

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF PAUL RICŒUR: THE QUESTION OF THE METHODOLOGY OF INTERDISCIPLINARY THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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RÉSUMÉ : *L'objectivité et la subjectivité dans l'herméneutique phénoménologique de Paul Ricœur : la question de la méthodologie de la recherche théologique interdisciplinaire.* L'article propose un bref aperçu de la méthodologie du philosophe français Paul Ricœur dans le contexte de la recherche théologique. Cette méthodologie donne l'occasion d'explorer l'expérience humaine dans le discours scientifique. L'herméneutique phénoménologique élargit les horizons de la méthodologie habituelle et montre la relation entre subjectif et objectif, immanent et transcendantal dans l'expérience humaine. L'article souligne l'importance de catégories clés telles que l'Autre, la confiance, l'humilité d'un chercheur, etc., qui constituent un outil indispensable pour étudier des textes sur l'expérience existentielle, religieuse et critique de l'homme dans le discours scientifique des études humanitaires. La relation de confiance avec l'Autre devient la clé de la recherche théologique, puisque Dieu en tant qu'Autre, selon le message de l'apôtre Jean, est reconnu par l'amour pour le prochain (1 John 4: 20-21). Aimer Dieu est la première tâche d'un théologien, l'Autre est le chemin de cet amour. Les exemples tirés de l'herméneutique phénoménologique de Paul Ricœur révèlent un lien logique entre la compréhension de l'autre et la compréhension de soi. Il est enfin souligné que l'expérience de chaque personne est une expérience mystérieuse consistant à se transcender au-delà de soi-même. Il s'agit d'une tentative sans fin pour se rapprocher de la véritable image de Dieu.

Mot-clés : herméneutique, phénoménologie, phénoménologie herméneutique, objectivité, subjectivité, la confiance, recherche théologique.

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REZUMAT: *Obiectivitatea și subiectivitatea în hermeneutica fenomenologică a lui Paul Ricœur: chestiunea metodologiei cercetării teologice interdisciplinare.* Articolul oferă o scurtă privire de ansamblu asupra metodologiei filosofului francez Paul Ricœur în contextul cercetării teologice. Această metodologie oferă o oportunitate de a explora experiența umană în cadrul discursului științific. Hermeneutica fenomenologică extinde orizonturile metodologiei obișnuite și arată relația dintre subiectiv și obiectiv, immanent și transcendent în experiența umană. Articolul subliniază importanța unor categorii cheie precum celălalt, încrederea, smerenia unui cercetător etc., ca un instrument indispensabil pentru studierea textelor despre experiența existențială, religioasă și critică a omului în discursul științific al studiilor umaniste. Relația de încredere față de Celălalt devine cheia principală în cercetarea teologică, întrucât Dumnezeu ca Altul, potrivit mesajului apostolului Ioan, este recunoscut prin iubirea față de aproapele (1 Ioan 4: 20-21). Iubirea lui Dumnezeu este prima sarcină a unui teolog, cealaltă este calea către această iubire. Exemple din hermeneutica fenomenologică a lui Paul Ricœur dezvăluie o legătură logică între înțelegerea Celuilalt și înțelegerea de sine. Se subliniază în sfârșit că experiența fiecărei persoane este o experiență misterioasă a transcenderii de sine, aceasta este o încercare nesfârșită de a te apropia de adevărata imagine a lui Dumnezeu.

Cuvinte-cheie: hermeneutică, fenomenologie, fenomenologie hermeneutică, obiectivitate, subiectivitate, încredere, cercetare teologică.

Introduction

Exploration of any philosophical notion requires a researcher of exceptional discipline, attentiveness and ability to “to stay in the saddle” so as not to lose sight of the logic of his/her own arguments and, at the same time, gain new knowledge. Theology differs by its uniqueness and specificity as a discipline (the word [logos] about God [Théos]), for it deals with transcendent and personal at the same time. This combination, which manifests itself in the figure of Christ, invites the researcher to thirst for a knowledge which is inexhaustible. Therefore, theological study has its own challenges which partly overlap with the philosophical

ones. Although theology has a well-defined dogmatic springboard that saves the researcher from repeating obvious things, a theologian must constantly check whether (s)he has not departed far from the doctrine of the Church, and in case (s)he has, ask him/herself whether it is justified. The interdisciplinary approach of the philosophical and theological character requires flexibility and clarity in the formulation of the problem and the way to comprehend it: a methodological foundation.

