

Moral Creativity in Paul Ricoeur's Poetic Hermeneutics

TIAN Yuqi, QIN Mingli

Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

Inclusiveness is a major feature of Paul Ricoeur's thought. The various stages of his thought development penetrate each other and realize the grafting of hermeneutics and phenomenology, hermeneutics and poetics of will. Based on that meaning comes from symbolism, Ricoeur turns to the philosophical dimension of doubt and trust by means of poetic hermeneutics. Starting from breaking the absolute status of cogito since Descartes, Ricoeur proposes the relationship between symbolism and language from the level of reflection. This kind of creative interpretation not only gives symbolism poetic significance, but also realizes the grafting of hermeneutics and poetics, and finally realizes the ontological sense of reinterpreting the existence of self in the existence of the world through moral creativity.

Keywords: Ricoeur, hermeneutics, symbolism, moral creativity

Paul Ricoeur is an outstanding phenomenological and hermeneutic master in France in the 20th century. Ye Xiushan has once commented on Ricoeur's ideological system that in the trend of contemporary French philosophy Ricoeur was not the most radical one, but the most solid and erudite one. The erudition of Ricoeur is mainly reflected in the inclusiveness of his ideological system, which not only contains the tradition of phenomenology, but also makes hermeneutics realize the unification with ontology, epistemology, and methodology in the process of grafting with phenomenology. Although Ricoeur does not complete the third volume on his poetics of will, he turns to the philosophical dimension of doubt and trust in the way of poetic hermeneutics. Starting from breaking the absolute position of cogito since Descartes, Ricoeur puts forward the moral creativity of symbolism and language to self-thought from the perspective of reflection, and finally realizes the purpose of re-understanding self-existence under the existence of the world at the ontological level.

At the same time, the inclusiveness of Ricoeur's thought is questioned by scholars. Michael Forster believes that from the perspective of the whole history of western hermeneutics, Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics shows an "obvious retrogression" (Forster, 2019, p. 267), especially compared with Herder and Schleiermacher's "rejecting religion from interpretation" (Forster, 2019, p. 267). However, Ricoeur's analysis of theology and mythology is not simply retrogression to religion, but regards mythology as the intermediary of the experience world and the experience of human being, not only from the perspective of epistemology, but also from the perspective of ontology, and examines the existence and significance of myth as the inherent event mode of the story itself. In Ricoeur's view, myth is a symbolism of human experience. In the process of being interpreted, the symbolism has its pre-set meaning. However, it still needs a certain degree of interpretation, because the symbolism itself is not complete. Only when it helps the will to form its own

TIAN Yuqi, Master degree candidate, School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.
QIN Mingli, Dr., Prof., School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

meaning in the world, can the symbolism achieve its own meaning. As a result, starting from the view that mythology as symbolisms, the Ricoeurian view of symbolism regards symbolism as the necessary path to cause thought and form meaning, and finally achieve the Ricoeurian theological hermeneutics.

Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics does not stop there. In the end, Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics points out the meaning of how will formed itself, which shows that the thought of poetics of will is contained in his theological hermeneutics. In this sense, symbolism is the poetic form of language, and interprets the original meaning of human nature. Meaning comes from the symbolism, and Ricoeur's creative interpretation gives the symbol poetic significance. Will is not formed from symbolic structures which inherited from language, nor from pure freedom in the use of these structures, but in the dynamic interaction between them. On the one hand, will creates meaning by immersing itself in symbol, so as to better interpret the world; on the other hand, symbol is not a formalized static object, but a possibility through which we can reimagine the meaning of our world. Symbols are not complete in themselves but realize their meaning only insofar as they contribute to the project of the will's ongoing formation of its own meaning in the world. What Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics intends to discover is not only the problem of simple language types, but also the philosophical ontological exploration of human self-meaning realized by moral creativity. Therefore, this paper will start from the poetic hermeneutics of Ricoeur, to explore the concept of early philosophy of symbolism in his thoughts, as well as the reinterpretation of self-existence in the existence of the world through this kind of moral creativity.

