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**Narrative and Self: A Hermeneutic Rejoinder
To Post-Modern Constructivism**

A concern for indubitable knowledge has been a hallmark of modern philosophy, particularly in the philosophies of consciousness inspired by Descartes' *cogito* (Ricoeur 1992: 04).¹ The cornerstone of this epistemology was the certain self-knowledge of the human subject. The thinking and conscious self was heralded as the undisputed point of departure for the edifice of modern knowing. The crowning expression of the philosophy of consciousness was the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, whose idealist or transcendental subject was expected to be able to undergird all meaning. This foundationalist subject, however, collapsed under the weight of the attack on the pretense of the subject by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, and in the 1970s and 80s by deconstructionism. These philosophers warn that the human subject hardly knows who or what she/he is. Self-consciousness is inevitably false consciousness. Thus, self-consciousness cannot be the source of cognitional certainty.

This malaise or crisis of the subject has been felt in all disciplines, but it has come to the fore with particular force in psychological theory. Few areas of human knowledge are more concerned with the understanding of the *self*. Traditional counseling psychology has been concerned with enabling individuals to "discover" their "true selves," and thus improve their inter- and intra-personal relationships. The search of psychology for an adequate definition of self has led to a variety of descriptions and theories from Freud's tripartite id, ego, and superego, to Skinner's behaviorism.

However, a new way of thinking about the self has been introduced to psychology that seeks to replace all of the old theories of self by a *denial* of the self. This new theory arises out of postmodernist philosophy, and is generally known as social constructivism.

Social constructionists argue that 1) the person is made up of multiple selves, 2) that the self cannot be ultimately known, understood or mastered, 3) that people cannot accurately know and understand one another, and 4) that people do not really inhabit the same world or speak the same language. For the social constructionists, the answer to the problem of the self is to eliminate the self. Kenneth Gergen gives us an explication of

the basic assumptions of a social constructionist stance, which may be summarized as follows (See Gergen 1991; 1994).

First, the terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts (Gergen 1994: 49). There is nothing inherent in the objects of our perception that requires the meaning ascribed to the object.

Second, the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people. Descriptions and explanations of our life-world do not reside in the things themselves, nor are they the result of our inherent biological ability to perceive, but are rather "the result of human coordination of action" (Gergen 1994: 49). For the social constructionist, all knowledge is constructed through the passage of time in a sustained "reiterative pattern of relationship." It is only by virtue of sustaining some form of past relationship that we can make sense at all. All accounts of reality are "constrained" by virtue of the fact that all realities ultimately arise from "reiterative patterns of relationship." It is to this problem that the third assumption is addressed.

"The degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social process" (Gergen 1994: 49). "Objective validity" is only pertinent within the context of any given social process. For example, a scientific explanation of a particular phenomenon is only true in so far as that particular scientific community agrees to say that it is so. The phenomenon's reality is "constrained" as truth by the "vicissitudes" of the social process known as science.

Finally, if we affirm that there is no subjective or objective knowledge, but only reiterative patterns of relationship, that find expression in "language games" which are further related to the specific meaning contexts of the particular language being used, we can come to the understanding that language can provide for us a context of evaluation that arises out of our pattern of cultural life. And in so doing, this realization creates an awareness of other "cultural enclaves." So in this view language—particularly narrative or story—becomes the mediation and continuity of identity, but that identity has no privileged position or permanence, only "epiphenomenal presence."

Thus, the only self that exists is the self caught in a particular narrative at a particular time. Both the self and the narrative can and do change anytime. The best that we can say from this perspective is that the only self that we can assert is the self "constrained" by a particular narrative—also constrained by history, culture, *etc.*,—is "real" for the purposes of that

particular "story." The social constructionist understanding of self and the world places a significant emphasis on narrative as constitutive of our social world. However, the multiplicity of narratives and their radical relativism of time and place ultimately makes narrative nothing more than convenient fictions to represent how one might understand the world. Gergen states:

There are indeed limits on our accounts of events across time [narratives], but they are not to be traced either to minds in action or to events in themselves. . . . [B]oth in science and in daily life, the stories serve as communal resources that people use in ongoing relationships. From this standpoint, narratives do not reflect so much as they create the *sense* of 'what is true. (Gergen 1994: 189; italics mine)²

The question is, however, can a *sense of the truth* ultimately satisfy the human desire for significant relationship and its search for the Good in human society? Paul Ricoeur, who has used narrative to recover a meaningful self, provides a more satisfying answer. However, understanding how he does this requires a significant detour through his recent essays in practical philosophy and the ethical self.

