

## A Pedagogy of Responsibility

Autonomy, Vulnerability, and the Future of the Humanities

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### Abstract

The following article reconstructs the philosophy of education implicit in Paul Ricœur's late writings — above all, his “Autonomy and Vulnerability” — to address the current crisis in the humanities. In keeping with Kant and the *Bildung* tradition, Ricœur reminds us that education aims, above all, at self-formation. In particular, a “pedagogy of responsibility” serves as a bridge between vulnerability and “autonomy”: shorthand in Ricœur's thought for character, intellectual independence, and moral maturity. Unlike orthodox Kantians, however, Ricœur highlights the indispensable role symbolic representation plays in the cultivation of autonomy, mutual recognition, and three related modes of identity: narrative identity, personal identity, and moral identity. Moreover, we learn this art of identity-formation from sustained study in the humanities (literature, philosophy, history, etc.).

*Keywords: Education; Identity; Ethics; Vulnerability; Autonomy*

### Résumé

Le présent article reconstruit la philosophie de l'éducation implicite dans les derniers écrits de Paul Ricœur — en particulier, « Autonomie et vulnérabilité » — pour répondre à la crise des sciences humaines. À la suite de Kant et de la tradition de *Bildung*, Ricœur pense que l'éducation vise avant toute chose la formation de soi. Une « pédagogie de la responsabilité » doit établir un lien entre vulnérabilité et « autonomie » — c'est-à-dire entre caractère, indépendance intellectuelle et maturité morale. Contrairement aux kantien, Ricœur souligne le rôle central de la représentation symbolique dans la constitution de l'autonomie, dans la reconnaissance mutuelle, et de l'identité narrative, personnelle, et morale. C'est enfin à travers une étude approfondie des sciences humaines que nous apprenons cet art de la formation de l'identité (ou *Bildung*).

*Mots-clés : éducation ; identité ; éthique ; vulnérabilité ; autonomie*

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# A Pedagogy of Responsibility

## Autonomy, Vulnerability, and the Future of the Humanities

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What role, if any, should the humanities play in higher education today? The percentage of undergraduates in the US with a major in the humanities has plummeted over the last twenty years, by a full third on average, in some places by almost half.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, complaints that the humanities are “in crisis” have become commonplace.<sup>2</sup> One book warns of a “worldwide crisis in education”: the humanities are undervalued and underfunded due to a preference for more profitable fields.<sup>3</sup> Another argues that the humanities are in “permanent crisis,” tasked, implicitly at least, with using the modern university’s tools of disenchantment (value-free explanation) to overcome that disenchantment (by giving our lives value and meaning).<sup>4</sup> Making matters worse, even would-be defenders doubt the value of *sustained* study in the humanities: a 2011 National Humanities Medalist recently admitted he will not encourage students to major in the humanities, unless maybe they plan to pursue a PhD in the subject.<sup>5</sup>

Should we share those doubts? Or are there still good reasons to take a degree in the humanities? To tackle those questions, I turn to the work of Paul Ricœur (1913-2005), and, in particular, his late-life lecture, “Autonomy and Vulnerability.” There, we find Ricœur’s view that education aims, above all, at character formation, even moral formation, a view that aligns him with the *Bildung* tradition of early modern Europe and Immanuel Kant. As I come to argue, it takes a collective effort —and a “pedagogy of responsibility” — to cultivate “autonomy,” Ricœur’s shorthand for the character, independence, and moral maturity that are the aims of a good education.<sup>6</sup> Simply put, education is a normative enterprise; it aims —or *should* aim— at making us the “intelligible and acceptable” selves we *ought* to be.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Heller, “The End of the English Major,” *The New Yorker* (February 27, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> There is no consensus on the meaning or scope of “the humanities.” Here, the term will mainly denote the *core* humanities (literature, philosophy, history) but also the *composite* fields that combine them (classics, religion, art history). For the list of fields funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities, see online: [neh.gov](http://neh.gov).

<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, *Permanent Crisis. The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Delbanco, interview with Michel Martin, “Are the Humanities in Crisis?,” *Amanpour and Company* (March 8, 2023), online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbXEV5JXhBM>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 75.

The cultivation of such a self takes skills: notably, symbolic representation, moral justification, and historical critique. More to my point, the realization of the self requires skills often, if not only, developed by sustained study of the humanities. My argument unfolds in four steps. First, I begin with Ricœur's view of autonomy and its improvements over its better-known Kantian counterpart. Second, I draw out Ricœur's take on education, especially as a bridge between vulnerability and autonomy. Third, I highlight the role of symbolic representation and the humanities in cultivating autonomy and three related modes of identity: narrative, personal, and moral identity. Fourth and finally, I conclude with three student stories that clarify the practical value of the humanities —and the identities they foster— in our day-to-day struggle for recognition.

