

**Hermeneutics in Paul Ricoeur as a Way of Interpreting Cultural Symbolic  
Language and Human Interaction with the Environment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This present work intends to prospect the potential of hermeneutics in the point of view of Paul Ricoeur, as a viable proposal to understand culture, considered as a human formation filled with symbolic language. While formulating this method, Ricoeur uses concepts developed by psychoanalysis as foundation in order to study the human meaning it involves, so that the aim of the theory of interpretation includes the action of demonstrating that reality is symbolic and needs to be interpreted as such. We also worked to facilitate a dialogue regarding the environment, pursuing a concept that goes beyond the understanding of the physical environment, and encompasses the social and cultural dimensions of its constitution. We accomplished, therefore, an interdisciplinary bibliographical research where we demonstrate that human beings are by excellence promoters of culture, but also products of it. Culture supplies human beings with the resources that are indispensable for their interaction with nature, and therefore, disseminates the principles that establish behavioral patterns, which are mediated by symbols. Thus, we concluded that human beings are immersed in a cultural and environmental context governed by symbols, and that, from this presumption, the symbols construct meanings connected to existence.

**KEYWORDS:** Environmental Philosophy. Cultural Ecology. Cultural Environment.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this research is to demonstrate the connection between the philosophical presuppositions left by Paul Ricoeur regarding the hermeneutic perspective applied to the comprehension of language and symbols, which are elements of culture, which is intrinsically linked to the environmental dimension.

What is proposed and developed here is an approach to culture that supports a perspective of appreciation that has the other as the core of the philosophical approach. In this way, Ricoeur conceives language and symbol as a path that makes possible the access to the other. Given this, we recognize that Ricoeur's thought may present relevant contributions so that the meaning of human existence is better elucidated through comprehension.

Thus, we want to show that language manifests itself as the core of the work of Ricoeur, considering that hermeneutics is seen as the means through which the interpretation of meanings and significations translated into symbols in culture is processed.

## **2 MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A strictly bibliographic research was carried out, adopting primarily Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics as an appropriate resource to comprehend the social phenomena that integrate culture, considering that it encompasses a series of symbols, which include semantics that can be interpreted thought it.

We also used a philosophical and anthropological discussion in order to support the dialogue about the environment, with a focus on Cultural Ecology with its definitions, reflections, potentialities, and applicability.

## **3 RESULTS E DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Culture: An expression of Human Language**

When explaining the conceptualization of the term culture, Baruffa (2005) presents it as a *sui generis* form of the human being, while a social constituent, of systematizing his or her thinking and interactions with the universe that surrounds him or her. Therefore, the individual is dependent on culture to become human. Based on this, Ricoeur advocates the understanding that without the intervention of culture, the species *Sapiens Sapiens* is naturally incomplete, considering that such biological category establishes behavioral ways that are, variably, autonomous from instinctive reflexes, and are relatively pre-determined by the cultural influence it bears.

Baruffa (2005) also adds that the human being is both the promoting agent of culture and the product of it. Furthermore, one etymology of the word culture says it comes from the expression *colere*, which is translated into cultivation. In a line of thought, the human being has the need to be cultivated, and therefore needs to be inserted in the social realm to become human.

Cultural creation provides man with the physical means and instruments for his insertion in the environmental variability: technology. It conditions the modalities by which individuals interact with each other: social organization. It offers an explanation of the world and of his own existence, elaborating beliefs and values: religion and ethics. It favors the comprehension of the laws that govern physical and biological reality: science. (BARUFFA, 2005, p. 36).

Culture is a disseminator of values that establish behavioral references. In this view, the human being emerges as an element elaborated by and disseminator of culture. Geertz (2008), in turn, emphasizes the symbolic personality of culture, which reveals the relational reality of a social body.

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (GEERTZ, 2008, p.4).

Based on what was aforementioned, Ricoeur introduces an indispensable element in the dialogue concerning culture, as he argues that human behavior is an operation mediated by symbols, and, because of that, needs to be deciphered. For Geertz (2008), symbols are configured as vectors of culture. He argues that these elements are not restricted to the pictorial representations of something, but they also encompass the values determined by a sociocultural set. In addition, a symbol corresponds to the combination of various elements such as customs, social structures, and their protocols, as well as the impressions that one has about this world. All of those, associated, form multiple meanings. In this way, symbols manifest the cognitive systems of culture and interconnect human life.

It is evident that symbols are interventions that individuals make feasible in order to develop communication. Language, for example, can be one of the symbolic conformations employed in the interlocution between peoples and also in the socialization of the conventional precepts that guide certain groups.

In Ricoeur's conception, there is a correlation between myth and symbol. However, these two aspects present a conceptual distinction. Regarding the former, Ricoeur remarks that he understands by "symbol analogical meanings which are spontaneously formed and immediately significant" (RICOEUR, 1982, p. 181). As to the last, he says: "I shall regard myths as a species of symbols, as symbols developed in the form of narrations and articulated in a time and a space that cannot be co-ordinated with the time and space of history and geography" (RICOEUR: 1982, p.181).