An Ontology of Being - Situatedness in Action

Ricoeur's recovery of a meaningful notion of the self does not lie through an "introspective encounter" with an empirical subject nor a transcendental deduction of a transcendental ego. Rather, he argues that the self "leaves traces" in its action which are recoverable through the "self's narratives." This position entails a shift from a foundationalist or substantialist notion of the self to an ethical or moral self grounded not by ontology of "essence" but by an ontology of action and passion.³ Before Being is a something, an essence, or whatness, it is a *dunamis* and *energeia*, that is, a power (or potency) and effectiveness or effort. Being is an "act" or a "desire" and "effort to be."⁴ The desire and effort to be is not a theoretical starting point, but a practical one to which all human actions attest. It affirms that "this is so" or asserts "this I can do."

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur calls this epistemological affirmation about reality and about the mode of the self's existence "attestation" (Ricoeur 1992: 299; [350]). Attestation is the commitment of the self, the unverifiable confidence of the self, in what the self says and knows itself to be able to do. Thus, "Attestation can be defined as *the assurance of being oneself*

acting and suffering? [sic] (Ricoeur 1992: 22). The self exists, in other words, also as a warranted belief or as an assurance of its truthfulness. In attestation, the self expresses the confidence that, in spite of the contrary suspicion, a meaningful and authentic realization of the self is possible.

This attested truth is not necessarily verifiable truth or truth as adequation. Attestation is the self in its commitment to the world. The self exists as an attestation of the truthfulness of being and as a confidence that everyone exists as a self (Ricoeur, in Gereisch and Reamey 1991: 381 - 403). The identity of the self, in its attestation, is central both as a project of life and as an epistemological stance.

Meaning and Human Action

What mediates the self as a project, such that it attests to its being is meaningful as opposed to random action? Recent philosophy, especially analytical, has expended a great deal of effort to determine what human actions are. What makes human actions so unique? What makes actions different from happenings or events? What makes greeting someone, giving a signal, or agreeing to a sale so different from a twitch of the hand or the flutter of the eyelids? (Moya 1990: 02).

The nature of these differences is difficult to express. There is something about actions that does not make them fully subject to observation. Only the waving of the arm, the lifting of a cap, the movement of the head and the eye contact are observable in a greeting. But they do not fully constitute a greeting, because the observable form is linked with intention. Actions are done in a context of meaning. If one wishes to understand actions, one must intercept them somehow, and language provides a key.⁵

But how does language display the intentional aspect of action? Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) has identified three linguistic types of intentionality, although in practice it has limited itself to using only two. The first type of intentionality is expressed as follows: (1) I do or have done something intentionally; (that is, intention is expressed adverbially in the present or the past). The second manner in which intentionality is expressed (2) "I do something with the intention that . . ." is similar to the first. It too refers to a present action. Propositions such as these emphasize actions that have been done, and, as completed, are observable.

But these two expressions of intentionality privilege only one aspect of action: the observable aspects – the movements. Consequently, actions are events in which the "what" of the action leads to the "why." Actions, it

is argued, are explained by giving reasons for actions (Ricoeur 1992: 62; [99]).

However, there is a third type of intentionality that is rarely invoked. Propositionally this intentionality is expressed as: "I have the intention to . . ." Here the proposition turns not to the past with its completed action that can be observed, but to the future. The intentionality of "I have the intention to . . ." is projective. OLP calls them commissives. They occur when "I commit myself" to do something.

The paradigm for this action is making a promise. With a promise, I project myself into the future. By means of the word that I speak, I commit myself to be faithful to a given word. Ricoeur insists that a promised action, a commissive, is the paradigm for action. For what happens in promising? Its action is not an observable event. The action is still in the future. It is a commitment to action. At this point, the emphasis of "What is action?" shifts away from the "Why?" or the search for reasons for action, toward the agent, the "Who?" of action.

