

“Who do you say that I am?” Truth in Narrative Identity

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Abstract

The following article explores what notion of truth is possible in Ricœur’s narrative identity. It is motivated by the question of how our identity can be constituted in narratives of self when we are often easily self-deceiving and do not choose the building blocks of our narratives. It explores how our identities are constituted in narrative, with others, in order to see what dimensions of truth this allows. Narrative identity implicates a novel notion of truth that is intrinsically ethical, which gives rise to a set of ethical issues. In particular, a truth of self that occurs in relation to others is open to violence and abuse—our very identity is, to varying degrees, in others’ hands. Butler’s ethics of fragility may offer a positive solution.

Keywords: Identity; Truth; Ethics, Butler; Vulnerability

Résumé

Le présent article tente de comprendre quel est le type de vérité auquel peut prétendre la notion ricœurienne d’identité narrative, en explorant la question suivante : comment notre identité peut-elle être constituée dans des récits de soi alors que nous nous trompons souvent facilement et que nous ne choisissons pas les éléments constitutifs de nos récits ? Il explore la manière dont nos identités sont constituées dans des récits, avec d’autres, afin de voir quelles dimensions de la vérité sont alors permises. L’identité narrative implique une nouvelle notion de vérité qui est intrinsèquement éthique, ce qui soulève une série de questions du même ordre. Dans la mesure en effet où une vérité de soi qui se produit en relation avec d’autres est exposée à la violence et aux abus — notre identité elle-même est, à des degrés divers, entre les mains d’autres individus. L’éthique de la fragilité de Butler est susceptible d’offrir une solution positive à cette question.

Mots-clés : identité ; vérité ; éthique ; Butler ; vulnérabilité

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I. Introduction

We don't always know who we are; sometimes, we discover aspects of ourselves we did not know existed: surprised, we unearth our own feelings, motivations, and participation in power dynamics. We lie to ourselves: I convince myself that I have been slowing my steps to enjoy the early spring, but I later become aware it was because I did not want to go home. We are, to some extent, strangers to ourselves.

Further, in our relationships with others we sometimes see our identities misunderstood, mis-constructed. In social or intimate settings, our identities are manipulated, reconstructed, even wielded to mold us into someone we feel we are not. In parallel, we sit by, confounded, as we listen to others claim to be people we are very sure they are not. In all of these, we feel there is a *truth* to identity, or at least that there are versions of identities—ours and others'—that are *more* true than others.

In this article, I would like to explore how or whether Ricœur's understanding of narrative identity can accommodate or give an answer to these questions regarding the truth of our identity. Ricœur defends a notion of personal identity that he claims sits precisely between theories that deny the existence of a unified self (as in Nietzsche) and those that defend an absolute ego immediately accessible to itself (as in Descartes). If the absence of self is not a satisfying answer to the problem of identity, a cartesian ego may certainly offer a solid version of subjectivity but suffers, as Ricœur states, from a lack of content: the cartesian ego—arguably also present in Husserlian phenomenology—“is, in truth, no one.”¹ Therefore, it cannot serve us in a concrete, practical context. Ricœur's own quest for a philosophical understanding of personal identity adopts a middle road: we do not deny a self—the self is not an illusion of a unified entity where there is none—but we recognize its opacity, its distance, even though we are both the seekers and what is sought.

Ricœur's proposal to the question of personal identity has the benefit of allowing space for change in someone by providing an account of how our identity is a relational affair—we are someone always with and for others. Yet it is precisely this aspect that also raises some issues: if the truth of identity is a social event in which circumstances and others participate, can we not lose control of our narrative, and in this way lose hold of who we are? How can we speak of a mistaken or false account of oneself or others?

Generally speaking, Ricœur does not use the term “truth” in regard to his proposed solution for personal identity, narrative identity. This is in part, I venture to guess, because the

¹ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 6.

term brings with it an entire tradition of meaning that does not and cannot apply to what can be meant by a “true” or “false” identity (we can already see how awkward these terms seem when conjoined). This is precisely the object of elucidation in this text: what is the conception of truth which can be applicable to narrative identity, and what limitations and issues does it give rise to? Whether we call it truth or something else, questions in our lives arise when we are concerned with the “truth of someone” —if they are who we thought they were or who they said they were, or if we or someone else correctly assesses who we ourselves are (for example, honest and kind, or brutish and zealous). Perhaps more importantly, our identities will at times be in question—we will identify in a particular way and someone else will deny it. How can we speak of who is right in these cases? In our social context, there are many instances where someone’s identity is not recognized by another, such as in cases of gender identity. Someone who does not identify as one of the binary genders can find their identity refused, even denied by others. At other times, someone might want to partake in an identity we believe they should not be able to claim. In cases of identity dispute, how could we argue who is right? In all these cases, we are speaking about how we can determine or define someone’s true identity, so the question of what truth is possible in identity is relevant. Accordingly, it is important to see if Ricœur’s proposed narrative identity can give a plausible answer to this question, since this is also a criterion for how sound a conception of personal identity it is.

