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Oneself as a Story¹

ABSTRACT: This article focuses an analysis and critique of Ricœur's conception of narrative identity as proposed in his work *Oneself as Another*. First, I will introduce Ricœur's conception of hermeneutical anthropology that should function as a mediatory system between fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger and analytical philosophy. I will explain that in the framework of this thought the narrative identity should also be developed as a mediatory notion and demonstrate Ricœur's description of human being as an action and his claim that the structure of action corresponds to the structure of a text. Finally, I will deal with the ethical dimension of action as it is described by Ricœur and will sum up problems of his project.

KEYWORDS: narrative identity • mediatory function • action • hermeneutics • text

In this article I intend to focus on an analysis and critique of Ricœur's conception of narrative identity as proposed in his work *Oneself as Another*². My argument involves the following steps: 1. I will introduce Ricœur's conception of hermeneutical anthropology that should function as a mediatory system between fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger and analytical philosophy; 2. I will explain that in the framework of this thought the narrative identity should also be developed as a mediatory notion. 3. I will discuss Ricœur's description of human being as an action and his claim that the structure of action corresponds to the structure of a text. 4. I will deal with the ethical dimension of action as it is described by Ricœur; 5. At the end I will sum up problems of Ricœur's project.

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² P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, transl. by K. Blamey, Chicago, 1992. The book has been reviewed already by many authors, like e.g. E. Pucci's “Review of Paul Ricœur's *Oneself as Another: Personal Identity, Narrative Identity, and 'Selfhood' in the Thought of Paul Ricœur*,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 18, 1992, pp. 185–209 and Ch. E. Reagan's *The Self as Other*, „*Philosophy Today*” 37, 1993, pp. 3–22.

1. Hermeneutical anthropology

Ricœur's aim in *Oneself as another* is to develop a philosophical anthropology based on hermeneutical presuppositions and to ask with all "ontological vehemence"³ the question about the character of personal identity. Ricœur's intention is to expand synthetic, and, as he himself says, a sort of third thinking which will act as a mediator between two different thoughts: the analytic conception of the human being derived from the assumptions of Cartesian metaphysics and Heidegger's fundamental ontology of *Dasein*. The author talks about a "realistic turn", which consists in the fact that in the phenomenological thinking it is necessary "to do justice to analytic philosophy for the support I shall constantly draw from it in executing my ontological sketch"⁴.

The motive of this philosophical effort is Ricœur's intuition that

In a certain way – how I am not at all sure – it is the same body that is experienced and known; it is the same mind that is experienced and known; it is the same person who is 'mental' and 'corporeal'. From this ontological identity arises a third discourse that goes beyond both phenomenological philosophy and science⁵.

Thus it seems that Ricœur aims to develop his anthropology beyond the strict phenomenological field. He claims that it is necessary to grasp the human being in its diversity and unify the human Self only at the level of unity of analogy. In this context, it is subsequently necessary to find such a definition of personal identity that could articulate two different sorts of the Self. These identities are the selfhood of the human being as *Dasein* and the sameness of the human being as a representative of the human kind. The mediatory way which Ricœur wants to take draws on hermeneutical assumptions.

2. Narrative identification

The intermediary role of the notion of narrative identity consists in the fact that it unifies two different conceptions of personal identity as two aspects of the same person: the sameness (*idem*) and the selfhood (*ipse*) of a human being. These two kinds of identity can be in some moments

³ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 300.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ J.-P. Changeux, P. Ricœur, *What Makes Us Think?* transl. by M. B. DeBevoise, Princeton 2002, p. 28.

very close to each other, while in other cases they can be radically distanced from each other. A typical example when sameness literally overlaps with selfhood is, according to Ricœur, the human character. A counterexample, when selfhood is distanced from sameness, the most and when its influence in the determination of personal identity significantly prevails over the influence of sameness, is manifested in the phenomenon of a promise.

