

Asking for Narratives to be Recognized

The Moral of Histories

Silvia Pierosara

Silvia Pierosara holds a doctorate in Philosophy and Theory of Human Sciences from the University of Macerata, Italy.

Abstract

This paper demonstrates an implicit connection between narrativity and recognition in the work of Paul Ricœur. This view is developed in three steps. First, it shows that the subject who calls for recognition demands that his or her own narrative be recognized. In order to be recognized, a *story* must be measured with *history*, particularly that of the victims. Second, from this perspective, the role of collective narratives is fundamental, because they represent the possibility to connect the intrinsic teleology of every human being to the collective attribution of significance. Finally, with the help of a little known essay by Ricœur, the metaphorical power of narrativity to configure meaning will be compared to the power of architecture to construct and to organize space. Both these fields give stories visibility and an ability to be recognized.

Keywords: *Narrativity, Recognition, History, Morality*

Résumé

Cette article vérifie l'hypothèse d'une connection implicite entre narrativité et reconnaissance dans l'oeuvre de Paul Ricœur. L'hypothèse est articulée en trois moments: d'abord, je vais montrer que le sujet qui demande reconnaissance demande que sa propre narration soit reconnue. Il faut que *une* histoire, premièrement celle des victimes, pour être reconnue, se mesure avec *l'histoire*. Deuxièmement, selon ce point de vue-ci, le rôle des narrations collectives est essentiel, parce-qu'elles relient la téléologie intrinsèque de tous les êtres humaines avec l'attribution collective de signification. Dernièrement, avec l'aide d'un article peu connu de Ricœur, je vais affirmer que la puissance métaphorique que la narrativité a de configurer la signification peut être comparée avec celle de l'architecture de construire et organiser l'espace. Les deux domaines donnent aux histoires une visibilité et une possibilité d'être reconnus.

Mots-clés : *Narrativité, Reconnaissance, Histoire, Moralité*

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 2, No 1 (2011), pp. 70-83

ISSN 2155-1162 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2011.52

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Asking for Narratives to be Recognized

The Moral of Histories

Silvia Pierosara

University of Macerata, Italy

Introduction

The title of this contribution could also read *On the Heuristic Value of Ricœur's Theory of Narrativity*, because it aims to focus on the history of effects of the theorization of narrativity. The field of narrative ethics has grown over the last two decades, allowing us to re-interpret the theory of recognition as it has been developed in contemporary moral and social philosophy. Briefly, I will use a couple of Ricœur's intuitions without illustrating the whole development of his theory of narrativity, which essentially aims at a conceptualization of the experience of time; rather, I will try to integrate his perspective on narrativity with another set of considerations, taken from the contemporary theory of recognition. I will then try to integrate those two starting points in order to show the narrative kernel of recognition, in which individual and collective narratives are both the subject and object of recognition. With the help of Ricœur's hypothesis of a narrative identity, I thereby propose to re-define some aspects of the theory of recognition.

In *The Course of Recognition*, Ricœur makes a connection between the topic of narrativity and that of recognition, but he mostly limits his analysis of the reflective potential of narratives to the individual level. On his view, the capacity to narrate is fundamental for recognizing oneself as being responsible for one's actions. Narration, as a means of self-recognition, signifies the capacity to ascribe acts to oneself and to recognize one's own biography, even if this is a contested concept.¹ Yet, Ricœur gives little sustained attention to narrative as a possible way to re-define the collective subject.

He does make a reference to collective narratives as a means of self-recognition, and on the basis of this reference, it could be said that there is a connection between the topic of recognition and that of narrative in his work. But, what could be made more explicit are the moral implications of the need of recognition within collective narratives, reflecting particularly on the passive side of recognition (the "being recognized" by another subject), in addition to self-recognition. Collective narratives, as Ricœur notes, aim to be recognized precisely in their moral dimension: "This interweaving can be observed as much on the individual as on the collective level of identity. We need to anticipate here what I shall say later about the status of collective memory with regard to individual memory."² Thus, in Ricœur's approach, the narrative kernel of recognition is not considered in terms of its claim to be morally accepted but rather in terms of its capacity to describe the interweaving of collective histories and the fragility which allows for the manipulation of collective memories.

