Ricœur on Conscience
His Blind Spot and the Homecoming of Shame

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Abstract

In his hermeneutic of the self, which he is working out in his *Oneself as another*, Ricœur writes about the constitutive conditions of conscience as a dimension of the experience of passivity. For the following considerations, I will argue that Ricœur is very right in maintaining the moral impact of the notion of conscience; but if we on the other hand remember older writings by Ricœur like *Fallible Man* we have to admit that something is missed in the chapter about conscience in *Oneself as Another*. And that means, that in *Oneself as Another* he neglects the affective dimension of conscience. This affective dimension is - I think - the notion of shame.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Self, Conscience, Shame

Résumé

Dans *Soi-même comme un autre* où s'élabore son herméneutique du soi, Paul Ricœur réfléchit sur les conditions constitutives de la conscience comme expérience de la passivité. Pour les considerations suivantes, je souhaiterai montrer que Ricœur a tout à fait raison de plaider pour la dimension morale de la notion de conscience. Mais, d'un autre côté,si l'on se souvient des écrits plus anciens de Ricoeur sur *l'Homme faillible*, nous sommes tenus d'admettre que, au cours du chapitre sur la conscience dans *Soi-même comme un autre,* quelque chose est perdu de vue. Nous voulons signifier que, dans ce chapitre, il néglige la dimension affective de la conscience. Cette dimension affective est, nous semble-t-il, la notion de honte.

Mots-clés: Herméneutique, Soi, Conscience, Honte

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In his hermeneutic of the self in *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur writes about the constitutive conditions of conscience as a dimension of passivity. I will argue that Ricœur is quite right there in maintaining the moral impact to the notion of conscience, but if we remember his older writings like *Fallible Man*, we have to admit that something is missed in *Oneself as Another*, specifically, the affective dimension of conscience. This affective dimension is represented by the notion of shame. To make this case, I will first make some epistemological and methodological remarks concerning the unique status of the self and the theoretical background from which Ricœur's suggestions gain their plausibility. This will be followed by a reconstruction of Ricœur's and Heidegger's conceptions of conscience through which I want to highlight the advantages of Ricœur's approach. I will then examine a psychoanalytical approach and its application by Williams to gain evidence for the relation between shame and conscience. Taking this as the background for a stereoscopic reading of Ricœur's early *Fallible Man* and his later *Oneself as Another*, we are entitled to speak of a homecoming of shame, because shame can be regarded as a paradigm for the *affective perspective*, which Ricœur took into account in analyzing man's access to other people in *Fallible Man*, but this affective perspective was neglected by him in his *Oneself as Another*.

The Starting Point: A Question of Ontology

In the final section of *Oneself as Another* Ricœur addresses the issue of a possible ontology of the self. The question of ontology - or of which ontology - seems to be a decisive challenge for his hermeneutics of the self. From the very first sections of *Oneself as Another* he is already dealing with problems concerning the concept of identity and the question of how it is possible to individuate entities. One question that emerges in a hermeneutic of the self is thus "how can we individuate such a thing like a self?"[1] As Strawson figured out in his book *Individuals*, there are certain classes of entities we can individuate by our five senses. Strawson discusses four categories of objects we identify: bodies, sounds, persons and monads.[2] But when we individuate or identify persons or selves,[3] Strawson's principle of identifying reference seems to be insufficient. To identify someone as a person or a self presupposes the ascription of mental states, but mental states are (at least without neuro-imaging methods) not observable in the framework of space and time.[4] Or, in other words, they lack the two *axioms of reference* described and critically discussed by Searle in his work, *Speech Acts.*[5] These two axioms are: (a) the axiom of existence, which means that there is reference only if there is an entity observable in space and time; b) that there is an entity or object, independent from the use of different predicate ascriptions. Additionally - and importantly for our subject - I would like to introduce a further axiom (c), to the effect that there has to be an object identifiable as persisting through time. This axiom is important for ascribing mental states and actions to persons, because it allows us to

identify a person as being the same, for example, when we discuss responsibility or when we rely on a promise. This temporal dimension of identification seems to be underestimated by Searle's account. From the epistemic framework that Ricoeur establishes early in *Oneself as Another*, his hermeneutics of the self will seek out an apt ontology of the self, as will became clear later in this paper.

