On the “Pathic” Dimension of Narrative Autonomy

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This paper explores how narrative autonomy operates in Ricoeur. Moving beyond both his thematization of narrative identity and his link between autonomy and vulnerability, I instead focus on Ricoeur’s potential for refiguring autonomy in a narrative sense. I argue that autonomy is not the same as independence but quite the opposite; it only arises within bonds and relationships; Ricoeur helps locate autonomy at precisely the interrelatedness of human beings. Interestingly, autonomy is generally found in circumstances that seem to impede it. To further develop this hypothesis, I refer to certain aspects of the human condition that in Ricoeur’s view are partly intertwined.

Keywords: ethics, relational autonomy, narrative autonomy, pathic dimension of agency, illness

Preliminary Considerations

This contribution explores how narrative autonomy operates in Ricoeur. Rather than delving into narrative identity and the link between autonomy and vulnerability[1], I focus on Ricoeur’s potential for refiguring autonomy in a narrative sense. I argue that autonomy is not synonymous with independence but quite the opposite; it only arises within bonds and relationships; and Ricoeur helps locate autonomy at precisely the interrelatedness of human beings. Interestingly, autonomy is found in circumstances that seemingly impede it. To further develop this hypothesis, I refer to certain aspects of the human condition that in Ricoeur’s view are partly intertwined.

Ricoeur treats narrative and autonomy separately. As has already been well established, his work in this area begins with narrative and time before moving on to narrative identity. The significance of his approach lies not in the analogies, but in the distinctions he draws between life and narrative. He devotes an entire essay to autonomy, framing it as something akin to independence and diametrically opposed to – or at least impeded by – vulnerability. It is true though, that his writings indirectly point to the passivity at the heart of autonomy and allow for a narrative reading of autonomy itself.

Another Approach to the Topic of Narrativity

First, I point out that narrativity can be deduced from Ricoeur’s treatment of historicity and the historical human condition. Narrating and being narrated are two of the most accessible ways that we humans can comprehend (albeit incompletely) our historical condition. Narratives and narrativity – to the extent that they make historical experience possible – can be seen as analogous to Kant’s categories of space and time. Therefore, autonomy cannot be attained outside our historical condition, historicity is the prerequisite for the development of autonomy. In other words, a) autonomy is not an abstract entity detached from concrete historical experience and, b) ahistorical autonomy is impossible and inconceivable. Ricoeur’s work on narrativity and historicity takes this even further; the provisional conclusion is that autonomy is fueled by the passivity inherent in the unchosen historical conditions, bonds, and relationships of our lives.

Narrative autonomy within Ricoeur's thought starts from his reading of historicity. With respect to human agency, historicity is simultaneously its condition of possibility and its outcome. What correlates human agency and historicity is narrativity, which operates in both a forward and backward-looking direction. First, narrative patterns and models, narrative reason, and narrative ways of explanation are the framework that allows us to explain and understand our historical condition. Second, agency – human reflexive agency, just like the Aristotelian phronesis – is organized on a narrative model that underpins diachronicity and the capacity to plan. In other words, narrativity is a two directional lens that allows us to make sense of the past and make the future seem real. This conceptual framework can be derived from several Ricoeurian texts, including *Time and Narrative* and *Oneself as Another*. Narrative shapes contingency and creates meaning: accidental events become the engine of the plot and the work of refiguration of the past becomes an act of *Sinngebung*. Meanwhile, narrativity prefigures the course of actions and shapes human moral agency starting from a particular and perspectivist viewpoint.

The close link between temporality, historicity, and narrativity is articulated by Ricoeur in his pivotal article, *Narrative Time*. He highlights the dialectical structure of narrative time which is simultaneously episodic and configurational. It is episodic because it presupposes an implicit linearity, a succession of events that are chronologically ordered. It is configurational because the part receives its meaning from the whole, so the configurative operation is a matter of "grasping together." According to Ricoeur, historicality and narrativity share a particular kind of repetition that we will see is closely – albeit implicitly – related to autonomy. He writes: "It is this communal act of repetition, which is at the same time a new founding act and a recommencement of what has already been inaugurated, that "makes history" and that finally makes it possible to write history"[2]. At the intersection of inherited tradition and new actions is an idea of narrative autonomy that draws upon the past to reconfigure the future. Like historicality, narrativity always starts from something inherited or received (to an extent, the events themselves can be considered as something received and coming from elsewhere). Narrative autonomy could be defined as finding connections and organizing the chaos of events within a synthetic framework of meaning that is always renegotiable and modifiable. Just as historicality embodies the three dimensions of time, narrativity takes inherited connections of meaning and launches them into ever new refigurations.

