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Reconstructive Hermeneutical Philosophy: Return Ticket to the Human Condition

Alison Scott-Baumann

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Reconstructive hermeneutical philosophy

Return ticket to the human condition

Abstract   Making meaning out of life requires effort, sustained thought and action. It can be difficult to reassert our responsibility for solving real life problems from within social science research or current trends, such as extremely deconstructivist text, and postmodernism in its cheerfully nihilistic guise. Hermeneutical philosophy, of the Ricoeurian reconstructive mode, rehabilitates text as a powerful device for influencing others and offers us courage to proceed with the human project by developing a way of writing, thinking and behaving that is provisional, affirmative and conciliatory, yet constantly questioning. Ricoeur invites the person, both reflective subject and empiricist object of research, to combine these elements and use written text and action as text for an active mode of living. Within philosophy he attempts to achieve a rapprochement between hermeneutical and rational thought. Understanding oneself, through better understanding of the other, derives benefit from crossing disciplinary boundaries between, in this study, philosophy and the social sciences (education and psychology), in order to attempt to move from the particular, individual issues to the general, holistic view and return to one's own situation to act for oneself and others. Ricoeur offers us the opportunity to repossess language, to be ethical and practical, and to challenge the hegemony of Explaining, going beyond method and methodology into epistemology and beyond fact into Understanding: an ontology of hope that makes sense of plurality, without the damage of relativism. This text attempts a narrative ethics, illustrating how Ricoeur's work transformed my thinking from that of a method-bound psychologist to that of, perhaps, a philosopher in the making.

Key words   critical realism · hermeneutics · holism · Hollis · individualism · Norris · rational analytic · Ricoeur · self · text

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Introduction: the tyranny of method

In a world of education that seems dominated by measurement, standards and accountability, it is difficult to find a place from which to challenge the position occupied by research methodologies in educational work. For a social scientist, research offers the opportunity to analyse the way we are and to predict and prepare for development. Yet research method can become closed and self-confirming, with polarized combatants defining themselves by how much they differ from the less (or more) privileged 'other', rather than defining themselves by what they are and might become. This occurs often in the literature on qualitative and quantitative methods in the social sciences, witness Silverman, and Cohen and Manion.[1] Nor can one derive much sense of purpose from the seemingly corrosive deconstructivists, like De Man, who imply the futility of re-assembling arguments after analysis. A different point of view can be found in the writings of Ricoeur,[2] French hermeneutical philosopher (1913–), with his profound interest in the self, in the history of the human sciences, and with his analysis of Dilthey and others. Hermeneutical philosophy can deconstruct the roots of modern research dilemmas very clearly, and Ricoeur offers a reconstructive antidote to the naturally positivist essence of research and educational policy. He goes beyond that also by reconstructing a narrative map[3] to get us through the confusing moral maze drawn by so-called postmodern thinking, where Lyotard's 'morally pernicious doctrine', as Norris sees it, can lead us in its relativist way to one of two dangerous options. If we ignore or deny the distinction between knowledge and human interests, one option is to become deterministic, with no room for human agency, and the other is to give free rein to pluralistic relativism.[4]

In the social sciences there is commonly a not dissimilar polarization between two major research methods: the positivist, explanatory paradigm is presented as the champion of quantitative method, and the relativist, interpretative paradigm is presented as the champion of qualitative method. These approaches, if combined, can lead to conflict within oneself akin to Hammersley's warnings about betraying 'paradigm loyalty' for the sake of 'methodological eclecticism'.

There is a sense of foreboding in the prospect of disloyalty to one's chosen method, which, Hammersley warns, could carry the price of contaminating one's methodology and one's findings in some unpredictable way.[5]

As a child psychologist, educational researcher and teacher educator I became aware of these conflicts, understood and accepted by many researchers, but not more tolerable because they are known. I could not see a way to break the paradigm deadlock. Winch, in recommending philosophy as the only way of releasing ourselves from the constraints

of anything as scientific as research methods, seemed blasphemous to me, in my devotion to method.[6]

Believable evidence, impressive results, but what are the ideas behind it all?

My reading and my growing confusion in this area led me to wonder why I seemed unable to resolve the demands of quantitative and qualitative methods from within research itself. Could philosophy help? In my reading I found some analysis of method in philosophical terms, but only in passing, with no real depth. A typical example that takes up a paragraph in Denzin and Lincoln *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* describes briefly the passionate debate between 'interpretivist philosophies and qualitative methods' on the one hand and 'rejected positivist philosophy and experimentalist methodology' on the other, and concludes:

> Much of this discourse was familiarly named the quantitative-qualitative paradigm debate. Although qualitative evaluations were initially contested on both practical and methodological grounds, the debate eventually evolved to a détente . . . signalling the important acceptance of these alternative evaluation methodologies.[7]

There is a little discussion of what this meant and we are then referred to other texts if we want to take it further. This is an approach that makes us aware that there are other arguments available. Yet these arguments are kept at arm's length, in a different book. This habit of giving references instead of arguments has contributed significantly to the lack of debate about method and methodology, and their relationship to epistemology and ontology. References become like raw data, marshalled in brackets to endorse a point. There is also a footnote in Denzin and Lincoln that states one reason why this debate has received little attention: 'this debate can certainly be viewed as a rarefied intellectual exchange of no relevance to daily life' (note 3).[8]

Such a polarization, ostensibly between theory and practice, does not seem helpful for resolving the two major research method dilemmas that emerged when I started to explore the ethnographic area of research in the mid-1990s. In order to develop research that would be useful and believable I was faced with the dilemma of using either the qualitative or the quantitative paradigm or a mixture of both methods that would nevertheless have to declare its loyalty to one 'type' of research or the other. Method began to seem intrusive, like the pounding and patting into shape of reality demanded by government inspectors in one of my daytime jobs, as a teacher educator.