The application of two types of predicates - mental and physical predicates - is a problem for identifying reference, and so Ricœur seeks to solve the problem by distinguishing between two types of identity. This presupposes two forms of identifying, whereby the forms of identification (as an activity) are prior to the entities identified. This should become clear if we remember that, for example, narrative identity is not already laid out in front of us but is a way of making identity. Ricœur distinguishes two forms of identity: *idem-identity* and *ipse-identity*. To recall, the notion *idem-identity* or sameness signifies the identity we can know by paying attention to relatively constant properties perceivable in time and space. The pencil I am using today is, to be sure, numerically identical with the pencil I used yesterday. And for my purposes, it is also qualitatively identical with the pencil I used yesterday and to the many other pencils of that brand and series. But this kind of identity is not very informative, when we are talking about personal identity. Although we might change in descriptive terms when we grow older or lose a leg or an arm by a car crash, we still claim that one's personal identity doesn't change. Surely, it can happen that such changes may influence our habits or mood, but a person can still be said to remain the same. For this reason, it seems that to a certain degree the "person" is somehow independent from her body, even if at the same time we also rely on descriptive features like the person's face and voice in order to identify a person. My purpose here is not to discuss the distinction between *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity extensively, instead I will focus on one of the phenomena associated with the *ipse*-identity: conscience. In what follows, I will compare the notion of conscience in Ricoeur with the one offered by Martin Heidegger. In so doing, we can see the distinct advantages of Ricœur's approach, while at the same time identifying Ricœur's blind spot with regard to conscience.

Heidegger on conscience

Ricœur's concept of conscience is clearly influenced by Heidegger's approach in *Being and Time*. Conscience, according to Heidegger, is a fundamental feature of selfhood; it gives Dasein something to understand,[6] and the possibility of being authentic. What raises the question for authentic being is being-with (*Mit-dasein*). Because Dasein is necessarily being-with-the-other, there arises the question for the attribution of actions and utterances to one another. Concerning actions and opinions we often ask "*who* did this or that?" or "*whose* opinion is it?" The who-question is a linguistic correlate of the self.

Since Dasein is initially being-with, Dasein is mostly not itself. This means, for Heidegger, that it is initially inauthentic. Notice that Heidegger maintains that the self is not primarily a substance or an observable entity, instead he constitutes Dasein through productive relations - or praxis. There is also no introspective access to the self or selfhood. Instead of hanging around in the own studio and try to make some introspective observations, Heidegger underlines the primacy of the public self: "For the most part I myself am not the 'who' of Dasein; the they-self is its 'who'."[7]

But what is the *they-self*? It is a mode of the being-there; it is, as Heidegger says, an existential. Thus the Man as well as the conscience is also not descriptive or an observable entity;

further, it is also not the sum of public institutions. Instead, it is a structure which enables a being to have a notion of publicity. The most important point here consists in the orienting function of the Man for Dasein. In acting or behaving as Man does, Dasein is improper, because it acts or behaves as "everybody" does. And many branches of our everyday life are governed by the everyday life of the Man.

