Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur have each uniquely and extensively influenced twentieth century developments of hermeneutics. While the vast literature springing from the writings of each shows completely differing focuses and interests, these essential contrasts and even oppositions should not be allowed to preclude possible rapprochement and complementarity between their hermeneutical projects.

This study attempts to reach a point at which the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Ricoeur can contribute to one another in a positive direction, leading to the possibility of a philosophy true to their respective paths and to the demands of thinking today. One issue at stake in the struggle between these two philosophies is the path leading to ontology. While emphasizing the importance of “way-making” (Wegmarken), Heidegger undertakes this move only after having sought guidance from the prior comprehension of Being in an effort to re-ask the Seinsfrage. Ricoeur, taking issue with Heidegger, detours to and dwells upon the ontic level in order to entertain fundamental critical questions of method. In contrast to Heidegger’s “shorter,” more direct route to ontology, Ricoeur proposes a “longer” way; this way addresses epistemological problems within the conflict of various hermeneutics and takes up questions of method in the human sciences on the ontic level, without emphasizing the circular implication between Being and man.

While it is necessary to note the limitations in Ricoeur’s approach in failing sufficiently to attend to the pre-comprehension of Being from which Heidegger’s investigation begins, the critical perspective generated in the process also entails throwing Heidegger’s thinking back to a re-examination of its origins and to the need for further enrichment at the ontic level in a way suggested by Ricoeur. Further, Ricoeur raises the question of the ultimate unity of the philosophical project itself. By contrast, Heidegger questions that whole domain in tracing the original inducement toward inquiry back to its place in the “there” of Da-sein, indicating a need for an adjustment in Ricoeur’s understanding of human existence. Each of these focuses has its positive impact.

Heidegger’s emphasis on the pre-comprehension of Being and the path upon which that focus puts thinking not only yields profound insight into the dynamics of the easily forgotten question of Being, but serves as well for a critique of the very level to which Ricoeur detours, within which he dwells, and upon which he almost fixates on his way.
toward a poetics of the will. Heidegger's perspective thereby pin-points a certain weakness in Ricoeur's otherwise rigorously critical approach, namely, in his neglect to consider adequately the underlying ontological and existential hermeneutical situation presupposed by those very critical questions. Yet Ricoeur's concern over the collapse of the "subject" in Heidegger, something which he considers to "play into the hands of the new scientism represented by structuralism," emphasizes a radical point of difference between his thinking and that of Heidegger. This difference, however, implicitly harkens back to the prospect of further radicalizing Ricoeur's position according to the guidance supplied from Heidegger's explication of the pre-understanding of Being. Thus, the integration allows for a new whole which does justice to both Heidegger's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics: to Heidegger's hermeneutics of existence and Being in a phenomenological ontology and to Ricoeur's treatment of the two poles of the hermeneutical arc, the side of the text, work or actions, and the side of the appropriation into the lived world of the reader or listener. The entire interpretive process would then seem to be guided in advance by a prior attunement to Being, which is first encountered within Dasein's disclosedness.

This discussion of hermeneutics takes place largely within the common focus of Heidegger and Ricoeur on Kantian philosophy, pivotal points of which each appropriates from radically differing interpretive situations. Their differing interpretations of the relation of reason to understanding and to the centrality of imagination lead to profound differences within their positions. For Heidegger, the sensibilization of reason which he initiates is engendered by his destruction and retrieval of Kant's latent inquiry into metaphysics' ultimate foundations. For Ricoeur, as a post-Hegelian Kantian, the adjustments to Kant's thought are less severe ontologically, considering the relation between reason and understanding in the Kantian context in which understanding proceeds at the promptings of reason, but within the limit imposed by an act of reason concomitant with the demand for totality and completeness going beyond knowledge limited to sense experience. This leads to the stress on the productive imagination as the creative element in knowledge and in the structuring of meaning implied in schematism, which has more depth in the context of symbolic and metaphoric functions than for Kant. Thus both Heidegger and Ricoeur take Kant into new areas not anticipated by the neo-Kantians, but each within his own context of interests and hermeneutical situation, having shaken loose and reintegrated Critical philosophy into a more viable contemporary hermeneutics.
Thus, each of these philosophies must be loosened from its specific context, contrasted with that of the other, and recast, not for the purpose of discussion or debate, but for the purpose of thinking each anew within the "deconstruction" or "delimitation" and viable reintegra-
tion engendered and required by the other. Their essentially differing perspectives upon existence and will, imagination and language, world and art, humanism and freedom, temporality and truth, all must be focused upon, delved into and expanded in terms of the guidance of a prior comprehension of Being in Dasein's disclosedness, and in terms of preserving and facing up to the enigmas on the ontic level. Hence, it must be clear that the guideline does not dissolve or absolve the need to deal with the ontic problems which have plagued philosophical thinking and still do; nor should it allow for a too glibly accepted interpreta-
tion of Being and of Dasein's existence at the expense of the particular aspects of the human situation. Thus, in addressing human existence, Heidegger and Ricoeur have something specifically positive to say to one other, after the mutual adjustment encompassing each thinker has been appropriated.

Accordingly, this essay emerges as a testimony to the "traces of understanding" not only by developing the hidden labyrinth of thought where Ricoeur's and Heidegger's hermeneutics meet in a delicate union, but also in suggesting possible paths to truth. Traces of understanding, then, indicates the movement of thinking across those still hazy frontiers which mark both the disruption and reintegration of the context in which the "claim" of Being can be evoked and emerge within the fragile setting of language. It is by entering the furrows left by man's pre-ontological grasp of the contingencies of his situation that philosophy can experience the diversity of its insight and foster a deepened (i.e., radicalized) understanding of Being.

In this way, the essay seeks to appropriate the thought of both Heidegger and Ricoeur to direct hermeneutics in the further exploration of its roots and in the more self-critical employment of its powers. As such, hermeneutics is seen to parallel other movements in contemporary continental thought, most noticably, deconstruction, which seeks to undo any dogmatic fixation on a given textual meaning, and to provide an outlet for hitherto supressed and subversive readings of a text. While the subversiveness which deconstruction sanctions is not entirely at odds with the strategies developed here, the current essay cultivates a reciprocity between thought and language which allows for a more explicit grasp of the historical advent of truth than deconstructionists do in addressing man at the extremity of his present situation. Hence, traces of understanding reserves a role for the "messenger" or the emissary for transmitting the withdrawn concern for
Being, in a way which continues to thwart the tyranny of “metaphysical presence,” the univocity of thought and meaning, without retreating as explicitly into the “flux.”

This study thus has relevance not only for developing a critical stance toward both Heidegger and Ricoeur, but also for charting the path for a thought which has become attuned to the broad constellation of issues defining philosophy, from the poetic appropriation of truth to the prospect of evolving a post-metaphysical concern for ethics required in this technological age. In this sense, the attempt to facilitate moving beyond the impasses between Heidegger’s and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics presses forward toward a more complete realization of itself. In the end, “traces of understanding” responds to the ebbs and flows of this development.