Another problem of theological research is that all knowledge begins with experience. The scientific interpretation of the world reduces everything to “pure objectivity” and views religious experience as lacking objectivity. Since some things cannot be verified, faith in general remains “the psychic state of the deceived maniacs”². This resolution is dramatic not only for theology but also for philosophy, literature, etc., the spheres of knowledge that derived from autochthonous human experience, yet often lack an instrumental or factual apparatus. As for theology, as Tomáš Halík notes, if we divide reality into “objective” and “subjective”, God becomes homeless. On the one hand, God cannot be measured, empirically proven, calculated, and on the other, God is not a feeling, not an idea. As Halík continues, “though human thoughts and feelings can focus on Him, it is only to make sure that they are not able to penetrate his mystery, as if by passing to touch the edge of His robe”³. In the end, theology is doomed to balance between the reality of man and God. Hence, the continuous search for methods to convey that which cannot be transmitted.

This article presents the main provisions of the hermeneutic phenomenology of the French philosopher Paul Ricœur in the context of the methodology of theological research. The aim of this study is to show that theology as science can and should use interdisciplinary studies, which in turn will help to reveal its richness and beauty. One such tool may be the hermeneutic phenomenology of the Paul Ricœur, which we present below.

² K. Уорд, *Связь между эпистемологическими парадигмами науки и богословия*, 27-34.

³ T. Halík, *Noc zpovědníka: paradoxy malé víry v postoptimistické době*, Praha 2005, 40.

Paul Ricœur and the Unknowable Cognition

In the twentieth century, many thinkers questioned the methodology of theological research and this problem still has not been solved. It is here that the work of the French philosopher, representative of hermeneutic phenomenology, comes to our aid. When considering his proposal of the method of hermeneutic phenomenology, we should first refer to his biography, as it contains life experiences which later formed the basic principles of his methods of research. Paul Ricœur was one of the leading researchers in the hermeneutics of phenomena. His mother died early, and his father disappeared during the First World War. Subsequently, Ricœur writes that grievance of losing the father prevented his family from taking part in the general post-war euphoria⁴. Little by little, P. Ricœur learned to balance between his religious upbringing and his critical mind: “I, from an armistice to an armistice, learned to lead, as I said then, the inner war between reason and faith”⁵. One of such attempts at reconciliation was embodied in his study of *The Problem of God in Lachelier and Lagneau*, which he produced when studying at the Sorbonne University. Another important stage in his life was the meeting with Gabriel Marcel. Ricœur, together with J. Mariette, E. Levinas, J. P. Sartre, M. Berdyaev and others, was a participant in “Marseilles Fridays”, which took place in Paris in the 1930s, where young philosophers had the opportunity to read, discuss, and form their main assertions, which were then successfully transformed into their philosophical texts.

With the start of the Second World War, being already married, Paul Ricœur volunteered for the front, but soon after became a captive for five years. It is precisely in the camp for prisoners that P. Ricœur experiences an existential crisis of a borderline situation (according to K. Jaspers), which before that had been only a theory for him. His philosophical doctrine of hermeneutic phenomenology which combines on the one hand the philosophy of E. Husserl, K. Jaspers, G. Marcel and others, and on the other hand his own experience

⁴ P. Ricœur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle*, Paris 1995, 13.

⁵ Ricœur, *Réflexion faite* 15.

of loneliness, abandonment and despair, was conceived in prison. Paul Ricoeur followed Wilhelm Dilthey, who introduced the concept of “spiritual science”, and tried to find a way to comprehend the phenomena that have their own flow of irrationality, subconscious, and teleological orientation⁶. He understood the complexity of these phenomena, was aware that they are difficult to prove or not at all reasonably verifiable, empirically verifiable and subjective, and therefore desperately sought a way to describe such phenomena.

