

On Narrative Identity and Truth of the Self

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Abstract:

The following paper offers an account of Paul Ricoeur's "narrative identity" which proposes that the identity of human persons (or selves) is constituted through narratives about oneself. This account of personal identity is then further formulated through replies to the main objection raised against it, namely, that narrative identity reveals a division in the self: it shows there must be - the objectors argue - a more originary experiential self prior to the self-interpreted narrative self. The replies to the objection offer, first, with the help of Jan Patočka's conception of "movement", a way to conceive a kind of being that is constituted through its self-narration; secondly, with the help of Judith Butler, a way to understanding how an apparent division in the self when one lies about oneself is bridged in an understanding of our own human limitations and fragility.

Keywords: Ricoeur, Narrative Identity, Patočka, Butler, Self, Truth

Introduction

Who we are is not a decided or obvious matter for us. We discover several times throughout the course of our lives that we were wrong about who we thought we were: we find aspects of who we are that reveal versions of ourselves we did not know until then; we realise we are also often wrong about who other people are, that we and others tell lies about ourselves, sometimes without even knowing it. So, in philosophical terms, how can we know who we are? How do know the truth about ourselves or others?

The theory of narrative identity, here in its articulation by Paul Ricoeur, offers an account of how selves are formed and constituted, how our identity comes to be. In this article, I have given an account of narrative identity and further elaborated it by replying to its main objection, namely, that for a self to be narrated it has to already exist. This doubling up of the self also seems to occur in lying - when we lie about ourselves we create a division between who we are and who we claim to be. Or so it would seem. The article offers both a conceptual and a practical answer to the main objection raised, both which bridge this apparent division between different orders of self.

1. Narrative identity and a question about unreliable narrators

Narrative identity proposes an answer to the question of how we can account for the identity of persons through (changes in) time. One of its central claims is that the identity of persons is not

only numerical or one where one speaks of an entity being identical to itself; that is, we should not speak of personal identity as only the *subsistence* of the same entity through time. In the famous thought experiment of the “Ship of Theseus”, for example, we are asked to consider if a ship is still the same if all its parts are progressively replaced over the course of many years and the old parts reassembled to make a new ship. If in one dock we have the old parts reassembled into a new ship and in the other the now fully renovated old ship, where is the ship of Theseus? If we say it is in the new dock, we have to also ask when it was that the original ship stopped being itself and became a new ship (since the removing of parts was gradual). Whatever answer we may find for this ship, narrative identity argues that there is a *different* question when speaking of the identity of persons. Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between two different ways of speaking about identity, *idem* and *ipse*. If numerical identity - being identical to oneself - is sought for by sameness (and characterised as *idem*), identity of persons, on the other hand, would also refer to *selfhood*, which would be characterised by the latin word *ipse*. When we speak of someone “being themselves”, we are not only speaking of them being the *same (idem)* entity over time, we are speaking about their identity as a *self (ipse)*. A self is a different kind of being than a ship, or any other entity; so while the Ship of Theseus invites us to consider a question about identity in time which is in some respects similar to the matter of identity of persons - insofar as we are speaking of the continuation of that person in time - personal identity will also require a different kind of answer that speaks to the particular manner of being of persons or selves - that selves are self-relating, for example, or that they do not require the same kind of permanence. How, then, does a self maintain an identity through time?

