

## RECOGNITION, STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** *In this paper, I analyze the development of self-consciousness from a reflection of what is individual ego, to reach the effective self-recognition which consists in the narrative synthesis between personal identity and the collective level of identity. In Ricoeur's book *Parcours de la reconnaissance* – personal identity is defined in the context of a successful attempt to bring philosophical dignity to the idea of recognition, which gives a special place to this concept in Ricoeur's work. In addition, constructing personal identity means “remembering the self which above all is essential to define the “person”. This development of self-awareness is achieved through a story well told about personal memory and collective history. In this regard – to say, to do, to tell stories and to recount himself are “capacities”: to say means to tell stories (possibly on what you did); to tell and to recount stories are forms of “action” by which the individual is aware of himself and shares this with others.*

**Keywords:** *individual identity, collective identity, phenomenology, selfhood, narrative construction.*

### *An Introduction*

A story well told about oneself or about the community to which one belongs is important both in the order of social and political recognition, as well as that of discovering its own identity, interlaced with the meaning of life and history.

In order to emphasize how useful are the concepts that point out the importance of story – telling in the course of recognition and affirmation of identity, we must remember that from a logical/ontological point of view, the notion of identity is grounded in the philosophical tradition of Aristotle and his followers, in the modernism of Leibniz and in Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics<sup>1</sup>. The concept of “difference” plays a major role in the definition of

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<sup>1</sup> According to the perspective of the volume *Identität und Differenz* (1957), being and thinking, in short, are equivalent to identity and difference. But as they occur at the same level, it follows that they are complementary. From this it can also be deduced that there is complementarity between substantialism and

identity that assumed the investigative approach known as weak thought”, consisting in the identification and correlation of cultural connotations, psychological and political implications of that concept in postmodernism.

In an attempt to define the concept, we can say that the individual’s identity consists of a “same” that can be multiplied and simplified without losing the essence, but also from a number of “otherness” features resulting from how differently others look on the “same”. All this constitutes a unique sense, whose unity is found in the individual who is “different” from others, and also constitutes the cultural characteristics of a community.

Beyond the traditional logical-ontological paradigm, in postmodernism “identity” is a notion often used in different theoretical contexts, emphasizing specificity and the difference between someone/something inherent to an individual or a community. However, some authors point out the conventional character of the notion of “identity” and, we might say, implicitly remark on its exploratory value and instrumental function of this concept.

Thus, according to Francesco Remotti, “identity” is a concept so prevalent and attractive in recent times, that “it seems that even the most astute intellectual cannot avoid situations where he has to use the word”<sup>2</sup>. From the perspective of this author, this concept is present so frequently, not because it provides objective data, but mainly because of its subjective value, which implies more possibilities for self-construction: “Identity (...) does not reduce to the essence of an object, it depends on our decisions. (...) And if it is a matter of decision, it is necessary to abandon the essentialist vision, in favor of the conventionalist connotation of identity”<sup>3</sup>.

From these premises, we started the investigation of the question of the relationship between the individual/personal identity and the construction of an individual ego using Ricoeur’s perspective on the narrative approach.

### *Narrative Construction as Negotiation between Substantialism and Conventionalism*

According to Remotti, “... on the one hand, identity is ‘there’ and it needs only to be ‘discovered’”, and on the other hand “there is no identity, but rather there are different ways to organize the concept of identity”, or, in other words, “identity is always, in some way, built or invented”. Remotti’s conception is

conventionalism. In this respect, see “Despre identitate, fenomenologie și filosofia culturii cu Alexandru Boboc” (interview conducted by Lorena Stuparu and Gabriela Tănăsescu) in the volume entitled *Identitatea individuală în contextul globalizării. Studii și interviuri*, coord. Lorena Stuparu, Craiova, Aius Publishing House, 2012, pp. 196-197.

<sup>2</sup> “L’identità è un concetto non solo largamente impiegato, ma oltremodo attrattivo. L’identità – potremmo dire – si è ormai diffusa in modo contagioso, e sembra che anche le persone intellettualmente più accorte non possano fare a meno di utilizzare questa parola. Sembra che, se non si utilizzasse identità, non si potrebbe far parte del mondo attuale” – Francesco Remotti, *L’ossessione identitaria*, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2010, p. IX.