Qualitative and quantitative research

The debate about qualitative and quantitative research has been surfacing in different places for many years and it has not yet been resolved. It is a long-running debate that has often become rather inward-looking and confrontational and it fuelled my desire to resolve the dilemma for myself. As Kennedy points out, it was basic and applied research that was debated in the 1950s and 1960s and now qualitative and quantitative research is battling it out.[9] Norris, as both philosopher and theorist of literature, detects an analogous movement in literary theory since the 1960s; 'a series of periodic pendulum swings between the twin poles of emulating science in a different field of endeavour and repudiating science as a "discourse" backed up by all kinds of academic and state sponsored institutional control'.[10]

As psychology is my original discipline, I often take examples from that field, although this debate clearly has resonances in other areas. Mayer, a psychologist, typically rests his case on the definition of science as rigorous and his belief that educational research must be as rigorous as science. For him, qualitative method is not rigorous and quantitative method is. If scientific method is questioned, he sees this as the logical and deplorable outcome of rampant relativism: 'Theories about the way the universe works must be tested against empirical data. In this way, science incorporates a self-correcting mechanism in which theories that cannot be reconciled with empirical data are not accepted.'[11]

It made me uneasy to have this empiricism offered as a model for studying humans, as I make use of some useful and convincing material in models of thought that would be anathema to this view of reality. Freud's theory of the unconscious, for example, is interesting whether his texts are read from the viewpoint of a believer or a non-believer in psychoanalysis. Freud's views on dreams, on the Unconscious and on slips of the tongue can be seen as illuminating guides to the nature of certain aspects of human life. Even if these ideas are not always convincing, they provide fascinating working models for future debate and have transformed the way in which we think about ourselves.[12] Yet they would be rejected if we were insisting on a major empirical study. It also became clear to me that qualitative researchers clamour often as loudly as quantitative researchers for evidence. The literature seemed to expect paradigm loyalty and neither party appeared to be offering me more than the deceptively raw material of life to manipulate according to specific methodologies.

Human action as data and philosophy's response

In my struggle to resolve these major research dilemmas I initially used the terminology that I found, i.e. qualitative, quantitative, positivist,

empiricist, etc. It was necessary to review my understanding of what modern educational research is. By looking at the philosophical bases underpinning some of my chosen research methods, I realized there were contradictions that can serve to conceal the enduring and often tacitly accepted, yet poorly recognized, influence of positivism.

One such symptomatic contradiction is the selective and controlled use of subjects as informants for research purposes in ethnography. While studying tramps, Spradley interviewed Bob, a tramp with a Harvard degree and post-graduate experience in anthropology.[13] Spradley concluded that Bob's testimony was not useful, as it contained Bob's own sophisticated analysis of the tramp population that Spradley was studying and of which Bob formed part. Hammersley and Atkinson describe this as a potential erosion of the researcher's database, because the respondent gives a 'heavily theorized account'.[14] Spradley's research requires a research subject who is not given to theorizing to the same level as the researcher and does not pervert the research by giving holistically potent pictures of the individual that are different from the trend. Hammersley and Atkinson indicate that humans' often unconscious motivations could be a threat to validity, which makes it seem as if human behaviour is more important as explanatory data than as a way of understanding individuals.[15] This use of rigorous method to distil the essence of human behaviour permeates much of the methodological literature on ethnography or qualitative material.[16] I was beginning to doubt my judgement that research can be useful. Indeed the 'violent or coercive relation' between 'knowing subject and object known' as Yamamoto puts it,[17] was known to me already, from my work on Stenhouse, Walker and others, for whom the teacher researcher should be the key figure, served by the researcher, rather than data fodder for research. At this point it was method's complicity in this process that came as a shock.

Hollis, as rational analytic British philosopher, approaches the type of problem that Bob faces, of being both object and subject, in considerable detail.[18] Hollis analyses the Enlightenment project, with its faith in reason, and reason's subsequent dismantling by the Romantic movement. He discusses rationalism and compares it with and contrasts it to positivism and its empiricist approaches. He considers many related issues in an attempt to build up a believable picture of reason; trust, Rational Agents, Game Theory and the problems of relativism. The issue of Explaining and Understanding is predominant in his analysis, because he perceives them to be indissolubly linked yet diametrically opposed within the social sciences. The terms quantitative and qualitative represent research methods and the terms Explaining and Understanding represent philosophical positions, yet their similarities are striking; quantitative research and Explaining are both based on positivist precepts and qualitative research and Understanding are based on

interpretative precepts. Weber, in developing the argument about Explaining (*Erklären*) and *Verstehen* (interpretative understanding), suggests that *Verstehen* is logically incomplete and must be supplemented by statistics,[19] so this literature might not help me to find alternatives to research methods, particularly as Hollis also expresses concern at the polarized nature of these two concepts and attempts to combine them.

Hollis's analytical duel

Hollis uses the device of a matrix that crosses Explaining and Understanding with individualism and holism, in order to attempt synthesis from a variety of philosophical, economic, sociological and (to a lesser extent psychological) viewpoints. Individualism is used to debate theories that deal only with the individual human and holism is used to deal with theories that take a holistic view of mankind, looking at social and economic pressures.