There is a novella by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Accident*,² in which a traveling salesman is forced to stay overnight at a village due to car troubles and ends up staying at a former judge’s house. His host invites him to play a game with him and his friends—an attorney, a public prosecutor, and a former executioner, all retired as well—while they enjoy a sumptuous banquet. The “game” is a trial where he will play the accused, even provided with his own defense attorney. He is not accused of anything in particular, at least initially; he is simply asked to talk about himself, to give an account of his life, how he has ended up where he is; how did he get that fine automobile, they ask. Encouraged by the rich food and easy flowing wines, the travelling salesman begins to narrate his life. In the course of it, he admits—or so the others accuse him, laughing and screaming, gradually drunker and more hysterical—to having indirectly killed his boss by having an affair with his wife and ensuring the other man found out about it, despite knowing his health was fragile. On receiving the news, his boss did indeed succumb to a fatal fit. Our salesman had enjoyed increased success since. Now, in the story as originally told, our protagonist introduces himself as having had more success since the unfortunate demise of his previous boss—whom he admittedly did not like—brought on by ill health. But these were events connected by chance. He confesses to having been involved with his boss’ wife, which he justifies by her attractiveness and her own interest caused by, he argued, the emotional neglect she suffered in her marriage. In short, everything is circumstantial; these are not innocent situations, but neither are they criminal. Nevertheless, as the questioning continues, and the accused’s own perspective of events begins to be swayed, his dinner companions discover premeditated intentions carefully orchestrated and put into action: a malicious, cleverly enacted plan supported by a number of other events, thoughts, and judgements that the salesman offered up for scrutiny. In the end, almost incoherent with drunkenness, they find him guilty of murder and sentence him to death. The accused openly assumes his guilt and declares, sentimentally, to have come to know himself anew. As the others

² Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *O Acidente* (Lisboa: Publicações Europa-América, 1963).

begin to fall asleep, slumping into their chairs tired and overindulged, the traveling salesman hangs himself in his room.

This literary example shows, I want to argue, the dangers of an identity open to interpretations (and misinterpretations). Our identity is vulnerable to violence and abuse, susceptible to misunderstandings and appropriations of power. How much of our own lives could be misinterpreted by others if we were to engage in a mock trial as the travelling salesman did?

When we narrate ourselves, our identity can be twisted, reformulated, reinterpreted in its reception. To make matters more problematic, we can become convinced by these reformulated identities and believe we are who we are told we "are." At other times, others' contributions can help us understand ourselves better. But in all cases, who we are is susceptible to others' influences, which puts us in a position of vulnerability. Further, our identities are made up of concepts and narratives that we inherit: for instance, we do not choose the language that determines who we are, so we are from the beginning molding ourselves through others' views. Our sense of self is so deeply entangled in cultural norms and social conventions that from its very genesis, we struggle to disentangle ourselves. We have false memories, memories that we adopt from others, and stories about who we were as children that guide who we think we should be. In all of this, our identities are fragile, vulnerable, so malleable and foreign that we wonder how we can ever know who we are. In a 1970's text titled "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," Ricœur himself raises the question about the limitations of our self-knowledge and the distorting power social structures can have on our identity. In a critique to Husserl's conception of knowledge of the self, he writes:

Husserl believed that self-knowledge could not be presumptive because it does not proceed from "outlines" or "profiles." But self-knowledge can be presumptive for other reasons. In the measure to which self-knowledge is a dialogue of the soul with itself, and to which this dialogue could be systematically distorted by the violence and by all the intrusions of the structures of domination into those of communication, self-knowledge, as interiorised communication, can also be as doubtful as knowledge of the object, although for different reasons.³

Already here, Ricœur understood self-knowledge as occurring in a "dialogue" with oneself and recognized the latent dangers such narrative identities can bring with them, how the seeds of power structures and domination are already present, lifting a veil of opacity to our self-knowledge.

Now, I am not looking for some kind of "pure" personal identity to be extricated from the web of external influences and disguises. It has been made clear—by Ricœur as well as others like Foucault and Butler—that there is no such thing. But does assuming that there is no originary, untouched core of our identity imply that we cannot distinguish or disentangle our imposed or distorted identities from our more authentic ones? How can we distinguish between an account of the self that is more true than another? In disputes of identity, claimed and denied, how can we determine who is right?

³ Paul Ricœur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," *Noûs*, vol. 9/1 (March 1975), 91.

The issue is not only that we are susceptible to falsifications and distortions of our stories through narrative identity, be it by our own hand or that of others, but that the *very notion of truth* in narrative identity seems to include such distortions and variations—it does not seem to leave us any clear indication of how we can tell an authentic identity from an impostor.

I will begin, in the first section, to offer a brief account of Ricœur’s narrative identity. In the second section, I will articulate how “truth” (in its variations) is present or articulated in narrative identity. In the third and final section, I will attempt, with the help of Judith Butler’s work, to offer the only answer that seems available: an ethical one.

II. Narrative Identity—*Idem* and *Iipse*

Ricœur’s narrative identity offers an account that distinguishes the identity of a self from the traditional notions of identity as sameness that are applicable to other entities other than selves. To do this, Ricœur differentiates between *idem* (sameness) and *ipse* (selfhood). *Idem* speaks to something that remains “the same” throughout time, of continuity in or persistence over time, whereas *ipse* speaks to the subjectivity of identity, of what it means to be a self, or a *who*. In this sense, *ipse*, identity in terms of selfhood, is “in the sense of the self-designation of a subject of discourse, action, narrative or ethical commitment.”⁴ We are looking here for identity in the sense of *who* speaks, *who* acts, *who* is responsible or accountable in a promise. It is no longer about the “whatness” of who we are—the characteristics or aspects that might endure and point to a constant sameness in time—but to speak of an identity truly in the sense of being a subject and an agent in life, “the self of responsibility,” as in the quote above.

