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# Narrative Identity and the Three Fundamental Theses of the Hermeneutics of the Self

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**Abstract**

*The article aims to show how the three fundamental theses underlying Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self can be reformulated at the narrative level. Thanks to this reformulation, the notion of narrative identity appears grounded in a conception of the subject that is equally distant from the postmodern destitution of the "I" and from its exaltation in modern transcendental egologies. The first thesis (reflection is always mediated) is reformulated by showing that narrative is the principal means through which self-understanding is achieved. The second thesis (selfhood is different from sameness) is reformulated by showing how narrative clarifies the temporality of character and of the promise. The third thesis (otherness is constitutive of the self) is reformulated by showing that the three forms of otherness distinguished by Ricoeur (the otherness of the body, intersubjective otherness, and the otherness of moral conscience) have a precise counterpart at the narrative level.*

***Keywords***: Ricoeur, narrative identity, narrative self, hermeneutics of the self, phenomenology of the person

## 1. The Necessity of Narrative Mediation

To highlight the theoretical relevance of the concept of narrative identity, it is useful to show how it fulfils the requirements of a hermeneutic conception of the subject. In the introduction to *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur presents the three fundamental theses of his hermeneutics of the self. The first thesis can be formulated in phenomenological terms: (1) *reflection is always mediated*. *Oneself as Another* aims to demonstrate "the primacy of reflective mediation over the immediate positing of the subject" (Ricoeur 1994: 1). This requirement is already expressed in the title *Soi-même comme un autre*, which echoes Rimbaud's famous statement: "Je est un autre" (Ricoeur 2016: 241). In Ricoeur's formulation, however, there is a substantial variation: Rimbaud's *je* becomes a *soi-même*. This terminological shift is significant. The personal pronoun *je* is used in French as a first-person pronoun, which generally occupies the position of logical subject: "I do this or that". In propositions of this kind, the *I* is the point of origin of action; it is the *who* of psychic acts and worldly actions. By contrast, *soi* is used as a third-person pronoun and generally indicates the term or the object of an action or an act. This can be verified by considering expressions such as "to think of oneself", "to know oneself", and "self-esteem". To say that the person is a *self*, even more than an *I*, therefore means calling into question the primacy of subjectivity. In the constitution of my person, I am not the primary origin; rather, I find myself in the position of an "object". This means that I, as a person, am a constituted and constructed entity.

To a certain extent, this decentering of the *I* is already contained in the concept of reflection. On several occasions Ricoeur defined his thought as a reflective philosophy. In phenomenological terms,

"reflection" is the general name for all those acts through which consciousness turns back upon itself (Husserl 2002: 152). In such acts, the *I* becomes an object for itself: the *I* reflects upon its "self". The thematization of one's own self is already a first form of objectification (Sartre 2004: 22). This objectification is symmetrical but differs from the objectification that occurs in the intersubjective relation, when I am the object of the action of another *I*. Ricoeur devotes particular attention to the distinction between action and passivity, which he identifies as the origin of the problem of violence and, consequently, of the great question of justice. The practical world is not only the world of acting, but also the world of suffering. In suffering, I am the object of the action of another subject. In the French this distinction is marked by the difference between *je* and *moi*, between the personal pronoun in the subject position and the personal pronoun in the object position. This distinction signals the objectification of the *I* in propositions such as "he did this to me", or "he loves me".

However, the formula that Ricoeur chooses is not "Me as Another", but "Oneself as Another." The linguistic shift is therefore twofold: one moves from the *I* as subject to the *I* as object, but also from *me* to *self*, from the first person to the third person. This shift corresponds to a dual decentering of the I, and thus to a dual mediation in self-identification. In immediate reflection, the *I* knows itself as a constituted object. But in the mediated reflection, it knows itself primarily from a third-person perspective. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur does not explicitly emphasize this shift from the first-person perspective to the third-person perspective, which is, however, of utmost importance for understanding the connection between the first thesis of the hermeneutics of the self and the question of narrative identity. Fortunately, this connection is highlighted in one of the essays contained in the third volume of the *Écrits et conférences*:

> Before anything else, the narrative art confirms the primacy of the third person in knowledge about human beings. The hero is someone about whom one speaks. In this regard, confessional literature and autobiography which derives from it have no exclusive privilege, not even any priority in the order of derivation. We have learned infinitely more about human beings by what German poetics calls *Erzahlung*, third-person narrative. (Ricoeur 2016: 237)

This primacy of the third person is by no means self-evident. Ricoeur begins his intellectual journey with Husserl's phenomenology. The fundamental principle of phenomenology is evidence. Evidence is absolute immediacy. According to Husserl, a thing is given in evidence when it is presented "without any mediation" (Husserl 2002: 81). This immediacy is an exclusive feature of the first-person perspective. From a phenomenological point of view, only my own experience is given in an absolutely immediate way. Thus, in establishing the primacy of mediated reflection, Ricoeur in fact contradicts the first methodological assumption of Husserlian phenomenology (Venema 2000: 3): *the subject does not know itself immediately, in self-consciousness conceived as self-perception, but rather mediately, passing through signs.*

In the third volume of the *Écrits et conférences*, this thesis is further specified: narration is identified as the main instrument through which this mediated self-knowledge is realized. Narration can be in the first person, as in the case of autobiography, but it can also be in the third person, as generally occurs in novels. Ricoeur explains unequivocally that, between these two forms of narrative mediation, the more important one, unexpectedly, is the second. Certainly, we know ourselves through self-narration. But we come to know the depths of our *I* even more by reading third-person narratives, from

great literature to cases in psychoanalysis: "we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture" (Ricoeur 1991: 32).