Hollis's approach in *The Philosophy of Social Science* takes an initially historical view, in order to investigate the difficulties that social science finds itself in with regard to epistemology, ontology and methodology. The Enlightenment project marks the beginning, in many ways, of the difficulties that still face the social sciences, yet also face the natural sciences in a different way. The scientific discoveries that re-shaped understanding of the natural world in the 17th century were followed in the 18th century by an interest in the enquiring mind itself and the nature of society. Thus Hollis helps us to tackle the Explaining/Understanding debate as it relates to our history and our whole life experience, rather than to research methods alone. It is significant that Hollis does not feel able to resolve social science's problems from within the social sciences themselves, but needs to seek enlightenment from well outside the discipline, in philosophy. He points out that social science textbooks deal with method often to the exclusion of epistemological and ontological issues and he wants philosophy and social science to be able to cross each other's boundaries.[20]

Both individualism and holism are created and maintained by the normative expectations that structure our social world and give us

Table 1 Explanation, Understanding, individualism, holism matrix[21]

	Explanation	*Understanding*
holism	Systems	'Games'
individualism	Agents	Actors

reasons for action. Individuals and groups need to be seen also in terms of the relationship between structure and agency. Hollis believes that it is realistic to assume constant interplay between the two and feels that in fact 'games' and players cannot do without each other. When they are together players implement rules and, in so doing, partially construct their own rules in the process of interpreting them. By such arguments Hollis believes it is possible to propose a blend between individualism and holism. But he finds Explanation and Understanding more intractable. Weber's analysis of social action and Wittgenstein's (later) views of rules and action as moves in a game take us into the difficult areas of social identity and free will. Do we have the will to take on a role or is it determined for us? Can we choose our own reality?

It may in fact be possible to sustain the argument that the social world is constructed from within us and therefore is quite different from the natural world. Yet this raises spectres of relativism and conflicting, even incommensurable, values and suggests that it would be artificial to try to meld all four of Hollis's boxes together. Hollis starts at the top left quadrant of his grid and proceeds anti-clockwise, presenting the dilemma in the form of a maypole dance that becomes truly horrific, more a St Vitus dance than a solution to our problems. The difficulties arise in that the desired dialectical interplay, involving a dynamic synthesis of all four areas, would lead to chaos, he believes. In this matrix, Hollis hopes that combinations of dances and dancers can develop, but concludes that the middle actually 'represents a black hole, into which social theories and philosophies vanish without trace'. Nor can he accept the quadrants in their pure form, as each alone would either seem too dogmatic or become too compliant in attempting to meet all contingencies. He nevertheless experiments with his grid, presenting four possible combinations, of which the first is 'Systems and Agents'.[22]

Systems and Agents

Hollis finds it relatively feasible to connect Systems and Agents, which means that Explaining could be unified within itself at an individual level and holistic level. Hollis has indicated his scepticism about Rational Choice theory and Games theory, because of the mechanistic flavour of asserting that agents' preferences are to be inferred from the pattern of their choices. He would, at the very least, wish to introduce a Humean component, i.e. that we are determined in our actions by our emotions and that such actions do not necessarily reflect our preferences in any rational sense. However, individuals as agents are influenced by social circumstances and market forces and Hollis accords some validity to this model of human life, because he knows that many of our actions

are indeed determined by resources, economic factors and geographical constraints, all from a systemic level.

Games and Actors

The second attempt at blending is undertaken, following Hollis's matrix, between 'Games' and Actors. This Understanding half of the matrix lends itself relatively well to a blend of individualism and holism, because social groupings, being intersubjective, cannot exist without social actors. Role play is a construct that puts individuals together, even if we are sceptical about how to define the mercurial characteristics of human personalities. Hollis believes that the ability of hermeneutics to help us to understand norms of behaviour better than Explanation can, is evidence that we can put some enduring faith in Understanding. He does, however, warn us of the intractability of the philosophical problem of other Minds; how *do* other people really think and how does my understanding of them square with how they understand me?

Games and Systems

The third pairing becomes very difficult, as it attempts to blend Explaining and Understanding. 'Games' and Systems could only blend through a truce between naturalism and hermeneutics. This seems unlikely, as both disagree about where to start: if there are no theory-free facts (as hermeneutics may seek to explore), then naturalism cannot defend itself ontologically or in terms of methods. In other words, if the world is not perceivable in terms of absolute truths, then natural sciences cannot assert that their scientific methods are any more capable of being objective than those of hermeneutics. As each is competing against the other to have the definitive say, then both may be too busy justifying themselves to unite.

Agents and Actors

Finally, Hollis considers bringing together agents and actors, another blending of Explaining and Understanding. It is fascinating to consider individuals who combine rational choice-making with socially determined fulfilment of roles and active, sensitive responses to moral issues. That would be the human race at its best. Unfortunately we are partially determined by normative pressures, by moral issues and by our own desires (if there is no penalty for parking my car antisocially I may

do it and justify my actions by saying that otherwise I will be late picking up my child from school). Hollis's view of society may be rather monolithic: he asserts that rational agents do not respond to the normative and moral pressures that strengthen the social fabric of culture against too many rips. Yet normative and moral pressures may not be the dominant ones, as individual desires may defy analysis and control. Hollis's arguments preclude satisfactory combining of Explaining and Understanding. The explaining theories cannot conjoin happily with the hermeneutic ones and this reflects my experience of inspection systems.

In this expanded version of Hollis's matrix for Explaining and Understanding, I have used his text to illustrate his matrix, and added my own examples in italic script:

Table 2 Matrix: expanded Explanation, Understanding, individualism, holism grid

	Explanation	*Understanding*
holism	**Systems**: objective, deterministic Plants, machines, insects, human bodies *Teacher Training Agency* (TTA) *Ofsted inspection system* (HMI) *Spradley*	**Games**: intersubjective hermeneutics Politics, religion, philosophy rules, practices, forms of life *School life and school relationships among staff, among pupils*
individualism	**Agents**: mechanical calculators with given preferences, determined partly by market forces etc. Rational Choice theory? Game theory *Ofsted inspectors/HMI inspectors*	**Actors**: subjective meaning Role = amalgam of institutional and 'theatrical' role play Role conflict *The problem of Other Minds, Bob Teachers in schools*

