

On Narrative Identity. Paul Ricoeur on Time and the Person

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In Quest of the Person

What starts out as an apparently tedious treatment of time and narrative turns out to be a fascinating and refreshing theory of the human person – among other things that *Time and Narrative* is. It surely helps a great deal that in a wonderfully condense but reader-friendly essay, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, Ricoeur gives us a summary of his argument.

The Distention of the Soul and Plot

Augustine’s anguished soul bemoaned the soul’s distention on the rack of time. The past is no longer, the future is not yet, and the present, as Heraclitus already remarked in his day, can no more be caught than one can step into the same waters of a flowing stream twice! Despite that memories are real as are anticipations. And so the paradox revolves around the *reality* of what defies every idea of the real: what is no longer, what is not yet, and what cannot be pointed at!

What sounds like a lament about time and its evanescence is also a lament about the soul, for it is the soul that keeps within itself the impressions of the past and the signs of the future in the effervescent present, as it is the soul that must wonder about

time. And time is precisely that about which one seems to be familiar as long as the question is never asked what one's familiarity with time is! *Quaestio temporis, quaestio animi. Quaestio temporis, quaestio mihi factus sum!*

Ricoeur's other icon is Aristotle. It is not Aristotle on time however that earns Ricoeur's attention but Aristotle on *muthos* – emplotment. By plot the distention is somehow eased, because what plot is the configuration of distinct, discrete, disparate events into a "story". It is one story despite the fact that its twists and turns are unlikely and cannot be anticipated. In fact, plot seems to be more intriguing – and more captivating – in the measure that it does what plot is supposed to do: achieve concordance from discordance, bring about the "one" of the story, from the "many" of the characters, the characters' doings, events, scenes, etc.

But again, of course, talk about plot is talk about persons, although in a very interesting way, for the characters within the plot are "defined" by the plot. That brooding, plotting, reflective man that Macbeth is emerges from the plot of *Macbeth*, the Shakespearean tragedy.

The distention of the soul cries for the healing act of emplotment. Distention carried to its extreme is separation, and separation as unconnectedness is incoherence. An incoherent soul is a *non-soul*. That psychological disintegration that Wojtyla refers to in *The Acting Person* when he argues for integration is one aspect of distention left unattended to. Emplotment assuages, heals distention not by casting a seamless mantle of continuity over the ekstases of time but by achieving – one is tempted to say "conquering" – coherence, consonance from dissonance. Life cries out for narrative. This is a basic thesis of Paul Ricoeur.

A Reprise on Time

Temporality, we are reminded by Heidegger, is not primarily the measure of motion by a counting soul. It is not even the *ens rationis* that God is said to have created when he created moving beings and measuring minds. Rather time is principally Dasein engaged with the world, bringing possibilities to pass. Temporality is the very there-ness of Dasein, his very Being. Care, the Being

of Dasein, is essentially temporal. There would be no cyclic time, no time to measure with watches or chronographs, no time to associate with the rotation of the earth or its revolution if there were no possibilities to realize. If Dasein's Being were not essentially futural there would be no future. Animals have no future, neither does this computer at which I presently work. Futurality is the prerogative of a be-ing that must achieve its Being. That Being is Dasein, the be-ing by whom Being is there!

To talk then of the human person and his activities as being "within time" is to speak in familiar language, because like our Being, we reify time – deal with it at arms length and objectify it, but it is language that is metaphysically naïve. Closer to home, To Be is itself temporality. For all the abstruseness of time especially as geniuses of physics like Stephen Hawking discourse on it is to deal with time at one step removed from its ontological well-spring: our very Being as bringing the future to pass.

To tap on my keyboard and write the next line to this essay is to project a possibility, to bring about the future. But it is to bring the future to pass by already having been – having been around, having mastered bringing my thoughts somehow via keyboard to monitor – and being-with these tools of my trade and the people who I hope will have the patience to think these thoughts through. Dealing with time within a Transcendental Aesthetic as Kant does is a convincing way of explaining why we always think time-ly (events happening "in time") and we need not take issue with Kant except read his Transcendental Aesthetic as the prelude to the ontology of Dasein. To think Dasein's Being then is to think Time.

Familiarity then with Dasein his familiarity with Temporality. Time is not learned apart from Dasein, nor is it inscribed by an innate archaic inscription distinct from the intuition of Being, which is always my Being. To ask then in Bergsonian fashion whether or not the "now" is dense is asking about the density of Dasein's present: his being-in and being-with. And of course, the inquiry yields an affirmative answer for Dasein's Being-in is dense as the conjunction of "project" and "facticity".

In a sense then the very coherence of Dasein's Being is the ontological resolution to Augustine's paradox and the response to his lament over the distention of the soul. The soul cannot but be

distended, because To Be is to be distended. Presence is always remembrance and anticipation. To be is to become from having-been.

Ricoeur's thesis however is precisely that time is humanized only as narrated. This is a thesis of course that rests on an earlier one – that human praxis calls for narration. If Dasein's very Being is in itself the ontological resolution of the Augustinian paradox, does that make of narrative superfluous, or at least a helpful but otherwise dispensable venture?