According to Ricœur, personal character is defined as “the set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same”⁶. What kind of character one has is, according to Ricœur, an unchangeable and involuntary thing and thus character functions as an objective expression of subjective existence. In other words, “character is truly the ‘what’ of the ‘who’”⁷.

Individuals do not have the ability to change this level of their own personality; their only possibility is to agree to their character and consent to it. Identity which is founded by character is close to the definition of sameness: “character secures numerical identity [...] uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time which designate the sameness (*mêmeté*) of the person”⁸.

The other pole of personal identity is distinctly manifested in the phenomenon of a promise. According to Ricœur, “keeping one’s word expresses a self-constancy”⁹. As the self-constancy (holding oneself in one’s hands, taking-over and self-keeping) is related, in Ricœur’s terminology, to the concept of self-subsistence (*Selbständigkeit*), which Heidegger uses in *Being and Time*. This sort of self-subsistence is expressed in the following form of resoluteness: “[...] even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, ‘I will hold firm’ (*‘je maintiendrai’*)”¹⁰.

Having explained the two limit aspects of personal identity, Ricœur continues in his argument and claims that “this new manner of opposing the sameness of character to the constancy of the self in promising opens an interval of sense which remains to be filled in”¹¹. There occurs in this interval a gradual prevalence of one aspect of identity over another while, according to Ricœur, it is necessary to show in what sense the continuity of this gradual prevalence can be preserved. Ricœur’s intention is to interpret this interval between the sameness of character and the selfhood of keeping a

⁶ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 119.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

promise as a space of narrative identity. I think that several objections can be voiced concerning this exposition of individual components of personal identity.

First, although Ricœur speaks about the character as an objective pole of personality which determines its sameness, we cannot, to all intents, speak about any sameness in this case. If the character were to found human sameness, it would have to have the form of a substance which can be re-identified by contemplative thinking in repeated non-dimensional moments. The substance of character would have to be distinguishable from other representatives of the same class (one character and not two, a character with a defined origin, character as an independent entity). However, character does not illustrate such a nature. Character comes to be, evidently, by stabilization and sedimentation of experience. Ricœur grasps by means of character but a mere imitation of personal “sameness”, which reminds us of sameness from the perspective of human experience.

Second, the phenomenon of a promise should be, according to Ricœur, in contrast to character, a manifestation of almost “pure” selfhood in which the objective component of sameness is present only to a minimum extent. However, couldn’t the promise become, during one’s lifetime, one of the classic features of human character? In many cases keeping one’s word belongs to the cultural norm which we have to get used to and understand it as a social prescription. It is not completely clear anymore, however, whether keeping one’s word presents a subsistent basis of selfhood, which does not rely on sameness. Isn’t it also possible that the actor, by keeping the promise, maintains a sort of an “own” role, perhaps even as a caricature or image which was foisted on him by the public ‘they’? A promise can be fulfilled to the same extent by one’s resoluteness, as well as by the fear of eternal vengeance, or simply by a custom, which has the function of a rigid support of an unchangeable life order. For the same reason, it is impossible, within the scope of Ricœur’s conception, for a human being who betrayed someone in some concrete situation to dispose of any sort of selfhood. The way in which Ricœur interprets a promise confirms therefore that the author ultimately does not look for a way in which to mediate between various ways of predicating the self, but he orients himself directly to the realm which completes human existence – and that is the realm of personal ethics. The promise characterizes the pseudo-individual ethical identity. This is attested for instance by the following statement: “But is not a moment of self-dispossession essential to authentic selfhood?”¹².

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 138.

Although Ricœur insists on the inseparability of sameness and selfhood, he speaks in this sentence about authentic selfhood neither wholly about authentic identity, nor about authentic sameness and selfhood at the same time. He contradicts here his own primary intention by proposing a phenomenological and hermeneutical ethics that unifies, founds and completes the diversity of the self.