In his text *Understanding and Explanation*, included in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur points out that there is an analogy between the theory of texts, the theory of action, and history: "the parallelism between the theory of texts, action theory, and the theory of history is suggested immediately by the *narrative* genre of discourse"[3]. Thus, he recognizes the narrative fabric of the discourse of action, of text, of history. In the same work, he refers to the relationship between tradition and narration: "what motivates the analyst to look for the signs of the narrator and the reader *in* the text of the narrative if not the understanding that envelops all the analytical steps and replaces the narration as the giving of the story by someone to someone, back within the movement of a transmission, a living tradition?"[4]. Having established that text, action, and history share a common narrative language, Ricoeur then focuses on the idea of understanding (in dialogue with explanation). He points out that stories are in-between phenomena with a relational structure that presupposes a teller and a listener/receiver/interpreter with the latter also the author of the story. Indeed, in describing this process of giving and receiving stories, Ricoeur implicitly admits that the work of understanding is based on a creative receptivity. Importantly, this creative receptivity is contingent upon narrative autonomy, which allows us to inherit tradition as well as transmit stories open to shifts in interpretation. Thus, narrative autonomy is not the creation ex nihilo of novel plots. Instead, both on a personal and a collective level, it is a way of coming to terms with, reconfiguring, and even emancipating people and communities from the inherited accumulation of stories and meaning from the past. Autonomy, then, would not exist without a tradition to manage, a history to come to terms with; indeed, its roots are firmly embedded in historicality and in the historicity of our being in the

world.

We could say that narrativity and narrative autonomy share the dual functions of interpretation and action. It is interpretation, since it is the condition of intelligibility of history and time-ness; it is action, because, starting from the work of refiguration, it orients and directs actions toward a shared, common end. Ricoeur is persuaded that, "human action is in many respects a quasi text. It is externalized in a manner comparable to the fixation characteristic of writing. In separating itself from its agent, it leaves a trace, a mark; it is inscribed in the course of things and becomes an archive, a document […] like a text, it is detached from the initial conditions of its production […] finally, an action, like a text, is an open work, addressed to an indefinite series of possible 'readers'"[5]. If this is applied to history, then all human deeds are subject to constant re-interpretation. Ricoeur notes in another reflection on history, that the human task towards historicity – i.e., the task of transforming historicality into historicity – should be that of re-opening and re-examining the past to better determine the future: "We need to re-open the past, give new life to its unaccomplished, impeded, even massacred, potentialities. To be brief, contrary to the saying that the past is exclusively close and necessary, and the future is, in all its aspects, open and contingent, we need to make our expectations more determined, and our experience more undetermined"[6]. My hypothesis is that this represents the real potential of narrative autonomy: in the never attained but continuously cultivated re-examination and interpretation of the past for a more precise determination of the future. It is important to recognize the human capacity to recognize oneself and the living communities capable of influencing the future with initiative and planning. Indeed, to impact and determine the future, we must believe in human agency's peculiar power to start anew and transform reality. It is a close collaboration between practical deliberation, phronesis, and narrative autonomy that acknowledges the importance of human relationships and might even begin with them.

Against the backdrop of unavoidable historicality, it is useful to highlight certain features of Ricoeur's narrative autonomy. The first is narrativity's capacity to find connections among disparate events and actions. This feature derives from the structure of narrativity itself, whose main peculiarity is this capacity of conferring order upon chaos. Wilhelm Dilthey, one of the leading scholars on Ricoeur's meditation on hermeneutics and action, has identified this "connective" quality. The second could be called its "co-authoriality" or self-authorship feature, referring to Ricoeur's famous quip in *Oneself as Another* that it is impossible to consider oneself the author of one's own life, that more plausibly we are the co-authors of our lives. Importantly, agency does not imply identity or ownership. However, self-authorship means playing an active role in shaping our future and negotiating the meaning of our past experiences. According to Ricoeur, "by narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning"[7]. Narrative autonomy subjects are not proprietary "idem" who create themselves without regard to the others; rather, they are subject that find themselves always already implied in other stories, stories made by others; they cannot become self-contained entities created in a vacuum; instead, they play a role in other people's stories and are only autonomous to the degree they are able to articulate and participate in the meaning making process[8]. The third, and possibly most important feature of narrative autonomy is its decentralization, for it begins and ends with others. The experience of being narrated is a constant in our lives and while there is a "normal" passivity in being narrated, there is also a sort of "pathological" one. The latter does not consider "being narrated" by others as something transitory or at least coterminous with one's own storytelling. Rather, "pathological" passivity is a permanent nullification of one's own version; it is a radical expropriation that feeds off the "decentralization" of the subject, relegating it to a position of subalternity. Instead of engaging in a healthy dialectic with its counterpart, decentralization – which should be a starting, dislocated point, of a path – has the last word. In contrast, narrative autonomy should foster the possibility of having a voice – and the awareness that there will be other voices – in