My hypothesis is that narrativity and recognition do interact in Ricœur's work, even though their interaction remains mostly implicit. In order to make this connection explicit, this paper will proceed in three steps: first of all, by testing an equation, not made explicit in Ricœur's works, between *the claim to be recognized* and *the demand that one's own story be recognized*; second,

by clarifying the particular kinds of collective narratives and the differences between them; third, by examining one of Ricœur's essays on architecture and narrativity, which sheds light on his reflection on the narrative capacity.

Recognizing a Story

Here I want to show the narrative kernel of recognition. While this kernel is never explicitly addressed in Ricœur's work, it might be seen as a deduction we can make from his texts on the topics of recognition and narrativity. Before demonstrating this hypothesis, it is first useful to clarify the concept of recognition in order to dissipate any possible ambiguity or confusion. The definition of recognition might read as follows: recognition is a human capacity which pertains to the intrinsic openness to the alterity and to the need for visibility or approval from others. Clearly, this concept is intrinsically relational and potentially ethical. By the phrase "potentially ethical", I wish to highlight the possibility of recognition to become ethical, assuming the recognition of the bonds as an intermediate step. This initial definition also proposes to regard at least two features as fundamental to recognition: the unavoidability of intersubjectivity and its being always both active and passive.

With regard to the former feature, relations of recognition make our dependence upon others evident. With regard to the latter feature, in *The Course of Recognition*, Ricœur emphasizes the polysemy of recognition ascribing it a trajectory that passes from active to passive.³ It is worth stressing the double nature of recognition, as both active and passive. This, on the one hand, implies the act of recognizing somebody or something, and, on the other hand, it also indicates the recognition we receive from someone else. Some trace of this distinction can also be found in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, where Ricœur, referring to the epistemological status of historiography, writes:

Why does the notion of representation seem opaque if not because the phenomenon of recognition that distinguishes every other relation of memory to the past is without parallel on the plane of history? The irreducible difference risks being misunderstood with the extending of the notion of the representation-supplement of the work of art with the extending of the notion of the representation-supplement of the work of art to memory and to the writing of history. But this gap will continue to be challenged by our subsequent reflections between memory and history. The enigma of the past is finally that of a knowledge (*connaissance*) without recognition (*reconnaissance*).⁴

It is precisely with regard to the past that it becomes possible to distinguish neatly an active aspect of recognition from a passive one: the past, so goes Ricœur's argument, can only be known, but not recognized. But, the past, together with its stories, demands recognition, asks to be told and to have a public visibility; from such a standpoint, it is also possible to speak of the possibility to recognize the past as a collective history with its own values and its own call for truth. Moreover, it can be noted that the active and passive sides of recognition are always already reciprocally involved: the formation of our capacity for recognition depends on being recognized. By enlightening this original interconnectedness of active and passive, we can now begin to grasp the narrative kernel of recognition.

We are the subject of recognition, that is, we can recognize only because the narrative that we are is already involved in the dynamics of recognition. We have learned to recognize by already being recognized, an original gesture which can help us, if reiterated, to develop our moral sense. We are the object of recognition because it is our own narrative that asks to be recognized. Narrativity is the attempt to clarify the plot we are living before it can be told. And in order to tell the story, we need to recognize the constitutive narrativity of our experience. Between narration and life, there is an intrinsic relationship. Narrativity is not only a means of defining the experience of time, but, rather, the characteristically human way to live, in the sense that human life is a continuous attempt to understand the way that events unfold and to develop a shared meaning of history, even when painful events occur.

That said, let us now turn to the equation between the call for recognition and the demand that one's own story be recognized. Narration, or narrativity, is pervasive in our lives on two distinct levels: on one level, we find ourselves implicated in stories before we can construct them: this is the narrative tissue of our existence; on another level, narration is able to give an order to our stories, to give them a coherence, that is, to make the plot intelligible or, in some cases, to recognize a pre-existing coherence in it.