Moral Creativity Inherited From the Self

Moral creativity is the creativity that exists in and acts on the self. There has been a dispute between morality and poetry since ancient times, and most of them think that the separation between morality and poetry cannot be eliminated. Plato examines the poet and his significance in the *Republic* that "all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of the truth" (Plato, 1997, p. 1205). Plato's accusations against poets and poems can be divided into three aspects: philosophical, religious, and moral. Poets are not trusted on the moral level. On the one hand, they are considered to be imaginative fantasies rather than a true description of reality. On the other hand, the imitation of reality in poetry is too realistic, which leads to some citizens who cannot distinguish right from wrong by poetry, which is harmful to the citizens of city-state on the moral level. Aristotle, after inheriting parts from Plato, made a distinction between the two virtues: One is the virtue of wisdom (*phronesis*); the other is the virtue of behavior (*poiesis*). The former refers to good practice in society, which is derived from learning; the latter refers to the virtue of making goods or imitating the behavior in poetry and stories from practice. In Aristotle's philosophy, ethics is to explore the inner virtues of human beings, while poetics is to explore external virtues, such as manufacturing techniques and dramatic works. It can be seen that both of Plato and Aristotle made a distinction between poetics and morality, and the practical significance of poetry was also separated from morality in different degrees.

The separation between poetry and morality continues after Kant. In Kant's view, the close relationship between moral freedom and moral law is the freedom of rational existence to get rid of the restriction of natural causality law and act according to moral law through self-discipline of will, while aesthetics is a kind of spiritual activity without interests, which directly embodies "freedom". The separation between moral freedom and aesthetic freedom was further deepened by romanticism after Kant, in which creativity is attributed to the subjective and pure expression of genius behind literary works.

The moral creativity in Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics not only means the elimination of the separation between morality and poetry since Plato, but also the inclusiveness on the level of self will. Ricoeur's philosophy of will can be divided into three stages, including the essence of will, the empiricism of will, and the Poetics of will. Although he did not complete the third volume of poetics of will, he continued to deepen his poetics in the field of hermeneutics, and explored the creation of moral creativity for meaning and thought. The early Ricoeurian poetics of will referred to as the transcendental poetics by Ricoeur points to the possibility of curing "evil", that is, the possibility of reconciliation between will and self. Poetics here is understood as an attempt to grasp will at the source, using mythological terms to re-grasp will in creation.

In terms of the relationship between the self and the other, the inclusiveness of moral creativity in Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics is different from that of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer's fusion of vision is not only the integration of tradition and the present, but also the convergence between the interpreter and the interpretee, the self and the other. The inclusiveness of Ricoeur's moral creativity is first shown as the tolerance of others, and then manifested as a roundabout path of tolerance under his poetic hermeneutics, that is, starting from the self and returning to the self through the other, thus achieving the re-understanding and interpretation of the self. Ricoeurian moral creativity not only shows the tolerance to tradition and history, but also diverts from Gadamer's attention to tradition to the other. In Ricoeur's view, the historical experience and tradition contained in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is a pluralistic and open tension, and more importantly, a tension open to the present. What moral creativity needs to do is to realize the detour of self in this tension between tradition and the present, to return to self through the other in the language of poetry, and to form a new understanding of self in the existence of the world.

The moral creativity in Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics is a kind of creativity that breaks the separation between morality and poetry and of highly inclusiveness. The inclusiveness of Ricoeur's moral creativity is first shown as the tolerance of others, and then manifested as a roundabout path of tolerance under his poetic hermeneutics, that is, starting from the self and returning to the self through the other, so as to achieve a understanding and interpretation of the self. This moral creativity not only shows the tolerance of tradition and history, but also transfers Gadamer's attention to tradition to the other. However, where does this kind of moral creativity come from, and how does it complete the analysis of human meaning in the ontological sense? We should return to the starting point of Ricoeur's discussion on moral creativity, namely the doubt of self-will.