Ricœur identifies two principal ways a self-identity manifests or is maintained through time: character and promise keeping. Ricœur associates *character* with the dimension of identity as sameness or *idem*.

Character, I would say today, designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. In this way character is able to constitute the limit point where the problematic of *ipse* becomes indiscernible from that of *idem*, and where one is inclined not to distinguish them from one another.⁵

The lasting traits of character offer a continuity in time by which we can be recognized as the same - my stubbornness, her nervous humor, for example. These are aspects of self which have a lasting presence in time; they are, says Ricœur just a little later, the “what of the who”⁶: they comprise our characteristics, how we could be described to someone by those aspects that define us. In this way, they are the predicates, the “what” of our identity, so they are the aspects of our identity which are closer to “sameness.”

A mode of identity where *ipse* is distinguished from *idem*, according to Ricœur, occurs when an identity is assumed in promise keeping or a commitment. In these cases, the identity is

⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 335.

⁵ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121.

⁶ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 122.

made via the commitment of "maintaining oneself" despite disruptions of sameness or continuity in time; that is, in promises, I hold myself to be accountable to something in the future even if I won't recognize myself as the *same* then. In a promise, we state that even if our predicates change, we will hold ourselves accountable to what we commit to now.

There is, in fact, another model of permanence in time besides that of character. It is that of keeping one's word in faithfulness to the word that has been given. ... The perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again. The continuity of character is one thing, the constancy of friendship is quite another.⁷

In this case, then, we have a mode of identity that is entirely held up by agency rather than by characteristics. This is why, according to Ricœur, it is where *idem* is furthest from *idem*.

According to Ricœur's narrative identity, who we are is articulated through narratives: we make sense of who we are by interpreting our lives in narrative form; we form narratives to articulate our lives into a plot of events, circumstances, people, and projects. Through the plot, the continuity of a character emerges. This emplotment is continuously done and so our character is also continuously being formed and reformed. It is important to understand that we don't only understand who we are or come to see who we are through these stories, but that we *constitute* our identity in the narratives of self.⁸

Claude Romano, in dialogue with Ricœur, identifies "selfhood" as the part of personal identity in which we are actively engaged, to which we contribute by assuming it and in so doing further sediment it; selfhood is an aspect of our identity which depends on our relation to it, and how we hold ourselves responsible for it⁹—it is not "out there" like characteristics to be found or listed off, but rather exists in the very action of its constitution, by assuming it. Personal identity is in this way very different than the identity of things. We cannot think of our identity purely in terms of sameness or persistence of traits through time, without that additional aspect which involves our assuming it and vouching for it. Selfhood is inherently a matter of responsibility.

So, personal identity can never be reduced to characteristics with which we could be identified: it is never a purely objective affair, but has to include being a *subject* of that very identity, *assuming* that identity—there is always both *idem* and *ipse*.

⁷ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 123.

⁸ The question of whether identity is *constituted* or merely *interpreted* in self narratives is one that has been discussed by readers like Dan Zahavi—"Self and Other. The Limits of Narrative Understanding," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, vol. 60 (2007), 179-202—and Sara Fernandes—"Identidade narrativa e identidade pessoal. Uma abordagem da filosofia de Paul Ricœur," *Philosophica*, vol. 33 (2008), 75-94. If our identities were only interpreted in the narratives of self this would mean our identity would already have to exist prior to the narratives (and the question of identity would remain unanswered), as these be a work of *understanding*. Nevertheless, there are good indications Ricœur meant the stronger version of those two positions, as Fernandes herself admits.

⁹ Claude Romano, "Identity and Selfhood. Paul Ricœur's Contribution and its Continuations," in Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricœur. Between Text and Phenomenon* (New York: Springer, 2016), 57.

Recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*. ... An element of loyalty is thus incorporated into character and makes it turn toward fidelity, hence toward maintaining the self. Here the two poles of identity accord with one another. This proves that one cannot think the *idem* of the person through without considering the *ipse*, even when one entirely covers the other.¹⁰

While we speak of “narrative” identity, we are of course not speaking strictly of words one can say to another: the narratives that constitute us are the continuous sense-making we engage in, which we do—as Ricœur keenly pointed—in interpretation,¹¹ in narrative form. The stories we construct to articulate our identity are always burgeoningly present, when we act; our narratives do not appear cleanly and fully formed *after* we have acted, and then we present them to others. Rather, as we make sense of our life, especially the actions and events defining it, we interpret it in narrative form and thus constitute our *selves*: “By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning,” writes Ricœur.¹² I cannot avoid making sense of my life—since we cannot have an uninterpreted experience—so the interpretation intrinsically infused in our experience constitutes our identity.

Narrative identity is always made from an interlacing of these two polarities of identity: we constitute who we are in self-narratives by forming a unified sense of self in the narratives—we discover and form a character—and secondly, by assuming that this is who we are, we are committing ourselves to being this (albeit changeable) person. When I tell you that I have been a faithful person with a story of myself, I am not only giving an account of who I am and have been, but I am also promising who I will be. We make ourselves accountable to the identities we present. *This is an aspect which constitutes that very identity*: as I create a coherent account of who I am, I assume that very identity in responsibility. There is an aspect of promise keeping in character narration. In this way, narrative identity weaves together *idem* and *ipse*.

