Interpretation of Action**

### **Abstract**

In this thesis I develop a critical but sympathetic reading of Paul Ricoeur's textual model of interpretation as it is presented in his 1971 essay "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text".

My reading of Ricoeur's essay aims to clarify some of the strengths and limitations of his project in "The Model of the Text", and to develop the analogy between text and action in directions left largely undeveloped by Ricoeur. In particular, I argue that hermeneutic philosophy can help us elucidate the validity of interpretive claims in the human and social sciences, and also to understand the role of the *objectification* of action in ensuring this validity. The fixation of action as an object of inquiry opens up the possibility for interpreters to hold themselves at a distance from their pre-reflective judgements regarding the meaning of action. This allows interpreters to reflect critically upon action and to arbitrate between competing interpretations. Furthermore, the textual model allows us to recognise the description and objectification of action as an *active* and *constitutive* dimension of interpretive activity in the human and social sciences.

My argument proceeds by engaging in a detailed examination of Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought, expanding upon aspects of hermeneutic philosophy that can inform our understanding of the textual model, and by attempting to address points of disanalogy and potential objections that may emerge from the application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action. Ricoeur's textual model has the potential to provide a valuable resource for the human and social

sciences by inviting its practitioners to consider the interpretation of action in terms of the text and textual hermeneutics, but only on the condition that self-critique and a recognition of objectification as part of interpretive activity are incorporated into interpretive practice.

David Standen, UEA

## Contents

Section	
Page	
<b>Introduction: Paul Ricoeur and the Human Sciences .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Model of the Text and Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Heritage ...</b>	<b>25</b>
1.1: Distanciation in the Text .....	25
1.1.1: Distanciation in the Text: Event and Meaning .....	26
1.1.2: Distanciation in the Text: The Autonomy of the Text .....	28
1.1.2.1: Gadamer and <i>Wirkungsgeschichte</i> .....	31
1.1.3: Distanciation in the Text: The World of the Text.....	33
1.1.4: Autonomy and the Limits of a Textual Paradigm.....	35
1.2: Understanding and Explanation.....	37
1.2.1: Understanding and Explanation: From Understanding to Explanation .....	39
1.2.2: Understanding and Explanation: From Explanation to Understanding.....	44
1.3: From Text to Action.....	47
1.3.1: From Text to Action: Distanciation and the Problem of Description .....	49
1.3.2: From Text to Action: Explanation and Understanding .....	54
1.4: Conclusion .....	57
<b>Chapter Two: The Text .....</b>	<b>59</b>
2.1: The Absolute Text: Roland Barthes.....	60
2.2: The Absolute Text: Jacques Derrida.....	65
2.3: The Text as Discourse .....	71
2.4: The Limits of the Text.....	77
2.4.1: Chatman on Film and Literature .....	79
2.4.2: <i>The Ax Fight</i> .....	83
2.5: Conclusion .....	92
<b>Chapter Three: The <i>Sprachlichkeit</i> of Action .....</b>	<b>94</b>
3.1: Meaningful Action & Speech-Acts.....	95
3.2: Thick & Thin Description .....	106
3.3: "Linguistic" & "Experiential" Meaning.....	109
3.4: The <i>Sprachlichkeit</i> of Action.....	112
3.5: Meaningless Action.....	118
3.6: Conclusion .....	126
<b>Chapter Four: Critical Description and Tradition.....</b>	<b>128</b>
4.1: The Objectification of Action .....	129
4.1.1: "Leaving a mark" and the Problem of Description.....	134
4.1.2: Gadamer and Prejudice.....	140
4.1.3: Tradition and the Description of Action.....	143
4.2: Homo Sociologicus .....	146
4.3: The Reception of Action as a Text.....	160
4.3.1: Critical Reading and Freud's <i>Totem and Taboo</i> .....	162
4.4: Conclusion .....	169

<b>Chapter Five: Wittgenstein, Ethnomethodology and the Case against Interpretation.....</b>	<b>173</b>
5.1: Against Interpretation.....	174
5.2: In Defence of Interpretation.....	178
5.2.1: Heidegger in Translation .....	179
5.2.2: Gadamer & Ricoeur .....	182
5.3: Reflective and Pre-Reflective Understanding .....	185
5.3.1: Rule-Following and Critical Understanding.....	186
5.3.2: Objectification and Critical Understanding .....	190
5.4: Ethnomethodology .....	194
5.4.1: Ethnomethodological Principles .....	195
5.4.2: Ethnomethodology, Signs and Referents.....	198
5.5: Ethnomethodology, Objectification and Disciplinary Prejudice .....	203
5.5.1: Ethnomethodology and Objectification.....	203
5.5.2: Ethnomethodology and Disciplinary Prejudice .....	206
5.5.2.1: Agnes and Ethnomethodology .....	207
5.6: “The Model of the Text” and Ethnomethodology .....	214
5.6.1: The Risk of Programmatisation .....	215
5.6.2: Objectification, Reflexivity and “The Model of the Text” .....	216
5.7: Conclusion .....	221
<b>Chapter 6: Responsibility, Attestation and Distanciation .....</b>	<b>224</b>
6.1: Responsibility and Interpretation .....	225
6.2: Attestation as Hermeneutic “Certainty” .....	229
6.3: Distanciation as the Condition for Critical Understanding .....	234
6.3.1: Self-Critique .....	236
6.4: The Textual Model as Interpretation.....	240
6.4.1: Ricoeur and Models .....	242
6.4.2: Concerns and Qualifications .....	248
6.5: Conclusion .....	253
<b>Concluding Comments: The Model of the Text and the Objectification of Action</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>Reference List .....</b>	<b>264</b>

## **Introduction: Paul Ricoeur and the Human Sciences**

The philosophy of Paul Ricoeur is an increasingly influential force within the human and social sciences. Although probably best known for his work in hermeneutics, phenomenology and narrative theory, Ricoeur's work is nevertheless rarely untouched by an interest in other disciplines. It is perhaps even outside of philosophy that Ricoeur is presently garnering most critical attention. Gérôme Truc, for example, in his recent essay "Narrative Identity against Biographical Illusion: The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricoeur", observes that "many applications of Ricoeur's philosophy can be found in contemporary French sociology", and that "[t]he insertion of philosophical concepts into the realm of sociology represents a generational phenomenon affecting all of the human sciences" (Truc, 2011: 151). And even if Ricoeur was not a sociologist by trade, he frequently engaged with and wrote about the problems and concepts of the social and human sciences from a philosophical perspective. Ricoeur's influence on the human and social sciences is not limited to the works in which the matter of these disciplines is explicitly addressed,<sup>1</sup> but it is within these works that we get a sustained sense of how Ricoeur thought philosophy could contribute to the theory and practices of the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

In this thesis I engage in an exploration of Ricoeur's ideas about the objectification and interpretation of meaningful human action. In particular I consider his hypothesis that textual interpretation can serve as a model for the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences, as outlined in the 1971 essay "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text". Therein

---

<sup>1</sup> Truc's article, for example, deals primarily with the influence of Ricoeur's work on the narrative self in *Oneself as Another* – a text written without any overt sociological intent – upon sociological theory and practice, contrasting it to the critique of narrative identity made by Pierre Bourdieu in his 1986 article, "The Biographical Illusion".

Ricoeur argues that “the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197). In doing so Ricoeur articulates a hermeneutic model of the validity of the interpretation of meaningful action in the human sciences. This textual model of interpretation has already influenced the work of a range of thinkers, including the anthropologist Clifford Geertz<sup>2</sup> and the sociologist John B. Thompson.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably however, given the brevity and broad scope of the essay, “The Model of the Text” raises new questions at the same time as offering us new ways of understanding the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences. This thesis represents an attempt to articulate and respond to a few of these questions, and to explore potential implications of the textual model left undeveloped by Ricoeur.

Ricoeur comes to engage with hermeneutic philosophy via the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and describes his own thought as marked by a “concern to avoid the pitfall of an opposition between an ‘understanding’ which would be reserved for the ‘human sciences’ and an ‘explanation’ which would be common to... the nomological sciences, primarily the physical sciences” (Ricoeur, 1981a: 36). This stands against the background of Romantic hermeneutics, a tradition of which Ricoeur is an indirect inheritor, within which interpretation is often identified solely with *Verstehen* (understanding) at the

---

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Geertz writes that “[t]hinking consists not of ‘happenings in the head’... but of a traffic in... significant symbols – words for the most part but also... anything... that is disengaged from its mere actuality and used to impose meaning upon existence” (Geertz, 2000 p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> Thompson is also responsible for editing and translating *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*, a collection of Ricoeur’s essays focussing on the relevance of hermeneutic philosophy to interpretation and understanding in the human sciences.

expense of *Erklären* (explanation). In terms of *Verstehen*, “understanding” is traditionally conceived of as an attempt to grasp the psychic life of the author, and meaning is identified with the intent behind the text. This notion of “understanding” is in turn considered to be inherently opposed to the kind of objective verification seen primarily in the physical sciences, which falls under the category of *Erklären* or “explanation”.

In “The Model of the Text” Ricoeur sketches an outline of interpretive understanding in the human and social sciences that integrates a dialectical rather than irreconcilably oppositional relationship between “understanding” and “explanation”. Basing this upon his work in textual hermeneutics,<sup>4</sup> he argues for an “analogical extension” of this textual model to the realm of meaningful human action as it is treated as an “object” of inquiry within the human and social sciences (Ricoeur, 1981a: 37). Ricoeur thus uses the text primarily in order to address the issue of interpretive validity in the human and social sciences. Beyond his work in “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur does use hermeneutics and textual interpretation in order to elucidate particular problems in the human sciences elsewhere, e.g. his exploration of the relationship between history and fiction within *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur, 1988: 180-92). However, despite this continued interest in how hermeneutic thought can inform our understanding of human action, Ricoeur does not explicitly return to the “textual model” in his later work.

There are, nevertheless, many aspects of the analogy drawn between text and action-as-object and the subsequent application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of action that Ricoeur leaves undeveloped and that demand further

---

<sup>4</sup> Primarily the lectures and essays from the 1970s published in collections such as *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, *From Text to Action* and *Interpretation Theory*, but also, for example, his early work on interpretation evident in *The Symbolism of Evil*, *Freud and Philosophy* and the essays spanning the 1960s collected in *The Conflict of Interpretations*.

critical attention. If “The Model of the Text” is to fulfil its stated aim of providing a model that might inform the interpretation of action, then it is important that we attempt to address some of the issues that emerge from Ricoeur’s analogical extension of textual hermeneutics to the human and social sciences.

With this in mind I offer a sympathetic but critical reading of Ricoeur’s essay that aims to clarify some of the strengths and limitations of the project sketched therein. I thus engage with Ricoeur’s stated aim of elucidating the validity of interpretation in the human and social sciences and argue that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy can help us understand the kind of validity apposite to interpretive understanding in the human and social sciences and the role of the objectification of action within them.

Moreover, I supplement Ricoeur’s work by exploring elements of “The Model of the Text” that remain obscure or problematic within the limits of Ricoeur’s essay. This involves examining some of the potential problems faced in applying the categories of textual interpretation to meaningful human action and the centrality of self-critique as a moment within critical hermeneutic interpretation as a response to this. I also place a much greater emphasis than Ricoeur does in this essay on attempting to understand how action is constituted as an “object” of inquiry and on the nature of the analogy between text and action-as-object. In particular, I explore the idea that “The Model of the Text” can make us more aware of objectification as an integral part of the interpretation of meaningful human action. In order to achieve this aim, I articulate the ways in which action becomes “fixed” as an object within the discourses of the human and social sciences, and the challenges that objectification poses to us as interpreters of action.

By engaging with Ricoeur's work herein I hope to show how textual hermeneutics can work to inform our practices as interpreters of action. This is not, however, to say that "The Model of the Text" or my own work are intended to offer a "handbook" for the interpretation of action. How Ricoeur's model may be applied within different interpretive disciplines depends to some extent upon both the intellectual traditions with which the interpreter is engaged and the particular case of interpretation at hand.<sup>5</sup> This thesis engages most closely with the literature regarding interpretation and validity in sociology, but I neither want to limit what I am saying to that domain nor imply that what is presented here is any kind of fully formed interpretive model for sociological interpretation. How a textual model may be applicable in different circumstances is a question which requires closer attention within different interpretive disciplines, and not within the kind of broad philosophical overview of the interpretation of meaningful action in which I am engaged. The remainder of this introduction will be dedicated to a chapter by chapter breakdown of the thesis and a detailed overview of the arguments made therein.

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

### ***Chapter One: The Model of the Text and Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Heritage***

In this chapter I offer a reading of "The Model of the Text" in terms of the philosophical hermeneutical tradition of which it is a part. The purpose of this contextualisation is primarily to clarify the idea of textual interpretation that Ricoeur proposes for use as a paradigm for the interpretation of action, but also to introduce some of the issues that will demand further articulation and analysis within the

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, Ricoeur has written elsewhere both that "there is no general hermeneutics, no universal canon for exegesis" (Ricoeur, 1970: 26) and that this "diversity" of hermeneutics in part reflects "differences in technique" (Ricoeur, 1989b: 64).

thesis. In order to achieve this I examine those elements of Ricoeur's work where aspects of his interpretive philosophy are expanded upon, offering a critical exegesis of his hermeneutic philosophy in relation to "The Model of the Text". Where necessary, I also draw upon the work of other hermeneutic philosophers, primarily Hans-Georg Gadamer, to help illuminate and supplement Ricoeur's own philosophical thought.

I first focus on Ricoeur's notion of "distanciation" in discourse. Broadly speaking, this refers to the potential for the meaning of discourse to become "distanced" from the intentions and socio-historical conditions that circumscribe its production; the way in which the actualisation of discourse as meaningful in understanding involves some kind of a remove from the act of discourse itself. Ricoeur discusses various forms of distanciation in the text which, taken together, constitute the various forms of "autonomy" attributable to textual meaning; i.e. the ways in which the meaning of the text can become removed from the authorial intention and the historical and social conditions of its production. These various forms of distanciation, for Ricoeur, are important conditions for how texts can have meaning for their readers and factors we must take into consideration as interpreters.

A second important aspect of Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought lies in his articulation of a dialectical relationship between understanding and explanation, each drawing upon the other and together representing different aspects of interpretation as an overall phenomenon. In "The Model of the Text", Ricoeur approaches this reconciliation of understanding and explanation from two directions. The first of these is to articulate the way in which the process of "understanding" necessarily involves an element of explanation. The second is to offer an account of how explanatory procedures ultimately presuppose that what they explain is meaningful,

and therefore presuppose understanding. For Ricoeur, this recasts the dichotomy of understanding and explanation as a productive opposition, rather than as a problem requiring final resolution as it has historically been perceived within hermeneutic thought.

The preceding assessments of distanciation and the dialectic of understanding and explanation serve to articulate the most pertinent points of Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutic interpretation. After this I turn to Ricoeur's application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful human action, beginning with his arguments for perceiving an analogous relationship between text and action considered as an object of the human sciences. Ricoeur works to articulate a parallel between the ways in which action and the text can be seen to be meaningful. This involves the notions of "distanciation" and "autonomy", which Ricoeur considers central to both the production and interpretation of meaning in the text, and the way in which explanation and understanding together comprise complementary aspects of a critical interpretive approach to the understanding of action.

## ***Chapter 2: The Text***

In this chapter I compare and contrast Ricoeur's understanding of "the text" – conceived as a paradigm of meaningful discourse under the condition of fixation – with what Ricoeur describes as the "ideology" of the "absolute text", a concept which he is eager to disavow (Ricoeur, 1981b: 201). This "ideology" refers to any characterisation of the text as something existing without either author or reference, as a hypostasised and closed linguistic construct wherein meaning is only identified with the transitory play of signifiers in relation to one another.

Despite similarities between the “absolute text” and the autonomy of textual meaning as it is discussed in “The Model of the Text”, the transitory and arbitrary nature of meaning within the “absolute text”, and the accompanying impossibility of arbitrating between competing interpretations, means that it could not possibly function as a model for interpretation in the manner suggested by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text”. It will be useful for our purposes, therefore, to distinguish between Ricoeur’s notion of textual autonomy and any kind of “absolute” textual autonomy if we wish to be able to draw upon textual hermeneutics in order to articulate the validity of interpretation in relation to meaningful human action. To this end I contrast Ricoeur’s formulation of the “text” with that of two thinkers sometimes associated with the idea of the “absolute text”; Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

The first example of the “absolute text” I address is that of Barthes’ notorious essay “The Death of the Author”. I argue that there are important differences between Barthes’ and Ricoeur’s conception of “the text”, and that these differences are primarily motivated by the polemical intention that undergirds Barthes’ essay. I then turn to the arguably more sophisticated picture of the “absolute” text that can be found in the work of Jacques Derrida. I argue that Derrida conceives of the text primarily as a basis for metaphysical critique, and therefore obscures the question of the “meaning” of texts almost entirely (despite tacitly depending upon there being problems at least “meaningful” enough to demand critique). This stands in stark contrast to Ricoeur, for whom the text is a paradigm of discourse and therefore always “about something”. It is this fundamental difference in the presuppositions and aims motivating their characterisations of the text that most prominently distinguishes Derrida and Ricoeur from one another (Ricoeur, 1981h: 198).

I conclude with a brief examination of how non-verbal media, such as photography and film, may play a distinct role within the human and social sciences, and the extent to which these media can be compared to Ricoeur's notion of "the text" as it has previously been articulated. As with the comparison with the "absolute" text, this will serve to clarify Ricoeur's understanding of "the text", but also to make us more aware of some of the potential limitations of this construction. I draw upon the work of film theorist Seymour Chatman in order to illustrate some of the ways in which non-verbal sources, particularly film and photography, can be used to represent action in a manner distinct from that of more conventionally "textual" written accounts and descriptions. I supplement this with a brief examination of Chagnon and Asch's notorious anthropological film *The Ax Fight*. Therein I attempt to demonstrate how film can be used to present action in the human and social sciences, but also note that the way in which this action is presented and supplemented with additional information can have a profound influence on how we understand the action represented therein. I argue that such "non-verbal" media are an important complement and corrective to certain aspects of the predominantly linguistic discourse prevalent within the human and social sciences. I also argue, however, that whilst we must be careful not to conflate non-verbal documents of action with "literary" descriptions of action, their use as sources within the human and social sciences still involves working to "fix" action as an object of inquiry, and that as such Ricoeur's hermeneutic model of interpretation can still help inform our understanding of how we receive and interpret these non-verbal "texts".

Ultimately, I argue that the autonomy of the text in Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy is not "absolute" but a feature of the text inseparable from the

“distanciation” of which the text is a paradigmatic example for Ricoeur. As a consequence, Ricoeur’s characterisation of the text can account for the autonomy of textual meaning without entailing the irreducible multiplicity and relativity of meaning commonly associated with the “absolute text”. It is this, and the accompanying possibility of making *contingent* but *valid* and *authoritative* interpretations, that makes Ricoeur’s conception of the text particularly suited to the project described in “The Model of the Text”.

### ***Chapter 3: The Meaning of Action***

In this chapter I examine the idea of “meaningful action”, primarily regarding how we conceive meaningful action as something liable to being fixed via linguistic description and appropriated as an object of reflective inquiry in line with “The Model of the Text”. To this end, I first consider Ricoeur’s own definition of “meaningful action”, drawing upon the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin, in which he attempts to argue that the meaning of action can be conceived as “propositional” after the manner of a speech-act, and that meaningful action can therefore be articulated in terms of its “locutionary”, “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary” force (Ricoeur, 1981h: 200). I argue, however, that this definition of meaningful action risks conflating meaningful action too closely and uncritically with the “action-sentences” by which we describe and recount meaningful action. In doing so, Ricoeur potentially overlooks the possibility that there are features of meaningful action that may not be amenable to linguistic description, and as such oversimplifies the issue of the adequate description and objectification of action.

With this in mind I next turn to look at the work of other thinkers who have addressed issues regarding the nature of “meaningful action”. This includes the

distinction made by Gilbert Ryle between “thick” and “thin” description of action and Charles Taylor’s analysis of the concept of meaning within the human sciences. I then bring these analyses into conjunction with the hermeneutic concept of the “linguisticality” – the *Sprachlichkeit* – of meaningful experience. This examination of the way in which meaningful action can be understood in relation to language allows me to articulate some of the features of meaningful action that make it amenable to objectification – especially in terms of linguistic description – and consequently to the kind of objectification and hermeneutic interpretation for which Ricoeur argues in “The Model of the Text”.

Finally, and as a challenge to the presupposition that the “meaning” of action should be a matter of concern for the interpretive human and social sciences, I consider and criticise the work of two profoundly influential thinkers for whom the “everyday” meaning of action is considered insignificant: B.F. Skinner and Emile Durkheim. What their accounts share is an aspiration towards the kind of objectivity found in the natural sciences. I argue that, by comparison, the “objectivity” of the human and social sciences is one that must be capable of responding to the “everyday” meaningfulness of action. I argue further that by incorporating the “critical moment” of explanation as part of a wider interpretive schematic, “The Model of the Text” outlines a form of “objective” analysis of action within the human sciences that can fulfil this demand.

#### ***Chapter 4: Critical Description***

This chapter, picking up on the preceding discussion regarding the objectification of action within the discourses of the human and social sciences, focuses in turn on the challenges posed to interpreters seeking to “objectify” and

describe meaningful human action. I argue that it is the responsibility of the interpreter to recognise and respond to the difficulties involved in bringing action to discourse in the human and social sciences. In doing so I hope to explore some aspects of “The Model of the Text” which Ricoeur leaves relatively underexplored, and to articulate the ways in which we must supplement Ricoeur’s textual model with a greater awareness of how action becomes “fixed” as an object of inquiry. I concentrate primarily upon the *description* of action as an aspect of the work undertaken by practitioners in the social sciences as a precursor to interpretation, arguing in greater depth that description is in itself an interpretive activity. I consequently argue that “description” as a practice within the human and social sciences must incorporate a critical awareness of the fact that *how* action is described can influence our understanding of the *meaning* of that action. In particular I wish to emphasise the importance of self-criticism on the part of the inquirer describing action.

I begin by examining the issue of the “description” of action in relation to Ricoeur’s metaphor of action “leaving a mark” in time, a notion which remains largely undeveloped in “The Model of the Text”, and argue that if textual hermeneutics is to serve as a model for the interpretation in the human and social sciences, then the “fixation” of action as an object of inquiry requires close critical attention. I argue that there is no “neutral” system, applicable regardless of the circumstances and context of any particular case, for recording action as an object for the human and social sciences. Drawing upon hermeneutic notions of “tradition” and “disciplinary prejudice”, I then argue that the descriptive constitution of action as an object of inquiry necessitates some level of self-critique on the part of the inquirer *as part of the work of description*. In order to illustrate this in greater depth

I engage in a critical examination of Ralf Dahrendorf's notion of "*homo sociologicus*", and its use as a "fiction" to characterise the way in which human beings are conceptualised within sociology.

I follow this by touching briefly upon the *reception* of pre-composed descriptions and accounts of action, both contemporary and historical. Although it is relatively well established that practitioners of the human and social sciences should read critically, and take possible bias into account in their interpretations of these sources, it is nevertheless imperative that we also understand the importance of "disciplinary prejudice" in influencing our reception of such pre-composed texts of action. Herein I examine these "critical" reading practices in terms of the hermeneutic categories of disciplinary prejudice and tradition that I used in the preceding discussion of the objectification of action, and draw upon Ricoeur in order to offer a critical reading of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* as an example of how an uncritical appropriation of texts describing human action can lead us into misunderstanding. I argue that the importance of interpreting such "given" accounts and documents of action *critically* finds its complement in the necessity for self-criticism in the composition of descriptions of action within the human and social sciences.

### ***Chapter 5: Wittgenstein, Ethnomethodology and the Case against "Interpretation"***

This chapter focuses on two separate but related approaches to inquiry within the social sciences which could potentially pose a challenge to Ricoeur's hermeneutic model. Both approaches take exception to what they perceive as the imposition of "theory" prevalent in mainstream "interpretive" social science. I first consider a number of criticisms of interpretive social science influenced by the

philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Peter Winch. I then examine Harold Garfinkel's work in ethnomethodology. Although neither addresses Ricoeur's work directly, I explore the possibility that such anti-interpretive approaches to social inquiry might pose a fundamental challenge to Ricoeur's conception of the interpretation of action as proposed in "The Model of the Text". In doing so I aim primarily to offer a defence of the textual model against these anti-interpretive claims, but also to consider how these approaches might help us understand the problems that arise in relation to the "objectification" of action and how that might impact upon our reading of "The Model of the Text".<sup>6</sup>

I begin by looking at the claim that the hermeneutic characterisation of "understanding" as interpretive is an over-intellectualisation of how we engage with and understand others in our real lives. Influenced by the work of Wittgenstein and Winch, some thinkers argue that understanding is not *usually* problematic and that it is thus not necessary to "interpret" action in order for us to understand its meaning. Adherents of this approach recommend a more thoroughly "descriptive" approach to social inquiry as an alternative. I argue to the contrary that the kind of interpretation discussed by Ricoeur in "The Model of the Text" – *Auslegung* – does not necessarily involve the kind of "imposition" or "abstraction" with which Wittgenstein and Winch were concerned, and that hermeneutic models of understanding can be seen as far closer to the kind of "descriptive" social inquiry recommended by such thinkers than the kind of positivistic and intellectualist thought which they set out to criticise.

I then turn my attention to ethnomethodology, particularly the influential work of Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodology is, broadly speaking, an approach to

---

<sup>6</sup> Likewise, I will also attempt to outline the important ways in which "The Model of the Text" might impart something useful regarding the objectification and interpretation of action to the approaches with which I am contrasting Ricoeur's essay.

sociology premised upon the idea that meaningful action can *only* be understood by reference to the environment in which it takes place, and that the “meaning” of action is a result of the ongoing “work” of those who are acting within that environment. Taking this into account, ethnomethodology recasts the study of social action in terms of an inquiry into “the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on circumstances in which they find themselves” (Heritage, 1984: 4). Ethnomethodology therefore attempts to avoid what it sees as the distorting influence of interpretation shaped by sociological theory and the abstraction involved in the “objectification” of action modelled after the natural sciences.

I argue, however, that Ricoeur’s modelling of “objectification” and “interpretation” after the text and textual hermeneutics is not necessarily prone to the same kind of criticism. I also argue that although the ethnomethodological focus on “meaning” as a situated and contextually sensitive phenomenon provides an invaluable resource for social inquiry, ethnomethodology nevertheless still has to account for the ways in which it constitutes action as an “object” and the role of “disciplinary prejudice” within the production of ethnomethodological accounts of action.

Ultimately, I contend that rejecting a hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of action such as that proposed within “The Model of the Text”, because of the implied abstraction from the context in which an action occurs, represents a misunderstanding of the hermeneutic thought on which it is premised. I also suggest, contrary to this concern, that “The Model of the Text” can help us avoid imposing meanings upon action by helping us understand the role of the

researcher in constituting action as an “object” of inquiry, and thus help us fulfil our responsibilities as interpreters of meaningful human action.

### ***Chapter 6: Responsibility, Attestation and Distanciation***

The final chapter focuses on the kind of hermeneutic validity associated by Ricoeur with the interpretation of texts and, therefore, the interpretation of action modelled after textual hermeneutics. I aim to articulate the nature of this hermeneutic validity by considering Ricoeur’s discussion of “attestation of self” in *Oneself as Another*, where Ricoeur describes “attestation” as representative of “the sort of certainty that hermeneutics may claim” (Ricoeur, 1992: 21). Given this, I attempt to take what Ricoeur has to say about “attestation” in regards to the hermeneutics of the self and show how this might illuminate our understanding of the interpretation of meaningful action. This involves considering the idea that engaging in interpretive activity entails a sense of *obligation* and *responsibility* that must be fulfilled if an interpretation is to be valid, and examining the role that “distanciation” and “objectification” play in the strength and validity of interpretation.

I begin by considering the kind of “responsibility” we face as interpreters. In particular I argue that by engaging in interpretive activity we make a commitment to the *truth* of what we say and of the reasons we give for saying it, and that we are *obliged* as interpreters to meet this commitment. I also argue that meeting this obligation involves a number of the issues discussed in previous chapters; e.g. the importance of being sensitive to the socio-historical context in which action takes place, the importance of considering the meaning of action critically and the incorporation of self-critique into our interpretive activities.

While being careful to distinguish the discussion of “attestation-of-self” in *Oneself as Another* from any application it might have to the interpretation of action, I draw upon Ricoeur’s notion of “attestation” in order to argue that the validity to which hermeneutic interpretation might aspire is inextricably connected to the exercise of doubt and suspicion. In line with this I argue that hermeneutic interpretation involves a “trust” in our power to understand and make meaningful assertions about action, but that this is a trust that incorporates within itself an element of suspicion and self-critique. This detour of accedence via suspicion lends hermeneutic interpretation a kind of validity characterised by Ricoeur as “credence without guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1992: 23).

I next attempt to elucidate the roles of distanciation and objectification within the strength and validity of hermeneutic interpretation. Taking “distanciation” as the key feature of Ricoeur’s conception of the text, I argue that by objectifying action we reflectively distance ourselves from our pre-reflective understanding of action, and therefore avoid being “dominated” by our presuppositions of meaning. It is under this condition of distanciation that the possibility of freely endorsing our beliefs and understanding arises. The text, for Ricoeur, embodies this kind of “distanciation” in which meaning is temporarily held in suspense and made available for critical consideration. I argue *via* Ricoeur’s analogy between text and action that it is likewise within the objectification of action that the possibility of critical interpretation within the human and social sciences arises.

The final part of the chapter is dedicated to understanding how we should read “The Model of the Text” in light of Ricoeur’s interpretive theory and the hermeneutic tradition in which it is located. Key to Ricoeur’s idea of interpretive validity is that the kind of truth claim made in hermeneutic interpretation is neither

absolute nor a case of “verification” in the sense associated with the natural sciences. Rather, it is a case of offering arguments for and against possible interpretations by which we might deem them as more or less probable. I argue that the textual model of interpretation is in itself interpretive in this manner, i.e., as a model of interpretation that draws upon various features of the text that might be applied to action but without making any claim to “absolute” truth nor to be the only potentially valid model for interpretation in the human and social sciences.

Indicative of this is Ricoeur’s description of this project as a “model” and I close the chapter by articulating the way in which Ricoeur understands the text as working as a “model” for action. By reading the “The Model of the Text” as making the kind of non-absolute claims to validity definitive of hermeneutic interpretation, we can consider the textual “model” as offering us a productive and powerful way of drawing upon textual hermeneutics in the human sciences without necessarily falling into the trap of *uncritically* generalising from textual to non-textual categories of understanding. We may then benefit from what textual hermeneutics might offer the interpretive practices and methodologies of the human and social sciences, whilst still incorporating the note of critical caution sounded by Ricoeur in the claim that “there does not exist a general hermeneutics... a general theory of interpretation... there are only various separate and contrasting hermeneutic theories” (Ricoeur, 1989d: 314).

## **Chapter One: The Model of the Text and Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Heritage**

Paul Ricoeur's 1971 essay "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text" outlines a proposal for the application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences. Ricoeur's core claim in this essay is that "the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of ... text interpretation" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197). In this chapter I offer a reading of "The Model of the Text" in light of Ricoeur's wider hermeneutic writings and the hermeneutic philosophical tradition of which it is a part. My purpose is to both clarify the idea of textual interpretation used by Ricoeur as a paradigm for the interpretation of action and to begin to identify aspects of Ricoeur's hermeneutical project that require further critical attention.

### 1.1: Distanciation in the Text

I begin by examining Ricoeur's conception of textual hermeneutics. Ricoeur conceives of the text as a paradigm of discourse under the condition of fixation. Discourse, for Ricoeur, is essentially communicative: in very general terms, it involves somebody imparting something about something to someone. Discourse can become "fixed" and enduring, according to Ricoeur, when it is inscribed as writing. Under this condition of fixation, Ricoeur argues that the "message" of discourse is preserved and becomes available to be interpreted and understood at a distance from the specific situation in which discourse is produced. Interpretation represents the attempt to understand the meaning of discourse through this distance. Essential to Ricoeur's notions of both discourse and the text, and consequently his

understanding of the “objectification” to which we submit action in the human and social sciences, is the concept of “distanciation”.

Distanciation, for Ricoeur, is a multifaceted phenomenon with a number of important consequences for hermeneutics. Most importantly, Ricoeur argues that distanciation describes important features of the way in which discourse is meaningful, not least the “autonomy” of meaning he attributes to discourse under the condition of fixation. “Autonomy”, in this context, refers to the various ways in which it is possible for the meaning of discourse to escape from the conditions of its utterance or inscription, and from the intentions of its author. In order to understand Ricoeur’s conception of interpretation, it is vital that we also understand the concept of “distanciation”, the autonomy of meaning this lends to discourse, and the way in which interpretation is conceived of as a “reply” to this distension and complication of textual meaning (Ricoeur, 1981d: 138).

#### 1.1.1: Distanciation in the Text: Event and Meaning

Ricoeur begins by identifying a form of distanciation that he believes to be inherent to discourse in general (as opposed to textual discourse in particular). The “distanciation” in question here is the endurance of the meaning of discourse beyond the particular temporal act in which this meaning is expressed. Ricoeur argues that the communicative dimension of discourse is fulfilled when the discourse itself is understood as meaningful, and that in being so understood it transcends the transitory conditions of its production. This persistence of discourse as meaning is perhaps most apparent in speech; spoken words, in a very real sense, disappear when we stop speaking – but what is *said* endures beyond our silence and, according to

Ricoeur, “may be identified and reidentified as the same so that we may say it again or in other words” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 9).

Ricoeur believes that, when we speak of “understanding” something we are usually interested not in the specific particularities of vocalisation or inscription but in the meaning of the act of discourse “insofar as it endures” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 12). With this in mind, he refers to the way in which all discourse is realised as an event but understood as meaning as the dialectic of event and meaning. This dialectic refers to the way in which, insofar as we are interested in discourse as a communicative phenomenon, we can divide it into two poles; the “event” of discourse – its utterance, or its inscription as a text – and the subsequent reception – i.e. when the utterance is heard, or the text read – at which point it is understood as meaningful. In terms of the text, it is this dialectic which, for Ricoeur, gives rise to a “problem of fixation” insofar as “[w]hat we want to fix is what disappears” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 198). It is via the inscription of discourse as a “work” that the “fleeting event” of discourse can be made to endure.

“Work” in this context refers to the way in which discourse is expressed as a unique structured configuration of some kind, something particularly (even exaggeratedly) evident in the manner in which discourse can become fixed in the form of a text. Ricoeur describes the text-as-work in terms of bringing together a sequence of meaningful sentences in “a unique configuration”, the uniqueness of which “likens it to an individual and which may be called its style” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 136). The style of a text, for Ricoeur, expresses “a particular standpoint in a work which, by its singularity, illustrates and exalts the eventful character of discourse”, and it is in “the very form of the work” that this individuality and eventfulness is embodied and made available to us (Ricoeur, 1981d: 137). It is in the stylised

“work” of the text that the individuality of the eventuation of discourse is captured and embodied, but is captured in a way which still calls to be read, understood and fulfilled as meaningful.

In fixing the event of discourse thusly, the text makes explicit the dialectic of event and meaning identified by Ricoeur as definitive of discourse; the individuality and particularity of the *event* of discourse, which can henceforth be identified with its “fixed” form, is distinguished from the *meaning* of the act of discourse which is only fulfilled when the text is read and understood. And although Ricoeur writes that the event of discourse is “surpassed” in meaning, the eventful character of discourse is an ineliminable quality of discourse as such. This is reflected in the importance attributed by Ricoeur to the work of the text, and the way that it is in the “very form” of the text by which the event of discourse is preserved that we discern meaning. Ricoeur therefore considers the preservation of the event of discourse via some form of fixation of deep importance to the possibility of taking discourse (including, in the case of “The Model of the Text”, meaningful human action) as an object of reflective understanding. And for Ricoeur it is the “distance” between the event and the meaning of discourse, embodied by the text, which is the very condition of the possibility of such reflective understanding.

### 1.1.2: Distanciation in the Text: The Autonomy of the Text

The inscription of discourse as writing also gives rise to other forms of “distanciation”, notably the “autonomy” of textual meaning; i.e. the various ways in which the meaning of a text can exceed the intentions of its author and the historical

and social conditions in which it was originally written.<sup>7</sup> In regards to the intentions of the author, Ricoeur draws a contrast between spoken and written discourse. Spoken discourse has a “character of immediacy”, according to Ricoeur, because the speaker addresses her utterance to someone with whom they share “the situation of interlocution” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 29). This means simply that there exists a shared context between interlocutors within spoken discourse; that the speaker and listener are together at a certain time or place and within a shared cultural milieu, something which is not necessarily, or even typically, true of written discourse. When discourse is fixed in writing it endures beyond the situation of its articulation and its meaning cannot therefore be identified purely with the intentions of its author. The fixation of discourse in writing therefore demonstrates the ability of the text to transcend the limited horizon of the author. A text can outlive its author, and take on new meanings in new situations far removed from what the author intended: “thanks to writing, the ‘world’ of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 139).

In a manner, this may seem to clash with the claim that the “style” of the text as a work serves to represent the individuality of the event of discourse as a “point of view”. But the individuality of the text is not subsumable to the particular psychological intentions of the author. The individuality of the text is present only in the text as a “work” with a particular “style”, and we needn’t reach beyond the text towards the intentions of any particular individual in order to justify this.

---

<sup>7</sup> In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur reserves the term “autonomy of the text” primarily to refer to the autonomy of the text from its author. However, for the sake of brevity, I treat authorial intention alongside other socio-historical factors that might be taken to genetically determine meaning without distorting Ricoeur’s ideas too violently. We can perhaps think of these as falling within the broader category of “conditions of production” (i.e. the *psychological* conditions of production, the *social* conditions of production etc).

Insofar as the “author” exists for the text, it is as a textual phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that authorial intention cannot play a role in how we understand the text, or even that it should not. It is only to say that what the author may have intended is not necessarily definitive of the meaning of the text. Thus while what the author may have intended can often be an important aspect of how we understand a text, the meaning of the text transcends this limited horizon and takes in other considerations potentially outside of the authorial intention. It is in this way that the text is autonomous of its author.

The same can be said of the social and historical conditions against which the text was produced. It is always possible, of course, to conceive of the meaning of the text purely in terms of the social and historical situation in which the text was originally produced. By doing so we gain an invaluable sense of the context in which it was possible for such a text to be produced, and, likewise, the context in which a text would have originally been understood. But, as with authorial intention, these conditions are not entirely or exclusively definitive of how we might understand a text. Under the condition of fixation, written discourse becomes capable of escaping its original context, available to be read and interpreted by anyone who is familiar with the written language (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203). In practice, we might rarely have reason to read a text without considering any of the conditions of its production. Ricoeur’s notion of textual autonomy does not deny this. It only denies that the meaning of the text can be entirely circumscribed by these conditions. This “autonomy” is a product of the distanciation inherent to discourse under the condition of fixation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur is careful, however, to distance his position and his conception of textual “autonomy” from that of the “absolute text”, wherein the text is considered as a fundamentally authorless entity. This important distinction is discussed in greater detail within chapter two of this thesis.

### 1.1.2.1: Gadamer and *Wirkungsgeschichte*

In terms of understanding how authorial intention and historicism can play an important role in how we understand any given text, but without artificially prescribing and delimiting the possible meaning of the text in terms of these interests, an important figure to take into account is Hans-Georg Gadamer, to whom Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy is deeply indebted. Gadamer's notion of the "history of effects" or *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text is particularly helpful in this regard. Ricoeur does not explicitly discuss the notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* within "The Model of the Text", but elsewhere Ricoeur does acknowledge an affinity between his notion of textual distanciation and Gadamer's interest in the reception of texts at a "temporal distance".<sup>9</sup> By unpacking the notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* here, we will more easily understand the way in which Ricoeur conceives of the conditions of a discourse's production as an important but not exhaustive determining factor of textual meaning.

The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text consists of the different ways in which the text we receive has been interpreted and understood before us and how this can shape our reading of the text at hand. Under the condition of fixation, discourse is preserved and becomes available to be read and understood in potentially very different circumstances from those in which it was originally produced. At this remove we have no "direct" access to either the intentions of the author or the historical and social conditions under which the text was authored.<sup>10</sup> As a text,

---

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Ricoeur, in "Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology", says that his remarks on textual distanciation can be conceived as an extension of Gadamer's own interest in "temporal distance" and the linguisticality of experience, and that it is in the distanciation embodied by writing that the "profoundest aim" of the constitution of discourse is realised (Ricoeur, 1981b: 91-92).

<sup>10</sup> If we wish to make appeal to such conditions as constitutive of the meaning of the text, we must justify doing so by appeal to *the text itself*. To some extent then, it is the meaning of the text that opens us up to drawing upon the author and the socio-historical reality of the situation in which it was written, not the other way round.

discourse rather becomes an “object” with a history of being read and understood, and when we come to a text our expectations of meaning are often mediated by the history of effects that accompanies our reception of the text.<sup>11</sup> Distance, consequently, is not simply a form of alienation from the historical situation that would allow us to understand the meaning of the text, but “a positive and productive condition enabling understanding” (Gadamer, 1993: 297). The history of the text does not end when it is authored, but continues to include the history of how it is read and understood by those who come to it throughout its enduring existence.

If we find the “soul” of the author or the “spirit” of an age in the text, therefore, it is insofar as it is embodied within the text and carried with it as part of its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Because our reception of the text both draws upon and contributes to this history, Gadamer describes interpreting a text as participating in a form of “tradition”.<sup>12</sup> Consciousness of this tradition and our participation in it becomes an important part of our interpretive activities, and opens the door to understanding the text in terms of the conditions of its production without letting these conditions delimit every valid possibility of understanding the text. This is the kind of “autonomy” identified by Ricoeur as part of textual meaning, and as a product of the “objectification” undergone by discourse under the condition of fixation.

---

<sup>11</sup> Even if we are reading a text “blind”, so to speak, without knowing its title, author or date, our understanding does involve the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text to the extent that the style and literary conventions of the text in question will appear to belong to our engagement with a literary tradition or genre of some sort, which in turn condition what we expect from the text and how we understand it in the light of these expectations.

<sup>12</sup> Awareness of being part of this “tradition” of reception is what Gadamer calls “consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*” (Gadamer, 1993: 301).

### 1.1.3: Distanciation in the Text: The World of the Text

Another important aspect of textual autonomy is the reference of the text. Inherent to Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought is the idea that discourse has reference to something outside of itself, that it says something about something. Under the condition of fixation, however, the reference of discourse too is subject to a form of distanciation to the extent that it can no longer be simplistically understood as the same as spoken discourse. According to Ricoeur, in the text the referential dimension of discourse is held in *suspense* and only actualised in reading. The permanence lent to discourse by fixation in writing, and by which it outlives the immediate historical and social situation of its author, means that the reference of the text should not uncritically be identified with any situation shared in common between the author of a text and its reader.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, the reference of the text can be thought in terms of how it can open up realms of meaning for the reader. Ricoeur refers to this as the text's ability to disclose a world to the reader: “the world is the totality of references opened up by texts... the meaning of a text... is not something hidden but something disclosed... Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orientating oneself in these worlds” (Ricoeur, 1981f: 177).<sup>14</sup> This notion of the “world” of a text is used by Ricoeur in order to express the idea that, when we read a text, we do not simply

---

<sup>13</sup> Ricoeur contrasts textual reference with the idea that the reference of spoken dialogue is “the situation common to the interlocutors, that is, the aspects of reality which can be shown or pointed to,” and refers to this kind of dialogical reference as “ostensive” reference (Ricoeur, 1981f: 177). This is, to say the least, a remarkably thin conception of what might be the reference of spoken discourse, but serves largely to draw a distinction between the interpersonal interlocution by which something is said in spoken discourse, and the fact that the text can only “speak” to us as readers and interpreters rather than as partners in a conversation.

<sup>14</sup> The example used by Ricoeur to illustrate this idea is “the ‘world’ of Greece”. This is a “world” not because it refers to the geopolitical entity currently known as Greece, or even to the fact that there once existed a group of people which we now refer to as the “Ancient Greeks”, but rather to the way in which the text allows us to draw upon all these different cultural and historical touchstones and imagine inhabiting a “world” in which particularly “Greek” forms of life were lived.

think of it as referring to something outside of itself, or to some purely fictional entity or set of events that we treat “as if” they were “out there” in the world.

Rather, the possibility that interests Ricoeur is that we as readers may enter imaginatively and collaboratively into a “world” belonging to and projected by the text, a world in which we can imagine ourselves and others potentially inhabiting and in which different possibilities might be lived out. He refers to this as the possibility of the reader having “a world, and not merely a situation, a *Welt* and not merely an *Umwelt*” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 202).<sup>15</sup>

The reference of the text is therefore inseparable from the way in which interpreting a text is not simply a case of deciphering some hidden meaning, but *allowing* the text to speak to us and how we understand the world around us. It follows that understanding a text involves not just understanding the words of the text, but also coming to grips with the possibilities revealed to us in the world projected by the text. This applies both to our understanding of the “world” of the text itself, but also our own existence and situation in relation to this “world”. The text confronts us with a *Welt* which has the potential to alter or challenge our perception of the ways in which we live our lives and our understanding of the historical and institutional contexts in which we live them. Ricoeur expresses this idea by saying that “[t]o understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 202).

This possibility involves some extent of distanciation from conventional “ostensive” forms of reference insofar as the possibility of being receptive to what

---

<sup>15</sup> The idea of “world disclosure” is one which marks Ricoeur’s philosophical debt to Martin Heidegger. Ricoeur draws directly upon Heidegger in “The Model of the Text” when he says that “what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a project... the outline of a new being-in-the-world” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 202). Heidegger himself characterises discourse as “the way in which we articulate... the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, 2008: 204). Discourse is therefore understood as that by which reality is disclosed to our *conscious* understanding.

the text has to say is not premised upon any prior sharing of some situation, as is the case with interlocution. To subsume the referential dimension of the text to our own situation, or conversely to assume that the world of the text has nothing to do with this, is to close ourselves off to the world of the text and fail to “hear” what it might have to say. The text, as discourse under fixation, carries within itself the possibility of disclosing a world within its fixed form, and is actualised when, in reading, we open ourselves up to it.

#### 1.1.4: Autonomy and the Limits of a Textual Paradigm

At this point it may be worth touching upon some of the potential issues that arise from this textual paradigm. Ricoeur’s characterisation of the autonomy of textual meaning is inseparable from his interest in how the meaning of discourse is capable of enduring beyond the moment of its initial articulation. He conceives of meaningful discourse as involving a dialectical relationship between being understood as a  *fleeting event* and in terms of its *enduring meaning*. The text serves as a paradigm of discourse insofar as it fixes and embodies this dialectic. This then gives rise to the autonomy of the text, according to which we cannot simplistically identify the meaning of discourse with the conditions of its production. The importance of this autonomy of meaning, for Ricoeur, lies in the idea that the meaning of the text should not be thought to necessarily be grounded in anything *outside of the text itself*. This is not to say that nothing beyond the printed page – such as the author’s biography, of the socio-historical situation in which the text was

authored – can be brought to bear upon the text, but that we are justified in doing so only insofar as it is justified by the text itself.<sup>16</sup>

For Ricoeur distanciation, of which the text is a paradigmatic example, is an aspect of all meaningful discourse to at least some extent. But writing is paradigmatic of discourse only *insofar as* we consider such distanciation as central to the nature of discourse. By focussing on the way in which the event of discourse is surpassed in meaning we already identify them as distinct from one another (albeit in a way which also demands that we recognise that both are essential to one another as part of discourse). It is by considering them separately that we legitimise the introduction of writing as a paradigm of discourse. But this arguably fails to capture the importance of other aspects of, for example, spoken discourse, that make it importantly distinct from written discourse.<sup>17</sup>

In taking any particular form of discourse as a paradigm we unavoidably focus on the specific aspects of discourse that are most prominent within our paradigm. However, as Ricoeur argues, “[m]eaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203). Insofar as the interpretation of meaningful action within the human and social sciences involves taking action as an “object”, we therefore have legitimate reason to be interested in the way in which action is fixed as an object and consequently the role of distanciation in our reflective understanding and interpretation of action. So

---

<sup>16</sup> If, for example, we wished to discuss the theme of railway expansion in nineteenth century Britain within Charles Dickens’ *Dombey and Son* and draw upon other sources on the matter in order to do so, we could point to Mr. Dombey’s troubled meditations upon the “triumphant monster” which drags “living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it” in order to help justify our reading.

