What is critical hermeneutics?

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Abstract
This article explores the promises of critical hermeneutics as an innovative method and philosophy within the human sciences. It is argued that its success depends on its ability to articulate a theory of meaning with one of action and experience as well as its capacity to renew our understanding of the problem of ideology. First, critical hermeneutics must explain how cultural messages ‘show and hide’; that is, how the ambiguity of meaning always allows for a group to represent itself while opening the door for distortion and domination. Second, critical hermeneutics ought to show how action can be best understood as opposing performances driven by ideological-moral views. Through an analysis of social movements, for instance, it is shown that any attempt to do justice could also and easily create exclusion. Third, critical hermeneutics has to clarify how tension and dualism within meaning and action are not to be dissociated from the self-interpretation of concrete individuals. A theory of experience is thus required in order to explain why the autonomy of the subject is finally at stake with regard to the problem of ideology.

Keywords
action, critical theory, experience, hermeneutics, ideology, meaning, Paul Ricœur

Introduction

There are no other paths, in effect, for carrying out our interest in emancipation than by incarnating it within cultural acquisitions. (Paul Ricœur)

Some ideas and theories become so popular that nobody knows exactly what they mean anymore. Critical hermeneutics is on the verge of becoming one of these.
Although many use it in art history, pedagogy, literary studies, methodology, etc. (see, e.g., Zuidervaart 2003; Thouard 2002; Palermo 1975; Kinsella 2006), it remains difficult to find analytical or even somewhat systematic definitions of the concept itself. In other words, few have explored the question of what critical hermeneutics fundamentally is.¹ With more specific regards to the human sciences, I suggest here that such a definition is intrinsically linked, and always refers to the simultaneously old and new question of ideology. This question lies at the source of the sociological discipline, its history inseparable from the emergence of modernity, while simultaneously revealing a malaise that is present, current, and profound. Ideology continues to be a problematic concept, mostly due to its semantic complexity and polemic nature.² Nevertheless, there is no denying the continued usefulness of this concept, the fact that it remains among the most fundamental terms in social theory. Wanting to understand ideology is thus having the intuition that it condenses within itself all the great paradoxes of culture, its diverse tensions, and the very possibility of critical hermeneutics on a dual epistemological and ontological front.

Drawing inspiration from the work of Paul Ricœur yet also looking beyond it – a ‘non-dogmatic’ posture that should encourage a dialogue with works as diverse as those of Jeffrey C. Alexander, Clifford Geertz, Axel Honneth or Michael Walzer, for example – the present article wants to demonstrate that critical hermeneutics is in fact the conjunction and the articulation of three theories: a theory of meaning, a theory of action, and a theory of experience. These three theories are deeply interrelated, and critical hermeneutics is understandable only insofar as this fine dialectic of meaning, action, and experience is considered. In Section I, I shall analyze what is critical hermeneutics’ theory of meaning from its principal source, namely the Habermas-Gadamer debate. Surprisingly, this debate does not even come close to showing the complementary character of critical theory and hermeneutics, a complementary pair that is particularly necessary when applied to the specific problem of ideology. A position of this kind can be found in Ricœur, among others, for whom ideology is characterized by the triple process of interpretation, legitimization, and dissimulation.

In Section II, I shall explain why such theory of meaning leads to a practical philosophy and a theory of action by largely recalling the renewed concept of performance. The interest of this shift lies in the fact that it brings down the center of gravity, the locus of ideology towards social movements and counter-movements, their symbolic struggles, and conflicts of interpretations. The challenge of all this also changes since it refers to the perpetual reorganization of the moral boundaries of good and evil, which are inseparable from diverse struggles for recognition.

In Section III, I shall argue that action cannot be dissociated from its effects on the concerned audiences, from its reception by individuals, thereby leading to critical hermeneutics as a theory of experience focused on the self-understanding and the autonomy of the subject, with all the possibilities and the difficulties these notions entail. Thus, knowing the leeway of intellectuals in what can be called the ‘Mannheim paradox’ will become a final question rather than a primary one. In the end, the solution proposed by critical hermeneutics will show its still ambiguous character.
I. Critical hermeneutics as a theory of meaning

The polemics between the universal hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas during the 1960s and 1970s is known well enough to be considered a landmark in contemporary philosophy of human sciences (see Habermas 1988 [1970]; Apel 1971). Space constraints oblige us here to proceed directly to the heart of the controversy. Building on Heideggerian thought, Gadamer developed an ontology of understanding by insisting on human finiteness and the immersion of human beings in the historic-cultural world. All understanding proceeds from what precedes it – this is the Vorstruktur des Verstehens, its prestructure – thereby rehabilitating three contested concepts, namely tradition, authority, and prejudice (see Gadamer 1975 [1960]: 151–341). These are positive in that they enable understanding, which is also true about a historical science that cannot free itself totally from its historical condition. Gadamerian hermeneutics is thus a ‘meta-critique’, that is to say a critique of critique itself, of the Enlightenment, of positivism, etc.