The fruit of his quest was a two-volume study, published in 1960 under the title *Philosophy of the Will*. In the first part, *Fallible man*, Ricoeur explores the principle by which a person chooses evil. Ricoeur insists that this choice involves both voluntary and involuntary human will. At the same time, he introduces the category of “unintentional” into philosophical comprehension, but also emphasizes that all unobtrusive acts of human will can be tracked only by its voluntary will, that is, conscience⁷. In opposition to Sartre and his “unbridled freedom”, Paul Ricoeur, understands human freedom as an opportunity to express freedom. He gives a new explanation why people choose evil, a vulnerability to falsehood: “This ontology I gave a very Pascalian name: ‘the ontology of disproportion’. The weakness of a person, his or her vulnerability to moral evil, will be nothing more than a constitutive disproportion between the pole of infinity and the pole of finitude”⁸.

The second part of *Philosophy of the Will*, the Symbolism of Evil, reveals the concept of evil in metaphorical and symbolic language. Here, he demonstrates the first attempt at hermeneutic analysis of the phenomenon of the original sin. Sin becomes the cornerstone for Ricoeur’s quest. The art of interpretation helps him to penetrate the consciousness of other people by reproducing the creative process through external manifestations – the texts themselves. Texts are composed of words, which reflect the author’s neural connections, that is, his consciousness⁹. For this, P. Ricoeur uses mythological plots, which

⁶ S. E. Porter, J. Robinson. *Hermeneutics: an introduction to interpretive theory*, Michigan 2011, 108.

⁷ Porter-Robinson. *Hermeneutics: an introduction to interpretive theory* 109.

⁸ Ricoeur, *Réflexion faite* 28.

⁹ Porter-Robinson, *Hermeneutics* 109.

illustrate the importance of symbolic foundations¹⁰. He also examines in detail the formation of St. Augustine's concept of the original sin. In thinking about human sin, guilt, and the existence of evil, Paul Ricœur emphasizes that the propensity for sin is generated in a person between one's awareness of his\her own finality and the sense of guilt, although this does not exclude the possibility of "jumping" into profound evil¹¹.

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Theology

One of the following questions raised by Paul Ricœur is how to achieve objectivity and whether there are limits to the interpretation of the text. For example, Bertrand Russell defines objectivity through the consensus of views and subjectivity by views which differ from each other. He gives the example of a theatrical performance where each spectator objectively understands that (s)he is in the theater and what is happening in the performance, but when asked about the actors, the color of their clothes or scenery, a discrepancy of thoughts and observations arises. When asking a person about the details of scene by pointing to a photo of actors, subjectivity will decrease, but the viewer will not be able to tell the height of the main actor, which is subject to objective parameters¹². Such a principle of determining objectivity is inherent in journalism and criminology which define truth by looking at one and the same phenomenon from different angles. Therefore, the consensus of views will be objective. However, does this principle apply to theology?

Objectivity requires "destroying" the person, taking the "I" out of the subject to provide the text with transparency and clarity in the interpretation. Philosophers from antiquity to positivism as much as possible tried to overcome subjectivity, but Ricœur saw in this "a real loss of the most archaic object 'I'"¹³. This loss affects creativity and uniqueness and makes the act of interpretation overly simplistic and dull. As a result, the same happens in thinking, writing

¹⁰ Porter-Robinson, *Hermeneutics* 110-111.

¹¹ Ricœur, *Réflexion faite* 29.

¹² B. Russell, *Dictionary of mind, matter, and morals*, New York 1965, 248 – 249.

¹³ P. Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations: essais d'herméneutique*, Paris 1969, 24.

and expression. Karol Wojtyła also expressed similar anxieties, stressing that “the science of the spirit” should focus on that, which in man is “unmanageable”, that, which in every person is unique. Therefore, a human being is not only a species but also a person, a subject¹⁴.

In his book *The Conflict of Interpretation*, Paul Ricœur, in a debate with structuralism, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology itself, tries to prove that it is impossible to be objective when one forgets that (s)he is always subjective. In Ricœur’s view, the interpretation of the Other can only be based on different discourses, different types of knowledge and with a clear awareness of their own subjectivity, the uniqueness of the experience of a separate person, both the author and the reader.