Moral Creativity Starting From the Symbolism

The ultimate goal of the moral creativity in Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics is to reveal the significance of human's existence at present. On the issue of realizing the revelation of the meaning of existence, Ricoeur turns his attention to symbolism and metaphor, which is also a powerful criticism of Descartes' dualism of body and mind. In modern philosophy since Descartes, the self-will represented by cogito has always maintained the position of truth without preconditions. Ricoeur and his contemporaries point directly to the mind-body dualism in western thoughts since Descartes that emphasizes consciousness and despise body in different forms. Foucault, by emphasizing the importance of body, as well as in-depth analysis of the system of discipline and punishment in modern society, reveals the fundamental purpose of training the body to improve its effectiveness. On this level, on the one hand, Ricoeur coincides with Foucault, that is, to subvert the dualism of body and mind which emphasizes consciousness and despises body since Descartes, and on the other hand, he exposes the falsity of self-consciousness proposed by hermeneutics, which is also the most innovative point of his thought.

The innovation of Ricoeur's symbolic philosophy mainly focuses on two aspects. On the one hand, Ricoeur's body view is the most direct point of view to break Descartes' dualism of body and mind. "The body has appeared twice, once as the body as the subject, and the second as an unnamed subject of experience" (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 12). In *Freedom and Nature*, Ricoeur, inheriting Marcel's thought that the body is subordinate to human body, directly challenges Descartes' view that the body is separated from cogito. The body is not only a simple subject of experience or a tool freely used for the self or the other, but also the existence of constituting self-meaning. In Ricoeur's view, the body gives the ego an "involuntary" need, desire, energy, and temperament. When they become "voluntary", that is, they are freely, reflexively, and creatively incorporated into the self's actions and narratives; these are meaningful. This is what Ricoeur meant by saying that the body is part of the will. The body is not only the object and tool used, but also a part of self-intentionality, which is the way for the body to exist in the world.

On the other hand, Descartes seeks the absolute truth and the starting point of philosophy through the method of doubt, which is an illusion of self-consciousness for Ricoeur. Cogito is just a kind of false existence, while thinking starts from the language that has exists in the world.

Symbolism gives the idea that cogito is in existence, not out of existence. Ricoeur puts the symbolism and its language at the starting point of his poetical hermeneutics, and separates the symbolism and its language from the pure semantic research, giving it the ontological significance, which lays the ontological foundation for the later exploration of human meaning. As a result, Ricoeur's research has entered the field of skeptical hermeneutics.

Ricoeur's skeptical hermeneutics once again embodies the inclusiveness of his thoughts. By absorbing Marx's thought of economic interests, Nietzsche's will to power, and more importantly, Freud's psychoanalysis, Ricoeur brings the philosophical thoughts not included in the history of western hermeneutics into his skeptical hermeneutics. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur (1970) interprets it from the conscious level to the unconscious level by absorbing Freud's psychoanalysis into his skeptical hermeneutics. As mentioned above, Ricoeur tries to give symbolic existential meaning. In his field of skeptical hermeneutics and different from Heidegger, Ricoeur tries to move towards ontology through a way of roundabout. Firstly, it interprets the text by means of semantics, and then reaches existence through reflection. The means of more important is reflection. Only through reflection can we distinguish the direct consciousness from the false consciousness, and finally reach the level of existence. As Ricoeur said, such a way of roundabout is a process of disillusionment. The fantasy that he wants to dispel is what Descartes called "self-consciousness"; the philosophical starting point he wants to re-establish is the existing symbol and its language.

To realize the revelation of moral creativity to the meaning of existence, Ricoeur turns his attention to symbolism. At the same time, his symbolic philosophy of moral creativity was also a powerful criticism of Descartes' dualism of body and mind. On the one hand, Ricoeur subverts the dualism of body and mind which emphasizes consciousness but ignores body since Descartes, holding that a body is not only a simple experience subject or a tool freely used for the self or the other, but also constitutes the meaning of the self; on the other hand, by exposing the illusion of self-consciousness and taking the existing symbol and its language as the starting point of thinking, Ricoeur enters the stage of reveling of moral creativity in language.