The interval between two poles of identity should represent, as we have already seen, a gap which has to be filled in. This gap, is according to Ricœur, filled by means of narrativity. Narration is always able to transform every incoherence into coherence. Declan Sheerin calls this feature a triumph of concordance over discordance¹³. It can show every discordance as a seeming discordance, which is bridged by a higher degree of agreement. So, thanks to narration, the gap is a sphere of continual transformation of one identity into another. Thus it seems that Ricœur's intention was, from the beginning, to bridge two modalities of one being and not to discover a connection of two heterogeneous spheres. For this reason, narrativity can to prevail essentially in this task of a joining-up medium because this conclusion is in fact presupposed.

The interval of sense which is to be filled in by narrative identity probably expresses the form of the whole and essential 'what for' of a person. This 'what for' is no longer the concern of *Dasein* about being, but an ability of narrative dialectical interconnecting of sameness and selfhood, which takes place essentially in the ethical relationship to another.

3. Being is action. Hierarchical structuralization of human ontology.

In principle, Ricœur builds his conception on presupposition that the essential characteristic of human being is action. However, what does "action" mean in Ricœur's interpretation?

First, action in the true sense of the word is such a human activity which "maintains and preserves itself"¹⁴. It is the pure actuality which consumes itself by actualizing itself. The only possible way how to "disentangle [this action] as much as possible from the inexorable oblivion"¹⁵, is to remember it and to preserve it in the form of a "narrative which is created about it".

¹³ S. Declan, *Deleuze and Ricœur, Disavowed Affinities and the Narrative Self*, „Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy“, 2009, p. 210.

¹⁴ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Idem*, *Individu et identité personnelle* In: Paul Veyne et al. *Sur l'individu*, Paris 1987, p. 69. English translation is mine.

Second, Ricœur in his notion of being as action reinterprets Heidegger's crucial statement about the fact that *Dasein* always already understands (its own) being. In an implicit paraphrase Ricœur claims that the human being is always already able to narrate a story about its action. Given that narration is one of the forms of actions and that any other form of action can be captured by this unique form of action, narration becomes a priority sort of action. Narration can talk about any sort of action including itself. Thanks to this, narration presents a hermeneutic tool which is applied to itself and simultaneously to everything that essentially determines the human being. It holds, however, that the actor not only is his narration, but reveals and performs in narration truly himself, that is, his identity. "It therefore appertains to narration to predicate the identity of the who"¹⁶.

The third characteristic feature of action is the concrete way of its structuring within practical life of an individual. Since narration as a significant action apprehends any form of action, the structure of action is similar to the structure of narration about this action.

Ricœur projects such a structure, which is composed of three basic horizontal levels, are vertically interconnected on the basis of one referential principle "what for" (not ethically neutral). Thus a tree structure emerges, on whose bottom level elementary units of action are located and on whose upper level the units become composite and more general. The lowest and most basic level of action is, according to Ricœur, composed of the so-called basic actions ("gestures, postures, elementary corporeal actions – that we learn to coordinate and master, but the basics of which we do not really learn"). Basic action is defined without reference to other basic actions; it is completely non-intentional.

In contrast to basic actions, all other elements of action are necessarily intentional, that is, the structure 'what for' belongs to them. The second level that is located beyond the basic actions consists of practices – various skills, games and crafts, organized together into second-order units: "The work of a farmer, for instance, includes subordinate actions, such as plowing, planting, harvesting, and so on in descending order, until one reaches basic actions such as pulling and pushing"¹⁷.

The third level that is located beyond the level of practices is the level of the so-called life plans or projects. "We shall term 'life plans' those vast practical units that make up professional life, family life, leisure time, and

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Idem, Oneself as Another*, p. 154.

so forth”¹⁸. And finally at the top, the primary ‘why’ is to play the role of a directive idea of all action, basic actions, practical acts and life plans, that is, the entire manifestation of a human being. Ricœur defines this leading idea as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions”¹⁹. Every individual, as Ricœur says, wants to live a good life with the other and for the other; every human being has some experience with moral institutions shared with other people. In other words, the hierarchical tree structure of human action is at the same time a hierarchy of values, action is always ethical.