III. How Can we Speak of Truth in Regard to Narrative Identity?

The main question that motivates this article is what kind of truth we can talk about with regard to narrative identity. As I reflected earlier, we don’t always know exactly who we are: we often deceive our very selves in the stories we tell about ourselves and, willingly or unwillingly, we also deceive others—for example, by construing events in a particular way, or placing ourselves at the center of situations, by being unaware of the motivations of our actions in the moment to discover them only later, or by misreporting ours and others’ tones or actions, or by adopting postures that fail to align with how we really behaved, and so on. Further, our identities are made from concepts and language which inevitably set the terms of understanding. We do not choose

¹⁰ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 121.

¹¹ Paul Ricœur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricœur. Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1992), 27-8: “To this end, I should like to stress the pre-narrative capacity of what we call life. What has to be questioned is the overly simple equation made between life and experience. A life is no more than a biological phenomenon as long as it has not been interpreted. And in interpretation fiction plays a mediating role.”

¹² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 162.

freely how to understand ourselves. If our selves are constituted through narratives and we lie or can be wrong about ourselves, what kind of truth of the self is possible? If we are also constituted in narratives from others, could we ever *become*—by our own words or others'—someone we were not? Ricœur himself asks a similar question in regard to the truth that is possible for both *idem* and *ipse*: "Now the question is precisely whether selfhood and sameness lend themselves in the same way to the test of truth claims."¹³

III. 1. Variations on a Self

When speaking in relation to truth in narrative identity, Ricœur uses the term "attestation." What is attestation?

Attestation presents itself, first, as a kind of belief. But it is not a doxic belief, in the sense in which *doxa* (belief) has less standing than *episteme* (science, or better, knowledge). Whereas doxic belief is implied in the grammar of "I believe-that," attestation belongs to the grammar of "I believe-in." It thus links up with testimony, as the etymology reminds us, inasmuch as it is in the speech of the one giving testimony that one believes.¹⁴

The kind of truth we are dealing with, Ricœur tells us, has to do with trust. We have trust or confidence *in* someone *and* the story they tell us about themselves. This is a different kind of belief than "believing-that." To trust is not the same as to know.

Attestation, a concept related to testimony, is also described as a truth based on the concept of *aletheia* (as unfolding), Heidegger's conception of truth. One's self-understanding is always undergoing revisions: who we are is being discovered and formed through attempts to make sense of ourselves, by revising and editing the account of our path and how we have unfolded in it. In this way, it is an identity that is in becoming that we both discover and constitute as we tell and retell it. As Jan Patočka wrote in his essay "What is existence?," the kind of being that we are is not like a moon rock that is there waiting to be discovered—we can't just know who we are because our identity is implicated in the discovering itself.¹⁵ The path of discovery is as much a part of its unfolding as the interpretation—both occur simultaneously because we live by acting and interpreting together. At no point in our lives is our identity given once and for all; rather, it is always reviewed and reformulated, and so agrees with the notion of *aletheia* of a truth as unfolding, as manifesting in its becoming.

Ricœur writes that the narrative identity we have is neither stable nor seamless.¹⁶ Speaking of the multiple possible narratives we can give about ourselves, even some that contradict one another, Ricœur says that narrative identity is as much the name of the problem as of the solution.¹⁷

¹³ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 129.

¹⁴ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 21.

¹⁵ Jan Patočka, "Qu'est-ce que l'existence?," in *Le monde naturel et le mouvement de l'existence humaine*, trans. Erika Abrams (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 248.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 248.

¹⁷ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* III, 249.

The account of self that a narrative identity offers is always unstable, always on the way. This shows that the kind of being we are can never be defined in an absolute or final way, but can only be told and retold, never resolved. Sebastian Purcell, in his article “Hermeneutics and Truth. From *Aletheia* to Attestation,” proposes that the difference between Heidegger’s *aletheia* and Ricœur’s attestation is that the latter is an infinite process; the discovery of an answer or meaning is always only provisional.¹⁸ Interpretations and meaning are open projects that we undertake continuously throughout our lives by learning—and making—who we are.

The reformulations and revisions we apply to the narrative of our lives do not diminish the truth of such a narrative, which can never be correct or accurate “one day,” in some “final” or “ultimate” sense but are rather part of the very becoming of narrative identity. The continuous corrections and revisions of our life story, of the narrative of who we are, *are a part* of the same identity. In “Life in Quest of Narrative” Ricœur writes:

It is therefore by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego that we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity.¹⁹

Narrative identity does not offer us a fixed or delimited identity, but neither does it say there is *no* identity. Instead, it proposes that our identity is continuously being formed in a work of self-interpretation, which inevitably makes use of the cultural and personal references and examples available.

Since what I can know about who I am is not immediately accessible, it must be found through circuitous routes (stories, cultural references, and others)—the truth we have of ourselves is always textured with fiction: on the one hand, it tries to account for past events and actions, and on the other, like any historical account, it cannot help being a fictionalized account. In *Time and Narrative III*, Ricœur writes: “As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful and fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.”²⁰

The multitude and variation of interpretations give rise to questions about one’s own identity. Some of these accounts will contradict one another or vary wildly. This may leave us unsure, and as Ricœur says with reference to Jesus, befuddled about who we are and who others expect us to be:

In the first place, narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity. Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents ... so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives. ... In this sense, narrative identity continues to make and unmake itself, and the question of trust that Jesus posed to his

¹⁸ Sebastian Purcell, “Hermeneutics and Truth. From *Aletheia* to Attestation,” *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 1 (2013), 149.

¹⁹ Ricœur, “Life in Quest of Narrative,” 33.