But aside from the structural background in which the Dasein is embedded, there seems to be a certain inconsistency in Heidegger's approach. Although being-there is being-with, and the Man seems to be prior to the particular Dasein, Heidegger's conception of conscience as the possibility of being proper is conceived in monadic terms. Heidegger does point out the possibility of conscience by recurring to the other, insofar as conscience as a call presupposes the ability to listen to the other. This is followed by the claim that Dasein is only in being-with-other and that it is an understanding being.[8] We grow up in an already institutionalized world of communicative relations and symbol use. To acquire these skills, we depend on the help of our parents, teachers and other persons. On the one hand, it seems as if Dasein is the result of a social construction, but, on the other hand, the call seems not to have its offspring in the they-self, because "[t]he call comes from me and yet beyond me."[9]

Heidegger, a little bit confusingly, observes that "'it' does the calling"[10], but the "it" - mentioned as the caller - is rooted in the structure of the Dasein. It would be interesting to compare Heidegger's account of the "it" of the calling to Freud's, but this is a path that cannot be pursued here. The call itself is a response to the mood of anxiety [*Angst*] as a mode of being in the world. Thus Heidegger answers the question of who the caller is:

> Dasein is at the same time both the caller and the one to whom the appeal is made, [...]
> Conscience manifests itself as the call of care: the caller is Dasein, which, in its throwness
> [...], is anxious about its possibility-for-Being.[11]

Here the differences between Ricœur's and Heidegger's approaches to conscience become obvious. While Ricœur points out the importance of alterity (or the other) for the self, Heidegger, it seems, thinks about conscience as the private business of a particular Dasein who is the offspring of its own conscience. It is a significant difference that Heidegger focuses on the anonymity of the they-self, whereas Ricœur emphasizes the importance of friendship in *Oneself as Another*. In contrast to Heidegger who widens the gap between the general and the singular - and this seems to be a point concerning the possibility for Heideggerian fascism[12] - Ricœur is building on dialogue as the main mediating principle.[13]

If we follow Heidegger, then we don't think about the claims of the other when we become aware of our own proper conscience. In this regard, his ontological notion of conscience is irrelevant for moral philosophy, as Ricœur pointed out. And yet, there is an affinity between Heidegger and Ricœur concerning the epistemic and ontological status of conscience. Heidegger observes: "As a phenomenon of Dasein, conscience is not just a fact which occurs and is occasionally present-at-hand."[14] By this remark Heidegger asserts - like Ricœur - that conscience is not accessible by mere description, because conscience is not present-at-hand [*vorhanden*]. To make it short, I want to draw attention to an important metaphor in explicating the main act of conscience. Compared to the history of science, knowledge and recognition, which were reflected in the mode of visuality (just remember the metaphor of *lumen naturale* or the notion of *enlightenment*), there has been an auratic turn initiated by hermeneutics.[15] And it is due to the

epistemic and ontological status of conscience that there is nothing visible to individuate. The reasons for providing a hermeneutic of the self, instead of a science or "description" of the self, will be presented in the following section.

Ricœur on Conscience

I hope to make the point clear by recalling the active role of the self in generating narrative identity or - in general - the framework of praxis Ricœur is introducing from the very beginning. This has epistemic reasons on which Ricœur is reflecting all the time and above all in the last section of *Oneself as Another*. Concerning the ontology of the self, Ricœur observes: "If an ontology of selfhood is possible - this is in conjunction with a ground starting from which the self can be said to be acting."[16] Thus, the point to be discussed is very clear. We are not looking for an entity with certain descriptive features - for example, a small blue ball inside the body or a glowing fog -, rather we are asking for certain practical capabilities or relations in a being. At first glance, when reading Ricœur's hermeneutic of the self, it could seem as if the self would be the master of its own fate. Consider, for example, the issue of personal identity and narrative identity. We narrate our own life, our stories of our life and can end in different ways. We configure our experiences and actions when we try to tell who we are. Identity in these regards is a made identity.[17] But instead of explicating conscience in terms of activity, Ricœur explains it as a passivity. Among the passive experiences he mentions in the last section of *Oneself as Another* are the experience of the other and conscience. These are both experiences that happen to and not by the self. Thus understood, conscience is not an action, although it can be a condition for action or praxis.

