

## **Ricoeur and MacIntyre: On the Self**

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### **Abstract:**

*Alasdair MacIntyre, and Paul Ricoeur both tried in their ethical concerns to reestablish the human person, the singular self as a conscious moral agent and connected this sense of self to the narrative. They differed on the claims for the self as established out of a literary structure, a text, by literary and historical means to specify the goals and organize the meaning of past actions and events. The literary narrative explains the present and leads like the plot of a novel to the future. It is precisely this closure of the text, possible in literature, but impossible in life which serves as the basis of Paul Ricoeur's dispute with MacIntyre. Ricoeur arguing from a phenomenological-existential point of view that the difference between literary fictions and the stories of lived experience is precisely the latter's shifting boundaries and lack of stability and totalizing functions as a singular totality. How Ricoeur borrows from, credits then builds upon the work of others is the objective of the following investigation.*

**Keywords:** Self, ego, virtue, teleos, narrative, hermeneutics

### **I. Introduction:**

It is extremely valuable to set the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, and that of Paul Ricoeur, one against the other, as closely as possible at their point of inter-action and interpenetration. There is an intense critical relationship of opposition and co-option for which MacIntyre may have been unprepared, but which was stock-in-trade for Ricoeur who had amply demonstrated an ability to absorb and redirect influences. This was true from his earliest associations with Gabriel Marcel in his earliest years, through his reading, and borrowing from scholars of the text-based New Critical era, to when advancing from text-as-literature he turned to explain life and lived experience, as he had in his earliest years, but from the entirely different perspective taking the narrative, the story of one's life, as the basis of a new approach to the self. Ricoeur borrowed freely and with critical appreciation from MacIntyre's use of the narrative mode as a closed text that brings historical closure to life and lifts it, as a whole, to ethical judgment. Both had appreciation of Aristotle, MacIntyre to establish ethical purpose or *telos* in human affairs, Ricoeur as the meaning of what he formerly called "will" and later "action", drawn from Aristotle's literary examples of mimesis. Both had in the face of post-modernist skepticism insisted on the Cartesian "ego", powerfully reborn in our age as a moral agent who gains access to the self by virtue of a narrative.

For each of us, in this approach, there is a story we share with others by which, as in a literary text, the separate elements are woven together giving to life a moral purpose. That is accomplished by a "reading" which gives it coherence and intelligibility.

MacIntyre's narrative out of which a "self" is established is a closed Aristotelian system in line with his philosophical concerns, while Ricoeur's, again characteristically, is an open system (Arthos, 2014, p.1-20). There is no dispute between the two philosophers that the stories that we tell about our lives has as its basis the multiple authorship and interwoven tales of others, though ultimately embedded for the structure that renders it meaning as if it were a literary text. As we shall see, it is the nature of the "self" which emerges from the narrative which is in considerable dispute precisely on the point of whether the text as lived experience has a closure, finality and inner coherence possible in literary texts., or have features of lived experience of freedom by which we not only read the text of our lives as a literature, but coauthor it and shape it through a circular movement of recollection and a forward movement of anticipation.

There is found in MacIntyre a necessary totalizing tendency as the basis of moral judgment, though that was to be delivered in a sociological foundation by the place of the self in the community, not as with Ricoeur by an inter-personal relationship with the "Other" as if it were an internal psychological process.. In some ways, the two crossed each other's path on the site of the self's emerging from and realizing itself in narrative, but going in opposite directions following their methods of investigation, which gives their exchange its characteristic similarity and difference, in Ricoeur's words and employed as means of setting two poles of the metaphor showing likeness between what are fundamentally different (Bohorquez, 2010). What then were the area of cooperation and that of dispute, and from where did either arise?

A shared feature is their ethical concerns seeking to reestablish the human person, the singular self, as a conscious moral agent able to join our isolated self through experiences with others to constitute in narrative shape coherence and intelligibility to our existence, an awakening and self-revelation that we wouldn't otherwise have had. The "narrative unity of life" was first established in MacIntyre and redirected away from its sociological direction toward hermeneutics by Ricoeur who adapted and modified the term by which each separate event or action becomes meaningful as joined to a larger story that relates each segment to one another within the context of one's life. To that extent, MacIntyre's view of the self coincides with that of Ricoeur. They have as well a common concern with establishing human values, what MacIntyre calls virtues, in a world where an absence of common values once established by religion is notable for its absence, giving way, they agree, to growing skepticism and alienation. Indeed, MacIntyre and Ricoeur published *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (1969) separate papers they had delivered together which gives an indication of their commonality and establishes as well their differences. MacIntyre thought that atheism could tear down, and never rebuild established values from the past, while for Ricoeur in a more positive light, the destruction of values that are no longer pertinent is the very ground on which new values may arise (MacIntyre & Ricoeur, 1969).