²⁰ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative III*, 246.

disciples—Who do you say that I am?—is one that each of us can pose concerning oneself, with the same perplexity that the disciples questioned by Jesus felt.²¹

From this perspective, all these accounts are part of the meaning and speak to the character of the truth an identity can have. In narrative identity, what we would normally call the lies about someone's story—for example, how they try out different personas or vary the telling of a story, or how they work out the sense of their life story by adopting different tones and perspectives—are part of the very identity of the self being discovered and formed, as they form the continuous path of its formulation. These lies would not be directly opposed to the truth in narrative identity, but they are part of the way to arrive—not at a final truth about who that someone is—but at a truer truth, always on the way. In a passage where Ricœur distinguishes the notions of truth and falsity present in this proposal from the more traditional ones, he writes:

Attestation, as was stated in our Introduction, has as its contrary suspicion. ... [However] It is not simply the contrary of attestation in a strictly disjunctive sense as being-false is in relation to being true. Suspicion is also the path *toward* and the crossing *within* attestation. It haunts attestation as false testimony haunts true testimony.²²

These variations in my narrative and of who I am are not lies that sit opposite to who I "truly" am, they are rather a part of my identity, like veins in a tree trunk—some more awkward and salient, but still a part of it. As Ricœur states about truth and lies in a different text: "Perhaps it is already apparent that the spirit of falsehood is inextricably bound with our search for the truth, like a tunic of Nessus clinging to the human form."²³

Ricœur's work on textual interpretation supports this reading: the meaning of a text, like the meaning of human action, is open, in the making. It is not a "free for all," since some interpretations will be better justified than others, but neither is it fixed or final. In the same way, the various changing accounts one provides of oneself are like textures of one's identity and a part of its sense: "That means that, like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is 'in suspense.'"²⁴

In her article "The subject of critique: Ricœur in dialogue with feminist philosophers," Annemie Halsema compared Ricœur's notion of the self with that of some central feminist philosophers, including Judith Butler.²⁵ She articulates several similarities in their conceptions of self, arguing that both perspectives see the self as articulated through (and thus also bound by) language, so it is changing; and that there is a necessary opacity of the self that arises from its being in interpretation (and for Butler, the unconscious). Yet Halsema argues that this opacity, coupled

²¹ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* III, 248.

²² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 302.

²³ Paul Ricœur, "Truth and Falsehood," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 166.

²⁴ Paul Ricœur, "The Model of the Text. Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research*, vol. 51 (1984), 201.

²⁵ Annemie Halsema, "The Subject of Critique. Ricœur in Dialogue with Feminist Philosophers," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 1 (2013), 21-39.

with the variety of possible interpretations and accounts that can be given of oneself, allows the self to be critically assessed; that is, we can productively question and analyze the accounts of self we adopt and are handed, so we can infinitely reinterpret who we are.

In other words, the self can interpret itself differently in the light of different texts. For Ricœur, discourse is the place of unending variations for the subject, it is the field of alterations and dreams. The distancing between subject and discourse that he conceptualizes, indeed does leave openings for critique and include possibilities for change.²⁶

From this distance between discourse and subject that Halsema points to, one might be led to believe that the subject sits apart from its narratives: there could be a “subsisting self” that uses narratives and texts for interpretation but is somehow independent from them. But how would this self be constituted? How does its identity emerge? This is where it is important to mark the difference between interpretation (of texts) and constitution (of selves): we are not only interpreted through narratives, but are constituted in them.

We can only understand ourselves in and through narratives—there is no wordless or thoughtless interpretation. Unless we remit to a substantial, immutable version of a self, we can only think of our constitution as continuously occurring in this understanding. In this way, while we are able to critically assess different variations of ourselves that we may entertain, this critical standpoint is still situated—in narratives! The variations on the self we postulate are also ways of developing and fine-tuning our identity. We are creating ourselves at the same time as we are self-understanding.

The varying accounts, however different, are not a cacophony of conflicting stories but more like voices in a song, entering at different times and together creating a piece of music. Some might be more dissonant or discordant from the harmony, but all together they make a melody that is always textured, and most times complex.

III. 2. Relational Identity

Our stories about ourselves are necessarily infused with others’ narratives and with stories of our history and culture that we have received; we are informed by characters, norms, and values that we embed in our narratives without even realizing. That, for example, I compose my narratives toward certain achievements, that they are *aimed* and have a story-like structure, or that they assume some values as desirable and attempt to evidence them in my “character,” or that I emulate the mannerisms and tones of people that I admire—all of these are manners in which I vary presentations of my self by adapting and appropriating (knowingly or not) from external sources. I find otherness already in me: in the language, stories, origins, and the cultural references that inform me, and in the opacity and strangeness I find in myself, as if a stranger lived inside me. Marc-Antoine Vallée, in his “Quelle sorte d’être est le soi ?,” writes: “Ricœur’s most fundamental thesis is that the self, as ipseity, is always already inhabited by a certain alterity. The relation to

²⁶ Halsema, “The Subject of Critique,” 29.

alterity is constitutive of the self."²⁷ The narratives we use to account for ourselves, and the fact that they are inspired by and borrowed from history, culture and other people's stories puts others at the core of our identity—who we are is interrelated to others and can only be known in relation with them, rather than solipsistically.