<sup>17</sup> The level of interaction involved in dialogue and the production of meaning therein, for example. The importance of understanding how action is meaningful as a form of *ongoing transaction* is a central tenet of ethnomethodological thought, and is examined in greater depth in the fifth chapter (section 5.4) of this thesis.

although the paradigm of the text inevitably focuses our attention on particular aspects of discourse, this does not mean that we should reject it. Rather, we must be aware of the implications of using such a paradigm; both what the text can tell us about discourse and the interpretation of action, and what it might obscure. Whether Ricoeur fully acknowledges the limitations of the textual paradigm and the abstraction that is involved in “fixing” discourse (or action) is questionable. But if we are to take “The Model of the Text” seriously such considerations have to play a central role in our inquiries.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.2: Understanding and Explanation

Another major feature of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics with important consequences for how we read “The Model of the Text” is his attempt to reconcile the dichotomous categories of “*Verstehen*” and “*Erklären*”, or “understanding” and “explanation”. Traditionally, hermeneutic philosophy has privileged, and is often identified solely with, *Verstehen* at the expense of *Erklären*. In terms of “*Verstehen*”, understanding can be thought of as the attempt to intuit what the author of a text might have meant.<sup>19</sup> This, however, may in turn be contrasted with the kind of “objective” verification Ricoeur considers to be characteristic of the physical sciences, which falls under the category of “*Erklären*” or “explanation”. This opposition is problematic for hermeneutics because there is an apparent tension between “the intuitive and unverifiable character” of understanding and “the

---

<sup>18</sup> The importance of confronting and acknowledging the limits of the textual model as part of its validity is touched upon throughout this thesis, and in greater depth in section 6.4 of chapter six.

<sup>19</sup> Such an attitude is, for example, to some extent manifest in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who wrote that the task of hermeneutics is “to understand the utterance... better than its author” and that “we must seek to bring much to consciousness that can remain unconscious to him” (Schleiermacher, 1998: § 18).

demand for objectivity” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 151) associated with explanation and that arises within the human sciences insofar as we want to be able to arbitrate between the validity of different interpretations.

Ricoeur describes his own work as marked by a “concern to avoid the pitfall of an opposition between an ‘understanding’ which would be reserved for the ‘human sciences’ and an ‘explanation’ which would be common to... the nomological sciences, primarily the physical sciences” (Ricoeur, 1981a: 36). He even goes so far as to describe this reconciliation as the “main implication of our [textual] paradigm” in terms of how we conceive “the methods of the social sciences” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 209).<sup>20</sup> This is because, for Ricoeur, the “scientific” character of the human and social sciences demands that we need a characterisation of “understanding” which allows us to incorporate critical and “explanatory” categories by which it is possible to arbitrate between alternate or competing interpretations of the action or actions to which we are attending.

Simultaneously though, Ricoeur is deeply aware that the possibility of such explanation is premised upon the idea that there is something meaningful to be explained in action, and that this means that we cannot apply the same categories of “explanation” that we find in the natural sciences to the interpretation of human action. To do so would involve conceiving of human action not as meaningful or a matter of agency, but simply as the result of impersonal and objective forces and as such would constitute a failure of *understanding*. It is to this end that Ricoeur

---

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur’s identification of this as the “main implication” of “The Model of the Text” is perhaps related to the nature of his ongoing engagement with structuralist thought. Ricoeur, although interested in structural analysis as an explanatory method and as a “moment” within interpretation, was nevertheless sceptical about the reduction of language to such a “science of signs” and questioned the dominance of structuralist thought within French philosophy in the 1960s. Instead Ricoeur looked to how we might understand structuralist thought in relation to phenomenology and hermeneutics, and in his engagement with structuralism sought to “shed light on the debate and at the same time move beyond it” so that we might “glimpse the validity of structural analysis and the limits of this validity.” (Ricoeur, 1989c: 77) The identification of structural analysis as an explanatory “moment” within interpretation thus represents an important synthesis of philosophical approaches within this debate.

proposes to re-evaluate the relationship between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*, and argues that the text can provide a model wherein “understanding” and “explanation” together constitute interpretation as a single activity.

### 1.2.1: Understanding and Explanation: From Understanding to Explanation

Ricoeur first discusses the way in which the element of “understanding” in textual interpretation demands some degree of “explanation”. This finds its origins in Ricoeur’s belief that “to understand a text is not to rejoin the author” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 210). An effect of the distanciation that emerges with fixation is to make different ways of construing the text possible depending upon how we understand different parts of the text as relating to one another and to the work as a whole. This is because the text is, ultimately, more than the sum of its parts, a holistic whole rather than simply a linear accumulation of meaningful sentences whose meaning we could somehow “add up” as we went along. We cannot, therefore, simply infer the meaning of the text from our understanding of the sentences within it, as if the meaning of the text was simply the “sum” of the meaning of its parts considered in isolation. Rather, we must recognise that “the presupposition of a certain kind of whole is implied in the recognition of the [individual] parts” of the text, and “reciprocally, it is in construing the details that we construe the whole” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 211).

Depending on how we see the individual sentences of a text as relating to the text as a totality, and consequently upon how we *construe* the text as a whole, there will be different ways of understanding the meaning of any given text. This, according to Ricoeur, constitutes the “plurivocity” of the text “considered as a whole, open to several readings and several constructions” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212).

Equally important, however, is that in construing the text in one particular way we obscure or reject other potential alternative readings. Ricoeur expresses this by comparing the “text as a whole and as a singular whole” to “an object, which may be viewed from several sides, but never from all sides at once” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 77). When we interpret a text we are confronted with different possible readings from amongst which we may choose, and by accepting any particular reading as the best available we necessarily reject others which may have otherwise been open to us. It is up to us as interpreters to find the best “angle” from which to view the text, and it is this initial effort to construe the text in some particular fashion that Ricoeur identifies with the category of *Verstehen*.

But not every way of construing the meaning of a text is necessarily as good as every other. To concede this would be to open up hermeneutic interpretation to the accusation of unbridled relativism. In order to avoid this, interpretation must be able to make some kind of appeal to the idea of “validation” as traditionally associated with the category of *Erklären*. Ricoeur claims, however, that the kind of validation appropriate to textual interpretation is “closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification”, and that “[t]o show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what is known is something other than showing that a conclusion is true... It is a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212). Ricoeur draws this idea of a “logic of probability” from the literary theory of E.D. Hirsch, who characterises an “interpretive hypothesis” as “a probability judgement supported by evidence” (Hirsch, 1967: 180). This refers to the way that, in literary interpretation, we weigh up and judge the relative strengths

of different possible readings based upon the textual evidence on offer.<sup>21</sup> So while a hermeneutic conception of interpretative validity means that we must “recognize that no rules of thumb can lead mechanically to the most probable reading” (Hirsch, 1967: 186), this is not to say that we reach an interpretive conclusion arbitrarily. By critically assessing the evidence upon which an interpretative claim is based we engage in “a rational means of reaching conclusions in the absence of directly experienced certitude” (Hirsch, 1967: 175).

Although Ricoeur directly refers to Hirsch’s concept of validation in order to articulate his own, there are notable differences in their approaches. He sees the “logic of probability” described here as a way to “give an acceptable sense to the opposition between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* without conceding anything to the alleged dogma of the ineffability of the individual” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212). The appeal to a “logic of probability” allows us to conceive of interpretation as something methodologically distinct from empirical verification, but without having to renounce the possibility of validation altogether. This attitude towards validity in interpretation is shared to some extent by Ricoeur and Hirsch, but their reasons for suggesting that such a distinction is necessary are very different. Ricoeur believes that interpretation is a potentially interminable project, that the inherent openness and permanence of the text denies even the theoretical possibility of there being any *final* truth about its meaning. Hirsch, by contrast, believes that a logic of probability is necessary largely on pragmatic grounds.

This difference is an important one. There is nothing about a “probabilistic” understanding of validation which rules out the possibility that there is a correct and

---

<sup>21</sup> The evidence for an interpretation may lay both inside the text, in terms of the textual properties of the work we are interpreting, and outside, in terms of, for example, any historical, biographical or theoretical considerations we wish to bring to bear on the interpretive process. In the latter case, however, this is only true insofar as the use of extra-textual evidence is supported by the textual evidence.

final reading to be made of a text, against which other interpretations are mere approximations to be judged. For Hirsch this is in fact the case, and meaning remains an irreducibly intentional phenomenon with interpretation the attempt to discern the author's intentions within the text. Validity is a matter of probability, for Hirsch, simply because of the ineliminable possibility of new evidence regarding the author's intent coming to light.<sup>22</sup> Our interpretive judgements are, on this reading, probabilistic judgements based upon the available evidence, but cannot claim any absolute finality due to the possibility that new evidence might yet arise, forcing us to re-evaluate.

This radically distinguishes Hirsch's understanding of interpretive validity from Ricoeur's, for whom authorial intention is merely part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text and not the definitive standard of validity against which our interpretations are to be judged.<sup>23</sup> Rather, for Ricoeur, interpretation involves a judgement of probability insofar as we are forced to weigh up competing interpretations and decide between them on the basis of the evidence available to us within the text itself.<sup>24</sup> This judgement is probabilistic because there is no absolute standard of validity against which interpretations can be judged, but rather various and competing interpretations which will be more or less justified depending upon how well we judge them to be supported by the textual evidence. It is important,

---

<sup>22</sup> E.g. new biographical details about the author, or different drafts of the text which may help us understand what the author was thinking as they composed the text.

<sup>23</sup> Interpretation is, for Ricoeur, in some ways *fundamentally* interminable because interpretation is conceived as participation in an *ongoing* tradition. New readings of the text can always be made on the basis of past interpretations, and these new interpretations in turn contribute to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text and thus potentially open up new possibilities or variations of meaning for subsequent readers.

<sup>24</sup> This includes any decision we make to draw upon anything we know about authorial intention or any other extra-textual information to guide our interpretations; there must be something in the text itself that justifies our use of this information if it is to be valid.

therefore, that we appreciate Ricoeur's use of Hirsch's work without necessarily identifying their thinking too closely with one another.

What we should take from Hirsch's work is an emphasis on the idea that interpretation involves decisive adjudication between alternative possibilities of meaning based upon the evidence presented to us by the text. Ricoeur refers to this process as the ability to "move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213). The limit of dogmatism, in this case, refers to the idea that for an interpretation of meaning to be valid it must be the one and only valid interpretation; that we must in some way reach the verifiable "essence", the univocal truth, of the meaning of a text. The limit of scepticism represents the opposite pole of the hermeneutical process, the belief that, in the absence of the univocity to which dogmatism aspires, there is no such thing as meaning, and that to assert otherwise is mistaken.

Insofar as we associate "explanation" with empirical verification, "understanding" finds itself stuck between these two limits. The inherent plurivocity of discourse under the condition of fixation denies the possibility of the kind of "dogmatic" and univocal reading that verification of this foundational kind demands, but the alternative does not therefore have to be a "sceptical" relativism by which no interpretation is any more valid than any other. Ricoeur's conception of hermeneutic interpretation identifies the possibility of making resolute and non-arbitrary claims about textual meaning whilst still acknowledging the plurivocity of the text. Within this model we compare and contrast alternative interpretations with one another. This comparison is guided by attending to the text itself, the fixed form of which serving as "a limited field of possible constructions" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213) from which our interpretations must be drawn.

It is the argumentative process involved in coming to an interpretive judgement, the “conflict between competing interpretations”, that plays the role of falsification in a “logic of probability” as it is described by Ricoeur. An interpretation “must not only be probable, but more probable than another” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213). Herein we see the dialectic of *Verstehen* – the initial effort of construing the text in some particular way amongst a number of potentially viable alternatives – and *Erklären* – the appeal to validation made by arguing for and against particular interpretations with support from the text – reconstituted as two terms in a *productive* opposition which together give rise to interpretation as a single process.

### 1.2.2: Understanding and Explanation: From Explanation to Understanding

Ricoeur also inverts this dialectic of explanation and understanding by offering an account of how explanation necessarily presupposes that what we aim to explain is meaningful, and that our explanations must ultimately both draw upon and culminate in *understanding*. In doing so he argues that explanatory methodologies, rather than being opposed to the idea of “understanding”, can be seen as an important stage between an unreflective “naïve” appropriation of the text and an informed “critical” reading for which we can offer arguments based upon the text itself. Explanation is therefore not antithetical to understanding, but the means by which we can come to assert the validity of some particular interpretation against its potential alternatives. Ricoeur describes this detour of understanding via explanation as the “*hermeneutical arc*” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218).

This possibility of offering “explanations” in order to support our interpretive activities is, once again, premised on the kind of distanciation that emerges in

discourse under the condition of fixation. In particular, Ricoeur believes that it is the suspension of the “referential function of the text” that lends itself to the possibility of explanation. He writes that as readers we have the potential to “treat the text as a worldless entity” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 215) and hold the meaning – the reference – of the text in a state of temporary suspense wherein it becomes possible to analyse the text in terms of its structure. Ricoeur claims that this way of approaching the text is “exemplified” by the various “*structural* schools of literary criticism”, and uses the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss as his primary example (Ricoeur, 1981h: 216).

According to Ricoeur, the text as a work of discourse is characterised by being a production, a “labour which organises language” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 136). By discussing the labour involved in the production of a text, Ricoeur hopes to emphasise the way in which composing a text involves “treating language as a material to be worked upon and formed” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 136), and drawing upon literary and linguistic convention in order to produce a structured “work” of discourse with a particular style and individuality. Analysis of the text in terms of this structure allows us to get a sense of the way in which the text is constructed, and to identify key relationships and oppositions between motifs and terms within this.<sup>25</sup> Such an analysis can then serve as “an injunction to think in a certain manner” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218) about the text, but an injunction that proceeds *from the text itself*. Importantly, however, some *presupposition* of meaning has to exist in order for there to be anything that might be explained. Explanation of any kind would be

---

<sup>25</sup> The structural oppositions we encounter in any particular text, and the relationships we perceive between them, will depend upon the subject matter of the individual work at hand. Ricoeur, drawing upon Levi-Strauss, uses an example of the “meaningful oppositions concerning birth and death, blindness and lucidity, sexuality and truth” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 217) as they are found within mythology. Such an “explanation” of a text’s structure, as well as providing us with a guide as to how the text can be read, might also work to expose ideological tensions and power relations at play within the text, and thereby open up the possibility of critique.

impossible “if there were not significant questions, meaningful propositions” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 160). The possibility of this kind of *explanation* is therefore inseparable from *understanding*, just as the *validity* of interpretation demands that we supplement our understanding with some degree of explanation.

Even, therefore, if the possibility of engaging in such “structural” explanation is premised upon holding our judgement regarding meaning in a state of “suspense”, this can only ever be a *temporary* suspension of the referential dimension of the text. The text remains a form of discourse which is only fulfilled when it is understood as a meaningful whole, and as such always “awaits and calls for a reading” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 158). The relationship between explanation and interpretation is therefore, again, a reciprocal one in which “to explain is to bring out the structure... [and] to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the *orient* of the text” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 161-62). This is not, of course, to say that any understanding we might have of the text or of discourse in general *requires* a detour via explanation, but only to say that explanation (*Erklären*), as a part of hermeneutic interpretation, can serve to guide our reading and understanding of the text and to support our interpretive hypotheses, and therefore should not be thought of as something which is supportive of rather than inherently opposed to understanding (*Verstehen*).

It is primarily this reciprocal exchange between “understanding” and “explanation” which, according to Ricoeur, gives an “acceptable meaning to the famous concept of a *hermeneutical circle*” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212), and not the more traditional exchange between part and whole of the text (e.g. Schleiermacher), or even text and reader (e.g. Gadamer). These other kinds of “circle” form an important part of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic thought, but he reserves the term

“hermeneutic circle” or “hermeneutic arc” for the dialectic of understanding and explanation as the ground of validity in interpretation. The inclusion of explanatory methodologies within the broader concept of interpretation emerges from the “distance” inherent to the fixation of discourse as a text, and such explanatory procedures can serve as a corrective to the uncritical acceptance or imposition of presuppositions of meaning upon the text. We thus have a responsibility as interpreters not only to open ourselves up to the text and to seek to understand its meaning, but also to engage critically with and to attempt to “explain” the text in a manner which guides our understanding. The possibility of such a productive opposition between “*Verstehen*” and “*Erklären*” constituting an integral part of the “hermeneutical arc” is what defines interpretive validity, and in turn what lends interpretation its own form of “objectivity” distinct from that of the *Naturwissenschaften*.

### 1.3: From Text to Action

The main concern of “The Model of the Text” is to set the stage for the application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action and especially human action subjected to a condition of “objectification” approximately equivalent to the “fixation” undergone by discourse in the text. Action, as an object of the human sciences, is subject to the conditions of distanciation that he identifies in the text and to the interpretive dialectic between the categories of “understanding” and “explanation” that we witness in textual hermeneutics. This opens the possibility of introducing a notion of the validity of interpretation in the human and social sciences and a methodological clarification of their objectivity.

In order to support this claim, Ricoeur first identifies a similarity between meaningful action and discourse that precedes the “fixation” of action as an object of inquiry. The most important point of similarity at this level is the way in which discourse can endure beyond the “fleeting event” of its articulation as *meaning*, or the dialectic of “event” and “meaning” in discourse. It is the *meaningfulness* of action, and how we understand action as meaningful, that interests Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text”. He believes that we should recognise that meaningful human action too finds fulfilment in *being understood* in a manner analogous to linguistic discourse, and that we must therefore attempt to understand the way in which the action-event “develops a similar dialectic between its temporal status as an appearing and disappearing event, and its logical status as having such-and-such identifiable meaning” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 205).

By this Ricoeur means the difference between understanding action purely as a temporal and transitory event in space and time, and as something which has a meaning which endures beyond this event and which may even have a significance that outstrips the initial conditions of its eventuation. Just as the meaning of linguistic discourse persists beyond the moment in which we speak, the meaning of action can at least sometimes endure beyond the particular moment in which we are acting. Bowing when you meet the Queen, for example, is meaningful insofar as it signifies a relationship of respect and subordination on behalf of one individual towards another based upon their traditional social status, but the meaning of the bow – as a formal gesture of respect and subordination – survives and endures beyond the moment of its eventuation.<sup>26</sup> Insofar as we are interested in action as a meaningful phenomenon, therefore, Ricoeur believes that it is the potential for the

---

<sup>26</sup> This is just one reason why the Queen does not usually demand that people bow or curtsey constantly in her presence.

meaning of action to persist beyond its eventuation that opens up the possibility of discussing “action” in terms of “the text”.

### 1.3.1: From Text to Action: Distanciation and the Problem of Description

In order to develop this idea Ricoeur moves on from discussing the “enduring” quality of meaning and appeals to a metaphor in order to support his claim that action can be “fixed” in a manner analogous to writing. He does so by drawing upon the way in which an action can be said to have “*left its mark* on its time” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 205) as ballast to the idea that action can become “inscribed” as part of our lives and in our histories. According to Ricoeur, the “marks” left on time by some meaningful actions are analogous to the marks left by the inscription of language as writing, and thus opens the possibility of addressing meaningful human action as if it were a text.<sup>27</sup>

Although this metaphor of “leaving a mark” may invite us to make a comparison between the way in which meaningful action can become “inscribed” upon time and the inscription of linguistic discourse as writing, there can be little doubt that the kind of “mark” or “trace” left by an action upon time is much more difficult to define than the kind of mark left by writing. There is no alphabet of action, no schematised grammar of human behaviour, no similarly formalised system for codifying meaningful action as there is for inscribing linguistic discourse as writing. Ricoeur appeals instead to the way in which action can become “inscribed”

---

<sup>27</sup> To say that some actions can leave a “mark” upon time, however, is importantly different to saying that meaningful action does this as a matter of course. Ricoeur does not state explicitly that all actions “mark” time in this way, but his argument seems to be that insofar as they are meaningful they are the kind of things that *could* leave a mark upon time. The question of whether this focus upon the enduring significance of meaningful action obscures the importance of recognising the “ordinariness” of meaningful action as it is experienced on a day-to-day basis is one to which we will return in chapter five.

in social time in the form of “persisting patterns... which become the *documents* of human action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 206).

Ricoeur claims that these patterns are evident in things such as formal records as well as apparent informally in concepts such as “reputation” and, ultimately, in history itself within which meaningful action becomes “sedimented” in the form of social institutions (Ricoeur, 1981h: 207). But to consider either formal records of action or the idea of history as marks upon time as equivalent to writing in any simple sense would be naïve. Perhaps most importantly in terms of Ricoeur’s hypothesis in “The Model of the Text” is that such a comparison with writing risks obscuring the importance of description as part of the constitution of action as an object of inquiry within the human and social sciences. “History”, for example, is at least potentially an ambiguous term. It can sometimes refer to a nebulous totality of everything which has happened in the past, without implying an attempt to explicitly distinguish or articulate any specific events or identify their potential significance.<sup>28</sup> But insofar as we wish to focus on any *particular* set of human actions and the way in which these events may have “left a mark” upon time, or attempt to understand historical events as part of a coherent and developing whole which we might hope to follow and understand, we are usually dealing with some particular and determinate account or description of action, which is already to some degree an “interpretation” of events.

I do not mean to imply here that every description of historical events necessarily involves explicit interpretive work, but only that description is necessarily selective and involves focussing upon particular aspects of the situation

---

<sup>28</sup> This, of course, is different again to conceiving of history as a “totality” in a broadly Hegelian sense, within which the development of history is sometimes perceived as an expression of and progress towards some unifying and sense-giving ideal or end point.

being described at the expense of others. This is because the description of historical events already involves, to some degree, (pre)-judgements regarding the meaning of those events and as to which features of the situation being described are relevant to understanding the events in hand. These presuppositions in turn guide and shape the descriptions we make. Similarly, formal records are subject to and filtered through the particular interests and methods of the recording institution, and we should take these contextual features of inscription into account if we hope to use formal records of action as sources within interpretive inquiry. So although Ricoeur uses the way in which action can “leave a mark” in order to support his comparison between meaningful action and the text, he does not engage thoroughly with the importance of the methods by which action can become fixed as an object.<sup>29</sup>

Given this, it is difficult to see how meaningful human action, even considered in terms of being an “object” of inquiry, is supposed to be *analogous* to writing rather than simply something subject to being inscribed in writing and other formal records. The notion of action “leaving a mark” is introduced because Ricoeur wants to distinguish between the endurance of *meaning* beyond the translocutional situation of *inter-action* between agents, and the idea that actions can sometimes be thought of as being “fixed” or “inscribed” in a manner which preserves the transitory event of action. This parallels Ricoeur’s claim that the specificity of the event of discourse is preserved by the individuality of the text as a work. The marks left by action upon time should therefore be thought of as whatever preserves an action-event in its specific *individuality*. Ricoeur’s analogy draws attention to the way in which understanding action involves recognising it as a particular transitory event,

---

<sup>29</sup> The “interpretive” quality of description and the role of different methods of description and objectification as part of our interpretive activities is a subject that is addressed in greater depth in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

but also recognising that the meaning of this “event” has the potential to endure beyond the moment and situation of its occurrence.

This does not, however, help us overcome the problematic disanalogy between the fixation of linguistic discourse in writing and the manifold forms of “fixation” that can serve to preserve the action-event. Nor does it help us understand the differences between such “fixed” documents of action and action as it is experienced in the form of inter-action between individuals in our day-to-day lives. Finally, the question of how action is actively fixed via description as an object of the human and social sciences remains, for now, unanswered. All of these are issues about which Ricoeur remains largely silent within “The Model of the Text”, and which must be addressed before we can begin to get a clearer understanding of what textual hermeneutics might have to offer as a model for the interpretation of meaningful human action within the human and social sciences.

What we can take, however, from Ricoeur’s comparison between the inscription of discourse as text and the “inscription” of meaningful action on social time is the idea that the meaning of action is capable of transcending the limiting horizons of both the intentions of the agent to which the action is attributable and the historical and social conditions of its eventuation. Thus Ricoeur claims that “[i]n the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own”: this “constitutes the *social* dimension of action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 206). Because of this “human action is an open work, the meaning of which is ‘in suspense’... human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations that decide their meaning” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 208).

The meaning of an action is not inherently something privately enacted by one individual, or even between two or more interlocutors, but something social and

manifest publicly both in terms of its enactment and its consequences. In the “marks” that action leaves upon social time – the ways in which an action-event is preserved as a specific event in space and time – it becomes open to being “read” and understood by a potentially indefinite number of people. And whilst the intentions of the actor and the historical and social conditions under which an action originally took place are typically vital to any attempt at understanding action, they are not necessarily definitive of its meaning. The importance of this kind of autonomy of meaning for Ricoeur is evident when we consider how he conceives the “reference” of action under the condition of fixation.

Under the condition of fixation, an action refers insofar as it “opens up a world” for interpreters of action. Like a text, meaningful action can be considered as the manifestation of some *possibility of being*, and insofar as it is preserved in some fixed form can potentially develop “meanings which can be actualised or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 208). But such world disclosure is possible only under the condition of fixation wherein meaningful action endures, in all its individuality, beyond “the narrowness of the dialogical situation” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 202) that defines its occurrence as an action-event and therefore becomes available to be reflected upon and understood outside of this situation.

The autonomy attributed by Ricoeur to meaningful action is a freedom from being understood *purely* in terms of its fleeting temporal occurrence. He believes that action can have “durable relevance” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 208) beyond the confines of its occurrence, and that this is made manifest under the condition of fixation. Ricoeur’s conviction is that understanding something, whether text or action, is not simply a case of grasping how it might have intended, or how it might have been

understood by contemporaries, but of opening oneself up to the “world” that is manifest in that thing. The paradigm of the text allows us to see how this can be part of the interpretation of action.

### 1.3.2: From Text to Action: Explanation and Understanding

Using the model of the text, Ricoeur can articulate the interpretive dialectic of “explanation” and “understanding” in relation to action. Perhaps the greatest single advantage of Ricoeur’s textual model when applied the human and social sciences is that it deploys a concept of validity in virtue of which “understanding” and “explanation” are set in productive opposition to one another. As was the case with textual interpretation, Ricoeur approaches this from two perspectives, the first of which involves articulating the way in which “explanation” can aid our attempts to understand action within the human sciences. He argues that we must recognise meaningful human action as something that, like the text, can potentially be understood in a number of different ways and thus demands construal. In the same way that our understanding of the text is limited and guided by attending to the structural and referential dimensions of the text, human action is “a limited field of possible constructions” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213) and, if perceiving the different possible constructions available to us requires that we exercise our understanding, arbitrating between them involves engaging in explanation.

In particular Ricoeur argues that understanding an action as meaningful involves engaging with “the relation between the purposive and the motivational dimensions of action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213). This means that understanding an action involves engaging to some extent with alternative possibilities regarding the *motivation* and *justification* of that action, of *explaining why* some particular course

of action was undertaken and the sense we can make of it. Ricoeur claims that “in arguing about the meaning of action I put my wants and beliefs at a distance and submit them to a concrete dialectic of confrontation with opposite points of view” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 214). This confrontation is roughly equivalent to the “logic of probability” that Ricoeur draws from Hirsch’s work on literary interpretation, wherein the confrontation of alternative interpretations of the text plays the role of falsification. In terms of meaningful action, then, we must consider the relative plausibility of alternative accounts of the action that we are seeking to understand and the differences these accounts make to how we understand it. This involves attending closely and openly to the action we are seeking to interpret, considered from various perspectives, in order that we should think our own presuppositions of meaning critically and so that our interpretations should be grounded in the “world” disclosed to us by the action itself. It is the element of explanation involved in understanding that affords this possibility.

Ricoeur also argues for the reverse expression of this dialectic between “explanation” and “understanding” within the interpretation of meaningful action. As with the text, explanatory accounts can serve to reorient our understanding, and to bring out tacit features of action of which we might otherwise have been unaware. Ricoeur even goes so far as to say that structuralism can provide a valuable resource for the interpretation of action, arguing that “the structuralist model, taken as a paradigm for explanation, may be extended beyond textual entities to all social phenomena because it is not limited in its application to linguistic signs, but applies to all kinds of signs which are analogous to linguistic signs” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218). Accordingly, Ricoeur considers meaningful action as a semiotic phenomenon; “the function of substituting signs for things and of representing things by the means of

signs... appears to be more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 219). Social life, as conceived by Ricoeur, *depends* upon shared systems of meaning and understanding, and as such we can submit the phenomena of social life to semiotic and structural analysis.

But, as with the text, the possibility of this kind of structural analysis – or any explanatory account – depends upon the prior existence of shared systems of meanings and understanding. Any explanatory schema we bring to bear upon action, whether some form of structuralism or any other critical framework that we might wish to use to help understand action, will typically involve engaging with action in a manner different from that of our pre-critical, everyday understanding of action. We are seeking instead to bring out some feature of the action that we might usually overlook or take for granted. But we do this based upon some level of pre-critical understanding, and in order to gain a greater (or different, at least) understanding of that which we are explaining. There is nothing to “explain” if there is not something there which we “understand” to some extent beforehand, and if our explanatory accounts don’t ultimately find a place in our understanding of what we are interpreting then they are empty.

Conceiving the dialectic of “understanding” and “explanation” in this manner provides a useful template for understanding interpretive validity within the human and social sciences. Recognising both “understanding” and “explanation” as elements of – or moments within – interpretation helps us ensure that we engage thoroughly and critically with meaningful human action, and thus to fulfil our responsibilities as interpreters. A hermeneutic model of the interpretation of action allows us to acknowledge and remain open to the inherent plurivocality of meaningful action, whilst retaining the determination and ability to make positive and non-

arbitrary assertions about the meaning of human action. Both are important conditions for achieving a sensitive but critical understanding of meaningful human action within interpretive inquiry.

#### 1.4: Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to offer a survey of “The Model of the Text” within the philosophical tradition of which it is a part, whilst also touching upon a few issues arising from this that demand further critical attention. Ricoeur offers his hermeneutic model of interpretation as a way of re-conceiving how we understand and interpret action as an object of inquiry in the human and social sciences. He does so by making a comparison between linguistic discourse and meaningful human action, and in particular between discourse as it is “fixed” via inscription in writing and action as it is taken as an “object” within the human and social sciences. Based upon this Ricoeur extends his reconceptualisation of the traditional hermeneutic dialectic of “understanding” and “explanation” and applies it to the interpretation of meaningful human action. This is perhaps the most significant contribution that textual hermeneutics has to offer to the human and social sciences, as it provides us with a new way of understanding the validity of interpretation within these disciplines.

It is important to bear in mind that Ricoeur does not suggest that this model captures everything that we might wish to say about human action, or that treating meaningful action as a text is the only way of approaching these issues. “The Model of the Text” should be thought of as a way of critically and rigorously addressing questions about the interpretation and meaning of action within the human and social sciences, but without necessarily excluding other possibilities of understanding.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic model is by no means a "final word" on the interpretation of action, nor would Ricoeur claim that such finality is possible. But by directing our attention towards certain parallels between linguistic and textual discourse and meaningful action it may allow us to understand how action is interpreted within the human and social sciences in new or different ways and inform our interpretive practices accordingly.

Ricoeur's essay serves to orientate our thought towards this possibility whilst leaving much left unsaid. Just as there is no single "correct" way in which to interpret literary texts, there is no single and universally correct method for the interpretation of meaningful action regardless of what it is we are seeking to understand and the context in which interpretation takes place. It is up to us, and those who may seek to apply the textual model in practice, to be aware of and to judge what it is that "The Model of the Text" may help us see, and to an equal extent as to what it may leave obscure. Within the rest of this thesis I explore a selection of issues related to the interpretation of meaningful human action, primarily regarding the objectification of action and the implications for how "The Model of the Text" might affect our understanding of interpretive validity in the human and social sciences.

Such explorations will not bring us any closer to finding a hard and fast set of rules for the interpretation of action as this is not what "The Model of the Text" aims to achieve. It will, however, allow us to get a greater sense of some of the potential strengths, weaknesses and consequences for interpretive practice that lie at the heart of Ricoeur's hypothesis and in doing so help us evaluate the validity of his claims within "The Model of the Text" itself.

## **Chapter Two: The Text**

Ricoeur understands the text as a paradigm of discourse under the condition of fixation. Central to this is Ricoeur's formulation of the "autonomy" of the text, wherein the meaning of the text cannot simplistically be identified with the conditions of its production.<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur is nevertheless keen to distance this idea of textual autonomy from association with "any ideology of an absolute text" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 201). When Ricoeur discusses the "absolute text" he is referring to the idea of "hypostasising the text as an authorless entity" (Ricoeur, 1976a: 30). Such hypostatisation would imply that the text exists without either author or reference, but simply as a weave of language in which meaning can only be identified with the endless play of signifiers in relation to other signifiers, considered independent of any final signified.

Ricoeur's notion of textual autonomy shares at least some features of this idea of the "absolute" text; for example, that the meaning of the text cannot be naively identified with the intentions of its author, and that there can be no "final" interpretation that isn't open to reinterpretation by subsequent readers.<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, however, claims that the idea of an "absolute text" is fallacious because it "forgets that a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something" (Ricoeur, 1976a: 30). In terms of "The Model of the Text", this distinction is important. Minimally, if the text is to work as a model for the objectification and interpretation of action in the human and social sciences, it is

---

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur's notion of textual autonomy has been outlined in greater detail in section 1.1.2 & 1.1.3 of the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> While we are concentrating here primarily upon "the text", it should be noted that a "reader" in this sense is not necessarily or simplistically limited to a consumer of writing. Rather the "reader" is the person or persons that realise the meaning of any work of discourse that has been submitted to fixation.

important that there remains a possibility of adjudicating between competing interpretations. This possibility is foreclosed by the radical autonomy associated with the absolute text.

In order, therefore, to clarify the distinction between Ricoeur's conception of textual autonomy and "absolute" textual autonomy I propose to compare Ricoeur's formulation of the text with that of two thinkers who may be considered as proponents of the "absolute text": Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.<sup>32</sup> By making this comparison I will demonstrate the ways in which the autonomy of the text for Ricoeur is importantly distinct from the sort of unbounded autonomy associated with the "absolute text", and why this distinction is crucial for Ricoeur's project in "The Model of the Text". Further to this I will also consider whether Ricoeur's use of the text as a paradigm of objectification may be problematic in relation to the use of non-verbal media to represent action within the human and social sciences. This will help us gain a more comprehensive picture of how Ricoeur believes the text can serve to inform the interpretation of meaningful human action.

## 2.1: The Absolute Text: Roland Barthes

I begin by examining Roland Barthes' influential 1968 essay "The Death of the Author".<sup>33</sup> In this essay Barthes is concerned primarily with overthrowing what he terms the "Author-God" from his perceived position as the arbiter of meaning in the text. Barthes sets out his position as opposed to the dominance of the belief that

---

<sup>32</sup> It should perhaps be noted that neither Barthes nor Derrida use the term "absolute text" within their own work. Nevertheless, in both cases they treat the text as the kind of "authorless entity" which Ricoeur describes.

<sup>33</sup> Given that Barthes, Derrida and Ricoeur all contributed to the debate surrounding structuralism in France in the 1960s and 70s, and given that I will be referring to a number of these texts in this chapter, I include the dates of the original French publications of works referenced for the purposes of comparison where appropriate (either in the main text or in the footnotes).

literary meaning is purely intentional. He does this on the basis that “[t]he image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author” (Barthes, 1977a: 143). Barthes, at that time, considered language not as a tool to be utilised by the author in order to express or communicate thought, but simply as “a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words and so on indefinitely” (Barthes, 1977a: 146). Given this, he claims that the text “is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the “message” of the Author-God) but... a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes, 1977a: 146). Barthes’ text, then, seems to be the very definition of Ricoeur’s “absolute text”, divorced entirely from authorial intentions and where reference to anything outside itself is forsaken in favour of the endless play of signifiers within language.

Despite Ricoeur’s desire to distance his thought from association with any notion of the “absolute text”, there are a number of parallels between the ways in which Barthes and Ricoeur conceive the text. Given the way that both thinkers draw upon (and, in Barthes’ case, radicalise) the insights of structuralism, this is perhaps unsurprising. Both reject authorial intent as the arbiter of meaning, favouring instead a focus on the way the structure of the text guides us as readers. Barthes, for example, claims that when we read a text “the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level”. Understanding the text consists in following these structural “threads” and not in a trawl for something “beneath” the text (Barthes, 1977a: 147). Ricoeur, likewise, claims that reading involves responding to “an injunction starting from the text” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218). This too involves following the sense of the text, disclosed in the structure of the text as a work, rather than identifying the authorial intent that might underlie the text

itself. Barthes and Ricoeur also both identify the reader as the locus of the emergence of meaning in the text.

Barthes' claim that “[t]he reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (Barthes, 1977a: 148) has, on the surface, much in common with Ricoeur's assertion that “[r]eading... marks the realisation, the enactment, of the semantic possibilities of the text” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 159).<sup>34</sup> There are, however, fundamental differences between Barthes' understanding of the text and Ricoeur's. And although they agree that the reader is the place in which textual meaning is realised, major disagreement is nevertheless evident in the ways in which Barthes and Ricoeur understand the role played by the reader in the emergence of textual meaning. When Barthes discusses the reader as the “destination” of the text, for example, he writes that “this destination cannot any longer be personal. Barthes' reader is without history, biography, psychology. He or she (if Barthes would allow that they are gendered at all) is “simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (Barthes, 1977a: 148). The motivation for emphasising this depersonalised vision of the reader is, presumably, the same as that which leads Barthes to call for the death of the Author-God in the first place. To preserve the pure “textuality” of writing Barthes can no more identify the meaning of the text with the personal understanding of the reader than he can with the intentions of the author.

Ricoeur, by comparison, does not want to deny that the psychology and history of the reader are important. Nor, however, does he want to say that textual interpretation amounts to the reader gratuitously imposing her own meaning upon

---

<sup>34</sup> “Qu'est-ce qu'un texte? Expliquer et comprendre” [1970].

the text. Rather, Ricoeur's account of reading involves an exchange between text and reader: a version of the Gadamerian "fusion of horizons".<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur's particular conception of this fusion is influenced by Heidegger and conceived of as a meeting between ways-of-being or between two "worlds": the world of the reader and the world of the text. He describes this exchange as "between my mode of being... and the mode opened up and disclosed by the text as the world of the work," and writes that "[t]o understand oneself in front of the text... is to let the work and its world enlarge the horizon of the understanding which I have of myself" (Ricoeur, 1981f: 178).<sup>36</sup> It should be clear from this that Ricoeur's reader cannot be the ahistorical, depersonalised reader described by Barthes. For Ricoeur, textual meaning is intertwined with the temporality and historicity of understanding, and Ricoeur's reader is one with a "world" of their own, with particular ways of being in the world – of which they may or may not be consciously aware – and consequently expectations of meaning which allow them to engage with a text which "awaits and calls for a reading" (Ricoeur, 1981e: 158).

This emergence of meaning within the "fusion of horizons" is also fundamental to the kind of autonomy that Ricoeur attributes to the text. It is, after all, not only the world of the reader which is enlarged in this meeting. The text has its own history in terms of a *Wirkungsgeschichte*, a history of reception.<sup>37</sup> When we come to the text as a reader, our understanding can often be influenced by the ways in which it has been read by those before us, by the traditions of thought and the

---

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Gadamer's account of the historicity of understanding in *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1993: 302-07); Ricoeur's discussion of the same in "Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology" (Ricoeur, 1981b: 75-76).

<sup>36</sup> "La métaphore et le problème central de l'herméneutique" [1972].

<sup>37</sup> The notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in relation to the autonomy of textual meaning is extrapolated in section 1.1.2.1 of the first chapter of this thesis.

“cultural weave” with which the text is identified. The “world” of the text encompasses this history within the text as a structured work. It is this referential dimension of the text – the way in which the work of the text directs us as readers towards different possibilities of meaning – which allows the reader to find the “thread of the stocking” which can then be traced and followed in the text.

The autonomy of the text lies not in the utter vanishing of the author and the reader as individuals; the author, after all, is typically an integral part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text. It lies rather in the fact that the permanence lent to discourse by inscription enables the text to escape the narrow contingencies of the horizon of its composition so that it might be actualised in situations removed from the conditions of its production. We cannot, therefore, *limit* the meaning of the text to either the intentions of the author or to the “impositions” of the reader, as neither does justice to the reality of the text *qua* text: to the text as a paradigm of the dialectic of event and meaning identified by Ricoeur as an integral part of discourse.

Perhaps the clearest indication of why there should be such a difference between Ricoeur and Barthes’ treatments of the text is hinted at by the very title of “The Death of the Author”. The “Death of the Author” is, after all, a polemical text; something attested by the title’s deliberate evocation of Nietzsche’s infamous proclamation that “God is dead.”<sup>38</sup> This polemical intention shapes Barthes’ idea of the text in a manner which is, at the very least, inconsistent with claims that Barthes makes elsewhere. For example, in his 1971 essay “From Work to Text”, Barthes wrote that the text “asks of the reader a practical collaboration” (Barthes, 1977b: 163). This implies that the reader is not simply a locus of meaning, but instead that they bring something to the situation in which the text is actualised as discourse.

---

<sup>38</sup> Possibly Nietzsche’s most notorious proclamation, the first prominent occurrence of this statement comes in sections 108 and 125 of *The Gay Science*, and later becomes an important part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Barthes also states that “[i]t is not that the Author may not ‘come back’ in the Text, in his text, but he does so as a ‘guest’” (Barthes, 1977b: 161). This suggests not only that authorial intention can play a role within interpretation, but also that the “absolute” autonomy of the text with which “The Death of the Author” is sometimes identified may only be telling part of the story. By comparison, Ricoeur’s account of textual autonomy, and the analogous autonomy of the meaning of action he identifies in “The Model of the Text”, does not find itself committed to such an extreme position.

## 2.2: The Absolute Text: Jacques Derrida

The second thinker with whom we are to engage has a different and arguably more sophisticated account of the “absolute” autonomy of the text, and one which potentially poses a greater challenge to the kind of finite textual autonomy argued for by Ricoeur. Derrida’s work in this regard is one with which Ricoeur has had reason to engage directly, having at one point described Derrida’s technique as “unbounded deconstruction” (Ricoeur, 1978: 284).<sup>39</sup> I propose now to engage both with Derrida’s formulation of the text, and consequently with the differences between this and the construction of the text upon which Ricoeur’s application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action is premised.

A good starting point for this comparison, and one which serves to symbolise the difference between Ricoeur and Derrida in regards to the text, is the statement for which Derrida is arguably most famous: “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida, 1997: 158).<sup>40</sup> This statement – that there is nothing outside the text – should immediately make apparent why some, including Ricoeur, consider Derrida as a proponent of the

---

<sup>39</sup> *La Métaphore Vive* [1975].

<sup>40</sup> *De la Grammatologie* [1968].

“absolute” text. Without an “outside”, writing and the text never refer to anything other than more writing, we are forever caught in the unending play of signifiers. In this sense, Derrida’s notion of the text exceeds anything that might be printed on a page:

in what one calls the real life of these existences... there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from invocation of the supplement... (Derrida, 1997: 159)

The text for Derrida is therefore not only absolute in purely textual or literary terms, but an intimation of the instability of meaning in general. Given this, Derrida’s conception of the absolute text denies not only that the text could serve as a suitable model for understanding valid interpretation in the human and social sciences, but also denies that such authoritative claims to meaning are possible at all.

Drawing upon De Saussure’s linguistics, Derrida distinguishes between spoken language (*parole*) and writing, identifying writing with the play of signifiers typical of language considered as system (*langue*). Specifically, however, and unlike Ricoeur who considers writing as the *fixation* of a discourse that could at least potentially have been spoken, Derrida emphasises not only the *autonomy* of writing from speech but also the *priority* of writing – considered as the play of signifiers in *langue* – over the spoken word: “There is no purely and rigorously phonetic writing. So-called phonetic writing... can function only by admitting into its system non-phonetic ‘signs’ (punctuation, spacing, etc.)... the play of difference, which... is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play” (Derrida, 1982: 5).<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> “Différance”, lecture originally delivered in 1968 and first published in *Marges de la Philosophie* [1972].

Derrida presents this play of signs in terms of “*différance*”. The term “*différance*” plays on both senses of the French word *différer*, meaning both to “differ” and to “defer”. As such, *différance* describes not just the way in which language functions in terms of difference, but also how this play holds the referential world in suspense: “The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present.... The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence... the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we encounter the thing itself” (Derrida, 1982: 9). The consequences of conceiving language in terms of *différance* are dramatic. Derrida describes them as “strategic” and “adventurous”: “[s]trategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a *telos* or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field” (Derrida, 1982: 7). When we focus on *différance* the meaning of language is no longer reducible to either anything existent independent of the play of signifiers, or to any particular end to which language is employed. The differences that constitute language as a system “are effects which do not find their cause in a subject or a substance, in a thing in general, a being that is somewhere present, thereby eluding the play of *différance*” (Derrida, 1982: 11). The play of language is, instead, marked by the constant emergence and disappearance of meaning in *différance*.

This extreme autonomy of language as a system marked by the play of *différance* implies the independence of language not only from the intentions of any determinate or particular speaker or author, but from the very possibility of a subjectivity prior to language: “the subject (in its identity with itself, or eventually its consciousness of its identity with itself, its self-consciousness) is inscribed in

language, is a ‘function’ of language, becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech conform... to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences” (Derrida, 1982: 15). Any claim for language to either express anything prior to or to make reference to anything outside the play of *différance* cannot, for Derrida, be justified. Language only ever returns to itself, to the endless play of signifiers. Likewise, as our engagement with and relation to the world and ourselves as conscious individuals is mediated by language, the concepts and ideas that we take to ground our being in the world are equally the effects of the play of *différance*. With this prioritisation of *différance* writing and the text become the locus for a critique of metaphysics and the sovereign subject; a “dismantling from within of all the notions dear to Western philosophy” (Joy, 1988: 525).

Writing for Derrida is effectively the “presence” of “absence”, a pseudo-presence, insofar as it marks the instability of the very dichotomy of absence/presence – by reminding us of the “absence” of the “presence” it supposedly signifies – and, consequently, of the conceptual network with which this dichotomy is intertwined. Part of this, of course, involves the collapse of the dichotomy of “inside” and “outside” in relation to the text itself. The text is not fulfilled in relation to anything outside itself, and that which lies “outside” the circumscribed space of the text does not exist independently of the play of *différance*. In this regard, writing becomes the location of metaphysical critique and, as such, almost takes us beyond an interest in language as *meaning*.

For Derrida meaning is *nothing more* than the play of oppositions in *différance*, one in which dichotomous pairs of terms are constituted in relation to one another. Any meaning claim that aspires to a stability or significance outside of this transitory play of signifiers involves an illegitimate reification of meaning, one

which attempts to evade *différance* itself and therefore deny the very conditions under which meaning emerges. The privileging of one side of an oppositional dichotomy over another is therefore, for Derrida, a covert act of violence that spreads throughout the system of oppositions of which any dichotomy is but a part: “in classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other... or has the upper hand” (Derrida, 1981: 41).<sup>42</sup>

Derrida’s analysis of language and meaning thus involves a very different set of concerns to those of Ricoeur, for whom discourse is *fulfilled* in meaning. But in emphasising the “play” of language that lies “beyond” and that is obscured by focussing on the surface meaning of language, Derrida risks undermining himself. Ricoeur, after all, never proposes that we should settle with the “surface” meaning of a text, or that we should have no interest in what might be “hidden” in discourse. It is simply that Ricoeur conceives of the possibility of such in-depth analysis as being irreducibly tied to the way in which the text is understood as addressing “meaningful” aspects of human existence. We must, after all, have some preliminary sense of what a text is about – to be able to identify meaningful propositions, questions or points of tension or opposition that arise from the text – in order to even begin engaging in the kind of structural analysis discussed by Derrida and Ricoeur.<sup>43</sup>

We need, therefore, to get to grips with what the text presents to us as readers before we can realistically hope to identify what it might keep hidden. Derrida’s

---

<sup>42</sup> *Positions* [1972].

<sup>43</sup> In relation to Levi-Strauss’ structural analysis of myth, for example, Ricoeur points out that “[t]here would be no contradiction, nor any attempt to resolve contradiction, if there were not significant questions, meaningful propositions about the origin and the end of man” (Ricoeur, 1981e: 160).

account of *différance* brings to the surface instabilities in the picture of language and writing with which he is engaged, but it can only do so because contradictions *do exist* between meaningful points of opposition and because the relationship between language, writing, being and truth is, in the first place, an *aporetic* one.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Derrida cannot reject out of hand an interest in language as meaning, but only the possibility of a final *resolution* to questions of meaning, or an appeal to any “final signified” that transcends language itself.

Ricoeur’s conception of the text, however, is not committed to such a “final” interpretation, but to contingent readings which themselves contribute to the ever expanding “horizon” of meaning within the text. Herein we see Ricoeur’s commitment to the communicative potential of textual discourse, a commitment which circumscribes his construction of “the text” as a concept. Ricoeur, like Derrida, identifies the production of meaning in the text with a kind of “play”, but does not wish to limit this to the endless play of the signifier, against which we are powerless to say anything about anything outside of the text itself. For Ricoeur “all play reveals something true,” and the play involved in reading a text exists insofar as we “abandon ourselves to the space of meaning which holds sway over the reader” (Ricoeur, 1981g: 187). It is within this “play” that the text is capable of disclosing a world and is actualised as meaning for the reader.

Ricoeur’s conception of the text is one that, as a fixed work of discourse, cannot be reduced to any transcendental signified, but at the same time retains its power to “speak” to an interpreter about a world outside of itself. In contrast to Derrida, therefore, Ricoeur considers the kind of explanation involved in structural analysis as only partially constitutive of the interpretive task. Explanation of this

---

<sup>44</sup> After all, why should we be concerned with the “violence” inherent to philosophical hierarchies if the *only* “victim” of this violence is a linguistic signifier?

kind must be complemented by an interest in understanding the text at hand, by which the text is appropriated and fulfilled as meaningful discourse. It is Ricoeur's aim to integrate both "understanding" and "explanation" as moments within "an overall conception of reading as the recovery of meaning" (Ricoeur, 1981e: 161).