It follows that for MacIntyre the unity of an individual life consists of "the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life" in which the overwhelming question is "how to live out that unity and bring it to completion" with a second question asking what is in common in such questions from individuals provides the moral life with a unity that religious faith once provided. It is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as word (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 218-219). As with Ricoeur, MacIntyre's starting point is the analysis of language, though as remote

from hermeneutics as possible, directed without suspicion to how it is used in the most conventional circumstances representing an objective quality and reliability by having been witnessed by others whose observation and memory of our actions establishes the unity of our personality. No matter how hard we may try to forget or mislead, as empirically observed by others, we are now who we were decades ago. In this way, our self emerges from the narrative totality of our stories mixed with those of others with a certain reliability that the means of representation as an individual within a collective in which our personal stories are told in the context of other stories with a commonality from which may be gathered what virtue and the good life is. This is the approach of a “strong narrativist” not given like Ricoeur to worrying about the complexities of action passing into the narrative out of which a self is constituted. “The strong narrativist”, Teicher (2004) tells us, that (1), that there is a fundamental connection between action and narrativity: acting presupposes narrative schemata and upon that claim, she bases a further claim, (2) that the self is constituted by narratives (Teichert, 2004).

The story of any individual life perceived by the Aristotelian standard of a goal or *telos* constitutes virtue in a larger historical and communal meaning-giving structure. Indeed, the mythological accounts, fables, ballads and fairy tales have as their collective and social purpose a way to educate youngsters in their social self by its imaginary formulation as well as way of organizing their life into a meaningful whole which is later taken up by the self-reflecting quality of philosophy as a higher form of the same activity geared toward leading the good and purposeful life in society (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 221). There is in fact no way of comprehending ourselves outside our social roles played out sequentially, rising in an orderly and comprehensible manner to a climax and conclusion according to a narrative pattern of the classic story.

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre explains along this line how man is “a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 216). Virtue itself, as the deliberately provocative title has it, requires a “concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 204). There is rest, closure and consistency in each person’s narrative which makes visible the unity of human life, perceived exclusively in linear time intersecting with other lives, to bring before its author the self, in its wholeness which allows the life as closed text to be judged by the criterion of virtue. “Narrative is not the work of poets, dramatists and novelists reflecting upon events which had no narrative order before one was imposed by the singer or the writer; narrative form is neither disguise nor decoration,” (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 211) he writes, establishing each person as the teller of his or her tale which is also that of the intellectual tradition and society in which the events of individual lives unfold, and therefore have objective, historical validity. “The narrative of any one life is part of an interlocking set of narratives” so that “the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity” (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 218). He goes on explaining his need for the establishment of the self as a unified narrative. “I am born with a past,” he goes on, “and to try to cut myself from that past in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide” (MacIntyre 1985, p. 221).

MacIntyre's updated account of the virtues works as a critique of the abstract characteristic of modern ethics in favour of an orientation towards the communal ethos, Lia Mela (2011) sums up." First it is a critique of individualism, which conceives the individual that is a physically discernible and psychologically continuous rational and autonomous subject, as the basic ethical unit, ultimate source of value and bearer of justification" (Mela, 2011, p. 103). Up to a point, there is no dispute between Ricoeur and MacIntyre. The unity of the self is constituted by narrative. Ricoeur (1988) writes in his long rumination of time in establishing narrative coherence that even to answer the question 'Who?' [...] is to tell the story of a life. The story told tells about the action of the 'who' and the identity of this 'who' therefore itself must be a narrative identity.

We should look most carefully at the assumptions behind the above claims for the self as established out of a literary structure, a text, by literary and historical means to specify the goals and organize the meaning of past actions and events, explain the present and lead like the plot of a novel to the future. It is precisely this closure of the text, possible in literature, but impossible in life which serves as the basis of Paul Ricoeur's dispute with MacIntyre on just this point.

Ricoeur being a phenomenological existentialist makes it clear that the stories of lived experience lack stability and totalizing functions as a singular totality where as literary fictions does not. The question of diachronic numerical identity, a criterion of what makes something one and the same thing as itself at different times, serves as the background to the controversy. For Ricoeur, only a partial understanding of the nature of being and the being of nature is possible, given his philosophical tradition of skepticism in this area implicit in his method of phenomenology in which he had stressed in his earliest writings that humans have limits and only a space for freedom within those limits. As Van Der Heiden (2011) tells us of the shortcoming of Ricoeur's method: "Ontology remains the promised land that hermeneutics will never enter ( Heiden, 2011, p.407). By contrast, Lila Mela (2011) tells us of MacIntyre; "The conception of the narrative unity of life involves, first, an ontological dimension, in the context of which priority belongs to the society, since the character is defined by the social construction of individuals, their self-understanding within a specific social structure." (Mela, 2011, p. 113).

Within that limitation, each person's story, Ricoeur agrees, has already been made by others through our very own procreation and only partly determined by independent decisions given that who we are is established by stories we tell others, others tell us, or one we tell ourselves in a complex inter-woven narrative with multiple authorship. But then the two philosophers part ways, one coming from the positivist sociological milieu, (Lutz, 2004) the other in the self-proclaimed tradition of Hermeneutic suspicion (Xie, 2011, p. 175) of time as a simple unfolding of an easily identifiable succession of activities as it is possible to tell in myths and fairy tales. In response, Ricoeur had argued that MacIntyre had insufficiently identified the self-established in fiction from the much more opaque stories we enact in lived experience which lacks what is readily found in novels a distinct beginning and ending with signals from the text of how the narrative is to be understood out of which the fictive self of a character in literature is constructed. (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 158-159). By not heeding this crucial difference, MacIntyre neglects of the author of the life-story takes an active role

in constructing and reconstructing the self in question and making sense of his or her story.