## I. Autonomy and Anthropology: Revising a Kantian Classic

Initially delivered at Paris' *Institut des hautes études sur la justice* (IHEJ) in 1995, "Autonomy and Vulnerability" is, first and foremost, a piece of moral and legal philosophy: a reminder to the judges in Ricœur's original audience of the complications that come with the "imputation" of responsibility to anyone, but especially the accused. It is, nevertheless, also a work in the philosophy of education, one of the few Ricœur wrote, apart from his calls for university reform in the 1960s. Ricœur's address returns again and again to talk of pedagogy, autonomy, and Kant. Granted, any essay with autonomy in the title might bring Kant to mind. After all, autonomy is, by Kant's own estimation, Kant's great contribution to history: "If we look back upon all previous efforts that have ever been made to discover the principle of morality, we need not wonder now why all of them had to fail [...] it never occurred to them that [the human being] is subject *only to laws given by himself but still universal*."<sup>8</sup> Ricœur, however, makes more than a passing reference to Kant.

Ricœur's remarks begin with the so-called "paradox of autonomy." Autonomy has multiple meanings: 1) our inherent capacity for self-determination, the "condition of possibility" for our moral accountability, analyzed in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*; and 2) the actual exercise of that capacity through the "task [*tâche*]" of thinking and acting for ourselves, endorsed by Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" (albeit without ever using the word "autonomie").<sup>9</sup> By emphasizing the "task" of self-realization, Ricœur aligns himself not only with Kant but also with other advocates of *Bildung* ("formation"), from Humbolt and Herder to Hegel. Ricœur's word-choice even anticipates the opening of a recent book on *Bildung*: "Once upon a time we awoke to find humanity a *task*."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, Ricœur's ideas echo the opening of Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy*: "The human being is the only creature that must be educated. By education we mean

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<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82 (4:432).

<sup>9</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer A. Herdt, *Forming Humanity. Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), 1.

specifically care (maintenance, support), discipline (training), and instruction, together with formation [*Bildung*].”<sup>11</sup>

Given its origins at IHEJ, it is not surprising that Ricœur’s address focuses on the role “judicial practice” plays in bridging the two sides of that paradox, in advancing the accused from “capacity to actualization.”<sup>12</sup> By holding them accountable, judges attest to the capacity of accused individuals to make choices about their actions. More to my point, Ricœur acknowledges that this “attestation,” this “appeal to responsibility and autonomy,” plays a crucial role in the valuable work not only of judges but also of teachers; it is the “place of all pedagogy, all education, be it moral, juridical, or political.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, we become who we ought to be through the efforts of ourselves and others—in particular, those who “encourage, accompany, [and] assist [us] by having confidence in us,” especially in our capacities related to responsibility.<sup>14</sup> More precisely, the realization of our moral character—or “autonomy”—requires “interpersonal and institutional” mediation.<sup>15</sup> Individuals and the institutions where they play out their roles—court, home, church, school—shape us. Educators play a special role on the road to responsibility. The “teacher-disciple relation is the *one* external relation that does not imply either a pact of servitude or one of domination;” teachers exercise their authority by giving it up, empowering students to become autonomous.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his affinities with Kant, Ricœur emphasizes aspects of autonomy that are underappreciated, even ignored, by most Kantians, if not by Kant himself. In effect, Ricœur exercises his own autonomy about autonomy, thinking independently about thinking independently. Each divergence from “orthodox Kantianism” provides the focus for a separate section below: first, the human *vulnerability* that always accompanies autonomy; second, the role of *symbolic representation* in autonomy; third and finally, the importance of *mutual recognition* to autonomy and identity.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Autonomy and Vulnerability: Rethinking the Aims of Education

One main difference between Kantian autonomy and its Ricœurian revision is Ricœur’s emphasis on vulnerability. Autonomy has become synonymous with strength and self-mastery.<sup>18</sup> As a result, critics often denounce Kant’s supposed arrogance and denial of our dependence on

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Pedagogy*, in *Anthropology, History, and Education. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 37 (9:441).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ricœur, *The Just*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 84.