In this way, the decentering of the *I* is complete. Self-understanding is realized through the mediation between self-narration and third-person accounts. We can therefore reformulate the first thesis of the hermeneutics of the self in relation to the question of narrative identity. If it is true that reflection is always mediated, then the first formula of the theory of narrative identity will be as follows: *to understand myself, I tell my own story*. But this first formula is immediately complemented by a second formula: *I tell myself as the other tells himself*. It is a question of narrating the self as (it is narrated) by another.

## 2. Ipseity and Sameness

The second fundamental thesis of the hermeneutics of the self (2) implies the necessity "to distinguish two major meanings of 'identity' [...] depending on whether one understands by 'identical' the equivalent of the Latin ipse or idem" (Ricoeur 1994: 2). Ricoeur emphasizes that the distinction between these two modes of identity is "at the center of our reflections on personal identity and narrative identity" (Ib.). But in what way does the narrative constitution of the person gather these two dimensions of identity?

*Sameness is presented by Ricoeur as a substantial identity, that is, the self-equality over time of a substance*. The underlying idea is Kantian. The *Critique of Pure Reason* explains that the schema of the category of substance is temporal. A substance is something that endures over time. The reality around us is a continuous becoming of forms and phenomena. But within this changing flux, we can identify some points of constancy. These nuclei of permanence are what we call substances.

This analysis of the concept of sameness explains one of the meanings of the word "identity". But for Ricoeur, this conceptual paradigm is inadequate when it comes to understanding the human subject. *Things have a substantial identity; subjects do not.* To think of the identity of the subject starting from the notion of sameness would amount to reifying the person. *If the person were simply an immaterial substance*, his identity would be in a direct relation with his immutability, and *his ontological status would be that of a psychic thing*. However, there are reasons of principle and reasons of fact against this reification of the person. In principle, one can say that a subject is not truly a subject unless he possesses at least a minimal degree of freedom, which is incompatible with the idea of a thing-like immutability.

The reasons of fact are no less evident than the reasons of principle. In fact, people change over time, sometimes quite drastically. There is no human individual who can claim to have remained always the same throughout his life. Contemporary literature provides unequivocal testimony to this subjective mutability: "toute l'expérience humaine va à l'encontre de cette immuabilité d'un élément constitutif de la personne. Rien dans l'expérience intérieure n'échappe au changement" (Ricoeur 1991b: 36).

Yet this mutability becomes evident even when one merely considers how different a child is from a young adult, or a young adult from an old person. Should we think that when a confident, happy child becomes a troubled adolescent, or a cynical, irritable old man, another person takes possession of the same body? Ricoeur is not willing to accept this skeptical conclusion, which would imply a collapse of the phenomenology of the person. It is precisely to address these issues that it becomes necessary to distinguish two different modes of identity.

> Does the selfhood of the self imply a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum? [...] Is there a form of permanence in time which can be connected to the question "who?" inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of "what?"? Is there a form of permanence in time that is a reply to the question "Who am I?"? (Ricoeur 1994: 118)

There thus exists a form of persistence that is not reducible to substantial sameness (Rasmussen 1996: 164). It is a persistence that takes place not on the level of nature, but on the level of history. From this perspective, the *who* is different from the *what* (Heidegger 1977: 60). *The identity of a thing is sameness. The identity of the who is ipseity*. It is, however, important not to conceive of this fundamental distinction as if it were a strict opposition. The human being is at the same time a *who* and a *what*. Both dimensions are equally fundamental in the constitution of personality.

> I prefer not to restrict myself to a pure and simple opposition between sameness and ipseity, as if sameness would correspond to the question what and ipseity to the question who. The question what in a sense is internal to the question who. Can I pose the question “Who am I?” without asking what I am? The dialectic of sameness and ipseity is thus internal to the ontological constitution of the person. (Ricoeur 1999: 53)

Just as it is important not to set the *who* and the *what* in opposition, it is equally important to grasp the internal duplicity within the notion of sameness. We can identify a permanent core both in the body and in the psyche. Certainly, my body has changed greatly

compared to twenty years ago (I now have white hair), but its deep structure – DNA, fingerprints, skeletal structure – has remained the same. My body is different, yet it is the same body. The same can be said of my psyche. Ricoeur calls the relatively invariant psychic structure present in every human subject the "character". Certainly, my character today is different from the character I had as an adolescent: I am less angry, more self-assured. Yet there are also many psychological traits that have remained constant: I continue to be absent-minded and perfectionist. Thus, in my person there are two distinct dimensions of sameness.

If the body and character are examples of sameness, to think of the persistence over time characteristic of ipseity, Ricoeur starts from a paradigmatic act: the promise, fidelity to one's given word. This act has three remarkable features. First, it implies a complex temporal dynamic involving past, present, and future. By virtue of past experience, I promise in the present moment, binding myself for the future. Second, the promise is a linguistic act and not a bodily action. Although it can sometimes be recorded – for example, in the form of a contract – *the promise is a performative linguistic act*, that is, an action that is essentially realized on the verbal level. The fact that one speaks of keeping faith with the "word" given is significant: one cannot promise outside of language. Third, *the promise necessarily involves an intersubjective relation.* I promise something to someone. I give my word to someone. One cannot truly promise anything outside of a relation. To promise to oneself, in fact, is simply to decide. In this way, the promise reveals a "dialogic structure" (Ricoeur 1992: 266), which corresponds to the third fundamental thesis of the hermeneutics of the self, to which I will return shortly.