My hypothesis is that human bonds are primarily based on recognition, and narratives help us to understand this fact. It can be said that there is a close connection between narratives and our bonds with others. These two issues converge in the fact that narratives are also useful in understanding ourselves as well as in recognizing our bonds to others. In this way, narratives can also bring out the moral tensions between ourselves and others. Narratives are constitutive of meaning and have a teleological form. But, this teleology does not guarantee that we will find meaning and, if we do, such meaning is not pre-determined. The teleological character of narrative is thus also vulnerable to manipulation. Ricœur himself associates this exposure to manipulation with its "ontological fragility":

In the test of confronting others, whether an individual or a collectivity, narrative identity reveals its fragility. These are not illusory threats. It is worth noting that ideologies of power undertake, all too successfully, unfortunately, to manipulate these fragile identities through symbolic mediations of action, and principally thanks to the resources for variation offered by the work of narrative configuration, given that it is always possible, as said above, to narrate differently.⁵

Such an "ontological fragility" is strongly connected with the teleological character of narratives: although narrating and being narrated are necessary, what or how we narrate are always changing. In other words, it is always possible to narrate differently.

Given that identity is narrative, it follows that to be recognized as the object of recognition is precisely to be recognized as a story, both by the person to whom the story can be ascribed and by others. Based on this hypothesis, we can say that the claim for recognition comes from a narrative which represents itself and constantly configures its relational bonds through a story. To ask for recognition means to ask that one's essential values be recognized as worthy of consideration or esteem. People configure their own values in narrative terms, both because narrativity provides a tendency towards a sense, and because narrativity justifies our choices or values. To maintain the narrative kernel of recognition thus means to sustain a narrative kernel of

our values. Inasmuch as social esteem depends on the values we share with others, it is itself based on a narrative tissue.

On the above point about social esteem, I owe a debt to Axel Honneth's article "Recognition Relations and Morality", in which he clearly describes the intrinsic connection between relations of recognition and the development of morality. Honneth's main hypothesis can be summed up in the following statement:

The first step of developing a morality of recognition consists in the essential proof that the possibility of moral injuries follows from the intersubjectivity of the human life form: human beings are vulnerable in that specific manner we call "moral" because they owe identity to the construction of a practical self-relation that is, from the beginning, dependent upon the help and adfirmation of other human beings. If a positive concept of morality is to be drawn from this anthropological premise, then it is obvious to assign the purpose of protecting against the dangers referred to. What is understood by the "moral point of view" is the network of attitudes that we have to adopt to protect human beings from injuries that spring from the communicative presuppositions of their self-relation.⁶

The construction of self-relation, Honneth's argument goes, is dependent initially upon the help of other human beings. My further hypothesis, developed with the help of Ricœur, is that the construction of self-relation is narratively organized.

Narratives, in fact, concentrate in themselves the tendency towards significance; they are able to lead to a shared meaning, and if we recognize a unique story, we legitimize its tendency as a relevant way of finding a sense. To the extent that recognition can be narratively defined, we could say that this corresponds to the possibility to narratively defining one's identity and relations to others in a shared sense. The need for approval is crucial in order to gain a better understanding of the narrative kernel of recognition, because narratives are able to convey and to compare values. They are even better than argumentation at doing this, due to the pervasiveness of narrative practices: whoever gives an account of herself or himself is implicitly trying to be legitimized in her or his choices, or life stories.

Moreover, a subject who recognizes someone else is hosting the other in their own language and recognizing another's narrative in a story of their own. We could describe this aspect of others' narratives in terms of hospitality: a person who recognizes another person is attesting that her or his own story crosses the other's life story, without reducing it to something of her or his own. Such hospitality can be useful because of its hermeneutic potential: it may in fact be able to ground the intercultural dialogue on the basis of an intra-cultural one, this latter being rooted in the constitution of personality. Ricœur refers to the notion of *linguistic hospitality*⁷ in order to describe the ethical quality of translation; it could be suggested that an analogous ethical quality could be found in *narrative hospitality*, which has the difference of languages as its necessary condition. The possibility of one's own story to be hosted in another's words and in a different narrative is grounded in the possibility of each person to tell her or his own story in different terms.