meaning making. Acknowledging being narrated as an act of dislocation does not entitle the subjects to abdicate their own narration efforts and search for meaning. Quite the contrary, narrative autonomy is precisely this act of becoming closer to oneself and participating in the construction of meaning. When referring to decentralization, with the primacy of the passive side of the being narrated, being hosted in other narratives before learning to have voice, the thought goes to the Ricoeurian considerations concerning the analogy of text and action. A text undergoes displacement or decentralization because its meaning is not controlled by the author but subject to interpretation by others. Similarly, human action is displaced or decentralized because its intentions or outcomes are at the mercy of the community's interpretation. Just as the reasons for the action are not immediately accessible to the agent, so too the consequences, results, and meaning of said action are not entirely graspable by the agent. When decentralized, however, agency *does* pertain to autonomy. Indeed, that is why we can use the adjective "narrative" to modify the noun "autonomy". And this operates at more than one level: from "being narrated" to "action", to "action" that "narrates itself", to the possibility of negotiating meaning within a community where displacement and decentralization are dialectically intertwined with their counterparts.

To sum up, narrativity is simultaneously a backward-looking lens through which we understand and communicate our historicality and at the same time is the way in which we make possible to think to the future by trying to co-determinate it. Narrative autonomy is rooted in narrativity, and consists of at least three key features: "connective", the capacity that can be traced back to Ricoeur's description of narrativity as a meaning-making tool; "co-authorship", the idea that the subject is not a master, but rather participates in making meaning as a co-author of the meaning its life, and the possibility to articulate meaning as a common, shared enterprise, without sacrificing self-narrative and the right to have voice; and finally "decentralization", the concept that narrative autonomy locates itself in the space between the decentralized self and the attempt to centralize and unify it. This is not just about coherence, seen as a task rather than a datum, but it is also about the relationship between activity and passivity. Being narrated precedes self-narration: passivity is the condition of possibility of activity, is a "yet to be realized" activity. A pre-requisite for becoming autonomous is recognizing the primacy of passivity and crediting it with the initiative-taking capacity of human action[9]. This concept of passivity merits further inquiry and clarification in relation to suffering, narrativity, and autonomy. Defined in this way, it could be argued that passivity is the driving force behind human agency.

Suffering, or the Pathic Dimension of Autonomy

This section draws upon Ricoeur's *La souffrance n'est pas la douleur (Suffering is not Pain)* to relate his ideas about suffering to his anthropology of passivity and moral action. Ricoeur explains that suffering reveals far more than we might expect and is linked to narrativity. It is precisely the experience of suffering that makes it possible to recognize the "pathic" core of autonomy, because when we suffer, we resist and strive for emancipation. The irreducible dimension of suffering is a *Grenzsituation* (Jaspers's well-known concept elaborated in 1919[10]) i.e., a paradigm of the human condition because it reveals our pathic constitution. This pathic state does not impede autonomy but lays the groundwork for it. Autonomy cannot be possessed like an attribute or skill; it is more like an attitude or strategy for managing radical passivity, so it does not devolve into an occasion for domination, exploitation, and alienation.

In this work, Ricoeur notes that the condition of suffering, while emblematic of passivity, is initially experienced as utter incapacity. Incapacity in action and incapacity in narration deserve further analysis. As for the former, he maintains that suffering retains a residue of activity: "suffering means, as the roots of the word indicate, first and foremost to bear. So, a minimum level of action is involved in the passivity of suffering"[11]. To be sure, even in a condition of radical passivity there is the possibility of action, even if such action is simply a positioning of the subject with respect to an