<sup>17</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Guyer, “Progress toward Autonomy,” in Oliver Sensen (ed.), *Kant on Moral Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76.

others.<sup>19</sup> To be fair, Kant knew we were weak. In the words of his *Lectures on Ethics*, “ethics can [...] be rigorous and demand the highest moral perfection” or “ethics can propound laws of morality that are lenient and adjusted to the weakness of human nature.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, because he separates his “impure ethics” from his better-known pure metaphysics of morals, many assume Kant denied our vulnerability.<sup>21</sup>

Ricœur steers clear of a similar misreading by binding autonomy to vulnerability within the same work, starting with the title itself. Ricœur highlights the obstacles to the character formation at the heart of education and *Bildung*. We are vulnerable because of the many threats to the development and deployment of our central capacities: 1) to speak (to think and communicate, with or without the spoken word); 2) to act (to imagine and pursue projects, big and small); 3) to narrate (to weave together past and present into a coherent story); and 4) to impute (to attribute actions and accountability to an agent, whether oneself or another).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, because these capacities are crucial to our fully formed human identities, curbing them also curbs the cultivation of our character.

Education, however, helps us address, if not entirely overcome, our ever-present vulnerabilities. Education is, in effect, a bridge between vulnerability and autonomy, our potential and our self-realization. It serves as a vivid reminder that we live in between imperfection and improvement: we would have little incentive to learn, if improvement were either impossible or inevitable. Put differently, education, whether formal or informal, transforms our “capacities” (inborn potentials) into “capabilities” (developed and deployable powers). Through our own efforts and the efforts of others, we can and should confront the impediments to the enhancement and exercise of our fundamental powers, the capacities catalogued by Ricœur’s philosophical anthropology, his “phenomenology of the *I can*.”<sup>23</sup>

While we are all vulnerable, some of us are more vulnerable than others—notably, accused and incarcerated individuals. While our capacities are “universal,” part and parcel of being human, our vulnerabilities are distinct, “historical” and “cultural” products of particular social contexts.<sup>24</sup> Identifying our capacities requires a phenomenological approach, an “eidetic description” of the human being; identifying our vulnerabilities, in contrast, requires a sociological investigation.<sup>25</sup> If so, then we need, not a one-size-fits-all education for autonomy, but, instead, a pedagogy tailored to the peculiar challenges facing particular people in their fight for autonomy and responsibility.

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<sup>19</sup> Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 346.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 91 (27:301).

<sup>21</sup> Robert B. Loudon, *Kant’s Impure Ethics. From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 17, 86.

In truth, although autonomy is my main focus here, other capacities also call for attention. If education aims at the formation of the whole person, then each power matters. Furthermore, if autonomy is the culmination of our capacities —“It is here that the notion of a capable subject reaches its highest significance” — then the capacities that set the stage for autonomy’s entrance also matter.<sup>26</sup> So what are these vulnerabilities —these incapacities, even sufferings— that education aims to address? And how might education address them?

*Speaking.* First, we may lack the power to speak, to think and communicate for ourselves. As a result, someone else may speak for us or about us, often badly. In particular, the accused may lack the ability to speak successfully for themselves in court. They may lack the technical language of the law due to a lack of legal education or the financial resources needed for representation.<sup>27</sup> They may, in fact, lack any language at all due to disabilities, or else the national language due to immigrating from elsewhere. They may even lack a credible language; even though they speak well, they may be disbelieved due to prejudice or what Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice” (the unjust treatment of someone as a thinker and communicator).<sup>28</sup>

What is the role of education in addressing these vulnerabilities? To overcome this silence, we might begin by teaching would-be speakers the vocabulary, skills, even confidence needed to speak effectively. But the onus of this work falls on more than the silenced speaker. We can and should also teach would-be hearers (e.g., judges) the vocabulary, skills, and humility needed to listen to others and to understand them, especially the unduly doubted.

*Acting.* Second, we may also lack the power to act: to imagine and pursue our own projects. As a result, someone may act for us or even towards us, again often badly. In particular, the accused may lack the skills and characteristics sought out by employers. They may, therefore, find themselves in an unenviable position, in which criminal activity may seem like a good option for fulfilling basic needs. They may also find themselves suffering from “intimidation” and “manipulation” by others —perhaps even pressured into criminal activity.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, what is the role of education in response to these dangers? To overcome these particular vulnerabilities, we might begin by teaching would-be actors. Our “fragilities in the order of action are directly connected to a pedagogy of responsibility,” one that cultivates the social and vocational skills that allow the individual to act.<sup>30</sup> But, once again, the onus also falls on others: would-be employers and court officials, for instance, who must make fair judgments about others and their actions. Simply put, a pedagogy of responsibility is an education for all: for the actor and for the judge (or employer) of that actor’s abilities.