This structure significantly co-relates, as Ricœur supposes, with the universal structure of every narration. Action, therefore, according to the author, is naturally composed into just such a structure which creates a suitable foundation for the construction of the narrative unity of life:

The practical field then appears to be subjected to a twofold principle of determination by which it resembles the hermeneutical comprehension of a text through the exchange between the whole and the part. Nothing is more propitious for narrative configuration than this play of double determination²⁰.

The similarities between human life and a text can be summed up as follows: the life of the actor as well as a text form a certain unity, a whole. Furthermore, this life consists, analogically to a text, of clearly defined parts that create unities of a lower order. We can reasonably assume that a life as well as a text have one global meaning, which emerges from partial meanings of its individual components and which has to be interpreted and not grasped by cognition. The narrative unity of life is not, according to Ricœur, obviously unambiguous and fixed, but it is undoubtedly always relatively stable. That is why Ricœur believes that all sorts of senselessness, discordance or discontinuity of meaning within the framework of action can be considered a mere incident of a story. The incident has in the narration about the human life the function of joining one section of the story of life of a given person with another even though their logical interconnectedness is not totally obvious. For this reason, in a story the incident plays an absolutely essential role; it is an instrument which enables one to create a continuity of narration and therefore a human life under unexpectedly complex circumstances.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 172.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

Thus, according to Ricœur every action is narratable. Subsequently, if action can be transformed into a story, the actor has to be configurable into a character about whom the story talks. The character of the story disposes of a specific identity which is a narrative identity. It follows that personal identity which oscillates between the limit points of prevailing sameness (character) and prevailing selfhood (promise) is configurable into a narrative identity that expresses this personal identity.

Ricœur documents this oscillation between the prevailing sameness and the prevailing selfhood on various sorts of characters of literary stories. He speaks about fixed Self of classical heroes (characters) as well as about characters with no stable support, no permanent character. Ricœur is convinced that even though a person of a literary work is a true non-subject and it experiences the “dramatic disintegration of identity”²¹, it is as such “a figure of subject”²². He explains it as follows:

The self refigured here by the narrative is in reality confronted with the hypothesis of its own nothingness. [...] The sentence ‘I am nothing’ must keep its paradoxical form: ‘nothing’ would mean nothing at all if ‘nothing’ were not in fact attributed to an ‘I’²³.

It seems that this theory draws on assumptions which do not have any further justification. Ricœur insists that the diversity of the human self can represent an issue only within a delimited realm in which unity, coherence and a clear guiding idea of human life are preserved. The question of identity is therefore posed after already being answered.

5. Ethical action and moral institutions

The last level at which the dialectics between selfhood and sameness takes place is the level of ethical action and the level of moral normativity. The ethical dimension of language manifests itself in the fact that every utterance is necessarily an evaluation of reality. It is, however, necessary in this context to point out that basic actions – atoms of the lowest level of the tree structure of human action – are not distinguished by any ethical character. Ricœur, however, insists that human action and narration about action have in principle an ethical dimension and claims further that a person, while permanently evaluating reality, cannot but evaluate itself. “Evaluation of oneself which accompanies all evaluating comes from a basic feeling, self-

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 166.

esteem, that makes me say, in spite of all, that: it is better for me to be than not to be”²⁴.

The second presupposition of all interaction is the will to friendship, will to consensus, shared meaning and reciprocity. As Ricœur says: each “break [...] creates the conditions for a second-order continuity”²⁵. Ricœur, by disregarding the specific moments which are brought about by phenomena such as indifference, hostility, the radical otherness of the Face, autism or disinheritance, can state that the human being is itself only if it is itself with another. This point is thoroughly commented by David Vessey in his article *The Polysemy of Otherness: On Ricœur’s Oneself as Another*²⁶.

In interaction, the individual receives, according to Ricœur, an “apophantic understanding”, that is, indubitable evidence which in this case is: “Everything is possible but not everything is beneficial [to others and to myself]”²⁷.