The other person is a source of the experience of alterity. What the passivity of this experience requires is the self's responsivity. This is how Ricœur follows the path of dialogue. One important clue concerning the dialogical principle of conscience - in contrast to Heidegger's "monadic" account – can be found in Ricœur's criticism of Heidegger's account of conscience as amoral:

> To this demoralization of conscience, I would oppose a conception that closely associates the phenomenon of injunction to that of attestation. Being-enjoined would then constitute the moment of otherness proper to the phenomenon of conscience, in accordance with the metaphor of the voice. Listening to the voice of conscience would signify being-enjoined by the other.[18]

Attestation is the only epistemic access to the phenomenon of conscience and selfhood, as Heidegger often repeated. But here Ricœur connects attestation to injunction. This makes the difference between Ricœur's dialogical account of conscience and Heidegger's "monadic" account clear. For Heidegger, conscience consists in a call, and the one who calls to the conscience of Dasein is Dasein itself. By contrast, on Ricœur's dialogical model, conscience is responsive to a request or an injunction from the other; someone else is asking me something. But Ricœur isn't able to explain the complete structure of this request or the responsivity to it. At the end of *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur in fact admits that he doesn't know where the otherness of the being-requested/asked comes from:

> Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in

the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation […,] or God living God, absent God - or an empty place. With this aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end.[19]

This, it seems to me, is due to the fact that he discusses important cognitive conditions for conscience but forgets to take into account the affective dimension of our relation to the world and others. This affective dimension of conscience, I maintain, can be described in terms of shame.

Shame as Affective Conscience

Now I want to approach the relation of shame and conscience through psychoanalysis and Bernard Williams. In doing so, I want to point out some interesting remarks in psychoanalysis on the link between conscience and shame and then turn to the work of Williams to identify his own blind spot concerning the link between shame and moral guilt. As a result, a kind of symmetry will emerge. While Heidegger and Ricœur neglect the affective dimension of shame in their treatments of conscience, Bernard Williams reflects on shame and guilt but neglects the notion of conscience.

Shame is not regarded as a stimulus response relation or a kind of mechanism, instead it is regarded as a certain way of responsivity. Michael Lewis presents the following case:

> Consider the case of a 30-month-old child who has a bowel movement in his pants. We could assume that this event automatically causes a state of shame; that is, that there is some connection between the bowel movement and shame. Alternatively, we could think of shame as the consequence of what the child was thinking, either about the accident or about his parent's response to it. In my work, I have focused on the latter explanation, because I believe that most examples of shame-eliciting events cannot readily be explained by an automatic process.[20]

This is, of course, a rather harmless example, and it is not obvious wherein the relation to conscience consists. But the purpose here is only to give a clue to the conception of shame as a kind of responsivity, as opposed to a mere instinct or reflex. Shame appears when there is a violation of normative standards. These normative standards can vary on widely, and therefore not every situation in which shame plays a role is relevant for the notion of conscience. Seidler is interested in the relation between the look and shame:

> Above all the process of internalisation, transformation of the look of the other to the own function of self perceiving,-observation and -estimation in the subject may be expressed by shame itself.[21]

What matters here is the transformation of the other's viewpoint to one's own perception and self-evaluation. Similar to Heidegger, to whom the called Dasein is also the caller, the self who feels shame is also the observer. But in Seidler's perspective, shame is the result of an alterity experience in a sense that seems to be compatible with Ricœur's dialogical approach. Seidler writes: "The place of shame as a unity is twofold; it exists in two places: inside of the subject, which can fill out different positions with it's I-ness, during the process of this affect."[22]

The two places of shame result from two forms of passive experience: the look and the voice of the other. For Seidler shame is a necessary stage in the development of conscience: "It seems that shame plays, as an affective reflection, on the distinction between intimate and non-intimate, an important role for self knowledge as conscience and self-consciousness."[23] Shame is not only describable in terms of the imagined look of the other; it finds its articulation also in the voice of the internalised other. Taken this way, shame represents a certain form of synthesis that takes place within oneself.