<sup>3</sup> “L’identità, allora, non inerte all’essenza di un oggetto; dipende invece dalle nostre decisioni. L’identità è un fatto di decisioni. E se è un fatto di decisioni, occorrerà abbandonare la visione essenzialista e fissista dell’identità, per adottarne invece una di tipo convenzionalistico” – Francesco Remotti, *Contro l’identità*, Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza, 2009, p. 5.

consonant with the narrative perspective on the identity. In his book, *Parcours de la Reconnaissance*, Paul Ricoeur defined personal identity as a constructed narrative identity of “capable man”. From Ricoeur’s perspective – to say, to do, to tell stories and to tell himself are “capacities”: to say means to tell stories (possibly on what you did); to tell and to tell stories are forms of “action”, by which the individual shows awareness of himself and he shares this to others. Here, personal identity is defined in the context of a successful attempt to bring philosophical dignity to the idea of recognition, which had a special place in Ricoeur’s work. In addition, constructing personal “identity” means remembering the “self”, which above all, is essential to define the “person” and this development of self-awareness is achieved through memory and history.

Also, in the above-cited book, Ricoeur defined identity starting from the capital etymological distinction between “*idem* identity” and “*ipse* identity”. According to this distinction, the “*idem* identity”, for the same individual, is defined as “all the features of permanence in time, biological identity in the genetic code, located in the fingerprints to which is added physiognomy, voice, walking, going through customs, stable or, as they say, contracted to the features that marked it accidentally, but by which an individual is recognized as the example of great Odysseus’ scar”<sup>4</sup>. The same philosopher opposed this definition, as a form of substantialism, to a conventionalist definition, which is reflected in the identity of “*ipse*” which favors the story, the self-definition. I believe that the two meet in a happy way because “the same” (or “*idem*-identity”) is the ontological foundation of the person or of the community, a situation that cannot, itself, be modified. At the same time, the “*ipse*-identity” is that in which lies the quality of a membership “in fiction to produce a multitude of imaginative variations for which changes tend to make problematic the character of identify the same” to “the nude question: Who am I?”<sup>5</sup>.

So, on the one hand, the essentialist view contains constructivist elements, and on the other hand, the constructivist or conventionalist perspective cannot be missing altogether from essentialist perspective. In this respect, essentialism and constructivism are complementary, which requires, an elementary comparativism – a methodological exercise related to creative hermeneutics. Personal identity of the individual (both in a biological sense, or civil or metaphysical meanings) and ethnic-historical identity are substantial objective assumptions of any subjective identity construction, while the political identity, the social identity, or cultural identity can be a matter of “decision” in a developed democratic state.

On the other hand, a contradiction appears when we make theoretical generalizations on “individual identity”, since there are at least as many identities,

<sup>4</sup> In the context of narrative theory, “*idem* identity” appears as «tous les traits de permanence dans le temps, depuis l’identité biologique signée par le code génétique, repérée par les empreintes digitales, à quoi s’ajoute la physiologie, la voix, la démarche, en passant par les habitudes stables ou, comme on dit, contractées, jusqu’aux marques accidentelles par quoi un individu se fait reconnaître à la façon de la grande cicatrice d’Ulysse» – Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Paris, Édition Stock, 2004, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> According to Ricoeur, “*ipse* identity” consists of the quality of belonging «à la fiction de produire une multitude de variations imaginatives à la faveur desquelles les transformations du personnage tendent à rendre problématique l’identification du même », jusqu’à la «question nue: qui suis-je?» – *Ibidem*, p. 154.

as there are individuals. Even if they largely identify themselves with anthropological discourses on the identity of their time, each person has a proper “discourse” on self and existence – whether or not it gets marked as an expression of the unique, unrepeatable style of their life, as happens with creators. So, the research on the identity problem must begin with the assimilation of informed discourses on the subject.

This is because the essential and unique “identity” is the very thing that makes us different one from another; each of us perceives, thinks, externalizes and speaks about their identity in his own way; there is not a type of man, whether younger or older, but only different people, even if everyone recognizes himself in a part of an “universal soul”.

From my point of view, considering the research problem of identity, when regarding the complementarity between conventionalist and essentialist perspectives, we can formulate several questions such as: how much of our identity belongs strictly to us and how much do we owe to others? In other words, what is the proportion between trans-individual and individual construction of identity?

From our own experience (which includes that of reading), we can say that differences between people are due to little physical characteristics: living “my” life in a unique way, recounting my memories and “myself” are the “things” that define me and distinguish me from others. Identity consists of a mosaic of “otherness”. It is made up of concrete things which are most intimate, belonging to our manifest being, but also of ideal things. This new consciousness imposes this kind of difference: there are as many identities as there are individuals, but if they can be defined by a specific difference of self-consciousness and temporality, proximate genus is given by a temporal human being.