The Moral Creativity of Interpreting the Meaning of Human Existence

Hermeneutics is a discipline about "interpretation", and its primary task is to interpret and explore "meaning". With tragic mythology as the medium, Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics explores the generation and

interpretation of meaning by returning to the inherent event mode of the story itself through the symbols in the mythology. In a way of learning the truth from fiction, mythology substitutes the whole human history into a fictional history, symbolizing the whole human event with individual human events, and the history of the whole period with a period of history. In this way, a highly concentrated and generalized story is formed. In Ricoeur's view, mythology is no longer a simple theological concept of story, but a collective human story about existence. The function of mythology is to determine the paradigm for the meaning of human existence, and the symbol of myth is open to experience, so as to realize the transmission of meaning.

The two dimensions of moral creativity are also elucidated in the symbol of mythology. One dimension is that the symbol itself gives meaning and thus creates ideas. Ricoeur advocates interpreting the symbols in myth with the dual attitude of doubt and trust, so as to realize the creative promotion of symbols to meaning. Doubt means to be alert to and not limited by the surface meaning of symbol, while trust is to be attentive to the double meanings of the symbol. Not being limited to the interpretation of single symbol at the level of semantics, Ricoeur goes a further step on the basis of semantics, combining various symbols revealed by myths into an organic system, and restoring and revealing symbols. A symbol has its pre-set meaning in the process of being interpreted, but it still needs a certain degree of meaning interpretation, because the symbol itself is not complete; only when it helps the will to form its own meaning in the world, can the symbol achieve its own meaning. In this sense, symbol is the poetic form of language, which interprets the original meaning of human nature. Meaning comes from the symbol, and Ricoeur's creative interpretation gives the symbol poetic significance.

Will is not formed from symbolic structures inherited from language, nor the pure freedom in the use of these structures, but in the dynamic and continuous interaction between them. Will creates meaning by immersing itself in symbols, so as to better interpret the world; and symbol is not a static object, but a possibility, through which we can reimagine the meaning of our world. The Ricoeurian so-called attitude of trust is manifested in such a kind of trust; that is, through the possibility of symbolism, we can reimagine and reinterpret the meaning of the world we live in. What Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics wants to express here is not only the problem of simple language types, but also the problem of human significance in philosophical ontology, that is, to reinterpret the existence of self in the existence of the world.

The second dimension of moral creativity is creativity of language. The creativity of poetic hermeneutics lies in the self's ability to use language to make semantic creation. In the final analysis, the ability of self to innovate language is the ability to reorganize heterogeneous genes in language and produce new semantics. Metaphor provides readers with new semantics by linking irrelevant words. As Ricoeur described in *The Living Metaphor*, metaphor is usually composed of multiple terms, and the creation of semantics is not completed in a single term, but generated by the interactive comparison between multiple terms. Therefore, the meaning of metaphor is not generated in the self-closed world, but in the self-world which has been changed in the process of interpretation.

The moral creativity of Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics shows a strong consideration of reader. Both fictional and historical narratives have their own meanings. They are important firstly as symbols of the objects in the world, and what is more important is that they creatively integrate different events, characters, and plots, and thus open up to meaning world of readers. The narrative characters and plots are not only the events of the text itself, but also an imaginative possibility for readers to remodel their own meaning world. The event in language is the reader's self-interpretation of the event. As mentioned in the first part of this paper, there is a

tradition of separating morality from poetics in western thoughts. This separation also shows that the creativity of poetics is attributed to the author and the text, separated from the readers; among them, romantics attribute "meaning" completely to the author under the text. This kind of separation tradition has been strongly rejected in Ricoeur's moral creativity.

A thousand readers make a thousand Hamlets. Only when Hamlet's dilemma changes the reader's self-understanding and interpretation, can Hamlet's dilemma be meaningful. In Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics, moral creativity lies in the reader's present self, and language loses its meaning without readers and interpretation. Taking the modern novels which focus on the description of the protagonist's psychological reality as an example, it is important not only to understand the protagonist's real psychology and emotion, but also the readers' interpretation and understanding of their own world beyond the novel. When reading Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, readers should not only understand Mrs. Dalloway's psychological changes, but also the readers' deeper interpretation of themselves, such as life, death, and hope in the world they live in.