### 2.3: The Text as Discourse

Derrida, of course, would not accept this compromise. In reference to Ricoeur, as one figure among other "dialectical" thinkers, Derrida says "polysemy, as such, is organized within the implicit horizon of a unitary resumption of meaning... annulling the open and productive displacement of the textual chain. Dissemination, on the contrary... marks an irreducible and *generative multiplicity*" (Derrida, 1981: 45). He also claims that "[t]he issue is to show that the risk of metaphysical reappropriation is ineluctable" (Derrida, 1981: 58). Derrida's concern with this "ineluctable" necessity of the critique of metaphysics lies in the belief that, without this critique, we run the risk of allowing the violence of binary opposition to continue perpetuating within our discourse. As such, we can never return to "meaning" in any conventional sense. Here, then, we see what might be an irresolvable gap between the thought of Ricoeur and Derrida at the level of their interest in the text. Derrida is interested primarily in identifying and "*overturning*" (Derrida, 1981: 41) the violent hierarchies prevalent within the dichotomies of language. Ricoeur, by contrast, is "committed to action" (Joy, 1988: 526) and interested in the way in which meaningful discourse – and, therefore, meaningful action – plays a role in shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live and act.

Taking this commitment to action into account is important in order for us to understand the difference between Ricoeur's conception of the text and any possible formulation of the "absolute" text. For Ricoeur, the text is a paradigm of discourse. The autonomy of the text is intricately linked to the way in which discourse is meaningful, and the way in which this meaning cannot be *restricted* to the conditions of its eventuation. This is not to say that the social, psychological and historical conditions of the event of discourse have no role to play in how we come to read the text, but rather that under the condition of fixation these factors are only part of the story. Even if the relationship between the conditions of the production of discourse and meaning becomes "distended and complicated" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 201) in this picture, this by no means denies that they might be of interest to an interpreter of texts. Many of the conditions that potentially serve to limit how we read a text – that shape the "world" that the text reveals to us – are related to the social and historical conditions of the eventuation of discourse.

This is, perhaps, even more fundamentally the case when we are considering meaningful action in terms of the text, as Ricoeur does in "The Model of the Text". If the autonomy of the text precludes us from identifying its meaning with the conditions of its production in any "absolute" sense, this has dramatic consequences for the possibility of using textual hermeneutics as a "model" for the interpretation of action. It would imply, for example, that under the condition of objectification action becomes detached entirely from the circumstances in which it originally occurred and that any attempt to draw upon the self-understanding or socio-historical circumstances of the agents of action would be illegitimate. Objectification, under the model of the *absolute text*, would be fundamentally opposed to understanding.

But there is an important sense in which part of attempting to understand the other, who may be separated from us by an historical or cultural divide, involves trying to take on their point of view and to understand them in the context to which their form of life belongs. One aspect of attempting to understand the other involves acknowledging a deficiency of sorts on our part; that there is something about the other that stands beyond our current understanding of the world. Ricoeur identifies a similar demand to extend our understanding, in order to accommodate the alien and strange, as part of the task of translation. The activity of translation – wherein we “serve two masters, the foreigner in his strangeness, the reader in his desire for appropriation” (Ricoeur, 2006: 22-23) – is therefore involves comparable challenges to those faced by interpreters of action in the human and social sciences, wherein we often attempt to understand and articulate something about people whose lives and beliefs may differ significantly from our own.<sup>45</sup> This necessarily involves maintaining a level of fidelity towards those we are trying to understand; an attempt to preserve the “strangeness” of the other, rather than merely subsuming anything alien under categories of experience familiar to us from our own lives and thus obliterating the differences that we wished to understand.

As Peter Winch writes in relation to anthropological accounts of the Azande people: “Since it is we who want to understand the Zande... it appears that the *onus* is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room... rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own [experience]” (Winch, 1964: 319). We can perhaps relate this idea to Ricoeur’s notion of “linguistic hospitality” (Ricoeur, 2006: 10, 23). This refers to the demand on the translator to “make space” in their language for the foreign text. Similarly, the interpreter of action has to try and “make space” for the

---

<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur even says on several occasions (quoting George Steiner’s *After Babel*) that “to understand is to translate” (Ricoeur, 2006: 11, 24, 28).

world-view and self-understanding of those she is seeking to understand as part of the work of interpretation. This “onus” on the interpreter to approach action openly is an important aspect of the “responsibility” we face as interpreters of action – a responsibility towards the fidelity of our interpretations, and to not simply impose our own meanings upon those we nominally hope to understand. The epistemic humility involved in this kind of understanding is not something for which an “absolute” conception of the text can account, as the task of “making space” for the other within discourse presupposes that there is something there to be understood and not simply the ever fluctuating play of *différance*.<sup>46</sup>

This is what undergirds the text for Ricoeur in contrast to Derrida: the idea that discourse has reference to a “world” and, therefore, is always “about something” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 198). For Ricoeur, the referential dimension of the text (as a paradigm of discourse) stands in stark contrast to the possibility of an “absolute” text.<sup>47</sup> But at the same time we need not assume that the referential dimension of discourse should necessarily lead to the kind of “metaphysical reappropriation” that Derrida seeks to guard against. Interpreting a text involves arguing for and arbitrating between different possibilities of meaning, none of which has any “absolute” or “theological” privilege over every other. As Ricoeur writes, “[i]t is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them, and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement

---

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, of course, whilst praising Claude Levi-Strauss for his use of structuralism within anthropology, criticises him for clinging to “a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech” and consequently of tacitly imposing this ethic of “natural innocence” upon the people within whom he claimed to find this “innocence” (Derrida, 1978: 292). Even this notion of “epistemic humility”, then, for Derrida, can perhaps be thought as a form of “violence”.

<sup>47</sup> For Ricoeur, the possibility of the “absolute” text is restricted to particular texts, and not endemic to writing in general: “Only a few sophisticated texts satisfy the ideal of a text without reference. They are texts where the play of the signifier breaks away from the signified. But this new form is only valuable as an exception and cannot give the key to all other texts which in one manner or another speak about the world” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 201).

remains beyond our reach” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213). Interpretations of this sort remain open to challenge and reinterpretation, all of which contributes to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the text. We do not escape *différance* and reach the hallowed land of the signified, but then any claim to do so would be an invalid reification of meaning that fails to do justice to the text itself. In this sense, at least, Ricoeur and Derrida are in agreement.

Derrida, however, is interested in the text purely as the stage of *différance*, and the challenge this poses to traditional Western metaphysics. Derrida emphasises nothing but what he perceives as the failed attempt to attain a false “metaphysical” truth in textual interpretation. For Derrida, therefore, the question of how we understand texts is misplaced, based upon an illusion that the analysis of the text in terms of *différance* works to dispel. Ricoeur, by contrast, is interested in the interpretation of texts as a paradigm of understanding “at and through distance” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 143).<sup>48</sup> This “distance” is not simply the contingent distance of historical and cultural difference, but more fundamentally the distance between “event” and “meaning” in discourse (Ricoeur, 1976a: 12). Within this dialectic the event of discourse is its occurrence: the instance of speech, writing or action by which meaning is conveyed. But, for Ricoeur, it is only in being appropriated as meaning that discourse is realised. This realisation of discourse as meaning is only fulfilled when it is taken by an understanding subject to refer to a world outside of itself. The fixation of discourse in writing – the distance introduced between the “event” of writing and the text being appropriated by a reader – is paradigmatic of this dialectic of event and meaning insofar as the text embodies this condition of distanciation.

---

<sup>48</sup> “La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation” [1975].

The autonomy of the text, for Ricoeur, lies in this gap between the event of discourse and its actualisation in meaning. Under the condition of fixation, the meaning of the text-as-discourse escapes being determined by the horizon of its eventuation, and as such its meaning cannot be simplistically or wholly identified with either the historical or psychological circumstances of its eventuation. Instead we must take into account the situation in which the text is actualised as discourse by the reader.

But nor is the meaning of the text to be identified definitively with the way in which it is read and appropriated by its interpreters. Any single reading will typically represent only a partial actualisation of the text, depending on how the reader construes the text – what Ricoeur describes as the “perspectivist aspect” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212) of text construal – and the accompanying specificity of the “world” thereby disclosed for the reader by the text-as-discourse in this situation. The autonomy attributed by Ricoeur to the text means that it cannot have any single or final meaning in a metaphysical sense, but instead has a history of meaning – a history of being interpreted and understood – beginning with its production and continuing for as long as it is read and understood in new ways and in new situations: continuing for as long as the text is capable of referring to something outside of itself and disclosing a world to the reader.

Distanciation should not therefore be conceived first as a “problem” for discourse, a gap that we struggle to cross between the event of discourse and some definite and determinate meaning somewhere just out of reach. Nor should it be thought to obliterate the referential dimension of discourse, and thereby justify treating the text as “absolute” in the sense of Barthes or Derrida. Distanciation for Ricoeur is rather the precondition of critical understanding. Under the condition of

fixation we can hold the meaning of discourse in a state of suspense and submit it to reflective and critical attention. Ricoeur argues that the paradigm of the text therefore “reintroduces a positive and... productive notion of distanciation” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 131). For Derrida the text as a stage of *différance* demonstrates the impossibility of attaining metaphysically stable and transcendent truth. But for Ricoeur the text is more interesting as a paradigm of understanding at a distance, and therefore of our struggle to attain *contingent* but *valid* truth within the interpretive human sciences. It is this vision of the text which is drawn upon in “The Model of the Text”.<sup>49</sup>

#### 2.4: The Limits of the Text

It is important to recognise, however, that “the text” is intended as a limited paradigm. In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur frames his project by claiming that textual hermeneutics can work as a model for interpretive practices within the human and social sciences “inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text”, and asks “to what extent” it is possible to make this identification (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197). No matter, then, how similar the “fixation” of discourse in the text might seem to be to the “objectification” undergone by human action as it is appropriated as an object within the human and social sciences, it is vital that we do not uncritically conflate the two. To do so would be to lose sight of the “as if” involved in the analogy being drawn by Ricoeur, in favour of uncritically

---

<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting at this point that Ricoeur’s account of “the text” is not supposed to be definitive of anything and everything we might want to call a text, nor is it the only valid or interesting way of thinking about “texts”. The “text” is not a metaphysical entity that captures the essence of all actual things we might wish to call a “text”. It is a construct which allows us to identify some particular phenomena (i.e. the fixation of discourse as a work/the objectification of action as an “object” etc.), the applicability and validity of which needs to be judged on a case by case basis.

subsuming meaningful action under the rubric of the literary text, no matter what differences there might be between them.

It is even more important that we recognise these differences given what we might term as a “linguistic bias” within the discourse of the human and social sciences. The discourse of the human and social sciences, in which action is constituted as an object and then interpreted or articulated, is primarily linguistic. It consists heavily of written accounts, descriptions and interpretations of human behaviour and action, and other verbal discussions and exchanges regarding the same. Because of the pervasiveness of linguistic discourse within the human and social sciences, it is perhaps tempting for interpreters to think of meaningful action purely in terms of linguistic meaning, and consequently believe that nothing is lost or changed when we attempt to express or analyse the meaning of action via linguistic discourse. But action, although inclusive of linguistic behaviour, does not consist entirely or even primarily in language-use. We should, therefore, be aware that there may be some aspects of meaningful action that may remain difficult, or even impossible, to represent purely linguistically.

In this regard it is imperative to remember that non-verbal media such as photography and film – “non-verbal” in the sense that, unlike written accounts, they are media which are not exclusively or even primarily linguistic – can be important documents of action, and can often play an important role as sources within the human and social sciences. Part of their importance lies in their capacity to present action to us in a form other than that of the dominant mode of discourse within the human and social sciences, offering us ways of looking at action of which purely linguistic accounts of human action may not be capable. If we are to avoid being dominated by the “linguistic bias” of the human and social sciences, it is important

that we remain open to what non-verbal sources such as these can offer us as interpreters, and how different methods of representing and objectifying action can inform our understanding and analysis of action.

Nevertheless, insofar as non-verbal media of these kinds can be said to “fix” action as an object of inquiry, to some extent they may also be thought of as “texts” of action. As I have argued, Ricoeur understands and presents “the text” as discourse under the condition of fixation, and not therefore inherently something limited to writing. Insofar as it is possible to fix meaningful action as an object without resorting to literary description, such documents of action may also be thought of in terms of “the text” as it is defined by Ricoeur. In “The Model of the Text”, however, Ricoeur does not distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic methods for the representation of meaningful action, and if we are to count photographs, films and other non-verbal records as “texts” – without losing sight of what they uniquely offer us as interpreters of action – it is imperative that we also work to recognise the difference between these non-verbal “texts” and the literary texts which have a more central place within Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

#### 2.4.1: Chatman on Film and Literature

In order to begin exploring the issue of the difference between “verbal” and “non-verbal” texts, I will examine film theorist Seymour Chatman’s distinction between “description” in literature and “point of view” in film as modes of representation. Chatman identifies one of the most important distinctions between literary texts and film as being between the ways in which each represents action.

---

<sup>50</sup> Audio recordings and statistical analysis are, of course, vital resources widely used by researchers in the social sciences that differ importantly from “literary” texts, but in what follows I have chosen to limit myself to discussing the differences between literary and visual representations of action (primarily film) as a contrast to the possible “linguistic bias” of the human and social sciences.

Literature, in which events and characters are typically presented primarily through written language, is identified by Chatman with “description” as a presentational technique. By contrast, film primarily relies upon visual images in order to present its subject matter to its audience, a presentational method defined by Chatman as offering a “point of view” (Chatman, 1981: 119) to the viewer. Although not something addressed by Ricoeur directly, looking more closely at the ways in which non-verbal media can be used to “fix” action will help us to understand both the way in which Ricoeur uses “the text” as a paradigm for the objectification of action in the human and social sciences and the caution we must take when extending this model beyond the realm of “literary” texts.

As well as identifying the dominant modes of presentation within each medium, Chatman distinguishes between the different ways in which these media are capable of representing action. In offering a description of events, the action being described in the literary novel is “interrupted and frozen” in order to establish the relevant detail about the action in the form of a *“tableau vivant”* (Chatman, 1981: 119). In comparison to this, film offers a dynamic presentation of action in which the entire scene is proffered to the view from a particular point of view as an ongoing sequence. And aside from not having to “freeze” the action in order to present it, film, along with photography, also differs from verbal or literary description insofar as it is not forced to select particular details or aspects of a scene or action and can instead represent a scene in its entirety. Chatman therefore describes film as possessing a “plenitude of visual details” and “an excessive particularity” (Chatman, 1981: 122) compared to literary description.

Although these distinctions between the capacities of film and literature are designed primarily with narrative artworks in mind, we can also consider how they

might apply to the use of non-verbal media to record and document action in the human sciences. Video and photographic records have had a role to play in the human sciences as sources of information for almost as long as the technology has existed. They serve as invaluable methods by which to document and preserve records of human behaviour and culture. Their value, as much as anything, comes from the fact that they “show” rather than “say”; they record action in a manner distinct from that of verbal and literary descriptions or accounts, and in a style which putatively avoids the way in which linguistic descriptions are necessarily selective about the details they recount.<sup>51</sup> So whilst, of course, a filmed record of action is also perspectival – it is shot from a particular “point of view” in which some aspects of action will be brought to the fore and others obscured at their expense – there can be little doubt that such records of action possess a greater degree of what Chatman describes as the “plenitude of detail” inherent to film as a medium.

The relevance of this to the human and social sciences lies in the way it allows us to preserve the “excessive particularity” of action. At a fairly fundamental level this is useful for evidencing and supporting our interpretive claims, as we can point to those aspects of the relevant filmic or photographic records that might support our conclusions. This then allows us to witness some evidence of interpreters’ claims, allowing us to assess their construal of events against the evidence upon which they have based it. Importantly, it also means that subsequent interpreters are not limited to only assessing and criticising those aspects of an action considered relevant or meaningful by those who have previously described and interpreted it. The plenitude of detail caught within non-verbal records of action thereby works as an antidote to the specificity of linguistic description, potentially

---

<sup>51</sup> The selectivity of description within the human and social sciences is discussed in greater depth in section 4.1 of chapter four of this thesis.

allowing subsequent interpreters access to details that may have been otherwise overlooked or misunderstood. Non-verbal media therefore offer a very different, and potentially very important, dimension to the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences.

But as valuable as these kinds of sources may be, especially in regards to presenting human action in a way that can offer a plenitude of detail that linguistic description arguably lacks, they are not inherently superior modes of representation, nor should they be thought to undermine the importance of linguistic descriptions of action within the human and social sciences. The trade-off that accompanies the richness and plenitude of detail that, for example, filmic or photographic records of action provide is that these modes of representation frequently lack *specificity*. For this reason, Chatman claims that “it requires a special effort for films to assert a property or relation. The dominant mode is presentational, not assertive. A film doesn’t say, ‘This *is* the state of affairs,’ it merely shows you that state of affairs” (Chatman, 1981: 124). A film of some series of events can provide us with access to much more detail than most linguistic descriptions can, but because of this it can be a struggle to direct our attention towards specific details or to assert specific relations between different elements present within the recording.

Non-verbal records of action, in this regard, still *demand* interpretation or articulation to some degree before we can utilise them as sources within the primarily linguistic discourse of the human and social sciences. Minimally, it is often necessary to have some idea of the context within which an action is taking place before we can understand it. Purely non-verbal records of action, such as a set of photographs or a video, can often struggle to communicate a sense of this context beyond what is immediately evident in the record at hand. Like a verbal or textual

description, recording action via any non-verbal medium involves a certain amount of abstraction; a photograph is typically a single frame of a single moment in time and film has the limits of its framing and excludes anything that happens before or after recording. Given this, it is often necessary to at least have a title, date or caption which tells us something else about the scene and the events being represented, something which exceeds what it is possible to capture in the recording itself.

#### 2.4.2: The Ax Fight

A useful example of how non-verbal media demand interpretation or articulation, and the effect that the presentation and related supplementary information can have on how we understand the events portrayed in such media, can be seen in the anthropological film *The Ax Fight [1975]* (Asch and Chagnon, 2006). The film, made by ethnographic filmmaker Timothy Asch and anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon during a stay in the Yanomami village of Mishimishimabowei-teri in 1971, depicts a conflict between residents and visitors from a neighbouring village. The fight begins when a woman from the village (Sinabimi) receives a beating from one of the visitors (Mohesiwa) in the gardens having refused to provide him with plantains. From this point on the situation escalates, with numerous other participants getting involved and a threat of more serious violence beginning when Sinabimi's husband and brother-in-law run into the fray wielding an axe and a machete. The intervention of older men from both sides of the conflict gradually dissipates the violence – though not before Mohesiwa's brother has received a heavy blow to the back with the dull side of an axe – culminating in a hostile standoff and continued verbal provocations.

The film *The Ax Fight* provides us with a document of these events, but does so in three distinct parts. After an initial scene-setting title screen, we are first presented with the unedited footage as it was recorded at the time (beginning at 00:01:02, and finishing at around 00:12:50).<sup>52</sup> This footage is raw, unaccompanied by any commentary bar a few comments from Asch, Chagnon and their team captured on the soundtrack, and it is difficult to identify precisely why the fight is taking place, why it escalates so rapidly, or what the different loyalties between the participants might be. The second section, following on from this, aims to offer an explanation of what we have just witnessed. This section begins with a title screen (00:12:53) which sets out some of the circumstances surrounding the event. Having initially been told that the fight broke out over the discovery of an incestuous relationship, the titles continue to inform us that they “learned that several former members of the village were visiting” but that they also had “old enemies in the village, so the situation was volatile.” We then return to the footage, over which Chagnon’s voice can be heard offering an explanation of events as they unfold. The film employs arrows superimposed over the footage to help the viewer identify key protagonists mentioned in the voiceover (starting around 00:16:30). Chagnon explains that the conflict is occurring between two factions and explains the way in which elder male relatives from Mohesiwa’s side of the conflict eventually form a protective cordon around the fallen man, allowing the physical violence to gradually diffuse (00:21:10).

Chagnon’s commentary over the footage is followed in turn by an image of a flow chart documenting a “simplified structure of conflict in terms of marriage and descent” with the voiceover describing this in terms of “three lineages” split between

---

<sup>52</sup> Numbers in brackets indicate running time (hours:minutes:seconds) on the 2006 DVD version of *The Ax Fight* released by Documentary Educational Resources.

“two villages” (00:21:54). Chagnon uses this chart to explain the relationships and loyalties that exist between key figures in the conflict, and describes the fight as an “expression of hostility” (00:23:08) rooted in these conflicting lineages. Finally, we are presented with titles introducing a “final edited version of the fight” (00:24:10). This edited version aims to present a more coherent version of the fight based upon the preceding analysis. It does this by cutting the footage down to the key moments in which the conflict between different lineages is most evident, and by intercutting footage of the initial club fight with images of one of the female villagers shouting at the visitors (00:24:58) taken from *after* the fight had dissipated in the raw version of the footage. This works to help establish the importance of tribal loyalties in the conflict at a much earlier stage than is evident in the raw footage. The film concludes with another title screen stating that “[s]everal days after the fight, some of the visitors began leaving. Tensions were temporarily relieved” (00:29:00). This, once more, implies that it was the tensions between different lineages present in the village at one time that provided the primary cause for the outburst of violence.

It is perhaps this three-stage structure that makes *The Ax Fight* such a fascinating example for our purposes, as it deliberately demonstrates how the apparently chaotic actions taking place in the raw footage can be given sense using a variety of editing techniques. Foremost among these is the use of titles screens, graphics and voiceover to provide supplementary information. The entire second section of the film is dedicated to using these resources in order to pick out key figures, establish their relationships and to provide contextual information which allows the viewer to make sense of the events they see before them. The edited version of the film too is constructed in such a way that places a focus upon certain aspects of the events as they unfolded in real time, and which emphasises the

importance of the features of the scenario identified by Chagnon in his explanation. The way in which editing and supplementary information – such as graphics, voiceover and text – can work together to suggest a particular interpretation of the events represented is also evident in the final title screen that describes the aftermath of the fight, and which works to reinforce the connection between conflicting lineages and violence that is presented in the edited version of the footage.

Over the thirty minutes of the film as a whole we are presented with a compelling document of a fight in a Yanomami village, one which presents us with both an interpretation of those events and a document of how film can be used to present us with a particular version of the events recorded. That there is an important difference between the “raw” unedited footage and the final presentation of events with which *The Ax Fight* culminates seems obvious. Even without the accompanying commentary, the edited version of the film uses filmic techniques to select and present certain aspects of the fight and excludes others. However, it is not only the selectivity of the editing process that can effect how we understand a videoed document of human action, nor is it only the supplementary information which is *included* in (or alongside) the presentation of such a document. We also have to be aware that when supplementary or explanatory information is included, it will inevitably involve *excluding* other information which may have the potential to alter our understanding of what is presented. *The Ax Fight* can prove illustrative in this regard too.

From the very outset of the film, when the title screen states that “[l]arge Yanomami villages are volatile and the slightest provocation can start a violent

outburst” (00:00:42), the viewer is primed to think of Yanomami society as violent.<sup>53</sup> This presents violent conflict as something indigenous to Yanomami culture, and leads us to understand the fight documented primarily as an expression of this culture. This characterisation of Yanomami society is, however, disputed. R. B. Ferguson, for example, claims that the idea of Yanomami society as inherently violent is an example of the “anthropological dogma that people are ready and willing to go to war for any purpose that their culture valorizes” (Ferguson, 1995: 9). Contrary to this, Ferguson claims that the violence documented amongst Yanomami people “is not an expression of Yanomami culture itself. It is, rather, a product of specific historical situations: the Yanomami make war not because Western influence is absent but because it is present, and present in certain specific forms” (Ferguson, 1995: 6). Ferguson places a particular emphasis on understanding the role played on “antagonistic interests in the acquisition of steel tools and other Western manufactures” (Ferguson, 1995: 7) in understanding the occurrence and patterns of Yanomami warfare.

For Ferguson, the widely documented violence of Yanomami culture is “explainable largely as a result of antagonisms related to scarce, coveted, and unequally distributed Western manufactured goods” (Ferguson, 1995: 8). The inequalities introduced into Yanomami society and between competing groups of Yanomami people by the presence of desirable steel tools – such as the machetes and axes used during the fight documented by Chagnon and Asch, and which were originally supplied to the villagers by them – means that individuals and groups from rival villages are more likely to come into conflict in order to acquire, protect or control the distribution of these resources. It may thus be contact with Westerners,

---

<sup>53</sup> This perspective on Yanomami society is one closely associated with Chagnon, whose influential 1968 book on Yanomami society is subtitled “The Fierce People”, an epithet now widely associated with the Yanomami people.

and not something inherent to Yanomami society itself, which “has resulted in a lowered threshold for war – a warlike disposition that makes violence more likely” (Ferguson, 1995: xii).

This is not to say that Chagnon’s account of the fight was fundamentally erroneous in the details presented, or in the emphasis placed upon the relationships between the antagonists involved. Nor would Ferguson argue as such.<sup>54</sup> Having not done any fieldwork with the Yanomami of his own, Ferguson draws upon Chagnon’s work heavily in his analyses and when he describes the incident documented in *The Ax Fight* he broadly emphasises the same factions and events as Chagnon. Ferguson writes that the visitors had “refused to leave when they should have” and that they were “closely tied to a faction within the main village” who had encouraged their kinsmen to stay permanently on the basis that “increased numbers would give them greater leverage over everything that went on in the village”. This “constituted a challenge to the dominant factions, of or allied to Moawa [headman of the main village]” and eventually escalated into the conflict captured on film by Chagnon and Asch (Ferguson, 1995: 328).

For Ferguson, however, this conflict between factions is inseparable from the unequal distribution of Western goods, particularly axes and machetes, bought into the group by anthropological researchers. Ferguson goes on to recount Chagnon’s later encounter with Moawa upon his return to Mishimishimabowei-teri in 1972. On this occasion “trouble was brewing” over the issue of “the distribution of the anthropologist’s Western goods”. Although Chagnon had previously to deal with

---

<sup>54</sup> Ferguson criticises totalising theory in anthropology on the basis that that “too often contending theorists have each portrayed his or her particular research interest as if it were the whole story, as if the positing of psychological, institutional, and material bases of war were somehow incompatible” (Ferguson, 1995: 7). He also qualifies his theory of the Western influence on Yanomami conflict when he says that “to emphasize the violence-generating impact of Western contact is in no way to deny that completely autochthonous factors may also lead to war” (Ferguson, 1995: 57).

many demands from the villagers, this time Moawa wanted to have all of the goods “or at least control their distribution”. This culminated in Moawa threatening to kill Chagnon for not distributing his machetes, given in payment for blood samples, to those whom Moawa had directed (Ferguson, 1995: 331). Herein we perhaps see how the distribution and demand for steel tools such as machetes and axes could contribute to both inter- and intra-village conflict amongst the Yanomami in a manner not at all evident in *The Ax Fight* as it is presented.

To reiterate, it isn’t that the divisions and relationships identified by Chagnon aren’t important, only that by excluding supplementary information regarding the distribution of Western goods and the potential impact this might have on the relationships documented, we perhaps only get a partial picture of what is happening. Along these lines Ferguson argues that the “tribal loyalties” characteristic of conflicts such as the one documented in *The Ax Fight* can “provide definition to existing hostility” but “are not the cause of the conflicts” (Ferguson, 1995: 370). Minimally, we might wish to argue that the presence of the Westerners and their valuable manufactured goods contributed to an instability between competing factions, and thus to the conflict which ensued. This, however, is not a possibility presented or entertained in the version of events offered to the viewer by *The Ax Fight*. The contrast between these two interpretations of the significance of what has been captured on film – on the one hand, Chagnon’s interpretation of the fight as an expression of a conflict of loyalties within an *intrinsically* violent culture, and on the other hand Ferguson’s interpretation wherein the presence of anthropologists is an *extrinsic* factor contributing to that violence – is marked, even if the events themselves are not in dispute. Here, once again, we are confronted forcefully with

the difference that the inclusion (or exclusion) of supplementary information can make to how we understand the action presented to us in “non-verbal” documents.

To this extent at least, non-verbal records of action are still subject to many of the same considerations as linguistic descriptions of action. We need, for example, to be aware of the socio-historical context in which the action documented originally occurred and the methods used in the recording. We need to be aware of any history of interpretation that may accompany and precede our reception of these documents. And we need, perhaps most importantly, to be aware of the theoretical and doxic presuppositions that we bring to these documents of action as interpreters. So whilst non-verbal sources can offer us much that purely linguistic descriptions of action cannot, the *specificity* available to us within linguistic discourse is a necessary complement to the *plenitude* of detail afforded to us by media such as film and photography.

This privileging of linguistic discourse is why it is possible to posit a “linguistic bias” within the human and social sciences. But this “bias” is only pernicious if we do not recognise it as such, and consequently consider all experiential meaning as merely a form of inarticulate linguistic meaning. Such a move is deeply reductive, and undermines the value of any attempt to articulate the meaning of action in linguistic terms. Rather, we must recognise that bringing meaningful action to linguistic discourse poses a particular kind of challenge and that in doing so we risk obscuring or distorting some aspect(s) of that which we are trying to articulate. Considering all objectification of action under the rubric of “the text”, even non-verbal documents such as films and photographs, causes similar risks of obscurity and distortion. A photograph is not a literary text, and we need to be aware of this alterity if we are to understand how such sources might play a role

within the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences. If “The Model of the Text” is to inform our practices as interpreters of action, it must be able to respond to this injunction.

In “The Model of the Text”, where Ricoeur discusses the “objectification” and “fixation” of action, he does not explicitly address the issue of non-linguistic or non-verbal documents as distinct from literary descriptions and accounts of action, nor the possibility of there being a “linguistic bias” prevalent within the discourse of the human and social sciences. This is something that must be expanded upon by those looking to follow Ricoeur’s suggestions in “The Model of the Text”, and vigilance is required if textual hermeneutics is to inform our understanding of interpretive practices in the human and social sciences without unwittingly reifying any linguistic bias which does exist.

However, it does not necessarily follow from Ricoeur’s conception of “the text” as discourse under the condition fixation that non-verbal records of action are merely a species of linguistic texts, and that we can simplistically understand the former in terms of the latter. Ricoeur’s interest in the text and textual interpretation is designed to draw attention to some of the ways in which discourse is meaningful under the condition of “fixation”, and how this in turn plays an important role in understanding the validity of textual interpretation. Action documented by non-verbal means is still action that has been “fixed”, still action objectified and received at a distance from the situation in which it originally occurred. It is this distanciation that allows us to approach the action documented as an object of critical interpretation, and we must augment our appropriation of these non-verbal resources with the same level of critical caution as we would adopt when dealing with linguistic descriptions of meaningful human action.

Insofar as meaningful human action is “fixed” as an object of inquiry within the human and social sciences, considering these non-verbal documents of action in terms of the text can still prove fruitful in many regards. But in order to understand the specific value of these non-verbal “texts” it is important that we strive to recognise the ways in which these kinds of media differ from purely linguistic descriptions, and how they might work to both complement and resist any linguistic bias present within the practices and discourse of the human and social sciences.

## 2.5: Conclusion

Ricoeur argues in “The Model of the Text” that the interpretation of action involves understanding at a distance in a manner analogous to that of textual interpretation, not least due to the condition of “alienating distanciation” which “renders possible the objectification which reigns in the human sciences” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 131). In taking action as an object of inquiry, whether represented verbally or non-verbally, we distance ourselves from our pre-reflective understanding and the lived experience of that action, allowing us to reflect critically upon it and thereby to clarify our understanding of it. The paradigm of “the text”, as conceived by Ricoeur, provides us with a resource by which we might attempt to understand the way in which action is constituted as an object of interpretation, and consequently the kind of interpretive claims we can make as part of the inquiry into meaningful action.

Equally important, however, is that Ricoeur’s text as a paradigm of discourse under fixation provides a framework by which we can arbitrate between the “multiplicity” of meanings that Derrida considers irreducible, but without having to make appeal to any “final” or “transcendent” signified. This, ultimately, is the ability to make a *contingent* but *valid* and *non-arbitrary* claim to truth; an

interpretation of meaning given from within a particular socio-historical context without any claim to this “truth” being absolute or exhaustive.<sup>55</sup> For Ricoeur, this is the primary value of textual hermeneutics as a paradigm for the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences, and it is a possibility that emerges insofar as the text is conceived of as a paradigm of *discourse*. By drawing a contrast between Ricoeur’s text-as-discourse and the idea of the “absolute text” as imagined by Barthes or Derrida, we make explicit both the importance of Ricoeur’s particular construction of the text to the project outlined in “The Model of the Text”, and the reasons for Ricoeur’s eagerness to distance himself from the “ideology” of the absolute text.

---

<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, for example, argues that even if “objectifying knowledge” always falls short of the kind of “absolute” objectivity towards which scientific thought often aspires, it is nevertheless possible to achieve a kind of “relative autonomy” within our inquiries via objectification and the introduction of critical distance (Ricoeur, 1981i: 243-44).

### **Chapter Three: The *Sprachlichkeit* of Action**

Within the human and social sciences there is a need to constitute meaningful action as an object of critical inquiry whilst remaining cautious not to distort or misrepresent it. There is an accompanying need, therefore, to try to understand the extent to which meaningful action lends itself to objectification and the role that our methods of objectification might play in how we understand and interpret action. In this chapter I examine the notion of “meaningful action” in relation to Ricoeur’s essay “The Model of the Text” with the twofold aim of outlining how we might understand action as meaningful, and how this conception of meaningful action can be brought to linguistic discourse as an object of reflection within the social and human sciences. I also take into consideration the way in which our understanding of action as meaningful might help to determine the kind of objectivity towards which inquiry into meaningful human action may aspire.

In this chapter I will argue that Ricoeur’s appeal to speech-act theory in “The Model of the Text” risks obscuring the role of representation and linguistic description in constituting action as an object. I will then articulate a way in which we can understand the relationship between meaningful action and its linguistic expression by making an appeal to the linguisticality – the *Sprachlichkeit* – of action, arguing that our experience of action as meaningful is inseparable from the modes of expression we find for “experiential meaning”, and in particular from the language in which we bring meaningful action to discourse. Finally I will consider the possibility that an interest in action at the level of its “meaning” detracts from the “objectivity” of inquiry, but ultimately will argue contrary to this that any form of objectivity suited to the human and social sciences must be capable of recognising action as meaningful.

### 3.1: Meaningful Action & Speech-Acts

“The Model of the Text” is an essay primarily concerned with outlining the ways in which the text can work as a paradigm for the interpretation of meaningful action in the human and social sciences. In this essay, the objectification of action is, for Ricoeur, analogous to the fixation of discourse in writing. In order to articulate this fixation he draws upon the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin. Ricoeur writes that in making this appeal to speech-act theory he is “giving the word ‘meaning’ a very large acceptation” so as to cover “all the aspects and levels of the intentional exteriorisation that makes inscription of discourse possible” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 200). For Ricoeur, the different “levels” of the speech-act defined by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* allow us to understand both the different levels at which action is meaningful, and the ways in which the exteriorisation of these different layers of meaning lends itself to inscription. I will now briefly examine the use made by Ricoeur of speech-act theory in order to articulate the way in which action lends itself to objectification, and indicate some of the problems that arise from this approach.

In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin distinguishes between some of the various things that we do in uttering a performative sentence. The first of these is the “*locutionary act*, which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference”. Ricoeur refers to this level of meaning as the “*propositional act*”. In addition to this Austin also identifies “*illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning... utterances which have a certain (conventional) force”. The final level of the speech-act identified by Austin is the “*perlocutionary act*”, defined as “what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as

convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading” (Austin, 1962: 108).

Ricoeur claims that these different aspects of the speech-act provide us with a resource for articulating the way in which the dialectic of event and meaning in discourse can become fixed in writing (Ricoeur, 1981h: 200). They lend themselves to fixation insofar as the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of a speech-act represent an “exteriorisation” that can be captured, to differing extents, in terms of linguistic and grammatical codes and conventions. In particular, Ricoeur is interested in the “locutionary” and “illocutionary” aspects of speech-acts.<sup>56</sup>

According to Ricoeur, the locutionary act “exteriorises itself in the sentence” in the sense that a sentence asserts particular relations between particular terms. The locutionary act is therefore preserved by writing insofar as we identify the utterance as having some particular and identifiable sense and reference that can be expressed in a written sentence. The “illocutionary act”, meanwhile, is described as being “exteriorised through grammatical paradigms”. This is to suggest that the illocutionary act is captured via the features of a sentence indicative of its grammatical mode. Ricoeur lists the “indicative, imperative, and subjunctive modes, and other procedures expressive of illocutionary force” as examples of the grammatical paradigms within which the illocutionary act is captured in writing, though he also recognises that prosody plays an important role in the illocutionary

---

<sup>56</sup> Ricoeur largely marginalises the “perlocutionary” aspect of discourse, describing it as “the least inscribable aspect of discourse”. He argues that the perlocutionary aspect of discourse is also “what is the least discourse in discourse. It is the discourse as stimulus.” As such it is also the least “meaningful” aspect of discourse, confined instead to working “energetically” upon the “emotions and affective dispositions” of my interlocutor (Ricoeur, 1981h: 200). Were we to pursue Ricoeur’s appropriation of speech-act theory further, however, we may wish to ask whether discourse as “stimulus” might not sometimes be of interest to the interpreter of action, and whether the possibility of “fixing” the “perlocutionary” force of action might not therefore be of more importance than Ricoeur seems to suggest.

force of speech and concedes that “illocutionary force is less completely inscribed in grammar” than propositional meaning (Ricoeur, 1981h: 199-200).

Based upon this analysis of the way in which different aspects of the speech-act lend themselves to exteriorisation in writing, Ricoeur goes on to argue that it is possible to conceive of action as similarly structured. In a manner analogous to the way in which the fixation of oral discourse in writing is “made possible by a dialectic of intentional exteriorisation immanent to the speech-act itself”, Ricoeur argues that within action there exists “a similar dialectic” which “prepares the detachment of the *meaning* of the action from the *event* of the action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 204).

There are, however, good reasons to be wary of uncritically identifying meaningful action too closely with the narrower realm of speech-acts. Austin, for example, claims that speech-acts contrast with “ordinary physical actions” insofar as, within physical action, “the minimum physical action... being a bodily movement, [is] *in pari materia* with at least many of its immediate and natural consequences” (Austin, 1962: 112). This refers to the way in which the immediate consequences of physical actions are most commonly physical effects: e.g. if I clap my hands together, a noise is produced. In contrast to this, Austin argues that the consequences of such a speech-act are “not normally other acts of saying something”, but are instead frequently manifest in terms of people *doing* rather than *saying* something.

Austin describes this difference in kind between the speech-act and its effects as a “natural break in the chain, which is wanting in the case of physical actions” (Austin, 1962: 112). This natural break, for Austin, marks the speech-act as importantly distinct from physical action. Ricoeur, of course, is not primarily

concerned with the idea of “minimum physical action”. Ricoeur argues, contrary to Austin’s distinction, that action considered as *meaningful* is subject to convention in a manner similar to language and, in particular, to the speech-act.<sup>57</sup> This is because understanding action as meaningful, rather than simply as a chain of physical events, involves engaging with the established structures of meaning and practice by which an action has some particular meaning.

This is perhaps most overtly evident in the case of ceremonial or ritual action. For example, we cannot even begin to understand religious rites such as the Christian Communion if we reduce the actions performed therein to their purely physical dimension. The Eucharist, for the believer, is an act of worship and of communion with God. This, however, is far from overtly evident on the surface of the actions that comprise the liturgy. The rite of Communion, for example, is an important part of liturgical practice within many Christian denominations, and revolves around the symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ in which consecrated bread and wine are shared with the congregation by a priest, but if we were to describe this in purely physical terms – as merely a protracted distribution of wafers and wine – we could in no way claim to have understood what we have witnessed.

This distinction is exploited for literary effect by Leo Tolstoy in his novel *Resurrection*. Therein Tolstoy has his narrator describe the rituals of Communion from a perspective which deliberately alienates the events described from their symbolic resonance. Thus, he describes the way in which “the priest, having robed in a peculiar, strange and very inconvenient garment of gold cloth, cut and arranged little bits of bread on a saucer, and then put most of them into a cup with wine, at the

---

<sup>57</sup> Ricoeur writes, for example, that “to understand what a promise is, we have to understand what the ‘essential condition’ is according to which a given action ‘counts as’ a promise” and that this “covers both the ‘matter’ (propositional content) and the ‘quality’ (the illocutionary force)” of the action at hand (Ricoeur, 1981h: 205).

same time repeating various names and prayers” (Tolstoy, 1966: 180). And although Tolstoy’s narrator identifies the connection between the sacraments and the events of The Last Supper, there is an air of anthropological detachment in his description of the “supposition” that “the bits of bread cut up by the priest and put into the wine, when manipulated and prayed over in a certain way are transformed into the body and blood of God” (Tolstoy, 1966: 181).

Tolstoy achieves this by describing the rites of Communion in primarily physical terms. The “manipulations” performed by the priest are represented not in terms of the ceremonial preparation and consecration of an offering to God, but primarily in physical terms. The priest is described as “uniformly raising his arms and holding them aloft... then sinking to his knees and kissing the table and the objects on it” and as having “picked up a napkin in both hands and rhythmically and smoothly waved it over the saucer and the golden cup” (Tolstoy, 1966: 181). Tolstoy strips the priest’s actions of their symbolic meaning, presenting them instead as empty physical gestures incapable of achieving their supposed aims. By doing so Tolstoy is offering a criticism of the perceived hypocrisy of organised religion, suggesting that the ritual surrounding worship is merely procedural, and thus obscures the fact that its practitioners do not live by the values of which their liturgical practices are supposedly representative. This critical intention, of course, depends precisely upon the fact that we would ordinarily understand the actions described as *meaningful*; Tolstoy subverts our familiar understanding of the Eucharist as an act of worship enmeshed in Christian tradition by presenting us with a “minimal” version of these actions, divested of the symbolic meanings by which we would usually understand them. The representation of Communion in terms of the “minimum physical action” involved is thus deliberately inadequate.

We need not, however, restrict ourselves to ceremonial or ritualised action such as this in order to understand how describing action in terms of its “immediate physical effects” deprives it of its meaningful dimension. Rather, and as Ricoeur argues elsewhere, understanding human action as meaningful involves recognising it as “at once a certain configuration of physical movements and an accomplishment capable of being interpreted in terms of reasons for acting which explain it” (Ricoeur, 1992: 66). We must, therefore, attempt to understand action in relation to the conventions and structures of meaning that allow us to understand it as something to which a motive can be attached, and as something attributable to a responsible agent, and not merely as a physical event with purely physical consequences.

The noise produced when I clap my hands together, for example, is a physical effect of the physical action. Understanding this as a meaningful action, however, demands that we consider *why* I may have done so, and in what context the action is performed. If I am a teacher trying to attract the attention of an unruly class, the sharp, loud noise produced by clapping my hands together may serve to command the attention of my charges and allow me to continue with my work as an educator. If, later in the day and looking to unwind after work, I decide to go to the theatre and am party to a dramatic performance of the highest quality, I might join with the audience in offering the performers a round of applause, once more exploiting the possibility of producing a noise by clapping my hands together. These latter circumstances differ from the former, however, in that I am no longer looking to command the attention of an audience of disobedient students, but am now part of an audience looking to express their collective admiration for what they have just witnessed.

There may, of course, be important physical differences between the way in which I clap my hands in the former case and the latter, and this physical difference may be integral to the difference in meaning between the two outwardly similar actions. We cannot, however, reduce this difference in meaning to the physical differences involved in the performance of these actions. We must also take into account considerations such as the different environments in which the two different actions are performed, and the difference of intention between using the noise produced by a handclap to attract the attention of others and participating in an ovation. Recognising this difference, and discerning between these alternative possibilities, is at least as much an aspect of understanding my behaviour as an *action* as perceiving the physical effects caused by my bodily movements. The “physical” and the “meaningful” dimensions of action are, however, inseparable, and it is insofar as the conventionally established structures of meaning are identifiable within the physical dimension of an action that its meaning is manifest. It is therefore the “conventional” nature of meaningful action that means that, like the speech-act, it is possible to identify an action as meaningful, and likewise that opens *meaningful* action to the possibility of fixation in the sense discussed by Ricoeur.

Herein we begin to encounter a slightly paradoxical aspect of Ricoeur’s appropriation of Austin’s work on speech-act theory. As evidenced by Austin’s reference to the “natural break” between speech-acts and their effects, part of the reason Austin develops his theory of the speech-act is to distinguish between action in general and speech-acts in particular. In conceiving of action in terms of its meaning, however, Ricoeur subverts this distinction. Understood in terms of its meaning, “physical” action cannot be reduced to its physical manifestations, but has also to be considered as a form of meaningful *trans-action*. This is why, although

clapping my hands together has a set of immediate physical consequences, understanding the significance of this action and the effect it is likely to have upon those around me demands that we pay attention to the situation in which it is enacted and my motivations for doing so. Likewise, if we are to understand the actions of the priest performing Mass, and the way in which the congregation understand and responds to these actions, we need to be aware of the traditions and institutions of which they are part. In cases such as these we can see how the natural break identified by Austin might also apply to actions other than speech-acts.

However, as well as undermining the distinction Austin wishes to make between speech-acts and action in general, Ricoeur's use of speech-act theory in order to characterise the meaning of action leaves us very little grasp of how linguistic meaning and the meaning of action might be importantly different from one another. Ricoeur's identification of meaningful action with the speech-act therefore carries with it the risk of presupposing the linguistic *structure* of meaningful action. This presupposition is arguably evident in Ricoeur's claim that action is "propositional".

The propositional nature of meaningful action, according to Ricoeur, is primarily evident via "action-sentences" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 204). The "action-sentence" is importantly distinct from the speech-act. A speech-act is a performative sentence, an example of which would be the sentence "Shoot her!" uttered as an order. An action-sentence, by comparison, is a *description* of some particular action: "The officer shouted 'Shoot her!' to the soldier", for example. So while the conventional dimension of the speech-act is evident insofar as the speech-act is already structured linguistically, the posited conventional quality of the wider

category of meaningful action is, according to Ricoeur, evident insofar as it is reflected in the ways in which action is captured by description.

What remains largely untouched upon by Ricoeur, however, is the constitutive role that *description* plays in the meaningfulness of action.<sup>58</sup> An action-sentence is always an example of action already described in some particular way, and it is impossible to separate out the question of the meaning of an action-sentence from this act of description. Consequently, it is far from clear to what extent the structure of meaningful action identified by Ricoeur as being “mirrored” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 205) in action-sentences may actually be a property of the way in which we describe action linguistically. In order to support his claims about the “propositional structure of action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 204), Ricoeur appeals to the work of Anthony Kenny in *Action, Emotion and Will*. But although Kenny does say that he aims to “clarify the concept of *action* by considering the special logical properties of the finite verbs which we employ to support actions” (Kenny, 2003: 106), this is still some distance from the claims about the “structure” of action to which end Ricoeur attempts to employ Kenny’s arguments in support.

The parts of Kenny’s work drawn upon primarily by Ricoeur are chapter seven of *Action, Emotion and Will* in which he attempts to draw “a broad distinction between actions and relations” (Kenny, 2003: 119), and chapter eight in which he works to draw distinctions between various action verbs and their use to describe “states”, “performances” and “activities” (Kenny, 2003: 120-30). And though such an inquiry is undoubtedly valuable for clarifying our use of the language of action, and perhaps even indicates that there may be certain things about action that call for linguistic representation, or suggest that the ways in which we speak about action

---

<sup>58</sup> The role played by description in constituting meaningful action as an object of inquiry is discussed in greater depth in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

help to determine how we understand it as meaningful, this does not equate to Ricoeur's claim that the "propositional" structure of action has been "clearly and demonstratively expounded" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 204) in Kenny's work. It is far from clear, based upon Ricoeur's arguments, what the relationship between action-sentences and the action they purport to describe is supposed to be, beyond a putative "mirroring" between the two.