Yet this is precisely the reason for Habermas’ criticism. For him, Gadamer had absolutized hermeneutical understanding so that his faith in tradition, for example, became mostly a form of blindness. How could such a tradition see itself from the interior, or see what is defective within itself? What is missing is the very possibility of coercion, of systematically contorted communication, and of ideology. Universal hermeneutics misses all this in refusing, on the one hand, to concede whatsoever to explanatory methods – namely, disciplines like the critical social sciences and psychoanalysis for Habermas – and, on the other hand, by not having any emancipative project (see mostly Habermas 1972 [1968]). Gadamer nevertheless defends his position. He attacks Habermas by claiming that his ideas lead to imagining an Archimedean point for both knowledge and critique that cannot rightfully exist. Once more, nothing lies outside one’s own historical position within a long tradition, neither the method nor the interest for emancipation, not even reflection itself, except, of course, to move within a rationalist and idealist illusion that overestimated its own power.

The consequences that can be drawn from this debate are certainly more important than its multiple details. First of all, one must admit that, on many occasions, it is a poorly framed debate. Gadamer, for example, never states that the relationship to authority is based on submission, stating rather that it is built on recognition. In Habermas’ case, it is also false to say that he demands full transparency regarding the diverse conditionings affecting people in society. This misunderstanding is thus strongly linked to the offensive strategy of each protagonist (see Nuyen 1995: 423ff.). Furthermore, it is useful to note that the debate does not help to clarify the complementarities of both perspectives. Hermeneutics and critical theory observe the world from two different points of view, but these can nevertheless ‘interpenetrate’ each other to form multiple points of convergence (see Bubner 1975: 338ff.; Hekman 1986: 138ff.; Mendelson 1979; Nuyen 1995; Ricœur 1973a, 1981). A first relevant point is that all comprehension of the tradition introduces a critical distance at the same moment that all critique is made about and is supported by a reinterpretation of cultural history. But there is more. I want to argue that this convergence must not be found in something exterior to the two approaches – such as their common attack on positivism, among other
examples – but in a problem that is intrinsic to both. It is from the interior, that is to say the way in which they continually come up against the same problem, that hermeneutics and critical theory intersect. And this problem is again and always that of the ideological constitution of reality.

Ricœur could serve as a guide in the exploration of this problem, as he formulates interesting propositions in order to overcome some of the difficulties inherent to the Habermas-Gadamer debate. In his many essays and lectures on ideology, he never fails to discern the cultural and hermeneutical impact of the phenomenon – which could be interpreted as situating him within a Geertzian paradigm or, at least, in dialogue with Geertz’s renowned article on ‘Ideology as a Cultural System’ (1973; see also Ricœur 1977: 31–37; 1986: 10, 254ff.; 1991 [1986]: 20). This first level involves arriving at ‘the necessity for a social group to give itself an image of itself, to represent and to realize itself, in the theatrical sense of the word’ (Ricœur 1981: 225). In other words, this implies a ‘function of integration’ inherent to ideology which is at once impassable and positive, and which must allow the group to discover itself through the mediation of a ‘social imaginary’.4

Why must this function be impassable and positive? Three characteristics can serve to clarify this. First, ideology does not have a meaning that could be partial or secondary, but it is a meaning, it is meaning-full or, as Ricœur says, it provides a ‘surplus of meaning’. Secondly, ideology has always been in the realm of interpretation. What is interpreted is mainly the correlation between the group and its own foundation, as well as the boundaries of said group, be they temporal or spatial. Finally, the third characteristic is that ideology can be understood as a text (see Ricœur 1971, 1981: 145–64; for commentaries see Thompson 1984a; Roberge 2008: 163–80). This latter characteristic is the most important and the most complex one since it introduces a considerable dose of cultural autonomy. On the one hand, it means that ideology functions, to speak in the manner of de Saussure, as a ‘system of signs’ (see de Saussure 1986 [1922]), a semiotic network in which elements position themselves in opposition to others. On the other hand, it must be understood that ideology as a text has a reference; that is to say it speaks of something other than itself and at a distance from itself. This is not, prime facie, obvious: ‘The “thing of the text” – this is the object of hermeneutics. Now the thing of the text is the world it unfolds before itself’ (Ricœur 1991: 95, my translation). For Ricœur, this world is not the real world, but one that recreates it a second time, a third time, a fourth time, etc.