*Narrating.* Third, we may lack the power to narrate: to combine speech and action into a coherent identity, especially our own identity. As a result, someone may tell harmful stories about us. In particular, the accused may lack the ability to pass “the test of time,” weaving together an

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<sup>26</sup> Ricœur, *The Just*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 77.

identity across conflicting occasions: for instance, before, during, and after the alleged crime. Consequently, “jurists run the [...] risk of having to deal with individuals who are incapable of constructing a narrative identity.”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, given their confinement, both behind bars and beneath prejudices, accused and incarcerated individuals may be especially vulnerable to dehumanizing stories.

As a result, we need “an education for narrative coherence, an education leading to a narrative identity,” Ricœur says.<sup>32</sup> With it, we can construct a complex but comprehensible character, one that is neither “immutable” nor “incoherent.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, we can construct a complex *ipse*-identity (from the Latin for “self”), in lieu of an unchanging *idem*-identity (from the Latin for “same”). Such an education can and should, once again, be cultivated on all sides: in both “judge” and “judged.” We may have to do more than acknowledge another’s complexity and narrative identity; we may have to complete, even co-create one another’s stories.

*Imputing.* Fourth, we may lack the power to impute: to hold agents — others but especially ourselves— morally accountable for actions. As a result, others may attribute bad intentions and interpretations to us. Accused and incarcerated individuals may lack a framework that makes sense of conflicting considerations: “On the one hand, I did the crime; on the other, I was more likely than my wealthier counterpart to be caught and convicted.” Or: “I committed the act of violence, but I just haven’t been myself since I came back from the war.”

Once again, we need education on all sides. How should the accused understand and assess their moral accountability? And how should the judge, whose job it is to impute, decide whether to hold the accused accountable? How, for that matter, should any of us manage: 1) the epistemics of what actually happened; 2) the hermeneutics of how to describe it; and 3) the ethics of whether and how to attribute it to the accused. Ricœur says we must “interpret the case, principally through the use of narrative, in order to be able to give a ruling regarding the fit between the description of the case and the angle from which the law is interpreted.”<sup>34</sup> If so, the art of imputation requires education in all four capacities. Why, though, is autonomy so special?

### III. Human Identity and the Humanities: The Symbol Gives Rise to the Self

Another difference between Kantian and Ricœurian views of autonomy is Ricœur’s emphasis on autonomy’s symbolic side. To be sure, Ricœur’s interest in symbols is no surprise given his well-known work on: myth (1960’s *The Symbolism of Evil*), self-interpretation (1965’s *Freud and Philosophy*), linguistics (1975’s *The Rule of Metaphor*), hermeneutics (1976’s *Interpretation Theory*), and narrative (1983’s *Time and Narrative*). What is surprising, however, is that Ricœur brings his interest in signs and symbols to an analysis of autonomy.

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<sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>32</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Ricœur, “Life. A Story in Search of a Narrator,” in Mario J. Valdés (ed.), *A Ricœur Reader. Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 437.

<sup>34</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 219.

Kantian autonomy connotes an internal power, namely to obey the moral law, which is also, in some sense, internal, as we see in the second *Critique's* conclusion about “the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”<sup>35</sup> As the etymology of autonomy (self+rule) suggests, we give ourselves the law, by using the internal reflection of reason to discern our duties. Due, perhaps, to this “inner” quality, Kantians rarely dig into the symbolic side of autonomy, an oversight Ricœur himself underscores: “A symbolic order is something that has to be shared. Here we touch on a feature that distances us from orthodox Kantianism inasmuch as this gives a monological version of the connection between the self and the norm within the core of the idea of autonomy.”<sup>36</sup>

To be fair, Kant has plenty to say about representation and morality. Notably, he describes the will as “a capacity to determine itself by acting in conformity with the *representation* [Vorstellung] of certain laws.”<sup>37</sup> Even so, Ricœur denounces Kant’s “monological” approach to autonomy, in contrast to his own “dialogical” approach, one that draws on the multiple meanings of the various symbols humans use to indicate, both explicitly and implicitly, how we ought to live.<sup>38</sup>

More specifically, Ricœur’s address uses autonomy as a shorthand for what he calls our “entry into a symbolic order,” or “inscribing oneself” into a “symbolic universe.”<sup>39</sup> Autonomy is symbolic for two reasons: because the self and the law that combine in autonomy are *both* symbolic. The *autos* (“self”) is a narrative construction, the *nomos* (“rule”) a symbolic one, recorded in writing and communicated in constitutions, contracts, and law-codes. Insofar as self-legislation involves a narrative *self* and shared *legislation*, autonomy also involves symbols.