John Wall (2002) explains where Ricoeur and MacIntyre part company. “But in contrast to MacIntyre, Ricoeur views texts as not in themselves but only as necessary distancing *detours* in the larger process of understanding,” he writes. “Interpretation for Ricoeur is completed only in the fully dialectical moment in which the structures of texts are actively appropriated in relation to the vast complex of the background assumptions that exist in the world of their reader” (Wall, 2002, p. 50). This requires considerable clarification of how such reading of life as text constitutes a self through the tripartite-activity of his employment of *mimesis*. Aristotle’s sense of the unity of action depicted through *telos* leads in MacIntyre to the unity of the self in life’s drama. Not so in Ricoeur for whom the collectivity and tradition does not take the place of the self’s working out the dissolution of the Cartesian ego in his phenomenological tradition. According to Van Den Hengel, Ricoeur’s concern about “the shattering of the Cartesian cogito”, that modern fragmented self, brings about the contemporary crisis: without a unity of the self, the problem of constituting a narrative with the meaning of the life and its ethical dimension comes to an end as well.

Indeed it is not hard to see how the idea of “a shattered cogito” constituted a major crisis for values. Without a consistent idea of a self, the question of the meaning of life and the ethical dimension is quite meaningless. The consequences of accepting the dissolution of the cogito are significant, as Van Den Hengel(2011) points out: “If the ego is no longer the radical origin or foundation, what role does the human self play in relation to the world ...?” (Heiden, 2011, p. 420) Put differently, when Ricoeur borrows and employs in his own system the “narrative unity of life” from MacIntyre and underlines similarly that we “read” ourselves and explain our lives in the form of a narrative when we tell it (Ricoeur 1992, p. 158). This is put in terms of the “internal good” that MacIntyre finds in each action satisfactorily completed by the self : “This concept of internal good, dear to MacIntyre, thus provides an initial support for the reflexive moment of self-esteem, to the extent that it is in appraising our actions that we appraise ourselves as being their author”(Ricoeur 1992, p. 177). Furthermore, there seems in the end a communal goal for the self as in MacIntyre defined by Ricoeur aiming at the good life’ with and for others, in just institutions (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172).

Where then are their differences? Ricoeur’s main work on the hermeneutics of the self: *Oneself as Another* maintains that at the core of the self there is “an otherness” that constitutes the self. In short, there is no gathering of separate stories into a communal tale but really a form of inter-subjectivity within the person in which “the other” is employed almost as an internal mechanism of self-constitution. Kearney (2002:4) explains the action depicted indirectly as mimesis in Ricoeur establishes “narrative identity” of the self without the plot going in one direction to a climax and conclusion. Human beings proceed by constituting themselves more existentially. “You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to,” Kearney calls Ricoeur’s constant circling, back ward and forward glances. “And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that endures and coheres over a lifetime. Through the three stages of mimesis, past understandings and future imaginings come together in action in the present” (Kearney, 2004, p. 4) Hall explains this rather well: “Narrative, Ricoeur argued, is a fundamental structure of self-understanding. It

casts both a retrospective glance and a prospective glance over one's existence, and in so doing, erects a configuration around what are otherwise random events" (Hall, 2012, p. 52).

Venema explains how narrative configuration transforms experience and personal identity: "Narrative configuration is completed through an act of reading that produces a possibility for experience which, when taken up through decision and action, refigures experience and therein personal identity" (Venema, 2000, p. 103). This reading which constitutes a "self" in Ricoeur passes through three stages of mimesis. Mimesis 1 includes the practical world of irreversible past-to- future time out of which MacIntyre constitutes his sociologically oriented narrative. But we are not far from positivism in the realm of hermeneutics, which constantly retraces its steps. At the level of mimesis 2, these events are configured into a narrative, rather various potential narratives, out of which the self in constituting itself employs mimesis 3 to find a space of freedom and self-realization. In the end, there arises out of the process a self as co-author with his or her limits aside able to reconstitute and revise the story, own its details as itself through a co-authorship with others in its unfolding. Thus, in John Arthos' (2014) words, "prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration is conceived as a process that expands outward in a growing circle beyond the literary text to the construction of the phenomenological life-world" (Arthos, 2014, p. 1-20).

In this way, despite obvious influences and common use of terms, the self as constituted out of MacIntyre's narrative and that from Ricoeur have differences according to the nature of the philosophical tools that are employed. In one instance, MacIntyre presents the self as a journey with others through time in a straight line from birth to death devising ,a meaningful narrative that becomes, when compared with the account of others, a sociological statement of what is held as virtuous, or at least what takes the place of virtue " after virtue" in an inspired title. By contrast, in Ricoeur, there is start-and-stop, retracing of steps and circling characteristic of his hermeneutical method and thereby determining a very different self, despite similarities and sharing of terms between the two philosophers.

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