Further, I always direct my self-narrative to another, whether they are real or imagined; the stories we tell always presume an interlocutor even if they are not a real or concrete person: we tell our stories to *someone*. Ricœur says:

[T]he Other is not only the counterpart of the Same but belongs to the intimate constitution of its sense. Indeed, on the properly phenomenological level the multiple ways in which the other than self affects the understanding of the self by itself marks, precisely, the difference between the *ego* that posits itself and the *self* that recognizes itself only through these very affections.²⁸

The very truth of my narrative, as attestation, is connected to the credibility and trust the other places in it; I already construct my narrative to make it believable to another, I anticipate its reception. In this way, at its core, personal identity also implicates intersubjectivity, our relation to others. My own identity occurs as I relate to others, it varies or is permeable to that social occurrence: the self *emerges and occurs in relation*.

If attestation requires others' trust, then we have a conception of truth that is itself relational. It is a truth that is not (solely) referential to facts in the world, nor is it determined by oneself alone; instead, it is made in relationships with others in the unfolding of my narrative and own identity. When I attest and commit to being who I claim to be, this involves *you*, my interlocutor in receiving, believing and holding me responsible for my account. "If another were not counting on me, would I be able of keeping my word, of maintaining myself?"²⁹

Our identities are, to use a term employed a philosopher discussed in the next section, *performative*. In my narratives, I enact who I am—these are not mere words I am saying, I *live through* them. This performance, like any performance (even if in an empty room), is directed at another, and changes permeably to the others' (possibly imagined) reaction and input. It is a work in the making that is made with (and for) others. So, the truth of narrative identity—or what we can speak of what is being true of someone—is also made in that dance, that continuous emergence which takes place with and alongside others.

Pol Vandavelde, in an article titled "Two French Variations on Truth. Ricœur's Attestation and Foucault's Parrhesiastic Attitude," writes that, for Ricœur, truth is a performance, it is a situated event.³⁰ Truth is made in the commitment we make when we attest to the veracity of our account, when we commit that we are who we are presenting. Attestation—as the conception of

²⁷ Marc-Antoine Vallée, "Quelle sorte d'être est le soi ?," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 1 (2010), 39.

²⁸ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 329.

²⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 341.

³⁰ Pol Vandavelde, "Two French Variations on Truth. Ricœur's Attestation and Foucault's 'Parrhesiastic' attitude," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 46/1 (2015), 34.

truth in narrative identity—involves the commitment of the one who attests, and *this is what makes the account true*. In the same sense that narration constitutes selfhood, attestation makes an account true through a commitment to its veracity. “What is remarkable in attestation is that it is not a supplementary fact to the narrative given, but the making itself,” writes Vandeveldel.³¹ Our identity is not only performative, its truth is performative as well: it occurs in the event, with others. Of course, attesting to something being true doesn’t simply make it so. My commitment to the identity I claim isn’t made only with words: commitments are repeated actions in time, consistently, like the constancy of friendship, as Ricœur writes.³² This is the character of *event* to the notion truth; the truth or falsity of the narrative is implicated in the event or performance that is the constitutive, acted or performed narration that involves others. The multitude of interpretations, some conflicting with each other, speak to the nature of the event.³³

Todd Mei has also described Ricœur’s conception of truth as “interrelational.”³⁴ To say something is true in the broad sense—not just in terms of personal identity—is a social act with practical motivations and repercussions: “Truth is in some sense an event of the relation with others.”³⁵ Mei further proposes that there is an ethical character to this notion of truth: it is founded on human fragility,³⁶ on the perennial uncertainty of our (self-)knowledge and the inextricability of our being in relation with others. If there is a difference between knowledge and understanding,³⁷ each concept has a correlate conception of what truth is possible: the first aims at certainty, while the latter engages in a continuous, endless endeavor that is situated, historical, and made with others.

In this section, I explored the relational and performative character of narrative identity. One *is* in that exercise because identity occurs in the performance *with others*; it does not exist in any final and predetermined way before it emerges in the performance. According to Kathleen Wallace, identity is a “process,”³⁸ the kind of thing that doesn’t exist outside its being in action, its exercise. At the same time, we do not create our personal identities freely and wholly from our unfettered imaginations, but they are instead a continuously revised combination of external influences, which we mix, and distill, and edit. We constitute our identity through variations of what we learn are possible ways of being a self. Writing on the fragility of the moral self, Hille Haker reminds us that “self-constitution is a public, heteronomous process that occurs before any self-definition or self-identity emerges.”³⁹

³¹ Vandeveldel, “Two French Variations on Truth,” 39.

³² Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 123.

³³ Purcell, “Hermeneutics and Truth,” 151.

³⁴ Todd Mei, “Constructing Ricœur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” in Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée (eds), *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricœur. Between Text and Phenomenon* (New York: Springer, 2016), 199.

³⁵ Mei, “Constructing Ricœur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” 213.

³⁶ Mei, “Constructing Ricœur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” 199.

³⁷ Mei, “Constructing Ricœur’s Hermeneutical Theory of Truth,” 206.

³⁸ Kathleen Wallace, “A Theory of the Relational Self. The Cumulative Network Model,” *Humana.Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 19 (2019), 202.

³⁹ Hille Haker, “The Fragility of the Moral Self,” *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 97/4 (2004), 359.

The question is whether this conception of identity as relational and performative, which on the one hand allows us to have a more dynamic and open conception of identity, does not bring with it dangers regarding others' intrusions in our identity. As Dürrenmatt's novella alerts us, we can be susceptible to how others construe our accounts and narratives. If who we are is malleable, then our identities are also, by the very virtue of being open, vulnerable.

