Paul Ricoeur’s Oneself as Another

Paul Ricoeur’s contribution to hermeneutics philosophy, is one of the most significant. Ricoeur focuses on the concept of personal identity. Oneself as another is important because personal identity is an important issue in contemporary society. He develops a hermeneutics of the self that charts its ontological status, by asking, “What is the self?” and the epistemological path where we have a metaphysics of the morals.

Paul Ricoeur is one of the few philosophers that addresses the problem of violence. Though his discussion of violence is only peripheral to the larger project evident in “Oneself as another” Ricoeur offers a definition of violence based on individual interaction and the expression of power. Violence, for Paul Ricoeur only occurs in a social setting.¹

Narratives are like texts open to different interpretations. We are exposed to different narratives about the same event or element of knowledge, and we are invited to decode the significance of each particular perspective.

Ricoueur is influenced by other writers, among of which we find Hans-Georg Gadamer and his call for a dialectic between the horizons of the text and reader and F. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and his attempt to gain meaning through understanding the mind of the author. Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative has implications for a wide spectrum of contemporary thought.

Oneself as another

Paul Ricoeur in his book “Oneself As Another” initially launches two studies confined to the resources that semantics and pragmatics offer. In the first semantic study the problem of the self-stemming from the philosophy of language is pursued. The pragmatic study, which is the study of language as it is used in specific contexts of

interlocution, undertakes not an empirical description of acts of communication but an investigation into the conditions that govern language use in all those cases in which the reference attached to certain expressions cannot be determined without knowledge of the context of their use.

The two studies that follow discuss the relations between agent and action. The complexity of the relation between the theory of language and the theory of action is discussed in the course of this first study within the context of philosophical semantics, then in the next study within the context of the pragmatics of language. “What does action teach about the agent?” he asks. “To what extent can, what is learned in this way, contribute to clarifying the difference between ipse and idem?”

Two major meanings of “identity” are distinguished in the word “self”. In fact the fifth and sixth study treat this subject of selfhood - ipse and sameness - idem within the framework of narrative theory. The equivocity of the term “identical” is at the centre of the reflections on personal identity and narrative identity and related to a primary trait of the self, namely its temporality. Identity in the sense of idem unfolds an entire hierarchy of significations which are explained in the fifth and sixth studies.

In studies seven, eight and nine, Paul Ricoeur undertakes the task of proposing a final detour by way of the ethical and moral determination of action, related to the categories of the good and of the obligatory, respectively. In this way, he brings to light the ethical and moral dimension of a subject to whom an action, whether good or not, whether performed out of duty or not can be attributed. In these last three ethical studies the dialectic of the same and the other finds its appropriate philosophical development.

The final study in this book aims at bringing to light the ontological implications of the earlier investigations, placed under the heading of a hermeneutics of the self.

This overview just presented of the studies that form this work gives an idea of the gap that separates the hermeneutics of the self from the philosophies of the cogito. To
say self is not to say “I”. The “I” is posited—or is deposed. The self is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward this self. Upon this dialectic of analysis and reflection is grafted that of idem and ipse.

Following this brief overview of the whole book “Oneself As Another”, two studies, namely of “Personal Identity and Narrative Identity” and “The Self And Narrative Identity” will be dealt in more detail.

The notion of narrative identity

Narrative identity as described in Paul Ricoeur’s book “Time And Narrative” goes through a long voyage through historical narrative and fictional narrative. He then tries to find whether there existed a structure of experience capable of integrating these two great classes of narratives. He then formed the hypothesis according to which narrative identity, either that of a person or of a community, would be the sought after place of this chasm between history and fiction. Following the intuitive preunderstanding we have of these things, he asks: “Do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? Are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the narrative models of plots – borrowed from history or from fiction (drama or novel) – are applied to them?”. Therefore it seems plausible to take the following chain of assertions as valid: self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. Ricoeur here notes that a triad has thus imposed itself on his analysis: describe, narrate and prescribe – each moment of the triad implying a specific relation between the constitution of action and the constitution of the self.

It suffices to say that in many narratives the self seeks its identity on the scale of an entire life. Between the brief actions and the connectedness of life we find staggered
degrees of complexity which carry the theory of action to the level required by narrative theory. Ricoeur concludes by stating that there is no ethically neutral narrative.

