

Dialogue and narrative in Paul Ricoeur's philosophy

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Abstract

Able to talk and talk to each other, human beings discover not only their fellow men, but also the different ones who oppose them. Because of these differences, the man is particularly exposed to the risk of disagreement and division. Disagreement and division sometimes lead to conflict, violence and war. Faced with such risks, the role of communication, of public discussion, is important. The act of communication aims in principle at the similar in the different. In other words, he may seek to hear a reasonable disagreement. In this context, I emphasize Paul Ricoeur's contribution to the problem of communication. Ricoeur makes efforts in education for discussion and communication. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully examine the theory of dialogue and narration in Ricoeur.

Keywords: Dialogue, Dialogism, Communication, Narrative, Text

1. Background

“In a pluralistic society like ours”¹, the quality of communication between men speaking is paramount. Able to talk and talk to each other, human beings discover not only their fellow men, but also the different ones who oppose them. Because of these differences, the man is particularly exposed to the risk of disagreement and division. Disagreement and division sometimes lead to conflict, violence and war. Faced with such risks, the role of communication, of public discussion, is not negligible. The act of communication aims in principle at the similar in the different. In other words, he may seek to instruct a ‘reasonable disagreement’, to use a happy expression proposed by John Rawls.

Reasonable disagreement relies primarily on mutual recognition among participants of social interaction. Concerned with social cohesion, the participants hope to reach a consensus, which makes it possible to cooperate despite the diversity of perspectives. According to Paul Ricoeur, reasonable disagreement can be concretized not only by “overlapping consensus”, but also by “acceptance of the fact that there are different insoluble ones”.² In the act of

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *La critique et la conviction. Entretien avec François Azouvi et Marc de Launay*, Paris : Hachette Littéraires, 1995, p. 195. ² *Ibid.*

communication (or, better, public discussion), it is important to recognize the different insoluble. The challenge of communication is not to adhere to what we believe is true, but to find the best arguments for the difference between us.

Pluralist society demands the *acceptance* of opposing points of view and the *confrontation* of plausible arguments on both sides. To accept different and opposing perspectives is to respect others and to recognize their dignity. The acceptance of diverse perspectives is one of the matrices of ethics. Confronting opposing views is trying to resolve disagreements and problems. To discuss their opposition, men make various plausible arguments. In confrontation, one must accept that the argument of the other is just as acceptable as my own argument. Respect for the other is a necessary condition of the act of communication. In other words, public discussion requires mutual recognition. Communicating is possible, since language allows us to meet each other. According to Hans Georg Gadamer, language is the space where man can meet others. Through language, man can not only communicate with others, but also coexist and cooperate with them in a pluralistic world.

However, the art of communicating does not seem an innate thing. To discuss and negotiate properly on what opposes them, men must be competent. In other words, they need *rhetoric* or the *art of dialogue*. As we know, for the intellectual formation of his interlocutors, Socrates aims their critical awakening through ‘the discussion’. This is called the ‘Socratic art of dialogue’ or ‘maieutics’, the art of giving birth to spirits. The method of Socrates presupposes a minimum of mastery in the art of communication; we must therefore educate humans so that they acquire certain skills in the art of dialogue. It must be emphasized that educating in the field of communication is not simply transmitting knowledge, it is awakening critical thinking. The art of giving birth to spirits, according to Socrates, is not simply about repeating answers already acquired, but about questioning. The wisdom of Socrates invites his followers to seek the truth according to their own means. Just like Socrates’ method, communication education, in my opinion, must seek to form *autonomous* and *thoughtful* beings.

In this context, I will propose an effective solution to overcome the difficult situation of communication in South Korea and that, similar, in other countries. For that, for a long time, I put the accent on the thought of Paul Ricoeur. On this occasion, I will pay attention to his theories of dialogue and hermeneutics.

2. Methods

I would like to address the problem of dialogue and narrative in Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy to found the ‘ideal communication community’ in our world that can solve the various conflicts. The dialogue between peers within the ‘communication community’ is one of the important factors that leads to the replacement of the classical paradigm with a reflexive paradigm. If I

use the term ‘community of communication’² in Habermas, it contains ‘plurality of voices’, happy expression proposed by Bakhtine, that is to say the voice of others, that of John Dewey, Martin Buber and Francis Jacques. For example, the good citizen advocated by Dewey is not only the autonomous being, but also the being-for-others and the social being. Dewey’s education emphasizes the importance of the social relationship and the active role of individuals in their interpersonal relationships. The social and interpersonal relationship is based on the awareness of shared interests among citizens; it is based on the idea of free and complete exchanges with others. Concisely, Dewey focused on the community and the communication relationship. By virtue of the act of dialogue, men face others; they do not shut themselves up in their ego, but leave it; they understand the value of others, partners in the general and philosophical discussion, who collaborate in common actions and enrich the shared experience. In a word, the act of dialogue allows men and especially young people to reach an intersubjective position.