Against the background of Ricœur's *Fallible Man*, we can assume that it is a practical synthesis, a synthesis of the possible horizons of the other through cooperative praxis. One constitutive moment in this practical synthesis is character, which is only explicable in terms of perspective. For further differentiation we can draw the distinction between the practical perspective as the possibility of voluntary actions and the affective perspective as the possibility of evaluating and motivational access to world and other people. Ricœur emphasizes the importance of motivation for action and decision in pointing out the designing function of affects:

> I posit actions only by letting myself be influenced by motives. I advance toward… (toward the "to be done") only by supporting myself upon… (upon the lovable, the hateful, etc.) A human freedom is one that advances by means of motivational projects. I constitute my actions to the extent that I gather in reasons for them.[24]

Ricœur doesn't hesitate to explain where motivation comes from:

> For the first time we see in what sense the analysis of perspective is a transcendental guide for all the other aspects of finitude: because sensory receptivity is the first form of receptivity admitting of transcendental reflection, it serves as an analogue for all the others. First of all, it serves as an analogue for motivation: "I see" why I act in such a way; "I hear" the call of the desirable and lovable.[25]

The desire-grounded motivation functions as a kind of drive. In contrast to the theoretical (which means the mere propositional object perception) model for the affective and practical perspective, the affective perspective is not merely propositional but constitutes an intentional relation. There seems to be a hermeneutics of emotions or affects in the third chapter in *Fallible Man*, since affects or feelings give us something to understand. Notice that it is *the call of the desirable and lovable* and not the look of the desirable and loveable, which motivates action. Shame, as an affective dimension of conscience, belongs to the practical synthesis where we are not just acting but evaluating another's and our own actions. Shame is one kind of affective reflection on our actions - it is an affective perspective on one's own ethical identity, which comprises actions, opinions, habits, etc. What is missing from Ricœur's approach in *Fallible Man* is the principle of dialogue, but this is precisely what gets added later in *Oneself as Another*. *Oneself as Another* considers conscience as embedded in dialogical structure; this dialogical structure is also asserted by psychoanalysis whereby conscience is enriched by the affect of shame. Since shame is dialogical as well as affective, we should undertake a synthesis of both writings.

Shame and conscience do not have the same extension, instead their relation seems to be a dialectal. We can feel shame at many occasions, not only when we are acting. We can be ashamed of our utterances or for our new haircut. But feeling shame for our own actions or moral beliefs throws light on our ethical responsivity and, as Williams would say, identity.

With Ricœur we can undertake a reinterpretation of the moral value of the affective perspective akin to Williams' approach, which has importance for our current subject; whereby we have to keep in mind the important feature, that Williams doesn't employ the notion of conscience. And perhaps this could count as an improvement of Williams' approach. What completes the conception of an acting and perceiving subject - at least in the sense of moral philosophy - is the affective perspective. The affective perspective is the motivational moment in one's character. I want to make this point clear by a remark of Bernard Williams:

> If we come to understand our shame, we may also better understand our guilt. The structures of shame contain the possibility to controlling and learning by, because they give a conception of one's ethical identity, in relation to which guilt can make sense. Shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself.[26]

This seems to offer a clue toward understanding the relation between conscience and shame. Williams's reference to shame as a matter of moral identity depending on one's character is sufficient to draw the connection to Ricœur's conception of conscience. Williams explicitly says that shame concerns the question what or who I am: "Shame looks to what I am. It can be occasioned by many things-actions, as in this kind of case, or thoughts or desires or the reactions of others."[27]

The important point is that conscience means the decisiveness and responsibility for our actions and beliefs by relatively constant, sedimented or habituated evaluation schema. This does not only count for a guilty conscience. Even if a person is without conscience, he or she still evaluates situations and projects actions on the basis of motivations. And when we say somebody is unscrupulous, then we mean that he or she is not sensitive to the other's horizon. Furthermore there seems to be good evidence that sociopaths are nether able to feel shame nor to have a notion of guilt. Shame helps to develop or to modify the evaluation schema of conscience, thus it is justified to grasp shame as the affective dimension of conscience.