The implications of this meaning-interpretation-text triptych are certainly numerous. Among other things, one would need to show that it encourages the thought of a delay, or a displacement at the very heart of the history and culture of a group. Ideology, for this group, signs ‘an indirect relationship to its own being’ (Ricœur 1991 [1986]: 182, emphasis added) in order for these delays and displacements to, at least, always remain possible. Already at this level of a cultural reading of ideology, ambiguity is thus both constitutive and fundamental. It touches what Ricœur calls the ‘semantic knot of all hermeneutics’, the constant reference to an ‘architecture of meaning ... whose role in every instance, although in a different manner, is to show while concealing’ (1974 [1969]: 12, emphasis added).5 Moreover, this impassable relationship between clarity and obscurity, between unveiling and disguise, is no stranger to the fact that ideology
refers to a perpetual conflict of interpretations. There is not one but many ideologies in competition – Ricœur even talks about a ‘battlefield of ideologies’. Fundamentally, ‘the plurality of interpretations, or even their conflict, does not constitute a flaw, a vice, but a privilege of comprehension as such at the heart of interpretation’ (Ricœur 1991: 19, my translation). What is more problematic, however, is that these diverse interpretations, these various points of view on morality, etc., will soon evict all traces of neutrality. This discussion on ideology thus finds itself on the threshold of a critical reading or rereading.

It is mainly through the functions of legitimization of authority and of pathological dissimulation-distortion that the critical theory of ideology provided by Ricœur is uncovered. No matter what, ideology always revolves around force and constraint. ‘What ideology interprets and justifies is, above all, the relation to the system of authority’ (Ricœur 1981: 228). Rulers are always invested in the defense of their right to rule, in the promotion of their power, in their own magnificence, and therefore also in their pretenses and claims of legitimacy. Certainly, all these things never fail to be problematic:

Everything then turns on the nature of the knot – the nexus – that binds the legitimacy claims raised by the governors to the belief in that authority on the part of the governed. The paradox of authority resides in this knot. Ideology, we may presume, arises precisely in the breach between the request of legitimacy emanating from a system of authority and our response in terms of belief. (Ricœur 2004 [2000]: 83)

One would note the Weberian and Marxian dual nature of this position. It is Weberian through the idea, for example, of a ‘supplement’ (see mostly Ricœur 1995: 164ff.) by which belief is always positive for power, thus facilitating its action by being less costly than violence. And yet it is also Marxian, namely through the idea of ‘surplus value’ (see, e.g., Ricœur 1981: 228ff.; 1986: 14). However, since it is impossible to talk about ideology without talking about Marx, this somehow forces the negotiation of aporias that his thoughts did not fail to instigate and, even beforehand, links to the symbolism of the camera obscura, or the inverted image of reality. On the one hand, it must be false to say that in reversing the reverse one can find an unaltered virgin reality. This would mean forgetting the primary function of the ideological phenomenon which asserts that ‘the imaginary [is] coextensive to the very process of praxis’ (Ricœur 1991 [1986]: 317), and this Ricœur cannot resolve to do. On the other hand, it is necessary to note that ideological dissimulation-distortion is an undeniable reality. Propaganda and trickery are effective tools for domination and there are too many potent historical examples to state the contrary: Nazism, Stalinism, etc. Distortion presents itself as the always possible and thus constitutive degeneration of ideology, that is to say the area where it can begin to manifest worrying signs of inhumanity.

To summarize, then, it is important to acknowledge the subtlety of Ricœur’s solution to the problem of ideology; how, in other words, this solution shows a tension that can travel in two directions. If, in fact, ‘the illusion is not the most fundamental phenomenon, but a corruption of the legitimating process [and the] integrative function of ideology’, it is also important to state, at the same time, ‘the opposite thesis according to which every idealization necessarily transforms itself into distortion, dissimulation, and lies’ (Ricœur
The diverse functions and parts of the problem signify each other, interpenetrate each other here, much like the complex rapports between hermeneutics and critical theory. It is all of this that must work together in a fine dialectic that repeatedly puts its fragile balance to the test. The example of RICOEUR’s dialectic does not provide a synthesis, nor a ‘super system’, for all the reasons mentioned above, but it certainly allows us to move beyond the Habermas-GADAMER debate or, for that matter, beyond some solely culturalist perspectives such as GEERTZ’s. It is this dialectic, and what it means for the development of critical hermeneutics, that should therefore begin to be clearer. What is certainly less clear, however, is how such a theoretical architecture – which insists on the primacy of meaning – could also reveal its practical or sociological relevance. This will be shown as the discussion moves from a theory of meaning to a theory of action.