Two ways in which one can give an account of a *self* throughout time are, according to Ricoeur, *character* and *keeping one’s word* (1994, 118). With character, we are not so far from an account of “sameness” in that we are talking about the continuation of character, or of the persistence of some aspects of someone’s character; it is not the same as an immutable substrate of a “thing”, but we are still talking about maintaining a semblance of some aspects of oneself through time (Ricoeur 1994, 121). That my stubbornness and impulsivity reminds you of myself as a child, for example, is a testament to the continuation of my character (and my self) even when in so many other ways, physical and otherwise, I am not recognisable as that young person. Keeping one’s word, or “self-constancy”, on the other hand, assures identity exactly in cases where there might be a disruption in the continuity of the character or in the sameness of a self in some other manner. When I make a promise, I am assuring you that I will keep my word - maintain myself, in a sense - regardless of what happens in the future. Even if I feel or am very different, my word will maintain *me* from here until then. Whereas character is still talking about a kind of persistence in time, however non-numerical it may be - and so Ricoeur says it is that aspect of selfhood which overlaps with *idem* - self-constancy is the bridge of identity in cases of a disruption in the continuity - I am here, giving myself, even if I am no longer the “same”. (Ricoeur 1994, 168) Finally, narrative identity proposes that while saying that something is the same as itself (or identical) - *idem* - indicates a persistence in time of some unchanged aspect of the thing we are speaking of (such as with the ship

of Theseus), for selfhood proper, on the other hand, this is not the case: “identity in the sense of *ipse* implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality.” (Ricoeur 1994, 2)

Iipse, then, describes the *kind* of identity we’re after when we speak specifically of persons or selves. The theory of narrative identity proposes the way through which (this kind of) identity is formed or constituted. According to narrative identity theory, our personal identity, *who* we are, is constituted through the telling of stories about ourselves. In threading the events, projects, anticipation, memories and relationships into a coherent narrative - emplotment, Ricoeur calls it - we create our sense of self. As our stories are continuously told and retold, altered, extended and revised, so is our self, continuously formed through our making sense of our lives in stories: “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.” (Ricoeur 1994, 147-148) In threading the story of our life (or of a part of our life as we tell it at a specific time), we establish the constancy of the character in the story; the protagonist of our life, *who* we are, is continuously and progressively defined as she appears and reappears in our stories as this *same* person.

We can certainly see how this works in fiction: we learn who the characters are in the stories we read or watch as the story unfolds. How a character responds to certain events, how her hidden dreams are revealed in an emotional response, the reliability her of gestures and habits, these are the ways in which we come to know a character in a story. One can even argue that this is how we come to know others in real life as well: they show us in their actions and by how they behave every day.

There is an issue with this, however, when it regards self-narratives: in a narrative of my self, I am *claiming* who I am. If the identity of my character is made through the unity of my story, it seems I have far too much creative license in who I am: I can tell a story that makes myself out to be who I want, I can distort the narrative, pick and choose which events to tell, make myself grander, or simply lie about who I am. In this way it seems I would be creating who I am. Narrative identity is positioned against what Ricoeur believes are the two extreme theoretical positions for the *ego*: on the one hand, a fundamental ego perfectly delimited and transparent to itself, as it appears in Descartes or Husserl, and on the other a “shattered cogito”, as Ricoeur calls it, (1994, 11) where there is no consistent sense of self, and it can only be illusorily projected. If narrative identity is allowing one to create one’s own character, then this would be closer to a position like that of a “shattered cogito” (as it appears in Nietzsche), where one’s self is whatever one chooses freely to project or assume. But this goes against what Ricoeur says (1994, 16). So what is the case in narrative identity regarding the truth of our identity? How are the stories we tell about ourselves constitutive of our identity?

Ricoeur himself raises this question regarding our own creative role in self-narratives: “What is to be said, first of all, about the relation between author, narrator, and character, whose roles are quite distinct on the plane of fiction? When I interpret myself in terms of a life story, am I all three at once as in the autobiographical narrative?” (Ricoeur 1994, 159-160)

2. Criticisms: a doubling of the self – is there already a self present before I narrate it?

Although not specifically asked in terms of lies one might tell about oneself, criticisms raised by several authors to the theory of narrative identity are tied to a question of a doubling or a division in the self (which I would argue is also present in our common conceptions of lying about oneself). Authors arguing for a more phenomenological account of the self (like Dan Zahavi or Jakub Čapek) ask if a narrative account of the self isn't constructed or based on a more originary "experiential self". According to Zahavi, a core self is assured by the first person perspective of experience which makes the experiences "mine". Before I make sense or recount the experiences through stories - and thus could construct a narrative identity - I first have these direct, *self-referential* experiences. The stories I tell about myself are constructed by and so depend on these first-person experiences which I experience as "mine" (Zahavi 2007, 6). My autobiographical self, he claims, requires my experiential self but the inverse is not the case making the "experiential self" more originary or fundamental (Zahavi 2007, 11).