At this level, meaningful action is not an event. It is, in the pure sense of the word, an initiative, a projecting ahead, of the self of the agent (Ricoeur 1992: 83; [107]). This ascription of an action to an agent does not ask the question of propositional truth but the question of personal truthfulness or veracity. In the promise, the agent attests to the self who will be measured by the kept word (Ricoeur 1992: 58; [91]). The self attests to a capacity that it has of doing: "I can." It attests to a ground in the self of acting and suffering that is activated in initiatives. It attests to the self as an openness to the world "as a specific coordination with the movement of the world and all the physical aspects of action" (Ricoeur 1992: [363]). Thus, the acting self is also the ethical self who avails itself of the most detailed analyses of human action to promote the own most possibilities of the self. So what is recovered in this ontology of action is not a substantial, essential, self but a responsible self – as responsive or responding in its own actions.

Here, however, one must be cautious about Ricoeur's meaning of the term "self" The term self is not synonymous with "I" or "me" or "myself" The term "*self*" and its associated forms in French "*soi*" and "*soi-même*," take their cue principally from the reflexive infinitive form of the predicate; that is: "*se dire*," "*se poser*," "*se demander*."⁶ Only then is this reflexivity deployed in the variety of personal pronouns: I, you, she; we.

Let us for a moment relate these to features of Ricoeur's own definition of an ethical perspective (or intention): "*la visée éthique est la visée de la 'vie bonne' avec et pour autrui dans des institutions justes*" (Ricoeur 1992: 172; [202]).⁷

The three elements of this definition (a) "*vie bonne*" (good life), (b) "*avec et pour autrui*" (with and for others), and (c) "*institutions justes*" (just/good/fair institutions) correspond to the forms of three personal pronouns "I," "you" or "thou," and "he, or she (the other)." The pronominal relation that Ricoeur sets up among these terms of the "ethical perspective" may appear more obvious with regard to the second ("*avec et pour autrui*") and the third person ("*institutions justes*") than to the first. Indeed, the first, "*la vie bonne*," appears to break, at the very beginning, the logical sequence of these pronouns, "you," "he/she." But let us consider that Ricoeur remarks that he deliberately avoided beginning his definition by referring to the "I." He did not want the notion of ethical identity to be governed by a truncated notion of the isolated self.

The ethical self can only be adequately appropriated insofar as the self understands himself/herself as he/she is constituted by relationships with the other. For his part, Ricoeur takes up in the second moment of his definition ("*avec et pour autrui*") the reference to the personal other as "you." Then he adds in the third moment a more specific reference to the other as the anonymous "*chacun*," here referring to the mediating role of institutions in the constitution of the self.

Only then does the entire complex of relationships represented in the definition contribute to the constitution of the self. When speaking of "*la visée de la vie bonne*" Ricoeur refers to an organizing principle of all human action, a *telos*, a horizon or limit toward which all action is concentrated. Furthermore, in light of this, other patterns of human action (e.g., daily routines, life plans, my life story) assume a certain order and hierarchy.

This horizon is a matter of judgment. It corresponds to what Ricoeur calls attestation. Attestation is a form of judgment. It refers to a level of self-awareness, "*une reconnaissance de soi*"⁸ whose corresponding linguistic expression is "*Me voici!*" – "Here I am!" – the "I" who situates him/herself. Attestation then is an initiative that opens a further series of actions which will stamp the course of human time and history. Not only is this true of my time as an agent, it is true of the time of others who will bear the consequences of my actions, and it is true of those who preceded in time and to whose achievements I am in debt.⁹

Ricoeur would respond by saying: if ethical identity thematizes the moral self it is only because it has already inherited a notion of the responsible subject. It belongs to the role of narrative identity to offer this notion of the responsible subject. In so doing, it will fulfill its mandate as a mediating role between description and prescription. To develop this claim, I would like to refer to another statement in Ricoeur's text for which he shows a special liking:

Literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval and condemnation through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethic. (Ricoeur 1992: 115; [139])¹⁰

At one level this statement expresses quite clearly what narrative offers to ethics. But we may ask further what is it about narrative that allows it to make this contribution? The answer, in short, is the way it advances personal identity and portrays human life.