These last two characteristic features of the promise make the distinction between ipseity and sameness particularly evident. While the concept of sameness applies primarily to objects, the concept of

ipseity applies mainly to subjects who exist within the world of language and history. Yet in fact, the difference between ipseity and sameness also becomes clear in relation to the first characteristic feature of the promise, namely temporality. In the promise there is something that endures over time, just as in character and in the body. But what exactly endures when we remain faithful to our given word? It is not the persistence of a substance with an unchanging core. *What endures in the promise is an intention*. "Does not commitment have all the characteristics of a firm intention?" (266–267). For example, in the marital promise, a man decides to make permanent the intention to love one woman exclusively. This intention is enduring in the sense that the one who promises undertakes to keep his word beyond all possible vicissitudes of existence and beyond the variability of feelings. Thus, in the promise there is a double intention: on the one hand the intention itself (I want to love you), and on the other the decision not to change that same intention for any reason, "the intention not to change my intention" (Ricoeur 1992: 268).

## 3. The Permanence of the *What* and the Self-Maintenance of the *Who* in Relation to Narrative

In the promise, just as in the character and the body, there is something that endures over time. Yet this persistence is fundamentally different. A thing-like substance endures by persisting through inertia. By contrast, a decision endures by renewing itself each time. The difference between these two modes of persistence – which Ricoeur signals terminologically by *distinguishing "maintien de soi"* and "*permanence dans le temps"* – is parallel to the distinction between natural causality and historical action.

Consider an example. The church where I was married, the Basilica of Santa Maria in Domnica in Rome, has stood there for centuries. Since the Renaissance, it has not changed substantially, and

so one can say that it persists in its sameness. This form of persistence is different from the sustaining of my marriage. My marriage has "lasted" for eighteen years. I hope it will continue to last; I hope that my wife and I can remain faithful to the promise we made to each other. But in this case no inertia is possible. Faithfulness to that promise must be renewed day by day, situation by situation. *Substantial persistence is a passive resistance to change*: the walls of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Domnica resist the wind, the rain, and the sun. They have certainly aged after centuries of exposure, but in substance they are still there, just as they were in the Renaissance.

By contrast, the promise of my marriage is a past word, preserved in memory. My wife and I must decide anew each day to remain faithful to that promise. In this case, therefore, *persistence is a constant repetition, not an unchanging permanence*.

Although in two different forms, ipseity and sameness are both made possible within the temporality of persistence. This reference to temporality allows us to understand why the notion of narrative identity corresponds to the second theoretical requirement underlying the hermeneutics of the self. For Ricoeur, narrative is the mode of discourse capable of describing a change, an event. Since time is the factor of change par excellence, narrative is the means to describe the passage of time. Certainly, time can also be measured using the tools of experimental science. But the objective time of science, for Ricoeur, is not properly human time (Ricoeur 1988). Human time is the time in which something happens, that is, the time of action.

Action always has a pre-narrative structure, and for this reason *narrative identity can also be defined as the who of an action*. The acting subject need not be human: to a certain extent, for example, we can tell the story of a dog, even if it would probably be a rather uninteresting story. We can tell the story of a plant by viewing it as the "protagonist" of a series of changes. Procedures of personification are

important for understanding the question of the "who" of action in relation to the problem of narrative. *We can personify an object by placing it at the center of an action*. In historical research this commonly occurs: we can tell the story of a city or of a building. But if we can personify objects by considering them as the subjects of an action, it is even more the case that we "personify" a human being when we recount his deeds. Narrative identity is precisely the result of this theoretical operation.

Insofar as it requires identification, narrative identity corresponds both to the permanence of the *what* and to the maintaining of the *who*. In a narrative, insofar as there is a protagonist, there is always something that endures and someone who maintains his selfhood. On the other hand, by taking the form of something resembling a tale, narrative identity also expresses a change, something that happens in the form of action or quasi-action. In this way, the temporal dimension proper to both sameness and ipseity is taken up from a narrative point of view.

Let us consider another autobiographical example. To explain to someone who I am, I might try to describe my character. The most essential part of this psychological description might appear only by recounting the aspects of my character that have shown constancy over time, or that have undergone evolution. Thus, the fact that I have always had a melancholic trait, ever since I was a child, appears as a determining element of my character. Similarly, the fact that over time I have learned to manage a certain tendency to anxiety better represents a character trait that has changed and constitutes a fundamental aspect of my psychological history. In self-narration, then, my character appears not exactly as an immutable thing-like object, but as something endowed with a certain sameness.

However, the description of the evolution of my character captures only one dimension of my personality. To say who I truly am, I should

certainly add personal traits that belong to another ontological region. Thus, I could say who I am by explaining that I am married and that I am the father of three children. These traits of my personality, unlike the character traits I have just mentioned – melancholy and anxiety – are intersubjective and imply a reference to an ethical-moral fidelity (or infidelity). I am married because I promised my wife to love her enduringly. I am a father because I accepted my children into my life and assumed the commitment to care for them unconditionally. In both cases, a fidelity over time is presupposed, which is a "*self-maintenance"* that differs from the almost substantial permanence of a psychological trait. My ipseity is defined by this maintaining (or not maintaining) of my promises over time. But even in this case, just as in the case of character, the real understanding of ipseity occurs only narratively. To explain why I am married, how I arrived at this decision, how I succeeded (or failed) in keeping my word, I must tell a story: the story of my falling in love, the story of my emotional relationship with my wife, the story of the joys, the sorrows, the crises, etc. Trite as it may be to say that marriage is the fulfilment of a romantic narrative, it is nonetheless entirely evident that there is no marriage that is not a story. In fact, *every promise entails a story.*

We thus arrive at the two formulations that summarize the relevance of the second thesis of the hermeneutics of the self within the theory of narrative identity: *my story demonstrates how my character has evolved over time*; *my self-narrative recounts the events I have had to go through in order to remain faithful to the commitments and promises I have chosen to undertake*.