Finally, it is necessary to add that the question of living a good life relates not only to the way in which the individual relates to himself and to another, but it concerns the realm of “the ideologization of the individual”²⁸. Ricœur introduce the following triad, which according to him is universally valid: “[...] I have to keep my promise; you can require that from me; it is necessary to keep one’s promise and increase the belief of all participants in the process of cooperation within a shared community”²⁹. Human being is to respond to what it is called and attest in this way its essential intersubjectivity³⁰. Institutions maintain the life structure of the community and all its participants agree that each for his part “rightly contributes to the well-functioning [of institutions]”³¹.

6. Critique of Ricœur’s conception

Besides the problematic points I have already mentioned, I believe that three different objections to the Ricœur’s conception can be raised.

²⁴ *Idem*, *Individu et identité personnelle*, p. 71.

²⁵ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 180.

²⁶ D. Vessey, *The Polysemy of Otherness: On Ricœur’s Oneself as Another*, „Arobase“ 4: 1–2, Fall 2000.

²⁷ P. Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, p. 167.

²⁸ *Idem*, *Individu et identité personnelle*, p. 71.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

³⁰ More about the problematic term of attestation, see P. S. Anderson’s, *Agnosticism and Attestation: An Aporia Concerning the Other in Ricœur’s Oneself as Another*, „The Journal of Religion“ 74, 1994, pp. 65–76 and M. Muldoon, *Ricœur’s Ethics: Another Version of Virtue Ethics? Attestation is not a Virtue*, „Philosophy Today“, Fall 1998, pp. 301–309.

³¹ *Idem*, *Individu et identité personnelle*, p. 72.

1. Ricœur does not develop a mediation between objective description and phenomenological analysis.
2. Action is presented as a necessarily intentional event.
3. Ricœur claims that narration presents a significant form of action capable of grasping truly all forms of action and therefore constitutive of the being of the human existence as such.

Concerning the first point, we have seen Ricœur hover fully on the side of the phenomenological conception and he performs the merging of objective and phenomenological description only seemingly. When Ricœur speaks about the sameness of an individual, he always means a quasi-sameness that is founded on *e x p e r i e n c e* in which something is *e x p e r i e n c e d* as the same. The authority of lived experience lies behind all of Ricœur's statements about objectivity. Ricœur develops, despite his statements, only a corrected conception of *Dasein* and its selfhood without ever leaving the realm of fundamental ontology.

Narrative identity fulfills not the function of intermediary of various respects but a unifying function referring to ethical completing "selfhood in the strong sense of word". The crucial moment of this turn is Ricœur's decision to declare a certain teleological idea of hermeneutics of the human self and present within this thought

gradually the stages in which the concept [of an individual] comes from one pole ('a further indivisible representative of the human species, such whom we can encounter in all societies) to another ('self-sufficient, independent and not social being whom we encounter in our modern ideology of the human being and society) [...] The definition of this concept proceeds from logic to ideology across stages in which the individual gradually reveals and becomes [...] more and more human³².

As soon as Ricœur explicitly talks about the stages of change, degrees of development and about a being that begins to appear in these stages *m o r e a n d m o r e* human, we cannot doubt that his effort is to create a comprehensive and global conception of an individual which completes itself on the ethical level³³.

Let us proceed to the second point of the critique, to the intentional character of each action. In his considerations Ricœur assumes about the

³² *Ibidem*, p. 54. Ricœur quotes in the brackets „le petit lexique”, which Luis Dumont included in the appendix of his *Essais sur l'individualisme*. Dumont's quotations are on the same side as Ricœur's statement.