The assessments (valuations), evaluations, and judgments of praise and blame mentioned in Ricoeur's expression are directed toward the actions of characters and personalities, indeed they are attributed to their identity. Ethical reflection will submit the traits of these "actors" and their actions to evaluation. This being said, it is no small achievement, at a reflective level (recall that Ricoeur is thematizing narrative identity), to achieve personal identity, and further, to get the idea of a responsible subject out into the open.

To do this, Ricoeur had to trace the long route toward a theory of action in order to relate action to agency. As Ricoeur maintains, at the descriptive level all one has is an account of "abbreviated actions" (*actions courtes*) or random actions. What is lacking on the descriptive side, Ricoeur argues, is the temporal dimension, and with it, the emergence of personal identity: "personal identity' [. . .] can be articulated only in the temporal dimension of human existence" (Ricoeur 1992: 114; [138]).¹¹ Narrative identity represents, therefore, coming from the side of description, an extension and augmentation of the idea of action. This extension of the domain of action through a reference to temporality is an act of the creation of meaning and order. Time, taken up by the narrative form, allows us to make connection among actions and to follow, by means of the act of emplotment ("*mise en intrigue*"), the emergence of forms of activity that range from simple daily routines, through plans of life, to my total life story.

But what precisely do we follow in a narrative identity? Drawing on his reflections with the domain of ordinary language philosophy, Ricoeur maintains that the structure of action cannot be dissociated from reference to agency, that is, an attention to persons who act (ascription). Narrative follows, not just the courses of action, but actors, as they assume specific roles and identities. The act of plotting a story generates at the same time the actors, their roles and the story line.

As a moment in the analytic of action, then, narrative fulfills a twofold function. First, it brings to light a personal identity that can only develop as action is followed over a period of time; secondly, it relates the

employment of a story to the employment of characters. The story is a story about people. Thus, the narrative brings into play two dimensions of the narrative character and shows how both are productive of a narrative identity. One dimension is "character" (understood here not as personage but as an individual's habitual dispositions); the other is a "fidelity to one's word" ("*la parole tenue*"). The first, "character," underscores the fact that, through all the different actions that take place, it is this one and the same person who acts. It testifies to the irreducible corporeal dimension of action. The second ("*parole tenue*") accentuates the person who continues to care about life amid the fragility of all attempts to create a coherence in life. It refers to the unexpected events and incidents, the variables of life that affect and intersect the course of human actions, that disrupt intended designs and plans. What matters at these times is how the narrative constructs its characters. The quality of their life and the nature of their role are defined and shaped by the way in which these actors respond to unexpected developments. In contrast to the sameness of "character," a unique value announces itself here, that of personal truth and a capacity for maintaining one's word. In displaying this in action, narrative achieves a pattern of human life that saves the character from dissimulation. Fiction, Ricoeur writes, "saves us from randomness" (Ricoeur 1992: 150; 192)).

This narrative position takes a significant departure from the convenient fictions of constructionism, because the narrative identity thematizes more than the created coherence of an individual's life. It thematizes personal identity in its dimensions of solicitude (how the other counts on me) and justice (how others whom I do not know are affected by my actions; how my life, well before I appear on the scene, is affected by other people's actions). With this, the full density of a narrative self comes into focus, the self and selves who are both acting and suffering subject(s). Simultaneously, however, in the decisions taken by characters that configure their roles and identities, life is opened to examination. In narration "*la parole tenue*" refers not only to how I situate myself in face of the unexpected, the novel or the new, but also how my word in these circumstances is kept because someone else depends or counts on me.

We return again to Ricoeur's elegant expression "literature is a vast laboratory where we try out assessment, evaluations, and judgments of praise or blame through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics" (Ricoeur 1992: 115; [139]). Narrative creates a playground within which we can test out our feelings of what is praiseworthy and blameworthy, of worthwhileness and pointlessness, of change and permanence. In following literary characters in the execution of their roles and the outcome of their actions, we discover a storehouse of possibilities for testing out our own

feelings and reactions. We project our own identities; how do we situate ourselves? How do we ourselves react before these characters and their deeds? Our own moral sense and awareness, our feelings about what is attractive and unattractive emerge. A sense of responsibility spontaneously surfaces as our feelings respond to the course of actions narrated in the comic and tragic dramas of human action (Gergen 1994: 185 - 209).