IV. An Ethics for Truth of Self

This penultimate section works towards an answer, but not the answer we initially looked for, perhaps not even the one we wanted. The path to this answer is detoured: it does not tell us how we can find the truth about ourselves or other selves, but rather it tells us what we should do from the standpoint of knowing that the truth of a self is something we can never know with any degree of certainty.

Judith Butler assumes our opacity to ourselves as a starting point to an ethics based on the limits of self-understanding, of humans' general limitations to knowledge. Although Butler and Ricœur have different background supports for their theories and different aims, I believe there is a shared project of an ethical conception of truth between them.

If who we are is *relational*, always with another, then the self is always opaque and never transparently and fully accessible to itself. Butler, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, makes this point clearly when she reminds us that our story is interwoven because it emerges with and from the stories of others who were already here when we arrived: our story has a beginning we cannot account for firsthand. Our story is never completely illuminated nor fully accounted for, so neither can we be. There are parts of our existence that determine who we are, such as how we were treated as infants, but to which we have no access, except through the accounts of others. We form ourselves as subjects in complete vulnerability, writes Butler, "at the mercy of one another."⁴⁰ In addition, one's stories are made from stories and language that already existed, since we make use of preexisting concepts and rules of narrative to give an account of ourselves.

The "I" can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge.⁴¹

For Butler, this is not a limitation, but rather marks the possibility for "an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves."⁴² Butler is defending the claim that our opacity to ourselves does not imply that we cannot assume responsibility for ourselves—since that would imply responsibility is only possible with self-transparency—but that it instead allows for the founding of a new ethics (and so, of a new responsibility). This ethics is based on the

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 101.

⁴¹ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 37.

⁴² Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 41.

impossibility of us ever having absolute and final knowledge about who we are since, as Butler maintains, this is a condition we all share insofar as we are all human.

Indeed, to take responsibility for oneself is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community.⁴³

The ethics Butler proposes includes refusing to ask for a final or completed answer about who someone is and instead allowing those answers to remain open, to allow the other to “live” —that is, to recognize that each of us is more than we are ever capable of saying at one time and that what we say about ourselves today can be different from what we say tomorrow.⁴⁴ Rather than committing the “violence” of asking someone to offer a unified account of themselves, we should not expect them to be able to contain and delimit themselves into a finite narrative form, since that would be to ask them to act as if they knew exactly who they are. Butler suggests we do better to allow ourselves and others the limitations of our knowing: to understand that we are always missing parts and in the process of forming ourselves.

Ricœur also mentions the notion of “ethical violence” and does so precisely in relation to truth. He writes: “the unification of the true is at once the wish of reason and a first violence, a fault.”⁴⁵ Ricœur’s notion of truth agrees with Butler’s in this way: namely, that we should not force any *one* truth as an interpretation of someone (or their lives, or of a text).⁴⁶ Both Ricœur and Butler seem to agree that the truth about actions and people is ethical in this sense: it requires that we leave it open, that we allow it to unfold and change.

Judith Butler famously proposed that gender is performative: the categories of gender, she says, are learned and repeated in gestures and actions, simultaneously sedimenting them in the social world and modifying them. In being relational—open to and made with others—our identity in general can be performative in the same way: it is an enactment and repetition of previously carved molds of possibilities of being, performed with variations arising from creativity and critical assessments, birthed from our relations with others. Who we are surrounded by and the interactions we have will certainly impact who we will be (at each time). There is no “substantial core” to our identity; rather, it is made and remade in our actions and accounts, sedimented through our habits and our commitment. The latter is not just a promise—saying “I will”—but its keeping: my commitment to being an honest person is made in conducting myself honestly, in performing honest actions, and abstaining from lying or duplicity.

Marjolaine Deschênes, in her comparison of Ricœur with Butler, claims that Butler loses on *any* possible identity by denying there is a substantial character to identity and that it is all

⁴³ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 83.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 43.

⁴⁵ Ricœur, “Truth and Falsehood,” 165.

⁴⁶ In “The Model of the Text,” Ricœur writes: “Neither in literary criticism, nor in the social sciences, is there such a last word. Or if there is any, we call that violence” (209-10).

performance.⁴⁷ This assessment, however, may still be too tied to an idea that for something to *be* must be static or somehow defined. There are other ways of conceiving identity than as substantial entity, though this is a difficult tradition to shed (as this very text testifies to!). Still, we can conceive our identities as being in becoming, a mutable identity that is continuously achieved in its performance—like a piece of music, or a melody.⁴⁸

A number of other authors have been writing about identity as relational (Somers,⁴⁹ Haker,⁵⁰ and Wallace,⁵¹ for example). They agree that the self is constituted through networks of changing relations; the model of an atomistic self is no longer plausible as we understand how intricately enmeshed we are in our relations with others, in our social and cultural context, as well as determined by the social institutions and norms that govern our living together (and which also exercise conventions, language and concepts which have a capacity to form our selves). Our identities are open: we form ourselves within our relationships with others, in a continuing process; we affect and are affected in our identities as we narrate them, and in that narration enact them, or perform them, for others in ways which constitute us.

Conceiving of identity and truth in this way is not only intrinsically ethical: it calls for an ethics. The truth of self occurs in relation—not only insofar as the truth about myself is something I tell (and care about) in relation to others—but in the stronger sense that who I am is open and co-constituted in relation. There are ways to live with and in relation to others that allow the truth of oneself to be: we recognize it as a work in progress, for instance, we encourage and question constructively, we dialogue and try to understand. The alternative—to be decided upon, categorized, or condemned—impedes growth not just for the one providing an account, but also for the one who receives it. The truth-event of an identity occurs in a genuine relationship between selves - that is, a relationship that allow each of them to *be* selves, occurring and forming in relation.