## 4. The Otherness of the Body

The third fundamental thesis of the hermeneutics of the self (3) implies the recognition of "the dialectic of self and the other than self" (Ricoeur 1992: 3). The idea that *subjectivity is constituted by a relation to the*

*other* shapes the entire trajectory of *Oneself as Another* and is systematically developed in the last four studies. Here, I propose to show that this idea also has a relevant place within the framework of a theory of narrative identity.

In the paragraph that concludes *Oneself as Another* ("Selfhood and Otherness") Ricoeur explains that it is necessary to recognize "the polysemic character of otherness" (Ricoeur 1992: 317). Otherness can mean at least three different things: there is an otherness of the body, which is opposed to the freedom of the spirit; there is an intersubjective otherness, which is the otherness of the other self; and finally, there is the otherness of moral conscience. *The body is otherness in me below me* (in the sense that it partly obeys me); *the other person is otherness outside me alongside me* (in the sense that they are my equal); *moral conscience is otherness in me above me* (in the sense that I am called to obey it).

For Ricoeur, all these forms of otherness are constitutive of the person. In all three relations to the other, the self appears as passive (Pellauer 2007: 108). The relation to the other first takes the form of undergoing something. This idea is consistent with a conception of subjectivity in which the practical dimension has primacy. From Ricoeur's point of view, to be a subject means above all to be the point of origin of an activity, which may be a practical action, a bodily gesture, but also a psychic act or an act of speech. Consequently, for the subject-agent, *otherness always takes the form of a passivity*, of being the object of an activity that comes from elsewhere.

The first form of otherness (3a) appears in the analysis of the body conceived as "own body" (which Ricoeur rather hastily equates with Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh). In my view, this problem appears too late in *Oneself as Another*, almost as if it were a last-minute attempt to recover a forgotten theme. For reasons I have analyzed elsewhere (see Feyles 2019), Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* can be

reproached for omitting to address the question of the subject from a phenomenological perspective. This omission results in the exclusion of a series of fundamental problems for defining a person's capacities. The subject who speaks, who acts, who relates to others, who obeys moral laws – is this not also a subject who perceives and experiences feelings? Why, then, does *Oneself as Another* fail to thematize the set of problems that phenomenology has illuminated (perception, memory, imagination, emotions)?

This absence of a phenomenological perspective is only partially offset by the recovery – a somewhat too hasty and belated one – of the problem of the body. The recovery is partial because, in the tenth study, the body does not appear so much as the positive center of action, but rather as the site of resistance to action. Drawing on Maine de Biran, Ricoeur explains that "the body denotes resistance that gives way to effort" (Ricoeur 1992: 321). It is clear in what sense the body, as the center of resistance to action, constitutes an otherness, but in general the treatment of corporeality in the tenth study is not linear, and *Ricoeur seems to oscillate between a positive determination of the body and a negative one.*

The subject is first and foremost the origin of action. The body is the primary instrument of this activity in all cases in which action must be exercised in the world. Through the body, the self is anchored in the world and can thus act upon the world. Insofar as it obeys the free will of the I, the body is an "own body", and not simply a piece of inert matter, a mere material body. *This positive determination of the own body – as a system of "I can" – is not truly brought into focus* in the tenth study of *Oneself as Another*. The active body is neglected, while *the passive body comes to the foreground*. But what does passive body mean?

*To move my body, I must always overcome resistance*. The body is a system of "I can," but it is at the same time a system of "I cannot."

I can move my legs. By moving my legs, I can walk or run. But in order to walk or run, I must overcome resistance. The ninety-six kilos of my material body are a burden on the free movements of my own body. Thus, if I run for a long time, I get tired, I sweat, I strain. In this phenomenon of effort, Ricoeur sees a first figure of the body's otherness with respect to the I.

However, *Oneself as Another* does not entirely clarify the two sides of corporeality in relation to the question of otherness. *The own body is the organ of the will. The material body, by contrast, is the otherness that opposes the will.* The body in its materiality appears as an involuntary that resists the own body, which is at the disposal of the will[1].

> The fact that the flesh is most originally mine and of all things that which is closest, that its aptitude for feeling is revealed most characteristically in the sense of touch, as in Maine de Biran – these primordial features make it possible for flesh to be the organ of desire [l'organ du vouloir], the support of free movement; but one cannot say that they are the object of choice or desire [vouloir]. I, as this man: this is the foremost otherness of the flesh [l'altérité prime de la chair] with respect to all initiative [toute initiative]. Otherness here signifies primordiality with respect to any design [tout dessein]. (Ricoeur 1992: 324; Ricoeur 1990: 375)

In this important passage, Ricoeur explains in what sense the body

[1] The chapter entitled *Moving and Effort* in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* explains the problem of bodily resistance to voluntary movement in a more systematic and clearer way than *Oneself as Another*. In resistance, the material body, which is part of the self, opposes the will, which is also part of the self; it can therefore be said that "Resistance is a crisis of the unity of the self with itself". (Ricoeur 1966: 310)

is an otherness. The terms "initiative" and "dessein" indicate the subject's power to be the origin of an action. The body precedes every initiative and every design. This primordiality is at the same time enabling, but also limiting. I can walk thanks to my body, but I cannot fly. I can run thanks to my body, but only for a limited time. Insofar as it resists my initiative, the body appears as other with respect to the I as the origin of action. It should be noted, however, that here Ricoeur uses the term "chair" and therefore *seems not to recognize the difference between the otherness manifested by the own body as a sentient body and the otherness manifested by the material body, as a mass that resists action*. The problem of resistance to action arises only because I am constituted by a material corporeality and not solely by an own body. This means that I have certain physical properties (for example, my body weight) that condition my capacity to act. To walk, I must move a mass of ninety-six kilos, which is entirely different from the bodily mass of my wife or my children.