Narrative is an exercise of productive imagination. How, we might ask, do we relate this act of imagination back to concrete life and ethical identity? This is a necessary step, for ethics addresses the concrete lives of suffering and acting human beings. The link between these stories and our lives is effected in the act of reading. If fiction abstracts from the concrete actions in these isolated initiatives or routines and configures a pattern according to which we can begin to perceive personal identities and responsible subjects, the act of reading these narratives begins to forge links between fiction's array of actions and our life's concrete possibilities.

Ricoeur has always maintained in his textual hermeneutics that reading is essential to the structure of the text. Reading not only integrates the text within our lives, it also brings the text to a close by our own initiatives. Genuine interpretation is at the same time an existential stance. Within an ethical perspective, the moment of attestation, our own decision toward the good, closes the book of fiction as a playground, a laboratory of possibilities, and initiates our own ethical selves in the moment of decision. The structure of that is the matter of ethical identity.

Notes

1. See also David Carr, in "Re-reading Modern Philosophy: The Death and Life of the Subject," *The Mid-South Philosophy Conference*, Memphis State University: Memphis, Tennessee, February 24, 1994, for an exceptional reconstruction of this history.

2. Gergen's answer to the criticism that constructionism fails to provide a basis for ethical decision making is that

... constructionism does not in itself attempt to establish or institute a code of ethics either on the psychological or the philosophical level. Rather, it brackets "the problem of moral principles," favoring in its place an exploration of those relational practices that enable people to achieve what they take to be a "moral life." The question is not

“What is the good?” but instead, given the heterogeneity of the world’s peoples, “What are the relational means by which they can move toward mutually satisfactory conditions?” (Gergen 1991: 112)

Ricoeur will not disagree with the detour through “an exploration of those relational practices,” but will insist that a return to the “problem of moral principles” will be essential to any intelligible description of a narrative self.

3. Ricoeur acknowledges the danger of separating the political and ethical from a metaphysics. The political theories of Hobbes and notably Rousseau relinquished the metaphysical base of a philosophy of act or action. The re-establishment of the link between ethical and political action and a metaphysics is important for the legitimization of the social bond and for democracy. In modern times, only Spinoza recognized the importance of an ontology of action. In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur invokes Spinoza’s *conatus* as a still valid ontology of human action. See Ricoeur 1992: 315 - 316 [*Soi-même*: 365 - 367].

4. The “desire and effort to be” or as expressed in Ricoeur 1992: 317 [367], the “backdrop of being at once actual and powerful” [*le fond d’être à la fois effectif et puissant*] is Ricoeur’s translation of Spinoza’s *conatus*.

5. Here analytical philosophy commits itself to a single clear option. Its theory of action accepts only those actions that are spoken. Their study of human action, and Ricoeur follows them in this, at least in part, takes place in a study of the propositions of human meaningful actions. What is at stake here is the effort to avoid having to enter the murky area of mental events or volitions. A mental event or volition is not public, and therefore, inaccessible.

6. Translated, respectively, as: to call (or say) to oneself, to pose questions of oneself; to wonder. The emphasis of the reflexive verb refers to the reflexive noun.

7. Thus: “The ethical intention (*visée*) has as its goal (*visée*) ‘the good life’ with and for others (the neighbor) in just institutions.” The French term “*autrui*” is not an impersonal other (*autrui*), but the personal other as in “neighbour,” other “person” *etc.*

8. “As in recognizing oneself,” or a “coming to oneself.” The emphatic meaning of the word or phrase is self-awareness, or self-conscious identity.

9. Thus, Ricoeur likes to speak of the suffering and acting subject.

10. Perhaps more felicitous is the translation, “Literature is a vast laboratory for trying out assessments, evaluations, judgments of praise and blame which through their story serve as the elementary education of ethics.”

11. “[I]dentité personnelle” [. . .] *peut précisément s’articuler que dans la dimension temporelle de l’existence humaine.*” Again, a better translation than Blarney’s is “. . . personal identity can only be connected (that is, become coherent) by means of the temporal dimension of human existence.” The image of the temporal domain provides the ligatures of sinew that bind the “bones” of personal identity, or as Ricoeur says elsewhere (p. 115) in reference to Dilthey’s historiography, “the connected of life.”

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