Another important aspect of Ricoeur’s research is the doubt that entered the intellectual sphere through the philosophers of “suspicion” S. Freud, F. Nietzsche and K. Marx as Ricœur call them. He calls them “destroyers” of prejudices, including religious ones. He, though, immediately emphasizes that often, precisely because of these ruined walls, an authentic understanding of the truth and the possibility of its knowledge is revealed: “Only after them [Freud, Nietzsche and Marx] does understanding become hermeneutics; the search for meaning does not mean disassembling into parts the awareness of meaning, but rather deciphering the expression of meaning in the mind”¹⁵. Doubting becomes a tool for finding the truth which, at the same time, becomes an instrument for seeking objectivity.

Consequently, any objectivity is possible as much as one person is ready to enter into the world of another person together with him/her to experience his/her story. At the same time, there is awareness of inaccessibility: another person is the Other which is not me. The phenomenological method makes it possible to concentrate on the experience of “that, which cannot be reduced” by trying to penetrate the whole essence¹⁶. Charles Taylor, in his characterization of the philosophy of Paul Ricœur, writes: “First of all, it is a question of the subject’s philosophy. This is a paramount topic of contemporary Western

¹⁴ K. Wojtyła, *Podmiotowość I „To, co Nieredukowalne” w Człowieku*, Lublin 1994, 25.

¹⁵ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* 149.

¹⁶ Wojtyła, *Podmiotowość I „To, co Nieredukowalne” w Człowieku* 27.

philosophy, which is extremely worried about the ‘I’, the problem of the status of the acting subject, his freedom and identity. That is why there is no complete transparency in this area. After all, it is necessary to reconcile many views that seem to be opposing in order to find an approach within which it would be possible to unite them, instead of looking for premature and illusory clarity, taking one position in opposition to everything else”¹⁷.

How Does Hermeneutic Phenomenology Work?

Paul Ricœur, unlike Martin Heidegger, who refuses to think about the method and immediately goes to the ontology of the concept, as if “suddenly immersed”, chooses the “winding path” of the gradual methodological introduction to the concept. He also tries to consider any phenomenon as comprehensively as possible. He emphasizes: “Hermeneutics should be doubly indirect: firstly, because existence is confirmed only by documentary evidence of life, and secondly, our consciousness from the beginning is erroneous, and because of the correction of criticism it is necessary to be raised from misunderstanding to understanding”¹⁸. This world is the world of the reader, insists Ricœur, so it is important to learn how to “correctly” read and interpret it. Reading the text also involves two positions from the researcher: the first, to remain in the uncertainty of the text “without the world and without the author”; the second, to return to living communication, to the interpretation: “The reader is absent in the act of writing; the writer is absent at the act of reading. Consequently, the text creates a double effacement of the reader and the writer. This replaces the connection of the dialogue, when the voice of one hears the voice of another”¹⁹.

According to Ricœur’s methodology, hermeneutic interpretation of a text has three stages, as we have generalized. The first is reading-familiarity with the text, considering its form, content and doing the initial analysis. Only the internal component of the text is provided. The second is reading-entering into the world of text and its author. And the third stage is the existential and

¹⁷ Чарльз Тейлор, *Філософія без кордонів* 17.

¹⁸ Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* 22.

¹⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Du texte à l' action: essais d' herméneutique II*, Paris 1986, 155

reflexive appropriation of the meaning of the text, namely the interpretation by the researcher. Interpretation makes sense only where there are multilevel meanings, it aims to overcome the distance between a reader and a text, to make the text of the other one's own²⁰. The final stage is also intended to present the text to the audience.