This otherness of the material body should not be confused with the otherness that manifests in the own body. Ricoeur does not seem to distinguish between the two problems, which are discussed as if they were a single issue in the tenth study of *Oneself as Another*. The otherness of the own body manifests in all experiences of passivity in feeling. By contrast, in the effort and fatigue of action, the I feels the resistance of its own material body. This passivity, however, is an inertia and not a true undergoing. True undergoing manifests only *when I am the object of an action coming from the world or from others.* In this case, the passivity is of a different nature; it is not inertia. If, while running, I hit a stone, I hurt my foot. In this case, I undergo what appears as an "action" of the world on my body. Even if another subject throws a stone at me, I undergo something and get hurt. *In violence, I am passive*; I undergo the action of the other subject. In these two situations, the body appears not as a merely

material body, but as a sentient body. I feel pain when I hit the stone. The stone, for its part, moves, perhaps rolls, but feels nothing. *In feeling the pain, I am passive as my own body*. For its part, the stone is passive in its movement, but it is passive as a material body. I certainly did not intend to hit the stone; it was not my "intention." The pain I suffer is not chosen and lies outside what I can do. I can move my foot, I can decide to run, but I cannot decide not to feel pain when I hit the stone. There is, therefore, an otherness that manifests in passivity that is typical of the sentient own body. This otherness is particularly evident in pain and suffering, which are, in a sense, an experienced undergoing.

> However, the phenomenology of passivity does not go beyond the implicit stage we have evoked several times, until, in this global phenomenon of anchoring, we underscore one important feature which our earlier analyses have not sufficiently taken into account, namely suffering. Undergoing and enduring are, in a sense, revealed in their complete passive dimension when they become suffering. (Ricoeur 1992: 319–20)

The suffering body thus appears as the other, specifically opposed to the acting subject. When I feel all my weight while walking uphill, I feel the materiality of my body. When I feel pain in my foot after hitting the stone, I experience a situation or a state of my own body. In the first case, the acting subject collides with the otherness of inertia, of resistance; in the second, it passively undergoes the action of a subject or a reality that is other than itself.

## 5. Beyond Ricoeur: The Narrative Opacity of the Body and the Inenarrable

How does the otherness of the body enter into the constitution of narrative identity?

First, I believe *it is necessary to pair the concept of resistance to action with the concept of narrative opacity*. By this concept, I mean the fact – never adequately addressed by Ricoeur – that the body is something that can never be fully narrated. This *narrative opacity of the body emerges whenever one attempts to describe a bodily gesture*. The sporting gesture is particularly emblematic in this regard: I can try to explain in detail how to take a free kick under the crossbar, leaping over the wall. But no one will ever be able to learn to perform this gesture on the basis of my description. By contrast, I can perfectly explain in words how to format a thesis or how to fill out a tax return. I can describe in every detail Maradona's famous goal in Argentina vs. England in 1986. Even assuming I were a great writer, this description could never be equivalent to the visual perception of the corporeal genius of that "action." The same happens if I try to describe a ballet, Hitler's tone of voice or Chaplin's way of walking. These "narrations" are always destined to be ineffective because the materiality of the body is adequately given only in perceptual experience. *The body is the other of narration.*

This narrative opacity has repercussions for the constitution of my narrative identity for others and for the constitution of others' narrative identity for me. I know very well the story of certain key episodes in my parents' lives: it is a story they have told me many times. This story indeed opens a window onto their person. But I was not there, I did not witness the events, and the narration can only partially make up for this absence. In the same way, I have recounted some significant episodes of my life as a boy to my children. Certainly, my children

understand many things about me by hearing these stories. But the fact remains that my personality as a boy remains beyond their grasp and they can infer it only a very fragmentary way from my accounts.
In my view, this issue of narrative opacity must be considered together with another problem that Ricoeur tends to overlook, namely the problem of the inenarrable. In *Oneself as Another*, this theme appears briefly and is not truly developed.

> But we must go further and take into account more deeply concealed forms of suffering: the incapacity to tell a story, the refusal to recount, the insistence of the untellable [*l'incapacité de raconter, le refus de raconter, l'insistance de l'inénarrable*] – phenomena that go far beyond mishaps and adventures, which can always be made meaningful through the strategy of emplotment. (Ricoeur 1992: 320; Ricoeur 1990: 370)

In this passage – to my knowledge, the only instance in *Oneself as Another* and *Time and Narrative* where the term "inénarrable" appears – *three different cases are mentioned in which narration proves powerless*. The first case is that of the inability to tell a story: for example, an Alzheimer's patient often has such a degree of cognitive impairment that he is *unable to recount his story*. His suffering is in fact inenarrable, and this poses serious problems for caregiving. A very different case is that of the refusal to tell. Ricoeur is not explicit in this very condensed passage, but it is possible to imagine what he has in mind: it probably concerns the "resistance" of a patient who goes to a psychoanalyst. Ricoeur is very familiar with Freud and knows well that in many cases the patient refuses to recount an essential part of his past. The repressed is therefore also inenarrable. Certainly, this resistance to narration can in some cases be overcome,

thanks to the strategies of the psychoanalyst. But the fact remains that *the unconscious, as such, is inenarrable.* Even the third case mentioned probably refers to a typical situation in psychoanalysis: the repressed that is not told, which is not told, cannot be reworked, and continues to reappear in the pathological form of an obsession, a compulsion, or a repetition. In these three cases, suffering is inenarrable either because it cannot be told or because one does not want to tell it.