To be clear, symbols of all sorts inform and inspire us to live well, telling us both what kind of life to pursue (what Ricœur calls “ethics”) and which obligations to fulfill (what Ricœur calls “morality”).<sup>40</sup> We are surrounded by symbols, as Ricœur reminds us: “I have chosen the adjective ‘symbolic’ because of its capacity to encompass within a single emblematic notion the different ways in which language can give figure to obligation.” Obligation takes the form, Ricœur says, of everything from “imperative” and “injunction” to “shared customs, founding narratives, the edifying lives of heroes of the moral life” and even “the praise of moral sentiments, including — beside [Kantian] respect— admiration, veneration, guilt, shame, pity, solicitude, compassion, and so on.”<sup>41</sup> What role, though, do these symbols —and the humanities that teach us how to handle them— play in paving the way to our better selves? What role do they play in crafting the three modes of human identity that constitute the autonomous self: 1) the narrative identity of attaining

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<sup>35</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. and trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 269 (CPrR 5:161).

<sup>36</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 78 (4:427).

<sup>38</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 87, 88-9.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 170.

<sup>41</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 84.



and maintaining one's character; 2) the personal identity of thinking for yourself; and 3) the moral identity of living responsibly?

*Narrative Identity.* First, Ricœur's understanding of autonomy requires a coherent, intelligible self, one marked by a so-called "narrative identity." Autonomy depends, after all, on a unified sense of self, one who can be *self*-determining: "The handling of one's own life, as a possibly coherent narrative, represents a high-level competence that has to be taken as one of the major components of the autonomy of a subject of rights."<sup>42</sup> More to my point here, the narrative identity or character that accompanies autonomy is a crucial goal of a good education.

Faced with the constant threat of fragmentation, we can and should learn to weave together a story that acknowledges yet manages our incoherence. We are fragmented both "diachronically" (due to our different characteristics at different moments: past, present, future) and "synchronically" (due to our different dimensions at one moment: thoughts, feelings, needs). We have to hold together the many aspects of ourselves: past acts and experiences, social identities (race, class, gender), roles and relationships, and idiosyncratic personalities.

Consequently, we are always teetering on the edge of incoherence. Although it raises questions both metaphysical and epistemological, identity is ultimately a practical matter; it allows us to be responsible for our past faults and our future promises, as well as the long-term projects that make up the ethical life of "aiming at a good life with and for others, in just institutions."<sup>43</sup> Education aids us in our perpetual fight against fragmentation and fragility.

Simply put, narrative identity is a crucial part of a good life. The integrity yet complexity of a narrative self is a pre-requisite for autonomy. Consequently, we have to ask what insights, skills, and dispositions are needed for such a self, for an "education leading to narrative identity"?<sup>44</sup> For starters, we need the insight that our lives are fragmentary, full of twists and turns, yet capable of consistency and character. But it is not enough to trust that our fragments *can* become "an intelligible and acceptable narrative."<sup>45</sup> We need the skills and dispositions to make them so: both the know-how and the drive to create coherent life-stories, for others and ourselves, for individuals as well as collectives. More accurately, because narrative identity entails both retrospective and prospective storytelling —making what we have done into a narrative and deciding what we will do in our next chapter— we need the skills to be both the *authors* of and the *actors* in our stories.

Where, though, can we learn this art? Many, of course, learn the art of narration from narratives, from reading. But we also, and more intentionally, cultivate narrative capability from writing, and analyzing others' writings. The examination of fictional narratives seems especially helpful. After all, if we can create intelligible selves out of nothing, out of mere squiggle marks on a page, then, perhaps, we can learn to turn our own actual lives into similar selves, whether through

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<sup>42</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 172.

<sup>44</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 75.

the study of English, Arabic, Classics, or creative writing. We might, in fact, learn it from any discipline dedicated to the art of “emplotment”: history, biblical studies, ethnography, etc.<sup>46</sup>

Admittedly, we cannot all major in the humanities or the art of emplotment. In fact, many will not major in anything, neither attending nor graduating from university. If Ricœur is right, though, if we do need the ability to construct compelling stories from our fragments — and if some of us need that ability more than others (e.g., the accused or incarcerated individual) — then we need a society with a sufficient number of souls who have learned it well, whether in university or elsewhere. They serve as co-authors, helping us make sense of ourselves. A creative writing major helps his sister make sense of their father’s puzzling shift from warm and loving in their early days to aloof, even cruel after their mom died. A high school English teacher helps her former student make sense of her conflicted feelings about her sexual identity. And a history major on the local school board helps others see how a new name for the high school honors the town’s past without honoring the slave-owning founder for whom the school is currently named.