Hollis is attracted strongly to the top right-hand column, but sees no way of melding Explanation and Understanding. (Thus the British Teacher Training Agency, or TTA, as system and Her Majesty's Inspectors, HMI, as agents of that system as well as of their own systems, will always be incompatible with mentors (school-based trainers of student teachers) in primary and secondary schools, who are the actors, engaged in complex human interactions.) He believes that, in the end, we must declare ourselves for one or the other grouping of ideas, however broad, and clarify our moral reasons for our position. Given Hollis's arguments, it is impossible to combine Explaining and Understanding, and method remains integral to Explaining. Little surprise then if many researchers find it difficult to combine different methods. If, on balance

and reluctantly, Hollis cedes hegemonic status to Explaining in its domineering, although ambivalent, commitment to serving rational, analytical thought, I wondered what an exponent of 'Understanding' would say and turned to hermeneutics.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical reconciliation

The hermeneutics movement, as the theory and practice of interpretation (Greek *hermeneia*), attempts to look very closely at the ways in which we think, the ways we select and marshal our evidence and the types of understanding that we bring to bear on evidence, such as the artefacts of our human existence and texts. It developed, in its various modern continental forms, out of Husserl's work, although scholars have used it to interpret religious text for centuries. Heidegger, one of Husserl's many influential pupils, takes Husserl's quest for the pure unknowing state of full insight, uncontaminated by earthly stuffs, and applies hermeneutics to the study of ancient Greek and German texts in a dark, power-seeking manner, as discussed by Norris.[23] Conjuring with the Greek *aletheia*, to seek Heidegger's postulated 'unknowingness' that in fact became embedded in the pure race debates of the Third Reich, could not be further from the hermeneutical phenomenology of Ricoeur, who invites us to attempt a critical hermeneutics of the self, through text and action. Nor should Ricoeur be seen within the hermeneutical relativism that Norris describes, starting with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer (and Ricoeur would seem to fall into this list of hermeneuticists) and ending with Rorty, ironic relativism incarnate, according to Norris.[24] By referring to depth-hermeneutics, often without distinguishing between writers as different as Gadamer and Heidegger, Norris seems to imply that hermeneutical philosophy is as unsound as we know Heidegger to be,[25] and only occasionally gives Ricoeur credit for good ideas. In *Resources of Realism*,[26] for example, Norris uses Ricoeur's work briefly to discuss the difficulty inherent in Davidson's use of causal arguments to fix actions, thereby precluding interest in intention as a defining feature of action. Sometimes Ricoeur receives a footnote, as in Norris's otherwise excellent book, *Deconstruction and the Unfinished Product of Modernity*.[27] Within philosophy itself, then, there may be subtle ways of playing variations on the Explaining and Understanding game, as Norris's critical realist dismissal of hermeneutics seems to imply to me. We shall see that Ricoeur's focus on text is in fact very different both from that of those for whom text is, in pluralistic terms, the ultimate reality and those for whom it is, in relativistic terms, only one of many possible, all equally valid, readings. Text is the way for the self to

understand itself better, to circumvent the English-speaking philosophers' 'mistrust of speculation' and to struggle towards attempted understanding of tentative, provisional yet ethically enlightening truths.[28]

In seeking to develop a phenomenon that resists both 'alienating distance' and 'participatory belonging' Ricoeur chooses text, both for its inherent characteristics (its narrativity, its ability to cross aesthetic boundaries and its ability to represent ideational imagery in metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony) and for its ability to combine explaining and understanding. Text is more than intersubjective communication, it can be the arena for ideas to develop and turn themselves into action. Text uses distance to decontextualize itself, moving away from its author and giving itself to its readers, with their own interpretation of the text and their relationship to it. The text is separate from both its creator and its interpreter and creates the reader anew, by the world that unfolds 'in front of the text'. There are many ways of doing this, whether, for example, in narrative form that we can follow as it mimics our thoughts and actions, or in a register that allows more than one voice to inhabit the text, or by using vocabulary that is inclusive. This textual richness that Ricoeur reclaims for philosophy, not ceding it to literature, includes our actions, which can also be 'read' and interpreted as a sort of text. Nebulous as this may sound to a critical realist, Ricoeur's approach recommends pluralism without relativism, a way to plan the future with as many potential, yet moral, options as possible while we look ahead. Our identity is dependent upon our understanding of time and narrative, the means by which we should be able to develop a narrative ethics based on a complex balance between stability and change, partially understood and tolerated in oneself and thus in others. In order to think about what it is that I believe in, I find in Ricoeur the courage to explore the ontological significance of my actions: what it is that I believe is worth doing. From my reading of Norris, a highly significant philosopher, I find a tendency to use the word ontology when Norris is not satisfied with the quality of the argument ('Quine's ontological-relativist argument',[29] 'our choice between various refential frameworks or ontological schemes' as discussed by Quine,[30] Davidson's debates about 'standard objections from the cultural or ontological-relativist quarter').[31] Surrounded as we are by superficial debates that start and finish at the level of method (how to measure outcomes, how to meet quality assurance requirements), it is vitally important that Norris helps us to deconstruct intellectually dishonest arguments about epistemology. Yet there may be a Ricoeurian territory that he does not acknowledge, related to the more hermeneutical ideas about beliefs, faith and hope. Ricoeur, in his way, does not reject existing frameworks either. He deconstructs and reconstructs, asking if the social sciences can have their ball back so that we may use both Explaining

and Understanding to interpret our actions and lives and those of others. We should insist on the right to employ any combination of investigative, interpretative approach that is revelatory, in order to have choices in how we 'push the rock of Sisyphus up again, restore the ontological ground that methodology has eroded away'.[32]