³³ This aim is not unique in the epoche of Oneself as Another, see e.g. C. Schrag's *The Self After Postmodernity*, New Haven, 1997.

character of human action, and therefore, about being that every action is necessarily intentional. The so-called “basic actions” which represent spontaneous acts of one’s body do not have, however, any intentional character. Neither can we claim with certainty that such events of human action as for instance dreaming, experience of anxiety in Heidegger’s sense of the word, illness, insanity, emergence of involuntary fantasies, trance, meditation, are intentional and we cannot deny that this whole sphere is a sphere of action and that it participates on human being. However, Ricœur’s will to narration leads to his understanding of action as voluntary and intentional, i.e. some sort of power-to-do³⁴.

The last critical point to Ricœur’s conception corresponds to author’s conviction that narration is able to articulate all action, that is, being of the human being and it is an expression of human identity *par excellence*. Ricœur’s conception affirms by this step the already mentioned discarding of unintentional acts from the concept of action, but it simultaneously performs another step towards the fulfillment of the desired aim which was, in fact, present in this conception already as a starting point, that is, to attain thinking of human existence’s continuity. For, Ricœur does not ask, from the beginning of his analysis, whether the human being is itself, whether it is identical with itself, but his question is how specifically the human being is itself. He finds an answer to this question by means of a construction of narrative identity. Creation of this continuity via all breaking moments of existence is enabled by the capacity to compose a unified story of one’s own life under all circumstances, whereas this capacity is always “up to” all other moments of the structure of human existence. We can, for instance, mention the experience of sinister uncanniness (*es ist mir unheimlich*), which can become the experience of the human being only if the given person is able to narrate the story of the type “I will tell you how uncannily ‘I’ felt the other day, how it went away and how I gained my strength again”. In this conception, every strangeness and incoherence of human life can only have the form of incident. However, it is important to ask, in our view, whether that which is revealed in the experience of a breach or strangeness, is really exclusively an incident. If these moments were not grasped as components of a coherent story of an actor – and they cannot be any other component but an incident – they would not have any other possibility to exist and, at the same time, to participate in the determination of who the actor is.

³⁴ H. Venema, *Oneself as Another or Another as Oneself?*, „Literature and Theology” 16 (4), 2002, pp. 410–426.

Personal identity is therefore created on the basis of the only type of experiential reference “as”, that is, the reference “as a component of a story”. Other aspects of experience cannot participate in the construction of personal identity in any way. That is why we can say that Ricœur’s conception builds “someone as a story”. In other words, there is no principal difference between discursive apprehension and action. Narration is an immediate experience of action. It follows from this that the realm of narration is a mirroring field of all experience.

However, this is, in our view, a purposeful and unconfirmed assertion. For, narration appears as a significant form of action by virtue of which action grasps itself only for the sake of a very violent structuralisation of a human life according to a model from a literary text and, in addition, a very specific literary text. It is necessary, during this structuration, to use concepts such as invariant, universals and to find support in the idea of a solid material basis that delimits a field of a subsequent singular interpretation. Ricœur significantly overestimates, next to this problematic conception of the human life, the possibilities of narration itself. According to him, there is, analogically to the intention “to live a good life with another and for another in just institutions”, a final goal of narration that has the form “to reach a good meaning”, “to unify action and provide it with intelligibility”. This vision, however, certainly is not the only reason why the human being narrates about its action. The motive of narration can be the effort to influence the action of someone else, to disguise one’s own deeds, to tell stories, improvise and play, to entertain oneself, create, drive away unpleasant emotions, to dispel urgent ideas, or, on the contrary, to construe some new ideas, to get rid of boredom, or to try to meet one’s engagements. Narration can be to the same extent an instrument of self-riddance, an attempt at the reconstruction of oneself as well as creation of a new reality. It sometimes works as an alleviative that persuades the human being that it really exists and that it is itself (but which itself?). It is only because “something” is extracted from the “merciless oblivion” that something else is thrown onto an even more profound level of irreality.

I do think however, that action is not essentially a narratable action. Yet, it is possible to create narrated action. Narrated action is, however, a different form of human existence than action itself and even than narration itself; narrated action is not narration about such action which was, prior to narration, potentially apprehensible by narration.



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