Juame Plensa, *Source* (detail)

One Language as Another:
Ethics and Alterity in the Hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur

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Most of us, I suspect, are aware that people living in the same society, who share the same language, history, and to some degree the same culture, are becoming increasingly unintelligible to one another. Not all that long ago, one could count on a largely shared form of life that gave sense to our comings and goings, even in spite of all the complexity and stratification of our lives together. In all of this, the foreigner, the alien, the one who did not share *our* particular form of life, was the Other. From such a perspective, *we* are never strange; only those who fell outside our understanding of who "we" referred to. My questions in this essay are: Can we conceive of this unintelligibility as an ethical concern and what is a promising line to take toward a solution? In order to bring these concerns into the ethical domain, I want to develop some of the lines of thought in Paul Ricoeur's lectures, *Sur la traduction*.[1]

James Ensor, *The Stranger*

1. (Paris: Bayard, 2004). Henceforth *ST*. All translations from the French are my own.

THE UNIVERSAL PRETENSIONS OF MODERNITY

The first thing that I need to do is bring Ricoeur's target clearly into view. Particularly one of the central projects of Modernity: the project of universality. What I want to get at with the notion of universality is a kind of abstract purity in the theoretical realm of thought and language. If we can achieve purity in theory, then we can achieve it in practice—or so the thought might go. A highly influential figure in this project is the Prussian philosopher, Immanuel Kant, and I want to follow his line of thought for a moment here.[2]

In his most famous work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant was at pains to circumscribe the limits of reason so as to restrain philosophy from going beyond what could be known by

2. Though Kant does not appear in *ST*, Ricoeur clearly sees Kant as elaborating a universalising ethic in *Soi-même comme une autre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 200.

reason. Unsurprisingly, this theoretical project informs Kant's thinking about ethics, or what he refers to as the "metaphysics of morals."[3] To get at what Kant means by this phrase, we need to follow his thinking for a moment. What he calls "rational cognition" is either material because it has an object or formal because it is concerned with the forms of understanding and of the universal rules that govern thought. In other words: cognition is either thinking about itself (formally) or it is thinking about something other than itself (materially). Now, what is formal is not derived from, or founded upon experience. For if the laws of logic are going to hold for all thinking at all times and places, then they cannot be grounded in the particularities of any given experience.

Thus, empirical philosophy is grounded in experience where pure philosophy is grounded entirely on the concepts and laws governing thought. For Kant, then, *metaphysics* is restrained to this pure philosophy that has the understanding as its sole determinate object and this is what the metaphysics of morals refers to: it is a form of pure philosophy that seeks to uncover the universal principles of moral thought that are true for every being that possesses this mode of cognition. This leads to the further distinction between moral philosophy and what Kant calls "cultural anthropology," which is empirical and interested in the particularities and peculiarities of different societies or cultures. Morality is universal, anthropology particular, and therefore, not the domain of morality or philosophy.

In seeking a limit to what can be intelligibly thought, Kant was engaged in a project that would be taken up in the early twentieth century and transformed into an issue of what could sensibly be said. Kant, for his part, explicitly excludes ordinary language and discourse from his theorizing about logic—in spite of the fact that virtually all of our ordinary and philosophical reflections are done in

non-formal ways.[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein would seek a pure and reified underlying structure to language in the form of logic and it would be in this restraint on what thoughts could be intelligibly *expressed* that would function to limit what could be said in philosophy.[5]

Yet this highly abstract view of reason and language belies the fact that it is our ordinary language that constitutes the way in which we exist in, and make sense of, the world. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, "Understanding is bound-up in language [*sprachgebunden*]."[6] There is no such thing as prelinguistic experience of the world or of others; language is where I and the world meet; it is the way in which I render myself intelligible not only to others, but also to *me*. Ricoeur's own philosophical method everywhere reminds us of the deep sense in which our capacity to understand is *sprachgebunden*.
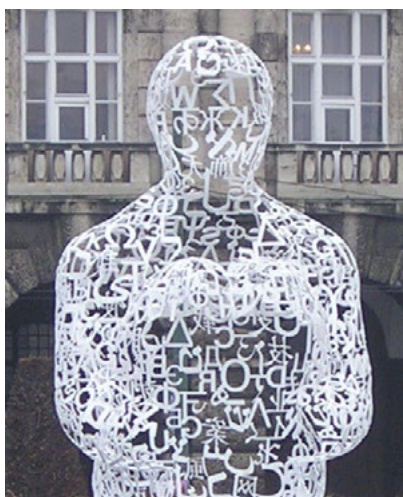
Jaume Plensa, Alphabet sculpture

With hardly any conscious awareness, we acquire a language that has existed and developed within a staggeringly complex history of cultural transformation and interaction. In the process, any given language has accumulated—either through internal invention or borrowing—a large set of symbols, metaphors and images by which it figures the world. Many of which are not even obvious to speakers of the language because they have become so natural and routine. It is the pretension of Modernity, and its ideal of universality, that we can begin by creating a language free from these parochial means

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3. Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4:388.