This access to intersubjectivity within the communication community is not enough. We must go further. Dialogism allows widening my perspective, not to limit it to the dialogical relation. If we can say that the dialogue consists of an interaction between the speaker and the listener (or between you and me), the dialogism focuses on the place of ‘he (i.e. *il*)’, that of the third person, like that of an actor indispensable in the act of speech, even in the act of dialogue. Although the ‘he’ corresponds to the simple “*register délocutif*”, as an object of conversation, when he is silent or absent, ‘he’ is always a ‘reactualizable’ being, a ‘potential’ partner, according to Francis Jacques. That is to say, the ‘he’ can always speak by saying ‘I’ in turn. In this sense, the community of communication is significant a community of ‘us’, not a pair composed of ‘*ego* and *alter ego*’. On this condition, it can become a “community of enunciation in a happy word (*communauté de l’énonciation dans une parole heureuse*)”⁴, to use a formula dear to Francis Jacques.

In my opinion, however, the transition from dialogue to dialogism does not stop there. Remains another passage, upsetting that of the dialogism to the narrative. Why is this passage so upsetting? Because there is more in the narrative than in the dialogism. The narrative has a triple advantage. 1) Facing the limit corresponding to the intimacy of dialogism, the narrative is able to accommodate a larger audience, or even more readers, transcending the spatial

² Jürgen Habermas use the term “Communication community” or “Ideal communication community”. Although Habermas does not often use the term “community of communication”, he means, by the concept of ‘community’, a world where the democratic model of consensus constitutes the horizon of the “Theory of Communicative Action”. The lived world (i.e. *le monde vécu*) crystallizes the meanings conveyed by any practice oriented towards intercomprehension, that is to say the social practice par excellence. Of course, instead of the expression “community of communication”, Habermas introduces the concept of the “lived world”. ⁴ Francis Jacques, *Dialogiques. Recherches logiques sur le dialogue*, Paris : PUF, 1979, p. 6.



dimension. 2) In the face of the temporal limit of dialogism, the narrative, in particular the classical work, overcomes the limit of the temporal dimension, by addressing contemporaries, predecessors and successors. 3) Due to its autonomy with regard to the author's intention, because it does not take into account the life or death of its author, the narrative suggests a constant and faithful partner in the interaction with his reader.

In the light of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the narrative, we can consider two features of the narrative. First, with fiction, we find the heuristic force of fiction and vivid metaphor.

Such force exercise in the redescription of reality. It proceeds from the "*référence dédoublée*"³. In the sense of classical rhetoric, metaphor first means "a unit of reference"⁶, it is the first level of metaphor. It also becomes an impertinent, bizarre preaching from the semantic point of view, it is the second level of metaphor. In a hermeneutic perspective, the metaphor finally recognize in all its heuristic power, its power to redesign reality. This third level of metaphor holds our attention. Ricoeur says, "Every metaphor is a poem in miniature"⁴. This second metaphorical function is limited to the sphere of "seeing-as (*voir-comme*)"⁸. The seeing-as proceeds from the intuitive connection of meaning and image. Unlike the second level of metaphor, the third level of the metaphor corresponds to the concept of "being-as (*être-comme*)"⁵, correlative to the concept of "seeing-as". According to Ricoeur, "being-as means to be and not to be. It was and it was not. That is to say, being-as has a double meaning: a relational sense and an existential sense. Thus, being-as is characterized both referentially and ontologically. However, being-as cannot be understood in a dichotomous way. On the contrary, there is always tension between an 'is' and a 'is not'. This tension not only ensures the transfer of meaning, but also gives the metaphorical enunciation its power of openness to new horizons of meaning. Thus, with the concept of being-as, the third level of metaphor can be watched as one where the metaphor opens new horizons. At this level, we discover the referential dimension of the metaphorical enunciation. This referential dimension reaches an extra-linguistic real because, on the one hand, the metaphorical enunciation redescaling a reality inaccessible to direct description, on the other hand, the metaphorical reference brings to the language aspects, qualities, and values of reality. Thus, the metaphorical enunciation gives us access to a dynamic vision of reality. In this sense, Ricoeur sees in the living metaphor a "*référence dédoublée*".

Taking up the Aristotelian thesis of the polysemy of being, Ricoeur declares, "the reference of the metaphorical enunciation involves being as act and as power"⁶. This means that there is an intersection between poetics and ethics, if not ontology. In other words, the

³ Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, Paris : Seuil, 1975, p. 376. ⁶ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action, Essai d'herméneutique II*, Paris : Seuil, 1986, p. 20. ⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, p. 269.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 312.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 389.



ontology of the act and the power makes it possible to render justice to the metaphorical reference. With the help of this concept of being-as, a poet sees reality as a work of art. More precisely, following Ricœur, we can say that the author of a tragedy leads us to “see human life as what the myth exhibits”⁷.