**The problem of personal identity**

Identity as *sameness (idem)* is not identity as *selfhood (ipse)*. It is with the question of *Permanence in time* that the confrontation between the two versions of identity becomes a problem. Sameness is a concept of relation and a relation of relations. Ricoeur first performs a conceptual analysis of identity as sameness to indicate the eminent place that permanence in time holds.

It is precisely to the extent that time is implied in the series of occurrences of the same thing that the reidentification of the same can provoke hesitation, doubt or contestation. This is what happens when we speak of the physical identity of a person. We have no trouble recognizing someone who simply enters and leaves, appears, disappears and reappears. Yet doubt is not far away when we compare a present perception with a recent memory. The weakness of the criterion of similitude, in the case of a great distance in time suggests the third component of the notion of identity, namely the *uninterrupted continuity* between the first and the last stage in the development of what we consider to be the same individual.

However, does the selfhood of the self imply a form of permanence in time which is not reducible to the determination of a substratum, not even in the relational sense which Kant assigns to the category of substance; in other words, is there a form of permanence in time which is not simply the schema of the category of substance? 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?”
When we speak of ourselves, we in fact have available to us two models of permanence in time which can be summed up in two expressions that are at once descriptive and emblematic: character and keeping one’s word. In both of these, we easily recognize a permanence which we say belongs to us. Preferences, evaluations, and estimations are stabilized in such a way that the person is recognized in these dispositions, which may be called evaluative. This is why behaviour that does not correspond to dispositions of this sort makes us say that it is not in the character of the individual in question, that this person is not herself or even that the person is acting completely out of character.

Therefore character designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. Two notions related to these dispositions are habit and acquired identifications. There are two types of habit: habit as it is, as we say, and habit already acquired. Habit gives a history to character, but this is a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it, even to the point of abolishing the latter. It is this sedimentation which confers on character the sort of permanence in time that Ricoeur is interpreting here as the overlapping of ipse by idem. This overlapping, however, does not abolish the difference separating the two problematics: precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, ipse; but this ipse announces itself as idem. Each habit formed in this way, acquired, becomes a lasting disposition and constitutes a trait — a character trait, a distinctive sign by which a person is recognized, reidentified as the same.

Related to the notion of disposition there is also the set of acquired identifications by which the other enters into the composition of the same. To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideas, models, and heroes, in which the person or the community recognizes itself. Recognizing oneself in contributes to recognizing oneself by.

Another model of permanence in time besides that of character, already mentioned above, is that of keeping one’s word in faithfulness to the word that has been
given. The perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else. The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship is quite another. Here we have two models of permanence in time — the perseverance of character and the constancy of the self in promising. It is therefore in the sphere of temporality that the mediation is to be sought. It is this setting that the notion of narrative identity comes to occupy. Hence narrative identity swings between two limits: a lower limit, where permanence in time expresses the confusion of *idem* and *ipse*; and an upper limit, where the *ipse* poses the question of its identity without the aid and support of the *idem*.

**The paradoxes of personal identity**

Ricoeur then examines the claims of theories of personal identity, which do not consider either the distinction of idem, and *ipse* or the resources offered by narratives to resolve the paradoxes of personal identity, which these same theories have the advantage of presenting clearly and forcefully. He criticizes Locke with inventing a criterion of identity, namely mental identity, to which may henceforth be opposed the criterion of corporeal identity. Locke offered a case of a prince whose memory is transplanted into the body of a cobbler. Does the latter become the prince whom he remembers having been, or does he remain the cobbler whom other people continue to observe? Locke decided in favour of the first solution. But modern readers, Ricoeur says, more sensitive to the collision between two opposing criteria of identity, will conclude that the case is undecidable.

Hume introduces two new concepts, imagination and belief. To imagination is attributed the faculty of moving easily from one experience to another if their difference is slight and gradual, and thus of transforming diversity into identity. Belief serves as a relay, filling in the deficiencies of the impression. Ricoeur then asks: “Was not Hume seeking what he could not hope to find — a self which was but sameness? And was he not presupposing the self he was not seeking?” An argument from Hume’s writings is
then quoted. “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.” Here, then, is someone who claims to be unable to find anything but a datum stripped of selfhood; someone who penetrates within himself, seeks and declares to have found nothing. At least someone is stumbling, observing a perception. With the question Who? — who is seeking, stumbling, and not finding, and who perceives? — the self returns just when the same slips away.