*Personal Identity.* Second, Ricœur’s autonomy requires a distinct, independent self, one marked by a so-called “personal identity.” Autonomy is, after all, a way of describing our independence from others: “Here [with personal identity] we assuredly have a major implication of the idea of autonomy: dare to think *for yourself*.”<sup>47</sup> More to my point, the personal identity or intellectual independence, sometimes known as autonomy, is a crucial goal of a good education.

Faced with the constant threat not only of fragmentation but also of domination, we can and should learn to weave together a story that distinguishes us from others. Although “personal identity” is often synonymous with “narrative identity,” here the two address different challenges. While narrative identity confronts the “test of time,” seeking to hold the self together, personal identity confronts the “test of alterity,” seeking to hold the self apart — from others, from domination and oppression.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, personal identity is another aspect of autonomy, if not a synonym for it.

Like time, alterity both undergirds and undermines identity. Without time and alterity, we could have no identity, no self that persists from past to present and that distinguishes us from others. Each also, however, poses a never-ending threat to identity. The pursuit of personal identity involves, Ricœur says, an “interminable negotiation,” between thinking for ourselves and giving in to others.<sup>49</sup> We are inextricably social, enabled and constrained by the structures around us. Even when we succeed in thinking for ourselves, we do so with the symbols we borrow from others. What, then, might it mean to have “personal identity,” to “think for yourself,” to be “autonomous”? Granted, personal identity is sometimes simply a way of saying someone is an individual, marked by a “perspective that cannot be substituted for.”<sup>50</sup> But we can be singular without thinking for ourselves. In fact, we can even be rebellious without thinking for ourselves.

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<sup>46</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 162; *Reflections on the Just*, 175.

<sup>47</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 78, 80.

<sup>49</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

Reactionaries are just as determined by authorities as are sycophants. Personal identity and thinking for oneself must, therefore, involve something else.

Because we always think with others' symbols, autonomy cannot involve something entirely unprecedented. If it did, we would be unrecognizable, to others and ourselves. The best we might manage, then, is not *novelty* but intentionality. We can affirm our beliefs and habits through what Ricœur, following Charles Taylor, calls "strong evaluations."<sup>51</sup> We do not just think or act. We also think about our thoughts and actions. We also think about which values and projects to endorse over others. Often, we give reasons for what we believe and do. In short, we signal that our thoughts —and actions— run deep, that they are integral to who we are.

We can think and act for ourselves in at least two ways. 1) *Aesthetic Identity*. The free-thinker might make creative, artistic choices, crafting a self the way an author might craft a compelling character. Although this form of personal identity resembles narrative identity (discussed above), the focus here is less on the self's coherence and more on its creativity or independence. 2) *Ethical Identity*. The free-thinker might also make principled, argumentative choices, crafting a self the way an ethicist might craft a vision of the good life. Although this form of personal identity resembles moral identity (discussed below), the focus here is less on the self-justification of "morality," and more on the rational desires or ends of "ethics."

To be sure, we learn the craft of identity formation in virtually every corner of our lives: the political, the professional, and the interpersonal. Many of us, however, learn how to construct a specifically *aesthetic identity* from a sustained study of the arts: creative writing and literature, but also the visual and performing arts. Like the squiggle mark-self conjured up by the creative writer, the abstract image or instrumental can also give us confidence in our ability to construct a self that is not only coherent, but also independent. We learn the art of *ethical identity* from fields with evaluative frameworks: philosophy, sure, but also religion, literature, and history, especially given Ricœur's remarks about the ethical power of stories and founding narratives. Once again, we cannot and need not all major in philosophy, literature, or anything else, for that matter. We find support for imagining, pursuing, and articulating our personal identities by collaborating with others, those who have acquired the art of aesthetic or ethical creation, typically through sustained study in the humanities.

*Moral Identity*. Third and finally, Ricœur's understanding of autonomy requires a justified self, one marked by a so-called "moral identity."<sup>52</sup> Autonomy also denotes our ability to govern ourselves out of respect for the moral law, rather than be governed by whims and impetuous desires. It names "our capacity to submit our action to the requirements of a symbolic order" (RJ 84). More to my point, moral identity, sometimes known as autonomy, is a crucial goal of a good education.

If narrative identity relates the self to itself (its different aspects), and if personal identity relates the self to others (its would-be dominators), then moral identity relates the self to a symbolic moral order (its norms and duties). Although absent from *Le juste 2*, Ricœur uses "moral identity" elsewhere, to capture our capacity for "entry into a symbolic order," the "existential, empirical, and

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<sup>51</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Ricœur, *The Just*, xxiii.