Within History

A reflection on the institutional level of recognition may be useful in addressing the second topic of this contribution: the relation between history and myth. Institutions can recognize victims' stories only if they are aware of the ethical tendency towards truth: recognition of the truth and institutional recognition thus coincide in the work of the historian. One way to recognize individual stories is in fact to collect them in history and to recognize in them a tendency which could contribute to the discovery of historical truth. This point may be clarified with the help of two of Ricœur's major works: *Memory, History, Forgetting*⁸ and *The Course of Recognition*. My intention here is not to reconstruct Ricœur's formation of all these themes but to borrow a few key themes and to interpret them in the sense of a possible synthesis of them. In this regard, it is useful to investigate what language is needed to narrate the history of victims; this is one of the open questions of historiography and it is well described by Ricœur in *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Critically referring to Foucault, Ricœur writes:

Foucault's insistence on the exclusions and prohibitions through which our culture is constituted risks making popular culture exist only through "the act that suppresses it", as in his *Madness and Civilization*. If madness can speak only through the available language of the reason that excludes it, the protagonists are condemned to silence.⁹

So, why do people need institutional recognition and why do they need to be hosted in a narrative in which they recognize themselves? One could try to answer this question by saying that the dialogical nature of narratives reflects the fact that the tendency towards a meaning is real only if it is recognized by others. From this standpoint, common or collective narratives do not ask simply that their presence be recognized, instead they ask that their own perspective on values and meaning be recognized. Institutional recognition is possible only thanks to the work of collective memory and collective history, whose aim is the reconciliation of memories as a regulative ideal. The space between personal and collective instances of recognition can be filled by narratives, which ask to be recognized too.

Recognition in and by history can be defined in two main senses: first, as the recognition of truth; second, as the recognition that institutions grant to the victims of violence in history. Both these aspects could be extracted from Ricœur's thinking, particularly from *Memory, History, Forgetting*, where he does not explicitly refer to the semantic field of recognition. In *The Course of Recognition* the theme of recognition is more explicitly connected with that of narrativity. Crossing both of these instances, one could say that recognition has a narrative kernel, and this can be grasped through a reading of Ricœur's meditation on history.

At this point, another Ricœurian suggestion could help us. In the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, as everybody knows, Ricœur defines narrative a *transcultural necessity*.¹⁰ It may be worth mentioning that, before Ricœur, Roland Barthes also remarked on the transcultural diffusiveness of narratives; on his view, narrative is "international, transhistorical, transcultural [...] it is simply there in itself."¹¹ In contrast, Ricœur connects the importance of narrative to giving an account of time. On his view, the human way of thinking about the past and the future is necessarily depicted in a narrative form, because the sense of narratives is neither pre-given nor taken for granted, but, on the contrary, constantly looked for.

It is worth shedding light on the relationship between history and language in which stories are hosted. If we assume that the official and dominant language is unable to tell and to host the stories of victims, it is precisely this Foucaultian presupposition that Ricœur criticizes in the quote above. We must deduce that it is impossible for victims to liberate themselves through the public recognition of their condition as well. However, there are some fortunate circumstances in which this can happen. The problem of this type of relationship between history and stories raises at least two questions: the question of the truth and the question of the politics of the history of victims.

Prior to any investigation of the former question, it can be useful to understand what is intended here by *truth*. I am referring to truth in the sense of a dialogical reality. By stressing the dialogical nature of truth and of the possibility to approach it progressively through dialogue, I am not sustaining the linguistic nature of intersubjectivity. Moreover, it is worth mentioning the hermeneutical meaning of truth, which is, in Ricœur, the epistemological condition of dialogical practice. The problem of truth opens up the question of the relationship between history and myth, legitimized by the fact that myths are primarily narratives, and, as narratives, but, at the same time, more than common narratives, they constitute themselves as attempts to ascribe a sense to interior and exterior experiences, and to interpret the reserve of sense that they are. The intrinsic nature of myth is thus a work on itself, a constant work of interpretation. Maintaining and enforcing the distinction between history and myth is fundamental to the extent that history is primarily in a complex relationship with narrative. If assumed without critique, in fact, narrative in history can produce a sort of narrativization that corresponds to the imposition of a meaning upon events; if possible, myth increases this risk by adding the dimension of significance to historical events.