In hermeneutics, the ultimate ontological question (what exists and what do we believe is worthwhile?) is about the meaning of being and, for Ricoeur, it is not possible to find a satisfactory answer because the question is so complex that it cannot even be framed. For Ricoeur the best we can do will be partial and perspectival because we cannot approach truth head-on, only ever sideways, through symbols, stories, images, ideologies and texts.[33] Emancipatory text is not, as Rorty has it, only able to show us our cruelty from within literature, but is common to philosophy as long as the text is seen as a way of understanding ourselves better. Ricoeur is not denying our ownership of the meaning in text, he is reclaiming it for us. His belief is that existence and being are ultimately full of meaning, as encapsulated in the title of Van Leeuwen's book about Ricoeur: *The Surplus of Meaning*.[34] Ricoeur's philosophy, at least partly because of his debt to Hegel's dialectical thinking, is also more overtly optimistic than that of Hollis. This optimism, tempered by grief at human suffering, is robust, analysed by van Leeuwen in 'Toward a "style of yes"'.[35] How far can optimism take us? By this point I seem to have got myself into deeper trouble with philosophy than without it, as expressed in pragmatic terms by Becker: 'A lot of energy is wasted hashing over philosophical details, which often have little or nothing to do with what researchers actually do'.[36] Yet my concern about the tyranny of method, as I see it, is repeatedly endorsed by increased levels of monitoring in education, imposed by central government during the last decade of the 20th century. Various governmental agencies in the UK, such as the Teacher Training Agency and the Office for Standards in Education, are focusing on measurement in a positivist manner that exhausts schools and higher education institutions, as they try to squeeze human nature into the grids, forms and tables that are seen as gauges of excellence. Positivist competences, as encapsulated in Taylor's phrase 'brute datum',[37] confound wisdom and celebrate banality, becoming more powerful than creativity.

Text as emancipatory, heuristic device

Mediation by signs, mediation by symbols and, most significantly, mediation by texts are three areas at the core of Ricoeur's life's work, as seen in *From Text to Action* and *Time and Narrative*. The text is defined as any discourse fixed by writing, and as an archive available for individual

and collective meaning.[38] The word 'discourse' is used in many complex ways. For Ricoeur it is a textual event, a sequence longer than a sentence that belongs to a literary genre, bears the marks of an individual's style and is meant to communicate meaning, although the meaning intended may not be the meaning as understood.[39] Aristotelian poetics as the laws of composition that make discourse into a narrative text, are not restricted to literature, and are vital for philosophy too.[40] For Ricoeur the text is the cultural ground on which the reader appropriates (*aneignet*) the author's thoughts, which are alienated (*verfremdet*) from the author by the act of writing.[41] By using structural analysis in order to understand text, explanation becomes the obligatory path of understanding.

This combination runs counter to Dilthey. Ricoeur sees Dilthey's legacy to us as a deceit: Dilthey believed that any explanatory attitude was borrowed from the methodology of the natural sciences and applied incorrectly to the human sciences.[42] He struggled later in his writings to become less historical and more idealistic in the manner of Husserl (1859–1938). Dilthey's struggle is symptomatic of this area of phenomenological/hermeneutical debate and is also seen by Ricoeur as a problem for all research communities, i.e. how can we move from the particular to the general and back again?[43] For Ricoeur, Explanation should be a liberating mechanism in this endeavour, a hermeneutic of suspicion that challenges artificial constructs defined by the human will. He is suspicious of the wilful creation of constructs (such as methodologies) by the conscious human mind, because he believes that the self can perceive itself only indirectly, through cultural and historical phenomena. Ricoeur attempts to drive a middle road between Gadamer, with his 'dialogue which we are' as the basis of the historically bound hermeneutic task, and Habermas, with his regulative ideal of completely unconstrained dialogue, free of prejudice and ideology. Explanation, for Ricoeur, may seem to be able both to demolish and also to embody that which it attacks, namely the arrogance of the will in setting up definitive answers. Thus Explanation is not only connected to a method such as statistics. At an epistemological level, looking at what it is that we know, Explanation is a vital part of interpretation, helping us to understand the type of alienation from the self that scientists may have to adopt sometimes in order to attain objectivity. Explanation also allows us to develop a sort of dialectic that helps us to manage the contradictory aspects of our human state, avoiding repression of some parts at the cost of others. He cites semiology, as the study of signs and symbols, that goes beneath the surface events of language (*parole*) to investigate a variety of concealed signifying systems (*langue*).[44] The former allows us to interpret the latter and sometimes these roles are reversed. In the realm of metaphor, Explanation can help us to analyse metaphor at the

word level; Understanding can help us to interpret metaphor at the sentence level (and more); and the processes are interdependent.[45]

He is offering us a flexible combination of investigative approaches that draw profitably both on explanatory and on interpretative models. Ricoeur shows his debt to Saussure by discussion of *langue* and *parole* and takes it further by discussing the tension between the textual event and its meaning. The former happens and can be subject to the laws of explanation. The latter is not subject to the same temporal laws as an event, because the meaning of an event endures beyond its time and thus it needs to be responded to hermeneutically. The text creates a world of its own, with the author as the artisan of a work of language, an artisan who has no ultimate control over his or her intended meaning.[46] We all use combinations of Explaining and Understanding in our work and our play and, at a pragmatic level, its obviousness is banal, yet still the polarization and the worries of Hollis are there. From his Muslim perspective, perhaps reminiscent of Schleiermacher, Salleh Ja'afar describes a similar relationship in Islamic hermeneutics, between *tafsir* (rational interpretation of the external features of text such as syntax) and *ta'wil* (understanding the inner meanings of the text). He believes that the latter, more esoteric form, is simply a more intense form of *tafsir* and thus *ta'wil* complements the more rational with its more symbolic penetration of the text. He also writes of the 'extreme form of doubt' in modern Western critical discourse that is known as deconstruction.[47] He offers *ta'wil* as a form of Islamic hermeneutics that is predicated on a belief in the meaning of the text and invites exploration of the hidden meaning behind the text. Yet he writes of 'traditional hermeneutics' as if modern deconstructivism is the only significant characteristic of modern life and tradition is the only antidote.[48]