To *be in relation*—that our identities are formed in collaboration with one another, built with terms and language and examples we gather from our social world—means that we are more responsible even if we are less autonomous. Like webbed roots, we are entangled: our identities are imbued with concepts and stories we absorb, and they grow from dynamics of interrelation. Simultaneously, we affect and influence others' identities in every interaction and with the

⁴⁷ Marjolaine Deschênes, "Ricoeur et Butler. Lumières sur le débat sexe/genre à travers le prisme de l'identité narrative," *Études ricœuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 1 (2013), 123.

⁴⁸ Jan Patočka's conception of "ontological movement"—based on Aristotle's movement but radicalized to remove the substrate—and his thinking of human existence as this "movement" could be useful to articulate an idea of identity without substantial substrate. The analogy of existence and a melody is his: "Le mouvement de cette espèce fait penser au mouvement d'une mélodie ou, plus généralement, d'une composition musicale : chaque élément n'est qu'une partie de quelque chose qui l'excède, qui n'est pas là d'emblée sous une figure achevée, quelque chose plutôt qui, préparé dans toutes singularités, demeure toujours, en un certain sens, à venir, aussi longtemps que la composition se fait entendre" (Patočka, *Papiers phénoménologiques*, trans. Erika Abrams (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1995)).

⁴⁹ Margaret Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity. A Relational and Network Approach," *Theory and Society*, vol. 23 (1994), 605-49.

⁵⁰ Haker, "The Fragility of the Moral Self."

⁵¹ Wallace, "A Theory of the Relational Self."

language we use. We may never know with any certainty who we are—because we are never anyone firmly defined, and our stories emerge from a fog of memories and others’ own accounts—but we are capable of recognizing each other precisely as a work in process, and in doing so, allow the other to be. Our identities are fragile and in the making; the truth we can say about anyone is always in question and development.

This article’s question about the possibility of being burdened by false narratives, or of having our identity usurped, can only receive an ethical answer: the nature of our identity and the novel conception of truth it brings—both of them open, performative, and relational—ask that in our personal and social relationships, we engage with care and receptivity in our shared condition of fragility. There is no final or determined identity; there are only dynamics of relations, and these can be more or less in tune, more or less available to the work being done in them. Others may put us at risk and contest our identity, but they are also the condition of possibility for our continuous emergence as “I”s: they give us the words and receive our exercises of self.

Speaking of acknowledging others in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Stanley Cavell says that we must forego wanting to know in order to attain a different kind of knowledge.⁵² We must give up our attachment to knowledge as certainty and of truth as reference in order to understand what it means to “truly” know someone (including ourselves). To acknowledge or recognize someone is not to make an epistemic discovery, to know “things” about them; it is a becoming familiar in the same way we become familiar with a city or a piece of music—it unfolds in comfort and with some surprises, sometimes strangeness and recoiling, revealing themselves and becoming a part of us at the same time, opening the experience of belonging in familiarity. But doing this requires a certain availability, some *trust*, which is only possible in this new attitude of not wanting to *know* as certainty yet still wanting to know in another way, perhaps as intimacy: “For the point of foregoing knowledge is, of course, to know.”⁵³

V. Conclusion

In each of their own distinct projects, Ricoeur and Butler have in common an understanding of the self that has the Other inextricably connected, at its genesis and continuous constitution. They both understand that our self-understanding is built on human fragility and one’s opacity to oneself; that our self-knowledge indicates the limits of our knowing. While their paths also diverge in important ways—Butler, for instance, defends that there are important and constituting parts of ourselves that lie outside of narrativity (in the realms of the unconscious, for example)—, I wanted to take their shared orientation for an ethical truth as the answer that is possible to the question of what is the truth of the self.

The answer that is possible is not one where we are told who is right about who we are, or how we can know who we truly are. It’s an answer that takes for granted our vulnerability and our susceptibility to violence about who we are that begins even before we are born; an answer that recognizes we cannot choose the words and categories we use to describe ourselves, and that we

⁵² Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love. A Reading of King Lear,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 325.

⁵³ Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love.”

can always be wrong about who we are; that we can be victims of manipulation and power schemes over our identity just as we can be agents—deliberately or unintentionally—of distortions and influences to others' identities. But this is our human condition; to deny it would be to deny all the other aspects of being human that come from vulnerability and primordial relationally. It would be to deny a human life.

This mode of relationally, definitionally blind, makes us vulnerable to betrayal and error. We could wish ourselves to be wholly perspicacious beings. But that would be to disavow infancy, dependency, relationality, primary impressionability; it would be the wish to eradicate all the active and structuring traces of our psychological formation and to dwell in the pretense of being fully knowing, self-possessed adults. Indeed, we would be the kind of beings who, by definition, could not be in love, blind and blinded, vulnerable to devastation, subject to enthrallment.⁵⁴

A truth of the self—of our own self, or of another—will always be fragile: it will be in continuous formation and always in questioning, and in this questioning it will be open and dependent on others. It will also always have holes, and dark spaces; we will be able to shine a light sometimes somewhere, but not always and everywhere. More importantly, who we are lives through and from our relations to others: I couldn't have emerged without others, or told a story about myself without an interlocutor and all the previously existing structures of community, but I also can't keep discovering who I am unless I am living alongside others, who show me and lead me to question, and because of whom I care.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 102.

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