*The concept of the inenarrable is dialectically related to the opposite concept of narrative therapy*. For Ricoeur storytelling is not merely the way in which we describe action, but also a linguistic act that is, to a certain extent, performative. Narrative always produces effects in the real world. The concept of refiguration, which is formalized in *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur 1984, 76ff; Ricoeur 1988: 157ff), serves to indicate these effects of narrative on the world, through the mediation of the reader's experience. *Narrative refigures the reader* and, in this way, by changing one of the agents, it changes an element of the practical field. Within the broad spectrum of possibilities outlined by the concept of refiguration, one must include both Aristotelian catharsis and therapy based on narrative. In his interpretation of Freud, Ricoeur sought to show that psychoanalysis is a talking cure (Ricoeur 1970: 369) because it is almost entirely based on narrative (Kristeva 2004: 142). The psychoanalyst helps the patient to recount what he would not be able to recount on his own (Ricoeur 2012: 20). Within this theoretical framework, *narrative appears as an essential mode of caring for the other*, *one that can come to assume the form of therapy.* The work that the patient carries out together with the psychoanalyst entails fatigue, effort, and, in some cases, almost a struggle. In this one finds another narrative-level parallel to the body's resistance to action. The repressed resists narration, just as the material body resists action. From this one may derive the formula of

the inenarrable: *the repressed is the other of therapeutic narration*[2].

## 6. Intersubjective Otherness and the Otherness of Moral Consciousness

The second form of otherness that constitutes the self (3b) may be designated by the term *intersubjectivity*. In this case, the problem is not that of the relation between the psychic I and the bodily self, but rather that of the relation between one personal subject and other personal subjects.

Already at the level of the theory of action, one must acknowledge a kind of primacy of the relation to the other. Certainly, one of Ricoeur's aims is to link action and person in such a way that the subject is defined as the *who* of a given action. This connection is achieved through the concept of "ascription", which designates the (narrative) procedure by means of which responsibility for an action is attributed to an agent. However, this emphasis on the bond that unites person and responsibility does not prevent Ricoeur from highlighting the intersubjective character of human action.

> Another sort of entanglement, however, makes it difficult to attribute to a particular agent a determined series of events. It is the way the actions of each one of us are intertwined with the actions of everyone else. We have insisted elsewhere, following W. Schapp, on the idea, proper to the narrative field, of "being entangled in stories"; the action of each person (and of that person's history) is entangled not only with the physical course of things but with the social course of human

[2] I cannot explain why phenomenology is absent from *Oneself as Another*, any more than I can explain the absence of psychoanalysis: is not the unconscious the first otherness within the self?

activity. (Ricoeur 1992: 107)

Every action is also interaction. One can imagine bodily gestures that are purely individual – for example, walking, eating, sleeping. But these gestures can be individual only within an artificially abstract context and, in any case, if they are completely solitary, they remain below the threshold of entry into the world of action. *Action is always social.* (Arendt 1998: 181ff) Even when an action appears solitary, the agent is never truly an isolated monad. The craftsman who produces a good in his workshop does so for a buyer or with the demands of the market in mind. If the product is intended for personal use, the intersubjective dimension does not disappear: who gave the craftsman his tools? Did he perhaps make them himself? Where do the technical norms he follows in production come from? Did he perhaps learn his trade on his own?

Within the theoretical framework of action theory, then, one must recognize the precedence of otherness. But it is on the ethical plane that the relation to otherness becomes the true stake. The formula that Ricoeur chooses as a synthesis of his ethical perspective already contains a reference to otherness: "Let us define 'ethical intention' as aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" (Ricoeur 1992: 172). This formula states that *the individual search for happiness cannot be separated from the search for a relation to the other*. A good life is possible only with the other. The appeal to just institutions further broadens the meaning of the word *otherness*. A good life is not only a life with the other, but also a just life with all others.

At the ethical level, ipseity is defined as self-esteem[3]. For Ricoeur,

[3] As Kearney very aptly notes, there can be no genuine esteem for the other without at least a minimal esteem for oneself: "Ricoeur nous rappelle qu'un coefficient

the person possesses an existential consistency, insofar as he keeps his promises and remains faithful to the commitments he has undertaken. In this faithfulness, the self has its own ipseity. The ethical point of view adds an evaluative perspective. In self-esteem the subject regards himself as a value. This value judgement certainly presupposes a cognitive judgment. In order to have self-esteem, a subject must first be able to know himself. But self-understanding is only the basic condition of self-esteem. In esteeming himself, the subject recognizes himself as a person who has an "inestimable" value. Yet, for Ricoeur, self-esteem is not a refined form of egotism precisely because it necessarily implies a relation to the other.