Certainly, in order for Ricoeur to defend his claims about the "structure" of action, he at least needs a more thoroughgoing account of the relationship between meaningful action and the languages in which it is described and articulated. We cannot, therefore, use the structure of action-sentences as evidence of a (similar) structure within action itself unless we have good reason to think that meaningful action is the kind of thing which can be articulated thusly without the meaning of action being merely subsumed under the meaning of the sentences in which it is expressed, and even then we must be very careful not to overlook the role that description plays in presenting action in some particular and determinate way. Along these lines, the sociologist John Thompson observes that "if anything may be said to have a 'propositional content' that can be identified and reidentified as the same, then it is surely these [action]-sentences and not the actions which they describe" (Thompson, 1981a: 126). We should not, therefore, confuse meaningful action with its verbal representation. The meaning of an action, after all, is something we intuitively understand as part of our day-to-day experience of the world around us, independently of its potential for "objectification" via description.<sup>59</sup>

Ricoeur, of course, is careful to point out that within "The Model of the Text" he is discussing action *under the condition of fixation*, taken as an object of inquiry

---

<sup>59</sup> If, for example, J.L. Austin were to approach me "gently swinging a big stick" (Austin, 1962: 118), I would not get far in life if I needed this to be described for me before I could get out of the way.

within the human and social sciences.<sup>60</sup> The fact that we have an understanding of action independently of its availability to us as an “object” of reflection needn’t in itself be a problem for Ricoeur. But insofar as speech-act theory and action sentences are supposed to help articulate the way in which action is *susceptible* to fixation in the first place, it is arguable that Ricoeur ends up begging the question. By finding evidence for the linguistic structure of meaningful action in the ways in which it is “mirrored” in action-sentences, he risks conflating meaningful action with its linguistic expression. This leaves us almost entirely unclear as to whether there might be important features of the meaningfulness of action that cannot be represented linguistically, and whether certain aspects of the meaning of action might therefore be lost under the condition of “fixation” which is integral to the textual paradigm.<sup>61</sup>

Ricoeur’s appropriation of speech-act theory serves a particular purpose by emphasising the way in which the meaningfulness of action is to some extent conventional in a manner similar to linguistic meaning, and the way in which the “exteriorisation” of meaningful action can in turn lend itself to the objectification of action via a process of fixation analogous to the inscription of spoken discourse in writing. But, insofar as it fails to acknowledge either the possibility that there are aspects of the meaningfulness of action that defy linguistic description or the constitutive role played by description in the objectification of action, it remains deeply problematic. Ricoeur’s recourse to speech-act theory, then, falls short of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur goes so far as to say that “[m]eaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of discourse by writing” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203).

<sup>61</sup> Possible points of disanalogy between text and action of this kind are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this thesis. For example, the potential for visual representations of action to preserve a “plenitude of detail” lost within linguistic description is addressed in chapter two of this thesis (section 2.4) and the ethnomethodological principle of recognising action as an ongoing and dynamic phenomenon that resists objectification is discussed in chapter five (section 5.4 onwards).

desired end of helping us to understand how meaningful action lends itself to being fixed as an object of interpretive inquiry. In order to better understand the limitations of and possibilities afforded by “The Model of the Text” to the human and social sciences, it is necessary to consider the “meaningfulness” of action in greater depth.

### 3.2: Thick & Thin Description

A very useful initial distinction to make is Gilbert Ryle’s formulation of the difference between “thick” and “thin” descriptions of action. This broad discrimination between two ways in which it is possible to describe action immediately confronts us with the importance of description to how we understand action as meaningful. Ryle’s famous example of the difference between thick and thin description involves winking:

Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike... Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink. (Ryle, 1968)

By describing what the second boy does as a “wink” we are drawing upon a set of socially established, if usually tacit, codes and conventions by which we can judge certain contractions of the eyelid to be a wink and as something qualitatively separate from an involuntary twitch. A description which captures this difference is what Ryle refers to as a “thick” description. The “thin” description, on the other hand, simply refers to the physical phenomena involved in the twitch/wink and makes no more nuanced distinction.

Furthermore, Ryle introduces a third winker who parodies the clumsy wink of the second boy. Ryle observes once again that there is a vital difference between

the “thin” and “thick” description we might offer of the parodist’s action: “The thinnest description of what the... parodist is doing is, roughly, the same as for the involuntary eyelid twitch; but its thick description is a many-layered sandwich, of which only the bottom slice is catered for by the thinnest description” (Ryle, 1968). To understand this third wink as a parody we need not only to draw upon the codes and conventions that distinguish the wink from the twitch, but also those that make sense of the concept of parody: in this case by self-consciously exaggerating the clumsiness of the original winker.

According to Ryle, this difference cannot be captured in the “thin” physical description of the contracting eyelid alone. We could, perhaps, claim that it would be possible for us to tell that there was a difference between the twitch/wink/parody simply by comparing photographs of the three, even if it would not be easy to describe what the qualitative difference was between them. Indeed, it may prove very difficult to attempt to delineate the difference between thick and thin description as cleanly as this simplified version of Ryle’s example suggests. The “thickness” of a description is more intricately related to the physicality of what is being described than is perhaps suggested by referring to the “bottom layer” of a description being the “thinnest”. The careful exaggeration involved in parodying a wink, for example, gives us some indication of how the nuances of the physical “thin” description are essential to us being able to articulate and understand the action being described “thickly”.

Even so, we can certainly make sense of the distinction between describing an object or an action in terms of its physical appearance and in terms of it being an action with some particular meaning. A wink is different from a twitch in part because it is an intentional action subject to intersubjectively agreed standards of

success and failure: if we were to contract both eyelids whilst attempting to wink, for example, we would have failed. In contrast to this, it is meaningless to say that a twitch has failed. A thick description attempts to capture some meaningful aspect of an action in this fashion. Already here we are forced to engage with the “conventional” quality of action that Ricoeur attempts to articulate via speech-act theory.

However, by engaging with action on the “thick” level of meaning, and as indicated by the fine line that exists between a wink and its parody, we are also confronted with the potential for ambiguity in how we understand the particular action at hand. To identify and describe a wink as a parody involves drawing upon a different set of conventions and circumstantial features rather than simply describing it as a clumsy wink, and certainly more so than describing either purely in terms of being a contraction of the eyelid. This possibility for offering alternative descriptions which subtly alter how we understand the meaning of action will typically grow along with the complexity of the action or actions that we are describing. A single linguistic representation of an action may therefore be insufficient to capture its meaning, and even a number of descriptions may only constitute an approximation of the action. So although the possibilities of understanding opened to us are to a large extent constrained by the action itself, meaning that there are always going to be a finite number of legitimate possible descriptions we can make of an action,<sup>62</sup> we can nevertheless begin to see how the description of action can be integral to our understanding of it as meaningful.

---

<sup>62</sup> We would not ordinarily, for example, understand the action of Ryle’s wink-parodist as expressive of a deep and profound yearning for freedom without a fairly extensive back story being offered to fill in the gaps.

### 3.3: “Linguistic” & “Experiential” Meaning

While Ryle’s distinction captures an important difference between understanding action in “thick” terms as *meaningful* and in “thin” terms purely as a physical event, we need still to consider in greater depth what it is about how we understand action that gives it this “thickness”. Charles Taylor’s comments on the nature of the meaning of action provide a useful starting point for this task, and also serve to return us to the important distinction between the meaning of action and “linguistic meaning”. This latter distinction is of vital import for Ricoeur’s project in “The Model of the Text”.

Ricoeur discusses the way in which action may be fixed as an object of inquiry, and draws an analogy between this and the fixation of discourse in texts. However, his appeal to speech-act theory in order to support this claim, as I have argued, risks conflating meaningful action with the action-sentences in which it can become an object. What is required is reason to believe that action – which is typically experienced as meaningful prior to any objectification it might undergo – is the kind of thing which can be objectified and brought to linguistic discourse without its meaning being lost or distorted to the point where we are simply imposing meanings upon action within our descriptions and interpretations. Taylor’s account of meaningful action in the human sciences points to some important characteristics of meaningful action in this regard, and in doing so offers useful traction on how it is possible to bring meaningful action to the discourse of the human and social sciences.

Taylor identifies three features in particular as characteristic of the “meaning” of human action. The first of these is that, insofar as action is meaningful, it is meaningful for an understanding subject: “it is not the meaning of

the situation in *vacuo*, but its meaning for a subject, a specific subject, a group of subjects, or perhaps what its meaning is for the human subject as such” (Taylor, 1979: 32). This condition recognises that human behaviour can only properly be recognised as *meaningful* action insofar as it is understood as subjectively and intersubjectively meaningful by one or more individuals in some social environment, and that understanding the meaning of action requires that we have some understanding of meaningfulness for someone and in a specific social context.

Taylor’s second characteristic of meaningful action is that it is always possible to make a distinction between the “given element – situation, action, or whatever – and its meaning” (Taylor, 1979: 32-33). The “given element”, in this context, refers to the physically observable elements of some particular action in a concrete situation. The distinction being made here is to some extent an abstraction. Taylor points out that although we can always characterise an action in terms of its “given element”, the two are nevertheless not “physically separable” if we are to identify the action as an *action* compared to a mere physical phenomenon. We can bracket the meaning of an action, and thus offer “two descriptions” of the given element of an action, either purely in terms of its physical manifestation or in terms of its “meaning for the subject” (Taylor, 1979: 33). But this always remains a possibility of describing the same phenomenon in two different ways, and as such can only amount to a temporary bracketing of meaning.

Finally, the third feature of the meaning of action identified by Taylor is that “things only have meaning in a field, that is, in relation to the meaning of other things.” The “field” of meanings described by Taylor refers to the background of intersubjectively and institutionally constituted conventions of practice and social meaning against which meaningful human interaction occurs. This highlights the

essentially social nature of meaningful action, insofar as there is “no such thing as a single, unrelated meaningful element” of action (Taylor, 1979: 33). This emphasis upon “fields” of meaning and the distinction between “given element” and “meaning” works to show us that, in order to identify an action as meaningful, we must also engage with the wider field of meanings to which it belongs. Depending on how we understand these different elements within a field of meaning as relating to one another, we bring different aspects of the meaning of an action to the fore in the descriptions and interpretations we make of it.

All objectification within the human and social sciences involves a certain level of abstraction, as it involves stepping back from the stream of experiences in which we are pre-reflectively immersed and identifying some course of events as a determinate sequence of actions. Depending on which features of the course of events in question have been selected as significant and which we might have omitted or marginalised, the way in which action is represented as a determinate sequence of this kind will to some extent delimit the possibilities of understanding that are disclosed to us as interpreters. We need, therefore, to be conscious of the way in which action is represented as an object of reflection, even prior to any explicitly “interpretive” engagement we might have with action.

The issues of how action lends itself to objectification and the difference between linguistic meaning and our *experience* of action as meaningful are ones that Taylor is careful to address. Under Taylor’s account, action is meaningful insofar as it is embodied or articulated within a network of meanings in a way that makes it available for understanding by some subject. He is aware, however, that this definition of meaning is close to many definitions of linguistic meaning. With this in mind, he attempts to distinguish between the kind of meaning he considers as

specific to action – what he refers to as “experiential meaning” – and linguistic meaning by claiming that linguistic meaning is “of signifiers and... about a world of referents” (Taylor, 1979: 34). Taylor here draws attention to the way in which a linguistic statement is *about* something beyond itself, whereas action as we experience it in our day-to-day lives simply has meaning as *part of* our ongoing activities and social inter-actions.<sup>63</sup> Given this difference, it is important to understand the way in which experiential and linguistic meaning are related to one another, and how it is that we can bring meaningful action into linguistic discourse as an object of reflection.

### 3.4: The *Sprachlichkeit* of Action

Taylor claims that the possibility of bringing meaningful action to linguistic discourse lies in the ground shared in common by both linguistic and experiential meaning: that both “kinds” of meaning are rooted in “[t]he range of human desires, feelings, emotions, and hence meanings” that are definitive of human experience of life as meaningful. These aspects of human experience are themselves, according to Taylor, “inseparable from the distinctions and categories marked by the language people speak” (Taylor, 1979: 36-37). We cannot, therefore, think of there being two radically distinct kinds of meaning. While both “linguistic” and “experiential” meaning are different from one another in a number of important ways, and while it is important not to lose sight of these differences, both emerge from and are

---

<sup>63</sup> We may wish to be wary of the extent to which this distinction simplifies both our experience of language and action. The illocutionary and perlocutionary elements of the speech-act, for example, demonstrate one way in which linguistic meaning cannot be reduced to simply designating something outside of itself. Similarly, the notion of textual reference developed by Ricoeur is not one in which we think of the text as pointing to something *beyond* itself, but of disclosing something before us as readers.

inextricably part of how human beings understand themselves, other people and the world and societies of which they are part.

It would be wrong, therefore, to claim that linguistic and experiential meaning could be entirely heterogeneous. Given this, Taylor writes that “human behavior seen as action of agents who desire and are moved, who have goals and aspirations, necessarily offers a purchase for descriptions in terms of meaning” (Taylor, 1979: 38). The descriptions we might offer of meaningful human action remain, in a sense, abstractions insofar as they isolate and fix a course of events that we experience as meaningful only within the broader context of a life as it is lived. But the language in which this “objectification” of action takes place is an integral part of, and has its basis in, the same realm of human concerns and interests as those by which our actions and experiences are meaningful.

A similar relationship between linguistic and experiential meaning is sometimes expressed by reference to the “linguisticality” of experience. In Gadamerian terms, the linguistic condition of experience – *Sprachlichkeit* – refers to the “intimate unity of language and thought” (Gadamer, 1993: 402) definitive of human experience of the world. Gadamer argues that such an “intimate unity” must be a precondition of the possibility of conscious experience itself, and that understanding is a fundamentally verbal phenomenon.<sup>64</sup> The idea that our experience and understanding are the kind of things which find expression in language, and that our “meaningful” experience of the world is therefore intimately related to the possibility of bringing experience to language, is an important influence upon Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy. Ricoeur, however, conceives

---

<sup>64</sup> Gadamer’s version of *Sprachlichkeit*, however, makes no distinction between what we have termed “linguistic” and “experiential” meaning, claiming rather that linguistic expression “shares in the pure ideality of the meaning that communicates itself in it” (Gadamer, 1993: 392).

*Sprachlichkeit* in more modest terms than those of Gadamer's prioritisation of language as the universal medium of all understanding, allowing instead for the possibility of a more complicated and reciprocal relationship between "experiential" and "linguistic" meaning.<sup>65</sup>

For Ricoeur, linguistic understanding is neither the primary nor exclusive form that our experience of the world as meaningful might take place.<sup>66</sup> Rather, the possibility of speaking meaningfully and achieving understanding within verbal discourse is first premised upon our meaningful engagement with the world, including but not limited to linguistic phenomena. At the same time, however, the possibility of engaging in linguistic discourse (both verbal and textual) constitutes an important dimension of many of the practices and experiences in which we find ourselves as participants, and our "experiential" and "linguistic" understanding of these cannot therefore be easily separated from one another. Human relationships, for example, are not meaningful *because* we have various ways of talking about and categorising them, but our experience of them as meaningful is effectively inseparable from the various symbolic mediations – including linguistic discourses – which we inherit, adopt and create in order to communicate and understand these experiences.

Neither "experiential" nor "linguistic" meaning as we typically understand them can be conceived of in isolation. Both are rooted in the way we live our lives

---

<sup>65</sup> Even limiting ourselves to the relatively narrow realm of textual interpretation, Gadamer's position would seem to fail to reflect our *experience* of understanding something as meaningful. As argued by Deborah Cook in her paper "Reflections on Gadamer's Notion of Sprachlichkeit", the "understanding of words may well take place outside of the particular language game we are playing and be extralinguistic" (Cook, 1986: 90). Given this, Cook argues that *Sprachlichkeit* should instead be considered "a derived phenomenon... the externalized and communicable forms understanding and tradition... take once the reader is ready to share it with others" (Cook, 1986: 91).

<sup>66</sup> Ricoeur claims, for example, that "hermeneutic philosophy begins with the experience of art, which is not necessarily linguistic", and that "[t]exts, documents and monuments represent only one mediation [of historicised experience] among others" (Ricoeur, 1981c: 117).

with, for and amongst one another, in a world with many established practices and ways of living into which we are born and within which we have to find our way. So while experience, for Ricoeur, retains “an expressibility in principle” (Ricoeur, 1981c: 115) insofar as the languages we speak and understand are an integral part of our experience of the world around us, this is balanced against the presupposition that the “linguistic order” itself refers back “to the structure of experience” (Ricoeur, 1981c: 118). Within this framework it is possible to maintain the distinction between “linguistic” and “experiential” meaning, but without having to conceive of them as radically heterogeneous to one another. The relationship is rather a circular one in which language is only meaningful against a background of meaningful experience, but wherein our experience is developed and articulated via the kind of symbolic mediation we find in language.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, linguistic and experiential meaning are both intentional human phenomena rooted in the human condition, and neither of them would be as we know it without the other: if it were not grounded in meaningful experience, language would be an empty play of signs; similarly, our experience of the world would be condemned to remain inarticulate if it were not for the kind of symbolic mediation we find in language. The potential for the objectification of human experience, and particularly in bringing experience to language, is therefore an integral part of the way in which we experience life *as meaningful*. By objectifying action we step back from it as it is experienced immediately, and instead reflect upon it as meaningful. It is this act of reflection that Ricoeur describes as “the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be by means of the works which testify to this effort and this desire” (Ricoeur, 1989a: 17).

---

<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur writes, for example, that “[e]xperience can be said, it demands to be said. To bring it to language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself” (Ricoeur, 1981c: 115).

Taking action as an object of reflection is therefore an important means by which we as understanding subjects appropriate the meanings of our actions as our own, and by which we seek to explicate our understanding of action. One of the key ways in which we do this, especially within the context of the discourse of the human sciences, is by bringing action to language. This is still an abstraction of sorts from our pre-reflective experience of action, but not an illegitimate one.

Ricoeur claims that discourse “attempts, in all its usages, to carry an experience to language, a manner of inhabiting and of being-in-the-world, which precedes it and demands to be said” (Ricoeur, 1995: 38). It is the “surplus of sense in living experience” (Ricoeur, 1981c: 119) which hermeneutic interpretation seeks to explicate, via the kind of objectification that takes place in description. It is possible that Ricoeur is taking the “expressibility” of meaningful action for granted when he presents his idea of meaning in terms of the speech-act, simply using the speech-act as a way of categorising some of the ways in which action is meaningful and how this might be captured linguistically.<sup>68</sup> But if he is doing so he is not only offering a drastically simplified version of the relationship between action and language, but risks over-estimating the adequacy of description and obscuring precisely those elements of meaningful action that are most difficult, or even impossible, to articulate in language.

Due to the richness of experience, it is unlikely that any single interpretation or description of action will capture everything there might be to say about it. We need, therefore, to first acknowledge the complicated relationship between

---

<sup>68</sup> The ubiquity of *Sprachlichkeit* for Ricoeur is, for example, perhaps evident when he writes that “[e]very hermeneutics... culminates in the concept of *Sprachlichkeit*” (Ricoeur, 1981b: 78). We may then, to some extent, be justified in believing that the concept of *Sprachlichkeit* is taken for granted in the background of his comments regarding action and the speech-act, but even if this is the case it nevertheless demands explication before we can understand how the speech-act might begin to inform our understanding of the objectification of action.

meaningful action and our attempts to articulate this in language before we can hope to use linguistic and textual paradigms in order to explore and understand meaningful action. But, despite this, the “linguisticality” of action – the way in which action lends itself to expression and objectification in language – is of vital importance insofar as we wish to gain an explicit, critical and reflective understanding of the way in which action has meaning in our lives. It is this *Sprachlichkeit* of experience which permits the possibility of articulating meaningful action in language, and therefore of “fixing” action as an object of inquiry via the detour of description.

The purpose of this chapter has so far been to examine how “meaningful” human action might lend itself to fixation. Ricoeur’s appeal to speech-act theory attempts to do this by arguing for a *de facto* “mirroring” between the structure of meaningful sentences and meaningful action, but in doing so risks conflating the two. I have instead drawn upon the *Sprachlichkeit* of meaningful action as a way of articulating the relationship between meaningful action and its linguistic expression, doing so on the basis that the meaning of both action and language is rooted in the practices, intentionality and lived experiences of human existence. So although the meaning of action is not subsequent to or drawn from language, our understanding of action as meaningful is inseparable from the linguistic practices in which human experience is discussed and articulated.

If it is possible to “fix” action via linguistic description, I suggest, it is because both language and action are meaningful as part of wider human experience within the world and society. However, the notion of this *Sprachlichkeit* being the condition for bringing meaningful action to linguistic discourse leaves largely underdetermined the particular form these linguistic expressions will take, and thus

maintains a place for description as an active dimension of the objectification and interpretation of action. Articulating the relationship between action and language in terms of *Sprachlichkeit* therefore allows us to understand how action might lend itself to objectification in language, but without the stronger claim to have discovered any particular structure of action “mirrored” in these very linguistic expressions of action.

### 3.5: Meaningless Action

The possibility of bringing meaningful action to linguistic discourse as an “object” of inquiry is a vital premise within “The Model of the Text” and the attempt Ricoeur makes to apply textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action therein. However, the “fixation” of action as an object of inquiry, for which Ricoeur argues that the text is an appropriate model, is not necessarily always centred upon the idea of *meaning* in the way that both “The Model of the Text” and my own appeal to *Sprachlichkeit* are. Some thinkers, particularly within those areas of sociology and psychology influenced by positivism, advocate a conception of human action in which the “meaning” of action is considered insignificant, and even as an obstacle to the kind of objectivity to which scientific inquiry should aspire. Rather, they hope to be able to explain human behaviour by appeal to objective and observable categories, independent of reference to the self-understanding of those being observed. If we are to appeal to the “linguisticality” of action in order to support Ricoeur’s aim of using textual hermeneutics to illuminate the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences, it is important that we do not take the meaningfulness of action for granted, and are able to justify our interest in the “meaning” of action against the challenge potentially posed to this by positivism.

Within psychology one such “positivistic” approach is behaviourism, in which action is considered not as an intentional phenomenon, but as a set of physical regularities that occur in response to the environmental conditions in which they are manifest. The proposed advantage of this kind of approach to studying human behaviour is that it renders the language in which the analysis of action takes place morally neutral and objective, thereby allowing us to examine behaviour with the kind of rigour commonly associated with the natural sciences.

The most prominent proponent of behaviourism of this kind is arguably B.F. Skinner. Skinner’s behaviourism accounts for action in terms of “operant conditioning”: the way in which behaviour is reputedly caused by “reinforcement” – in which the consequences of some behaviour cause it to occur with greater frequency – and “punishment” – in which behaviour has consequences that cause it to occur less frequently. Under a behaviourist account of action “the environment performs the functions previously assigned to feelings and introspectively observed inner states of the organism” (Skinner, 1974: 248). According to Skinner it is the environmental conditions that determine our behaviour, and, by comparison, the subjective experience we have of “motives and purposes are at best the effects of reinforcements... when a person is ‘aware of his purpose,’ he is feeling or observing introspectively a condition produced by reinforcement” (Skinner, 1974: 56-57).

Skinner’s behaviourism stands in obvious opposition to the way in which we have so far discussed behaviour as being meaningful. Even if the meaning of an action has a certain level of “autonomy”<sup>69</sup> and cannot be reduced purely to subjective intention, the meaning of action is still inevitably framed in terms of being purposive and having human significance. The language of intentionality, and our other

---

<sup>69</sup> The “autonomy” of action is discussed by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 206-209), and in more detail in the second chapter of this thesis.

“everyday” ways of discussing action, therefore still play an irreducible part in understanding and analysing the *meaning* of any action. In contrast to this, Skinner claims that our preoccupation with inner states and subjectivity has simply “stood in the way of the inspection of more important things” (Skinner, 1974: 165). For Skinner, there is “no evidence of... inner causes... except the behaviour attributed to them” (Skinner, 1974: 159). We should therefore focus purely on observable behaviour if we want to have an “objective” understanding of human action, and couching our inquiry in terms of inner or mental states can only cloud this observation. The objectivity proper to scientific inquiry, for the thoroughgoing behaviourist, can only be achieved by discussing behaviour purely in terms of the way that empirically observable behaviour is affected by empirically observable environmental conditions.

A similar emphasis upon objectivity, and the accompanying marginalisation of our “everyday” conceptions of the meaning of action, is evident in the sociological positivism of Emile Durkheim.<sup>70</sup> Durkheim argues that sociological inquiry has to aspire to the same kind of objectivity achieved by the natural sciences. As such, the starting point of his work was to attempt to define the proper object of sociology. This involves identifying trends in social behaviour that exist independently of the behaviour of any particular individual. Durkheim referred to these as “social facts”, and defined a social fact as “*any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint*”, or something in society “*which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an*

---

<sup>70</sup> It is worth, however, distinguishing Durkheim’s exclusion of psychological facts from sociology from Skinner’s reductionist approach. Durkheim rejects psychological concepts – including the “everyday” concepts which characterise our experience of action as meaningful – because he thinks that social facts are not psychological phenomena. Skinner, by comparison, is not looking for any such distinction and argues instead that psychological phenomena can be explained purely in terms of the tenets of behaviourism.

*existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations*" (Durkheim, 1982: 59). Within this model, we *explain* social action in terms of the social facts which exert their power upon us as individuals. The coercive power of social facts is in turn seen as evidence of their objective existence, and as such means that they "cannot be confused... with psychical phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness" (Durkheim, 1982: 52). By comparison, such psychical phenomena are merely "crudely formed concepts" (Durkheim, 1982: 60) that work to confuse any attempt at scientific inquiry into social phenomena.

For Durkheim the solution to this confusion lies in abandoning our everyday understanding of the meaning of social phenomena in favour of a more "scientific" form of discourse in which social phenomena are "considered in themselves, detached from the conscious beings who form their own mental representations of them" (Durkheim, 1982: 70). Durkheim refers to studying social phenomena in this way as studying them "from the outside" (Durkheim, 1982: 70), which in this sense refers to a desire to limit properly sociological discourse to discussing that which is publically observable and empirically measurable. Consequently there can be no room for speaking about action in terms of the intentions or motives that accompany our experience of social phenomena: if social facts originate outside of the individual mind, outside of the realm of psychology, then to speak of how they are experienced and felt psychically can only confuse matters. In contrast to this, by focussing on the external and observable aspects of social phenomena, Durkheim believes that "in order to be objective science" sociology "must start from sense-perceptions and not from concepts that have been formed independently from it... It must therefore create new concepts and to do so must lay aside common notions and the words used to express them" (Durkheim, 1982: 81).

Although they are importantly different in a number of ways, the work of both Durkheim and Skinner is marked by the belief that the way to achieve scientific objectivity in the study of human action is to eliminate the kind of intentionalist or mentalistic discourse that surrounds and is used to make sense of action in everyday life, and to emulate the methods of the natural sciences. It is perhaps misleading to claim that these conceptions of action are “meaningless”. Psychology and sociology, whether on the scale of the individual or of society, are both deeply concerned with explaining human behaviour, and therefore must believe that action can be *understood* in some form or another, and therefore have some kind of “meaning” when considered within the correct context.

But it is undeniable that both behaviourism and sociology influenced by positivism, in the forms outlined above, do not conceive of action as meaningful in the way we would recognise in our day-to-day lives, or even as something within which subjective and intersubjective meaning are a relevant factor for understanding at all. The elimination of meaning in this manner is motivated by the understandable desire to make the study of human behaviour as objective as possible. However, the elimination of everyday meaning in favour of explanatory concepts and terminology specific to their fields of study arguably creates more problems than it solves, and ultimately could be seen to make such approaches to the study of human action and behaviour untenable.

One thinker who has argued to this effect is Peter Winch. Winch claims that any approach to explaining action that does not at least engage with how agents understand their own behaviour is doomed to fail. He objects, for example, to the identification of various different purification rituals with one another as an example of a single social phenomenon on the basis that this represents an “illegitimate”

abstraction (Winch, 1990: 106) that fails to capture the contextual sensitivities that make any action precisely what it is. Winch argues, by contrast, that it is via reference to the “system of ideas or mode of life” (Winch, 1990: 108) of which an action is part, expressed by our everyday conceptions of meaning, that we identify it as the particular action that it is. Likewise, in “The Model of the Text” Ricoeur is careful to emphasise that recognising the “motivational” and “purposive” dimensions of action are central to understanding action *qua* action, and not simply as behavioural phenomena. Given this, he argues that any explanation we offer to make sense of action must be the kind that can “afford a motive understood as a reason for... and not as a cause” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213-14). Human action, for Ricoeur, should always be framed within the “subjective” language of purpose and motivation if it is to be recognised as action, and is therefore irreducibly a *meaningful* phenomenon.

It is not simply that the objectivity aspired to in the work of thinkers such as Skinner and Durkheim fails to fully do justice to the phenomena they purport to explain, but that it is impossible to identify an action as an action without reference to the kind of intentional concepts that such approaches hope to eliminate in the name of objectivity. The problem we face is that any attempt to achieve the kind of objectivity associated with the natural sciences within the human sciences will necessarily involve at least tacitly drawing upon the “crudely formed concepts” that we might have otherwise hoped to marginalise.<sup>71</sup> A similar observation is entailed by Ryle’s distinction between thick and thin description, in which it is only possible to identify some physical – some empirically observable – event as an *action* by

---

<sup>71</sup> Ricoeur makes broadly similar criticisms of Skinner’s behaviourism when he claims that behaviourism overlooks the “conditions of possibility of a discourse about human action” (Ricoeur, 1973: 170), on the basis that “the network of concepts which we use to speak of *human action* in ordinary language is not the conceptual framework of either behaviourism or mentalistic psychology” (Ricoeur, 1973: 167).

drawing upon socially established conventions of meaning, and that any attempt to understand action that fails to account for this will necessarily end up *misunderstanding* action.

We should not, however, necessarily dismiss the work of thinkers such as Skinner and Durkheim out of hand. Although the explanatory methodologies described above prove, upon closer critical inspection, to be deeply problematic, the emphasis on the importance of objectivity in the study of human action is something we must take seriously. It is important for us to be able to distinguish between “good” and “bad” interpretations of action, and to be able to submit both human action and the interpretation of human action to critical analysis. It is a desire for objectivity which informs such thinking. However, and as Winch demonstrates, there is a fundamental difference between natural and human phenomena insofar as any science of human or social phenomena must be able to account for the way in which action is meaningful *for the agents of action* as well as the observer. It is clear, therefore, that if we wish to achieve objectivity in the human and social sciences, we must look for a form of objectivity more suited to the subject matter at hand.

Ricoeur’s textual model for the interpretation of action, via his reformulation of the dialectic of “explanation” and “understanding”, provides us with one way of conceiving such a form of objectivity.<sup>72</sup> It is by means of the fixation of action as an object of inquiry that the possibility of explanation arises, but only as part of a broader interpretive process in which action is understood as fundamentally

---

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Ricoeur’s discussion of the same in relation to the interpretation of meaningful action in “The Model of the Text” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 209ff.) The relationship between explanation and understanding, thus conceived is also presented within my discussion of Ricoeur’s interpretive theory in the first chapter of this thesis (sections 1.2 and 1.3.2).

embedded within intersubjectively established frameworks of meaning.<sup>73</sup> Herein, relying as it does upon temporarily suspending our accedence to the given meaning of an action, explanation remains an objective approach to the analysis of action, but without having to position ourselves as fundamentally “outside” of that which we are seeking to understand.

To explain action according to this model does not therefore involve rejecting the “everyday” and “mentalistic” concepts by which we typically understand action as meaningful in our lives, but attempting to explicate the conditions under which action is understood in the way that it is (including that of which we would usually remain unaware). As such, explanation in terms of “social facts” or “environmental conditions” within the interpretation of action could not, as it is in the positivist tradition, be conceived of as an explanation of the *causes* of action, but rather as an explanation of some of the factors that allow us to *make sense* of an action as *meaningful*. Thus Ricoeur’s model of interpretation allows for the possibility of meeting two of obligations faced by interpreters of action: to recognise action as intentional and meaningful for those to whom it is attributable, but also to engage critically and consider how alternative explanations and critical perspectives can inform our understanding of meaningful action.

The mediation of our interpretive understanding by explanation is described by Ricoeur as a “rectification” to subjective approaches in which the meaning of action has primacy, but not as a replacement. The objectivism of thinkers such as

---

<sup>73</sup> Ricoeur even remains open to the possibility that a broadly behaviourist method of explanation could have a role to play in the study of action, claiming that “the philosophical task is not to deny the concept and project of a technology of behaviour, but to locate it correctly within a larger framework” (Ricoeur, 1973: 172-173). May Brodbeck’s essay “Meaning and Action” (Brodbeck, 1963), by taking “thick” verbal expressions of action as part of the behavioural data of interest, could be seen to represent an attempt to incorporate the meaning of action into a behaviourist framework. Whether this adequately acknowledges the character of “meaning” in action, or preserves the “neutrality” of behaviourism, is perhaps still questionable.

Skinner and Durkheim obscures the way in which engaging with human action is, by definition, to engage with the meaning of action as it is captured by the “common notions” and “crudely formed concepts” in which it is expressed by those to whom the action is attributable. Explanation, as conceived by Ricoeur, has the potential to supplement and even transform our understanding of action as a meaningful phenomenon, but is irreducibly rooted in the very meaningfulness of action as it is experienced by human beings in social environments. Any attempt to objectify action which involves excluding this aspect of its meaning is therefore untenable. It is, contrary to this, precisely the inseparability of the meaning of action from the language in which we articulate this meaning – the *Sprachlichkeit* of action – that provides us with the possibility of constituting action as an object of reflective inquiry of which it is possible to offer an explanatory account.

### 3.6: Conclusion

How meaningful action is constituted as an object of inquiry, and how this influences our understanding of the action at hand, is an important consideration for the interpretive human and social sciences. Ricoeur attempts to articulate the way in which meaningful action can be brought to discourse in this manner by making appeal to speech-act theory. In doing so he claims that meaningful action shares a structure with the speech-act, and argues that it is this structure that lends meaningful action to objectification. As I have argued, this approach is problematic, especially in regards to the way in which it obscures the role of representation and linguistic description in constituting action as an object within the human and social sciences. An appeal to the *Sprachlichkeit* of action is, in a sense, a more conservative way of trying to articulate this same notion, in that it does not commit us to the idea that the

experiential meaning of action shares a fundamental “structure” with linguistic meaning, and that we can see this structure “mirrored” in action-sentences.

Rather, I wish to claim only that our experience of action as meaningful is inseparable from the modes of expression we find for “experiential meaning”, and in particular from the language in which we bring meaningful action to discourse. This formulation of the way in which meaningful action lends itself to objectification preserves the importance of recognising the richness of experiential meaning, and therefore also the way in which different aspects of the meaning of action can be brought to the fore, or left obscure, depending on the ways in which we describe and interpret action. Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model of the interpretation of meaningful action must, therefore, be capable of incorporating a reflective self-awareness of the way in which the fixation of action as an object within the human and social sciences can play a constitutive role in how we subsequently come to interpret its meaning. Engaging thoroughly both with the problems posed and the opportunities of understanding afforded by the fixation of action in this manner is a vital part of understanding the meaningfulness of action as an object of inquiry within the human and social sciences.

## **Chapter Four: Critical Description and Tradition**

Within the interpretive human and social sciences action is often represented through discourse. This allows the construction of descriptive, expiatory and critical accounts of the way in which people act and interact with one another. Linguistic discourse – both oral and written – plays an integral role in how the human and social sciences constitute meaningful action as an “object” of inquiry. In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur sees the “objectification” of action as a precondition to any reflective or critical understanding of action, and claims that this process of objectification is equivalent to the fixation of discourse in the text. On the basis of this he further argues that the text can serve as a paradigm for action under the condition of objectification, and that textual hermeneutics can therefore provide a model for the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences.

However, the constitution of action as an object of critical reflective inquiry demands that we offer some particular and determinate account or representation of the action we are seeking to understand. In offering such an account we inevitably favour certain features of the action we are representing, and exclude or marginalise others. The features of action that we choose to focus upon depend on value judgments concerning what is most significant or central to the meaning of the action at hand. The way in which we choose to represent and “fix” action as an object of inquiry can therefore play an important constitutive role in how we interpret action as meaningful.

In this chapter I discuss how the description of action within the interpretive human sciences is to some extent an “interpretive” activity, and the way in which the practices of interpreters within the human and social sciences must therefore take account of the constitutive dimension of description as part of the interpretation and

understanding of action as an object of critical inquiry. I will argue that within “The Model of the Text” itself Ricoeur fails to adequately come to terms with the role played by description within the interpretation of action, but also that Ricoeur’s textual model of the interpretation of meaningful action, by emphasising the importance of the objectification of action to the interpretive task, provides us with a useful resource for acknowledging and understanding the role played by description as part of the constitution of action as an object of inquiry.

#### 4.1: The Objectification of Action

In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur addresses the question of how textual hermeneutics might serve as a model for the interpretation of action in the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The term “*Geisteswissenschaften*” denotes a category of subjects encompassing both the social and human sciences, and is traditionally set in opposition to the natural sciences, or the “*Naturwissenschaften*”. However, any conception of the interpretation of meaningful action that claims to be uniformly applicable across the various disciplines covered by the term *Geisteswissenschaften* could not but give rise to a seriously inadequate approach to the study of meaningful human behaviour. Different disciplines within the human and social sciences focus upon action in different ways, and their interpretive methodologies and frameworks serve to draw attention to different aspects of action. There are, of course, plenty of overlaps between different academic disciplines.<sup>74</sup> But unless we pay attention to the ways in which the different human and social sciences make different interpretive demands and make use of different interpretive schemata, we are

---

<sup>74</sup> Ethnography and anthropology, for example, are intricately related to one another even if they have different particular concerns.

unlikely to develop an effective methodology for the interpretation of meaningful action.

The climate of thought, established interests and standardised methods within any interpretive discipline will, to some extent, serve to direct the nature of the inquiry in which its practitioners engage.<sup>75</sup> The different interests and techniques that inform the direction of interpretation will, to some extent, also influence the judgements made by the interpreter regarding the meaning of any given set of actions. In addition to exerting an influence over this explicitly interpretive activity, however, the framework within which an interpreter works can also play a role in how she comes to describe action. “The Model of the Text” does not address the issue of how different social groups, academic disciplines and individual interpreters might “fix” action as an object in different ways. Nor does Ricoeur attend to the way in which different descriptions and descriptive methods might serve to illuminate or obscure different aspects of action in different ways. If “The Model of the Text” is to have any applicative relevance, then it must be supplemented by an account of the way in which the *constitution of action as an object of interpretation* is itself affected by the different interpretive concerns prevalent within different interpretive disciplines.

The importance of “objectification” to reflective inquiry into the meaning of action is recognised by Ricoeur within “The Model of the Text” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203), and is a central part of the analogy he draws between the interpretation of texts and the interpretation of action. In our lives, and as we experience it on a moment-

---

<sup>75</sup> E.g. Weber writes that “the problems of the social sciences are selected by the value-relevance of the phenomena treated” (Weber, 1949: 21). “Value-relevance”, in this context, refers to “the philosophical interpretation of that specifically scientific ‘interest’ which determines the selection of a given subject-matter and the problems of an empirical analysis... together with historical experience, [this] shows that cultural (i.e., evaluative) interests give purely empirical scientific work its direction” (Weber, 1949: 22).

by-moment basis, human action is typically transient and passing: I will wave to greet a friend passing me in the street, they will return my salutation and we will continue on with our respective lives, the meaning of our interaction effectively exhausted in its enactment as a transaction. The vast majority of human behaviour is transitory in this manner, and passes unremarked upon and with little conscious consideration. When we reflect upon action, however, we introduce an element of distance from the immediacy of our pre-reflective engagement with the world, taking some particular entity or series of events as an “object” of reflection. Within the human and social sciences this “objectification” takes place far more explicitly, with some particular action or set of actions selected and represented as an object of inquiry. It is this “fixation” of action as an object that Ricoeur considers analogous to the fixation of discourse in the text.

When *description* is involved in the objectification of meaningful action, it is also an act of composition and construal. In making a description of some particular action, we attempt to account for those features of the situation at hand that allow us to understand it as meaningful. In doing so we also inevitably overlook a number of things that we might consider incidental or insignificant to understanding the action we are describing. However, because description is selective in this manner, different descriptions will sometimes pick up upon different aspects of the situation at hand, or differ in terms of how they perceive different elements of the situation as relating to one another. This, in turn, can exert an influence over our subsequent interpretive activities and consequently our understanding of the action at hand. It is therefore important that we recognise the way in which different interpretive interests can play a constitutive role in how we come to perceive and understand the action in which we are interested.

The task of describing and accounting for a public protest, for example, could potentially be approached in a number of different ways depending on the interpretive framework within which its interpretation is undertaken. A sociologist influenced by the Frankfurt School might consider the protest as a form of “provocation” with the goal of the “immediate mobilization of many individuals for the sake of mobilization itself” (Habermas, 1971: 26), and consequently argue that the actions of the protestors should be interpreted within a framework of political and ideological conflict as an attempt to politicise the public sphere. Without necessarily disagreeing with this characterisation of the aims of the protest, a sociologist influenced by ethnomethodology might nevertheless attempt to make sense of the same event by observing the way in which the organisation and meaning of actions within the protest can be understood as a product of the “ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices” (Garfinkel, 1967: 11) evident in the transactional behaviour of the protestors. An historian offering an account of the same protest might, alternatively, take an interest in the ways in which this particular protest can be seen as part of a historical tradition of public protest, and concentrate primarily on a narrative which might be told connecting contemporary protest to protests that have preceded it.

Each of these approaches to the interpretation of our hypothetical protest is capable of helping us to understand the actions involved therein, but the way in which each approach does this involves looking for and prioritising different aspects of the situation at hand. In each case the observer in question will likely concentrate on different aspects of the protest taken as a whole, attributing greater or different significance to certain features over others *depending on the way in which they*

*attend to the concrete situation at hand.*<sup>76</sup> The kind of attention we, as interpreters, bring to the table within interpretation has the potential to influence not only the conclusions we draw from our observations, but also the descriptions we make of action understood *as an object of inquiry*.

The importance of how we attend to action to our understanding of it is something of which Ricoeur shows awareness, even in his earliest work. In the introduction to *Freedom and Nature*, for example, Ricoeur writes about the way in which empirical psychology works via “the reduction of *acts* (with their intentionality and their reference to an Ego) to *facts*” (Ricoeur, 1966: 10), and that this reduction is only “made legitimate by the type of interest represented by the constitution of empirical science as a science of facts” (Ricoeur, 1966: 11). Ricoeur argues, however, that understanding voluntary action is impossible under a mechanistic schema such as this, and that understanding action as intentional thus demands “a change of attitude, for a passage from the ‘natural’ viewpoint to the ‘phenomenological’ attitude” (Ricoeur, 1966: 221).<sup>77</sup> Here we see Ricoeur concerned with the different ways in which it is possible to attend to action, and the consequences this has for how we understand it.

The distinction made in this case is between action understood merely in terms of observable behaviour via a “mechanistic” conceptual schema, and action understood as meaningful and as attributable to a responsible agent. This, however,

---

<sup>76</sup> Which, it is important to remember, is not to say that each of these approaches have to be exclusive, or that their respective attempts to represent the protest or the actions of the protestors as an “object” of reflection amount to describing something different in kind in each case. More often than not, different approaches to describing and interpreting some course of events, such as our hypothetical protest, will be able to complement one another and make explicit some aspect of that which is being described which other approaches might otherwise take for granted or overlook completely.

<sup>77</sup> Ricoeur also discusses the tendency of empirical psychology to turn “acts” into “facts” in *Freud and Philosophy*. Therein he writes that psychoanalysis and positivistic psychology “diverge from the very beginning, at the level of the initial notion of fact and of inference from facts” (Ricoeur, 1970: 359).

and as gestured towards in the above examples of how we might understand a protest, far from exhausts the different ways in which we can attend to and describe action, and the notion of how we attend to action is something which is left largely unaddressed in “The Model of the Text”. We must, therefore, devote further attention to the objectification of action, glossed over by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text”, in order to understand how the textual model might inform our interpretive practices within the human and social sciences. Only by correcting Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model as it is presented in “The Model of the Text” through the addition of an explicit awareness of the role played by “disciplinary prejudice” in the fixation of action as an object of inquiry, can we hope to gain a better sense of the role played by description within interpretive inquiry.

#### 4.1.1: “Leaving a mark” and the Problem of Description

In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur identifies the objectification of action as a matter of its “preservation”, analogous to the way in which spoken discourse is fixed and preserved via inscription in writing. In order to make sense of this analogy between the inscription of discourse as writing and the “fixation” of action, he makes appeal to the way in which “[w]e say that such-and-such event *left its mark* on its time” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 205). This metaphor of action “leaving a mark” on time, for Ricoeur, points towards the way in which action can persist beyond the moment of its eventuation in a manner analogous to the persistence of discourse in the text. It is upon “social time” that action is inscribed, and this is manifest in a number of ways including formal records of action, the “informal analogue of these formal records which we call reputation”, and even history itself (Ricoeur, 1981h: 207). Action has

“left a mark” when it contributes to one of these many and varied “*documents* of human action” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 206).

At this point Ricoeur does not specifically have action considered as a formal object of the human and social sciences in mind. Although scholarly work is undoubtedly one important way in which meaningful action is recorded and made available to be understood, it remains but part of a wide spectrum of ways in which human action is “inscribed” and “fixed” within social time. When Ricoeur mentions “history”, he has in mind not “*Historie*” but “*Geschichte*”.<sup>78</sup> And the records via which human action becomes a “document” are not primarily the original research of sociologists and ethnographers working out in the field, but “those which are kept by institutions like employment offices, schools, banks, and the police” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 207).<sup>79</sup> Ricoeur’s appeal to the metaphor of “leaving a mark” is intended as a gesture towards the way in which action can have enduring significance within our everyday existence, and that understanding the ways in which action is meaningful involves engaging with the “documents” within which action is fixed and recorded.<sup>80</sup> It therefore precedes any question of how action might be “inscribed” as part of the work of any particular individual, group or institution.

---

<sup>78</sup> The important distinction here is between history understood as academic inquiry into past events by historians (*Historie*), and history understood as the accumulated and largely pre-theoretical understanding we have of life as it was lived in the past (*Geschichte*). Given that Ricoeur identifies history as something which precedes and exceeds “the archives which are intentionally written down by the memorialists” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 207), it would seem to be the latter conception of history that he intends at this point.

<sup>79</sup> Although it is also worth noting that these same “institutional” records are commonly used as resources by researchers within the human and social sciences.

<sup>80</sup> Ricoeur arguably risks obscuring the fact that most human action never gets recorded as a “document” in this manner, and is in fact best understood as meaningful in terms of being a transient and transactional event enacted within some social setting. This difference between reflective and pre-reflective understanding of action is discussed in greater depth in chapter five of this thesis via the lens of ethnmethodology.

But even if this helps to explain the apparent looseness of Ricoeur's account of the "inscription" of action, it does not make it any less problematic in terms of understanding how different methods of objectification may influence our understanding of action. This preliminary account of the "inscription" of action upon time, designed only to provide *prima facie* support for Ricoeur's claim that meaningful action can (and does) become "fixed" in a manner analogous to the fixation of discourse in texts, does not acknowledge the way in which even these "documents" of action presuppose some kind of *selective* attention, nor the fact that the methods and techniques by which records and documents of action are produced can affect how we understand them. Insofar as the human and social sciences seek to understand meaningful action, they must also determine how the "fixation" of action may affect our understanding of it, lest they fail to account for our own activities as interpreters of action.

Ricoeur's attempt to articulate the way in which action lends itself to inscription in terms of the speech-act, as I have previously argued,<sup>81</sup> risks conflating action with the language in which action is described, thus obscuring the role that description plays within the human sciences. I have instead suggested that we should think of the way action lends itself to objectification in terms of its *Sprachlichkeit*; the way that the meaning of action is amenable to linguistic expression.<sup>82</sup> Whilst Ricoeur's appropriation of speech-act theory led him to claim to have isolated a "structure" underlying meaningful action, in virtue of which it could then be objectified, an appeal to *Sprachlichkeit* takes the possibility of expressing meaningful action in linguistic descriptions to be inextricably tied to the modes of expression we find for "experiential meaning". The notion of

---

<sup>81</sup> Chapter three, section 3.1 of this thesis.

<sup>82</sup> Chapter three, section 3.4 of this thesis.

*Sprachlichkeit* therefore preserves an *in principle* expressibility for meaningful action, but without claiming to have discovered any particular “structure” held in common with language underlying the possibility of its expression. This, in turn, leaves room for us to recognise the important constitutive role played by *description* in how action is presented to us as an object of interpretation within the human and social sciences.

Identifying any example of human behaviour as an “action” *per se* involves engaging with it as meaningful: to recognise some gesture as a wave, for example, involves being able to distinguish it as a meaningful gesture, distinct from someone merely flailing a hand around in an effort to ward away a fly. Even in our everyday lives, offering an account of some action relies upon engaging with some existing system of meanings by which we recognise any particular action as itself, and within which our descriptions of action make sense. Some level of understanding must, therefore, precede any overt form of interpretation in which we might engage. Similarly, the possibility of describing action presupposes that we have some kind of understanding of what we are describing, a starting point upon which our description is based. Any description we give of an action will involve drawing upon these presuppositions about its meaning and the pre-acceptance of certain discursive frameworks or modes of being within which the description makes sense. This poses no problem in our day-to-day lives. If we wish to give an account of action to someone, it is precisely the ability to fall back on a shared system of meanings that makes communication possible.