When outlining in a theological conformation the distinction between these two forces, Ricoeur reports that symbols present a classification called first degree, from which flows the confidentiality of evil, which thus precedes the development of the mythical. In contrast, the myth is deemed by a type of secondary symbol that comes from the primary symbols. Ricoeur illustrates this context by communicating that:

I shall regard myths as a species of symbols, as symbols developed in the form of narrations and articulated in a time and a space that cannot be co-ordinated with the time and space of history and geography according to the critical method. For example, exile is a primary symbol of human alienation, but the history of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise is a mythical narration of the second degree, bringing into play fabulous personages, places, times, and episodes. (RICOEUR, 1982, p. 180-181).

In this regard, Wicks (2005) considers that Ricoeur, when looking at the theme of the symbol, faces three emerging zones:

First, it emerges in the myths and rites related to the manifestations of the sacred or cosmic hierophanies, which the phenomenology of religion deals with. Then, with the ghosts that populate our dreams, studied by psychoanalysis. Finally, in poetry, taking the term in its broadest sense, as *poiésis*, as artistic creation, which poetics deals with. (WICKS, 2005, p. 47).

Extending the statements about culture, Pesavento (2006) asserts that it is a representation of the world that comprises a range of semantics, given that it is configured as "a historical social production to be expressed, through time, in values, ways of being, objects, practices" (p. 46). Thence, it is believed that, like the evolutionary aspect of biological nature culminated in the process of hominization, culture took charge of developing a humanization (BARUFFA, 2005).

Culture not only engenders values, but also is in charge of spreading values to subsequent generations. The perception of the world, the ways of appreciating it, the ways of relating to the other, and of seeing itself while being immersed in the environment of social interactions are culturally formalized actions. However, it should be noted that the values are conditionally determined, since in a given context something can be considered relevant, while for other context it may not have any prestige. In view of the above, it is clear that culture does not accommodate a single perspective, but is composed of innumerable conceptions.

In this pluricultural composition it is impossible that there are no cultural antagonisms, once in the proportion in which there are multiple formations of social arrangements, illustrated by the different modalities of family organization, tribes, State, religious creeds, different dialects, different ways to generate the indispensable resources for the maintenance of subsistence, among the various manifestations that give meaning and portray the human endeavor for attributing meaning to their reality. In this way, when the human being enters the cultural dimension and the symbolic sphere, his or her reaction may be one of adequacy or incompatibility, and he or she may even behave in solidary correspondence, where alterity is legitimized when relating to others.

It should be noted that culture is not limited to a tight definition, as it refers to a landscape where transmutations are developed which are processed under the interference of a series of conditions, that include the social, financial, religious, and environmental spheres, according to the discussion developed in the following topic.

### **3.2 The articulation between Culture and the Environmental Dimension**

Some scholars on cultural themes, like Williams (1969), Thompson (1988), Hall (1997), and Canclini (1998), share in common the belief that culture is linked to lifestyle, customs, creeds, artistic expressions, among other things. It is possible to take advantage of this understanding to add to the conversation about the concept of environment, which is not limited to the idea of a physical and biological environment, but encompasses the social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

It is possible to observe that there is a more general and occasionally erroneous application of the noun “environment” and the adjective “environmental”. In this concern, Cristofolletti (1994) clarifies that that word can be placed in a geographical context, the extent of which corresponds to different levels, from the local to a worldwide perspective, and can be correlated with the social, family, cultural environment, for example.

On the other hand, the environmental problem demands the use of well-defined concepts and stated in a way that allows the instrumentalization of methodological mechanisms. Therefore, the most accurate comprehension of the environment is the one that takes into account both the physical and human components of the diverse landscapes that form geographic space.

From this point of view, the bond between culture and the environment must be analyzed in two different ways, from an anthropological perspective. The first derives from ethnographic works coming from a North American scientific tradition named Cultural Ecology. But also, the symbolic representations that are related to the factors time, space, and society.

Usually, these studies explored the complex link between the human, ecological, social, and cultural dimensions. In this universe, the human being is regarded as a social being, dependent on a lifestyle that is produced and reproduced by him or herself. Thus, the human being is understood in his or her unique and inseparable characteristics intrinsic to his or her social interactions. Therefore, it can be said that the individual’s way of life is not likely to exist without the occurrence of social actions, as these give meaning to his integration with other individuals and with the other elements that compose the space.

### **3.3 Hermeneutics is a Path to Comprehend the Symbolic Behavior of the Human Being**

Ricoeurian philosophy works with both the phenomenological category and the hermeneutical interpretation, and is recognized, by excellence, as a theory committed to the reflection of human actions. In order to weave considerations that make it possible to understand human existence, Ricoeur's reasoning orbits around the theme of the other and the symbolic language that emanates from it.

In the thesis *Hermenêutica e Psicanálise na Obra de Paul Ricoeur*, Franco (1995) corroborates the thought that the aim of Ricoeur's work resides upon questioning who the contemporary human being will become and how to interpreting him or her. To do so, he searches in the symbols, in poetic language, and in myth for the composing traits of this human being.