The Becoming of Dasein however is the becoming of a be-ing for whom Being is an issue. That is to say it is always a human achievement that takes place in a human world. It is not the inexorable onset of the tide or the inevitable resolution of tectonic tension by a monstrous quake. If even indecision is decision, then indifference and lethargy are its achievement, but achievement nevertheless.

The sequence of living calls for coherence, cries out to be a whole. That spiritual writers have always reflected on man's "search for wholeness" attests to their sageliness and to the acuteness of their insight. The coherence must be achieved. The individual phases of life call for coherence: my life as a university official was made up of different sequences – segments that did not always follow each other predictably – but which had a beginning and which had an end, with the result that the story of my years as university official can now be told.

"Telling stories", "re-telling stories", "re-counting stories" – all this has to do with plot. There is nothing to tell without plot, because telling and following a story are following plot. Plot is plot precisely because the unlikeliness and unexpectedness of a turn of events notwithstanding somehow the unlikelihood points to the end. People have different feeling about the recent film "Alexander" which the Greek lawyers wanted banned. Quite unlikely, for one, that a Macedonian prince should choose for himself a bride in some far corner of the world. But it is an "unlikely" event that points to the end and that "fits into" the plot that his rather flamboyant life was. Squabbling generals surrounding his death-bed in a quandary both about their future and about the future of the vast empire is the "end" of a plot that included marry-

ing an unlikely partner. Unlikely events emplotted into a story – and a story that makes sense. Narratives dramatically teach that life does not follow the canons of logic – which is no excuse for thinking illogically – but that definitely makes us understand “sense” more broadly when we say of an emplotted life that it makes sense no matter the unexpected events that made it up, for a plot is more than just disparate events strung together.

Life and Narrative: To be is To be Narrated

What then does life – human becoming – have to do with narrative? It calls to be narrated. It can be narrated, and its phases can likewise be narrated. But there is something more – or better, something related. Narratives make possible the achievement that human becoming is. Dasein’s becoming is becoming *with other* Daseins, in a world, and within culture. This is the pregnancy of “world”. The narratives – which include the epics of our culture and its fictional works – have a horizon of their own, many times very different from our own. Reading a narrative and following it through both result in as well as presuppose the opening up of our horizon to the horizon of the narrative. Gadamer refers to a “dialogue with the text” – to which he attributes an autonomy that frees it from the thought-processes of its author – and to “fusion of horizons”. And so by dialoguing with the narrative text which I read, or which I hear told me, or which I watch – through the media that allow a narrative to be watched – the horizon of the narrative opens itself to me, as does mine to its horizon.

In this respect, a community’s “privileged texts” will play a special role. The Word of God, to the Christian, is one such privileged text and central to the practice of the Christian’s faith is the Word of God. The Church’s insistence that the Bible be read is its insistence that the horizon of the Sacred Books open our horizons to it, and that our horizons fuse with the sacred horizon the Bible opens. The narrative, says Ricoeur, is completed in its reader, just as for Aristotle, every well-written tragedy brought about catharsis in its readers. After all a narrative is written to be read. It communicates not only sense but an entire world, an entire horizon, and it is when this world becomes part of the

reader's world is the text really "appreciated". For the Christian then, God's Word is always an "invitation", and the ecclesial mission is to for the narrative of Sacred Scripture to be completed in the lives of the faithful.

Following the plot of narrative fiction is, as Ricoeur insists, a "dimension of self-understanding". A fictional character – defined by a fictional plot – can be the mirror of who I am, therefore clarifying to myself whom I am, probably articulating through the plot what I have not as yet articulated about myself. It is also possible for the fictional character to be a dimension of my self-realization by embodying what I reject, what is repulsive to me, what I consciouslyprehend negatively, to use a term familiar to process philosophy. Still a third possibility is for a fictional world to offer me an alternate horizon that enables me to re-orient my self-narration. Reading fiction is understanding with a kind of understanding more basic than theory or science. Quite interestingly, Ricoeur hints at *phronetic understanding* – that kind of understanding arising not from a grasp of generalities but from a familiarity with particulars. In postmodern literature, *phronesis* is the decent alternative to the pretensions of comprehension proffered by the suspect, if not rejected, grand narratives. Are we too far off in reading in Ricoeur an accommodation of this very kind of understanding in the didactics of narrative? The plots of fictional works are more than idle thought-experiments for they are always possibilities of my existence, possibilities of Being.

Life calls for narration – for the coherence of narrativity – because "there is" life. Without my wanting or choosing it, I am here. *Me voici*. Narrating my life then yields two experiences: the maleability of identity – because as narrator of my life, I can develop plot otherwise with the result that a different identity emerges; but what equally emerges is my Being's gratuity – what Heidegger calls "thrown-ness", what Christians call "gift". *Narrator, not author*. That is what I am. It must however be always a concurrence with the Sartrean dictum: Existence precedes essence, for my essence – my identity – emerges from the narrative and does not stand before it.