Another dimension of moral creativity in the Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics is to restore the ability of language to construct the world. As mentioned above, meaning has been given in the symbol, which makes people promote the thinking of life. However, the simple philosophical reflection cannot completely promote the thinking of life. What Ricoeur wants to recover through moral creativity is the metaphorical and richness of language, and the ability of language to construct the world. This is similar to the natural science that Gadamer wanted to resist in *Truth and Method*. With people's pursuit of natural science and technology, the gap between mythological symbols and modern language began to occur, and the accuracy of language instead of the richness of language became the primary goal, so as to meet people's needs in technical production and natural science. In fact, Ricoeur's emphasis on creativity in language is to restore the ability of symbolic language to create self and the other world through attaching importance to symbolic meaning in mythological language.

In general, the moral creativity in Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics includes two dimensions. One is that the symbol gives meaning to itself and thus creates ideas. Ricoeur advocates interpreting the symbols in myth with the attitude of doubt and trust, so as to realize the creative promotion of symbol to meaning. Will creates meaning by immersing itself in symbols, so as to better interpret the world, while symbol is not a static object, but a possibility, through which we can re-imagine the meaning of our world. What Ricoeur's poetic hermeneutics expresses is not only the problem of language types, but also the significance of human beings in philosophical ontology, that is, to reinterpret the existence of self in the existence of the world. The second dimension is the creativity of language. The creativity of Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics lies in the fact that the self can use language to create semantic meaning, so the meaning of metaphor is not generated in the self-closed world, but completed in the self-world changed in the process of interpretation. In fact, Ricoeur's emphasis on creativity in language is to restore the ability of symbolic language to create self and the other world through attaching importance to symbolic meaning in mythological language.

Conclusion

The moral creativity in Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics is a kind of creativity with strong inclusiveness, which breaks the separation between morality and poetry. Firstly, the inclusiveness of moral creativity is shown as a kind of roundabout way, that is, starting from the self, returning to itself through the other, so as to achieve a new understanding and interpretation of the self. Taking breaking the absolute status of cogito since Descartes as the starting point, Ricoeur puts forward the moral creativity of symbol and language to the world of the self

from the perspective of reflection, and finally realizes the purpose of reinterpretation of self-existence in the existence of the world at the ontological level.

In order to reveal the meaning of existence by moral creativity, Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics takes tragic mythology as the medium to explore the generation and interpretation of meaning through the symbol in myth back to the inherent event mode of the story itself. On the one hand, Ricoeur subverts the dualism of body and mind since Descartes with the body as the existence of human self-meaning; on the other hand, he takes the existing symbol and its language as the starting point of thinking by exposing the falsity of self-consciousness proposed by hermeneutics. It also further explains that there are two dimensions of moral creativity in the Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics. Firstly, symbolism gives meaning and thus creates ideas. Ricoeur advocates interpreting the symbols in myth with the dual attitude of doubt and trust, so as to realize the creative promotion of symbols to meaning. Secondly, the creativity of the Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics lies in the self's ability to use language for semantic creation. Therefore, the meaning of metaphor is not generated in the self-closed world, but in the changed self-world in the process of interpretation.

Such a kind of roundabout moral creativity embodied the influence of Ricoeurian poetic hermeneutics on literature and language respectively. At the literary level, moral creativity shows a strong sense of reader tendency. Whether fictional or historical narrative, the characters and plots are not only the events of the text itself, but also an imaginative possibility for readers to remodel their own meaning world. The real event in language is the reader's self-interpretation of the event. At the level of language existence, moral creativity shows an attempt to restore the ability of language to construct the world. Ricoeur's emphasis on creativity in language is actually to restore the ability of symbolic language to create self and other world by emphasizing the symbolic meaning in mythological language.

References

- Forster, M. (2019). Hermeneutics and francophone approaches. In M. N. Forster (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion of hermeneutics* (pp. 260-285). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato. (1997). *Plato complete works*. M. John, (Ed.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Ricoeur, P. (1966). *Freedom and nature: The voluntary and the involuntary*. (E. V. Kohak, Trans.). Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1970). *Freud and philosophy*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). *The symbolism of evil*. (K. Charles, Trans.). New York: Fordham University Press.