For the combination of time and narrative, Ricœur uses the concept of a mimesis (Greek *μίμησις* - imitation, *mimeistka* "simulate"), which helps him to overcome the temporal disparity between text and reader. The story, for Ricœur, becomes of full value only when it becomes a condition of temporary existence. Thus, the interpretation is not exhaustive, because with each reading of the text, it is revealed to one or another person in a new way. The temporality of this phenomenon is not a problem, since the task of the researcher is to actualize one or another thought, that is, to reveal the continuity in time²¹. And since interpretation retains the attributes of appropriation, Paul Ricœur is convinced that the very first task of hermeneutics is the researcher's understanding of him\herself. The hermeneutic problem is overcome due to the ability of one person to understand another, to create mutual understanding, and to transfer oneself into the life of the Other. Through internal reflection we can understand others, the world and everything in it. Thus, any hermeneutics becomes an understanding of oneself through the understanding of the Other²². The culmination of the text comprehension occurs when the researcher is better able to understand him\herself, in a different or deeper way. Ricœur calls this a "concrete reflection", because the sentences of the text matter only here and now²³. That is why in the very heart of reading different explanations and interpretations oppose and reconcile themselves: an incomprehensible process²⁴.

The hermeneutic and phenomenological approach assumes a very important role in the perception and analysis of any text, that is to trust the witness of the "event". This is especially important when it comes to the phenomena of

²⁰ Антологія світової літературно-критичної думки XX століття 228.

²¹ Porter-Robinson, *Hermeneutics: an introduction to interpretive theory* 115.

²² Ricœur, *Le conflit des interprétations* 20.

²³ Ricoeur, *Du texte a l' action* 170-171.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *Du texte a l' action* 323.

human religious experience where any text should be taken without condemnation and skepticism critically and reasonably interpreted. The researcher should also trust the person who believes in his\her own experience, even if it contradicts researcher's own beliefs, or in terms of logic, is impossible. And lastly, here the researcher has some space for maneuver – an opportunity to compare similar experiences and make critical results²⁵.

Trust as a Key Category in the Hermeneutic Phenomenology of the Other

The problem of difference between experience and fact exacerbated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the one hand, the positivists provoked a successful discussion of a person; they, like nobody else, contributed to the reactivity of theological thinking. But, on the other hand, the phenomenon of “suspicion” in tandem with the consequences of the 1st and 2nd World Wars, the Holocaust, as well as the development of the economy, the struggle for equality of workers, women and ethnic minorities, spurred a rugged mixture of individualism, self-sufficiency and devaluation of human life. All that we can now call the “epoch of doubt” gave birth to our time “epoch of individualism”. In the context of Theodor Adorno’s questioning possibility of poetry after Auschwitz it is a diagnosis of the post-war time. Because poetry is not a simple rhyme, it is a manifestation of vulnerability, openness and trust. Asking if poetry can exist is all about asking if you can trust people again. Consequently, “doubt” as a category of existence must also have its limits. These limits can only be established by theology.

Theology is the only science that can combine the limited knowledge of the Divine Mystery and the call of God for the unceasing knowledge of His and human nature. Analysis of human religious experience can fall into different extremes, therefore in theological studies it is important to adhere to two principles. Firstly, it is important not to fall into fideism, which will deny any knowledge, and thus will level the gift of rationality, and, secondly, theology cannot categorically be reduced to the standards of positivism: formulas, definitions, logical reasoning, etc., because the true theology is the

²⁵ F. N. Watts, *Theology and psychology*, Burlington 2002, 78.

awareness of the inexhaustibility of God, a living inimitable relationship with God. So, one needs to find a category that will be a tool, a kind of arbiter, to combine objectivity and subjectivity, rationality and irrationality. In addition, analytical thinking and apologetics require additional support in the interpretation of any experience, it can be a phenomenon of trust: to yourself, to the Other, to the world. Ideas and concepts about God should periodically be criticized to safeguard man from replacing the living God with “the god of my ideas”. Thus, doubt and trust can be two aspects of a theological research that will complement each other.