Ultimately then such diverse concepts as "power", "dignity" and "selfhood" cluster around "narrative identity". The ulti-

mate existential power is the power to narrate my story. It is an ontological power, because it is the power to define my identity. And culture is ontologically significant because it offers me the "moulds", the "models", "the characters" that offer me patterns – or anti-patterns – of my narrativity. But narrativity is always a play, says Ricoeur, of sedimentation and innovation. As a priest, my life and ministry are determined by the cultural (which includes theological, ideological, rubrical) moulds of what a priest is, but it will also always be innovation, because I will be a priest as only I can be a priest. "Dignity" is what narrative identity is that sets it apart from the fixity of a species, or the determinateness of an artifact. Dignity can be transgressed or compromised because cruelty, oppression, neglect and subjugation can become part of the narrative of others, as it can become a part of the narrative of the oppressor. "Selfhood" refers to the non-interchangeability of narratives. The coherence that is achieved by a narrative is shot through and through by the uniqueness of the individual events out of which a plot is woven. It is not consonance plain and unqualified that narrative identity is, but consonance-in-dissonance, the achievement of coherence from the disparate. It is this that guarantees that the achievement of every personal identity is a self distinct from all others.

Listen, the story each tells about himself – or that will be told about each one – is a story none has ever heard before and none that will ever be repeated!

Strawson on Ascription; Ricoeur on Mimesis

How does this account of the person link up with a markedly different approach as Strawson's descriptive metaphysics? Perhaps it will help to summarize Strawson's position first.

The question with which Strawson commences his inquiry is why we ascribe states of consciousness to the very same thing as certain corporeal characteristics? Where do we get the notion of self?

It seems that there is an unavoidability about "my", "mine" – indicators of self. It is false to assert that "all experiences belong to a body" as a way of eliminating the need for "self" (my, mine)

because the experiences that do indeed belong to a body are “my” experiences, or the experiences of another for whom the experiences are “mine”. A sense of “self” is as elementary as a sense of “body”.

When in speech we wish to refer to the private experiences or particular states of consciousness, then it is unavoidable to refer to them as experiences of a person. They are referred to a person whose states of consciousness or whose experiences they are. To thus identify them is also to ascribe them in such a way as to exclude the possibility that they are likewise the states or experiences of some person else.

When one says: “I feel cold”, one condition for the possibility of ascribing “being cold” to oneself is that one is able to ascribe them to others. Put otherwise, self-ascription is not possible unless one has learned the language-game of ascription.

To be able to ascribe experiences to others is to be able to identify others as subjects of experience. It then follows that to be able to ascribe experiences to oneself, one must be able to ascribe experiences to others. To be able to ascribe experiences to others, one must be able to identify others subjects of experience. To be able to identify others as subjects of experience is to be able to identify them as possessors of states of consciousness.

The primitiveness of the concept of “person” has to be acknowledged. By person is meant that type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing physical characteristics are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type.

By “primitive” is meant that one condition for the ascription of states of consciousness is that they should be ascribed to the very same things as corporeal characteristics, meaning by this physical situations. In other words, states of consciousness could not be ascribed at all unless they were ascribed to persons.

Is there possibly any relation between the theory of ascription and narrativity?

Strawson’s account of the person – in itself rich and consistent with his own proposal of a descriptive metaphysics — is not antithetical to Ricoeur’s. In fact, Ricoeur’s thesis of narrative and

the emplotment of narrative should serve the purposes of Strawson well. The writing of a plot – as obviously its telling and following as well – is *mimesis praxeos* – the imitation of praxis. But to be able to imitate practice, to be able to link up with lived experience, the narrator must be familiar with the fundamental difference between human acting and physical events taking place. When I am jolted by an earthquake I do not ascribe the movement to anyone, but when I hear a yelp of pain, then I ascribe it to someone. When I see an interesting rock formation in the desert, I wonder at the handiwork of nature, but when I see graffiti in what should otherwise be pristine setting, I loathe the vandalism of persons. All this is to say that there is in the narrator – which we all can be – a basic competence: the competence that allows him to recognize human action and to distinguish it from physical happening. There is more: Ricoeur insightfully reminds us that human action is always grafted in the symbolism of culture: covering my mouth when one is amused, bowing towards someone to be respectful, rising to welcome a guest or acknowledge the presence of a superior, banging a gavel to commence a court session, etc. Actions are precisely unintelligible when the symbol-system in which they are crafted is alien, but given the hermeneutic continuity between all persons, alienage is never complete nor total. Human action, in fact, is already signification: rising from my chair signifies my work is done, as waving to a passing cab signifies my intention to engage the services of this means of conveyance. Finally, *mimesis* supposes a familiarity or a basic competence with the temporality of actions and with the temporality of life, for all plot arranges according to a “before” and an “after”. It starts with “in the beginning” and concludes with “the end”.

What to Strawson then is the primitive capability of ascribe to others or to recognize in others states of consciousness that I recognize to be in those whose physical characteristics or attributes I also recognize. This basic competence that is presupposed by the recognition of persons is for Ricoeur is the presupposition of the mimetic activity of plot, the elemental competence required by narration and narrativity.

On these accounts – Strawson’s and Ricoeur’s – a person is one of whom a narrative can be told and one who is able to narrate! □