When we engage critically with action, however, we need to be able to explicate the cultural and social presuppositions against which our descriptions are made, and to understand the ways in which these presuppositions might shape both

our descriptive and interpretive activities. We may also, as interpreters of action, have reason to focus on particular aspects of action and employ some particular descriptive schema to this end. In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur discusses human action as “a limited field of possible constructions” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 213), and touches upon the importance of construing the “motivational basis” and “desirability-characteristics” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 214) of action as part of its representation and interpretation. Beyond this, however, he gives no indication of the kind of concerns which we might bring to bear upon the descriptive fixation of action as an object of inquiry. This may simply be because, in “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur is discussing the interpretation of action at a fairly abstract level and doesn’t wish to delimit the possibilities of description open to interpreters working within different and varying fields of inquiry.<sup>83</sup>

However, the broad scope of application intended within “The Model of the Text” hardly discharges the necessity of engaging with the methods by which action is constituted as an “object” in practice. Elsewhere<sup>84</sup> Ricoeur does demonstrate a greater sensitivity towards the importance of methods of representation to how we understand meaningful human action within particular forms of inquiry. In particular, Ricoeur demonstrates a sustained interest in the role that narrativity has to play in how we understand historical events. Even this, however, does not represent

---

<sup>83</sup> Again, it is also perhaps important here that we take the intellectual climate within which “The Model of the Text” was composed into account. The “abstract” level at which Ricoeur addresses the objectification of action here may be related to the fact that at the time of writing “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur was engaged in an ongoing debate regarding the place of structural analysis within the human and social sciences, and thus was less interested in focussing upon particular methods of objectification than he was upon the relationship between structuralism and hermeneutics conceived as broad philosophical approaches to understanding and analysing human action.

<sup>84</sup> E.g. In “The Narrative Function”, for example, Ricoeur writes that “historicity comes to language only so far as we tell stories or tell history” (Ricoeur, 1981j: 294). This idea, and the relationship between our understanding of time and narrativity, is developed further within his three volume work *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur also touches upon the selectivity inherent to the representation of action in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, where he states that “there is interpretation at all levels of the historiographical operation” including at the “documentary level with the selection of sources” (Ricoeur, 2004: 235).

a targeted attempt to articulate a framework for the description of human action in any particular field of inquiry.

Such a project is perhaps more obviously evident in the work of sociologist John B. Thompson who, influenced in part by Ricoeur's hermeneutic thought, sketches a conceptual framework for understanding the social structuration of action which identifies certain aspects of social contexts – e.g. spatio-temporal settings, distribution of capital and other resources, institutionalised rules and conventions etc. – as particularly important for grasping “the social features of the contexts within which individuals act and interact” (Thompson, 1990: 150). An adequate description of human action is, for Thompson, one which attends most closely to those features of a social setting that help constitute it as a “social context” of this sort. By providing a framework such as this, Thompson provides a resource for engaging in a particular kind of interpretive inquiry, but also, to some extent, for construing action in accordance with particular schematised interests relevant to the kind of inquiry in which the interpreter is engaged.

Practitioners within the social and human sciences, as well as engaging with the conventions and practices of the social groups which they study are also always engaged with the traditions, conventions and practices of their own academic discipline. It is against the background of these inherited standards of practice and traditions of thought that the individual interpreter of human action – whether sociologist, anthropologist, historian or philosopher – comes to engage with and describe particular cases of meaningful action, and in light of which they attempt to make sense of what they observe. Such *disciplinary prejudices* can, if drawn upon without care, end up distorting our understanding of that which we are interpreting by leading us wrongly to subsume the phenomena we observe under unsuitable

conceptual categories. Disciplinary prejudices, however, also serve as the ground upon which critical inquiry takes place. It is important, therefore, that we attempt to take into account both the conceptual network upon which the description of action is premised, and the way these descriptions work to both permit and delimit the kind of interpretations of action that we might make.

#### 4.1.2: Gadamer and Prejudice

The notion of “prejudice”, in this context, does not primarily refer to the psychology of the individual researcher, nor does it necessarily imply any form of institutional discrimination in the negative sense typically associated with the word “prejudice”. It is instead the idea that our understanding is shaped by ideas inherited from the traditions of thought in which we are engaged, the existence of which precedes the exercise of our own judgement. The notion of “disciplinary prejudice” in this context, therefore, refers to the idea that inquiry within the human sciences involves engaging in an intellectual *tradition*, and that practitioners within different academic disciplines are influenced by the work and theory that precedes them. The productive potential of these prejudices is recognised by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, where he argues that prejudices of this kind can be “productive of knowledge” (Gadamer, 1993: 279) insofar as they lay the groundwork for judgement.

“Prejudice” of this Gadamerian kind is an idea with which Ricoeur is familiar.<sup>85</sup> Within “The Model of the Text”, however, there is no explicit reference to the role played by prejudice within interpretation. In what follows I will draw upon this Gadamerian sense of “prejudice” in order to articulate how prejudice

---

<sup>85</sup> Ricoeur discusses it most explicitly when he is dealing directly with the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer; e.g. in the essay “Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology”, where Ricoeur confronts the hermeneutic approach of Gadamer with the more overtly “critical” philosophy of Jürgen Habermas.

affects understanding, and to suggest how an awareness of prejudice needs to be incorporated into Ricoeur's textual model not only as part of the interpretation of action, but also at the level of the initial "fixation" of action as an object of inquiry.

Prejudice in the sense at hand can be productive of knowledge because "our attitudes and behaviour" are unavoidably shaped by the attitudes and behaviour of those who have preceded us, by what Gadamer refers to as "tradition". The centrality of tradition as a productive element of understanding means that, for Gadamer, tradition has an "authority" (Gadamer, 1993: 280) that we can and must rely upon as part of the exercise of our own judgement. The legitimacy of this authority, however, requires that tradition does not persist merely "because of the inertia of what once existed", but that it is "affirmed, embraced, cultivated" and taken over freely by those to whom it has fallen. He accordingly describes the preservation of tradition as an "act of reason" (Gadamer, 1993: 281). Arguably, Gadamer is unduly optimistic about the amount of reason involved in the continuation of tradition, and there are plenty of traditions and customs that seem to survive primarily through momentum of belief. Hannah Arendt, for example, takes a more cautious attitude towards the notion of "prejudice", arguing that "genuine" prejudice "conceals some previously formed judgement which originally had its own appropriate and legitimate experiential basis, and which evolved into a prejudice only because it was dragged through time without its ever being re-examined or revised" (Arendt, 2005: 100-01).

When the element of reason is missing from our engagement with prejudice – when we fail to engage critically with the traditions to which we belong – prejudice is no longer productive of knowledge, and instead takes on the negative sense with which we are more commonly acquainted in our day-to-day lives. In persisting as

“prejudice”, ideas and judgements which once had legitimate application become abstracted from these conditions and instead work to distort our engagement with the world around us, and to preclude the exercise of our own judgement. It is undeniable that such naïve recourse to prejudice will at least sometimes lead us into error, and it is for this reason that Gadamer emphasises that the authority of tradition as legitimate only on condition that it is cultivated and renewed by those who participate in it.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of tradition as a precondition of the exercise of our own judgements and as part of how we understand the world around us means that we cannot overlook the role played by disciplinary prejudice as part of the description and interpretation of meaningful action. The false hope that we might finally “free” ourselves from every form of prejudice is one that merely allows our prejudices to dominate our thought uncontrolled. The ideal of “objectivity”, conceived of as a complete freedom from prejudice, is therefore counterproductive to understanding because it blinds us to the “productive” dimension of prejudice: “A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his procedures and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances... will fail to see what manifests itself by their light” (Gadamer, 1993: 360). We need, instead, to be aware and vigilant of the power that “prejudice” has over us so that we might understand the way in which our intellectual and cultural prejudices influence our engagement with meaningful action.

---

<sup>86</sup> The very notion of an academic discipline is perhaps one of the more paradigmatic examples of how such “authoritative” tradition can function: Practitioners of any academic discipline develop and respond to the work of those who precede them, but do so critically and in order not simply to preserve a tradition, but to correct it, renew it, contribute something further to it and, by this, maintain its legitimacy as a tradition upon which others might draw.

#### 4.1.3: Tradition and the Description of Action

The role played by “prejudice” within the interpretation of meaningful action means that it is vital that the methodologies of the human sciences incorporate a level of self-reflective criticism. Ricoeur does argue that the interpretive encounter is marked in part by “a moment of distanciation in the relation of the self to itself” within which “a critique of the illusions of the subject” becomes an essential part of interpretive understanding (Ricoeur, 1981d: 144).<sup>87</sup> Engaging with and acknowledging the existence of prejudice within the human and social sciences and the influence this has upon our own understanding of meaningful action is an important part of this self-critical process. For the “disciplinary prejudices” inherited from the intellectual traditions with which we engage to be *productive* of knowledge, this kind of self-critical awareness must be incorporated into the interpretive process. On an overtly interpretive level it is important for an interpreter to realise how their interpretations of meaning might be influenced by the disciplinary prejudices that provide the ground for their analysis. By doing so the interpreter can place her judgements regarding meaning within an interpretive context, specifying the presuppositions upon which their interpretation is based and delimiting the conditions under which this interpretation is valid.

The recognition of disciplinary prejudice as productive should therefore precede any overtly interpretive activity in which we might engage. This is because the object of the human sciences is *constituted* in relation to the modes of thought and intellectual traditions of which we are part. Even identifying something as a potential object of inquiry relies, to a certain extent, upon the “prejudices” we inherit from the intellectual traditions of which we are inheritors, and an important role

---

<sup>87</sup> The significance of self-critique to Ricoeur’s interpretive model and to the validity of hermeneutic interpretive claims is discussed in greater depth in the sixth chapter of this thesis (section 6.3.1).

played by “tradition” within the human sciences lies in “in choosing the theme to be investigated, awakening the desire to investigate, gaining a new problematic” (Gadamer, 1993: 282). We cannot, therefore, hope to prevent “prejudice” from playing a role in the objectification of action, as recommended by advocates of “reflexive” thought such as the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.<sup>88</sup>

Rather, what is important is that we are aware of the way in which the “objectification” of action is to some extent schematised by the interests and prejudices of the discipline in which we are working. We must be aware of both what these prejudices might bring to the fore and, as a counterpart, what they might obscure in our descriptions of action. Ricoeur advocates the importance of self-critique within interpretation and associates this possibility with the “distanciation” of which he considers the text paradigmatic, even going so far as to say that the distanciation that arises with the fixation of discourse as a text is a “fundamental condition for the recognition of a critical instance at the heart of interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1981b: 91). So even when Ricoeur does not explicitly mention prejudice, we can perhaps still associate the call for self-critique in part with the demand for vigilance of “prejudice” within interpretation.

Despite this, however, Ricoeur does not explicitly confront the role that prejudice may play in the constitution of texts, or, more importantly for our present purposes, in the “objectification” of action. It is at this level, when the interpreter may be actively involved in the description of the action they are also interpreting, that a similar sensitivity towards prejudice has to accompany our descriptive activities. More broadly, it is important that description is recognised as part of the

---

<sup>88</sup> Bourdieu, for example, emphasises the neutralisation of prejudice within objectification: “What has to be constantly scrutinized and *neutralized*, in the very act of construction of the object [of sociological inquiry], is the collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems and... categories of scholarly judgement” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 40).

interpretive process itself rather than something pre-interpretive. The choices we make within descriptive activity serve to guide and partially delimit the interpretations we may then make of the action described, and we must therefore aspire to be aware of how “prejudice” might influence these choices.

This is by no means a claim that the description of action is arbitrary or voluntaristic, or that any description could be considered “adequate” so long as it acknowledges the “prejudices” that have helped to generate it. An untenable description or interpretation of action is still untenable, even if we specify the prejudices that have led us into error. Minimally, the description of meaningful human action will be delimited by the “brute facts” observed. The descriptions we offer of action will also, to a large extent, be circumscribed by the social and cultural conventions of meaning with which we are engaging. We must, for example, be careful to acknowledge the self-understanding of those for whom action is meaningful; our description of what we are interpreting should at least be recognisable to those we are describing.<sup>89</sup>

The descriptions we make of action should also aspire to be recognisable as an “object” according to the conventions of the intellectual tradition within which we are working. At any given time the interpreter of action will, as a result, be struggling to meet a number of different demands arising from different places as to what constitutes an “adequate” description of action. The self-critical attitude that I am arguing should accompany the description and interpretation of action cannot, therefore, rest with merely acknowledging prejudice; it must also incorporate a sense

---

<sup>89</sup> We can perhaps compare this obligation to fidelity with the “vow of faithfulness” (Ricoeur, 2006: 4) Ricoeur argues is integral to the task of translation. In both cases we may wish to present something from a culture potentially distant from that with which we are familiar (whether action, beliefs, or foreign texts) and render it in such a manner that it is understandable to those for whom these things are strange and alien. In both cases, however, we must be careful not to distort that which we are “translating” in such a way that understanding is lost.

of how the presuppositions at play within disciplinary prejudices relate to the concrete situation at hand and of the conflicts and distortions that can arise from this. The responsibility on the part of the interpreter of action to remain vigilant in this manner is part of the work of interpretation and can help maintain the “productive” character of prejudice.

Insofar as description is thought to be pre-interpretive, it is at the level of description that the influence of disciplinary prejudice and theoretical presupposition is most likely to go unremarked. But insofar as description is recognised as the active composition of something as an object of reflective inquiry, the description of action has also to be recognised as interpretive. I therefore believe that the descriptive constitution of action as an object of reflective inquiry must be considered as a *part of a wider interpretive process*, and that this wider interpretive process should at all times endeavour to incorporate a level of critical self-awareness into its practices. We must also, therefore, reject the idea that the role played by disciplinary prejudice within interpretation is a matter distinct from any practical engagement with action, and is therefore best reserved for discussions of methodology and conceived as a separate enterprise from the interpretive encounter itself. By marginalising the position of disciplinary prejudice within our interpretive practices we fail to engage with the role that they play in the constitution of the object of our inquiry, and consequently risk taking for granted the potentially contentious presuppositions that we use to picture and understand human action.

#### 4.2: Homo Sociologicus

In order to illustrate this point, I will examine Ralf Dahrendorf’s notion of “*homo sociologicus*” and the way in which it tacitly draws upon certain sociological

prejudices in order to develop a particular picture of social being. Dahrendorf, in an essay of the same name, uses the term *homo sociologicus* to refer to the manner in which man is understood and conceptualised by classical functionalist sociology. Dahrendorf does explicitly state that this act of conceptualisation is a fictionalisation of man as we would ordinarily understand him, necessitated by the demands of inquiry; “[e]very discipline... must reduce its huge subject matter to certain elements from which may be systematically constructed... a structure in whose tissue a segment of reality may be caught” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 4). But, simultaneously, he insists that this “fictionalised” version of man is “more than a metaphor. His roles are more than masks that can be cast off, his social behaviour more than a play from which audience and actors alike can return to the ‘true’ reality” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 14).

The concepts of sociology are fictions, but only insofar as they are devices that serve to tell us something *real* about some aspect of ourselves and the world of which we are part. Sociological fictions, then, are not intended to be fabrications, but *simplifications* which focus upon some narrow realm of human experience and elevate this in order that we might better understand it. By focussing purely upon the human being as a player of social roles, *Homo sapiens* is thus reconstructed as the fictional *homo sociologicus*. The sociological construct is, therefore, a fiction, but is based upon some perceived reality of human social existence – the idea that we adopt and play “roles” as part of our lives with and amongst others – and from which we might therefore hope to learn more about our own reality as social beings. But the relationship between the fiction of *homo sociologicus* and the “real” human of our day-to-day experience is a complicated one. Looking at this relationship in

more detail will help illuminate some of the reasons why both the description and interpretation of human action involve engaging with disciplinary prejudice.

According to Dahrendorf, we recognise a person as a social being by identifying the roles she plays and the position that she, as a role player, occupies in relation to other social role players. Social roles of this sort are defined as “quasi-objective complexes of prescriptions for behaviour which are in principle independent of the individual... binding on the individual, in the sense that he cannot ignore or reject them without harm to himself” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 19). *Homo sociologicus*, therefore, is a creature defined purely by the roles that society would have it play, a creature of conformity, and a creature potentially quite unlike that with which we are familiar from our day-to-day experience. Yet, despite this unfamiliarity, *homo sociologicus* is a sociological concept that purports to tell us something about ourselves as social beings.

This is a dilemma recognised by Dahrendorf: “by reconstructing man as *homo sociologicus*... sociology creates for itself once again the moral and philosophical problem of how the artificial man of its theoretical analysis relates to the real man of our everyday experience” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 7). Specifically, Dahrendorf sees this aporia as existing between socialised man – defined in terms of the constraints placed upon his behaviour by the social roles he plays – and our understanding of man as a free individual. In order to identify *homo sociologicus* with ourselves, we must somehow explain how to relate individual freedom with the bondage of social life: “The individual must somehow take into himself the prescriptions of society and make them the basis of his behaviour; it is by this means that the individual and society are mediated and man is reborn as *homo sociologicus*” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 38).

How much importance we invest in the conflict between social being and individual freedom, however, depends in part upon the extent to which we accept the idea of constrained social being represented by *homo sociologicus*. The picture of social being presented in *Homo Sociologicus* is one shaped at least in part by the presuppositions of a certain type of sociological theory, deriving some of its main conceptual categories from a tradition of thought in which social cohesion and socialisation is understood primarily in terms of the “constraints” placed upon individuals by society.

Dahrendorf himself, in “In Praise of Thrasymachus”, identifies this with a “conflict” approach to understanding social cohesion, and as one of two dominant modes of thought in sociology, traceable as far back into the past as the conversation between Thrasymachus and Socrates in the opening book of Plato’s *Republic*, and passed on and developed via Hobbes and a sociological tradition that emphasises power, conflict, constraint and sanction as definitive of social organisation (Dahrendorf, 1968b). Dahrendorf opposes this approach to sociology to a tradition he identifies with Socrates and Rousseau, within which social cohesion is understood in terms of consensus and equilibrium – the exercise of a “general will” – rather than conflict and the struggle for power. Even within this latter tradition of thought, however, the notion of “constraint” is frequently central to the way in which the individual relates to the social consensus.<sup>90</sup>

The importance of understanding *homo sociologicus* within “the context of observation and theory in which *homo sociologicus* emerges” (Dahrendorf, 1973:

---

<sup>90</sup> One paradigmatic example of the role played by constraint in a sociology of this latter kind would be Emile Durkheim’s notion of “social facts” which have an “objective” reality, apart from our subjective psychology, and which function by compelling me as an individual to act in accordance with “obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions” (Durkheim, 1982: 50).

14) is something Dahrendorf acknowledges. But the role granted to the almost pervasive notion of “constraint” within this picture means that socialised being is inevitably set on a collision course with freedom. The notion of “constraint” as definitive of social being therefore functions as a (productive) prejudice inherited from the sociological tradition of which Dahrendorf is a part. The prejudice is productive insofar as it allows the sociologist to focus upon particular aspects of the way in which the individual functions as part of society.

But by identifying social life purely with the necessity of conforming to socially determined constraints, and the threat of facing “sanctions” should we deviate from the behaviour endemic to the roles we are playing, social being is set up in dichotomous opposition to the idea of a perfectly free and autonomous human individual, unfettered by anything.<sup>91</sup> Minimally, it would seem that this idea of the free individual is supposed to reflect our felt autonomy; the belief that we are always in control of our own actions and are free to choose what we do, rather than have it dictated to us by social expectations. It is by placing socialised being at one extreme of this polar opposition between “constraint” and “freedom” that Dahrendorf is led to draw conclusions such as “socialization invariably means depersonalization” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 39).

This opposition between free and socialised being, however, is ultimately untenable. At the very least, it is necessary to recognise that the relationship between freedom and constraint is more complex than seems to be presupposed in the construction of *homo sociologicus*. The problem is not simply one of trying to reconcile freedom with the constraints of society in the individual. Far more fundamentally, and before we can engage constructively in such a debate, it is

---

<sup>91</sup> Dahrendorf at one point even describes human behaviour, without the constraints provided by the “established and inescapable expectations” of society, as characterised by “the randomness of chance” (Dahrendorf, 1968c: 167).

necessary to acknowledge the different ways in which freedom and constraint can be understood as relating to one another; that our individual autonomy exists in relation to constraints that are placed upon us and the limits of our own being, and that social constraint only makes sense within a context in which people are capable of recognising, negotiating and redefining the socially constituted behavioural expectations that bind them. Our freedom to act in any particular way emerges in relation to established ways of acting and being. And the normative power of social expectations can only be understood when conformity is not automatic, but within a society of individuals freely acting and making decisions about the best way to fulfil their social roles and obligations; about *whether* and *how* to conform, or deviate and face sanction.

Dahrendorf does acknowledge that there is some level of reciprocity between the individual and society when he writes of *homo sociologicus* that “if society shapes his personality, he can help shape society. Role expectations and sanctions are not unalterably fixed for all time”. This would seem to indicate that freedom and constraint can be defined in relation to one another productively, rather than necessarily as diametrically opposed. This, however, leads to a notion of freedom that exists only within the constraints of social life, and one that can “scarcely help to render *homo sociologicus* more compatible with the man of our everyday experience” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 40).

The apparent inflexibility of this dichotomy arises largely out of the belief that society is first characterised by prescribed forms of behaviour to which we characteristically conform. This characterisation of social being makes most sense in relation to the threat posed by legal sanction, or to institutionalised “roles” in which there are more strictly fixed procedures for how to behave, or in which there are

well-defined limits upon the range of behaviour acceptable in that role, and in which there is a system in place for the imposition of sanctions. The less a social setting fits this description, the less directly relevant the constraint model of social behaviour becomes. Minimally, therefore, a sociological construct such as *homo sociologicus* should be complemented by a specification of the scope of its intended application.

When applied to different aspects of society, or even society “as a whole”, the idea of a “social role” could instead be conceived of as a positive rather than a privative thing; as a paradigmatic model of some particular way of being, some particular social role, which can be adopted to a greater or lesser degree and which provides individuals with pre-established ways of behaving and of interacting with other individuals. We may even wish to think of a “social role” as something capable of guiding our actions by confronting us with “norms” of behaviour for individuals playing some role, similar to the way in which Ricoeur claims the text refers by projecting a “world” and confronting the reader with different possibilities of being, and thus as something which offers us a “positive” picture of how we might act as social beings, and not something which determines our actions via “constraint”. We can thus imagine the idea of a “social role” as an objectification of some particular set of behaviours considered as the norm for a given social context, and to which the autonomous individual is free to conform completely, reject or adapt in relation to the specific circumstances of their own lives.<sup>92</sup> Within this we

---

<sup>92</sup> This is, of course, merely a sketch of how hermeneutic thought might inform the sociological notion of a “social role”, set up primarily as a contrast to the version implied within the constraint approach, and would require further development beyond the scope of this thesis before it could have any real application within sociological research. Ricoeur does not make this suggestion himself, though should we pursue the idea we might wish to relate this idea to his conception that ideology is “linked to the necessity for a social group to give itself an image of itself, to represent and to realise itself” (Ricoeur, 1981i: 225).

might still face sanctions under certain circumstances, but only should our behaviour deviate so significantly from that modelled by the role that our actions undermine the social function that a role is supposed to fulfil (a father who deliberately kills his children, for example, is unquestionably a bad father and would be punished accordingly).

Beyond these fairly loose conditions, however, a role could be understood as something which legitimises a particular way of being within society without necessarily working *via* the explicit threat of sanction. A social role, rather than the effect of sanctions, could be thought of as something which projects a “world” or a sketch of a particular way of being with which the individual can engage in different ways. In this regard, the social does not have to be placed in opposition to freedom. We adopt many roles freely, and within these loosely defined roles there are several possible paths we can follow and opportunities for forging new paths ourselves.<sup>93</sup> Our freedom and autonomy can thus, in fact, be thought of as being constituted in *conjunction* with the possibilities of being that the social roles we play open up before us, rather than as being a fundamentally irreconcilable oppositional term in a dichotomy between “freedom” and “conformity”.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>93</sup> Dahrendorf does elsewhere acknowledge that *homo sociologicus*, as he has defined it, privileges conformity at the expense of recognising the way in which “people are often free to put their individual stamp on their roles” (Dahrendorf, 1968a: 102), citing Hans Paul Bahrdt and Robert Merton as examples. Even within the work of these thinkers, however, social being is considered primarily in terms of constraint.

<sup>94</sup> A similarly dialectical approach to the idea of freedom, in which human freedom is understood in relation to those factors which constrain and determine the exercise of our freedom, is developed by Ricoeur in the 1962 article “Freedom and Nature” (it is this article to which I am referring on this occasion, although a similarly dialectical approach to human freedom is developed in greater depth in the book of the same name). Ricoeur differs significantly from Dahrendorf from the outset by discussing freedom as opposed to nature, and by identifying human society not with constraint but with “an existence deliberated upon, preferred and chosen” which has been “wrenched from a natural, that is to say an unfree, existence” (Ricoeur, 1974: 26). Freedom, on this account, is freedom from having our lives and action determined by our human *nature*, our instincts and the facticity of our existence. However, Ricoeur’s analysis of this notion of freedom shows how it remains rooted in our “nature”, in particular our desires, and writes that “reflective choice always follows from some non-reflective moment, some inchoate act, tendency or inclination which deserves the name of

To view social existence in terms of constraints, in the manner from which *homo sociologicus* emerges, is one way of conceptualising social life among others, but should not be thought of as the only viable account of how individuals exist and act in society in every circumstance. Unless we are aware of the theoretical presuppositions and disciplinary “prejudices” from which this vision emerges, it is easy to become blind to alternative possibilities. We risk, for example, only identifying those aspects of a “social role” that seem to exercise a constraint over the individual as definitive of meaningful action within that role. This influences not only our *understanding* of action, but, insofar as we are unaware of the way in which such a disciplinary prejudice directs our thought, also our capacity to *recognise* and *describe* something in terms of its meaning.

We can perhaps see how this might occur within *Homo Sociologicus* when Dahrendorf writes that a “scale assigning numerical values to all possible negative sanctions... might be very useful in classifying role expectations” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 51). Here, from the very moment a methodology for the identification of social phenomena is developed, theoretical prejudices serve to dictate the *kind of* phenomena in which the researcher will be interested. By, for example, classifying social roles and role expectations in relation to the place that they occupy on a “scale of sanctions”, we immediately rule out the possibility of identifying social roles in terms of their “positive” rather than “privative” functions. Dahrendorf’s commitment to quantitative classification is also a result of a disciplinary prejudice

---

spontaneous will or natural freedom” (Ricoeur, 1974: 35). We are thus capable of appropriating the “non-reflective” aspects of our natures and choosing how we respond to them and how we incorporate our desires into our lives as we live them. This dialectical analysis of the relationship between freedom and nature thus undermines the initial presentation of “freedom” and “nature” as irreconcilable opposites in favour of what Ricoeur describes as “the recovery of nature as desire in freedom as project” (Ricoeur, 1974: 36). It seems more than reasonable to imagine adopting a similarly “dialectical” approach to the dichotomy of “freedom” and “social constraint”, similar to the one I have attempted to outline above, wherein our freedom is manifest in the different ways in which we appropriate and respond to the constraints placed upon us by social “norms” and “roles”.

in favour of quantification as a way of ensuring the objectivity of sociological analysis. This, however, risks limiting meaningful action to being understood *only* in terms of the pre-determined categories by which it is quantified. Such a classificatory methodology can therefore lead us to exclude any feature of meaningful action which doesn't already conform to the categories by which we seek to quantify it, or to see social roles only in terms of their “constraining” function even if this is not necessarily the best way to understand the situation at hand.

Dahrendorf, as we have said, acknowledges the status of *homo sociologicus* as a theoretical construction. He warns against the “dogmatic” sociologist who “describes man as an aggregate of roles, and unthinkingly goes on to claim that he has discovered the nature of man” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 61). Similarly, he claims that, should sociological theory be appropriated and used in a manner we consider morally repellent, “we may impute guilt by omission to the sociologist who, in full awareness of the damage done by his theories, washes his innocent hands in the pure logic of scientific discovery” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 80).

The sociologist, for Dahrendorf, has a responsibility to guard against such misappropriation and to make it clear that sociological models of human beings are theoretical constructions made in line with the presuppositions of a particular academic discipline, and should not be thought to conflict with or undermine the dignity or freedom of the person. He emphasises that the remit of *homo sociologicus* is purely that of sociological inquiry, and appeals to “[t]he individual as a moral being, as a living protest against the vexation of society” (Dahrendorf, 1968a: 105) as a counterpart to the conformity of *homo sociologicus*, a necessary complement to our overall picture of humanity. Drawing upon Kant, Dahrendorf even argues that *homo sociologicus* and the “transcendental freedom” of humanity serve to point

towards two fundamentally different aspects of humanity; “the two characters of man are an expression of *essentially* different possibilities of knowledge” (Dahrendorf, 1973: 63).<sup>95</sup>

For Dahrendorf, the sociologist’s responsibility to acknowledge disciplinary prejudice is, to a large extent, a moral one. It encompasses a responsibility to guard against the reification of sociological constructs when they are appropriated outside the limited field in which they have validity. But, inspired by the desire to find the “best” methodology for the social sciences, Dahrendorf ends up pre-determining what counts as the “proper” object of study for sociology; i.e. the way in which power, conflict and constraint constitute society and the individual in society. This depends upon a need to preserve a particular abstraction of man, *homo sociologicus*, as the object *proper* of sociology. Dahrendorf is ready to satisfy this need even if it means renouncing both the “realism” of sociological inquiry and the possibility that other categories or approaches to sociological inquiry might tell us something that a constraint-focussed approach cannot.<sup>96</sup> This, however, involves deliberately overlooking the complexity of social phenomena in favour of clarity, overlooking “truth” in favour of “method”.

Clarity, however, demands more than abstraction and simplification. Abstraction and idealisation are, to a certain extent, inevitable consequences of the kind of objectification undergone by social phenomena when they are constituted and “fixed” as an object of reflective inquiry, and have an important role to play in

---

<sup>95</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> It should perhaps be noted that Dahrendorf’s rejection of what he describes as his previously “tolerant view” that different sociological approaches might work alongside one another or in conjunction with one another is made specifically in reference to what he characterises as the “equilibrium” approach to social theory, typified for Dahrendorf by the functional structuralism of thinkers such as Talcott Parsons (Dahrendorf, 1968b: 149-50).

the study of human action.<sup>97</sup> But in order that they may do so it is not enough to simply state that they are abstractions, that they were never intended to be “realistic” and that they only tell us about *homo sociologicus*.<sup>98</sup> As I have argued, free and socialised being are not “essentially different”, but instead are intimately related to one another. Understanding either in isolation should involve at least attempting to engage with the other, and understanding what is lost or reified in abstracting one from the other. Without this effort we risk allowing the unspoken presuppositions – the disciplinary prejudices – upon which *homo sociologicus* is based to contribute to the reification of a dichotomy between “absolute” freedom and conformity that might not exist.

We need to be able to place these abstractions within a context in which they make sense, both in terms of their own aims and in terms of how they relate to the “real” phenomena they purport to describe. We need to be able to say what the presuppositions that underlie these abstractions are, what aspects of social being are being captured by these abstractions and how this might relate to the observations and interpretations of action we make in particular cases. This cannot simply be a meta-theoretical or methodological concern that precedes analysis, or a “moral” responsibility that arises when our ideas are misappropriated somewhere down the line. The issue at hand is one of “responsibility”, but this is not something subsequent to interpretation. It is a responsibility that arises from interpretive activity and which the interpreter of action must attempt to meet as part of their

---

<sup>97</sup> This is not to say that arbitrary abstraction or uncontrolled reification have any place in the human and social sciences. Problems arise only if the practices of abstraction and idealisation become more prominent than the phenomena they are intended to explain or clarify.

<sup>98</sup> Dahrendorf would possibly reject this as a misunderstanding of his project. For Dahrendorf, sociology, as a *science*, demands the clarity of abstraction. Descriptions which aim to tell us something about the “real” human creature, for Dahrendorf, are therefore a form of “philosophical anthropology” and not sociology proper (Dahrendorf, 1968a: 95).

work. Unless we incorporate an element of reflectivity and an awareness of disciplinary prejudice into the methods the human and social sciences, we run the risk of reifying our theoretical “constructions” in such a manner that other possibilities of understanding the object of our inquiry become nigh on imperceptible. We need therefore to consider the effect of “disciplinary prejudice” at each stage of our analysis – including the “descriptive” level at which action is constituted as an object of inquiry – and to carry an awareness of this with us – a *hermeneutic consciousness* of prejudice as a constitutive factor in our understanding – in order that we do not lose sight of how different hermeneutic frameworks might be more or less suited to different tasks, and in relation to different social phenomena.

This is not to say that there is no place for *homo sociologicus* in sociological inquiry. It is a construct that focuses our attention upon part of social existence – the way in which our actions as individuals are shaped by social norms and constraints – and does so powerfully, allowing us to better understand the way in which the individual relates to society under certain presumed conditions. If we lose sight of this act of fictionalisation, however, and become captivated by the power of our own constructions, we also lose sight of the fact that our theories make up but one “segment” of social reality.<sup>99</sup> By explicitly placing our theoretical constructions within critical, historical and social contexts, and by incorporating self-criticism as a part of our descriptive and interpretive methodology, we identify them as particular “interpretations” of reality, informed by certain presuppositions of meaning and

---

<sup>99</sup> Nor is the effect of disciplinary prejudice necessarily, or even typically, limited to the construction of ideal models or archetypes which are then used to interpret reality; disciplinary (or cultural) prejudices of one kind or another can inform interpretive analysis without these being part of any systemised historical “model” (e.g. the pervasive culture of “Orientalism” in Western thought notably criticised by Edward Said).

histories of interpretation. We need to contextualise our interpretive activity so that others might understand our reasoning, understand where abstractions have been made and how these might relate to some aspect of human life. It is for this reason that the descriptions of action we make within the human sciences must be “critical”.

To be “critical” in this fashion the human and social sciences must aspire to a culture within which hermeneutic consciousness and interpretive “vigilance” of the kind described here can be incorporated into its interpretive practices. It must do so in order that the “prejudices” of the human and social sciences can play a productive role in our understanding, and so that the interpretation of meaningful action is capable of recognising its own contingency and the limits of its own validity. Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics and “The Model of the Text” are capable of providing an important framework within which such a culture of vigilance could grow and prosper, even if this is not a possibility explored explicitly by Ricoeur himself.<sup>100</sup>

By explicitly identifying the objectification of action as a precondition of its interpretation we become more attentive to how the description and representation of action influences how we understand it. Insofar as it allows us to recognise description *as* interpretive, the textual model provides a framework within which interpreters can understand and incorporate disciplinary prejudice as part of their practices, rather than being dominated by its reified forms. The “critical” description of action is an important part of this, as it works to undermine the reifying powers of language and theory by placing our activities within an historical and disciplinary

---

<sup>100</sup> Although, of course, “The Model of the Text” also has to recognise both the limits of its own validity and the ways in which other models of understanding can complement and challenge these limits if it is to do so. This thesis represents a broad philosophical attempt to engage with this task, albeit still at a fairly abstract level.

tradition that can itself be questioned. This, rather than empty abstraction, is where the possibility of “objectivity” in the human sciences lies.

#### 4.3: The Reception of Action as a Text

In addition to composing original descriptions and interpretations of action, interpreters throughout the human and social sciences will often have reason to deal with accounts, records and interpretations of action composed by others.<sup>101</sup> Just as with our own descriptions and interpretations of action, the received accounts that we turn to as sources are historically and socially contingent; we have a responsibility to read them critically because understanding and interpreting meaningful action also involves understanding the circumstances under which it has become “fixed” as an object of reflection, and how these circumstances relate to, or potentially distort, the meaning of the action at hand.

The reception of pre-composed accounts, descriptions and interpretations of action demands also that we are aware of the history of interpretation – the *Wirkungsgeschichte* – that precedes our reception of the descriptions of action at hand.<sup>102</sup> I take this to apply to both contemporary and historical lay-accounts of action used as sources within the social and human sciences, *and* to the descriptions and interpretations of action composed within the academic community. Such accounts of action are often appropriated and reinterpreted in situations potentially far removed from those in which they were originally composed. Thus, if we hope

---

<sup>101</sup> I have left this question until now because it is relatively well established that practitioners of the human and social sciences should be sensitive to the reliability of their sources, and take possible bias into account in their interpretations of these sources. To say that we should read critically is hardly controversial (even if we do not always achieve this in practice).

<sup>102</sup> The concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is elaborated in more depth in chapter one, section 1.1.2 of this thesis.

to use them as sources within our interpretive analyses, accounts of action composed within the disciplinary traditions of which we are inheritors demand that we read them critically in the same way as we would lay or historical accounts. The obligation to take a reflective and critical attitude towards accounts of action in the human and social sciences is therefore one that should be shared at both the level of the composition and at the level of reception of “texts” of action.

Perhaps the most striking examples of disciplines in which the interpreter of action must rely upon received accounts are those of history and archaeology, in which human action is only ever understood at a temporal distance. Interpreters in these disciplines engage with received historical accounts of action and the “traces” of action – artefacts and documents – which are used as evidence from which an account of human action can be composed. The importance of critical analysis in this context arises because, like any description of action or account of its significance, historical texts are products of a particular socio-historical situation, composed for particular purposes, and for a particular audience.<sup>103</sup> Even, therefore, if we are not concerned specifically with endemic “disciplinary” prejudice, it is vital that we approach such received accounts and representations of action critically and attempt to take potential bias into account as part of our understanding of them.

And although the relevance of such a “critical” attitude is perhaps most pronounced when we encounter accounts of action composed in societies very removed from our own, either historically or culturally, even the reception of *contemporary* lay-accounts of action requires that we read critically before we

---

<sup>103</sup> Some historical accounts of action, for example, may have been composed to fulfil a propagandistic role: The Bayeux Tapestry, though undoubtedly an invaluable historical resource, was never designed to provide a balanced account of the Battle of Hastings; e.g. Edward Freeman, in “The Authority of the Bayeux Tapestry”, writes that “though the Tapestry perverts the story less than any other Norman account it is still essentially a Norman account. The main object of the work is plainly to set forth the right of William to the English Crown” (Freeman, 1997: 14).

interpret the action they purport to describe. That an account of action given by someone with whom we identify or share a cultural background might seem immediately familiar or plausible to us does not mean that it is any less a product of the socio-historical conditions of its production, or the ends to which it may have been composed. In approaching any account of action, we need first to try and understand the way in which it is framed by the wider social context of which it is a part.<sup>104</sup>

#### 4.3.1: Critical Reading and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*

The consequences of failing to read “critically” can be profound. Failing to remain aware of the way in which our readings are influenced by our interests, prejudices and the intellectual traditions which precede us can, for example, lead us to read “selectively” in such a manner so as to only pick out those aspects of our reading that support our presuppositions, and thus blind ourselves to any other possible readings. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur offers a critical account of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, arguing that his uncritical and selective appropriation of ethnological texts means that “taken as a scientific document, *Totem and Taboo* is simply a huge vicious circle” (Ricoeur, 1970: 208). In particular Ricoeur is critical of the “scientific myth” (Ricoeur, 1970: 198) constructed by Freud in order to explain the origins “of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion” (Freud, 1955: 142).

Freud indulges in this genealogical exercise because he needs to be able to explain the origins of social prohibition as the “external” element of our psyche. This notion of there being an external element of the psyche refers to the way in

---

<sup>104</sup> However, taking a “critical” stance towards one’s sources is not necessarily an attempt to undermine the veracity of such an account, but only the exercise of a will to question that veracity.

which prohibitions impressed upon us by our parents in our childhoods, and the way in which these prohibitions conflict with our unconscious desires, play a vital role in the formation of our Ego. Prohibition, however, “does not succeed in *abolishing* the instinct. Its only result is to *repress* the instinct... and banish it into the unconscious. Both the prohibition and the instinct persist” (Freud, 1955: 29). The ambivalent attitude which results from this repression leads to these instinctual desires to “find substitutes – substitute objects and substitute acts – in place of the prohibited ones” (Freud, 1955: 30). This process of substitution, whereby our repressed desires burst forth and find an outlet in something other than that at which the desire is truly aimed, is evident for Freud in the obsessional behaviours of neurotic patients.<sup>105</sup>

Freud, however, does not believe that these moral prohibitions originate with our parents, even if they are the primary source of authority within our early childhoods. In order to explain how “external” prohibitions play such an active part in our psychic lives, Freud must then account for how it is that moral institutions persist across time and are transmitted from one generation to the next as part of our cultures. He is, nevertheless, keen to avoid purely “sociological” explanations, and denies that “direct communication and tradition” could possibly be “enough to account for the process” (Freud, 1955: 158). He thus posits “the existence of a collective mind, in which mental processes occur just as they do in the mind of an individual” (Freud, 1955: 158), and an accompanying “unconscious understanding... of all the customs, ceremonies and dogmas left behind by the original relation to the

---

<sup>105</sup> In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud uses the example of a “touching phobia” (Freud, 1955: 27). He writes that this kind of phobic behaviour has its roots “in very early childhood” when “the patient shows a strong *desire* to touch [their genitals]”. This urge is in turn “promptly met by an *external* prohibition against carrying out that particular kind of touching” (Freud, 1955: 29), eventually leading the patient to develop obsessive behaviour in respect to making physical contact with some otherwise innocuous object. Freud references an unnamed “household article” in his example, but also cites “washing mania” – wherein the patient is compelled to wash obsessively as an act of “purification” as a common symptom of such phobias (Freud, 1955: 28).

father” which “may have made it possible for later generations to take over their heritage of emotion” (Freud, 1955: 159). However, in order to explain this scenario – and the notion of the “original relation to the father” – Freud is led to imagine a historical origin for the development moral prohibition, back to which we can trace the entire development of human culture and civilisation.

Freud reaches this conclusion by identifying the process of prohibition and substitution discussed above as manifest in the taboos prevalent within totemism; particularly within the taboos against killing the totem animal (representative, for Freud, of the father), and against incest (in particular against sex with the mother or those of the mother’s bloodline).<sup>106</sup> These prohibitions, according to Freud, are the “most ancient and important taboo prohibitions” (Freud, 1955: 31) and thus must testify to “the oldest and most powerful of human desires” (Freud, 1955: 32). These prohibitions against incest and patricide, for Freud, testify to the universality of the Oedipal complex – the claim that the universal fate of humankind is “to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father” (Freud, 1976: 364). That these “primal” desires are prohibited even in “primitive”<sup>107</sup> totemic cultures leads Freud to argue that “the earliest human penal systems” may thus “be traced back to taboo” (Freud, 1955: 20). This identification of totemic taboo with the origins of institutionalised morality

---

<sup>106</sup> The idea that the totem animal could be identified with the father is rooted in the observation that “primitive men... describe the totem as their common ancestor and primal father” (Freud, 1955: 131). The emphasis upon the mother’s bloodline within prohibition of incest is identified by Freud as related to the idea that there are “grounds for thinking that totem prohibitions were principally directed against the incestuous desires of the son” and that thus that, in terms of belonging to a totem, “descent through the female line is older than that through the male” (Freud, 1955: 5, fn. 1). There are, needless to say, many reasons why we should remain sceptical about these identifications, but for our purposes it is enough for the moment to recognise that Freud made them in the course of his analysis of the psychical origins of social/moral prohibition.

<sup>107</sup> Freud’s understanding of aboriginal people as cannibalistic “savages”, and the identification of “primitive” indigenous peoples as fundamentally childlike, were deeply held cultural prejudices of his era, perhaps especially among those such as Freud who had no first hand experience of the people he was discussing. Arens’ *The Man-Eating Myth* provides a compelling analysis of the origins and the dubious validity of the anthropological and cultural prejudice of the “cannibal savage”.

means that, for Freud, the Oedipal complex is “revealed both as an individual drama and as the collective fate of mankind, as a psychological fact and as the source of morality, as the origin of neurosis and as the origin of civilization” (Ricoeur, 1970: 188).

In order to support this position, however, Freud draws upon a number of diverse sources – including various ethnological accounts of totemism and sacrificial rites, along with the Darwinian notion of the “primal horde” – and constructs a story about a particular moment in history within which the origins of human morality are rooted. Freud imagines a “primal horde” headed by a “violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up” (Freud, 1955: 141). At some point, however, these banished sons – who, like the Oedipal child, both fear and envy their father – band together in order to both kill and devour their father “and so made an end of the patriarchal horde” (Freud, 1955: 141). In the wake of this act of patricide, however:

the tumultuous mob of brothers were filled with the same contradictory feelings which we can see at work in the ambivalent father-complexes of our children... They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too... A sense of guilt made its appearance... What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves... They revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruit by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex. (Freud, 1955: 143)

According to Freud, the consequences of this action and subsequent renunciation were far-ranging, and “must inevitably have left ineradicable traces in the history of humanity” (Freud, 1955: 155). He claims that it led to the instantiation of the “totem meal” – within which the totem animal, representative of the father, is sacrificed and

eaten communally by members of the clan – which is described by Freud as is “perhaps mankind’s earliest festival” and thus as “a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed” (Freud, 1955: 142). It is this “historical” enactment of the Oedipal complex, and the subsequent emotional ambivalence of the patricidal brothers, from which the institutionalisation and socialisation of prohibition originates, and of which all psychical conflict is in some sense a re-enactment.

Ricoeur, however, claims that in this attempt “psychoanalysis is condemned to have recourse to an ethnology that is fanciful, at times fantastic, and in any event always secondhand” (Ricoeur, 1970: 188). As Ricoeur puts it, in order to reach this conclusion one has “only to combine” the relevant elements of “Frazer, Wundt, Darwin, Atkinson, and Robertson Smith” (Ricoeur, 1970: 207). This, however, involves a very careful selection of sources which support this picture of humanity’s past, along with an exclusion of anything which does not fit this model, and an equally careful work of composition in order to bring this patchwork of ethnological fragments together into a presaging of the Oedipal myth so central to Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. Ricoeur thus claims that it is:

difficult to resist the impression that the Oedipus complex, deciphered in dreams and the neuroses, is what enabled Freud to select from the available ethnological materials just those factors that allow for the reconstruction of a collective Oedipus complex of mankind in the sense of an actual event that occurred at the beginning of history. Identification with the totem and ambivalence in its regard are reified, so to speak, in what is now a literal, and not a symbolic, interpretation. (Ricoeur, 1970: 207-8)

It is thus Freud’s uncritical appropriation of ethnological texts, prejudiced by his commitment to the universal psychological reality of the Oedipal myth, that leads us towards this picture of a “primal parricide” which Ricoeur describes as “merely an

event constructed out of ethnological scraps on the pattern of the fantasy deciphered by analysis” (Ricoeur, 1970: 208).

Freud was, to some extent, aware that this story might “seem fantastic” (Freud, 1955: 141), but nevertheless maintained that his account to be historically accurate and claimed in his defence against critics of his historicism only that “it would be as foolish to aim at exactitude in such questions as it would be unfair to insist upon certainty” (Freud, 1955: 142-3, fn. 1). Ricoeur rejects this positivistic version of the account, suggesting that we would instead be better served by “interpreting it as myth” (Ricoeur, 1970: 208). For our purposes here, however, it is enough to note that Freud’s construction of this historical/scientific “myth” depends heavily upon a very selective approach to reading his sources premised upon a concern to confirm his preliminary hypothesis and not upon the open-minded yet critically aware approach to the reception of texts which I have suggested should be part of a hermeneutic approach to interpretation.

The consequences of this cannot be limited to the positing of a historical turning point in the history of human psychology, but also to all that this entails. If we accept Freud’s account, for example, we find ourselves committed to a particular view of human history, religion, art and morality wherein all of the many and varied phenomena that fall under these broad categories are somehow to be considered as derivative of this original Oedipal crisis. This obscures the potential for understanding the institutionalisation of human morality in terms other than those of Freud’s psychological theory, and thus delimits the number of possible interpretations of human culture, history and action available to us in a manner which cannot possibly be justified by the circular reading of the Oedipal myth back into human history as it is presented in *Totem and Taboo*. Within Freud’s work we

may therefore perceive an extreme example of how our reception of texts within the human and social sciences can subsequently influence how we understand and interpret human action, and the accompanying necessity of reading *critically* and *carefully* if we are to avoid the kind of biased reading practiced by Freud on this occasion.

The work involved in the interpretation of action occurs both at the level of its *composition* and at the level of its *reception*, and at each stage these activities need to be critically informed. Critical responsibility within the social and human sciences is therefore shared between both writers and readers belonging to the communities within which texts of action are circulated, read and commented upon. Ricoeur does not explicitly discuss the necessity of critical reading (or description) in “The Model of the Text”. However, the critical distance recognised by Ricoeur as central to interpretive practice applies both to the composition and the reception of these “texts” of action. By attempting to recognise the “textuality” of received accounts of action, we can hope to achieve a kind of critical distance similar to that identified by Ricoeur within the objectification of action. In both cases, by identifying the object of our inquiry as a “text” of action we can begin to comprehend the role played by cultural and disciplinary prejudice in how we understand and interpret the action at hand. The “critical” description of action for which I have argued as a supplement to Ricoeur’s proposal of a textual hermeneutics of action should therefore be taken as a complement of the already well-established practice of critical reading prevalent within the human and social sciences.