Some questions lead to a transition to the second step: What sort of narratives are the collective narratives which ask to be recognized? What relationships can be established between history and myth? Notwithstanding their common narrative structure, at first instance we could say that there is a strong difference between history and myth in their relationship with truth: myth is explicitly disconnected from the claim to truth, whereas history shapes itself as a progressive approach to the truth. What myth does, is to provide people with a background significance which allows them to feel progressively at home in the world; myth is not only a narrative, but also a work on itself, it always envisages a receptive moment as a transformation of content and form.

There is thus a particular kind of relationship between history and myth. Some scholars, like Roland Barthes, stress the strict analogy between history and myth, by focusing on their common narrative structure. Chiara Bottici in her recent *A Philosophy of Political Myth*¹² presents a detailed discussion of Barthes' position on this topic and clearly traces the analogies and the distinctions between historical narrative and myth:

Notwithstanding the fact that political myths and historical narratives are quite often so intermingled as to coincide, analytically speaking we should keep the two categories separate. This will enable us to grasp the differences between certain phenomena that would otherwise be lost [...] The work on myth operates with a degree of freedom that is impossible in historical narratives.¹³

It is probably important to pay more attention than she does to the fact that if we too easily endorse the supposed analogy between these two levels, we run the risk of making history useless and of playing into the hands of those who hold history as a way of imposing their will on the future.

On the basis of the possible confusion between these two levels, we once again find the concept of narrative. Barthes writes:

The function of narrative is not to “represent”, it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us, but in any case not of a mimetic order. The “reality” of a sequence lies not in the “natural” succession of actions composing it, but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied [...] Narrative does not show, does not imitate; the passion which may excite us in reading a novel is not that of a “vision” (in actual fact, we do not “see” anything). Rather it is that of a meaning, that of a higher order of relation which also has its emotions, its hopes, its dangers, its triumphs.¹⁴

Here Barthes explicitly refers to narrative, and not to history; the unspoken element here is the fact that narratives are presented in his text as a means of explanation, and, particularly, of historical explanation. By stressing the common characteristics of myth and historiography, Barthes tends to minimize the relationship between history and truth. A narrative, on his view, is not a *representation* of a past event, but, rather, it is always a *construction* of an order or of a significance. Notwithstanding the strong analogy between myth and history, I suggest that the distinction between them should be maintained in order to preserve history from ideological manipulation and to ethically orient it to the recognition of suffering. If such a distinction disappears, the recognition of narratives can become an ideological tool, rather than a way of promoting and increasing justice.

Whereas historiography and history tend toward the truth and are mainly concerned with the past, myth is more explicitly concerned with the future course of events and actions, although it talks of past, even immemorial, events. It thereby provides people with a framework according to which they will be able to project meaningful actions. As previously stated, this distinction may be useful as an awareness exercise, for history too has the power to articulate and to project future actions, even though it is not its explicit aim and, on the contrary, myth has doubtlessly a genealogical structure also in Ricœur. The extent to which the distinction could be maintained may be as follows: insofar as myth is explicitly useful to domesticate the world, history is explicitly useful to reconstruct the past. Moreover, it is worth saying that if the practice of history is able to correct myth, it is just as certain that myth can influence the practice of historiography.

This comparison of history and myth, which are both present in Ricœur’s work, opens onto the semantic field of collective narratives which ask to be recognized. The French philosopher reflects on the use of narratives in the reconstruction of the past by analyzing the works of many historians who are more or less involved in the use of narrativity in history. In *Time and Narrative* he gives importance to the narration of human action as a means of explaining historical events, whereas in *Memory, History, Forgetting* he approves the use of narratives only in the phase of representation in historiography. In other words, narrative is no longer used to explain past events but rather to represent them in the writing of history.