4. See Huaping Lu-Adler, *Kant and the Science of Logic: A Historical and Philosophical Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 107.

5. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuiness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 3. Wittgenstein eventually rejected this project.

6. "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems," in *Philosophie Hermeneutik: Kleine Schriften I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1979), 111. My translation.

of grasping hold of and making sense of our reality. Ricoeur (*ST*, 30–31) describes this as the messianic project of European philosophy and its attempt to return to a primordial, pure language, in which "the imperfections of natural languages" and the cultural prejudices (*idoles*) that have accumulated within them are eliminated.

But Ricoeur (*ST*, 32) thinks that the gap between the conception of an ideal language and our actual empirical languages seems impassible. This is because ordinary languages are too complex and idiosyncratic; the conceptual schemes they help to organize and express are too different, and the ways in which they figure the world through imagery and metaphor are not reducible to something abstract. Languages function within the particular lives of individuals and communities and are thus irreducibly empirical. Thus, Ricoeur's own philosophy takes its starting point from the empirical and historical reality of ordinary language and discourse. It is properly *hermeneutic* because it is the interpretation and explication of the meaning that is "always already there" in the various symbols that cultures have used and adopted and the stories and myths in which they are found.[7] The major difference being that Ricoeur does not seek to dispense with symbol; rather, because he does not believe there is anything else for philosophy to work on, he seeks to use symbol for the sake of understanding.

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If what I have been arguing so far is true, then ethics is not something that we can get a grip on through abstracting from our ordinary modes of existing in the world. Furthermore, this implies that ethical questions are not susceptible to merely logical analysis because we must

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7. See *Anthropologie Philosophique: Écrits et conférences 3* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2013), 175–76.

accept that certain questions and answers are only sensible or relevant within the linguistic and conceptual framework we already occupy. Furthermore, the fact that our existence is *sprachgebunden* means that all understanding necessarily arises from within the horizon of our own language. That is, our language functions as both a condition of possibility for understanding and a limit to what it is possible for us to understand.

Viewed thus, interpretation of meaning is central to philosophical reflection and, therefore, so is our capacity to understand. But how exactly should this capacity be characterised? Ricoeur (*ST*, 44), quoting George Steiner, agrees with the claim that "To understand is to translate." Consider the experience of not understanding a text (assuming that it is written in a language that one is competent in). While I can understand the meaning of individual words and phrases, the conjoined meaning of the accumulated sentences is senseless to me. Phenomenologically, I might find describing the experience as being in a fog (or some such imagery) suits the experience well: I cannot find my way through; there are no relevant markers by which to navigate. In order to move myself out of this fog, I engage in a variety of tasks: I write things out in different words, or draw diagrams or images, or I use the author's words from somewhere else, or perhaps I attempt to give structure to an argument by rewriting it as a syllogism. In each of these instances, I am translating the words of the text into other words or images or structures in order to render them comprehensible to myself.

It is in this sense, then, that the *act* of understanding involves us in translation of one text into a new kind of text or image or involving the overlaying of one text upon another. But to introduce translation into the act of understanding is to bring with it all of the theoretical problems that plague translation: namely, that translation is an impossible task and that to translate is necessarily to betray whatever is being translated. Thus, if understanding and translation are equivalent in some sense, then understanding is an impossibility and it is to this problem that I turn now.

RICOEUR'S PRACTICAL SOLUTION

What seems to render translation an impossibility is what Ricoeur (*ST*, 53–54) calls the "radical heterogeneity"

of languages. It is not merely that languages differ systemically from the level of the phoneme all the way up to the semantics of a word; nor is it the different ways in which a language "divides reality"; it is more profoundly the way in which a language "puts reality back together" at the level of text or discourse. Texts are "worlds" all of their own; yet they almost always purport to relate to (albeit in deeply complex and interesting ways) the world itself.

The radical untranslatability of another language confronts us as a threat. Ricoeur (*ST*, 41) writes that, "The work of translation, overcome by internal resistance, which is motivated by fear, sees the stranger as hated, as a menace to one's own linguistic identity." It is a natural tendency to resist anything that makes us feel as though we do not know our way; anything, that is, that we do not understand. What Ricoeur (*ST*, 10) calls "Linguistic Ethnocentrism" arises from the assumption that my language is superior in the same way that we tend to think that an original text is somehow superior simply because it is enshrined in a particular language and cannot be exactly duplicated in any other. This can invite visceral reactions: either of fear or hatred.

Yet all of these considerations occlude a rather ordinary feature of human existence: we translate all the time. Ricoeur (*ST*, 24) draws our attention to this most ordinary of facts when he notes that, before there were theorists worrying about translation, there were merchants and ambassadors who, in their various travels and duties, effectively worked through translators or learned the language of the foreign land in which they operated. This ordinary and ubiquitous feature of our experience cannot be overlooked and should lead us to reject any theoretical commitment to the untranslatability between one language and another.