In self-knowledge, the *I* appears to fold back upon itself. This self-folding does not disappear in moral reflection, whose stake is self-esteem. In moral reflection, the person examines his life, or a single action, in order to assess its goodness. In moral reflection the subject says to himself: "Here I did well, there I did badly". Yet this thematization of one's own existence is not a narcissistic self-folding, because self-esteem is structurally dialogical. "L'estime de soi, ainsi conçue, n'est pas une forme raffinée d'égoïsme ou de solipsisme" (Ricoeur 1992b: 203). Self-esteem is first received from the esteem of others. *I learn to esteem myself because you esteem me.*

This dialogical structure of self-esteem does not exhaust the ethical meaning of otherness. Self-esteem is the outcome at which the person arrives when he comes to understand his own existence as a good life. But a good life cannot but be a life with others. Thus, for Ricoeur, self-esteem appears inseparable from solicitude (conceived as a reformulation of Aristotelian friendship).

minimal d'estime de soi est indispensable à l'éthique". (Kearney 2004: 213)

> Reflexivity seems indeed to carry with it the danger of turning in upon oneself, of closing up, and moving in the opposite direction from openness, from the horizon of the "good life." Despite this certain danger, my thesis is that solicitude is not something added on to self-esteem from outside but that it unfolds the dialogic dimension of self-esteem, which up to now has been passed over in silence. (Ricoeur 1992: 180)

The relation to the other thus appears twice at the ethical level. It appears first in the dialogical exchange of self-esteem, through which the person learns to esteem himself in relation to another who esteems him. It appears a second time in the relational structure that binds self-esteem and solicitude. In this sense, friendship with oneself is not separable from friendship with the other, and self-love is not separable from love for the other, as established by the Golden Rule, frequently invoked by Ricoeur.

The transition from the ethical to the moral level brings out a third figure of otherness, which Ricoeur calls "conscience" (3c). Here the term "conscience" should not be understood in a phenomenological sense. It is not Husserl's "*Bewusstsein"*, but the moral conscience proper to ancient and Christian philosophy, which in German is indicated by the term "*Gewissen"*. Although Ricoeur does not say so explicitly, everything suggests that, for him, conscience is the highest manifestation of subjectivity. It is certainly no accident that the final paragraph of *Oneself as Another* is devoted to a kind of apology of moral conscience. Of course, for Ricoeur it is always necessary to pass through the rigorous examination of the critiques of the masters of suspicion. In the final paragraph of *Oneself as Another*, the objections against "false conscience" coming from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud (and Hegel) are taken up as unavoidable steps. Yet the last word of *Oneself as Another* is a reaffirmation of the primacy of moral

conscience over the theoretical-representational consciousness of modern philosophies of the subject (Descartes and Husserl in particular) and over postmodern attempts at the deconstruction of morality (Nietzsche and Freud in particular). These critiques fail to recognize "the original and originary character of what appears to me to constitute the third modality of otherness, namely being enjoined as the structure of selfhood" (Ricoeur 1992: 354). This is the deepest structure of personality as ipseity: *the moral person is the self who, in conscience, feels called and obliged*.

This feeling of being called and obliged implies a relation to otherness. I am called by someone. I feel obliged by someone. However, this otherness is not defined as a relation to a personal *you*, but is, in a sense, internal to the *I*. Moral conscience is a voice that obliges and calls me from within. Naturally, it is with Plato's Socrates (Plato 2005: 115) that this metaphor is canonized. But Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another* is especially mindful of the well-known paragraph in *Being and Time* on *Gewissen*.

> In the chapter of *Being and Time* entitled "*Gewissen* [...] Heidegger described perfectly this moment of otherness that distinguishes conscience. Far from being foreign to the constitution of selfhood, this otherness is closely related to its emergence, inasmuch as, under the impetus of conscience, the self is made capable of taking hold of itself in the anonymity of the "they". (Ricoeur 1992: 342)

*The voice of conscience is internal, yet it possesses its own otherness. It is an internalized otherness.* Paradoxically, it is precisely this otherness that allows the subject to be truly himself. What, indeed, does conscience call us to? What does it oblige us to do? Not so much to do good and avoid evil (Heidegger seeks to demoralize conscience),

but rather to be truly ourselves. *The voice of conscience calls us to authenticity.* It is by virtue of this call that the *I* detaches itself from the anonymity of the "they" and projects itself in an authentic manner, thus becoming itself. In a certain respect, Ricoeur distances himself from this Heideggerian demoralization of the voice of conscience. Yet he certainly adopts the idea that there is a call to authenticity: in fact, for Ricoeur, *the moral person is an authentic person*; the self who keeps his word is a genuine self. But the fact remains that the person could never become moral or authentic if he were not structurally predisposed to listen to the voice of conscience, that is, if he were not structurally constituted as one who is called and obliged.

## 7. Intersubjectivity and Moral Conscience in the Constitution of Narrative Identity

How does the relation to the other, implicated by intersubjectivity and moral conscience, play a role in the constitution of narrative identity? First, *the other enters into the constitution of my narrative identity by offering himself as a model with whom I can identify.* Ricoeur began reflecting on the problem of identification already in his major book on Freud. In Freudian psychoanalysis, identification is fundamental for the constitution of the superego. Even though Freud tends to present it as a cruel censor, the superego is a necessary instance within the personality. By identifying with parental figures in the process of constituting his own personality, the subject establishes within himself the superego, which coincides with moral conscience. Conscience – which is initially expressed in a series of prohibitions such as "You must not do this!" – is presented as the internalization of the parents' voice. In this way, the moral person appears as a construction in which a dialogical relation is implicated. The *I* becomes itself in relation to another, the father or the mother, who becomes the voice of internalized authority: "The difficult problem of identification has its

roots here. The question is this: How can I, by starting from another-say, from the father become myself?" (Ricoeur 1970: 186)

The Freudian idea that the person is constituted (also) through a process of identification is generalized by Ricoeur. Identification with the parents becomes the paradigm for all subsequent identifications that shape the personality. In fact, the subject becomes himself – this is the paradox – by learning to think of himself as another.