II. Critical hermeneutics as a theory of action

From a sociological point of view, the study of ideology would be of little interest without the possibility of seeing the numerous ways by which its meaning is carried out concretely. Admittedly, meaning envelops and goes beyond action, but action develops and fulfills signification. Therein lies a dual movement that can be easily associated with something like a healthy circle or, once more, with a fine dialectic. RICOEUR calls this action ‘symbolically mediated’ (see, e.g., 1973b: 6; 1977: 31; 1991: 20) whereas others, namely BURKE (1957 [1941]), refer to it as ‘symbolic action’. Basically, these two concepts can be found within the same theoretical cluster, a single larger network that also includes GEERTZ and ends with the latest work of ALEXANDER around the concept of performance (see ALEXANDER 2003, 2004, 2005; ALEXANDER et al. 2006). It is this concept, and what it shows with regard to theoretical innovation in recent years, that constitutes, in this case, the major contribution that has to be borrowed and developed by a critical hermeneutics centered on social action.

The idea of text is not totally eliminated – ALEXANDER still talks about ‘social-symbolic texts’ or ‘text-based societies’ (ALEXANDER 2004: 538; ALEXANDER et al. 2006: 1) – but it leaves more space for a textuality ‘that walks and talks before our eyes’. Fundamentally, a performance does not merely consist of words or discourses but is a gesture and a staging through which flesh-and-blood peoples play the roles they need to play: ‘Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation’ (ALEXANDER 2004: 529). Be it in politics, in the arts, or in any other civic activities, what is aimed at is a fusion of the elements at play – background symbols, means of symbolic production, mise-en-scène, audience, etc. – as if the success and efficiency of this or that performance depended on this fusion. In other words, the goal is to arrive at a certain ‘verisimilitude’, which is the capacity to make others believe, to give the appearance of reality, of control, and of authenticity. Needless to say, especially in the current state of social disarticulation, this is quite a sizeable challenge.

At first glance, it appears to be power and its apologetic virtue that take delight in theatricality and staging. A large body of scientific literature exists that deals with this topic – ranging, for instance, from KANTOROWICZ (1957), EDELMAN (1985 [1964]) and
Marin (1981, 1993) to Kertzer (1988) or Alexander (2005). By studying this material, it would even be possible to level with what Ricœur has already said about the relation between the legitimization of authority and ideology. Nowadays, however, talking about social action makes it necessary to displace or bring down the center of gravity of this ‘performativity’ towards civil society. There is no longer any question of a state monopoly, but of a growing fragmentation of symbolic actions and of ideologies combined with the extension of the democratic paradigm and the rise of post-industrial societies. ‘In more loosely knit forms of complex social organization’, Alexander notes, ‘authority becomes more open to challenge, the distribution of ideal and material resources more subject to contention, and contests for social power more open ended and contingent’ (2004: 545). And this necessarily goes in conjunction with another phenomenon, namely the booming growth of what Alexander calls ‘hermeneutical powers’ (2004: 531; see also the latest work of Boltanski 2009), groups whose role is to constantly interpret and criticize authority. There are always reasons to raise doubts about power, be it because one questions the efficiency of its performance, its sincerity, or both. There is thus a primary vertical relation that must be crossed *eo ipso* with the more horizontal relation of civil society’s grasp on itself. This latter axis is certainly the most important one, and the most urgent, if one needs to think – like Walzer, to use a fundamental example – of ‘social criticism as social practice’ (1987: 3).

Bringing down the center of gravity of ideological performances or putting these on a horizontal axis of practice shifts the focus on the dynamics of social movements and counter-movements (see, e.g., Macé 2005; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Mottl 1980). These are cultural phenomena in the fullest and most complete sense; they were recognized as such by the theory of new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, and this is something that is more and more internationally recognized today (see, e.g., Earl 2004; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Melucci 1985; Sasson 1984). In the United States, for instance, one finds discussions on the notion of ‘frame’ (see, e.g., Benford 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992; Goffman 1974) that are deeply compatible with critical hermeneutics. A frame is what delineates a parcel of reality by distinguishing an interior from an exterior, and by insisting on the relevance of this ‘inside’. Moreover, this internal relevance is enhanced by the frame’s capacity to link and provide coherence to the diverse parts it contains. In other words, what this refers to is the production of an interpretation that builds its own world by reinterpreting the world – exactly like a text, as a matter of fact.