What is needed is a way to do justice to both of these facts: the radical heterogeneity of language, the otherness of the Other, and the everyday reality of translation. As is so often the case, truth lies somewhere in between the extremes and the difficult task is to account for all the facts and avoid occluding as many as possible. Ricoeur proposes to do this by replacing the theoretical dichotomy: translatable versus untranslatable, with a practical dialectic: fidelity or treason. Our commitment to fidelity recognizes that translation and understanding can and does occur; but our recognition of betrayal acknowledges the possibility that our translation may mutilate the original. Dialectic is mobile while dichotomy is static: this points us to the idea of translation as an ongoing *task*, which involves enlarging the horizon of one's own language. In this light, the language of the Other does not feature as a threat; instead, it features as a possible resource (*ST*, 38–39).

LINGUISTIC HOSPITALITY: FROM TRANSLATION TO ETHICS

What might ethics, conceived of through this paradigm of language and hermeneutics, be like? First, the hermeneutic dimension highlights the role that meaning and understanding ought to play in ethical reflection, and the crucial way that ordinary language features in this project. Second, if philosophy must take as its starting point all the various places that human beings have been interpreted, then it makes the choice to engage only with recognizably philosophical works arbitrary. This means that ethics not only can, but *should*, draw on the great variety of texts, especially those that have had a profound influence on our self-understanding, and this gives a wider legitimacy to Christian Scripture as a source of ethical reflection.

But I want to focus on one final concept that Ricoeur introduces, which I think has much to say to the way that we engage in ethical reflection at an academic and everyday level. The controlling metaphor in Ricoeur's (*ST*, 19–20) hermeneutical reflections on translation is "linguistic hospitality"
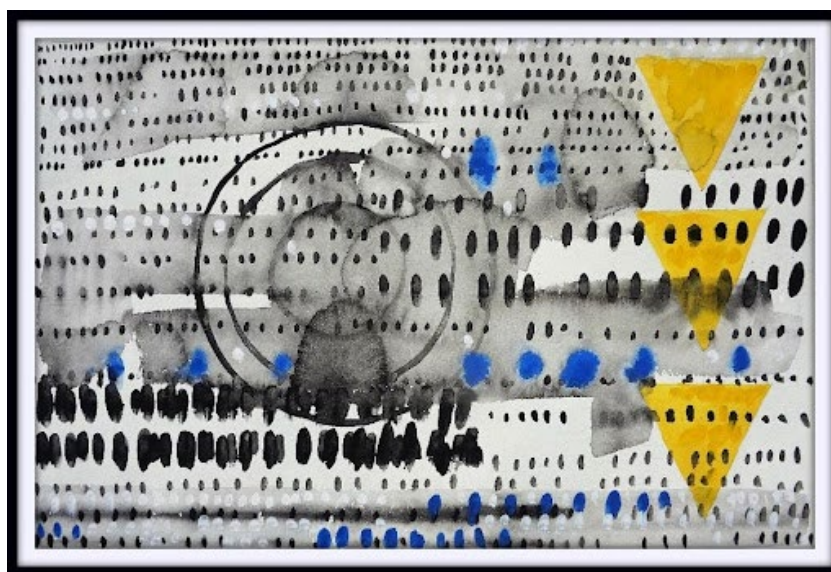
Bruce Black, *Codes*

(*l'hospitalité langagière*). The essential idea of rationalistic, consensual discussion is that there is no need for an intermediary. This is because it assumes that we are, each one of us, autonomous rational beings in virtue of which we speak the same language—the language of reason. Ethical consensus is, then, merely a matter of holding firm to what can be said in reasonable, universal discourse. But the idea that I am putting forward is that this is a deeply misleading position. In actual fact, there is a need for an intermediary—a translator—who can function as the host to two, potentially hostile, interlocutors.

Ricoeur (*ST*, 19) points out that, "The translator finds their repayment in the recognition of the unavoidability of *dialogicity* in the act of translation as the reasonable horizon of the desire to translate." The payoff of Ricoeur's practical dialectic is that we come to see that translation and understanding are essentially dialogical in nature and that there is never an end to the task of understanding. It is the task of the translator, then, to function as the middle term to the practical dialectic; to undertake the task of learning the languages of their guests and so to become aware of their own strangeness, and to act as a host welcoming understanding between their various guests.

CONCLUSION

This essay has been a brief attempt to develop Ricoeur's hermeneutical reflections on translation in the direction of ethics and to bring the central place that meaning and understanding ought to have in ethics—two notions that have been largely neglected by twentieth-century Anglophone philosophy. My hope is that Christians, and especially Christians committed to understanding and explaining the world, will commit ourselves to a Christ-like hospitality to those who we find strange, and to whom we appear strange in our turn.

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Haim Aronshtam, *Friends' Discussion*