> To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, in which the person or the community recognizes itself. (Ricoeur 1992: 121)

Identification is certainly based on fundamental psychological mechanisms, but it is also a structurally narrative process. *In order to identify with another self, I must be able to imagine myself as another*. But the ability to imagine oneself in the place of another is one of the fundamental prerequisites of narrative understanding. To understand a story above all means to be able to "empathize" with the hero. Indeed, for Ricoeur, literature is a vast "laboratory" (148) in which all conceivable modes of identification are experimented with[4]. In fact, identification with the father is only the first step of a long journey: the father is, in a sense, the first hero with whom we identify. Yet *the concrete genesis of a personality can largely be traced back to the history of all the identifications the subject has accepted (or rejected).*

[4] Busacchi and Martini explain, more clearly than Ricoeur, that identification is not always necessarily a positive dynamic in the constitution of personality: "This highlights the first risk posed by narration [...] that of the 'false self'. [...] The possibility then arises that instead of expanding one's identity, we end up enhancing an illusory and fictitious dimension of the self. Unfortunately, this is a frequent experience in a media society which, for various reasons, tends to not favour internalisation processes but imitative processes. (Busacchi & Martini, 2021: 56)

In this sense, narration – in the forms of fictional, historical, mythical, and religious narratives, as well as cinema and television – offers an inexhaustible treasure of practical models as reference points for one's own formation. Empathizing becomes the basis of a narrative assimilation, by virtue of which the person tends to resemble the heroes of the stories he has appropriated. Narrative assimilation thus becomes the precondition for psychological and moral identification.

Intersubjective otherness is involved in the constitution of narrative identity in another way as well. If it is true that action is always interaction, then one must recognize that "the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others" (Ricoeur 1992: 161). The metaphor of interweaving is significant here. A story can never be the monologue of a monad-like subject isolated from the world, just as an action can never be a merely solitary bodily gesture. The course of the protagonist's life necessarily intertwines with the course of events of all the other characters in the story. In this sense, *every individual story is always set against the background of a collective story*. My story is always situated within a broader history. In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur shows that this insertion of narrative time into historical time is almost always inevitable, even in fictional narratives. Even when telling a children's fairy tale, I must decide whether the protagonist is a medieval princess or a nineteenth-century peasant girl. Moreover, *this insertion into the history – and thus into the stories of others – is necessary in the case of narrative identity*, which is not a purely fictional identity.

This interweaving of individual stories is so essential that a significant part of a person's narrative identity escapes self-narration and appears only in third-person accounts. One may also reject the Freudian idea that an individual's personality is predominantly constituted during childhood. Even when rejecting this viewpoint, however, one must admit that childhood is an essential part of every

person's story. Yet childhood largely escapes self-narration. During the early years of a child's life, even after acquiring verbal language, narrative competence is almost absent. The most decisive episodes of this phase of anyone's life are made available through third-person narratives – primarily those of the parents. Thus, for example, my daughter knows well the anecdote concerning the choice of her given name, because we have told it to her many times. Yet clearly this story has no anchoring in her own memory.

Finally, the otherness of moral conscience also plays a role in the constitution of narrative identity. Ricoeur adopts a central thesis of MacIntyre (MacIntyre 2007: 204ff). *In order to judge a life as good, it is necessary that this life appear as a unity endowed with a certain coherence.* An existence dispersed across a multitude of disconnected activities cannot be a good existence. For this reason, for both MacIntyre and Ricoeur, a life can be good only if it is configured in the form of a story. In my view, this emphasis on the moral dimension in the theory of narrative identity is not entirely convincing. I am not sure that there is an equivalence between a good life and a coherent life, because there are highly unified lives that are lived in violence (Strawson 2022: 84). However, if narrative synthesis is even partly a necessary condition for the moral evaluation of one's own life (whether positive or negative), *the autobiographical account is invested with a fundamental practical role.* If it is true that what we ultimately seek in every action is a good life, *we need narrative to unify all the episodes of our existence into a plot that can be evaluated as good* (or not good).

> In a deliberately ethical perspective, which will be ours only in the following study, the idea of gathering together one's life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as a basis for the aim of a "good" life. (Ricoeur 1992: 158)

From Ricoeur's point of view, self-narration has its ultimate aim in the moral realm. (De Leeuw 2022: 76) We tell our story because we cannot avoid examining our lives, and we examine our lives because we strive for a good life. It is important to note, however, that *even in this case self-narration appears as the adoption of another perspective – the perspective of the moral judge – on our own existence.* The two images of conscience that have shaped Western thought – the Socratic image of the inner voice and the Kantian image of the internal tribunal – both equally imply otherness. Conscience is an other who speaks within me, or an other who judges me in my interiority. The self-narration that makes this dialogue, or this judgment, possible thus appears as a mediation between my experience and a point of view that has its own exteriority while remaining internal. The story that is offered to the guidance or judgment of conscience is, once again, a story addressed to another. A formula that could describe this relationship might be as follows: *my story is a narrative that submits itself to the moral judgment of another*. Ricoeur deliberately leaves open the question of whether this otherness echoes the fundamental ethical relation (I–You), or preserves a memory of the relation between the person and their tradition (I–We), or traces the transcendent relation with an Other (I–God).

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