This is what, in any case, social movements and counter-movements *do*: they ‘display ... the meaning of their social situation’, i.e. they endlessly try to frame and define social reality. How? By struggling against each other, by criticizing each other, and by mobilizing themselves for these struggles and critiques. As Eyerman states, ‘if social movements articulate frames of understanding, the performance of protest actualizes them’ (2006: 198). The conflict of interpretations is thus a true and real conflict that takes shape and crystallizes itself through concrete issues, like abortion or gay marriage, for instance. These issues, in turn, bring into play frames that are always partial and ideological, even though they do not recognize themselves as such, the reason being that the ideological stance is always ascribed to others as their mistake and their misunderstanding.10
Social movements and counter-movements, their frames, and their interpretations, are fundamentally ideological for another reason, namely this ‘trait inherent to action: knowing precisely that one can never be ethically neutral’ (Ricœur 1984 [1983]: 94; see also Alexander and Jacobs 1998; White 1987). It is the same problem that appeared with regard to the aforementioned theory of meaning that resurfaces here: axiology and relationships to values remain impassable. Every social performance is a moral performance to the extent that it brings into play, at least as a background, the categories of good and evil. Of course, the diverse contents of these categories can change, as what was considered evil one day may no longer be so later, but the reference to a foundation of sacred versus profane, of purity versus impurity, changes little. It is thus possible to talk about a binary system – Alexander, to continue with this example, speaks of a binary system of civil society (see, e.g., 1993, 1994, 1997; Alexander and Smith 2003). This system classifies and orders reality and will even find itself reinforced by the seeming disorganization and uncertainty of the present-day moral world. The more confusion, the clearer and more efficient performances from social movements and counter-movements must be or become; thus explaining in large part their propensity to become ideological. As Geertz rightly observes, ‘ideology tends to be simple and clear-cut, even where its simplicity and clarity do less than justice to the subject under discussion’ (1973: 209).

Once again, the goal is to convince, that is to say to arrive at a certain ‘verisimilitude’ through which the meaning proposed by a given movement must become a meaning that is both acquired and relatively unquestionable. And that is where, in this very interstice, all kinds of effects of violence and domination could always come together. While moving, the limits of good and evil also provoke the movement of the symbolic boundaries of society and, by way of consequences, those of exclusion and injustice. ‘In fact’, notes Alexander, ‘just as there is no developed religion that does not divide the world into the saved and the damned, there is no civil discourse that does not conceptualize the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not’ (2000: 298). As a result, it is really to understand this incessant production of exclusion that constitutes the greatest challenge of a theory of action that is fundamentally concrete, but nevertheless capable of integrating the truly symbolic dimension of society.

It is through this question of the dissymmetry of action and its penchant for inequality that the dialogue with critical theory can and must continue. More specifically, I would argue that this is a ripe breeding ground for the emergence of what can mostly be found in the later work of Honneth representing the third generation of the Frankfurt School. Honneth’s starting point is relatively simple: what comes first is the lack of justice, what is absent or deficient within justice itself. In other words, what comes first is the contempt and the denial that make it necessary to begin the study of society by its negative character or its ‘pathologies’ (see mostly Honneth 1994; 2004a), in addition to seeing that it is this very negativity that gives its impulsion to action. Society is therefore fundamentally stirred by incessant struggles for recognition that share a desire to mark the passage from invisibility to visibility, from exclusion to inclusion, and from humiliation to respect and social esteem.

What is perpetually at stake is the acceptance by others and by society, namely that a common space for participation, solidarity and difference can exist. Needless to say, achieving all of this is highly complicated – as complicated as the achievement of fusion.
for any given performance, one might add. In fact, it is no longer only an issue of going from action to symbolism, but to return to a pattern that goes from the later to the former. The recognition at stake cannot simply be abstract, but must be concrete and practical. For Honneth, it is important to see it as an action, as a ‘daily event’ echoed in the subjectivity of real people: ‘... an act of recognition’, he writes, ‘is never exhausted by mere words or symbolic expression since it is only the corresponding behaviour that establishes the credibility that matters normatively to the recognized subject’ (2002: 505–06; see also Ricœur 2005). Another way of showing this highly important point would be to ask oneself – a contrario – what would happen if this recognition was neither concrete nor close to individuals. The answer consists of saying that it would have many chances of falling back into ideology, that is to say in the mistakes of a false recognition consisting largely of confining people to fixed categories or ensuring that they accept their own ‘reification’ (see Honneth 2007, 2008).

In more general terms, it is undeniable that by considering both the normativity and the negativity inherent to action, these Honnethian ideas become a normative theory in themselves. But it is necessary to see that this is not a problem, a kind of flaw or counterfeit that should be fought. On the contrary, this axiology is the condition of possibility for this practice and this theory. It is what allows the intertwining of the theory of recognition with that of symbolic boundaries, moral performances, social movements and, moreover, of all that constitutes a theory of symbolic action centered on the very possibility of exclusion, injustice and inequality. All these questions and sub-questions are linked by their normativity – their will, in short, to decipher each parcel of ideology, domination and violence from their concrete sources – and it is together that they must show how critical hermeneutics has no other choice but to develop a theory of action. The problem is therefore elsewhere. It mostly holds in the sociological sub-thematization of the effects of this normativity. Quite often, or perhaps too often, the action becomes associated to a production without wholly considering that it is also a reception, something perceived and received by flesh-and-blood people. Alexander, for example, states that the concept of performance takes into consideration its effects on the audience, and this, despite the fact that it is possible to ask oneself whether this part of his theoretical enterprise is as radical as it seems. Who does this audience fundamentally consist of? How does it interpret and understand the roles played by social actors? How much of this is, or is not, shaped by ideology? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to examine how critical hermeneutics has yet to develop a theory of experience.