Following Zahavi (and another philosopher, Tengelyi), Josef Čapek's also critiques the theory of narrative identity by arguing that the narratives of our lives are *retrospective*: we narrate the events and interactions after they've happened (Čapek 2015, 102). In short, Čapek claims - again, alongside Zahavi - that this shows that there is already a self which is living through or experiencing events prior to narrating them. There is a "split of the self": on the one hand, a self who experiences life in the immediate in its uncontrollable expansiveness and who acts in it, and then the narrated self who tries to make sense of it backwards, and own it (Čapek 2017, 371). The two do not coincide perfectly, and the narrated self both limits, distorts, and constructs from the living of the experiential self.

Sara Fernandes asks a similar question in different terms: she asks whether Ricoeur means that the self can only be accessed or articulated through narratives or - more strongly - the self is actually *constituted* through narratives (Fernandes 2008, 83). These are two distinct pictures: in the first, there is a subject already present underlying the narratives and which makes narratives possible, while in the second, the self only occurs *through* the narrating. Although Fernandes initially admits it seems Ricoeur is defending the second stronger option, that the self is indeed constituted or made by the narratives, she eventually defends he is arguing the first, that the self is merely articulated or understood in the self-narratives.

All these objections share the commonality of pointing to a division in the self, suggesting there is an immediately experiencing self which is later articulated in its meaning through narratives, and becomes an articulated or reflected self. In all of them, the self is already there, albeit in "unrefined" form, and later it is articulated or understood by reflection and stories. In lying about oneself there is also a perceived division in the self: when someone is telling a false story about themselves we think of them as standing apart from the self projected by the story, designing and orchestrating the character that she hopes to convince others (and even herself) is the same as the one telling.

3. Answers to the criticisms of a double or divided self

3.1. Jan Patočka's "movement" of existence - a conceptual reply

In a titled "Phenomenology and Narrative Identity", Čapek suggests that, given the problems raised with the theory of narrative identity, it would perhaps be more fruitful to look to understand personal identity as a "movement" (Čapek 2017, 374). Although Čapek does not mention Jan Patočka by name, it is, of course, the fellow Czech philosopher who developed a central idea of human existence as "movement", a particular kind of ontological conception of movement which gives an account precisely of how existence is in its becoming. Although Čapek is suggesting we think of movement as an *alternative* to narrative identity, I would like to take his suggestion to instead think of Patočka's specific "movement" as what might be helpful to understanding narrative personal identity.

Jan Patočka proposes, as one of the central ideas of his work, that human existence is "movement" understood as the realisation of possibilities. Patočka's conception of movement is adopted from the Aristotelian concept of movement where it is understood as the changes occurring in a given entity based on the qualities it already has predetermined in a substrate, as the actualisation of a potential (*dunamis - entelecheia*). A fruit or a leaf, for example, has a certain range of colour it adopts, from blossom to decay (including possible alterations through disease). This range of colour is predetermined by the qualities this entity has established in the substrate which defines its identity as a leaf or fruit of a particular plant. Human existence, on the other hand, is a kind of being that does not have a stable substrate in this same way, it is not predefined with a set of characteristics it must adhere to in its living path; in this way, the "movement" that defines human existence will be understood differently to Aristotle's original movement as well.