There is more in the metaphor than in the symbol in the sense that it brings to language the implicit semantics of the symbol. What remains confused in the symbol – the assimilation of one thing to another, and of us to things; the endless correspondence between the elements – is clarified in the tension of the metaphorical utterance. ... But there is more in the symbol than in the metaphor. Metaphor is just the linguistic procedure – that bizarre form of predication – within which the symbolic power is deposited. (Ricoeur, 1976, p 81).

D'AGOSTINI (2003) witness that human beings are intimately integrated with the dimension of language, that is, with “a linguistic-temporal set, and adds that we never find things immediately, but we always have a certain number of preliminary information, prejudices, expectations about themselves, and language determines, pre-guides our judgment about reality” (p. 399).

Given that the human being is the one who originates culture, and that his or her behavior in the social field is historically determined, it is necessary to intervene in an interpretative action with the potential to allow the apprehension of the semantics that such manifestations transmit. It is noteworthy that culture is qualified as a manifestation gifted with symbols that are not necessarily a direct form of language, because, then, such elements do not previously express a meaning, thus demanding to be known in order to be understood. Examining the content regarding symbols, Wicks (2005) concludes that:

The symbol always appears at the intersection of language with something that transcends it, which is not entirely *logos* and which, consequently, can never be entirely translated by the word. But precisely because of this characteristic, the symbol becomes something “that makes us think”, that is to say, it requires an interpretation that – necessarily, since the symbol includes an unspeakable core – continues indefinitely without ever ending. (WICKS, 2005, p. 47).

Hermeneutics is consubstantiated as the theory through which the interpretation of a text is enabled. “Originally, the concept of text was attached to the notion of sacred writing.

Nowadays, there is an expanded concept of text. The text becomes any coherent set of signs that can be read and interpreted” (FRANCO, 1995, p.71).

The notion of the text does not refer only to the text in a written form, but equally to the human language that encompasses multiple meanings. In book *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Ricoeur aligns his scientific interests about interpretation to the presuppositions of Psychoanalysis, because, in his perception, the field of action of this science is not simply restricted to affective expressions and human desires, being, therefore, judged as a hermeneutics, as observed in the following statement: “other hermeneutic methods force us to perform as well, although in different ways” (Ricoeur, 1969, p. 23).

Psychoanalysis can find only what it seeks; what it seeks is the “economic” meaning of representations and affects operating in dreams, neuroses, art, morality, and religion. Psychoanalysis will thus be unable to find anything other than the disguised expressions of representations and affects belonging to the most archaic of man’s desires. This example well shows, on the single level of semantics, the fullness of a philosophical hermeneutics. (Ricoeur, 1969, p.16).

Upon appropriating the concepts developed by the field of psychoanalysis, Ricoeur enters this context to “bring out the human meaning implied there” (SCHAEFER, 2008, p. 59), so that the primary purpose of Ricoeur’s efforts regarding the theory of interpretation comprehended the action of demonstrating that “reality is symbolic and the symbol needs to be interpreted” (SCHAEFER, 2008, p. 59).

It is the symbol that expresses our fundamental experience and our situation in the being. It is it what reintroduces us to the nascent state of language. Being is given to man through symbolic sequences, in such a way that every view of the being, every existence as a relation to the being, is already a hermeneutic (RICOEUR, 1990, p. 3).

Such an approach centered on the symbol allows us to affirm that, for the human being, the primary language is insufficient to express his or her experience in the world.

Beyond the experience of things and events, there is the level of philosophical language, an interpretive language capable of revealing an ontological experience that is the relationship of man with what constitutes him as man, that is, the focus of meaning. (RICOEUR, 1990, p. 4).

The interpretation intends to find a meaning that comes from the object. Thus, the individual believes “that something is addressed to him through language” (FRANCO, 1995, p. 74). It is frequently pointed out that symbols contain meanings, and symbolic language has a history that requires interpretation, which is understood by Ricoeur as being “the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” (RICOEUR, 1978, p.14).

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The individuals are inserted in the symbolic realm of culture, and from it they generate the meanings associated with their existence. Hereupon, culture needs to be interpreted due to the range of semantics it accommodates around itself. Culture provides this interaction with the other, through the mediation of language. From what was presented here, we can note the capacity that the hermeneutics supported by Ricoeur possesses as a way of assimilating the significations and translating the meanings of the symbolic interlocution.

The conversation we proposed here comprised an interdisciplinary approach, in which Ricoeur's theoretical assumptions made it possible to intertwine the philosophical dimension of culture and the environment, with the perspective of human language as an object of appreciation. From the relationship of affinity between culture and the environment, the theme of environmental preservation emerges, because we understand that culture promotes the protection of values essential to the human being – including the environment that surrounds him or her.

Differently from other beings in the animal kingdom, the human being developed a symbolic behavior, an abstract language composed of signs and symbols. Faced with this reality, there is the formation of mental systems that enable the relation between the individuals and their intervention in the dimension external to themselves – the environment. Thus, through language, the world is structured based on numerous symbolic categories, such as, for example, cultural categories, which are endowed with complex phenomena that contain meanings that need to be interpreted so that human actions are fully understood.

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