III. Critical hermeneutics as a theory of experience

For the human sciences, there is perhaps no question as complex as that of understanding experience. However, there is no question of greater importance – how else would it be possible to understand the influence of meaning, the weight of ideology, the negative character of society as well as their profound and interrelated impacts? Here, one must go back to the hermeneutics of textuality in order to understand its complete inseparability from a theory of reading. A text only renews and fulfills itself in a specific act of reading. As Ricœur says, it is the receiver-reader as a flesh and blood person that ‘answers to
meaning’, that ‘answers to the thing of the text’, in this unique experience called ‘appropriation’ (see, e.g., 1981: 182–93),\footnote{15} namely that of taking something distant and estranged and making it one’s own. This, of course, leads to a peculiar back-and-forth movement. A reading is the meeting of two worlds that confront and build upon each other, the world of the text and the world experienced by the reader. This is not a question of any immediate psychological connection – a connection of empathy or identification with the author as in the romantic theory of Dilthey (1976 [1910]), for example. Appropriation is more a case of mediation, and more specifically of mediation made possible through interpretation. In fact, this is at the core of the analysis, namely that interpretation is a fundamental feature of both a theory of culture and a theory of action, but also, and more radically, of a philosophical anthropology.\footnote{16} At this fundamental level, experience refers to human finiteness, whose meaning needs to be claimed as one’s own to understand oneself.

These distinctions are important to the extent that they all point towards a unique destination: the self-understanding of a subject, of a specific individual. This interpreting subjectivity of the self is absolutely primary and positive, though it had been impossible to access it before going through all that precedes, i.e. the problems of meaning, ideology, action, performance, etc. This leads, among other things, to yet another of the fine dialectics found throughout the work of Ricœur:

On the one hand, self-understanding passes through the detour of understanding the cultural signs in which the self documents and forms itself. On the other hand, understanding the text is not an end in itself; it mediates the relation to himself of a subject who, in the short circuit of immediate reflection, does not find the meaning of his own life. (1981: 158)

Where does ideology then fit in this work on oneself? The answer to this difficult question goes through the idea of a dual experience, or of a single experience, but with a dual existential possibility. On the one hand, it remains true that ideology as text and interpretation of the world bends and unbends, rolls up and unravels the world of self-comprehension-interpretation. In other words, the latter remains within ideology. On the other hand, however, this work on oneself is certainly capable of presenting itself as a critique and, first and foremost, as a critique of the subject’s illusions (see, e.g., Ricœur 1974 [1969]: 3–24; 1981: 222–46). For authors such as Ricœur, it is as much a question of mediation through interpretation, of distanciation within appropriation itself, as it is a question of reflexivity of the self in relation to the self. Of course, all this critical and multiform comprehension is always partial and fragmentary, but this has the advantage of avoiding alternatives that are too fixed, such as false conscience versus heroic detachment or daring resistance, for example – one needs only to recall that it was this type of poorly mastered dilemma that was among the main problems in the Gadamer-Habermas debate. It is thus that the existential possibilities of being within ideology, and of being able to deplore its effects on oneself, appear as completely inseparable possibilities, namely that they always interpenetrate each other in what is, as a result, more a question of degree and nuance.

If experience as lifeworld, appropriation, and comprehension is critical in its ‘loving struggle’ with ideology, it is also moral and ethical in that it perpetually brings into play
the problem of the subject’s autonomy. What is fascinating about the latter is to see how it does not arise from an autonomous concept, or a disembodied philosophical anthropology, but from real, concrete interactions and forms of inter-subjective recognition, which again give rise to systems and conflicts of ideologies. Autonomy is thus always relative to the fragility of concrete actors, and in part linked to their vulnerability – cultural and social, among others, through poverty, racism, etc. (see, e.g., Ricœur 2001, 2005; Honneth 1995). This is why all forms of self-esteem and self-realization must still go through the detour of social esteem and, gradually, through diverse struggles for recognition. The aim of all this is the emergence of a subject that is both capable and responsible. On the one hand, a subject must gain the ability to give meaning to his own life – something that Ricœur deals with, for example, through the concepts of narrative coherence and ipseity. On the other hand, the autonomy in question constantly refers to the aptitude of thinking by oneself and interpreting the world for oneself. In other words, it is by daring to construct one’s own reflections that the subject can develop his singularity and his integrity, namely that he can become, as Honneth states, ‘a subject capable of reaching moral judgment’. This is, of course, more of a task and horizon than a reality. Autonomy is a project, a telos. But it is also, paradoxically, the most certain and constant criterion to resolve the problem of ideology: anything within meaning, action, or experience that prevents the subject’s autonomy from understanding and expressing itself could be argued as fundamentally ideological. The critical, hermeneutical, and moral dimensions of experience hence overlap fully.