Concluding remarks

By reading *Fallible Man* and *Oneself as Another* together, we are entitled to speak of a homecoming of shame. The homecoming of shame simply means reintegration of the affective perspective - as figured out in *Fallible Man* - into the rather cognitive hermeneutics of the self, as represented in *Oneself as Another*. If we regard the concept of shame as the affective mediation of the other and the structure of conscience as a dialectic between self and other, then we are entitled to talk about shame as the affective dimension of conscience. Here we can fill out Ricœur's blind spot about conscience and fill the explanatory gap left at the end of *Oneself as Another*. This suggests that affect and cognition are equally constitutive for our moral practice. Since shame and conscience presuppose a practice of giving and receiving reasons, they seem to be the result of cultural cooperation.

After the explanatory gap is filled out, there are new possibilities for interdisciplinary research based on Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self. I think his hermeneutics of the self, as I delineated in discussing the concept of conscience, enriched by the affective dimension, could serve as a solid ground for interdisciplinary research concerning education, psychology, social sciences and even aesthetics.

[1] To be clear, I do not maintain that the self is a spatial "thing" we could observe. My aim is just to address the question in an ordinary way by showing, that it depends on an ontological misunderstanding.

[2] Peter Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959).

[3] Here I will see aside the possible distinctions between the notions of self and of person.

[4] Notice that we do not mean to ascribe mental states in a neurological sense. What Strawson talks about is the ascription of mental states in the sense of first person perspective, which we do not see and ascribe, but presuppose.

[5] John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

[6] I would suggest that conscience is a peculiar mode of understanding, insofar as the call that calls to Dasein is nothing which could be heard and does not articulate a proposition or any other informative content.

[7] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), § 27.

[8] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* § 55.

[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* § 55.

[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* § 55.

[11] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* § 55.

[12] At least this could have been attractive to Nazis because it would be an apt foundation of "leadership."

[13] Taken politically, this seems to be, in opposition to Heidegger, an important starting point for a democratic society.

[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 27.

[15] Gadamer often writes that we have to listen to a text or that the text has something to say.

[16] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 308.

[17] This is shown by Ricœur in the Fifth and Sixth Studies in *Oneself as Another* and in Volume One of his *Time and Narrative,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[18] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 351.

[19] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 355.

[20] Michael Lewis, "The Role of the Self in Shame," *Social Research* 70:4 (Winter 2003).

[21] Günter H Seidler, *Der Blick des Anderen. Eine Analyse der Scham* (Stuttgart, 1995), 3. ["*Ja, gerade der Vorgang der Verinnerlichung, die Umwandlung des Blickes des Gegenübers zur eigenen Funktion*

der Selbstwahrnehmung, -beobachtung und -beurteilung im Subjekt vermag in ihr ausgedrückt zu warden."]

[22] Seidler, *Der Blick des Anderen,* 8. [*Der Ort der Scham ist ein doppelter; sie ist als Einheit zwei-fach lokalisiert, im Subjekt, das aber mit seiner Ich-Haftigkeit im Prozessverlauf dieses Affektes unterschiedliche Positionen wechselnd besetzt.*]

[23] Seidler, *Der Blick des Anderen,* 88. ["*Der Scham scheint aber als affektiver Widerschein der Unterscheidung von Vertraut und Fremd bei der Herausbildung des Wissens vom eigenen Selbst als Gewissen und als Selbstbewusstheit eine zentrale Rolle zuzukomme"*](88).

[24] Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbey (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 52.

[25] Ricœur*, Fallible Man*, 52.

[26] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 93.

[27] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 93.