Ricoeur seems to have more confidence in our ability to see and withstand the potentially corrosive effects of such arguments than Salleh Ja'afar does, by inviting us to consider the inevitable provisionalities of historical (as of any other) truths. He sees the purpose of hermeneutics as being a better understanding of oneself[49] and he seeks a mediating path between the rational *cogito* of Descartes and the sceptical *anti-cogito* of Nietzsche.[50] He always keeps a critical eye on the damage done by allowing research method to determine one's thinking with the 'excessive claims of methodologism'.[51] When writing of distanciation as a way of using text to give a distance that allows one to be relatively objective about phenomena, he comments that distanciation is 'not the product of methodology and hence something superfluous and parasitical'.[52] This resembles Thomas's 'tyranny of method' and the 'myth of rationalism'.[53] In Ricoeur's writing each of these is linked to the others and with his understanding of their relationship to the self. All these big ideas (history, ideology, prejudice, distanciation/alienation and

belonging) are used to help us reach a dialectical interpretation of ontology, in order that Explaining and Understanding can stop antagonizing each other. This makes it possible for us to select research methods according to the suitability of the chosen method and not be unreasonably determined by particular interests or ideologies.

This process involves practical appropriation of meaning, which transforms the individual and the individual's practices. Ricoeur puts great emphasis on that rich vein of practical knowledge that is found in the moment of meeting between the memory and the expectation, between what we know and what we hope for (what Ricoeur calls '*l'espace d'expérience*' and '*horizon d'attente*'). In this, Norris, still referring to Ricoeur back in 1993, likens Ricoeur to Empson, working towards a critical hermeneutics that gives symbols the linguistic creativity to allow us to move backwards in narrated time and forward in imagination among different cognitions, more or less emotional, rational and time-bound.[54] We need to reclaim the author's voice so that the text can be used heuristically by the writer and the reader. Fiction, history and time become one single problem, using narrativity to tell each other how it could be, but resisting the temptation to adduce false polarities or causalities,[55] and to dodge method as it spins back with a metaphysical turn.

The human, as subject and object of the human sciences, can never be directly analysed, but understood only relative to others and to ourselves.[56] Hermeneutics thus challenges any 'naive realism' that, as Drumm argues, equates 'taking a look' with objectivity.[57] This is not to say that we do not need to be pragmatic in our daily lives. Indeed, as Husserl pointed out, we organize our lives by relying on naturalistic perception and we know that rejection of empirical values can lead to loss of credibility. However, we should also remember that over-dependence on empirical evidence leads to loss of meaning.[58] Ricoeur's philosophy gives us no answers as to how exactly to balance empiricism and hermeneutics, but insists that we are capable of judging the situation to take morally appropriate decisions that are not unduly governed by method. He also asserts the necessity of tolerating the uncertainties that emerge if we accept doubt and the provisional nature of truths.

Linguistic, ethico-practical philosophy

I focus here on mediation by texts, as this impinges on my professional life as an instrument of the government in training teachers, and as a local authority educational psychologist, for whom action as readable text is of paramount importance. Psychologists' reports can create a textual myth about a child that is damaging – or productive – depending on how

the opportunity is used. For Ricoeur the human is linguistic, practical and ethical and we can use the social sciences to help resolve difficulties, as long as we are not over-determined by method. Ricoeur believes that we can use hermeneutical concepts and ways of thinking to ensure that there is a relationship between the particular specifics of life and the generalities that we use to make holistic sense of them.[59] He sees a surplus of meaning that necessitates provisionality, yet offers multiple interpretations and fruitful possibilities in return for such instability. He provides an antidote to the technically precise models of reality that currently occupy a privileged position in our educational culture, with his 'philosophy without any absolute'. This sounds like Rorty the ironist, for whom our descriptions of reality are relative more than they are absolute, leading him to believe that philosophy cannot help, but literature can. Yet where Rorty seems to suggest that we are too ironic to be able to decide how to think and act, Ricoeur develops a discussion that offers the 'credence and the trust – of existing in the mode of selfhood'.[60] Moreover Ricoeur has faith in text to help us to be active and moral, but not text as limited to literature or philosophy. He urges us to consider fiction, history and time as interrelated textualized problems for philosophy to approach. For him, all human experience is shaped by the temporal features of narrative; imputations of causality, reminiscences, alienation and prejudice. This makes it possible to describe the difficult recursive loop back to the particular, the individual, after we have established generalities that sound holistically credible. Ricoeur places his hopes in 'the dialogue which we are' that embodies the way we talk to each other and write for each other. He wants to see whether such dialogue is the universal element that allows hermeneutics to be de-regionalized, although he knows it will not be easy.[61]

It is revelatory to illustrate my philosophical argument with one of the professional examples from the (mainly) non-philosophical region of children with special needs, such as my challenge to the textual creation of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder[62] with its potential, I believe, for appalling moral and physiological consequences. This socio-pharmaceutical construct is presented as a recently discovered medical syndrome, and the research-endorsed solution is its 'treatment' by an addictive mind-altering drug. My clinical experience as a child psychologist provides me with much evidence-based information about normalizing processes, about the 'cure' being unrelated to the problem and about the need to support the family as well as the child. My arguments may have to fight for their right to use philosophy and ethics in a realm, such as psychology, that derives its strengths from its clinical, evidence-based specialities, easily taken to be generalizable. This critically analysed movement between the particular and the general is the way to let philosophy into our lives. In lecturing to masters level

students (mostly teachers) on research methods I note that our philo-
sophical debates rarely appear in their essays. Yet, since I have started
using philosophical discourse, there is a new confidence on their part in
challenging the morality and usefulness of some research, such as the
covert positivist presenting as an empathetic people-person ethnogra-
pher. How unnecessary this obfuscatory polarization is, yet how preva-
lent and potent, as Hollis reminds me.