The "I" is not a substrate passively determined by the presence or absence of a certain *eidos* [...]; it is something that determines itself and, in this sense, freely chooses its possibilities. "Being" does not mean, then, "being given", but choosing oneself, creating oneself in truth, *becoming*, achieving *what one is*. (Patočka 1998, 263, my translation from French)

The "movement" which defines human existence in Patočka, then, is a so-called "radicalised" version of the aristotelian movement. The realisation of possibilities in human existence is not made from a previously determined set of properties in the substrate; as "existence" we are the realisation of possibilities *as they are realised*, meaning, that we become what we realise from the possibilities we understand as such only as we realise them. Further, our possibilities are not only those of our biological being, but of *who* we can become.

Human beings are not *there*, already given and waiting to be discovered, says Patočka, but are instead a kind of being that is in the making: "each instant of his action - or non-action - implicates a decision about his manner of being." (Patočka 1998, 263, my translation from French). Human existence is the only kind of being whose being is involved in its own discovery.

This is what it means to say that existence is *in* its realisation, or "movement": the act by which we understand ourselves is the same which constitutes us. The identity of a being that is

a self is, in this way, continuously becoming through a process of self-reflection. We become who we are as we engage in the world reflectively: in our experiences, we don't simply act or realise possibilities unthinkingly, automatically; instead, we understand our actions and ourselves through the realisation of possibilities, and in this understanding become who we are. Our understanding of the world and the possibilities we realise in it are inseparable from our own self-understanding: only self-understanding can bring forth the understanding of "things" as they are useful in our field of possibilities, says Patočka (1998, 255) that is, only my interest, my project, opens up the world as meaningful; at the same time, my identity and my sense of self is inseparable from the realisation of possibilities - I understand who I am as I realise myself in the world.

Considering the critiques by Fernandes, Zahavi and Čapek, that one must have a self prior to the narrating self, Patočka's conception of existence as this particular ontological movement - movement without a stable substrate - could allow us to think how that same self could be both present and becoming in these experiences and narratives, it can help us conceive the continuity of a self without having it exist (or subsist) prior to its realisation (or narration). "Movement" understood in this way could help us understand how someone - a self - could simultaneously be both the *actor* and the *narrator who is the constituter of self*.

Josef Čapek's suggestion to consider the notion of movement to think of identity in time was attached to the way we experience some temporal unities like melodies. (Čapek 2017, 374) Patočka himself points to melodies as a manner of understanding his own conception of movement as a being *in* realisation:

[M]ovement of this kind makes one think of the movement of a melody or, more generally, of a musical composition: each element is only a part of something which exceeds it, that is not there immediately in an achieved figure, but is rather something which, while being prepared in all its singularities is always, in a sense, still to come, for as long as the composition is playing. (Patočka 1995, 108, my translation from French)

Think, for example, of Chopin's Piano Sonata No.3: each note, each keystroke, with its rhythm and force does not exist independently as an individual building brick in the complete sonata. Instead, the sonata *is* the whole of the composition, but it also *is* in its occurring; that is, the sonata does not exist when it's completed at its end, but *is* precisely in its becoming, in its development and making sense of transitions and moods, expected and unexpected. Similarly, human existence *is* in its occurring, in its becoming, it makes sense in its unfolding, and can't be separated from it. It is not as if it is an outside entity living secluded from its own living, looking out (or in) onto its life happening.

If we adopt this same (ontological) model to narrative identity, we could say that the self who tells the stories is only - and also continuously - constituted in the story telling. The self does not need to occur as a stable entity prior to offering a narrative of itself; instead, like the melody, the entity or identity is only occurring as it narrates itself through stories. The self is

in perpetual formation. In “Life in quest of narrative”, Ricoeur writes: “we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us.” (1992, 32) One of the advantages of narrative identity over some other theories of personal identity (like ones offered by a cartesian style ego, for example), is precisely that it allows for a changing self.