event. Ricoeur picks up the argument again a few pages on, linking suffering to the need to find meaning in experience: “the problem of suffering has an ethical and philosophical dimension to the extent that we encounter both the passivity of suffering and its call for meaning”[12]. So, in the same sphere of feeling we are inhabited by the perception of something that invades us and is impossible to cancel; at the same time, we experience a particular kind of autonomy, of agency, and it can be equated to the search for a sense, the request of a sense with respect to that experience. At the heart of an experience of passivity, we can find the possibility of autonomy, which could be characterized in terms of narrative autonomy, due to the reference to the search for a sense and for a meaning. And there is something else here too; Ricoeur detects another dimension to the incapacity to narrate: “we come to the third dimension of suffering [the first two are the incapacity of telling and of acting]. It consists in the damage inflicted to the *function of the tale* in search of narration. Understanding oneself means being able to tell oneself intelligible – and most of all acceptable – stories”[13]. In these “disasters of narrating” what is at stake is once again the space in-between, an” the “inter-narrative” space that is broken since it is based on a pact, on a commitment towards the meaning, and, we could add, on a mutual promise of maintenance. Even if we cannot find a reference to the idea of a promise, we can deduce it from the Ricoeurian text. He highlights the fact that we are all parts of others’ stories, and in being so, if we come across experiences of a radical loss of meaning, we cannot participate in the process of sense making and, moreover, we feel is broken. While the concept of a promise or a pact is not made explicit in Ricoeur’s work, he does highlight the role we play in each other’s stories and names the disintegration of shared meaning making as one of the main causes of suffering. To be clear, suffering does not erode autonomy; quite the contrary, experiencing a radical loss of meaning, an “inenarrability”, leads to a more urgent work. This is autonomy, narrative autonomy, focused on the search for sense and lived as an exigence that cannot translate itself into an effective action on the world. Here we can understand once again that narrative autonomy is composed by interpretation and action. Its experience can be either lived fully, as the perception of an effectiveness in the world, or lived as a wish, in negative, since it is desired and claimed, even if impossible to reach. In this sense, the narrative gesture comes from suffering and has an emancipative force. Autonomy is derived from this attempt to emancipate oneself and to live free from pain.

Starting from something we cannot control or manage, we strive for autonomy within the boundaries of our being narrated by others amidst experiences we find overwhelming. The famous description of the “triad of passivity” mentioned in *Oneself as Another* is relevant here. To say it with Ricoeur’s words: “I suggest as a working hypothesis what could be called *the triad of passivity and, hence, of otherness*”[14]. Ricoeur recognizes three sources of passivity: our body, the other, and (moral) consciousness i.e., “the most deeply hidden passivity”. The passivity of moral consciousness is a philosophically telling example of the irreducibility of passivity within the moral dynamics of deliberation. This element is of an unedited importance here, since it is located at the heart of the initiative, where being active and effective in making decisions and translating them into actions. This is the reason why the passivity discovered within the conscience deals with autonomy, because it has to do with the capacity of deliberating and acting in a moral sense. Moral consciousness is then shaped by passivity: it lies in the injunction of the law that comes from outside, in the desire for happiness that can lead us and that we discover within ourselves, and even in the conviction, that is not fully mastered by the moral subject. In other words, we need to acknowledge that the reasons, the moral imperatives, and the moral sources of our actions are not completely ours, that they spill over the boundaries of our moral conscience, which finds itself crossed by alterity. To say it with the words of Ricoeur: “the suspicion concerns, most precisely, the alleged surplus of meaning that the idea of conscience appears to superimpose on the major concept of ethics: the wish to live well (with all the additions with which we are familiar), obligation, and conviction”[15]. The surplus of meaning Ricoeur refers to stems from the dialectic between action, passion, initiative, and receptivity. If it is true that all the ingredients of a fully moral life do not mine, or at least not only mine, even moral

life has a passive root that we cannot fully understand or take exclusive ownership of.

The voice as a metaphor for passivity is paradigmatic of a radical non-possession of the sources and of the relevance that they own for us. Continuing his argument, Ricoeur notes that "Unlike the dialogue of the soul with itself, of which Plato speaks, this affection by another voice presents a remarkable dissymmetry, one that can be called vertical, between the agency that calls, and the self called upon. It is the vertical nature of the call, equal to its interiority, which creates the enigma of the phenomenon of the conscience"[16]. Once again, while not explicit, the connection between autonomy and passivity emerges in other writings where he refers to the pathic dimension of personhood.

Concluding Remarks

It is worth mentioning that narrative autonomy may be the best way to refigure autonomy in a relational sense. There reasons are two-fold: one, because narrative autonomy is closely related to historicity, reflecting the unavoidable intertwining of human lives; and two, because suffering – including the search for meaning amidst meaninglessness – triggers emancipatory striving both on an individual and collective level. Its historicity qualities presuppose that a) autonomy exists in our historical condition and, b) the narrative declination of autonomy helps us interpret history. Its suffering and striving aspects are predicated on an appreciation for passivity's role in the deliberative process. Suffering is not considered exceptional but an expression of the "normal" functioning of our moral consciousness. These conclusions, especially in relation to passivity, destabilize the Ricoeurian idea that autonomy is diametrically opposed to vulnerability. Vulnerability enables authentic interactions and passivity; vulnerability does not run counter to autonomy but underpins it. Vulnerable autonomy – narratively enmeshed with history, the world, and others – is all that is possible, inviting us to rethink how to relate to these contexts, free from domination, mastery, and control.

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