I agree with the wider use of narratives within history which considers narratives as a regulative ideal,¹⁵ although I think that the narrativist turn in historiography raises some problems, quite similar to Barthes' critique of narratives. At the same time, attention should be heeded to the role of myth in configuring symbols. If myth can be held as the way man tends to familiarize with the world and to domesticate it, history aims at progressively attaining of the real course of past events.

Both myths and histories are common narratives which shape personal and collective self-interpretation of identity: in the case of myth, it asks to be recognized insofar as it is full of significance; in the case of history, common narratives entertain a relationship with the lowest of stories, which is worth being named, as Ricœur does:

Seeing one thing is not seeing another. Recounting one drama is forgetting another [...]
The historian of the present day, then, cannot escape the major question regarding the transmission of the past: Must one speak of it? How should one speak of it? The question is addressed to the citizen as much as to the historian.¹⁶

In the field of literature we could consider the case of José Saramago as paradigmatic, with particular reference to his historical fiction *Memorial do Convento*,¹⁷ a very fitting example of the possibility to distinguish two levels in history: an official and an unofficial one. Although this novel does not refer to real events, nor is it strictly an historical novel, it can be taken as an example of the fact that beyond the official level of history there are always common people and common stories that have a fundamental role in making history, and they are often misrecognized or simply forgotten.

To the extent that collective narratives contain shared values and significances, they ask to be recognized, not only in their meaning, but, more profoundly, in their significance. I borrow this distinction from Chiara Bottici, who uses it as the basis for her distinction between common narratives and myth. The latter has a surplus of meaning, derived from its aiming at a significance, not only at a meaning, which is a target that myth shares with common narratives too:

There is something in the "work on myth" (*Arbeit am Mythos*), namely, the process of telling-receiving and retelling of myth, that distinguishes it from other kinds of narrative (Blumenberg 1985). This is because a myth is a narrative that provides not just meaning but also significance, and it does so by placing events in a more or less coherent plot. The work on myth is also the work on significance.¹⁸

We could say that "meaning", in Bottici's argument, indicates the fact that we can provide reasons to explain; "significance" indicates that we can find or discover a sense in order to understand events. In other words, "meaning" has to do with explanations, while "significance" has to do with understanding; the former answers the question "how", while the latter answers the question "why".

Although I agree with the distinction between narratives and myth, I do not think there is a so neat difference between them, because they can be both ultimately conceived as aiming at a significance, even though myth, unlike narratives, is explicitly created to do just that; probably the effective distinction between them is to be found in the collective dimension of the subjectivity to which those narratives can be ascribed, or, rather, to the sedimentation of

subjectivities that myth represents. Moreover, if history is constantly approaching to the truth of real events, myths tend to explicitly interpret the data of reality in order to find a sense in them, a *fil rouge* which allows to inhabit the world without constantly questioning the realm of meanings: it provides them with a frame of sense, which is able to distinguish between sense and nonsense. Myth explicitly configures itself as an interpretative narration of real events, whereas history can only implicitly set such an objective to itself.

In collective narratives that ask to be recognized the two aspects of history and myth present themselves as inextricable: inasmuch as myth is explicitly created in order to produce and reproduce a significance and significant world, through the work on itself, we can imagine that the subject of that kind of recognition is myth, that it is the myth that asks to be recognized in its ultimate tendency towards a significance: it asks for the significance it finds to be made visible. The task of an institutional reconstruction of memory should precisely be to distinguish between history and myth among the claims that collective narratives should be recognized.

Thus, myth should be in constant dialogue with history, otherwise it could become an instrument of domination and of imposition of one story over the others. I am thinking here about some examples such as the myth of the purity of race, or any other form of *imagined community*, to use a vivid expression of Benedict Anderson.¹⁹ Although historiography does not explicitly have the role of searching for recognition, it can also be an instrument of justice through truth, and only by comparing itself with truth can myth be taken into account as a subject of recognition.