Ricœur borrows it from François Dagognet. Although the latter uses this notion only to characterize “the strategy of the painter who reconstructs reality on the basis of a limited and dense optical alphabet”⁸, Ricœur seeks to extend it to “all the modalities of iconicity”¹³. Of course, these are based on fiction. This means that, through the virtue of fiction, positive images can increase the possibilities of living in a world that, without them, would be restricted and impoverished. In this sense, Ricœur strongly affirms: “what is interpreted in a text”⁹, in particular in a fictional text, “it is the proposition of a world”¹⁵ that I could live and in which I could project my cleanest powers. Secondly, in an intersubjective perspective, the narrative can become a correlate of dialogism. In the manner of the interlocutive relation between me, you, he, the narrative can appear as a form of intersubjective relation between author and reader. To read a narrative is not just to discover the immanent meaning of the text, but to relate to the world of the text. We can say from the outset that the relationship with the world of the text is the application (or appropriation) of the text to the present situation of the reader. The encounter between text and reader arouses a reaction from the reader. Obviously, we can also imagine a reverse reaction, i.e. a reaction of the narrative towards its reader. Unlike dialogue or dialogism, characterized by immediate interaction, the interaction of the text-reader couple may seem slow and unobtrusive.

To understand the notion of application or reception, it is necessary to consider the semantic autonomy of the text. Ricœur emphasizes that the death or life of the author of a work is of little importance to the reader when he meets this work. He even argues that the death of the author helps the reader to understand his text, because what the reader encounters at the time of reading is no longer the author himself, more the intention of the latter, but the text become fully autonomous.

The interweaving of the world of the text and the world of the reader contributes to the ‘*refiguration*’ of the action of the reader. Through the mediation of texts, the reader can modify and transform his daily reality. The interlacing in question brings about a change of perspective

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit 1. L'intrigue et le récit historique*, Paris : Seuil, 1983, p. 121. ¹³ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*

in the reader; in particular a change in the individual practice plan in terms of social practice. This change of perspective is very important because it concerns individual identity, on the one hand, and social identity, on the other. This is how the impact caused by the connection between the world of the text and the world of the reader is considerable. We must not lose sight of the conditions necessary to access the world of possibilities corresponding to the concepts of “*Lebenswelt*” and “*In-der-welt-sein*”.¹⁰ The conditions we have outlined are these: the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader, the application and the distancing. Among them, to me, the very first condition is to get in touch with the world of the text. Without this first step, the other necessary conditions will not be sufficient.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, let us talk about the three privileges of the narrative with regard to dialogism: firstly, despite a tri-personal dimension, the ‘he’ of dialogism has something intimate with the partners of verbal interaction. In other words, this ‘he’ does not extend to distant, unknown people. Moreover, for the sake of the effectiveness of the dialogue, it is better to limit both the dialogical space and the number of interlocutors. Nevertheless, it will be objected that, thanks to modern technology, we can communicate and connect the near and the distant without regard to spatial and numerical limits. Should this activity of ‘communication’ be considered as a true dialogical activity? The answer is unquestionably negative: virtual interaction, through the Internet or other contemporary technologies, never corresponds to true dialogism. However, unlike dialogism and its limited space, the narrative is free of spatial limits: it is open to the whole person who reads it. By the act of reading, the inequality of persons, familiar or unknown, near or far, is erased. The narrative concerns not only the close, intimate ‘he’, but also the distant, foreign ‘they’. In short, the narrative overcomes the fundamental limit of dialogism, which presupposes the relationship of ‘face to face’.

Secondly, dialogism (or dialogue) is characterized by interaction at a given moment. In this sense, we can say that the act of dialogue is not reiterable; it is ephemeral, like any act of enunciation (or communication). Unlike dialogism, the narrative transcends temporal boundaries; it lasts, as long as we wish, because it is fixed by writing. Thus, the narrative can be read by multiple generations and by various people, near and far, rich and poor, strong and weak. According to Ricoeur, such is the power of the narrative.

Thirdly, if one of the participants in the dialogue goes away or disappears, we cannot talk to him anymore; we ask any question, there is and there will be no answer (or reaction) on his

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action*, p. 114.



part. On the other hand, the existence of the author of a narrative is by no means indispensable, for even if he is no longer there, his narrative exists in front of us, facing the reader. According to Ricoeur, even if the author still lives, it is better to consider him as absent, almost dead. This situation allows us to relate to the narrative in a genuine, unbiased way. This means, in Ricoeur's view, that the semantic autonomy of the work is more important than the intention of the author.

The three assets of the narrative, compared to dialogism, are based on a triple semantic autonomy, according to Ricoeur. This is emphasized during the study of the application of the literary work to the present situation of the reader. Let us quote this: "in light of the writing, the discourse acquires a triple semantic autonomy: in relation to the intention of the speaker, to the reception by the primitive audience, to the economic, social, cultural circumstances of its production". To the three mentioned privileges, is added this other, mentioned here by Ricoeur: the semantic autonomy with respect to the "economic, social, cultural circumstances of its production". While dialogism is part of a defined context of communication, the intelligence of the narrative is not subordinated to this context. Through this comparison of the respective advantages of narrative and dialogism, we can discover that, on each side, service is rendered to certain values. These must not be erased and neglected. This is why I intend to consider these two perspectives as capable of inspiring a complete methodology for the benefit of the communication community.

4. References

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