The different parts of the puzzle assemble themselves slowly. If all ideology is lived as an experience, not all experiences are necessarily ideological – something that recalls the dual structure, positive and negative, of meaning and action. It is therefore necessary to have a criterion, and this criterion is linked to the autonomy of the subject within the perspective of critical hermeneutics. However, it is necessary to be careful that this criterion does not raise itself into a tribunal of reason or, for that matter, unreason; nothing here would be more harmful than to have the pretense of saying that certain people are ignorant and ideological, whereas others are capable of truthfulness. The criterion in question must thus be internal and not external, in relation to people’s life and interactions, and not only in relation to an abstract or disembodied theory. This is what Honneth emphasizes, for instance, when he states that ‘the standards for critical judgment are to be derived from the normative convictions that are already shared by the addressees’ (2002: 514). And this has very important ethical consequences. When applied to individuals, in fact, the analysis of ideology does not have any other choice than to impose upon itself a certain duty of reserve, that is to say to move itself into an ethics that is both concrete and in situ. Judgment is deferred, or suspended, as long as the individual or individuals have not expressed themselves on their own conception and interpretation of the good life. Honneth, to continue with the example above, speaks of it as a ‘moderate moral realism’ (2007: 332) whereas for others, and for Ricœur in particular, this will take on the form of what he calls a ‘small ethics’ (see, e.g., 1992 [1990], 2002).

What remains to be discussed is the role and capacity of the intellectual in all this. I would argue here that these capacities are not very different from those of any other subjects of experience. Examined from this angle, one only needs to state that the
famous ‘Mannheim paradox’ (see Mannheim 1936 [1929]) – if ideology is in fact inescapable, how does one account for such a non-ideological truth about ideology’s inescapability? – is not so much a primary question than a final interrogation and, from this position, that the complication is not as insurmountable as it seems. Once more, the error would consist in wanting to create a firm opposition: either the intellectual gets stuck in ideology, or floats above it like Mannheim’s ‘free-floating intellectual’. In other words, the error would consist in not seeing that everything is a matter of practical mediation, and that intellectuals are also simultaneously ‘in’ and ‘out’ of ideologies at all times. For intellectuals as well, these two existential possibilities interpenetrate themselves, even if the question of knowing how critique can better enter into experience is always a question of greater poignancy and urgency. The intellectual seeks to carve out a certain distance within the core of the self, of his comprehension, and of his interpretation of the world. In fine, it is this very distance and the effort involved in constructing it that comes closest to an ethics applied to the human sciences, namely that it is always necessary, among other things, to begin the critique of ideologies without ever knowing whether this critique can be completed.

Conclusion

The development of critical hermeneutics certainly remains a work in progress; a collective enterprise for which what comes before is but a minute part. In this article, it would have thus been necessary to show that the main challenge of critical hermeneutics resides in the fine dialectic, or the articulation of three analytical levels: a theory of meaning, a theory of action, and a theory of experience. First, ideology as a meaning-interpretation-text triptych is what reveals and hides reality – through the permanence of symbolism, but also through the constant possibility of manipulation and distortion. As stated above, this analysis produces in turn a remnant in the form of its somewhat sizeable difficulty of giving off a concrete appearance, i.e. of being relevant in terms of action. In other words, if it is important to decode and decrypt the very ambiguity of signification, it is no less important to see how, and through what, it actualizes itself in everyday social life. Secondly, it is the task of a theory of action – centered on, among other things, the concept of performance – to examine the diverse ways by which the mechanisms of social inclusion-exclusion construct themselves. From a critical hermeneutics’ point of view, this is truly what social movements and counter-movements do: against the background of morality, they seek to ensure that recognition either becomes or does not become a fact of reality. As a result, this discussion produces its own remains, namely that it is still important to understand how all this ‘performativity’ is received, perceived, and experimented by its audiences. Thirdly, ideology as an interpretation of the world is involved in the self-understanding of a subject nevertheless capable of keeping a distance from itself and thus somewhat criticizing its illusions. What is then central is the question of autonomy, whether it defines itself as a criterion to assess what is ideological in the final instance, or whether it presents itself as the beginning of an ethic for intellectuals.