The role of history should be that of de-mythization of the distortions that derive from a sort of “anxiety of a shared sense,” as we could define the phenomenon of a sort of imposition of the common, shared sense, often immediately and not reflectively endorsed, whose aim is precisely to protect the members of a community from diversity. From this standpoint, it is clear that the real course of events should be the object of recognition, and institutional recognition should be given on the basis of history, and not on the basis of the content of myth, detached from any tendency to morality. History too, if it does not reflectively endorse the narrative medium, can become a dominative instrument:

One can always recount differently, by eliminating, by shifting the emphasis, by recasting the protagonists of the action in a different light along with the outlines of the action. For anyone who has crossed through all the layers of configurations and of narrative refiguration from the constitution of personal identity up to that of the identities of the communities that structure our ties of belonging, the prime danger, at the end of this path, lies in the handling of authorized, imposed, celebrated, commemorated history – of official history. The resource of narrative then becomes the trap, when higher powers take over this emplotment and impose a canonical narrative, by means of intimidation or seduction, fear or flattery.²⁰

I agree with Ricœur’s lucid analysis; nonetheless, he should have also asked himself why narratives have that power and are able to influence collective refiguration. Although he points out that social narratives have the double function of integration and legitimation, and he does so with the help of Geertz and Weber,²¹ my hypothesis is that this kind of function can be understood fully only by grasping the pervasiveness of the need for approval, or moral

recognition. Even the imposition of one plot over another depends upon the dynamics of interpersonal recognition.

This is the reason why the subtitle of my intervention includes the expression *the moral of histories*, with which I suggest that the claim for recognition in collective frameworks, both historical and mythical, is more subtle than we could think by relegating it to an attestation of existence. What I am arguing here is that a claim for recognition has a moral aspect which is relevant too, and it is a request for moral approval. Here a connection between teleology and history should be underlined: the “moral of history” is partly grounded on the teleological structure of our *Sinngebung*. For this reason, the need for myth can be justified as a way to give a significance to events and to project common actions in the future.

Public Recognition within a Narrative Architecture

The last step of my contribution concerns Ricœur’s essay *Architecture and Narrativity*,²² where he tries to imagine a parallel between two different disciplines: architecture and narrativity. His intention there is to borrow some categories from narrativity and to apply them to the field of architecture. Narrative, as is well known, is described by Ricœur in three phases: pre-figuration, configuration and re-figuration. The narrative process provides a transition from the inextricable to the intelligible, and in so doing, clarifies what presents itself as unclear or inextricable. Here the parallel with architecture is strong to the extent that narrative makes stories visible and provides them with a public space, as if they inhabit a material space, through the plastic power of imagination. Like buildings, narratives ask for public visibility in order to acquire spatial consistency and to be known.

Let us analyze in detail the parallelism between architecture and narrativity with regard to the first step of narrative: *pre-figuration*. In his essay, Ricœur reflects on the practices of narration which precede narrative, including history, historiography and so on. I will carry on this fundamental intuition by saying that narrativity is not only a practice but a way of life. With its pervasive presence, it can be defined not only as a *vital need*, as Ricœur does with regard to the practice of narration, but also as a necessary part of our being-in-the-world. It denotes our attempt to order and give a significance to the world, despite all the failures of significance and of suffering. To call narrative fundamental, in this way, does not mean that any experience can be expressed in language, instead it signifies *the impossibility of not trying to do it*.

According to Ricœur, pre-figuration is strictly connected to the experience of inhabiting, which precedes and informs our need to construct. We could say that pre-figuration always contains spatial directions, and the distinction needs to be rethought with the help of the imagination: there cannot be a temporal imagination without a spatial one. Asking for narratives to be recognized requires not only a time for them, but also a public space in which such stories are rooted. To perceive oneself as situated in the world means to perceive oneself as situated in a time and in a space. In this way, we might develop the following terms of analogy: inhabiting is to building as pre-figuration is to configuration. “People *construct* because they have already *inhabited*,”²³ so goes Ricœur’s argument, that is, they build in order to feel at home. Analogously, they configure stories because they are already entangled in stories which call for recognition and clarification. Ricœur observes: “There is a constructing related to the vital need for inhabiting.”²⁴ Likewise, it might be said that the act of configuring reflects the human need for intelligibility, on a temporal and spatial level. In this way, narrativity and architecture both serve “to clarify the

inextricable.”²⁵ This analogy between narrativity and architecture, I suggest, can help us to think more deeply about the use of narrative in historiography, both positively and negatively.