[...] historical condition for binding a self to a norm," what is "signified by the idea of autonomy."<sup>53</sup> Autonomy, like writing, involves "inscribing [one's] action and behavior into a symbolic order."<sup>54</sup> What, though, is this "symbolic order"? And what does it have to do with "moral identity"?

A "symbolic order," as the name suggests, has two components: 1) the symbolic: we inscribe ourselves into a moral order by means of symbols; and 2) the order: the hierarchy or authority that a set of norms has over us. The symbolic order is marked by moral norms, which are, in some sense, "before us, above us, and outside us."<sup>55</sup> They make binding and restricting claims on us. If we need narrative identity to make us whole, and personal identity to make us distinctive —and both to make us "intelligible"— then we need moral identity to make us "acceptable." We tell stories that evaluate the actions of others and ourselves. Moral identity is, for sure, not the same as a "morally praiseworthy" identity. Sometimes we inscribe ourselves in order to confess our mistakes. Even then, though, we step toward moral improvement and recognition. By admitting our wrong, we do right —both in our confession and in our dedication to be better.

Where, though, do we learn this art of "inscribing oneself in a 'we,'" into a "symbolic [moral] order"?<sup>56</sup> Once again, we learn a lot from reading, from writing, and from analyzing others' writings. We appropriate ethical visions and ideas of the good life, in particular, from stories and histories. A moral vision, however, a sense of whether our pursuits are justified all-things-considered may be harder to come by. We need not only a vision of the good life and its aims, but also the ability to evaluate, even justify those aims. We must, in particular, submit our actions to another test: not of time, or alterity, but the norm (e.g., Kant's universalizability test) to see if what we want to do, or have done, respects the interests of others.<sup>57</sup> To develop a life-story that can situate itself in relation to obligations and the many competing claims on us, we need the sustained study, and the conceptual symbols, of moral philosophy —or the help of those who have undertaken that study.

#### IV. Conclusion: Recognition and the Humanities

Finally, Ricœur's autonomy differs from its Kantian counterpart in one more way. Ricœur admits that symbols are needed not only on the side of the one attaining autonomy, but also on the side of the one acknowledging that attainment. Ricœur knows we need more than an identity attained; we also need our identity acknowledged. We need, or desperately want, to be "recognized." Symbols are what enable that acknowledgment, serving as "signs of recognition among the members of a community."<sup>58</sup> Elsewhere and in a similar vein, Ricœur writes, "the term

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<sup>53</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 86.

<sup>55</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 85.

<sup>56</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 88.

<sup>57</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 84.

‘symbol’ first places the accent on the *public* character of signifying articulation. Symbols satisfy Wittgenstein’s objection to every ostensive private definition.”<sup>59</sup>

The goal of education —which is to say the goal of self-development (or *Bildung*)— is to achieve not only character, independence, and moral maturity, but also mutual recognition. Simply put, recognition requires a narrative that makes us both intelligible and acceptable: that is, seen for who we really are and respected as fundamental equals. Granted, longing for —and even deserving— recognition does not mean we should do anything to gain it. Nevertheless, we are engaged in an ongoing “struggle for recognition,” as I now aim to show with three student stories. Each imagined student struggles for recognition in one of three domains, which Ricœur borrows from Hegel and Axel Honneth’s work on the topic: 1) family; 2) state; 3) community.<sup>60</sup>

*The Dissatisfied Doctor.* The first student, a biochemistry major, has begun to doubt her longstanding plan to become a doctor. She is now considering a switch from pre-health to philosophy, a change that gives her pause and raises tough questions about: 1) narrative identity: Who am I and what will I do if I don’t go to med school? 2) personal identity: Can I really defy my parents —med school is their dream more than mine— especially after they’ve sacrificed so much for me? and 3) moral identity: Can I justify giving up medicine for metaphysics? Don’t I have a duty to help people and make a difference as a doctor? *The Struggle for Recognition:* Thanks to recent courses on medical ethics and the capabilities approach to development, she has begun to believe that a future addressing global health inequities might give her what she wants and needs. Several helpful conversations with her philosophy professor and advisor have helped her see that this new path combines her past and present interests in ways that would help many and, at least, should earn the understanding, even admiration of her parents.