Paul Ricœur’s methodology helps us to combine objectivity with subjectivity. Ricœur, though praising the “philosophers of suspicion”, is still moving in a different direction, namely, towards restoration of integrity of the human self, where the knowledge of man is the path to its subjectivity. It is here that the involvement of trust in the theological research begins. Trust does not mean lack of doubt or critical thinking, but rather it points to a conscious act of human freedom to trust. It combines two opposite things: it becomes a tool for verifying the experience of the Other and, at the same time, it is the consequence of the knowledge of the Other. First, it is carried out thanks to critical thinking of each person and confidence that it can be expressed freely. Second, it is the process of knowing the Other. Due to trust we become vulnerable to the Other, and thus open to knowing the Other. At the same time, trust is an instrument for understanding personal and common experiences, as it forms the bridge for a mutual dialogue between the I and the YOU.

Trust in the Other, in the text, does not mean that distrust/suspicion has no function in the interpretation process. And although the methods of the positivists reveal ambivalence and ambiguity in the text, it is only meant to become a tool for finding the truth which at the same time becomes an instrument for seeking objectivity. Thus, the relationship of trust does not preclude the need to recognize internal misunderstandings of the text. These ambiguities indicate the uniqueness of the text, as well as the human life expressed in the text. Trust is a sense of acknowledges the irreducibility and impossibility of ultimate meaning of the Other, his thought and finally his text.

Hence, trust also becomes a two-way transcendental connection between the author and the reader-researcher. Talking about trust, John Paul II emphasizes

that it is similar to the relation of equality that embodies a relationship of friendship in which a person is perceived as equal in dignity, in search of phenomenon, in the right to err and be forgiven for mistakes²⁶. The relation of friendship, even between the reader and the text, is capable of cherishing trust because it does not imply a dead interpretation but the entry into the world of the Other. This is especially true of research related to religious experience, where the researcher is part of the writer's experience framed in the text. Trust encompasses in itself a limited vision of the Other, and thus requires other critical opinions. Trust assumes that any intelligence should be built on the inner humility of the researcher realizing that even the most complete texts, descriptions, diaries reveal to the scholar only part of someone's inner universe.

The virtue of humility will help the researcher to accept his own limitations and boundlessness of the world. Humility will help him\her not to distort the knowledge of the phenomenon, but rather will become an element of objectivity. It will also help to realize that everything written, said and opened by us can and must be further developed. Trusting is a process that secures freedom of an author and researcher to preserve his/her identity. Trust in the Other is the basis of a study, it overcomes the uncertainty and allows one to look at a text as a certain aspect of the truth, which the researcher needs to combine with its other facets.

The crisis of confidence in the Other cannot be overcome only by logical conclusions because it is inherent to the state of human sinful nature. Nevertheless, for the person the state of distrust towards him/herself is unbearable, not inherent to his/her nature. It is fundamental for every person to discover the trust in him\herself, because only through this first step two things can be done: trusting the Other and trusting the world.

Conclusion

The phenomena of religious experience cannot be investigated by relying solely on empirical experiments and logic. However, the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricœur opens the way for interpretation of various

²⁶ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides Et Ratio* 33.

phenomena, which can be deduced from the formula “read-understand-interpret”. Multilevel elaboration of a text and its versatile interpretation make it possible to trace the psychological, cultural, social and other layers in the understanding of a phenomenon.

Hermeneutic phenomenology represents a way of combining objectivity and subjectivity. While the first is necessary for generalizing and drawing conclusions, the second is critical for laying epistemological foundations and gaining new experience. Although systematization of text with this method may lead us to its subjective interpretation, it also actualizes one or another phenomenon, thus making every human experience unique.

The special focus of our study pivots on the instrumentation of the phenomenon of trust. According to Paul Ricœur’s methodological foundation, one of the most important aspects of interpreting any phenomenon is trust. The researcher’s confidence in him\herself means that he is sufficiently objective: “It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5) and tries to share with the author his way. Trust also prevents the reader from attempts to impose the “correct” vision, to manipulate and to tell the story without the author.

The first step in trust is knowing yourself. We cannot start researching anyone until we carefully investigate ourselves. By knowing ourselves we come to know others. This is also one of the principles of empathy: to enter the experience of the Other, I must discover the same experiences as the Other, if it is a pain, then I must remember my pain; if it is joy, then I should remember my own joy. The way from yourself to the self of the Other - here is the future of any deep and profound research.