Returning to the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach through which Paul Ricoeur defines personal identity as constructed narrative identity of “capable man” and which could be considered an answer to the above questions, the overview of the problem is accomplished by referring to the dialectic of identity faced otherness, which introduces the difference between private and public identities. Storytelling helps the “capable man” to construct a personal subjective identity, but also to share the result with others. Through Paul Ricoeur’s narrative vision, the discovery of a well-told human story becomes possible, and also to say, to make, to tell himself, the personal and social relevance of the narrative identity.

From modern philosophy, which opens the perspective of subjectivity, one can speak of a sense of individual identity as subjective identity *selfhood*. The “selfhood identity” expresses “the result of a reflection of what is the individual *ego*, beyond an intrinsic quality of something or someone to be in a certain way and no any other”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> «S’il est un point où la pensée des Modernes marque une avancée sur celle des Grecs concernant la reconnaissance de soi, ce n’est pas principalement au plan de la thématique, celle de la reconnaissance de responsabilité, mais au plan de la conscience réflexive de soi-même impliquée dans cette reconnaissance. Donnons tout de suite un nom à ce soi-même réflexif, celui d’«ipséité», équivalent français des vocables anglais *self* et *selfhood*. Certes, les Grecs ont connu – comme nous en avons donné maints exemples – l’usage du

According to Ricoeur, the Cartesian *cogito* philosophy and John Locke's theory of reflection actually pave the way for what he has termed a "hermeneutics of the self". In addition, the advent of the "Cartesian *cogito*" is the major event after which self-reflection establishes a different style of thinking, illustrated by the transcendental philosophy of Kant and Fichte, both centered on the ego<sup>7</sup>.

The investigation of recognition is interested in the "hermeneutics of the self" to the extent that explores the dialectic between identity and otherness through "personal" forms of the verb "can", including: "to be able to say", "to be able to make", "to be able to tell and tell himself". To say, to make, to tell himself are ways to build an identity by memory, action, faculty of judgment. All of these are features of the "capable man".

If excessive politicization of multiculturalism, believes Ricoeur, favored an "indefinite request" of affective, legal and social recognition<sup>8</sup>, the actual self-recognition which means the assertion of personal identity occurs when "self-designation" of the speaker is in a position where the self-reflectivity meets with otherness; in other words, when someone becomes able to say, e.g., "My name is Paul Ricoeur" («*Moi, un tel, je m'appelle Paul Ricoeur*») – which signifies the real establishing of the speaking subject<sup>9</sup>.

According to Ricoeur, it is the capable man who can build a personal identity – by its specific narrative language, different from others'<sup>10</sup>. So, he builds a personal story of his own perspective, beyond or together with the symbolic or metaphorical language of religious and artistic creations, beyond or together with the conceptual language grounded in phenomenological philosophy.

### *Narrative Identity: Building and Telling its Own Story*

Entitled even "A phenomenology of capable man" («*Une phénoménologie de l'homme capable*»), Chapter II of the second study ("To recognize oneself") of *Parcours de la reconnaissance (The Course of Recognition)* addresses the issue of personal identity through the act of telling.

From this point of view, to tell oneself is a human capacity that contributes to the construction of personal identity, because under the reflexive form of "to tell", the personal identity is projected as a narrative identity<sup>11</sup>.

The reflection on the talking man, thinking man or acting man belongs to the same problem of the capable man. Therefore, this reflection comprises an

pronom réfléchi *hautô/heauto*. Mais l'usage en était spontané, dans la mouvance du langage ordinaire, comme nous aussi continuons de le faire. Pour des raisons tenant au tour ontologique et cosmologique de leur philosophie, ils n'ont pas élaboré une théorie de la réflexion où l'accent serait déplacé de l'action, de ses structures et de ses vertus, sur l'instance de l'agent, comme aurait pu y conduire la théorie de la *phronêsis*, où nous sommes tentés de discerner rétrospectivement une ébauche de philosophie réflexive» – *Ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 317.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146.

<sup>10</sup> «Autrement (...) met en mouvement (...) une problématique entière (...) celle de l'identité personnelle associée au pouvoir raconter et se raconter». «J'ai proposé le terme d'*identité narrative* pour caractériser à la fois le problème et la solution» – *Ibidem*, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 150.

identity constructed by the subject itself, even this identity is an “invented” one. An “invented” identity is possible either as a subjective alternative to the “objective” identity as perceived by the other, or as a discovered identity, which is recognized in the act of artistic reception. This latter often means the act of reading<sup>12</sup>.