In bidding tentatively for truth, Ricoeur makes ambitious claims for
language as understood by hermeneutics, because language frees us from
the particular and from the here and now. He asks us to agree that
hermeneutical philosophy has the same scope as natural sciences,
offering to base scientific investigation in the same 'experience of the
world which precedes and envelops the knowledge and the power of
science'.[63] He also believes that such universality must be derived from
the particular discipline to the general and that this ontological project
is based on a consensus of understanding about our shared histories. A
problem here, as discussed already, is his belief that it may be a one-
way journey from particular to general (or regional to universal as he
calls it). There are several solutions that Ricoeur presents to the one-
way ticket. One solution is that of creativity through, for example,
rigorous, respectful discussion,[64] challenging ideas without necessarily
annihilating them. Another suggestion is that we re-discover inspira-
tional text. For Ricoeur text belongs neither to its author nor its reader
and can thus enable us to communicate at horizons that allow us to put
distances between our individual identity and our shared desires (using
Gadamer's imagery). This can open up a new world to the reader.[65] This
new world invites exploration of new understanding by using artistic,
symbolic powers to free the mind from the particular, factual constraints
of daily certainty.[66] Language is easily abused by being neutralized and
rendered unable to speak for itself through metaphor and ambiguity.
The seamless deceit that can be created by such flat text deprives us of
a place in the text from which we can identify and question our beliefs.
Language can also become over-refined and introverted with depen-
dence on nuances that are understood by very few. Ricoeur's preoccu-
pation with 'the fullness, the diversity and the irreducibility of the
various *uses* of language'[67] can help us to regain the richness that is
bleached out of language often by that bureaucratic neutrality of tone,
seeking to be authoritative in a manner that brooks no dissent.[68] Sub-
sequent to this small act of rebellion the mind may be able to apply
clearer vision and understanding to daily life, thus closing the circle of
particular to general and back again with enhanced understanding and
tolerance of difference as much as seeking similarities. Another proposal
is that we look again at action. Becker sees action as clean, pragmatic
and reliable; this opens up the empirical model to be admired. Ricoeur

fashions a different (comparably valid) way of looking at action, by seeing it as multiple-layered and ambiguous, yet suffused with significance about the possibility of actions that are more good than they are evil[69] (Kearney, 1996). Such dialectical hermeneutics is inevitably complex because language and action must not only seek to understand that which has already happened, but also to help us anticipate and prepare future possible worlds.[70] Ricoeur sees his philosophy as a philosophical anthropology that needs to move in the direction of ethics. He presents a kind of theory in action in early work such as *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, with a phenomenological approach. Later, in *Time and Narrative*, he sees action from a more hermeneutical view, in which to narrate action is to provide paradigms for action. Later still, in *Oneself as Another*, he develops a narrative ethics from the tension between describing and prescribing, such that future actions emerge from a present narrative of past events.[71]

The self and the other

Just as each of us has a personal history, so each of us has a cultural, historical, philosophical past. In *Oneself as Another* (1992) Ricoeur visits again these, his classic themes: the fragility and the fallible nature of each human, struggling to find meaning in past action, current state and future options and the terrible tragedies of history. Ricoeur endorses the Hegelian notion that philosophy consists essentially of the interpretation of philosophical tradition. His philosophical analysis of the human sciences renews my confidence that it is possible to believe in human nature, in combinations of approach and provisional truths.

If we are to understand the world from inside it, as reconstructive hermeneutics would have us do, and also explain it as an observer from outside, as in naturalism and empiricism, then research method will not be enough. Nor will Hollis's arguments be sufficient to help me resolve my daily dilemmas because both polarities (Explaining and Understanding) are still there and both require a foundational belief in something. Norris's fluent, profoundly moral rejection of postmodern derision at historical facts and scientific truth-claims,[72] resonates very strongly with Ricoeur, but Norris, as a critical realist, does not take that tentative road towards uncertain truths that are nevertheless underpinned by beliefs in human potential. In his writings, Norris no longer refers to Ricoeur and prefers the 'conceptual precision and sustained analytic power' that he finds in Derrida, the deconstructivist attention to discrepancies and weaknesses in arguments.[73] My response involves a 'revolt against positivism',[74] and also an attempt to make space to debate more than method can provide, and I am not sure that curling

up inside others' arguments is liberating enough. There is only enough room in method to justify faith in method, so we have to deny method that hegemonic position and create that space ourselves with fertile texts, with uncertainty and with acts that permit several interpretations from different viewpoints.

Hollis is proved right unless we take the step towards some kind of active, non-rational faith in human nature. In fact Hollis writes on this himself.[75] For Hollis these are projects with insuperable internal contradictions, because he wishes to measure the degree of reasonableness in our decisions. Ricoeur's reconstructive hermeneutical philosophy, by contrast, can give us back the understanding to assert that we have beliefs that go beyond our faith in measurement. There is also a sense in which we have rendered ourselves incapable of narrative in a new world that is calibrated by creation of objects, still believes in polar states such as rationality or anarchy and measures itself in data. We need to re-assert our right to know how to use debate, conversation and philosophical argument. We need to contextualize the empiricist search for hard data and rationality within multiple interpretations of text and action and language, looking ahead to imagine and create a better world, for which we have a return ticket.