So, what is the purpose of identifying this connection between recognition and narratives? Beyond the demand of visibility, there is a deep ethical claim in demands for recognition. When a group asks for recognition, it asks that its own way of looking for significance be given space and accepted as a site of meaning. Recognition, for this reason, is more than a recognition of mere existence; it is a recognition of value, expressed in the significance of a narrative. In other words, in order to gather the moral implications of recognition, it is necessary to presuppose that the object of recognition is a narrative, both in individual and in collective cases. Only by accepting that, is it possible to understand that the claim for recognition is a demand for the acceptance of a particular way of giving significance. When an individual or a collective subject asks to be recognized, the subject is asking that its own values and its own narration of them are appreciated and taken into account. Reflecting on the interconnections between narratives and recognition helps us to make the moral content (or direction) of such claims evident. Moreover, the claim for recognition can assume the status of a *struggle* precisely because the subject of recognition represents itself as a narrative, with its own teleology and with its own attribution of values and significances. Finally, we could say that narratives contribute to better express the conflictual aspect of struggles for recognition and to resolve those conflicts by giving the protagonists the ability to work continually on their own narratives and how they relate to those of others.

- ¹ I substantially agree with the famous critique that Bourdieu gives of the concept of biography in Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 62-63 (1986): 69-72.
- ² Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007), 104.
- ³ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 19.
- ⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 567.
- ⁵ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 104. Referring to the work of Jean-Marc Ferry, Ricœur later comments that "His suspicion regarding an exclusive use of the narrative form of identity has to do with its being based on tradition and foundational myths" (*The Course of Recognition*, 140).
- ⁶ Axel Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation," *Social Research* 1 (1997): 28-29.
- ⁷ Paul Ricœur, "Translation as Challenge and Source of Happiness," in *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006), 10.
- ⁸ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*.
- ⁹ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 545.
- ¹⁰ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative: Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 105.
- ¹¹ Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," in *Music, Image, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 79.
- ¹² Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ¹³ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 216.
- ¹⁴ Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," 124.
- ¹⁵ Also an author who apparently is as far from the narrative paradigm as Karl-Otto Apel has clearly analyzed the connection between narratives and explanation, going even beyond the prudent insights that Ricœur expressed in *Memory* and grasping a wider significance of narrative explanation in history. He writes: "Perhaps it is not unnecessary to point out that the postulated construction of a story as the basis of a *narrative explanation* and understanding of human self-estrangement and liberation need not have the character of an objectivist dogma [...]. It should rather be a hypothetical sketch which remains within the criticist frame of intersubjective communication, and, so far as emancipatory practice is concerned, has the character of a proposal." See Karl-Otto Apel, "Communication and the Foundation of Humanities," *Acta Sociologica* 15 (1972): 26.
- ¹⁶ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 452.
- ¹⁷ José Saramago, *Memorial do convento: romance* (Lisboa: Caminho, 2005).
- ¹⁸ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 114-115.
- ¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1983).

²⁰ Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 567.

²¹ Concerning the concept of ideology in Geertz, Ricœur writes: "Another positive element about ideology as integration is that it supports the integration of a group not simply in space but in time. Ideology functions not only in the synchronic dimension but also in the diachronic dimension [...] I would claim that the primitive concept of ideology as integration cannot be used in political practice except for the purpose of preserving, even in the situation of struggle, the problematic of recognition. If I understand that the distorting function could not appear if there were not a symbolic structure of action, then at least I know that it is because an integrative process is under way that there may be some conflicts." See Paul Ricœur, "Geertz," in *A Ricœur Reader*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 189-191.

²² Paul Ricœur, "Architettura e narrazività," trans. Franco Riva, in *Leggere la città. Quattro testi di Paul Ricœur* (Troina: Città Aperta, 2008).

²³ Ricœur, "Architettura e narrazività," 59.

²⁴ Ricœur, "Architettura e narrazività," 59.

²⁵ Ricœur, "Architettura e narrazività," 63.