#### 4.4: Conclusion

One of the greatest strengths of “The Model of the Text” is its recognition of the centrality of objectification to interpretive practice. By objectifying action, we introduce a level of reflective distanciation within which interpretation can take place. Without this initial act of objectification, without being able to step back from action and consider it from a critical perspective, interpretation risks being reduced to either the naïve acceptance of some given meaning or the equally naïve imposition of one’s own presuppositions of meaning. Ricoeur, however, fails to pursue the importance of objectification as far as he might, and “The Model of the Text” pays little attention to the role played by description in the constitution of action as an object of critical inquiry. If we are to engage fully with the important role played by objectification, and the centrality of this to the possible application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action, it is necessary for us to go further than Ricoeur did in this regard.

I have argued for the importance of having a “critical” understanding of the way in which prejudice influences the description and understanding of action to the practices of the interpretive social and human sciences. By “critical” in this context I mean primarily that one should be able to reflect upon the way that descriptions and interpretations of action are informed by disciplinary prejudice and the socio-historical context in which these activities take place. I have placed a particular emphasis on the importance of maintaining a “critical” attitude as part of the *description* of action within the social and human sciences.

It is important to realise that the description of action is not, so to speak, a passive transcription of something given. Rather, it involves the activity of some individual or group of individuals working together in order to bring meaningful

action to linguistic discourse. The descriptions they make will, to some extent, depend upon the framework in which the description is made. It is also the level of interpretation at which the objectification of action occurs, the *construal* of action as an object of inquiry, and is therefore ineliminably a productive dimension of any understanding achieved in its interpretation. The presuppositions that underlie the *act* of description must therefore be taken into consideration as part of the interpretive process.

Although not explicitly directed towards the problem of description, “The Model of the Text” is nevertheless well equipped to cope with such issues. On a fairly broad level, the hermeneutic philosophy upon which the textual model is premised aims to engender a “hermeneutic consciousness” in the interpreter; a consciousness that the interpreter inevitably brings something into the interpretive situation, and a consciousness of how “prejudice” might inform or distort the understanding we achieve via interpretive activity.<sup>108</sup> The demands of such a hermeneutic consciousness led Ricoeur to argue that “the critique of illusions of the subject must be integrated into hermeneutics” (Ricoeur, 1981g: 191). A hermeneutic model of interpretation therefore encourages us to understand and engage with the active role we play not only in the interpretation of meaningful action, but, insofar as it plays a constitutive role in our understanding of action, also at the level at which action is “fixed” as a determinate object of reflective inquiry within the human and social sciences.

---

<sup>108</sup> There is, of course, no single and unique strict method for the description or interpretation of action within the human and social sciences. The particular form taken by the “vigilance” demanded by interpretation will depend to a certain extent upon the kind of inquiry into which we are entering, the kind of discourse and traditions of thought prevalent within the discipline(s) with which we are engaging and the kind of action we are looking to describe/interpret.

Where “The Model of the Text” stands out in this regard is in its recognition that for action to become the “object” of interpretation it must first be “fixed” in a manner analogous to the fixation of discourse in the text.<sup>109</sup> This casts the objectification of action as an integral precondition for interpretive inquiry in the human and social sciences. Part of the work involved in reflective inquiry within these disciplines includes, therefore, the representation of action as a “delineated pattern” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 204) of some kind. However, the richness of experience means that any particular action is potentially describable in a number of different ways, with each different description capable of subtly emphasising (or obscuring) different elements of the meaningfulness of action. We must therefore take this into account as part of our descriptive activities within the social and human sciences.<sup>110</sup>

Description is, like interpretation, irreducibly partial. “The Model of the Text”, by placing a great emphasis upon the “objectification” of action and the importance of self-critique within interpretation, is capable of engendering the kind of hermeneutic consciousness required to guard against the uncritical acceptance of disciplinary prejudice, and the distorting effect prejudice can have under such circumstances. But if it is to do so, then it must also engage more thoroughly with the role of description in the constitution of action as an object of inquiry. If different possibilities of description are informed by different presuppositions of meaning and “disciplinary prejudices”, a full and adequate description of action within the social and human sciences should attempt to contain within itself some

---

<sup>109</sup> E.g. “Meaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind of objectification” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203).

<sup>110</sup> John B. Thompson, for example, in response to the ineluctable potential for multiple descriptions of the same action or set of actions, claims that the task of sociological description is “no longer to identify some essential feature of action which endows it with meaning”, but instead to “clarify the ways in which an action may be described and to elucidate criteria for the evaluation of alternative descriptions” (Thompson, 1981a: 142).

account of the schema which helped generate this account, why they were used and in favour of what alternatives. It is a case of “working out” how best to describe action, taking the role being played by disciplinary prejudice into account and specifying the standards by which a judgement of adequacy was made. This is what I intend when I say that description within the social and human sciences should be “critical”.

## Chapter Five: Wittgenstein, Ethnomethodology and the Case against Interpretation

“The Model of the Text” is premised upon the idea that the social and human sciences are interpretive disciplines, concerned to at least some degree with the interpretive understanding of meaningful human action. There are, however, thinkers within the social sciences inspired by the work of figures such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Harold Garfinkel and Peter Winch that seek to move away from what they term an “interpretive” approach. Although there are important differences between them, what unites these thinkers is the idea that interpreting action involves subsuming it under some general category, and therefore abstracting away from the particular and contingent circumstances under which action occurs and can be understood as meaningful. If this is the case, then rather than “interpret” action we should understand it *only* in relation to the local features of the situation in which that action takes place, with particular reference to the self-understanding of those who are part of and belong to the social setting in which action occurs.

However, it is far from clear that the hermeneutic conception of interpretation – or *Auslegung* – utilised by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text” can be characterised as “interpretive” in the manner which concerns Wittgenstein, Garfinkel and Winch. Within this chapter I will criticise the claim that hermeneutic models of the interpretation of action represent an *a priori* invalid abstraction away from the understanding of action as a lived phenomenon, and argue that rejecting “The Model of the Text” on this basis represents a misunderstanding of hermeneutic thought. I will also, however, consider how claims that emphasise the locally-situated and transactional nature of action might offer an important contrast to Ricoeur’s textual approach, and reciprocally how Ricoeur’s textual model might be able to

complement these transactional theories in terms of understanding how action becomes an “object” of inquiry, and the role played by disciplinary prejudice within inquiry. To do so I will engage both with the arguments made against interpretation by thinkers inspired by the work of Wittgenstein and Winch, and with the claims and work of the school of thought within the social sciences known as ethnomethodology.

### 5.1: Against Interpretation

For Ricoeur and, more broadly, within the hermeneutic philosophical tradition of which he is a part, understanding is often described in terms of the “hermeneutic circle”. At its most basic level this refers to the way in which understanding a text is conceived as an exchange between the text as a whole and the individual parts of the text which taken together comprise the text as a unified work; that the text as a whole is understood with reference to the parts of which it is composed, and these individual parts understood in relation to the text as a whole.<sup>111</sup> Applied to the interpretation of action, the hermeneutic circle can be used to describe the movement between our projections of meaning – the expectations we have of the meanings of action based upon our past experience and the context in which the action takes place – and our experience of the particular situation at hand, by the light of which our presuppositions of meaning are revised. The interpretation of action, in the hermeneutic tradition, involves the attempt to explicitly articulate the meaning of action in terms of this “circular” exchange between presuppositions and the particular situation at hand.

---

<sup>111</sup> There are, of course, other formulations of the “hermeneutic circle” such as, e.g., an exchange between the reader and the text, between the text and the historical context of its production or, as it is imagined by Ricoeur, between understanding and explanation. I refer to the hermeneutic circle here in these basic terms simply to introduce the idea of interpretation as a circular exchange.

Some thinkers influenced by Wittgenstein, however, reject the idea that we can discuss human understanding in terms of the “presuppositions” brought by the subject to that which they perceive, arguing that to do so is to make a substantive claim about human understanding as “interpretive”, and thus misrepresents and intellectualises understanding as it is experienced in real life. Phil Hutchinson, Rupert Read and Wes Sharrock, in *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science*, draw upon the work of Wittgenstein and Peter Winch to argue against what they term “*the dogma that it cannot be meaningful to speak of a description of some behaviour that is not already an interpretation of that behaviour*” (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 39). Roughly speaking, the position advocated here is that understanding is not ordinarily problematic, and that interpretation is therefore unnecessary. As such, describing understanding in terms of interpretation “continually risks over-intellectualizing ordinary human action by means of investing it all within an *interpretive horizon*” (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 39).

An example of this “dogma” given by Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock is the idea that, when we see a glass, judging that what we see is a “glass” rather than anything else involves engaging in interpretation; that we interpret what is before us *as a glass*. In contrast to this, the Wittgensteinian claims that we simply *see* the glass, and that “other possibilities of what ‘the glass’ might be said to be do not arise only to be eliminated in favour of the best interpretation... they do not arise at all” (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 39). To say that perceiving a glass *as a glass* involves interpretation is to over-complicate what is ultimately a relatively uncomplicated situation. Rather than describe understanding in terms of interpretation we need instead only “to ‘grasp’ the rule actually being followed by the person(s) one is describing... just to look, and see it.” In doing this “one avoids

a hermeneutic”, and one might therefore hope instead “to capture the terms of the rules they are following” (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 40), without positing anything extra on the behalf of those we are describing. According to this argument, we should instead articulate understanding in terms of rule-following, because “[n]otions such as ‘rule’, ‘norm’ and ‘practice’ are first and foremost part and parcel of our social life already” (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 42). This, therefore, supposedly involves no imposition of anything alien or extraneous to understanding as a phenomenon; we simply describe how someone comes to understand something.

The thought here is that meaning is best expressed as being rule-governed insofar as rule-following allows us to articulate the kind of regularities characteristically evident in meaningful action; that by identifying the rule according to which something has meaning we can render that meaning perspicuous. This is not to claim that understanding necessarily, or even usually, involves the explicit recognition of rules on the part of the agent of action. To the contrary, understanding is best understood simply as the ability to engage in forms of behaviour that display the characteristics of being governed by rules, usually unreflectively. A paradigmatic example of this, used by Winch and drawn from Wittgenstein, is the ability to continue a number sequence correctly:

the test of whether a man’s actions are the application of a rule is not whether he can *formulate* it but whether it makes sense to distinguish between a right and a wrong way of doing things... Learning the series of natural numbers is not just learning to copy down a finite series of figures in the order which one has been shown. It involves *being able to go on* writing down figures that have not been shown one... ‘going on in the *same* way’ as one was shown. (Winch, 1990: 58-59)

Understanding is *participatory* insofar as it is manifest within the practical ability to continue the number sequence in accordance with what is already there, in

accordance with a “rule” that can be said to govern the correct performance or use of what is understood.

It is this practical aspect of rule-following which arguably makes it most distinct from interpretative conceptions of understanding. This distinction is also evident when Wittgenstein claims that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases”, leading him to conclude that the term “interpretation” should be restricted “to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another” (Wittgenstein, 2001: § 201). With this, the benchmark for understanding becomes the “rules” which most adequately capture the everyday quality of engaging in practical life. To “interpret”, in the sense recommended by Wittgenstein, is simply to articulate the particular circumstances under which understanding occurs on a case by case basis, and needn’t involve framing such a description in terms of “presuppositions” or “expectations of meaning” in the manner prevalent within hermeneutic philosophy.

In terms of understanding the meaning of action this would mean that interpreting action would involve nothing more and nothing less than “looking and seeing”. Understanding action necessitates viewing it within the social context to which it belongs, and it is only by doing this that we can hope to identify an action as itself. Winch, along these lines, writes that “ideas cannot be torn out of their context; the relation between idea and context is an *internal* one. The idea gets its sense from the role it plays in the system” (Winch, 1990: 107). By comparison, the “interpretive” approaches perceived as prevalent within the social sciences are said to involve critical and theoretical constructs being brought to bear upon the

identification and understanding of action, which in turn abstract away from and distort the phenomena being interpreted.

### 5.2: In Defence of Interpretation

We need, however, to question whether this represents an accurate characterisation of hermeneutic interpretation, and whether the Wittgensteinian alternative proposed does not also prove problematic in certain respects in regard to capturing the meaningfulness of human action. Primarily this concern revolves around how the word “interpretation” is itself understood, and the kind of epistemic and substantive commitments this implies. Many interpretive accounts are, or can be, far closer to the “descriptive” project of rule-following than to the kind of positivist and intellectualist approaches to the interpretation of action towards which Wittgensteinian criticism is justifiably aimed.

Just as articulating understanding in terms of “rules” needn’t involve making substantive claims about the ontological status of these rules, describing understanding in terms of interpretation can simply be an attempt to articulate the conditions under which understanding something as meaningful is possible, rather than a suggestion that understanding *necessarily* implies overt or explicit interpretive activities. I contend that looking more closely at the philosophical tradition of which Ricoeur is a part will show that interpretation understood in hermeneutic terms is importantly distinct from the kind of interpretation at which Wittgensteinian criticism is primarily aimed.

### 5.2.1: Heidegger in Translation

The issue of the character of hermeneutic interpretation is perhaps most strikingly evident in the distinction that Heidegger makes between two forms of interpretation; *Auslegung* and *Interpretieren*. Whilst both words can be translated as “interpretation”, they have very different implications. “*Interpretieren*” is typically used by Heidegger to refer to systematic and theoretical interpretation. “*Auslegung*” is used as a broader term to cover the activity of becoming aware of something *as* something; a kind of interpretation within which “understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself” (Heidegger, 2008: 188). It is via interpretation that we become *conscious* of the world in which we exist pre-reflectively. Conceiving of understanding *as* interpretation is therefore not to *add* anything to the nature of understanding, but simply to express understanding in a way that draws attention to the contextual conditions under which it makes sense to say that something has some particular or potential meaning.

The significance of this distinction becomes clearer if we look more closely at the German words translated as “interpretation” in the works of different philosophers who have written about understanding and interpretation. To begin with, we will turn to Wittgenstein, specifically the *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*; the work that provides the most direct source of inspiration for arguments against interpretation.<sup>112</sup> When Wittgenstein says that “there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*”, the German word used and translated as “interpretation” is “*Deutung*” (Wittgenstein, 2001: § 201). It is the noun “*Deutung*”,

---

<sup>112</sup> Unless otherwise specified, I will be referring to Elizabeth Anscombe’s translation of *PI*. Any reference to a different translation will be in order to draw attention to differences between translations and will be indicated when appropriate.

or alternatively the verb “*Deuten*”, not “*Auslegung*” or “*Interpretieren*”, that Wittgenstein primarily uses to refer to interpretation throughout the *PI*.<sup>113</sup>

The term “*Deuten*” in particular suggests the sort of concerns Wittgenstein held regarding interpretation, as it can also be translated as “pointing to” or “indicating”. Both of these potential translations show Wittgenstein as concerned with “interpretation” directing the understanding subject *away from* that which is being interpreted, against which he stipulates that we should only use this word to refer “to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another” (Wittgenstein, 2001: § 201). If Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with interpretation is specifically aimed at not diverting our attention away from that which we are interpreting, it is important that we take this into consideration. “*Auslegung*” typically designates a form of interpretation quite different from this; it can, for example, also be translated as “exegesis”, an activity, associated primarily with textual interpretation, which necessarily involves attending *closely* to that which is being interpreted.

Both “*Deutung*” and “*Deuten*” are words used minimally by those writers with whom the development of hermeneutics in its modern form is closely associated. As we have already mentioned, Heidegger is careful to distinguish between “*Auslegung*” and the more thoroughly systematic “*Interpretieren*”. Both of these, however, differ from “*Deutung*” and “*Deuten*”. Heidegger uses both terms in *Being and Time*, but does so minimally and in a manner distinct from the way in which he uses either “*Auslegung*” or “*Interpretieren*”.

---

<sup>113</sup> Other examples, among many, include sections § 34, § 85, § 160, § 170, § 198... the list goes on. There are occasions on which “*Deutung*” is translated differently, however, such as § 32 in which “*Deutung*” is translated as “significance” in the Anscombe translation (but as “interpretation” in Hacker and Schulte’s revised translation (Wittgenstein, 2009: 19e). These alternate translations are simply a reflection of the way in which the German word can be used however, and do not signify any notable deviation from Wittgenstein’s use of “*Deutung*” to mean “interpretation” elsewhere. “*Deuten*”, meanwhile, appears in passages such as § 34, § 170, § 206, § 637 etc.

“*Deutung*” is translated as “explanation”, and used infrequently. The occasion on which “*Deutung*” occurs most prominently is in a passage which begins with the sentence; “*Dieser phänomenale Befund ist nicht wegzudeuten*” (Heidegger, 1967: 275).<sup>114</sup> “*Wegzudeuten*” means to “explain away”, and it would seem that when Heidegger refers to “explanation” in this context it implies a similar kind of “interpretation” that fails to take account of the phenomena that it proclaims to explain, to explanations that lead us away from the phenomenon at hand; “*Beide Deutungen überspringen vorschnell den phänomenalen Befund*” is translated, for example, as “Both these explanations pass over the phenomenal findings too hastily” (Heidegger, 2008: 320).

“*Deuten*” is used even more rarely, and is translated simply as “points to”.<sup>115</sup> The related term “*Umdeuten*” is translated as “giving new explanations” (Heidegger, 2008: 298) and to “give a new explanation” (Heidegger, 2008: 305), and is closely associated by Heidegger with evasion and inauthenticity. The only time at which “*deuten*” is associated with “*Auslegung*” is when Heidegger writes: “*Die Analyse des Geredes und der Zweideutigkeit dagegen setzt schon die Klärung der zeitlichen Konstitution der Rede und des Deutens (der Auslegung) voraus*” (Heidegger, 1967: 346). “*Deutens*” here is still translated as explanation, but is followed by “*Auslegung*” in parentheses, which serves as a qualification of “*Deutens*” indicating that interpretation (*Auslegung*) is a particular kind of explanation relevant to Heidegger’s “analysis of idle talk and ambiguity” (Heidegger, 2008: 397). The very

---

<sup>114</sup> German references for Heidegger will be drawn from the 1967 eleventh, unchanged edition of *Sein und Zeit*. For English references I will be referring to the 1962 Macquarrie and Robinson translation of the seventh edition of *Sein und Zeit*.

<sup>115</sup> “Alle Modifikationen der Furcht deuten als Möglichkeiten des Sich-befindens darauf hin, daß das Dasein als In-der-Welt-sein »furchtsam« ist” is translated as “All modifications of fear, as possibilities of having a state-of-mind, point to the fact that Dasein as Being-in-the-world is ‘fearful’.” (German: Heidegger, 1967: 142; English: Heidegger, 2008: 182)

fact that Heidegger makes this clarification shows that he considers *Auslegung* importantly distinct from the kind of explanations or explanatory activity to which he otherwise refers with “*Deutung*” or “*Deuten*”. We should be cautious, therefore, about conflating one with the other in translation.

### 5.2.2: Gadamer & Ricoeur

In Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* too the use of the words “*Deutung*” and “*Deuten*” is marginal in comparison to “*Auslegung*”. “*Deutens*” occurs in reference to Kantian aesthetics.<sup>116</sup> “*Deutung*”, meanwhile, is translated as “interpretation”, but primarily functions as a general and non-specific term for interpretation. On at least one occasion “*Deutung*” is even related to the hermeneutic task “[o]nly in an extended sense”, although this may be because Gadamer’s notion of “*Auslegung*” is reserved specifically for text interpretation.<sup>117</sup>

By comparison, Gadamer writes that “[t]o interpret [Auslegen] means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning [*Meinung*] can really be made to speak for us” (Gadamer, 1993: 397).<sup>118</sup> There can be little doubt that Gadamer considers *Auslegung* the form of interpretation primarily relevant to the hermeneutic project. The concept of an “interpretive horizon” then,

---

<sup>116</sup> “...bewährte sich darin, daß es dem Genuss und der Betrachtung einen unausschöpfbaren Gegenstand des Verweilens und Deutens bot” (Gadamer, 2010: 99); translated by Weinsheimer and Marshall as “...proved by the fact that it offered to pleasure and contemplation an inexhaustible object of lingering attention and interpretation” (Gadamer, 1993: 94); German references are taken from the seventh edition of *Warheit und Methode* published in 2010, English references are taken from Weinsheimer and Marshall’s revised translation of the fourth edition of *Warheit und Methode*.

<sup>117</sup> Gadamer writes that “[n]ur in einem erweiterten Sinne stellen auch nichtschriftliche Monamente eine hermeneutische Aufgabe... Was sie bedeuten, ist eine Frage ihrer Deutung, nicht der Entzifferung und des Verständnisses eines Wortlauts” (German: Gadamer, 2010: 394). This is translated as “[o]nly in an extended sense do non-literary monuments present a hermeneutical task... What they mean is a question of their interpretation [Deutung], not of deciphering and understanding the wording of a text” (Gadamer, 1993: 391).

<sup>118</sup> German: “Auslegen heißt gerade, die eigenen Vorbegriffe mit ins Spiel Bringen, damit die Meinung des Textes für uns wirklich zum Sprechen gebracht wird” (Gadamer, 2010: 401).

drawn from Gadamer, needn't be something steeped in theoretical concerns which distract our attention from the concrete reality of that which we interpret, but simply a way of expressing the meeting that occurs between reader and text and the historical and social conditions under which understanding occurs.

Ricoeur, of course, was not a native German speaker, and wrote the majority of his work in French. In the notes on editing and translating that accompany the collection of essays *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, John B. Thompson indicates a number of distinctions he believes are important to take into consideration when reading Ricoeur in translation. Thompson notes that "Ricoeur uses specific terms to translate German expressions" and that it is "important to preserve Ricoeur's distinction if one is to make sense of his analyses of German texts" (Thompson, 1981b: 28). Accordingly, he provides a short comparative list of various terms in both the German original, Ricoeur's French terminology and in Thompson's own English translations:

<i>compréhension (Verständnis)</i>	: understanding
<i>explication (Erklärung)</i>	: explanation
<i>explicitation (Auslegung)</i>	: explication
<i>interprétation (Deutung)</i>	: interpretation

119

Both the French and English words used here to translate "*Auslegung*", as it is used in the hermeneutic tradition, are words closely associated with literary analysis, in particular with the idea of making aspects of meaning which may remain tacit or implicit clear and explicit. Explication involves looking at that which we explicate anew in some way and aims to enrich our understanding of that which we interpret by drawing attention to some particular aspect of the object of our consideration. The kind of attention we direct towards this object is guided by our presuppositions

---

<sup>119</sup> It is noteworthy too that Thompson chooses to translate "*Deutung*" as "interpretation", and that *Auslegung* is distinguished from this in its own translation (Thompson, 1981b: 28).

and interests, often themselves influenced by the intellectual traditions with which we engage, and it is partly in relation to how we attend to that which we interpret that understanding emerges. But our attention nevertheless remains directed *towards* and *responsive to* the phenomenon at hand. To do otherwise is no longer to “explicate” anything.

“The Model of the Text”, as an essay, represents somewhat of an aberration within all this as it was originally written in English. In this essay, and despite the distinction that Thompson makes in his translations of Ricoeur’s French writings, “*Auslegung*” is identified by Ricoeur with the English word “interpretation”.<sup>120</sup> We should not, however, take this difference in translation to indicate that Ricoeur is using the word “interpretation” differently here than elsewhere. Ricoeur is careful to identify the kind of interpretation he is engaged in within “The Model of the Text” as *Auslegung* in order to avoid such ambiguity. For Ricoeur, like Gadamer, *Auslegung* is quite overtly literary; “*Auslegung* (interpretation, exegesis)... covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197).

It is important, therefore, that we consider the use of the word “interpretation” within this context. Ricoeur does not argue that, in our day-to-day lives, our understanding of the world and our actions within it necessarily involve any form of explicit interpretive activity. However, when we take action as an object of inquiry, and thus “fixed” in a manner analogous to the text, we can submit it to interpretive examination in the manner of *Auslegung*; in doing so we can extrapolate

---

<sup>120</sup> It is, after all, conventional to translate both “*Deutung*” and “*Auslegung*” into English as “interpretation”; it is only when we are attending closely to the specific ways in which these terms are used, particularly within philosophy, that identifying one term with the other too closely becomes particularly problematic.

upon and make explicit particular aspects of human action that might (and often do) pass us by in day-to-day life.

### 5.3: Reflective and Pre-Reflective Understanding

The association of *Auslegung* with literary interpretation may seem like a case of begging the question within the context of defending “The Model of the Text” against anti-interpretive claims; as if the claim were that *Auslegung* is free of the theoretical baggage that might accompany the use of *Deutung* or *Deuten*, but only under the condition that we subscribe to the notion of viewing action “as a text” in the first place. But Ricoeur’s point is that action taken as an object of inquiry can be seen as having been fixed in a manner analogous to the text, and that it is under these circumstances that meaningful action becomes available to interpretation (Ricoeur, 1981h: 203). This kind of interpretation does not necessarily involve “adding” anything to the action, or any form of illegitimate abstraction. Instead it can be used to articulate our “everyday” understanding of something, to state explicitly something of which we may already be tacitly aware, or to show something about action of which we may not otherwise have been aware.

The fact that at a *pre-reflective* level we are not always, or even usually, explicitly aware of the ways in which our actions may relate to various factors – such as our historical heritage, our wider social position or our place within a network of power relations – doesn’t necessarily imply that these aren’t or can’t be acknowledged as factors contributing to the ways in which we act and the ways in which our actions have meaning for us and those around us. Interpretation conceived along the lines of *Auslegung* often attempts to focus on the context in which action can be said to make sense, and to use it to illuminate the meaning of the

action at hand. In this regard, there are definite parallels to be drawn between hermeneutic interpretation and the kind of descriptive Wittgensteinian approach, such as that expounded in *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science*, in which action is presented in terms of “rules” in order to draw attention to some particular aspect of its everyday meaning.

### 5.3.1: Rule-Following and Critical Understanding

The application of Wittgensteinian thought to the understanding of action undertaken by Peter Winch within *The Idea of Social Science*... involves the careful caveat that we should not too readily identify the meaning of action *purely* with how it might be understood in “everyday” situations. Winch writes;

I do not wish to maintain that we must stop at... unreflective... understanding... [But] that any more reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose... the participant’s unreflective understanding... although the reflective student of society... may find it necessary to use concepts... from the context of his own investigation, still these technical concepts of his will imply a previous understanding of those other concepts which belong to the activities under investigation. (Winch, 1990: 89)

Winch’s arguments are aimed primarily against the use of purely empirical observations, modelled on the methods of the natural sciences, as the benchmark for understanding meaningful behaviour in the social sciences. He argues that instead we need to be aware of the conceptual context within which action makes sense, and that our interpretations of action must ultimately relate to this context if they are to be valid.

There is nothing endemic to “The Model of the Text” which implies that interpretation should be based on something conceptually “different in kind” (Winch, 1990: 113) in the manner against which Winch is careful to guard. Of course, it is possible that an interpretation made in line with the textual model of

hermeneutics could transgress these conditions, but if an interpreter fails to sufficiently take account of the conceptual milieu in which action takes place this would simply be a case of *bad interpretation*. The incorporation of self-critique as a moment within interpretation in Ricoeur's hermeneutic model demands, however, that we are aware of the ways in which our theoretical presuppositions influence our understanding of action and, as such, that we take this into consideration as part of our interpretive deliberations if we find ourselves abstracting away from the context in which the actions we interpret can be said to make sense. In this regard, the reflectivity of "The Model of the Text" provides a meta-methodological resource with which we can help guard against bad interpretation.<sup>121</sup>

This is not to suggest that the authors of *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science* are committed to the idea that we mustn't engage in any form of "critical" analysis of action, but simply that understanding "the practices of another culture" involves understanding those practices "in their terms" (Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock, 2008: 120), and that critical analysis is subsidiary and subsequent to this. However, the privileging of the way in which action is understood on an "everyday" basis within this approach comes with its own potential risks.

Conceiving the attempt to "understand" the meaning of action too closely with identifying how things appear to the agents of action on a day-to-day basis risks taking this particular perspective for granted, and thus overlooking other critical perspectives that may be available to us. Such perspectives may allow us to perceive something about action or the circumstances of its enactment that remains obscure from the point of view of the "everyday" perspective. Nigel Pleasants, for example, has argued that Winch's 1964 essay "Understanding a Primitive Society", within

---

<sup>121</sup> The notion of reflectivity and self-critique as aspects of interpretation is discussed previously in chapter four (section 4.1.4) of this thesis, and comes to the fore once more in chapter six (section 6.3).

which Winch applies the principles of *The Idea of Social Science...* to an interpretation of Azande witchcraft practices, fails to come to grips with “key features of Zande social life, which concern such central issues as wealth, possession of scarce resources, social and political power” (Pleasants, 2000: 301).

Pleasants points out that “possession and use of the poison oracle was monopolized by the powerful elites of Zande society” and that “women were systematically marginalized and degraded as a consequence of being excluded from oracular practice” (Pleasants, 2000: 301). The way in which wealth distribution, gender politics and unequal power relationships influence oracular practices in Zande society is almost entirely overlooked within Winch’s analysis, which compares Azande oracular rituals to Christian prayers of supplication in order to emphasise the way that they may be seen to “express an attitude to contingencies... which involves recognition that one’s life is subject to these contingencies, rather than an attempt to control these” (Winch, 1964: 321).

Importantly however, Pleasants also points out that although these are “descriptions which quite obviously carry critical implications”, this needn’t in turn necessitate “theoretical judgment on the ontological and epistemic status of witchcraft and magic” (Pleasants, 2000: 301-02). Bringing critically informed description to bear upon action needn’t mean that we are failing to engage with or consciously rejecting the self-understanding of those we are interpreting, but only that understanding the meaning of action can sometimes involve explicating the wider social context within which these practices take place even when this would usually remain tacit within the practices themselves.

In Winch’s defence, he does state that “[w]e are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of [the society we are

observing]”, only that we should aim to achieve “a way of looking at things” which has “taken account of and incorporated” the self-understanding of those we are interpreting (Winch, 1964: 317). Nevertheless, Pleasants’ criticism shows that if we marginalise “critical” social and political perspectives from our analyses as a matter of principle, we are using “understanding” in a narrow and technical sense which no longer engages thoroughly with that which we are putatively seeking to understand. Even if “everyday” conceptions of the meaning of action are an ineliminable part of any engagement with meaningful action, by demarcating a narrow domain of what counts as “meaning” within inquiry we close off the potential to see new aspects of something in favour of focusing exclusively on one particular way of conceiving it.

The idea that the “everyday” should be privileged at the expense of any and every “critical” approach to understanding meaningful action is, of course, an extreme position, and not one which we should necessarily attribute to a Wittgensteinian approach. As previously mentioned, most advocates of the idea of “rule-following” do not wish to rule out the possibility of criticism, but simply to stipulate that if we are to submit action to critical analysis we must first be aware of the “everyday” understandings held by those we are criticising. If, however, this is taken to imply that critical analysis is something exclusively separate and subsequent to “understanding”, and that likewise to “interpret” action is something radically other than truly “understanding” it, then we must object. This conclusion only arises if we place description and critical understanding in radical opposition to one another, and identify “understanding” as something primarily sympathetic.

But the kind of understanding to which the human and social sciences aspires is not necessarily a case of simply understanding something from the other person’s point of view, but of understanding particular cases of action in all their complexity.

If trying to understand this situation as it is understood *in situ* is the best available method we have for achieving this understanding the two coincide. Most of the time, however, this sympathetic approach can be complemented with other critical and explanatory approaches which may afford us a more rounded picture of how the situation at hand can be understood. To the extent that it privileges the “everyday” meaning of action above and beyond any “critical” approach to the analysis of action, a Wittgensteinian approach to “understanding” maintains, or even possibly strengthens, the traditional interpretive dichotomy between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*.

This dichotomy, however, is explicitly rejected by Ricoeur when he locates the critical moment as part of the “*hermeneutical arc*” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218) that describes interpretive understanding and upon which the validity of hermeneutic interpretation is premised. We do not, therefore, have to reject *Erklären* on the basis that it clouds or distorts *Verstehen*. For Ricoeur, on the contrary, critical and explanatory activity is not antithetical to understanding but has a vital part to play in supporting the validity of interpretation and the kind of “understanding” to which the human and social sciences might aspire. Both the demand to understand the other (*Verstehen*) and the demand to engage critically with action (*Erklären*) are part of interpretation and are obligations that the interpreter must aspire to meet within their activities.

### 5.3.2: Objectification and Critical Understanding

For Ricoeur “critical” or “reflective” and “naïve” understanding are all parts of the same phenomenon of “understanding” conceived in a broader sense than that admitted by some Wittgensteinian critics; critical understanding is achieved by moving from a naïve or pre-reflective state of understanding characteristic of our

day-to-day engagement with the world, passing through the “critical moment” in which that which we seek to understand is held as an object of reflection, and culminating once more in an enriched understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

For Ricoeur, critical modes of thought are inseparable from the pre-reflective and “participatory” mode of being they attempt to explicate. The appropriation which goes on in interpretation thereby “ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of... It implies instead a moment of dispossession of the narcissistic *ego*” (Ricoeur, 1981g: 192). Hermeneutic interpretation, including any critical aspect of this activity, involves an element of passivity wherein we allow that which we interpret to impose itself upon us, revealing something about itself to us and shaping our understanding of that which we interpret and ourselves in relation to it.

It is via the distanciation which occurs in objectification that the object of interpretation is capable of speaking to us in this manner. Taking action as an “object” of interpretive reflection interrupts our pre-reflective experience of action in our day-to-day lives meaning we engage with it in a way that would otherwise evade us. In this regard, the distinction between “critical” and “naïve” understanding is an important one to make, even if they are ultimately inextricably linked, as it demarcates the kind of attentive engagement we reserve for certain situations under certain conditions. Being aware of such differences of attention is an essential part of understanding how our interpretations of action relate to our phenomenal experience of the world around us, and how they might in turn inform one another.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> This distinction cannot even necessarily be limited to the rarefied realm of academic discourse. The ability to continue a number sequence certainly demonstrates understanding of a kind, but under most circumstances we would probably think it very strange should the person doing this then proved

From a hermeneutic perspective, talk of the meaningfulness of action in terms of “presuppositions” is not a psychological claim about how people engage with the world. It is rather a way of representing to ourselves some of the conditions which might be considered pertinent to how action is perceived as meaningful. Most human action does not involve any explicit form of interpretation, but most human action does not involve rules either; we typically think about our actions in terms of rules when we think or suspect we might have transgressed them (it is only in light of the possibility of “going against” a rule that it makes sense to talk of “following” a rule, after all).<sup>123</sup> As models of understanding, neither hermeneutic interpretation nor a Wittgensteinian inspired rule-following approach capture how we engage with the world as meaningful in “everyday life” in a manner entirely free from abstraction or reflective distanciation. To do so would be to renounce any form of reflective understanding whatsoever, and we would be dominated entirely by our pre-reflective understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Ricoeur uses the text as a paradigm of the kind of distanciation undergone by action in objectification, and it is with this in mind that we should consider his use of textual hermeneutics to inform interpretive practices within the human and social sciences. He does not claim, on the other hand, that the ways in which we understand action on a day-to-day basis are “interpretive”, nor that interpreters within the human and social sciences should not be concerned with the “everyday” meaning of action. We cannot, therefore, discount a hermeneutic interpretive

---

unable to tell us what rule they were following. Reflection is, after all, an important part of our everyday engagement with meaningful phenomena in our lives.

<sup>123</sup> Winch, in his preface to the second edition of *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, distances himself from the idea that human action necessarily involves explicit rule-following, describing this as an “over-idealization” (Winch, 1990: xvi).

approach to understanding action on the grounds that meaningful action is not typically “interpretive”.

To do so represents a misunderstanding of the hermeneutic project and the nature of *Auslegung* as interpretation. It would be to misunderstand “The Model of the Text” as a psychological thesis about understanding rather than an essay outlining some observations and suggestions regarding the objectification and interpretation of action within the human and social sciences. *Auslegung* describes a different kind of interpretation to that with which Wittgenstein was primarily concerned. If this is the case, then there is little reason to think that hermeneutic philosophy necessarily involves the same kind of “negative” abstraction from or imposition upon our everyday experience of the world as is implied within *There Is No Such Thing as a Social Science*.

We can, of course, read too much significance into the minutiae of translation and the particularities of different kinds of interpretation. Wittgenstein was not engaging directly with the work of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur or with hermeneutic thought in general. He would not, therefore, necessarily feel the need to distinguish between different kinds of interpretation in the same way, and it could still be the case that he might have intended “*Deutung*” and “*Deuten*” to be catch-all terms covering all activities that might be termed interpretation. But it is precisely because Wittgenstein isn’t engaging directly with the work of hermeneutic writers that we need to be careful about the fine-grained differentiation involved in the translation of these examples of German terminology into “interpretation” in English, and why we should be interested in and remain open to how hermeneutic philosophy can inform the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences.

#### 5.4: Ethnomethodology

Another school of thought that rejects conventional “interpretive” approaches to social inquiry is ethnomethodology. Like the thinkers inspired by Wittgenstein and Winch discussed above, ethnomethodology is marked by the belief that meaningful action can *only* be understood by attending closely to the way in which action is enacted and understood by individuals interacting in a shared social setting. The similarities between these approaches to social inquiry are not entirely coincidental; Wittgenstein’s philosophy has been identified as an important influence upon and exemplification of ethnomethodological practices (e.g. Pleasants, 1999: 123) and his work is identified by Garfinkel as “a sustained, extensive, and penetrating corpus of observations of indexical phenomena” (Garfinkel, 1986: 169).

By focussing upon the context and practices against which action is enacted in specific situations, ethnomethodology aims to avoid the problems that arise from “objectifying” action, and the distortions that occur when particular cases are subsumed under theoretical categories. Focusing upon the work of Harold Garfinkel, herein I offer an account of ethnomethodology and consider whether ethnomethodological practices and principles might pose a challenge to the hermeneutic model of interpretation used by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text”. Ultimately I will argue that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic model of interpretation is capable of incorporating many of the insights of ethnomethodology, and complementarily that “The Model of the Text” has the potential in turn to aid and inform ethnomethodological practice.

### 5.4.1: Ethnomethodological Principles

Ethnomethodology has its origins in the work of Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, published in 1967. Garfinkel defines ethnomethodology as "the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (Garfinkel, 1967: 11). This refers to the study of "the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on circumstances in which they find themselves" (Heritage, 1984: 4). Roughly speaking, the central tenet of ethnomethodology is that action only makes sense within particular social environments, and that the sense-making features of these environments are the product of the ongoing work of the individuals – or "members" – within that environment.

Ethnomethodology professes to be distinct from the "resolutely theoretical" activities of the social sciences as a whole by recommending a "bottom-up" approach to social inquiry. Rather than beginning with a particular theory of action by which the observer makes sense of what he or she observes, the ethnomethodologist starts with and focuses upon the particular features of some specific social situation.<sup>124</sup> This "bottom-up" approach attempts to "get away from asking whether things really are the way members of the society say they are in order that one may examine what members of the society say they are and how they satisfy themselves that things are that way" (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 106). Escaping such traditional sociological preoccupations in turn allows us to attend to "the most

---

<sup>124</sup> Whether such a "resolutely theoretical" and top-down approach to inquiry is or was genuinely as pervasive within the social sciences as Garfinkel seems to imply is, of course, questionable. Garfinkel, nevertheless, is responding to a historical prejudice within sociology for "grand theory" within which universal and systematic rules for understanding social action are sought.

commonplace activities of daily life [with] the attention usually accorded extraordinary events” and in doing so “learn about them as phenomena in their own right” (Garfinkel, 1967: 1).

Central to an ethnomethodological approach of this kind is the belief that “the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings ‘accountable’” (Garfinkel, 1967: 1). Matters which are “accountable” in this sense are those that are “observable-and-reportable, *i.e.* available to members as situated practices of looking-and-telling”. According to Garfinkel, such practices “consist of an endless, ongoing, contingent accomplishment” and “are done by parties to those settings whose skill with, knowledge of, and entitlement to the detailed work of that accomplishment – whose competence – they obstinately depend upon, recognize, use, and take for granted” (Garfinkel, 1967: 1). For the ethnomethodologist, the recognisable structure of any given social group is therefore equivalent to the methods by which members of those groups make that structure present and recognisable to themselves, both tacitly and explicitly, in words and actions.

These “methods” by which social action is structured are themselves indexical insofar as they refer “reflexively” back to the settings in which they are located. Attempting to understand social action abstracted away from the reflexively constituted setting to which it belongs is therefore to miss the fundamental way in which meaning is a “local” phenomenon. Garfinkel uses this idea of indexicality not only to “capture the traditional philosophical problem of the *reference* of deictic terms, but also to note that the *sense* of ordinary descriptive terms is powerfully influenced by the context in which they are uttered” (Heritage, 1984: 143). It is the “reflexivity” of action which, according to Garfinkel, traditional approaches to the

social sciences often overlook or marginalise in favour of “objective” expressions purely for the sake of submitting action to formal analysis (Garfinkel, 1967: 4-7).

Garfinkel further argues that due to their failure to engage with the reflexivity of action, objectifying reports of action cannot be seen as the “disinterested descriptions” they purport to be. Instead formalised accounts of action consist of merely “a persuasive version of the socially organized character” of the situation being described, “regardless of what the actual order is... and even without the investigator having detected the actual order” (Garfinkel, 1967: 23). Formal “codified” representations of social order provide social scientists with “a grammar of rhetoric; they furnish a ‘social science’ way of talking so as to persuade consensus” (Garfinkel, 1967: 24). By identifying formal representations of this kind as “objective”, traditional social science ends up treating observable accountable elements of action as “sketchy, partial, incomplete, masked, elliptical, concealed, ambiguous, or misleading” (Garfinkel, 1967: 27).

Rather than fall prey to the temptations of objectification and formal analysis, Garfinkel claims we should instead “assign exclusive priority to the study of the methods of concerted actions and methods of common understanding. Not a method of understanding, but immensely various methods of understanding are the professional sociologist’s proper and hitherto unstudied and critical phenomena” (Garfinkel, 1967: 31). As such, ethnomethodology identifies “the desire to objectify phenomena” itself as an urge towards illegitimate abstraction, and one that leads us into misunderstanding “such that the nature of the phenomenon under inquiry may be forgotten” (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 111). Ethnomethodology aims instead to suspend such scientific “objective” judgement and analysis of action in favour of

treating action in “its own right” in the terms of the social context to which it belongs.

It is in relation to the notion of “objectivity” that ethnomethodology is perhaps most directly pertinent to “The Model of the Text”. Although Ricoeur rejects scientific paradigms of interpretive objectivity, the objectification of action is nevertheless central to the kind of critical interpretive understanding described by Ricoeur in “The Model of the Text”. With this in mind, it is necessary to ask whether ethnomethodology poses a challenge to the way in which Ricoeur argues that the interpretation of action can only occur when action is “fixed” as an object of reflective inquiry.

#### 5.4.2: Ethnomethodology, Signs and Referents

The emphasis placed by Garfinkel upon understanding action in terms of the sense-making methods employed in localised settings is partially grounded in a desire to avoid falsely imputing substantive beliefs about the world to those who we nominally seek to understand. In particular, Garfinkel criticises “the assumption that in order to describe a usage as a feature of a community of understandings we must at the outset know what the substantive common understandings consist of” (Garfinkel, 1967: 28). He claims that this assumption is invariably accompanied by a “theory of signs, according to which a ‘sign’ and ‘referent’ are respectively properties of something said and something talked about” and that by “dropping such a theory of signs we drop as well, thereby, the possibility that an invoked shared agreement on substantive matters explains a usage. If these notions are dropped, then what the parties talked about could not be distinguished from *how* the parties were speaking” (Garfinkel, 1967: 28).

Traditional social science, according to Garfinkel, has been too consumed with the idea of the “referents” of speech and action, and as such has marginalised what people actually do and say as merely pointing towards substantive “common understandings” which underlie meaningful human interaction. These concerns parallel those of Wittgenstein, in particular his criticism of the kind of “interpretation” which directs the interpreter’s attention away from the phenomena we are interpreting. Garfinkel even goes as far as to say that ethnomethodology “is not an interpretive enterprise” or “in the business of interpreting signs”. He argues that it is instead via attending to “ordinary everyday practices” in their “unmediated details” (Garfinkel, 1996: 8) that we can best understand and observe the ways in which social action is both possible and meaningful. The distinction between “sign” and “referent”, by contrast, only obscures the fact that “the recognized sense of what a person said consists only and entirely in... *seeing how he spoke*” (Garfinkel, 1967: 29).

Part of this critique of this “referential” picture of the meaning of action, and part of being able to attend closely to the “ordinary everyday practices” in which social action is manifest, involves, for Garfinkel, recognising that “[e]nacted local practices are not texts which symbolize ‘meanings’ or events” (Garfinkel, 1996: 8). On the surface, this would seem to be in direct conflict with Ricoeur’s professed project of considering meaningful action “as a text”. Before coming to this conclusion, however, we need to consider more thoroughly whether “The Model of the Text” does in fact involve the kind of metaphysical distinction identified by Garfinkel as endemic to a “theory of signs”, or whether Ricoeur conceives of objectification in a manner which aims to direct our attention towards that which we

are seeking to understand and not, therefore, towards some transcendental “referent” of which action is considered merely a signifier.

Certainly the most important point that can be made in Ricoeur’s defence here is that he claims “the text” not as an exemplar of action as we experience it in our day-to-day lives, but as the *object of the human and social sciences*. So while “The Model of the Text” is concerned with treating action “as a text”, this is *only* the case insofar as it provides a model for understanding action under the condition of objectification. Objectification of this kind undeniably involves engaging with action in a manner that diverges from the attitude of those involved with it as a practical ongoing achievement. But objectification is also considered by Ricoeur as a precondition of bringing action to discourse and the reflective understanding of action we hope to achieve therein. This needn’t, therefore, imply any “metaphysical” commitment to a “theory of signs”, nor to the idea that particular actions should be understood as “merely” signifiers which point towards a substantive realm of shared meaning.<sup>125</sup>

For Ricoeur, no meaningful discourse is ever absolutely free of the “event” in which it originates. The circumstances of the event of discourse constitute a vital part of its history – its *Wirkungsgeschichte* – and are therefore irreducibly a part of its meaning. The inscription of discourse as a text represents the mediation within which discourse is preserved as a unique configuration that “illustrates and exalts the eventful character of discourse” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 137), without this “event” being lost in the ongoing ebb and flow of translocution. Discourse is “fixed” as a text so it can be preserved, and precisely so that we can engage attentively with the eventful

---

<sup>125</sup> Even the autonomy of meaning attributed to the text by Ricoeur (discussed at length in chapter two of this thesis) does not imply that texts (or action under the condition of objectification) refer to some “transcendent signified”, only that their meaning can no longer be simplistically identified with the conditions of its eventuation.

character of discourse as a *part of* how it is meaningful. This is achieved insofar as the text opens up and refers to a “world” for the reader via the “ensemble of references” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 202) – the unique configuration taken on by discourse via inscription – that constitute the text as text. Ricoeur conceives the text, therefore, not as something which refers to some “transcendental signified” beyond itself, but as an invitation to the reader to think about and through the matter of the text itself.

This represents a very different conception of referentiality to that of the “theory of signs” identified by Garfinkel as prevalent throughout traditional approaches to the social sciences. This is not, of course, to say that Garfinkel and Ricoeur are in agreement regarding the idea of textual reference or the objectification of action. It is only to point out that Garfinkel’s criticism that the objectification of action necessarily involves a metaphysical commitment to a “theory of signs”, and which thus leads us away from understanding action “in its own right”, cannot apply in the same way to Ricoeur’s textual model as it might to other “interpretive” approaches to the social sciences.

Ricoeur utilises the text as an analogue of action constituted as an object of interpretive inquiry, but does so in a manner that demands the objectification of action should aspire to *preserve* the individuality and complexity of the course of events being objectified, to preserve the *work* of action, whilst simultaneously making it available as an object of reflection. The valid interpretation of action according to this model should, therefore, involve attending closely to the concrete features of the particular situation at hand. Just as textual interpretation requires that we support our suppositions of meaning by recourse to evidence manifest in the unique configuration of the text, attending to how action is uniquely manifest in any particular case is an ineliminable part of understanding what that action means.

The hermeneutic philosophy that undergirds “The Model of the Text” is therefore importantly distinct from the “theory of signs” defined by Garfinkel. Rather than metaphysical confusion, Ricoeur’s interest in textual hermeneutics as a paradigm of interpretation emerges from the perceived necessity of objectification to preserve the “event” of action; the observation that action, like discourse, is fleeting in its enactment whilst potentially having a significance that outlives this.

Garfinkel, by contrast, is concerned *only* with the ways in which actions are meaningful in a given social setting at a given moment in time, as “practical tasks subject to every exigency of organizationally situated conduct” (Garfinkel, 1967: 11). Given this relatively narrow remit for the object of social inquiry “proper”, however, it could still be argued that by ethnomethodological standards Ricoeur’s model fails to adequately do justice to the nature of action as it is experienced in our day-to-day social existence, and that as such “The Model of the Text” might at best be relevant to those of the human sciences that deal explicitly with pre-fixed *artefacts* of action – such as historical records and monuments – with which the analogy to texts is more overtly obvious. But while there may be some validity to the concern that the paradigm of the text risks marginalising the transactional nature of meaningful human action, completely dismissing “The Model of the Text” along these lines would be to obscure the ways in which ethnomethodology can benefit from Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of action, and the necessity of some form of objectification – understood in the sense used by Ricoeur – even within ethnomethodological research.