In the discussion that follows Ricoeur enters into the criteria of beliefs that we ordinarily attach to the claim of personal identity. He criticizes Derek Parfit’s book Reasons and Persons. Ricoeur finds Parfit’s work a formidable adversary to his thesis of narrative identity. Parfit’s analyses are situated on a plane where identity can signify only sameness, to the express exclusion of any distinction between sameness and selfhood, and hence of any dialectic — narrative or other between sameness and selfhood. The work recalls that of Locke — due less to the place occupied by memory in it than to its recourse to puzzling cases — and that of Hume, in its sceptical conclusion. The famous puzzling cases which serve as truth tests throughout Parfit’s book do indeed lead us to think that the very question of identity can prove to be meaningless, to the extent that, in the paradoxical cases at least, the answer is undetermined.

The contribution of narrative theory

Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative has implications for a wide spectrum of contemporary thought. The contribution of narrative theory to the constitution of the self is significant.

In telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity.²

Telling a story involves various viewpoints. They represent a radical departure from the scientific objective approach to the social sciences. Human behaviour speaks in terms of meanings and categories. It is through this that we make sense of the word reality. Meanings occur through the use of language and it is through this that we can distinguish between different types of objects, events and people.

It also involves a twofold process of identification. It also involves a two-fold process of identification the plot and character. Ricoeur highlights the connection between the plot and the character as revealed by narrative theory and the relationship between the action and who does that action. The ends of narrative identity are the permanence in time of character and that of self-constancy.

Ricoeur goes deeper into the dialectic of selfhood and sameness. When we say “I am nothing”, there is a concordance between ‘I’ and ‘nothing’ only if nothing is attributed to “I”. However while in Descrates there is a concordance between the self and the cogito, “I think therefore I am”, in Ricoeur the self is prior to the “I think”.

Identity is not one thing for any individual. Ricoeur discusses different ‘roles’ and the individual opts for a number of identities. Identity is constructed with that of the plot, and formed in sites and locations, e.g. developed or underdeveloped countries. It is also historically located and depends according where you are and at what time, e.g., at home housewife, at work manager, at work man is oppressed, and at home oppresses his wife. Identity is of course formed in discourses and systems of narration, where we tell about ourselves or can be ‘told’ in.

Enlightenment thought of the 17th and 18th century rejected traditional values and institutions and looked upon empirical science as means to understand and control both nature and society. It also encouraged rational philosophy which defined man’s destiny in terms of freedom and responsibility. Yet Ricoeur criticized Enlightenment skepticism
and sorrowed over the declined sense of community and over-importance given to individual.

Whereas for Descartes, either there are ideas, objects of essences, or there is nothing; for Ricoeur, narrative opens up the notion of an entity who acts and suffers within a framework of continuity and change through the changes and continuities of time.³

**The mediations between the theory of action and ethical theory**

The second aim of this study is to explore the mediations that narrative can perform between the theory of action and ethical theory. As specified in Chapter 5, Personal Identity and Narrative Identity, narrative identity is central in exploring the action theory and moral theory. We as humans are ascribed to act right and have the moral obligation to act right. The most significant point is the contribution of narrative theory to ethical reasoning.

Aristotle also defines tragedy as a definition of action.

> The most important of the six (parts of tragedy) is the combination of the incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse.⁴

He goes deeper into the understanding of the action by the grammar of action sentences. The first composite units are those which deserve the name of practices, “to practice”, e.g. to practice sports, to practice medicine. Here we can see more clearly the means and ends of the action and the intention. The vocabulary attached to some actions show subordination rather than coordination, e.g. setting up a menu while other actions show

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the coordination, e.g. practice the art of catering. These practices are our obligations and responsibilities.

The ethical implications of the narrative

Narrative identity helps to clarify the relations between narrativity and ethics. It is our responsibility to act morally good. When we say “I am nothing” the term ‘nothing’ does not mean anything if it is not attributed to the “I”. We can also imply that “I can try anything”.

Ricoeur goes deeper into the relationship to be framed in what McIntyre calls “the narrative unity of life”, that is life as a whole. We shall term ‘life plans’ those vast practical units that make up professional life, family life, leisure time and so forth.

Following this argumentation we think that as Christians our lives have to manifest our Christian being in all levels. Wherever we are acting we have to be acting in the life of the new Christian being we receive through the Sacraments. The modern person is able to live an honest act of willing and reflecting in Religion.