If this articulation is therefore accurate, critical hermeneutics could present itself as a humanist solution to the problems of the human sciences; a solution that is not devoid of
flaws, namely by being theoretically and ethically ambitious without being able to achieve any synthesis. What, then, would be won or lost? From an epistemological point of view, it must be said that critical hermeneutics could no longer be seen as a science defined in opposition to ideology, nor as a method capable of guaranteeing its truth by the simple logic of its operations. Rather, it should be considered for what it is: a philosophy within the human sciences; that is to say, a theoretical project seeking to radicalize the task of comprehension. For this very reason, it is first and foremost a hermeneutics, even if it is also much more through its questioning and criticizing of either the limits or the failures of understanding. Now, from an ontological point of view, it must be said that critical hermeneutics reflects the many discrepancies that constitute our historical, social, and cultural universe. This world is made of tensions and gaps in order to ensure that disturbances and adjustments remain always possible, inside meaning, at the heart of action, and within experience. It is for this fundamental reason that a duality of positive and negative poles exists – the way that social inclusion also transforms itself into exclusion, for instance. It is thus together that these gaps, tensions, and dualisms come to consecrate ambiguity as one of the most characteristic traits of this world. To be sure, gray zones are here to stay, if not to increase, thereby providing critical hermeneutics with a bright future.

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Notes

1. Among the works which most helped clarify this question, one could note those of Kögler (1996), Outhwaite (1987) and Thompson (1984b).
2. How can one not see, for example, the political agenda behind such opposite positions as those of Bell (1962), on one side, and Hall (1982, 1996 [1983]) or Laclau (1996), on the other?
3. Here is what Ricœur has to say in this previously mentioned unfamiliar text: ‘My thesis . . . is that the interest in emancipation would be empty and anemic unless it received a concrete content from our practical interest in communication and, therefore, if it were not confirmed by our capacity to creatively reinterpret our cultural heritage’ (1973a: 163–4).
4. It is important to note that very few commentators have chosen to address this question of the many links between symbolism, ideology and social integration within Ricœur’s work. One of the rare authors to do so is Moore (1990; see also, in French, Michel 2003).
5. Another quote supporting this idea can be read as follow: ‘It seems that the non-transparency of our cultural codes is a condition for the production of social messages’ (Ricœur 1981: 227; see also Freeden 2006: esp. 11ff., dedicated to ‘the obscure and the indeterminate’).
6. On this topic, it would certainly be interesting to consult Kaplan’s commentary (Kaplan 2003: esp. 37–45).
7. In more recent debates, many continue to propose unilateral views; Griffin (2006), for instance, gives everything to culture while Voirol (2008), for his part, insists on giving everything to critical theory.
8. Over the years, many have accused the Alexandrian strong program of putting too much emphasis on the autonomy of culture and thus too little on concrete yet meaningful
interactions (see, e.g., Langer 2004; Kurasawa 2004). It is my contention here that the renewed concept of performance answers most of the aforementioned critics by putting back culture into a proper theory of action.

9. In short: ‘The challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in society at large, is to infuse meaning by re-fusing performance’ (Alexander 2004: 548).

10. This is an idea that one would find presented by many, Alexander, Geertz and Ricœur amongst them. Having said that, it would be important to dissociate critical hermeneutics from certain new trends in resource mobilization theory (RMT), especially the latest work of Zald (see, e.g., Zald 1996, 2000; see also Olivier and Johnston 2000).

11. The same idea is also found under a different form: ‘Those who are lucky enough to become members of civil society, whether they are located at its very core or are more distant from the center, are continuously, even fervently, concerned with justifying why others cannot be included’ (Alexander 2007: 27).

12. It is important to note that Honneth’s project has undergone ‘several revisions’ since The Struggle for Recognition, especially in regards to its psychological dimension (see, e.g., Honneth 1995, 2002; see also, for commentaries, Alexander 2000: 291ff.; Alexander and Pia Lara 1996; Ricœur 2005; van den Brink and Owen 2007).

13. This explains, among other things, why the debate between Fraser and Honneth is also a poorly framed debate, the positions of one and the other being not as irreconcilable as one would first imagine (see Fraser and Honneth 2003). The various manners in which the question of recognition gets more and more into the literature on social movements must also be noted (see, e.g., Hobson 2003).

14. Like here, for example: ‘Actions are performative insofar as they can be understood as communicating meaning to an audience. For the purposes of understanding such performance, it does not matter what meaning “really” is, either for actors themselves or in some ontological or normative sense. What matters is how others interpret actors’ meaning’ (Alexander 2005: 2).

15. This is a well known problem from the biblical exegesis’s *subtilitas applicandi* to its reformulation as *application* by Hans-Georg Gadamer in Truth and Method (see mostly Gadamer 1975 [1960]: 274–8).

16. Ricœur’s most explicit claim for such a philosophical anthropology of interpretation can be found in ‘Existence and Hermeneutics’ (1974 [1969]).

17. This is something that was discussed earlier. For now, see, e.g., Honneth 2002: 504ff.; 1992; 2004b: 358ff). Moreover, there are similar discussions in today’s literature on social movements (see, e.g., Dubet 2004; McDonald 2004).

18. These two concepts are the most important of Ricœur’s mature work, especially since the 1990s and the publication of Oneself as Another (see, e.g., 1988, 1992 [1990]).

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