Nevertheless, is there really not in the meantime, as Zahavi says, already a first person perspective underlying our experiences, *before* the narrative? One could certainly try to imagine an experience with the structure of an I which doesn’t require a narrative self - a repeatedly emerging ego, each time new, for example, or perhaps a person just awaking with complete amnesia -, but when we think of a self, their experiences are usually attached to their other experiences. What we are looking for in personal identity is the continuity of a self through time. When we engage in the “simple experiences” Zahavi mentions as indicative of an experiential self prior to narration - “seeing the moon, reading a text, perceiving a windowsill, a red book or a steaming cup” (Zahavi 2007, 2) - these would in fact be narratively attached to our other experiences. These experiences are mine not only because they come with an I-structure, but because they are temporally connected to other experiences I have. This is not just *a* red book, this is *the* red book I have been working with, that I spilled coffee on last week, and nearly lost in the library last semester. That experiences have an I-structure does not, on its own, give us personal identity. In the same way that the certainty of the “I” in the *cogito ergo sum* does not assure me that it is the same “I” every time I say it, the fact that experiences are attached to an I does not alone make them *my* experiences, in the sense that “my” implies a notion of personal identity.

A narrative self is already implicated in experience, just as experience is implicated in the narrative. One’s narrative identity does not emerge, cleanly and newly, *after* one has experiences. I do not decide *ex nihilo* who I am in my stories, but I discover who I am (continuously as a life project) as I tell those same stories. Ricoeur speaks of the “pre-narrative capacity of what we call life” (1992, 27). Life is not composed of a neutral sequence of experiences, it is made of meaningful moments, activities, relationships, and in that sense it is already narratively structured. Meaning for us occurs in narrative structure (isn’t it difficult to conceive of it otherwise?). Our identity, who we are, is then threaded through those moments through emplotment, in making a narrative, and the self-understanding and self-constitution - both the making and the discovering of oneself - occurs there, when we make a narrative unity of those events as it relates to us and tell it to others (or to ourselves as the imaginary others we draw up as possible interlocutors). “By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning.”, writes Ricoeur. (1994, 162) We may not decide to having been born and in many ways what kind of life we have, but we do constitute our personal identity in our narrative telling of ourselves to others.

3.2. Truth in narrative identity and Judith Butler’s ethics of vulnerability - a practical reply

But how do we do so? How do we constitute ourselves through narratives? Patočka’s conception of existence as “movement” helped us understand a kind of being that is in its own

becoming, that is both the realiser and the realisation of possibilities, or both the character and narrator; but now how can we conceive of how this happens in practice? And further, how do we answer the original question in this paper about someone lying about themselves? If the self is, in the strong sense, constituting itself in narratives, what happens in cases of deception and self-deception? Are we really who we claim to be?

Truth for Ricoeur in narrative identity is not bound by the requirements of certainty. We never expect (or should expect) the absolute transparent truth when speaking of who someone is (including ourselves). Yet, truth - albeit conceived rather differently from a correspondence understanding of truth - is an intrinsic and important part of narrative identity. Further, it makes this conception of personal identity necessarily ethical (which is, in my opinion, an interesting aspect of it).

Ricoeur adopts the notion of truth as *aletheia*, a continuous unveiling, but includes in it the role of the other. In narrative identity, a self is making oneself through narratives and these are also attempts at self-understanding; through my stories I am coming to an understanding of who I am, and in that self-understanding becoming myself. Whether the interlocutor is real or imagined, I am telling my stories to another, and I am in this sense, claiming to be someone. Ricoeur calls this kind of truth “attestation”: I am testifying to being this person to another (including the “other” of my own conscience). The role of the other implies that my self-narrative can be accepted as believable, or not, and can of course be set against my other previous narratives, as well as my actions. The other is implicated in the truth of my identity: if the truth of myself involves my credibility and the trust of the other (that she believes *in* me), then I don’t decide alone and unilaterally who I am. The opposite of truth in the sense of attestation, says Ricoeur, is “suspicion”. (Ricoeur 1994, 302) My stories, like all stories, have a requirement for some credibility and consistency, though not absolute consistency, since as a person I am varied, multifaceted, conflicting, contradictory.

As a human person, there are unavoidable limitations to my being and perspective; this means all accounts of myself will be necessarily partial, faulty, and liable to illusions and deception. Judith Butler elaborates the idea wonderfully in an article (with the same title as their book), “Giving an account of yourself”.