*The Incarcerated Individual.* The second student, incarcerated at the state prison, has just returned from another unsuccessful parole hearing and is wrestling with questions about: 1) narrative identity: How can I be both the brutal teenager who killed those people and the mild-mannered man I am today? 2) personal identity: If I ever get out, can I really resist the bad influences that led me here? and 3) moral identity: Do I really deserve my freedom when those I killed can’t have theirs? *The Struggle for Recognition:* Thanks to several recent courses —one on justice and mercy; another on hope and change— he has begun to accept that we can hold competing, even conflicting ideas at one and the same time: past and present identities, love for friends and family yet distance from their worst habits; being responsible for, but not reducible to, a past wrong. A memoir by the daughter of an abusive and formerly incarcerated father really stuck with him and his classmates. Now, if he could just get the governor —or, for that matter, his estranged son— to read the same memoir, and see the same possibilities, maybe he would stand a chance at starting over.

*The Trans Christian.* The third student, a double-major in creative writing and religion, a conservative Christian, has recently come out as a trans woman, leading to questions about: 1) narrative identity: How can I go home for the holidays as a woman? And how do I explain that

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Ricœur, “The Symbolic Structure of Action,” in *Philosophical Anthropology. Writings and Lectures*, vol. 3, eds Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 183.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 187.

I've been hiding what I feel and who I am for years? 2) personal identity: Will my church make me feel ashamed and uncertain, especially about my recent decision to start hormone therapy and surgery? 3) moral identity: Is it right to put me, my family, and my church in harm's way, given the rise in anti-trans violence? *The Struggle for Recognition*: Her creative writing classes have taught her how to tell her story, first to herself and then to others. But, above all, two recent religion courses —on religious conversion and queer theology— have given her the freedom to interpret the biblical narratives of her youth in new ways. Consequently, those classes have given her the confidence that she can be both trans and Christian.

## V. Coda: Identity and Fidelity

Each of those student stories helps us see the importance of education to the process of self-realization. More specifically, each highlights the role of the humanities in the cultivation of human identity. At the same time, each story underscores the often-overlooked creativity and collaboration involved in the formation and recognition of the self. Unfortunately, that focus on the constructed quality of identity could leave a reader with the wrong impression, raising a final objection and critical question: Should we be free to create whatever identities we want? No, of course not. Such a view would be both morally and epistemically irresponsible. No one should make up facts —or identities— simply to serve base interests. No politician should claim to have won an election he lost. And neither should he claim to be someone or something he is not.

In other words, it is not enough to tell a *credible* story, one that sounds believable. Our stories, whether about ourselves or others, ought to correspond with the way things really are — or, at least, cohere with whatever else we have reason to believe is true. In other words, our identities ought to be not only intelligible and acceptable, but also *faithful*. Granted, determining whether a narrative is faithful is no easy task. Given the limits of our understanding, we may never know for sure what really happened. Memories, like histories, are always incomplete and often unreliable. Furthermore, as Inês Pereira Rodrigues makes clear, given the complexities of the self, we may never know for sure who we —let alone who others— really are or were.<sup>61</sup> The self is, as Ricœur reminds us, amenable to “attestation,” not “verification.”<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, we can and should strive to get our stories —and identities— right. We ought to learn, as Ricœur writes in “Autonomy and Vulnerability,” “how to submit the narrative of a life to the historian’s critique.”<sup>63</sup> Like a good historian —or history major— we should work hard to figure out what actually happened and how best to understand it all. In his last big book, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004), Ricœur clarifies that point when he reminds us that the aspirational goal of the historian is nothing less than “truth.”<sup>64</sup> To be fair, the historian has no monopoly on the complex goal of discerning what’s true. Notably, as Ricœur explains, both the

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<sup>61</sup> Inês Pereira Rodrigues, “‘Who Do You Say that I Am?’ Truth in Narrative Identity,” *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies*, vol. 14/1 (2023), 132-50.

<sup>62</sup> Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Ricœur, *Reflections on the Just*, 80.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 314.

historian and the judge are committed to figuring out what is or was, in fact, the case. Therefore, both historians and judges —including the judges for whom Ricœur wrote “Autonomy and Vulnerability” — can be good guides for us in our efforts to make sense of ourselves and others. Although the two professions are different —the historian can postpone judgment indefinitely, while the judge must “come to a conclusion”<sup>65</sup>— “being faithful to the past” is a regulative ideal for both.<sup>66</sup> More to my point, being faithful to the past, present, and future should be a regulative ideal for each of us in our day-to-day work on identity. After all, the humanities, at their best, teach us the art of self-formation, not self-fabrication. Simply put, the uncertainties of identity do not give us —or anyone else— a license to *lie*.

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<sup>65</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 320.

<sup>66</sup> Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 21.

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