## 5.5: Ethnomethodology, Objectification and Disciplinary Prejudice

One important aspect of the “reflexivity” of ethnomethodology is the claim that “every particular case of inquiry without exception, is the managed accomplishment of organized settings of practical actions” and the results of such practices of inquiry “are acquired and assured only through particular, located organizations of artful practices” (Garfinkel, 1967: 32). Ethnomethodological inquiry is no exception to this. However, ethnomethodological inquiry is also premised upon certain guiding ideas and principles, such as Garfinkel’s assertion that the sense of what someone says exists “*only and entirely in*” how they speak. These ideas help orientate the “work” of ethnomethodology. Given this, it is important that we take into consideration how the various *interests* and *practices* of ethnomethodology are themselves constitutive elements of the kind of accounts of action generated by ethnomethodological research.

### 5.5.1: Ethnomethodology and Objectification

Despite the emphasis placed upon grounding ethnomethodological accounts of action in the situated “observable-and-reportable” features of the actions being described themselves, ethnomethodology still has to contend with an essential asymmetry between the researcher and those being reported upon. At its most basic level, this involves engaging with the question of whether the methods and work employed in collecting information about human action accurately reflect the social reality that they are supposed to capture, i.e. whether it is possible to represent human action in a way which remains faithful to the lived reality of the agents represented. Ethnomethodology may differ in how it understands the role and nature of evidence and data in social inquiry from mainstream sociology, in line with the

less scientific approach recommended by Garfinkel, but it nevertheless has to face similar challenges regarding the relationship between that which is observed and the methods by which these observations are made and by which meaningful human action is brought to ethnomethodological discourse.

This problem is described by Wes Sharrock and Bob Anderson, working within the ethnomethodological tradition, as “the elemental fact of research” (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 112). The reason that it poses a problem for researchers conscious of avoiding false attribution of meaning to action is that by describing, reporting or recording action as part of sociological research we appropriate it as “data”. In treating action thus it is essential that we also recognise that it is “produced by research practices and data collecting and analysing techniques”. Failing to recognise the essential element of abstraction involved in the constitution of action as an object of reflective inquiry risks, in turn, obscuring how “the work of seeing order and pattern in a transcript, video or photograph may be something made possible by the capacity to replay, halt, write down, and inspect it closely over and over again” (Sharrock and Anderson, 1986: 112).

So although ethnomethodology works hard to maintain a non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and social actor, it cannot avoid the inherent asymmetry between actor and researcher and accompanying potential for “the relationship between what the researcher sees in the data and what was/would be noticed by social actors living in real-time situations” to become “problematic”. The capacity of researchers to “replay, halt, write down” some course of events “and inspect it closely over and over again” has an obvious affinity with what Ricoeur refers to as the necessity of objectification – of “fixation” – as a precondition of reflective understanding. As ethnomethodology demonstrates, however, this notion

of “objectification” needn’t imply that the interpreter of action is free to interpret action without taking account of the situatedness and reflexivity of the action being interpreted. Such “objectivism” stands in direct conflict with the hermeneutic model of interpretation developed by Ricoeur and employed within “The Model of the Text”.

Objectification, in the sense discussed in “The Model of the Text”, is just as much a part of ethnomethodological practices as it is part of any interpretive work within the human and social sciences, and does not necessarily transgress the principles of localism and non-imposition that define ethnomethodology. What is important, however, is that the *activity* of objectification is recognised as part of ethnomethodological practice, and taken into account as a productive dimension of the accounts composed therein. It is the active element of description and interpretation that marks the asymmetry of researcher and agent of action subjected to inquiry most explicitly. It is the researcher’s *explicit aim* to offer an *account* of some action or set of actions. Even if we accept the ethnomethodological principle that members make the sense of their actions “observable/reportable” as a routine part of engaging in meaningful action, this nevertheless differs from the position of the researcher in that this reflexive accountability is typically evident within the activity in which they are engaged, not the *specific end* to which their actions are directed.

Given this, it is vital that the interpreter of action attempts to incorporate an awareness of any asymmetry that may exist between themselves and those whom they are observing into their accounts of action. There are of course various activities in which *explicit* reflexivity and accounting for one’s action are an important part of the “methods” by which that activity is enacted. But this is not

necessarily a feature of all action. In each case we must try to acknowledge the asymmetry between researcher and member, especially in terms of how action is explicitly “objectified” for the interpreter of action, and attempt to take into account how this asymmetry may influence our understanding of the situation in question. If we fail to do so we end up obscuring how our own interpretive practices help shape the accounts of action we give.

### 5.5.2: Ethnomethodology and Disciplinary Prejudice

Despite setting itself up as an “alternate” to traditional and mainstream sociology, it is no less vital that ethnomethodology is able to engage with its own presuppositions regarding the meaning and nature of human action. In addition to the technical methods by which action is recorded and constituted as an object it is therefore also important that the interpreter of action considers how the presuppositions of ethnomethodological thought may also play a constitutive role in how action is understood. Failure to do so as *part of* the ethnomethodological work involved in studying human action can lead to taking one’s presuppositions for granted and thus risks a failure of understanding.

I will now examine Garfinkel’s famous case study of an intersexed person, Agnes, in order to demonstrate how “disciplinary prejudice” within ethnomethodology may work to demarcate the valid limits of the kind of accounts of action composed and the kind of understanding achieved within ethnomethodological inquiry.<sup>126</sup> In particular I will examine how the ethnomethodological prioritisation of understanding meaningful action as an “ongoing achievement” evident in and *only* in the “observable/accountable” features

---

<sup>126</sup> The notion of disciplinary prejudice and its relevance to the description and interpretation of action is discussed in greater depth within the fourth chapter (section 4.1.3) of this thesis.

of members' behaviour, although useful for making us aware of how certain elements of gender identity may be enacted by individuals in particular situations, may also lead us to exclude certain concerns potentially pertinent or useful for understanding gender norms.

#### 5.5.2.1: Agnes and Ethnomethodology

Garfinkel describes the experiences of Agnes, a “nineteen-year old girl raised as a boy” who identifies as female and has secondary female sexual characteristics, but who also has “a fully developed penis and scrotum” (Garfinkel, 1967: 117). Specifically, the study is concerned with Agnes’ attempts to “pass” as female within a society in which gender difference is traditionally and commonly considered as a dichotomy between “male” and “female” corresponding to a biological dimorphism typical of the vast majority of the population, but within which Agnes does not comfortably fit. Garfinkel in turn uses these observations regarding Agnes’ “performance” of femininity in order to draw conclusions about the social norms which define sexual identity within society. Garfinkel’s argument is that Agnes’ self-conscious attempts to be accepted as an “ordinary” female work by “making observable *that* and *how* normal sexuality is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct” (Garfinkel, 1967: 180).

The significance of Garfinkel’s choice to approach gender as a social and ethnomethodological issue in this fashion is important to remember. Garfinkel writes against a socio-historical background wherein gender was most commonly considered something “natural” and wherein intersexed persons attempting to “pass” would find themselves, according to Garfinkel, “operating with the realistic conviction that disclosure of their secrets would bring swift and certain ruin in the

form of status degradation, psychological trauma, and loss of material advantages” (Garfinkel, 1967: 117-18). Garfinkel’s commitment to recognising gender as something socially achieved, and to the idea that we might come to know the prejudices which define gender in society by observing the phenomenon of “passing”, marks his ethnomethodological approach to gender as both significantly ahead of its time and of enduring sociological interest.

Nevertheless, there remains good reason to be cautious when it comes to the conclusions we might draw from Garfinkel’s study of Agnes. One issue that has to be considered is whether Garfinkel gives sufficient thought to how the institutional setting and the expectations of the medical team with whom Agnes had contact may have influenced her behaviour. Perhaps the most notable feature of Agnes’ circumstances in this regard is that she is *actively seeking* to conform to a perceived norm of femininity. For Agnes, passing involved “an abiding practical preoccupation with competent female sexuality” (Garfinkel, 1967: 121). Arguably, this in itself distinguishes Agnes’ experience of femininity and the social norms of femininity from the vast majority of the wider population, for whom “sexual status is neither something they strive towards, nor something ‘contingent’ which could at any time be radically undermined” (Pleasants, 1999: 143).

More pertinently for our purposes, however, is the very specific manner in which Agnes experiences her sexual status as a goal, and that this takes place and is reported within an institutionalised medical environment. As is acknowledged by Garfinkel, throughout their interactions Agnes had the specific aim of “obtain[ing] a competent, guaranteed, and low-cost operation without ‘submitting to research,’ by which she meant protecting her privacy” (Garfinkel, 1967: 162). Garfinkel’s observations of Agnes’ “abiding practical preoccupation with competent female

sexuality” should, therefore, be set against the background of her intention “to display herself, through her talk, as always having been a real woman, *as ‘real’ was defined by the doctors*, so that the doctors would agree to surgery” (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 117).

To this end, Agnes even constructs a story in order to “naturalise” her identification as female, and to justify her desire for gender realignment surgery, and deliberately deceives those around her. Contrary to her original claims, she eventually revealed that “she had never had a biological defect that had feminized her but that she had been taking estrogens since age 12” (Garfinkel, 1967: 287). She chose to present her back story thusly so that it might fit more closely with the idea that her being born with a penis was “nature’s original mistake” (Garfinkel, 1967: 181) and therefore in “natural” need of rectification by medical intervention.

It is these circumstances that have led Susan Speer, for example, to state that Agnes “lacked power in the research process and was manipulated by the all-male research team” (Speer, 2005: 71). It would be deeply incautious, given this power disparity, to draw conclusions from Agnes’ display of “passing” unless we also consider the ways in which her “performance” of femininity may relate to the very specific circumstances in which she found herself, i.e. being an intersexed individual seeking gender realignment surgery and having to “prove” her femininity to male “experts” working within a medical institution.

Garfinkel leaves the question of any disparity in power or authority within his relationship with Agnes largely uncommented upon. Some indications of a power disparity are, however, evident within Garfinkel’s text. Amongst these we might wish to include Garfinkel’s accounts of his own efforts to “pass” with Agnes, i.e., deceptions he had to make in order to maintain his appearance of expertise when

confronted with questions the answers to which he did not know, when he says that he had to “side-step her requests for information in order to avoid any display of incompetence” (Garfinkel, 1967: 163); the fact that Agnes included “managing her conversations with us at U.C.L.A. in the hope that the decision would be favorable” amongst a list of “particularly difficult times” in her life (Garfinkel, 1967: 138); and perhaps nowhere more so than in Agnes’ fears that “the doctors at U.C.L.A.” would decide “among themselves, and without consulting her” that the right procedure would be to amputate her breasts and strip her of that which she considered the “essential insignia” of her femininity (Garfinkel, 1967: 132).

It is important to bear in mind that Garfinkel was not ignorant of the sometimes instrumental character of Agnes’ “passing” with him. He says, for example, that he believes that Agnes was engaging in “anticipatory following” with him “with disconcerting frequency” and that he was “appalled by the number of occasions on which I was unable to decide whether Agnes was answering my questions or whether she had learned from my questions, and more importantly from more subtle cues both prior to and after the questions, what answers would do” (Garfinkel, 1967: 147). Garfinkel, however, does not seem to consider these cases of “anticipatory following” as particularly noteworthy or distinct, and includes them among what he terms Agnes’ “continuous project of self-improvement” (Garfinkel, 1967: 147) by which she learns about the norms and standards of gender identity and behaviour from the social environment around her and by participating in activities governed by these norms.

There is, of course, nothing fundamentally inconsistent about believing that Agnes’ interviews with Garfinkel were just another case in a long line of activities in which Agnes practiced passing. It seems peculiar, however, that Garfinkel does not

give more consideration to whether there might not be important differences between the ways in which Agnes learned about gender from conversations and gossip with her female friends and roommates, or even from her rivalry with her female cousin, and the way in which she apparently sought to anticipate the best answers to give to someone who was in a position of power over getting access to surgery that was necessary to fulfil her “life-long desire to be the thing that she had always known she was” (Garfinkel, 1967: 130).

One possible reason for this apparent oversight could arise from the ethnomethodological principle of privileging the perspective and perceived social context of the agents of action, and the accompanying assertion that action should be understood “only and entirely” in terms of the locally situated practices of those agents. These principles, insofar as they guide the attention of those engaged in ethnomethodological research and help to demarcate some of the valid possibilities of how meaningful action should be described and understood, are an example of what I have previously termed “disciplinary prejudice”. It is possible, therefore, that the ethnomethodological “prejudice” towards understanding meaningful action as evident *in and only in* the ongoing activities of particular individuals in particular social settings leads Garfinkel to privilege Agnes’ given account and her presentation of herself as the “120 per cent female” (Garfinkel, 1967: 129) and, as a consequence, to marginalise the activities of the researchers and the medical setting as conditions for the production of this account.

The productive influence of this “prejudice” can perhaps be felt most strongly in the conclusions Garfinkel draws from the study. He claims, for example that the research team “learned from Agnes, who treated sexed persons as cultural events that members make happen, that members’ practices *alone* produce the

observable-tellable normal sexuality of persons, and do so *only, entirely, exclusively* in actual, singular, particular occasions through actual witnessed displays of common talk and conduct” (Garfinkel, 1967: 181).<sup>127</sup> He also cites Agnes’ methodological practices as the “sources of authority” for these findings and for their “recommended study policy” (Garfinkel, 1967: 181). Herein Garfinkel places a great emphasis upon the activities of Agnes as the individual working to make her gender “observable-tellable” for others.

This, however, may to some extent marginalise the importance of the context within which this action takes place. Specifically, we risk losing sight of the way in which the “norms” of femininity evident within Agnes’ accounts and actions may have been shaped to some extent by the institutionalised setting and prevalent gender-discourse within which the research team’s work took place, and therefore also of the context within which we can best understand how Agnes treats gender as an achievement and how this may differ from the experiences of both cis- and trans-gender individuals not seeking gender reassignment surgery.<sup>128</sup>

Again, it is worth reiterating that Garfinkel’s work is not radically undermined by the fact he marginalises concerns such as those described above.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>128</sup> It is arguably also Garfinkel’s emphasis upon seeing gender identity primarily as an “ongoing achievement” evident in and *only* in the “observable/accountable” features of members’ behaviour – i.e. as something which the gendered individual *actively* makes manifest within their behaviour – that leaves him little room to give much consideration to the ways in which gender might at times be constituted and maintained passively in relation to others. Kessler and McKenna, for example, whilst agreeing with Garfinkel “that gender is omnirelevant in everyday interactions, and that gender ‘work’ is required”, claim that “most of the work is done for the display [of gender] by the perceiver.” Drawing upon and developing Garfinkel’s own work on gender, Kessler and McKenna argue that beyond the initial moment of gender attribution “there is little that the display needs to do... except maintain the sense of the ‘naturalness’ of her/his gender” (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: 136-37).

<sup>129</sup> That his work was not necessarily exhaustive is something of which Garfinkel was evidently aware. He comments, for example, that “further information is needed comparing Agnes with normals with respect to the possibility that normals are more accepting of wilful election than she was” (Garfinkel, 1967: 125, fn. 4), and includes an appendix in which he claims that a “subsequent study”

There is great value in closely observing the “methods” by which an intersexed or transgender individual “passes” as a particular gender, and in considering how this relates to wider societal norms regarding gender identity. There is also much to be said for Garfinkel’s professed belief that the “methods” of Agnes’ passing are ultimately subsidiary to interest in her as a “*real and valuable person*” (Garfinkel, 1967: 184) faced with decisions on a day-by-day basis rather than a rational agent simply trying to maximize her femininity.

Minimally, however, it can certainly be said that Agnes had a great incentive to consciously conform to the (male-dominated) medical team’s expectations of femininity, and that any conclusions we wish to draw about “normal sexuality” should attempt to take this into account (even if only as a “critical moment” within interpretation, i.e. a stage at which alternative accounts of Agnes’ behaviour could be considered as constitutive factors in how we should understand her actions). In order that we should fulfil our interpretive responsibilities – the demands placed upon us within interpretive activity – it is important that these kind of “critical” considerations constitute part of the “work” of interpretation.

So although the principle of attending closely to the “methods” by which members act meaningfully is one of the greatest strengths of an ethnomethodological approach to studying human action, it is nevertheless still vital that we attempt to recognise these principles as a form of “disciplinary prejudice” which guides our attention towards action and upon which a *certain kind* of sociological analysis is premised. Without this recognition, we run the risk of taking these principles for granted and thus blinding ourselves as to whether they may also leave some aspects of meaningful action obscure. This is not only problematic from the perspective of a

---

will be made in light of Agnes’ disclosure of the deceptions made within her back story (Garfinkel, 1967: 288).

hermeneutic model of the interpretation of meaningful action such as that for which I argue within this thesis, but also represents a failure of the “reflexivity” central to ethnomethodological practice.

By recognising these principles as productive factors in the accounts of action ethnomethodologists produce, however, we also open ourselves to considering how these guiding principles may relate to other forms of sociological discourse, and the potential for different critical, interpretive and descriptive modes of thought to inform one another. I next give consideration to how “The Model of the Text” could help both to foster this “openness” within ethnomethodology and preserve the reflexivity central to an ethnomethodological approach to the study of human action.

### 5.6: “The Model of the Text” and Ethnomethodology

“The Model of the Text”, in and of itself, does not offer an alternative approach to understanding human action to that of ethnomethodology. However, to the extent that it foregrounds the constitution of action as an “object” and the way in which “disciplinary prejudice” is implicated within this process of objectification, the accompanying necessity of self-criticism within this, and the importance of “explanation” as a critical stage within interpretation, Ricoeur’s textual model has the potential to help ensure ethnomethodology is properly ethnomethodological and to resist the threat of programmatisation that can emerge if we begin to take the principles upon which our inquiries are premised for granted.

Ethnomethodology’s concern with the indexical properties of action performed in local social settings – its “bottom-up” approach – is designed in part to limit the extent to which researchers impose meanings alien to their setting upon actions. But insofar as ethnomethodology still involves descriptive and interpretive

activities, and still involves drawing upon relatively narrow presuppositions regarding the “correct” methods for gathering and making sense of data, it would, as I have suggested in relation to Garfinkel’s case study of Agnes, be unwise to disregard the constitutive role that the researcher and the disciplinary prejudices upon which they draw have to play in the interpretive and descriptive activities in which they are involved.

### 5.6.1: The Risk of Programmatisation

The self-implicating reflexivity of ethnomethodology leaves it theoretically better placed than many other schools of thought to incorporate awareness of disciplinary prejudice into its work and methodology. Nevertheless, criticisms have been made regarding the increasing programmatisation of ethnomethodology, and the negative implications this has for ethnomethodological reflexivity.

Melvin Pollner, for example, observes that “[a]lthough a significant feature of ethnomethodological self-understanding in early work, radical reflexivity has diminished to the point that most contemporary studies view themselves almost entirely in terms of their capacity to represent empirical structures” (Pollner, 1991: 372). The consequence of this is that “[a]s ethnomethodology is codified into an empirical program concerned with interactional, conversational, or scientific practices *per se*, radical referential reflexivity is muted, discounted, or disowned” (Pollner, 1991: 374). As ethnomethodology becomes “codified” and gains established and widely used methods of its own – such as conversation analysis as developed by Harvey Sacks, which has taken on the character of “a separate and highly technical enterprise” (Rawls, 2002: 41) – it begins to take its own conceptual

and intellectual background for granted, therefore becoming blind to how this background plays a constitutive role in the work of researchers within this tradition.

This is not necessarily endemic to ethnomethodology. But insofar as the principles of ethnomethodology are taken for granted and become “codified”, the disciplinary prejudices upon which this approach is premised inevitably become reified and lose their “productive” dimension, ultimately risking taking on the status instead of a “preconceived idea to which reality *must* correspond” (Wittgenstein, 2001: § 131). By taking the premises of ethnomethodology for granted, researchers within this tradition risk becoming *insufficiently ethnomethodological* about their own practices as interpreters of meaningful human action.

Ethnomethodology, like any other form of social inquiry, must therefore attempt to engage with how the presuppositions and practices of researchers play an important constitutive role in the way social action is described and understood, even if those presuppositions and practices are not drawn explicitly from any rigid or systematic “theory” of action. The price that has to be paid if we are going to avoid accidentally reifying disciplinary prejudices, especially for any “bottom-up” and non-programmatic approach to social inquiry, is that a great level of vigilance is required in regards to the constitutive role these presuppositions play in how researchers understand and interpret the action they observe.

#### 5.6.2: Objectification, Reflexivity and “The Model of the Text”

Greater sensitivity towards the “objectification” of action – how action is “fixed” in a manner analogous to the text – as part of the inquirer’s practices could certainly aid the work of ethnomethodological thinkers in this regard. At its best, ethnomethodology does this very well. Garfinkel is, for example, frequently careful

to state the nature of his intentions and the techniques he uses in undertaking studies, as well as often including a significant amount of supporting data with his analyses: “The Work of a Discovering Science Construed with Materials from the Optically Discovered Pulsar”, for example, involves a careful statement of the study’s intentions alongside reference to the “conventions of conversational analysis” (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 132) used to transcribe a tape recording made during the discovery of an optical pulsar.

In addition to this the article is accompanied by appendices including transcripts of conversations that occurred during the night’s work, notebook entries and the original discovery announcement made in the journal *Nature*. This meticulous approach to documenting their own work could certainly be seen as in accordance with the kind of reflectivity that a hermeneutic model such as that recommended by Ricoeur demands from interpretive inquiry.

Within this same article Garfinkel even writes that “[t]he social sciences are talking sciences, and achieve in texts, not elsewhere, the observability and practical objectivity of their phenomena” (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 133). In this observation, Garfinkel and Ricoeur are, in a sense, remarkably close to one another. However, Garfinkel intends this observation not as a comment upon his own working methods, but primarily as a criticism of the pretension of “naturally theoretic” social science towards a kind of objectivity traditionally associated with the natural “discovering” sciences. He argues that such aspirations towards objectivity contribute to a phenomenon of “irrelevance” of social scientific observations in relation to the “interests”, “knowledge” and “practices” that “compose the *in situ* apt and familiar efficacy” (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston, 1981: 133) of the work of particular individuals in particular social settings. In

contrast to such pretensions of objectivity, Garfinkel claims that our understanding of social phenomena must draw its sense from and *only from* the methods and accountable features of the social setting we are observing.

But, as I have suggested previously, to some extent Garfinkel fails to get to grips with the degree to which even ethnomethodological inquiry of this sort involves a level of abstraction and objectification, and how ethnomethodological presuppositions about action are potentially limiting if they are adopted without careful consideration of the particular situation at hand. To obscure the “objectification” undergone by action under ethnomethodological description is also to obscure the potential that the phenomenon at hand may be meaningful in ways not covered by any single description or interpretation. So although the principles of ethnomethodology emerge in part out of a noble enough desire to avoid becoming lost in “theoretical” abstraction, abiding to them rigidly and failing to recognise that there is also an element of abstraction involved within ethnomethodology undermines their value.

Ricoeur recognises that even if “objectifying knowledge is always secondary to the relation of belonging, it can nevertheless be constituted in a *relative autonomy*” (Ricoeur, 1981i: 243-44). By this Ricoeur means that, by fixing action as an object of inquiry, we gain the possibility of adopting a critical attitude towards the conditions which help shape our understanding, and towards the received meaning of the situation we are seeking to understand. The “relative autonomy” this affords us is the freedom from being *dominated* by the complex webs of social and historical relations to which we and those we seek to understand belong. This amounts to a rejection of any form of “absolute” objectivity, wherein it is claimed that the researcher might hope to proceed free of any conceptual or methodological bias, in

favour of acknowledging the productive role that “prejudice” can play in how we understand meaningful human action. This also applies at the level of the objectification of action, and demands that we engage in what I have termed the “critical description” of meaningful human action.<sup>130</sup>

The fixation of action as a “text”, by this account, does not supplant the way in which action is meaningful as a situated phenomenon, but reflects the reflective “distanciation” that arises whenever we take action as an object of inquiry. This distanciation, the potential to place our judgement regarding the meaning of action in a state of suspense, allows our understanding to take a “critical” detour. The interpreter of action is in a position, one often not available whilst caught up in the rhythm of action, where she can temporarily suspend the normativity of the “norms” to which a “common sense” understanding of the situation at hand conforms, and therefore engage with them *critically* before either acceding to, qualifying or rejecting them.

Concepts such as “power” and “ideology”, although alien to our pre-reflective engagement with the world in most circumstances, nevertheless attempt to capture something important about our social existence. We need, therefore, to at least be able to integrate them into our analyses, and not exclude such concepts before we have even considered their adequacy to the situation at hand.

“The Model of the Text”, by incorporating the “critical moment” into interpretation, describes one way in which we can comprehend these different approaches to understanding action in relation to one another and the implications of any choice we might make to draw upon or exclude them from our analyses. Even if this objectification represents a form of abstraction from our “everyday” engagement

---

<sup>130</sup> The notion of the critical description of meaningful action within the human and social sciences, as a response to the risk of taking our presuppositions of meaning for granted within the constitution of action as an object of inquiry, is discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

with and within action, the possibility of critical interpretation is premised upon and must remain sensitive to this pre-reflective understanding. Critically informed interpretation can, in turn, offer us different perspectives upon the situation at hand, directing our attention to things of which we would perhaps not otherwise have been aware. The hermeneutic image of a “circle” or an “arc” drawn upon by Ricoeur, although a simplification of the confrontation between interpreter and text which takes place during interpretation, allows us to see how the “common sense” understanding of individuals needn’t be placed in absolute opposition to any “critical” understanding we might achieve of these same situations.

The relationship between pre-reflective, lay and critical understanding can be more fluid and complex than might initially appear to be the case. If this is not taken into account ethnomethodological research risks drawing upon sociological, popular and specifically ethnomethodological presuppositions of meaning uncritically in a way that fails to do justice to the action being observed. The hermeneutic emphasis upon self-critique and Ricoeur’s re-formulation of the relationship between “understanding” and “explanation” mean that “The Model of the Text” has the potential to provide ethnomethodologists with a valuable resource for understanding how objectification plays a role within their analyses of action, and how ethnomethodological interpretations of action might relate to other forms of critical discourse regarding meaningful human action. It has, in this respect, the potential to aid ethnomethodology in its efforts to resist the kind of programmatication that threatens to undermine the reflexivity upon which it is premised.

In balance to this, it is also important to acknowledge that the centrality of distanciation and the “critical moment” to Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy, and his focus upon how meaning endures beyond the event of discourse, arguably

downplays the importance of how action has meaning for us in our day-to-day lives as part of our interpretive practices. The ethnomethodological emphasis upon attending closely and sympathetically with the “everyday” understanding of those we seek to understand, and upon meaningful action as an “ongoing achievement” in local settings, is therefore an invaluable antidote to Ricoeur’s preoccupation with the “enduring” meaning of action and with how action becomes “fixed” in both formal interpretation and as part of our everyday lives.

So while “The Model of the Text” may have the potential to, so to speak, help ensure that ethnomethodological practice remains ethnomethodological, ethnomethodological criticism in turn confronts us forcefully with the ineliminable role that doxic accounts play in how we should understand action within the human and social sciences and how the meaningfulness of action is inseparable from the way in which we live with and understand others around us as we and they act and communicate in day-to-day life.

### 5.7: Conclusion

Both ethnomethodologists and philosophers inspired by Wittgenstein and Winch reject the scientific paradigm of “objectivity” within the inquiry into meaningful human action, emphasising instead a sympathetic understanding of social agents *on their own terms*. Ricoeur shares with these thinkers their suspicion of scientific objectivity as the standard of validity within the human and social sciences. In “The Model of the Text”, however, he proposes instead a new paradigm of interpretive validity drawn from textual hermeneutics within which an emphasis is placed upon showing “that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what is known”, rather than “showing that a conclusion is true” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212).

“Objectification” is the heart of the analogy Ricoeur draws between the text and “the so-called object of the human sciences” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197). But this does not mean that the interpreter of action should attempt to understand action independently of how it is understood by those to whom the action is imputed.

Rather, it reflects the idea that by constituting action as an “object” we take a different attitude towards it than we would if it was part of our everyday lives and our everyday ongoing concerns. With objectification we gain the capacity to reflect critically upon action; upon how it is understood by those it involves, and even upon our own “critical” interpretations of that action. It is this ability to weigh up, compare and criticise different ways of understanding and explaining action that lends interpretation modelled after textual hermeneutics a form of “objectivity” for Ricoeur, not the subscription to any presumed way in which action “must be” if it is to make sense. It is for this reason that Ricoeur identifies interpretation in the human and social sciences with *Auslegung*, a term borrowed from literary interpretation. Given this, it is difficult to see how criticisms of traditional “objective” social sciences, within which the interpretation of action is diagnosed as “pointing towards” something other than the contingent and particular circumstances of the action itself, can apply in the same way to the hermeneutic model of interpretation presented by Ricoeur within “The Model of the Text”.

Instead, it is possible that “The Model of the Text” can help inform such “bottom up” approaches to social inquiry by aiding their recognition of the *activity* involved in the description and interpretation of action and encouraging them to incorporate this into their work and analyses. “The Model of the Text” helps us explicate the way in which we objectify action in order to reflect upon it, and as such the need to consider the ways in which this fixation plays a constitutive role in our

interpretive understanding of action. It is also the distanciation that arises with fixation within which Ricoeur identifies the potential for *critical* inquiry to form a part of our understanding of action, and as a prerequisite to the kind of self-critique that helps understand how disciplinary prejudice informs our interpretations of action. Insofar as we recognise an analogous relationship between the text and the *object* of the human sciences, we also recognise a need for this kind of reflectivity in our activities as interpreters.

"In every philosophy there is a point at which the philosopher's 'conviction' appears on the scene" (Nietzsche, 1990: § 8)

## **Chapter 6: Responsibility, Attestation and Distanciation**

In the "The Model of the Text", Ricoeur articulates interpretive understanding within the human sciences in hermeneutic terms, using his conceptualisation of the text as an exemplar against which we can understand the way in which meaningful human action is taken as an "object" of inquiry. Drawing upon Ricoeur's understanding of the text as a paradigm of discourse under the condition of "fixation",<sup>131</sup> I will now discuss the ways in which objectification and distanciation contribute to the strength and validity of hermeneutic interpretation within the human sciences, particularly in terms of how they can be seen to provide the space within which interpretation can incorporate critical practices into itself. Specifically, I will articulate the idea of the exercise of suspicion within interpretation as an important constitutive part of the strength of hermeneutic validity.

To do this I will examine the idea of interpretation *as an activity* which carries with it a sense of *obligation* and *responsibility* that we must fulfil if our interpretations are to be valuable. I will then use Ricoeur's concept of "attestation" in order to articulate the kind of non-absolute yet non-arbitrary validity characteristic of hermeneutic interpretation. Finally I will attempt to relate this understanding of hermeneutic validity to "The Model of the Text" itself, drawing upon Ricoeur's conception of a "model" in order to help understand his claims about the text and meaningful action.

---

<sup>131</sup> Ricoeur's conception of "the text" and the use he makes of it in "The Model of the Text" is discussed in greater depth in chapter two of this thesis.

## 6.1: Responsibility and Interpretation

The notion of “responsibility” does not form an explicit part of Ricoeur’s textual hermeneutics. One interesting occasion upon which Ricoeur does, however, make reference to the idea of responsibility is in his discussion of the “avowal” of evil. For Ricoeur, the avowal of evil involves recognising evil as something that emerges from human freedom and *action*, as something for which we are responsible. The avowal of evil is thus a “declaration of a freedom that admits its responsibility”, a “taking-upon-oneself” within which we acknowledge that our actions are our own, and that we are accountable for them.

It is this notion of responsibility as a “taking-upon-oneself” that interests me most in relation to hermeneutic interpretation, especially given that Ricoeur also writes that the recognition of responsibility “is not a conclusion but a starting point” (Ricoeur, 1986: xlvi-xlvii). The context in which Ricoeur discusses the term “avowal” is, of course, markedly different from any discussion of interpretation in the human sciences. Nevertheless, insofar as this discussion recognises responsibility as something that emerges from our actions and marks a *beginning*, it also indicates how responsibility might be an important part of our interpretive practices considered *as an activity*.

In making an interpretation we are, in a sense, making a commitment. At the very least we are committing ourselves to the truth of what we say, and the validity of the reasons that have led us to that conclusion. In making such an interpretive commitment, we are *responsible* for these claims. This is not merely to say that we are, to paraphrase Socrates, the “fathers” of our words, our *logos*, and that as such we have a responsibility to defend them from misunderstanding and misappropriation. This is, if anything, the most mundane sense in which we are

responsible for our interpretive activities. More fundamentally to interpretation considered as an *activity*, we are also “responsible” in the sense that we have a set of obligations that we must meet in order to make a good interpretation. It is in this sense that we can think of engaging in interpretation as a *starting point*. Engaging in interpretive activity commits us to meeting a set of obligations regarding what counts as a valid interpretation, and to *working* to find evidence and reason for favouring some particular interpretation over its alternatives. It is by the *work* of interpretation within the human sciences that we distinguish an interpretation, as something that is grounded in, informed and supported by evidence, from mere speculation or opinion.

These obligations are related to many of the issues central to understanding interpretation that I have touched upon thus far in this thesis. We have a responsibility, for example, to remain sensitive to the contextual features of action by which it is meaningful for those to whom it is part of their lives, in the sense emphasised by e.g. Winch and Garfinkel.<sup>132</sup> Failure to meet this obligation involves a failure of *understanding*, a failure to engage properly with those about whom we are making interpretive claims. We have a responsibility to think critically about action, not to rest with the *given* meaning of an action without first considering how this meaning might obscure alternative possibilities of meaning or leave certain aspects of some action unexplored.<sup>133</sup> We also have an obligation to turn this critical eye towards ourselves. We need to consider how constituting action as an “object”

---

<sup>132</sup> The importance of recognising action as a situated phenomenon and the work of Winch and Garfinkel is discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>133</sup> In addition to the necessity of adopting a “critical” attitude as part of the description and reception of action (discussed in chapter four), the importance of taking a critical stance towards “given” meanings in order to ensure the validity of interpretation will be further addressed later in this chapter (section 6.3).

of inquiry might risk distorting our understanding of it, and the ways in which “disciplinary prejudice” may play a role in shaping our interpretive practices.<sup>134</sup>

I do not wish to claim that this exhausts the idea of “responsibility” in relation to interpretation, nor am I proposing any radically new form of interpretation. Rather, I wish to suggest that in making an interpretation we are making a *commitment* that demands to be met, and for which we are responsible, and that the obligation placed upon us as interpreters is one internal to practices of interpretation within the human and social sciences.

It is important to distinguish the responsibility we have as interpreters to meet these various obligations from the logocentric idea that words require “living thought” behind them in order to be meaningful, and that as such we are responsible for our words insofar as we are the “*logos*” that imparts them with meaning. This stands in opposition to the autonomy Ricoeur ascribes to the text, and the hermeneutic thought which underlies this autonomy.<sup>135</sup> This is not, of course, to say that interpretations of action are simply cast into the void and that we may never return to them or that the “texts” of the humanities have nothing to do with the opinions and beliefs of those who authored them. It is a fairly basic principle of any discipline that aspires to “truth”, “knowledge” or “understanding” that its practitioners should not be disingenuous with their work. And it is part of discursive practice in the human sciences that researchers engage with their interlocutors, defending or revising their positions in response to criticism, and build upon previous work as their research progresses.

---

<sup>134</sup> The productive role of disciplinary prejudice within the description of action is the primary focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis, e.g. section 4.1.3.

<sup>135</sup> There is, of course, also an important difference between the Platonic discussion of writing in which meaning is identified with “*logos*”, and the kind of “textuality” discussed by Ricoeur, but nevertheless the contrast is one worth making insofar as the “responsibility” demanded by hermeneutic interpretation does not imply any intentionalist or logocentric position.

However, the way in which the interpreter will “stand by” her interpretations does not express the same kind of responsibility as that of a parent to a child. It is instead a commitment towards a kind of honesty or integrity in regards to our work, that we should not be blind to argument or evidence. We should be ready to revise or abandon our interpretations if the situation calls for such action, just as much as we should be ready to defend them. Commitment here is not simply self-constancy, but a commitment towards the *reality* and *validity* of our interpretations which governs and motivates our activities as interpreters. This demand for intellectual *honesty*, for integrity on the part of the interpreter, has to be part of interpretive activity if interpretation truly aspires to understanding.<sup>136</sup>

The key distinction here is between interpretation as an activity and some *particular* interpretation that might result from interpretive activity. We are responsible for some particular interpretation insofar as we are its author, but we are as free to reject it as we are to endorse it.<sup>137</sup> In making an interpretation, however, we are seeking to present a course of events and their significance as *plausible*, even *probable*. Even if we make an interpretation disingenuously or purely as an intellectual exercise, arguing for some position to which we are not committed, as interpreters we must still act *as if* we are seeking to support and argue for the truth of our position. The responsibility with which we are faced as interpreters involves

---

<sup>136</sup> Honesty, in the sense I discuss here, is perhaps worth comparing to the “extravagant honesty [*Redlichkeit*]” Nietzsche claims as characteristic of “every brave thinker” and which he describes as “a kind of cruelty of the intellectual conscience”. This refers to the willingness of a thinker to entertain new ideas and let them challenge her understanding, and stands in contrast to the temptation to simply “assimilate the new to the old, to simplify the complex” and to “overlook or repel what is wholly contradictory” (Nietzsche, 1990: § 230).

<sup>137</sup> A situation which can, at least on occasion, lead to a thinker engaging with their own past work as an interlocutor, reflecting critically on a position they might once have held. Perhaps one of the more peculiar examples of this might be the point in *Philosophical Investigations* when Wittgenstein refers to his past self in the third-person as “the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” (Wittgenstein, 2009: § 23).

fulfilling these conditions of plausibility and validity, without which reasoned and evidenced interpretative understanding is indistinguishable from speculation.

Once again, however, it is important to realise that this obligation isn't blind; we do not begin with a position which we simply and uncritically assume to be true, and then seek to find material that will support or rationalise our preconceptions. This is why Gadamer claims that "a hermeneutically trained consciousness" cannot be closed off, but must throughout interpretation be sensitive to alterity and be prepared for that which she interprets to "tell him something" (Gadamer, 1993: 269). It is on the basis of and in conjunction with the alterity of that which we interpret – the way in which a text or action exceeds our expectations of meaning and confronts us with new ideas or understandings – that we come to construct an interpretive position. Interpretation demands that we seek to support our interpretive conclusions with argument and evidence, but in order to ensure the probity of our interpretive activities it is vital that we engage in interpretation openly, and respond to the "alterity" of that which we seek to understand.<sup>138</sup>

## 6.2: Attestation as Hermeneutic "Certainty"

Interpretive integrity and the interpreter's commitment to "truth" are also, from the very beginning, inseparable from the exercise of doubt and suspicion. Ricoeur has elsewhere identified this admixture of doubt and commitment-to-truth within hermeneutic thought as part of his discussion of the "attestation" of self in *Oneself as Another*. Attestation-of-self, as discussed by Ricoeur, refers to an assurance in our capacity to act, suffer and understand. Importantly, this self-

---

<sup>138</sup> Here, once more, we can see the relevance of Ricoeur's notion of "linguistic hospitality" from his work on translation (as discussed previously in chapter two, section 2.3) To respond to the "alterity" of that which we seek to understand we must attempt to "make room" for it in our understanding, and not hastily subsume it under familiar categories of our own experience.

assurance is not given as a certainty, and its strength is inseparable from the exercise of doubt and the threat of a suspicion which presents our sense of self as a mere “effect” of something other.

Ricoeur articulates this by drawing upon Descartes’ notion of the self-founding *cogito* and Nietzsche’s critique of the same. On the one hand, we have the certainty expressed in the *cogito*; the idea that the self is the single thing we cannot possibly doubt. On the other hand we have the suspicion, expressed in Nietzsche’s critique, that it is merely grammatical convention, something “outside” of ourselves, that leads us to this false certainty, and that even our own self-identity can therefore be doubted. Ricoeur’s claim is that the self can be understood as existing between these two extremes; between the certainty of the *cogito* and the all-pervading suspicion of Nietzschean perspectivism. The “certainty” of attestation cannot therefore be absolute, but likewise it does not have to fall into the abyss of unbounded skepticism. The self, rather, exists as “credence without guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1992: 23).

Ricoeur says that the affirmation of attestation thus “has as its contrary suspicion”, but that this “is not simply the contrary of attestation, in a strictly disjunctive sense... Suspicion is also the path *towards* and the crossing *within* attestation. It haunts attestation, as false testimony haunts true testimony” (Ricoeur, 1992: 302). This intertwining of “doubt” and “commitment” works as an injunction that makes us aware of ourselves as being responsible for the validity of our interpretations. For Ricoeur, this insuperable presence of doubt within attestation expresses the strength of hermeneutic understanding. To doubt is to suspend the uncritical acceptance of our presuppositions of meaning, and thus to provide the space within which we might engage thoroughly, openly and critically with the

interpretive situation at hand. It is thus via the exercise of doubt that we open ourselves up to alternative possibilities of understanding engendered by the very alterity of that which stands before us.

In this regard, the exercise of doubt resembles to some extent the suspension of meaning that occurs with the objectification of action. The hermeneutic “strength” afforded by both attestation and objectification is premised upon the possibility of *distancing* ourselves from the given of our pre-reflective understanding of the world. So although in *Oneself as Another* Ricoeur is discussing attestation and hermeneutic certainty in the context of the self, the concept of attestation may nevertheless help inform our understanding of the strength of hermeneutic validity, and therefore help us understand why Ricoeur proposes the relevance of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action in the human and social sciences.

Attestation of self, for Ricoeur, refers to the way in which being a self is, at least in part, to identify oneself as an agent of action, as a patient of the action of others and as being-responsible for one’s actions as an agent/patient within the world; “the *assurance of being oneself acting and suffering.*” Ricoeur also describes the attestation of self as “a kind of trust... a trust in the power to say, in the power to do” (Ricoeur, 1992: 22). But this “trust”, and the strength of the assurance based upon it, is arrived at only via a detour of suspicion and doubt about our power to act and to exist meaningfully and freely. Importantly, for our purposes, Ricoeur also describes attestation as “the sort of certainty that hermeneutics may claim” (Ricoeur, 1992: 21). And although Ricoeur is here discussing attestation-of-self, it is worth taking this suggestion seriously and considering what sort of “certainty” we might aspire to in hermeneutic interpretation within the human sciences. The certainty of

attestation, as discussed by Ricoeur, can thus help us articulate the strength of the hermeneutic interpretation Ricoeur considers as applicable within the human and social sciences.

The feature of attestation that stands out most clearly in this regard, perhaps, is that hermeneutic “certainty” is something Ricoeur considers distinct from any possibility of “ultimate and self-founding knowledge”, or “*epistēmē*”. Rather, attestation “presents itself first, in fact, as a kind of belief”:

But it is not a doxic belief, in the sense in which *doxa* (belief) has less standing than *epistēmē* (science, or better, knowledge). Whereas doxic belief is implied in the grammar of ‘I believe-that’, attestation belongs to the grammar of ‘I believe-in.’ It thus links up with testimony... inasmuch as it is in the speech of the one giving testimony that one believes. (Ricoeur, 1992: 21)

In terms of the attestation-of-self, it is our own power to *act* and to *know* that we “believe-in”, hence the reference to “testimony”. We believe-in that to which somebody testifies because some combination of the character of the speaker and the context in which they speak leads us to place a certain level of trust in them. Similarly, the belief we have in ourselves can be thought of as a form of “trust” insofar as it exists between the two polarities of the self-certainty and unbounded suspicion, as characterised by Ricoeur in terms of Descartes’ self-founding *cogito* and Nietzsche’s critique of the same as a “habit of grammar”.

There are, of course, important differences that we must take into account between the “attestation of self” and any relevance this might have to the interpretation of action, the foremost of which is perhaps that in the human and social sciences we are engaged in varying forms of critical academic discourse. Such forms of discourse have their own conventions and, typically, high standards of validity; e.g. the demand for evidence, engagement with the existing literature, particular forms and styles of writing etc. If we were to speak of “trust” in critical

discourse as being identical to the almost intuitive trust we have in ourselves as “selves” capable of acting and suffering, we would be failing to acknowledge the peculiarity and conventional demands of the human and social sciences. But it is precisely these conventions that underlie our trust: the strength and authority of interpretive proclamations made by historians, anthropologists and sociologists relies, at least in part, upon the fact that their work and methods are circumscribed by the critical standards of the disciplines and institutions in which they work.<sup>139</sup>

The power in which we trust in the case of the human sciences, and as conceived in the “The Model of the Text”, is a power to make valid and informative claims about action. This “power” emerges partly in relation to the integrity and critical abilities of the individual interpreter.<sup>140</sup> But the “will-to-truth” and integrity of the individual interpreter is also ingrained within the conventions and critical standards that constitute the institutional and disciplinary background against which practitioners of the human and social sciences work. It is a power that involves interpreters engaging critically with ideas drawn from the realm of discourse in which they are working but, importantly, also involves engaging closely and critically with the particular circumstances at hand and, where possible, by engaging with and directly observing those whom we are seeking to understand. It is also, as with attestation-of-self, a power whose strength is suffused with suspicion. The exercise of this power is therefore fundamentally inseparable from the recognition of its limits, and from the inescapable contingency of interpretive understanding.

---

<sup>139</sup> This relationship between the credence of testimony and the doubt inherent within the critical practices of the social and human sciences is drawn most explicitly by Ricoeur when he writes that “we have nothing better than testimony and criticism of testimony to accredit the historian’s representation of the past” (Ricoeur, 2004: 278).

<sup>140</sup> In this regard there is perhaps an “ethical dimension” to interpretation; the interpreter is “responsible” for their interpretations and their practices are at least partly constituted in relation to this responsibility, the demand for integrity and a sense of humility in front of the other.

For this reason, Ricoeur ascribes to hermeneutic thought “its own special fragility, to which is added the vulnerability of a discourse aware of its own lack of foundation” (Ricoeur, 1992: 22). Attestation never escapes this fragility, demarcating it clearly from claims to epistemic *certainty* such as that of Descartes’ *cogito*, but aims to incorporate suspicion into itself as *part of itself*. This inherent fragility contributes towards the strength of attestation insofar as it demands a response. The assertion and confidence in the truth of what is said stands against the injunction of falsity that lies in the finitude of discourse and the ineliminable possibility of being wrong. It thus demands that we take *responsibility* for that which we assert, and as such that we are capable of fulfilling the demands that this responsibility entails.

It is, in part, an awareness of the fragility of discourse that places us under a condition of obligation when engaging in interpretive activity. Such suspicion and fragility alienates us from the uncritical endorsement of our pre-reflective understanding, leading us to “step back” and reflect upon the matter at hand at greater length. The notion of responsibility, in this sense, is intimately related to the possibility of holding that which we wish to assert at a distance from ourselves, and to consider it and ourselves under critical auspices. The possibility of fulfilling our responsibility as interpreters of action therefore demands the kind of distanciation that emerges from the fixation of action as an “object” of inquiry.

### 6.3: Distanciation as the Condition for Critical Understanding

The importance of holding ideas and beliefs at a distance in order to ensure the strength and validity of interpretive claims is a recurrent theme in the hermeneutic philosophy from which Ricoeur takes his cue. The notion of

“attestation”, as discussed by Ricoeur, is foreshadowed in Heidegger’s hermeneutical interpretation of being in *Being and Time*. Ricoeur’s discussion of attestation in *Oneself as Another* is much wider-ranging, but Heidegger is nevertheless interesting for our purposes insofar as he identifies “attestation” with the call of “conscience” and responsibility, and therefore the possibility of existing without being carried away by the prejudices and presuppositions which characterise and colour our pre-reflective engagement with the world.<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Gadamer insists that for the “authority” of tradition to be valid it must rest on participants and inheritors of a tradition *consciously choosing* to endorse and preserve it (Gadamer, 1993: 281). In Ricoeur’s own hermeneutic philosophy we see this tendency made explicit with the incorporation of the “critical moment” – the possibility of adopting a temporarily distanced attitude towards the meaning of the text and considering it critically – being an essential stage between a “naïve” and a “critical” interpretation, all within “a unique *hermeneutical arc*” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 218).

In each case the possibility and assurance of acting freely and of understanding genuinely is placed in opposition to the risk of being *dominated* by prejudice, preconception and our pre-reflective understanding of the world. In response to this these hermeneutic thinkers all recommend adopting an attitude of doubt towards taking for granted that which is “given”, i.e. a willingness to question our own and others’ presumed acumen regarding both our “everyday” and our “theoretical” ideas about the world. This needn’t necessarily lead to a rejection of the “given” ideas and beliefs in question, nor is the willingness to suspect motivated by the desire to reject them. Rather, we want to be in a position to *freely* endorse,

---

<sup>141</sup> According to Heidegger, “conscience” takes the form of “guilt”, and in turn “also has the signification of ‘*being responsible for*’ – that is, being the cause or author of something” (Heidegger, 2008: 327). Conscience is therefore *Dasein calling to itself* in a manner “that denies the they-self its domination” (Heidegger, 2008: 323).

qualify or reject what is given, based upon the best of our knowledge and understanding. Reflective distance undermines the normativity of the “everyday” or the “given” ideas and beliefs which otherwise have the potential to dominate our pre-reflective engagement with the world, opening an imaginary space where other voices, evidence and perspectives can be brought to bear on the situation at hand. It is only after the exercise of such doubt and comparative analysis that the hermeneutic thinker feels their interpretive claims might be made with confidence.