Conclusions

As a child psychologist, educationalist, researcher and philosopher, I find Ricoeur's hermeneutical philosophy gives me the strength, both intellectual and moral, to continue to be the thoughtful ironist I always was, in Rorty's description.[76] There can be no whitewash and my doubts can be disabling. Nor does Ricoeur stop me hankering after the certainty of Rorty's metaphysician, yet his ideas help me struggle to have more faith in myself and others than my ironic turn would let me do. Ricoeur invites us to believe in our capacity to be moral in the process of being unsure about what we know. Indignation about perceived evils in others has, as Ricoeur puts it, a 'sweeping reactive character'.[77] This helps us to identify the intolerable, as I found myself aggravated by over-dependence within the research community on positivist methods, both overt and covert. Indignation must be replaced by a 'reflective equilibrium' that enables us to be careful, to know how to avoid harm to others and to understand, just as I am confident now that I can use many different research methods and interpret their findings by using my philosophical understanding. The rehabilitation of Explanation as foil, complement and companion to Understanding is a way of reconstructing the human project through interpretation, to 'combine analytical precision with ontological testimony'.[78]

If we can tolerate the uncertainty of choice and provisionality in the multiple truths of our lives that can never be fully grasped, such a complex reality will allow us more opportunity to create a workable future than if we confine ourselves to living predominantly by the standards of what we can measure and repeat. Philosophy as a living language of ideas can remind us of our beliefs and encourage us not to be defined solely by the pragmatism of the Explainer, the manager, or the assessor. I reject the deconstructive nihilism to be found in De Man, as analysed by Norris.[79] Hermeneutical philosophy helps us to resolve one of the most distracting dilemmas of our time, clarifying with optimism why deconstruction does not necessarily 'lead us to an ethical and textual free-for-all where anything goes'.[80] There is the artificially polarized deconstruction by qualitative researchers of quantitative methods[81] and vice versa.[82] We also need to reject the positivist attempt to ward off uncertainty, an attempt that, in dulling our use of language, lowers our resistance to banality and insists upon visual evidence, accurate measurement and denial of ambiguity (as seen, for example, in many government inspector reports). What happens if we do not know what to do after setting aside the bureaucratic, form-filling behaviour that is offered as antidote to the self-irony, the cheerful nihilism, the postmodern illusion that it is too late to try? As Norris believes, this postmodern phenomenon constitutes a 'large-scale failure of intellectual and moral nerve'.[83] Norris's approach is a critical realism that depends a great deal on rational argument and seems uninterested in the hermeneutical philosophy that I find so useful in reconstructive thought.

Ricoeur, with a sort of non-conclusive dialectic of hope, can offer us much to work on, if we accept the provisionalities of moral truth, the need to be conciliatory and to rehabilitate text and the everyday life of doing what we believe to be worthwhile. We can, if we choose, be inspired by language that invites us to consider new possibilities, as explained by Kearney:[84]

> This hermeneutic task of recovering language in its symbolic fullness is, for Ricoeur, a singularly modern one. It is precisely because language has become so formalised, transparent and technical in the contemporary era that the need is all the greater to rediscover language's creative powers of symbolisation.

For both Norris and Ricoeur there is an urgent need to challenge our every premise, asserting our right and that of others to a humanity that is imperfect but better than a shrug. Ricoeur hopes that he contributes to 'arousing an interest in this philosophy on the part of analytical philosophers', as he attempts in *From Text to Action* (1991) and Norris hopes that it will be possible for both the so-called 'analytical' and 'continental' schools of philosophy to 'preserve a commitment to the values

of truth-based intersubjective enquiry'.[85] For both Ricoeur and Norris, there is another: Spinoza. Both see Spinoza as a highly significant thinker and, in a future project, it may be possible to reconcile some of their philosophical differences by exploring his texts. Spinoza arouses many different interpretations and is similar to Derrida in that respect. One of Spinoza's greatest achievements, perhaps, is his ability to combine the rigorous, detailed arguments of philosophy and the visionary Philosophy with a capital 'P' of his guide for living. The power of life, of consciousness, the passion for everything that is the essence of Spinoza's vision for integrating mind and body, may be able to help us to overcome the *ennui* affected by those of whom both Norris and Ricoeur are critical. I believe that we should bother about this because our world needs philosophers who work with each other instead of setting their texts against each other.

I am setting myself a five-year plan, with observable, measurable goals that will satisfy the Explainer in method, epistemology and ontology, and put into practice a Ricoeurian hermeneutics that combines different methods by which to interpret our world. There are several areas, of which a three-year government-funded project on teaching citizenship (working with the UK, India and Kenya) is one and the next five years of a ten-year project with the British Muslim community (which includes supporting Pakistani Kashmir in educational projects) is another. Integrating philosophical work into my research seminars is one way to bring philosophy back into university life and into everyday life. By considering the other we may be able to assert and then elide the specificities of our daily credo and establish some common truth-ground on which to sit and talk together, about our possible futures, pluralist yet not relativist.

An intellectual journey that started with my attempt to challenge the hegemony of method, led me beyond method and methodology into epistemology. With Ricoeur's approach to what we know, seeing history, narrative and prejudice, as Gadamer does, as givens to be deconstructed, I am better able now to go beyond self-irony and the irony of modern culture into an ontology of hope. On the way I no longer fear the tyranny of method. Discourse and data both have their place in reconstructive philosophies that require, as a necessary condition, suspension of disbelief about the worlds of others. Then comes the more adequate synthesis of both allowing the other to be wrong (*le droit de l'autrui à l'erreur*),[86] and also asserting our right to explore, together, why we think there may be horizons at which we can meet. Such horizons of understanding can be developed by shared professional and academic collaboration on joint projects that are ethical, are practical and create opportunities to talk. Hollis has the penultimate word, as his framing of the human condition is confluent with Ricoeur's, although more

rational-analytical. Hollis pleads for the reasons that inform our pursuit of the personal and the common good, yet finds himself perplexed in his efforts to understand people's actions.[87]

To my mind, Ricoeur has the last word. At this point in my intellectual development he embodies Rorty's 'final vocabulary'[88] for me, because Ricoeur's analysis of Explaining and Understanding gives me a metaphorical extension of quantitative and qualitative research methods, thereby helping me to explore the possibilities of a world 'in front of the text', no longer constrained by method and cognizant of higher stakes, namely the meaning of meaning. This attempt at a narrative ethics, made with the help of Ricoeur's work, exemplifies his hope that we can travel from the particular, individual (in this case research method) to the general, holistic (epistemological and ontological concerns) and back again to an intellectual life of purposeful engagement in live multi-disciplinary projects.

School of Education, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire, UK
[email: asbaumann@glos.ac.uk]

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Notes

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