My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I have no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do? [...] The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as what one thinks that one is, might imply, in turn, a certain patience for others that suspends the demand that they be selfsame at every moment. (Butler 2001, 27)

Butler’s account of the self is not the same as Ricoeur’s (though they share some overlapping

aspects). Butler is seemingly interested in precisely that unnarratable part of the “I”, the unconscious and the psychoanalytic philosophies that explore it. But she argues for an opacity of the self and an ethics based on it, and in this regard, there is a shared project with Ricoeur’s narrative identity. The argument is that my self-narratives are always attempts, incursions at making sense of my own life. Some I will find to make sense and be illuminating, others will be mistaken, or will contradict future understandings, many I will revise and continue to revisit until the end of my life (which I will not be able to narrate at all); in all of them, the criterion of truth is not certainty but something which I (and others) must see that it “fits” - my previous narratives, the situation, my actions.

The stories we tell about ourselves are always in some ways, fiction. We are attempting to find who we are precisely by telling these stories - we can only come to understand and become who we are in these tellings and in the reception by others. To be a self is to be in search of oneself. These fictional stories - these lies, really, if we want to be rigid - are not somehow opposed to what is true about ourselves, but are instead part of the way to the truth about ourselves (which is always a way).

Perhaps one can already guess that the spirit of lying is inextricably attached to our search of the truth, like a tunic of Nessus clinging to the human body. (Ricoeur 1990, 146, my translation from Castillian)

When speaking of the self, truth and lie do not sit opposite one another, but are bound together; the lies a part of the tissue we thread and shed on the way to making and finding who we are.

The fallible truth that is possible in these self-narratives yields a valuable treasure in that it brings forth an understanding of my own limitations and vulnerability, and by this, a greater sympathy for others’ faulty narratives. Further, it gives rise also to an understanding that my inability to give a perfect account of myself calls for my *commitment* in that I am still accountable for myself and my life - I must still take responsibility even if I don’t have a final, absolute knowledge of who I am. Now, it is *exactly* this commitment that allows for a continuity of my self, *an identity* - it is the “keeping of my word” which Ricoeur claimed assures the continuance of my ipseity through time when there is no continuation through the persistence (sameness or *idem*) of my character. It is precisely because of necessarily faulty personal narratives that I come through in promising to hold myself responsible all the same.

“Who am I, so inconstant, that *notwithstanding* you count on me?” The gap between the question which engulfs the narrative imagination and the answer of the subject who has been made responsible by the expectation of the other becomes the secret break at the very heart of commitment. This secret break is what makes the modesty of self-constancy differ from the Stoic pride of rigid self-consistency. (Ricoeur 1994, 168)

The truth of a self cannot not be attained or asserted in transparency - for myself or others - it is always struggled through, a work in progress, fallible and inconstant. And yet, I assert and guarantee

my identity - I am truthfully me - in the promise to hold myself responsible *to you* even so. It is the necessarily humanly fallible account of myself that gives rise to my identity as *someone* who can be depended on and held accountable.

Conclusion

In an article discussing narrative identity and self-interpretation, Arto Laitinen gives several examples in Ricoeur's work as evidence of his aversion to dichotomies (Laitinen, 2002, 57): narrative identity mediates between *idem* and *ipse*, for example, as well as between theories of an absolute "I" (as in Descartes) or its complete annihilation (as in Nietzsche). In the replies to the objections raised and identified in this article, the responses have also unified or brought together alleged divisions. To the objections of a divided self, where there would be a primary experiential self and then a narratively interpreted self, Patočka's "movement" was used to show how this could be one unitary occurring. To the common way of thinking about how one lies about oneself where a true self is machinating a false self, almost like a puppet master, we proposed, with Judith Butler, that the lies we tell are part of the way we make and discover the truth about ourselves. The responses integrate these apparent divisions, reformulating them in ways more accepting of our human complexity.

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