### 6.3.1: Self-Critique

The integrity of interpretation – the need for our interpretive claims to be valid, informed and informative – demands that we must be willing to question anything “given”; whether this is “everyday” meaning and the self-understanding of those we seek to understand, or the given of our own presuppositions and prejudices of meaning. It is in this respect that Ricoeur argues that interpretation must also involve self-critique if it is to be anything more than an uncritical imposition of our own beliefs upon that which we are nominally seeking to understand, and that critical interpretive understanding therefore involves “exposing” ourselves to that which we interpret and receiving an “enlarged self” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 143) in return. For Ricoeur, this “enlargement” of the self “implies a moment of distanciation in the relation of the self to itself” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 144). The interpreter must guard against taking their own critical categories and presuppositions of meaning for granted to just as great a degree as they must have a care not to take the given accounts of others entirely for granted. It is vital that the interpreter attempt to evaluate their own ideas, and how they are applicable to the specific situation at hand, as part of their interpretive endeavours so that their interpretations might be

“formed by the matter of the text and not by the prejudices of the reader” (Ricoeur, 1981d: 144).

The text, as a model of objectification, provides a locus for self-criticism by demonstrating how objectification affords the opportunity to suspend our judgement and turn a critical eye towards ourselves *as interpreters* in addition to that which is nominally the object of our interpretation. On one level, for example, it allows us to confront the ways in which our formulation and understanding of the interpretive situation is informed by disciplinary prejudice, how action is appropriated as an object of inquiry, and how these influence our interpretation of the situation at hand.

At a more thoroughly “existential” level, perhaps closer to Ricoeur’s notion of the “enlargement” of the self, we also have the idea that in interpretation new possibilities of being and understanding are opened up to us; that by remaining open to what we are interpreting we can learn new things about ourselves. Self-criticism like this demands that we, as interpreters, recognise ourselves as part of the interpretive situation, that we are actively involved in producing an interpretation of meaning, and that our own presuppositions of meaning are constitutive factors of the understanding we achieve via this activity. And just as the “critical” attitude which we might adopt towards the everyday meaning of action does not imply that we will necessarily reject that given meaning, self-criticism does not mean we will reject every “prejudice” we discover. It demands only that we understand how our interpretations are informed by our own presuppositions, and that we *choose* to employ them rather than blindly allowing them to surreptitiously delimit and “dominate” our thought.

All of this demands that we are capable of adopting a distanced attitude towards our understanding of action and our own practices as interpreters of action, a

distance which for Ricoeur is embodied by and manifest in the fixation of discourse in the text. This “distance” is, primarily, an affected attitude which has a specific role to play within critical reflective inquiry. It would be wrong, for example, to say that without objectification and distanciation we have no understanding of meaningful human action. If this were the case, we would not be able to engage meaningfully with other people, and there would be nothing for the human and social sciences to take *as* their object. Our day-to-day lives rarely necessitate this kind of conscious endorsement of ideas on a regular basis. In our day-to-day interactions with other people most of the time we simply live and act with and alongside them without having to resort to any sort of explicitly critical reflection.

But insofar as existing meaningfully involves, to some extent, a self-conscious awareness of ourselves as agents, responsible for our own actions and with the possibility of choice, it is impossible to divorce reflective distanciation entirely even from everyday meaningful human existence. So although critical distance might be affected and atypical of much of our day-to-day experience and understanding of the world, it would be wrong to suggest that it is something entirely alien or non-conducive to understanding how action is meaningful within our lives.

Ricoeur even argues that “externalization and objectification” occur, to some extent, “as soon as life is no longer simply lived, but begins to understand itself and to present itself for others to understand by means of the inner connection of its expressions” (Ricoeur, 1976b: 693). For Ricoeur, the very possibility of becoming consciously aware of the meaningfulness of existence is therefore inseparable from the possibility of taking some aspect of our lives as an object of reflection, and of presenting and sharing this “object” with others. It is this possibility that “The Model of the Text” draws upon and develops to a degree far beyond that commonly

prevalent within our day-to-day lives. Under the condition of objectification we, as interpreters, are in a position to “remain in a kind of state of suspense” in regards to how we should understand the action at hand (Ricoeur, 1981h: 215). Ricoeur focuses primarily on the idea that it is the meaning of the text which is held in suspense in the particular interpretive situation, but to a certain extent this underplays the role of the interpreter. We do not, after all, simply *grant* meaning to action when we make an interpretive claim, nor is action meaningless unless it is first interpreted. What is held in suspense is not the meaningfulness of action, but our *acceptance* of some given or pre-reflectively formulated meaning and our willingness to proclaim on the meaning of action until we have given it due consideration.

In order for the meaning of the text, or any analogue of the text, to be held in such a state of “suspense”, the interpreter must first choose to suspend their impulse towards judgement. By holding this impulse in suspense, we become capable of refraining from pronouncing on the meaning of action until we have considered various alternative possibilities of meaning and the socio-historico-theoretical context (both that in which the action took place, and that in which we now come to interpret it) within which we understand the action being interpreted. Ideally, when engaging in interpretive activity we should only settle upon some judgement when we consciously choose to and are in a position to qualify our interpretations by demarcating the limits of their validity. By holding that which is “given” in a temporary state of alienation – by objectifying it – we might attempt to overcome or ameliorate the perceived risk of domination within our interpretive activities, and thereby achieve the kind of hermeneutic “certainty” to which interpretation in the human and social sciences might hope to aspire.

The adoption of a critical attitude is, of course, no guarantee of truth or understanding, but only the condition under which we can attempt to fulfil the obligations involved in making a truth claim. The responsibility we have as interpreters of action in the context of the human sciences, then, could be characterised by our capacity to commit ourselves to a claim to truth, and by the demand for intellectual integrity and rigour that accompanies this commitment. This involves a readiness to open ourselves up to the “world” of which what we interpret is a part, to back up arguments with evidence in accordance with the conventions of critical discourse in which we are engaged, and that we are willing and able to accept the limitations – the contingency – of this claim. We never “bottom out” in some final and foundational truth about action.

But we nevertheless must have a “trust”, placed against the absence of a final transcendent signified, in our capacity to come to some kind of meaningful conclusion and to make valid statements about action and the world of meaningful human behaviour. It is this notion of the fragility of interpretive judgement, as discussed by Ricoeur in relation to “attestation”, which is most vital to keep in mind when we consider the kind of claims made in “The Model of the Text” and the way in which the “text” can work as a model for action.

#### 6.4: The Textual Model as Interpretation

In “The Model of the Text”, Ricoeur sets out a model of validity in which interpretive truth claims are considered as neither purely relativistic nor positivistic, and outlines the application of this textual model of interpretation to the interpretation of meaningful action in the human and social sciences. I have argued that hermeneutic interpretation of the kind Ricoeur applies to interpretation within

the human and social sciences involves renunciation of the possibility of “absolute” truth claims, and that instead the validity of interpretation depends upon acknowledging and responding to the inherent “fragility” of interpretation. I now wish to argue that “The Model of the Text” is itself offered in the same hermeneutical spirit; as an argument for the plausibility of a model of interpretation that draws upon various features of the text but without making any claim to “absolute” truth nor to be the only potentially valid model for interpretation in the human and social sciences. What is at stake, therefore, is not whether the text is necessarily and universally the best possible model for action available to us, but rather how persuasive we find the arguments made for such a comparison and how it might inform our activities as interpreters.

“The Model of the Text” is an interpretive model that, if it is to be taken seriously, must attempt to accommodate concerns about the limited scope and validity of interpretive methodologies into itself. If the proposals made in “The Model of the Text” are themselves an “interpretation” of how action is taken as an object and understood within the human and social sciences, then they are neither absolute nor necessarily the only way we might approach understanding and conceptualising the interpretation of meaningful human action. Ricoeur discusses the interpretation of action within the human and social sciences in very broad terms, incorporating a wide range of academic disciplines by invoking the category of *Geisteswissenschaften*. But the interpretation of meaningful action is not one homogenous activity across interpretive disciplines, and the insights afforded by considering meaningful action in terms of the text will have different application across this diversity of interpretive disciplines and particular interpretive cases. Even more fundamentally, the methods of interpretation appropriate in any given

situation should be determined in part by that which we are interpreting, in accordance with the openness towards alterity inherent to a “hermeneutically trained consciousness”.

This “openness” of the hermeneutical attitude demands that, if it is to be consistent with its own interpretive principles, any hermeneutic model of interpretation should remain flexible and responsive to the particular circumstances in which we engage in interpretation. Thus, we should not conceive of “The Model of the Text” as any kind of hard and fast set of rules for interpreting action. Rather it is an *interpretation* that articulates a certain way of conceiving interpretive validity and the role of objectification within this, and by doing so exposes us to the possibilities afforded by textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences.

#### 6.4.1: Ricoeur and Models

One way in which we might approach understanding the interpretive status of Ricoeur’s application of textual hermeneutics to the interpretation of meaningful action is by looking more closely at his choice to describe his project as a “model”, and at what this implies for how we should read “The Model of the Text”. Elsewhere, Ricoeur describes a model as “an instrument of redescription... a way of seeing things differently by changing our language about the subject of our investigation” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 66-67). This idea is one that draws heavily on Max Black’s treatment of “theoretical models” in *Models and Metaphors*. Theoretical models within the natural sciences, for Black, consist not in positing some metaphysical ideal to which reality must conform, but rather in “*talking* in a certain way” (Black, 1962: 229). The key to this lies in providing a new “language” with

which we can reconceptualise some given problem or phenomena, and allowing this to guide our investigations.

According to Black, theoretical models work by drawing from language standardly used to picture one “relatively unproblematic, more familiar, or better-organized” domain of inquiry, and applying this language to another domain in which “a need is felt for further scientific mastery” (Black, 1962: 230). This proposed relationship between different domains of inquiry is then used to move from known inferences in the more familiar field to the correlating inferences in the target domain. We assume that we can “model” inferences and procedures in the target domain upon those with which we are familiar in the domain from which the model is constructed. These correlative inferences are then “independently checked against known or predicted data” (Black, 1962: 230) in the target domain.

Whether or not Black’s account of theoretical models provides an adequate account of how models are used within the natural and physical sciences, this notion of the *metaphoricity* of models had an important influence on Ricoeur’s thought. In study seven of *The Rule of Metaphor*, for example, Ricoeur draws upon this idea of the scientific model as an “instrument of redescription” in order to elaborate upon the aporia of metaphorical reference (Ricoeur, 1978: 239-246). Given that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy maintains the importance of not conflating *Geisteswissenschaften* with *Naturwissenschaften*, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ricoeur is more interested in how Black’s account of theoretical models contributes to “the logic of discovery” within scientific investigation than he is in “the logic of justification or proof” (Ricoeur, 1978: 240). It is the “metaphorical” dimension of models that interests Ricoeur most, and it is this which can perhaps best help us

understand how Ricoeur believes that the text can serve as a model for meaningful action within the human and social sciences.

Ricoeur writes of the “theoretical model” that it is “essentially a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1978: 240). Ricoeur expresses this as “the conjunction between fiction and redescription” (Ricoeur, 1978: 247). Under this conception, a model works by first denying the *prima facie* adequacy of “our ordinary vision and the language we normally use” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 67), so that in turn “the heuristic fiction [of the model] can work its redescription of reality” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 68). The model itself is a heuristic fiction, but it aims towards the redescription of something “real” about the targeted domain of inquiry, based upon a “presumed isomorphism between the model and its domain of application” (Ricoeur, 1976a: 67). So whilst the model of the text is a construction, it is designed to describe and direct our awareness towards certain aspects of the reality of working with action as an object of inquiry within the human and social sciences, insofar as this “objectified” action “displays some of the features constitutive of text as text” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197). Based upon this redescription, Ricoeur is then able to draw from the domain of literary interpretation in order to disclose to us new ways of conceiving the interpretation of meaningful human action.

Ricoeur identifies textual hermeneutics as a domain in which interpretive validity is arguably better understood than it is within traditional interpretive models prevalent within the human and social sciences, especially when these interpretive models are based upon the same standards of validity that are prevalent within the physical and natural sciences. Proceeding from the parallels he perceives between

the text and action taken as the object of inquiry, Ricoeur identifies the interpretation of meaningful action within the human and social sciences as a domain which could benefit from the textual model. The evidence that bears testimony to the “isomorphism” between “the text” and action-as-object of the human sciences will not, however, be found in the kind of empirical observations made within the natural and physical sciences, and upon which the validity of scientific models is premised according to Black.

Rather, the validity of “The Model of the Text” is a hermeneutic validity of the kind discussed in this chapter. It is a contingent and “fragile” claim, based not upon anything “verifiable” but instead on the plausibility of the arguments given by Ricoeur for perceiving a parallel between action and the text. This kind of evidence has the same kind of weight as the evidence we give to support a particular reading of a text: it makes an appeal to our understanding, but always remains a partial and contingent view of the matter open to challenge or revision in light of new arguments, evidence or competing alternative interpretations. Understanding the contingencies and limitations involved in making an interpretation of this kind is an important part of circumscribing its validity, and the claim that we might use a “fiction” to redescribe reality demands a similar level of epistemic vigilance.

This need for vigilance arises from the very nature of using a model in this manner. The idealisation involved in constructing a model – the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of that which is modelled at the expense of others – means that we must always take care not to lose sight of the ways in which that which we are seeking to understand may differ from the “fiction” we utilise in order to do so. The difference between a literary metaphor and the metaphoricity of a model is illustrative in this regard. Ricoeur recognises that metaphor, as compared

to simile, tends to obscure its own fictiveness, in that although a metaphor is said to “stand for” something, it nevertheless presents itself as something to be “taken for” (Ricoeur, 1978: 252) that with which it is identified. Metaphor hides its own metaphoricity in that it hides the “as if” of the identity claim between the subject and object of the metaphor, the tacit “is not” that exists within the “is” of metaphorical reference. For this reason, Ricoeur claims that models, as compared to literary metaphors, demand a “deliberate mastery” of this “as if”, and that we must engage in a form of “ontological abstinence” in our claims to model one domain after another, no matter how “difficult to maintain” (Ricoeur, 1978: 254) this might be.

So whilst the rhetorical power of literary metaphor relies upon us being, to some extent, carried away by the comparison made and identifying the subject and object of metaphor with one another, the valid application of a model demands lucidity and control on behalf of the person using the model to speak about that which is being modelled. If we do not achieve a level of “mastery”, we run the risk of uncritically subsuming reality under the “fiction” we are nominally using to orientate our understanding. The test of the model lies in its application; we must remain epistemologically vigilant, aware of how adequately our “redescription” seems to fit the actuality of that which we are describing and interpreting, and willing to reject or modify our interpretive descriptions if we cannot find evidence for them in each case of application. If the text is to work as a model for action, it must then also incorporate an acknowledgement of the limitations of this project, to acknowledge the “is not” present within the metaphor of action-as-text, upon which “The Model of the Text” is premised.

So at the very same time as the model guides our adoption of an attitude towards our interpretive practices, the concrete situation at hand has the potential to

become an injunction *against* the model. The concrete task of “fixing” action as an object of inquiry and of interpreting that action works as a test of the textual model itself in that we need to judge how best to describe the action at hand. The need to respond to this injunction from reality, rooted in our commitment to the integrity of interpretation, is what I refer to as the “responsibility” involved in interpretive activity. This includes attempting to evaluate how well these (re-)descriptions accord with the self-understanding of those we are describing, and how well they fit with the interpretive standards of the discipline in which we are working. We must aspire to the hermeneutic ideal of remaining “open” to the alterity of what we are interpreting, and of being aware of the challenges this poses to us as interpreters.

The question is not therefore one of whether using textual hermeneutics as a model for action is fundamentally right or wrong, but of how plausible and persuasive we find the suggestion and of what possibilities the model discloses to us as interpreters. Ricoeur uses a construct of “the text” in order to focus our attention upon certain features of meaningful action as it is appropriated by interpreters within the human and social sciences and, consequently, to guide our engagement with and understanding of the ways in which action is meaningful. It is a reminder of the role played by objectification within the discourse of the human and social sciences, a reminder that it is via objectification and reflective distanciation that the possibility of critical understanding emerges, that the validity of interpretive inquiry into human action is closer to the validity of literary interpretation than it is to positivistic verification, and that self-critique is an essential part of the thoroughly “critical” understanding of action. But, no matter how powerful this metaphor might be, the model of the text does not claim to be either an exhaustive or an exclusive account of how we might come to understand and interpret action.

#### 6.4.2: Concerns and Qualifications

The necessity of keeping the “fragility” of interpretation in mind with regards to a model such as that of Ricoeur’s is rooted in the risk of misapplication. It might, for example, be asked whether the emphasis placed on “ontological abstinence” and “epistemological vigilance” indicates that a model lends itself, by its very nature, to over-generalisation. The thought here is that analogical transference on the scale involved in constructing and applying a model such as this is prone to being extended beyond its valid limits; that the text is a limited paradigm, but that the temptation for interpreters is to transgress these limits and overlook features of meaningful action that fall outside of the textual paradigm. The scope of a model, which is aimed at a “domain” of knowledge and presents itself as potentially applicable in a wide range of different interpretive situations, makes this risk to some extent unavoidable.

Rather than any particular case of interpretative activity, the textual model seeks to determine the conditions under which action can be understood when it is taken as an object of inquiry within the human sciences. We can realistically say that in any particular case of interpretation we can harbour hopes of reaching some kind of non-arbitrary judgement, even if this judgement is always going to remain open to reinterpretation or revision in the light of new information, or when considered from a different critical perspective. But how we go about any particular case of interpretation – the information and methods we bring to bear on the problem – depends necessarily upon the particular circumstances of that case. It is difficult, therefore, to say *a priori* how the textual model will be applicable in different circumstances, and what constitutes a misapplication in any particular case. Consequently, the “problem” of interpretation to which “The Model of the Text” is

addressed is, in a very real sense, irresolvable, and remains as long as people seek to interpret meaningful action.

It is precisely the indeterminacy that accompanies this breadth of potential application which leaves “The Model of the Text” open to the possibility of misapplication.<sup>142</sup> There emerges a risk of unthinkingly subsuming the interpretation of action under the rubric of textual hermeneutics, rather than allowing the textual model to guide our interpretive activities whilst simultaneously striving to remain open to that which we are seeking to interpret, and taking the specificity of each case into consideration. If there is this risk that a “model”, as envisioned by Ricoeur, is prone to reification or over-generalisation in this manner, there is also a risk of obscuring those features of action that are less amenable to being understood in terms of the text.<sup>143</sup> Given that “The Model of the Text” is concerned, to a large extent, with the *valid* interpretation of meaningful action in the human and social sciences, this risk is not one we can afford to dismiss lightly. If such a model is likely to cause us to misunderstand that which we are interpreting, then it is clearly not suited to the task.

Taken and generalised without caution, it is possible that “The Model of the Text” could lead us to misunderstand certain aspects of the way in which action is meaningful, or certain ways in which we as interpreters might impose meaning upon action. I have argued, however, that a hermeneutic model of interpretation such as

---

<sup>142</sup> Once again, it is worth remembering that “The Model of the Text” was formulated as part of Ricoeur’s ongoing engagement with the role of structuralism as a “science” of language, and as an analytical tool in the human and social sciences. The broad scope of “The Model of the Text” at least in part reflects the level of generality at which this debate was taking place.

<sup>143</sup> It is partly for this reason that we cannot uncritically appropriate everything that is true of the literary text when considering action *as* a text, even given Ricoeur’s characterisation of the text in terms of discourse submitted to fixation. At the very least, we owe a greater debt of humility to those we are trying to understand than we do to the author of a literary text. The responsibility we have as interpreters of *action* is therefore importantly distinct from the responsibility we might have as interpreters of literary texts.

Ricoeur's provides us with a valuable resource for resisting such misunderstanding, and thus carries with it an injunction against misapplication that I have characterised in terms of interpretive responsibility. Ricoeur recognises that interpretive activity should be accompanied by a hermeneutic consciousness that works hard to avoid misunderstanding that which is being interpreted, and to avoid uncritically over-generalising or reifying given modes of understanding. If we take the proposals of "The Model of the Text" to be an interpretive claim of this kind, then the same levels of care and self-critique as demanded by interpretation should also be involved in any application we might wish to make of the textual model in regards to the interpretation of meaningful human action.

Whether Ricoeur manages this adequately in the relatively brief space he gives over to explicitly discussing the textual model is perhaps more questionable. There is a slightly "scientific" tone to his writing, including his choice to describe the text as a "model", which seemingly stands at odds with his rejection of positivist principles within the interpretation of human action.<sup>144</sup> Given his prudence elsewhere regarding the importance of maintaining a distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*, one would also perhaps hope to see a more cautious distinction drawn between the way in which models are used within the natural and social sciences within in his discussion of the metaphoricality of models.

---

<sup>144</sup> In Ricoeur's defence, his "scientific" language, although potentially misleading on a shallow reading, is framed within the traditional hermeneutic debate about the relationship between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*. His insistence that it is possible to have a "scientific knowledge of the text", for example, emerges from his discussion of the possibility of making valid interpretive claims "without conceding anything to the alleged dogma of the ineffability of the individual" (Ricoeur, 1981h: 212). In this context a closer reading demonstrates that Ricoeur is using the notion of a "science" of interpretation primarily to emphasise that interpretation does not necessarily involve unconstrained relativism, or mysticism, rather than conflating the human and social "sciences" with the natural sciences without being sensitive to the differences between these domains of inquiry.

Ricoeur also makes certain claims, such as that “social reality is fundamentally symbolic” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 219), which do seem to conflate the application of semiotic theory to the interpretation of action with the foundations of the “reality” of what is being interpreted. Without significant qualification, this would be a much stronger claim than could be justified given the arguments made within “The Model of the Text”, and arguably conflicts with the relative modesty of the claims made elsewhere in the essay. Similarly, I have argued elsewhere<sup>145</sup> that Ricoeur does not address the importance of the Gadamerian notion of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a text and the way in which it can help us understand the ineliminability of intentional and historicist concerns within the interpretation of action, or the importance of critical awareness at the level of the “objectification” of action.

Ricoeur recognises, however, that the “fruitfulness” of a model depends upon us “knowing how to make use of it” (Ricoeur, 1978: 241). He qualifies the claims he wishes to make from the very outset of “The Model of the Text” when he writes that the kind of interpretation he is discussing (*Auslegung*) “covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing.” His hypothesis too makes the relatively modest claim that textual hermeneutics might inform interpretation within the human sciences “inasmuch as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of text as text” and “inasmuch as their *methodology* develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text-interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 197).

---

<sup>145</sup> The notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is discussed in more detail in sections 1.1.2.1 and 2.1 of this thesis, and critical awareness as a necessary moment within the description and objectification of action in chapter four (sections 4.1 and 4.2).

All of this is consistent with the note of caution sounded by Ricoeur when he says that “only some features are relevant in a model, others are not. The model purports to be faithful only to its relevant features” (Ricoeur, 1978: 240). That there are features of meaningful action not easily accounted for in terms of the text, and that other approaches to the understanding and interpretation of action may attend to these features in a way that “The Model of the Text” might not is therefore something inherent to Ricoeur’s conception of a “model”.

Ricoeur is primarily interested in how we can understand the validity of interpretation within the human and social sciences, and how textual hermeneutics can help us understand this. He focuses upon the way in which meaningful action can become “fixed” as an object of inquiry, and how this can provide a “fresh approach” (Ricoeur, 1981h: 209) to understanding the relationship between “understanding” and “explanation” within the interpretation of action in the human and social sciences. The text is chosen as a model for the interpretation of action specifically because Ricoeur believes that it offers us a new way of conceiving of interpretive validity in the human and social sciences, and not because Ricoeur believes that “action” and “the text” can be unproblematically identified with one another without caution or qualification. By focussing upon action in this way, Ricoeur inevitably obscures other features of action in which we might, as interpreters, be interested.<sup>146</sup>

For this reason, I have argued that “The Model of the Text” must be supplemented with a greater understanding of the way in which action is constituted as an object of inquiry, the challenges this poses to us as interpreters, an emphasis

---

<sup>146</sup> The ethnomethodological emphasis upon understanding meaningful action as it is understood *in situ* as an ongoing and transactional achievement is perhaps one example of an approach to action which is potentially marginalised by focussing upon the “fixed” forms of action and its enduring meaning, as I have discussed in greater depth in chapter five of this thesis.

upon our “responsibilities” as interpreters, and acknowledgement of the importance of considering these factors on a case-by-case basis. The hermeneutic structure of interpretation as conceived by Ricoeur, however, carries with it a moment of self-critique that should help us guard against misunderstanding. This will not always be the case in practice. But these will be cases of *bad interpretations*, not of a fundamentally flawed model of interpretation. They will, in fact, be interpretations that have failed to take heed of the caution and critical sensitivity that “The Model of the Text” seeks to engender in interpreters.

The “risk” inherent in misapplication and over-generalisation of a model is inseparable from the “fragility” identified by Ricoeur as inherent to hermeneutic validity. We can never guarantee that using the text as a model for understanding the interpretation of action will not lead us into misunderstanding, but this does not mean that the model has no value. “The Model of the Text” presents us with a way of orientating ourselves in our interpretive activities, and of understanding how the human and social sciences might benefit from textual hermeneutics. But these claims remain an interpretation of how we appropriate action within these interpretive disciplines, and at no point claim to encompass every concern which might be relevant to understanding meaningful human action regardless of the circumstances. The strength of the textual model lies precisely in how it is capable of acknowledging its own contingencies as part of its application, and in its ability to engender a sense of “responsibility” in interpreters.

### 6.5: Conclusion

That hermeneutic interpretation does not aspire to a false ideal of “absolute” truth, and that hermeneutic validity is inherently contingent and fragile, lies at the

very core of Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy. Interpretation is fundamentally an *activity*, and the validity of interpretation depends upon the practices of those engaged in interpretation. We must recognise ourselves as *responsible* for our interpretive activities, and the work of interpretation must involve an attempt to fulfil the obligations that arise with this. By engaging critically with that which we interpret, and with our own practices as interpreters, we can hope to reach a position in which we are capable of making plausible arguments for some particular interpretive claim, and to support these claims with evidence and arguments. Part of the validity of these claims, however, lies in our ability to recognise their contingency, and the conditions under which they are valid.

In "The Model of the Text", Ricoeur argues that the validity of interpretation in the human and social sciences can be understood similarly, i.e. as a valid but ultimately contingent truth claim, supported by argument and evidence. It is the "objectification" of action, identified by Ricoeur with the fixation undergone by discourse in the text, which provides the condition under which achieving this hermeneutic validity is possible. By objectifying action it becomes possible to hold our presuppositions and judgements of meaning in a state of suspense, allowing us to engage critically with both the action at hand and our own interpretive practices. This detour of suspicion – suspicion towards that which is given and that we might otherwise take for granted – mediates between our pre-reflective and critical understanding of action, and allows us to fulfil our responsibilities as interpreters of action. The state of suspense in which the meaning of action is held within objectification allows us to "take upon ourselves" the responsibility of interpretation, and strive to ensure the integrity of our interpretive work. Within this, interpretation can achieve a strength and authority which is neither absolute nor arbitrary. It is in

this manner that textual hermeneutics might inform the interpretive practices of the human and social sciences, and that the text can serve as a “model” for meaningful human action.

### **Concluding Comments: The Model of the Text and the Objectification of Action**

In this thesis I have offered a critical but sympathetic reading of Paul Ricoeur's textual model of interpretation as it is presented in "The Model of the Text". In addition to this I have attempted to draw upon and develop the analogy between text and action in directions left largely undeveloped by Ricoeur, with a particular emphasis placed upon the role of objectification and description as part of the interpretation of meaningful action within the social and human sciences.

My main reason for focussing upon these aspects of "The Model of the Text" in particular is that Ricoeur's account makes use of the notion of the objectification of action in order to establish an analogy between action and text, yet leaves the question of how action can be "fixed" as an object of inquiry relatively obscure. I also argue that Ricoeur's notion of interpretive validity is inseparable from the distanciation and temporary suspension of meaning that Ricoeur identifies as accompanying the fixation of discourse as a text, not least because these are preconditions to the adoption of the "critical" and "explanatory" attitudes that Ricoeur identifies as an important stage within the hermeneutic arc, and thus for fulfilling the responsibilities and obligations which arise from interpretive activity. Given this, the issue of the objectification of action is important both to the validity of Ricoeur's textual model, and, subsequently, to understanding the kind of interpretive validity that he recommends via "The Model of the Text".

Following a brief survey of "The Model of the Text", I have attempted to clarify the way in which Ricoeur conceives "the text" and the "autonomy" of meaning that accompanies it. I placed a particular emphasis on understanding how

Ricoeur's picture of textual autonomy differs from that associated with notions of the "absolute text". I have argued that the primary importance of this distinction is that Ricoeur's notion of limited autonomy, in contrast to the "irreducible multiplicity" of meaning associated with "absolute" autonomy, preserves the possibility of arbitrating between good and bad interpretations of action within the human and social sciences.

I have also argued that "The Model of the Text" fails to adequately account for the way in which action is constituted as an "object" of inquiry and that this, in turn, fails to acknowledge the prominence of the objectification of action as a productive part of its interpretation. Drawing upon the work of various thinkers, especially the hermeneutic philosophy of Ricoeur, Gadamer and Heidegger, I have attempted to articulate how meaningful action is brought to the primarily linguistic discourses of human and social sciences as an object of reflective inquiry, and how the objectification of action can subsequently influence the interpretations we make of it. Based upon this, I argued for the necessity of considering how different descriptions of action may be informed by the presuppositions and "disciplinary prejudices" of the academic and institutional traditions of which we are inheritors and within which we work. Such "critical description" should be considered as a necessary part of the self-critique that Ricoeur identifies as an important part of interpretive activity and validity, and has the potential to provide a complement to the already established culture of critical reading prevalent within the human and social sciences.

Following on from this I have offered a defence of the textual model and hermeneutic philosophy against anti-interpretive criticism within the social sciences, particularly those based upon the work of Peter Winch, and Harold Garfinkel's

ethnomethodology. I argued that there is an important distinction to be made between the hermeneutic notion of *Auslegung* and the kinds of “interpretation” at which these anti-interpretive arguments are aimed. I also argued that, although there are important differences between the kind of approach to meaningful action recommended by Ricoeur and those of thinkers such as Garfinkel and Winch, we should not view these different traditions as fundamentally opposed. We should rather seek to understand how they might be capable of informing one another and the interpretive practices and principles recommended by each.

I turned next to articulate the role played by the objectification of action within Ricoeur’s conception of interpretive validity. Drawing upon Ricoeur’s reconstruction of the hermeneutic dichotomy of explanation and understanding – wherein explanation is understood as a necessary “stage” between naïve and critical interpretation – I argued that the strength of interpretive validity is based upon the potential for holding our judgements of meaning in check in order to weigh different potential interpretations against one another and engage critically with the presuppositions upon which our interpretations are based. The necessity of engaging critically both with the action we interpret and with our own presuppositions and prejudices as interpreters is what I have referred to as interpretive “responsibility”. Fulfilling these obligations is possible in light of the distanciation produced by the objectification of action, considered by Ricoeur as the analogue to the fixation of discourse as a text and a precondition for engaging in critical interpretation. Interpretive validity, understood in light of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic philosophy, should therefore be understood as both strong and fragile, as “credence without guarantee, but also as trust greater than any suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1992: 23). “The Model of the Text” helps us see how a similar notion of

validity is applicable to the interpretation of meaningful action within the human and social sciences.

Finally, I have argued that it is important to read “The Model of the Text” as itself making an interpretive claim about how we interpret action in the human and social sciences, and not as a rulebook for interpretation. Under this reading, the paradigm of the text can serve to inform without *a priori* determining our interpretive practices. It does this by making us aware of the way in which action is appropriated as an “object” of inquiry and encouraging us to be aware of the constitutive influence of our own presuppositions and methods upon the descriptions and interpretations of action that we make. In order for it to do so, however, it is important that we engage critically with “The Model of the Text” itself and attempt to consider the limits of the analogy between text and action as part of its application.

I have argued that it is an important condition of the validity of an argument that it attempts to demarcate at least some of the limits of the validity of its claims, and given this it is perhaps especially important that I attempt to identify some of both the strengths and weaknesses of my presentation of “The Model of the Text” and the suggestions I make to supplement Ricoeur’s project therein. When appropriate, I have attempted to indicate some potential concerns as they have arisen within the work of the thesis itself. In chapter five, for example, I touch upon the concern that the focus placed within the textual model upon the enduring meaning and objectification of action risks marginalising the importance of recognising the ways in which action is meaningful for the agents and patients of action as a form of

situated transaction.<sup>147</sup> I have also previously touched upon the role of non-textual methods of representing action within the human and social sciences, and the importance of recognising what these might offer interpreters that purely linguistic descriptions cannot.<sup>148</sup>

At a more general level than this we may be concerned that the scope of “The Model of the Text” is inherently too broad, and that any “model” of interpretation which aspires to cover the many and varied disciplines and schools of thought within the human and social sciences will inevitably fail to remain sensitive to the particular demands of these disciplines and the work done therein. My own interpretation of “The Model of the Text”, although offering criticism on a number of counts, has largely engaged with the issue of the interpretation of meaningful action on the same slightly abstract level as Ricoeur’s (albeit with perhaps a greater focus upon sociology in terms of the other thinkers and theorists with whom I have engaged). As such, the challenges posed by the objectification and interpretation of action as part of individual disciplines and schools of thought within the human and social sciences still demand further exploration.

In order to meet this demand it would be necessary to examine different interpretive disciplines in detail, and to explore the different ways in which human action is constituted as an “object” of inquiry and the different interpretive responsibilities we might have to meet in order to support the valid interpretation of action within individual disciplines and traditions of thought. Even on a fairly broad level, for example, it should be evident that the ways in which action is brought to discourse within disciplines such as sociology or anthropology – wherein interpreters

---

<sup>147</sup> A concern to which I have recommended both an ethnomethodologically informed interest in the “indexicality” of action and a recognition of such situated meanings as an irreducible part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of action as potential antidotes.

<sup>148</sup> As discussed primarily in section 2.4 of chapter two of this thesis.

may be able to observe action directly and compose descriptions upon this basis – differ significantly from disciplines such as history or archaeology wherein the only access we have to the actions of those we seek to understand come in the form of its “traces” – artefacts and accounts of action that have been preserved perhaps long after the events to which they bear testimony have passed.

In each case there remains a responsibility on behalf of the interpreter of action to be aware of how action has been constituted as an object of inquiry, but how this affects their interpretive practices will differ depending upon the traditions and interests of the disciplines within which the interpreters are working. Perhaps also important in this respect is to try and understand the cross-pollination that occurs between disciplines concerned with understanding human action, and any problems that may arise when accounts and interpretations of action composed within one tradition are appropriated by another (philosophy as a discipline, for example, is perhaps particularly guilty of drawing upon “evidence” from other disciplines in order to support philosophical arguments without necessarily giving due consideration to the importance of understanding the context within which these accounts were composed). Ricoeur’s textual model, although addressed to the issue of objectification and interpretive validity at a level more general than any of these issues, nevertheless has the potential to serve as a stimulus and starting point for considering how the objectification of action occurs within each of these more localised and specialised situations.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> There are, of course, many examples of thinkers and interpreters within the social and human sciences who already place a great emphasis upon being sensitive to the way in which action becomes the object of interpretive inquiry and the way in which “prejudice”, both disciplinary and socio-cultural-historical, informs (or sometimes distorts) our understanding of action. These include thinkers who directly engage with Ricoeur’s work, such as the sociologist John B. Thompson, and others who demonstrate a creditable awareness of the same kind of concerns independently of any explicit engagement with Ricoeur’s thought such as William Arens’ study of anthropology and anthropophagy, Edward Said’s work on Orientalism or the work of ethnomethodologists inspired by Harold Garfinkel. In this respect, “The Model of the Text” is part of a more general trend within the

To return to the limits of my own interpretation of the textual model, however, we may also wish to ask whether the stringent demands for self-criticism that I claim must be incorporated into the description and interpretation of meaningful action in the human sciences are excessive; whether they ask too much of interpreters of action, demanding a “superhuman” level of critical self-awareness that is impossible to ever achieve. George Marcus, for example, has described the demands of a “hermeneutic sensitivity” within ethnography as a form of “puritanical honesty” (Marcus, 1986: 184). It is certainly true that no-one can ever have a complete overview of the historical and traditionary traces that inform their thought and actions, and an ability to absolutely “master” such conditions is no failure. Nevertheless, and as I have argued, the validity of interpretation depends to at least some extent upon the ability of the interpreter to engage in self-criticism that places their interpretation within a tradition of thought and, as Ricoeur puts it, “no thinker is dispensed from clarifying his presuppositions as far as he is able” (Ricoeur, 1978: 257).

This effort towards clarification does not guarantee validity, but as a regulative ideal this obligation towards self-criticism at least encourages us to engage more thoroughly with both that which we are interpreting and with our own practices as interpreters. To this extent, at least, while my demands for a “critical” approach to the interpretation of meaningful action may be conceived as excessive, I would prefer, to paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, to think of them as a call for an “extravagant honesty”.

---

human and social sciences, particularly since the mid-twentieth century, for finding a central place for reflective and (self-)critical practices within the wider activities of interpreters of meaningful human action.

The model of the text, as a paradigm of interpretive understanding applied to the human and social sciences, is an analogy designed to draw our attention to certain aspects of the interpretation of meaningful action and to suggest ways in which we might engage with action as an object of interpretive inquiry. This is not, of course, to say that the interpretation of literary texts and the interpretation of meaningful human action are exactly equivalent to one another, nor that understanding the interpretation of action in terms of the text could never lead us into error. The claims of “The Model of the Text”, as I have interpreted it, are more modest than this. An analogy such as that drawn by Ricoeur is foremost an *invitation to thought*.

Ricoeur explicitly invites us to consider interpretive validity and the dialectic of understanding and explanation within the human and social sciences in terms of textual hermeneutics. In addition to this, and as I hope to have shown, the textual model also invites us to consider in greater depth how the “objectification” of action is an important component of the notion of interpretive validity, and, consequently, how interpreters of action must give due consideration to the ways in which action is constituted as an “object” of inquiry.

## **Reference List**

- Arendt, H. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*. Edited by Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barthes, R. 1977a. “The Death of the Author”. In: Barthes, R. 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath [“La Mort de l’Auteur”, 1968]. Oxford: Fontana Paperbacks, pp. 142-48.
- Barthes, R. 1977b. “From Work to Text”. In: Barthes, R. 1977. *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath [“De l’Ouvre au Texte”, 1971]. Oxford: Fontana Paperbacks, pp. 155-64.
- Black, M. 1962. *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.J.D. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brodbeck, M. 1963. “Meaning and Action”. In: *Philosophy of Science*, 30(4), pp. 309-324.
- Chatman, S. 1981. “What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (and Vice Versa)”. In: Mitchell, W.J.T. (editor). 1981. *On Narrative*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 117-36.
- Cook, D. 1986. “Reflections on Gadamer’s Notion of Sprachlichkeit”. In: *Philosophy and Literature* (1986), 10(1), pp. 84-92.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1968a. “Sociology and Human Nature”. In: Dahrendorf, R. 1968. *Essays in the Theory of Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 88-106.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1968b. “In Praise of Thrasymachus”. In: Dahrendorf, R. 1968. *Essays in the Theory of Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 129-50.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1968c. “On the Origin of Inequality among Men”. In: Dahrendorf, R. 1968. *Essays in the Theory of Society*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 151-178.
- Dahrendorf, R. 1973 [1968]. *Homo Sociologicus*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Derrida, J. 1978. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”. In: Derrida, J. 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass [“La structure, le Signe et le Jeu dans le Discours des Sciences Humaines”. In: *L’écriture et la Différence*, 1967]. London: Routledge, pp. 351-70.
- Derrida, J. 1981. *Positions*. Translated and annotated by Alan Bass [from *Positions*, 1972]. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. 1982. “Différance”. In: Derrida, J. 1982. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass [“Différance”. In: *Marges de la Philosophie*, 1972]. New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 1-27.

Derrida, J. 1997 [1976]. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [*De la Grammatologie*, 1967]. Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press.

Durkheim, E. 1982. *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Edited by Steven Lukes. Translated by W.D. Halls [*Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, 1895]. New York; London; Toronto; Sydney: The Free Press.

Ferguson, R.B. 1995. *Yanomami Warfare: A Political History*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Freeman, E. 1997. “The Authority of the Bayeux Tapestry”. In: Gameson, R. (editor). 1997. *The Study of the Bayeux Tapestry*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, pp. 7-18.

Freud, S. 1955. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIII (1913-1914), Totem and Taboo and Other Works*. Translated by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson [*Totem and Taboo* first published as *Totem und Tabu*, 1913]. London: The Hogarth Press.

Gadamer, H.-G. 1993 [1975]. *Truth and Method* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall [*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960]. London: Sheed & Ward.

Gadamer, H.-G. 2010 [1960]. *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Garfinkel, H. 1967. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Garfinkel, H., Lynch, M. and Livingston, E. 1981. “The Work of a Discovering Science Construed with Materials from the Optically Discovered Pulsar”. In *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 11(2), pp. 131-158.

Garfinkel, H. 1986. *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*. New York; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Garfinkel, H. 1996. “Ethnomethodology's Program”. In: *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 59(1), pp. 5-21.

Geertz, C. 2000 [1973]. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Habermas, J. 1971. *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*. Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro [*Protestbewegung und Hochschulereform*, 1969 and *Technik und Wissenschaft als 'Ideologie'*, 1968]. London: Heinemann.

- Heidegger, M. 1967 [1927]. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Heidegger, M. 2008 [1962]. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927]. Malden; Oxford; Victoria: Blackwell.
- Heritage, J. 1984. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hirsch, E.D. 1967. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Hutchinson, P., Read, R. and Sharrock, W. 2008. *There Is No Such Thing As A Social Science: In Defence of Peter Winch*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Joy, M. 1988. "Derrida and Ricoeur: A Case of Mistaken Identity (And Difference)". In: *The Journal of Religion*, 68(4), pp. 508-526.
- Kenny, A. 2003 [1963]. *Action, Emotion and Will*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kessler, S.J. and McKenna, W. 1978. *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*. New York; Chichester; Brisbane; Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Marcus, G.E. 1986. "Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System". In: Clifford, J. and Marcus, G.E. (editors). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, pp. 165-193.
- Nietzsche, F. 1990 [1973]. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*, 1886]. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Pleasants, N. 1999. *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory: A Critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Pleasants, N. 2000. "Winch and Wittgenstein on Understanding Ourselves Critically: Descriptive not Metaphysical". In: *Inquiry*, 43(3), pp. 289-318.
- Pollner, M. 1991. "Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity". In: *American Sociological Review*, 56(3), pp. 370-380.
- Rawls, A. 2002. "Editor's Introduction". In: Garfinkel, H. 2002. *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*. Edited and introduced by Anne Warfield Rawls. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 1-64.
- Ricoeur, P. 1966. *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Translated by Erazim V. Kohák [*Le volontaire et l'involontaire*, 1950]. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

- Ricoeur, P. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage [*De l'interprétation: Essai sur Sigmund Freud*, 1965]. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1973. "A Critique of B. F. Skinner's 'Beyond Freedom and Dignity'". In: *Philosophy Today*, 17(2), pp.166-175.
- Ricoeur, P. 1974. "Freedom and Nature". Translated by Donald Stewart ["Nature et liberté", 1962]. In: Ricoeur, P. 1974. *Political and Social Essays*. Edited by David Stewart and Joseph Bien. Athens: Ohio University Press, pp. 23-45.
- Ricoeur, P. 1976a. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: The Texas University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1976b. "History and Hermeneutics". In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(19), pp. 683-695.
- Ricoeur, P. 1978. *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*. Translated by Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello [*La Métaphore Vive*, 1975]. London; Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981a. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited by J.B. Thompson. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 32-40.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981b. "Hermeneutics and the critique of ideology". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["Herméneutique et critique des idéologies", 1973]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 63-100.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981c. "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["Phénoménologie et herméneutique", 1975]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 101-28.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981d. "The hermeneutical function of distanciation". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation", 1975]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 131-44.
- Ricoeur, P. 1981e. "What is a text? Explanation and understanding". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["Qu'est-ce qu'un texte? Expliquer et comprendre", 1970]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-64.

Ricoeur, P. 1981f. "Metaphor and the central problem of hermeneutics". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["La métaphore et le problème central de l'herméneutique", 1974]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 165-181.

Ricoeur, P. 1981g. "Appropriation". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited by John B. Thompson. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 182-93.

Ricoeur, P. 1981h [1971]. "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-221.

Ricoeur, P. 1981i. "Science and ideology". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["Science et idéologie", 1974]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 222-46.

Ricoeur, P. 1981j. "The narrative function". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson ["La fonction narrative", 1979]. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 274-96.

Ricoeur, P. 1986. *Fallible Man*. Revised and translated by Charles A. Kelbley [*L'Homme faillible*, 1960]. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986.

Ricoeur, P. 1988. *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*. Translated by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer [*Temps et Récit, vol III*, 1985]. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Ricoeur, P. 1989a. "Existence and Hermeneutics". Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin ["Existence et herméneutique", 1965]. In: Ricoeur, P. 1989 [1974]. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. London; New York: Continuum, pp. 3-24.

Ricoeur, P. 1989b. "The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem". Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin ["Le problème du double sens comme problème herméneutique et comme problème sémantique", 1966]. In: Ricoeur, P. 1989 [1974]. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. London; New York: Continuum, pp. 61-75.

- Ricoeur, P. 1989c. "Structure, Word, Event". Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin ["La structure, le mot, l'événement", 1967]. In: Ricoeur, P. 1989 [1974]. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. London; New York: Continuum, pp. 77-94.
- Ricoeur, P. 1989d. "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: II". Translated by Charles Freilich ["Herméneutique des symboles et réflexion philosophique", 1961]. In: Ricoeur, P. 1989 [1974]. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Edited by Don Ihde. London; New York: Continuum, pp. 312-31.
- Ricoeur, P. 1992. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey [*Soi-même comme un autre*, 1990]. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1995. "Intellectual Autobiography". Translated by Kathleen Blamey. In: Hahn, L.E. (editor). 1995. *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: The Library of Living Philosophers Volume XXII*. Chicago: Open Court, pp. 3-53.
- Ricoeur, P. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer [*La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 2000]. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 2006. *On translation*. Translated by Eileen Brennan [*Sur la Traduction*, 2004]. Introduction by Richard Kearney. London; New York: Routledge.
- Ryle, G. 1968. "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?". Reprinted from *University Lectures*, no.18, 1968, by permission of the University of Saskatchewan [online]. Available through: [http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/CSACSLA/Vol14/Papers/ryle\\_1.html](http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/CSACSLA/Vol14/Papers/ryle_1.html) Date accessed: 22nd Feb. 2013.
- Schleiermacher, F. 1998. *Hermeneutics and Criticism and other writings*. Translated and edited by Andrew Bowie [selected writings, 1805-1833]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sharrock, W. and Anderson, B. 1986. *The Ethnomethodologists*. London; New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Skinner, B.F. 1974. *About Behaviourism*. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.
- Speer, S.A. 2005. *Gender Talk: Feminism, Discourse and Conversation Analysis*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, C. 1979. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man". In: Rabinow, P. and Sullivan, W.M. (editors). *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*. Berkeley; London: University of California Press, pp. 25-71.

- Thompson, J.B. 1981a. *Critical Hermeneutics: A study in the thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas*. Cambridge; London; New York; Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, J.B. 1981b. "Notes on editing and translating". In: Ricoeur, P. 1981. *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences: Essays on language, action and interpretation*. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge; New York; New Rochelle; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, pp. 27-31.
- Thompson, J.B. 1990. *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Tolstoy, L. N. 1966. *Resurrection*. Translated and introduced by Rosemary Edmonds [Воскресение, 1899]. London: Penguin Books.
- Truc, Gérôme. 2011. "Narrative Identity against Biographical Illusion: The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricoeur." In: *Études Ricoeurianes/Ricoeur Studies*, [e-journal] 42(1), pp. 150-167. Available through: <<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/ricoeur/article/view/51/28>>. Date accessed: 20th Feb. 2013.
- Weber, M. 1949. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch [essays originally published in 1804, 1805 and 1817]. Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Winch, P. 1964. "Understanding a Primitive Society". In: *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 1(4), pp. 307-324.
- Winch, P. 1990 [1958]. *The Idea of Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. 2001 [1953]. *Philosophical Investigations (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition)*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe . Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 2009 [1953]. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Chichester; Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- The Ax Fight [1975]*. 2006 [DVD]. Directed by Asch, T. and Chagnon, N. Watertown: Documentary Educational Resources.