This “fictional” action which is the real part of the truth of creation and reception is due to the author, and at the same time it is due to the receiver (reader) who responds with the act of reading. With this understanding, a story appears simultaneously with the inexpressible “inner man”, before this moment. It is about the self-discovery in the act of reading, more accurate than the recognition of “oneself as another” («soi-même comme un autre»), which was vaguely familiar to the reader, but “he” didn’t meet him yet.

The notion of personal identity, of course, is related to the “inner man”, with his immortal essence, with the person. On the other hand, it is a truth that does not need to be demonstrated that the characters which writers creates, are immortal “beings”. In this case, the identity of a character as well as the identity of the capable man who creates that character/personage, are reflecting each other, without having to replace one with other.

The capable man is the one who can externalize and say something of the inner man as creator of character that he built with his own abilities. Also, the reader can learn from the example of character/personage what the author/capable man communicates, and thus he is able to build his own history, his own subjective identity. And such a history as subjective identity does not involve the building of an unrealistic identity (like Emma Bovary, for example), resulting from the addition of features specific to the fictional character of another person.

By building and by telling his story, the narrator not only becomes aware of himself, but he is also known by others. The construction of a history can consist in the act of telling, but it can also be an aspect of “the rule of metaphor”<sup>13</sup> and this can take many forms – from mythology, through history, literature and imagery, to philosophy. The “selfhood” (or self-reflexive”) called «ipséité» by Ricoeur, also reveals its historical dimension, different from the logical dimension, but not outside of it. According to a “hermeneutics of the self”, the idea of narrative identity provides access to a new approach to the concept of “selfhood”. The overview of the problem is accomplished by evoking another dialectic, than

<sup>12</sup> «Une phénoménologie de l’homme capable retiendra de ce détour par la narratologie qu’il revient au lecteur d’intrigues et de récits de s’exercer à refigurer ses propres attentes en fonction des modèles de configuration que lui offrent des intrigues engendrées par l’imagination au plan de la fiction. Une «esthétique de la réception», comme celle de H. R. Jauss, a ainsi ajouté un nouveau volet à la théorie narrative en fonction du couple que constitue l’écriture et la lecture. Ainsi, un lecteur peut déclarer *se reconnaître dans* tel personnage pris dans telle intrigue. Encore faut-il ajouter que cette appropriation peut revêtir une multitude de formes, depuis le piège de l’imitation servile, comme chez Emma Bovary, en passant par tous les stades de la fascination, de la suspicion, du rejet, à la recherche de la juste distance à l’égard des modèles d’identification et de leur puissance de séduction. Apprendre à «se raconter», tel pourrait être le bénéfice de cette appropriation critique. Apprendre à se raconter, c’est aussi apprendre à se raconter autrement» – *Ibidem*, p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> In his book *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language (La Métaphore vive)*, 1975) Ricoeur seeks “to show how language can extend itself to its very limits, forever discovering new resonances within itself”. Recognizing the fundamental power of language in constructing the world we perceive, it is a fruitful and insightful study of how language affects how we understand the world.



that of “idem” and “ipse”, namely the “dialectic of identity faced otherness” which introduces the question of the relation between private identity and public identity. Thus, “a story of a life is mixed with that of others”<sup>14</sup>. This complex intercultural construction imposes mutual honesty.

Therefore, personal identity becomes a narrative synthesis between the individual level and the collective level of identity. The “status of the collective memory in the light of individual memory” is the expression of “capacity to memory” and it belongs “to all subjects which found their lexical expression in any of the personal pronouns”. So, the whole community is allowed to say “we” on the occasion of special operations of remembering. On the other hand, the narrative identity reveals its fragility in confrontation with others. Either in the case of an individual, or of a community, the narrative identity reveals its fragility<sup>15</sup>. And this is because the narrative identity can be the result of subjectivity or because others may find it false.

And this fragility is manipulated by ideologies of power, through symbolic mediations of action. These are mainly based on resources which the variation of narrative configuration provides, “telling otherwise” and in this regard “identity temptation” consists in the fold of identity – *ipse* on the identity-*idem*<sup>16</sup>. Only uncorrupted memory can restore a personal identity or a collective identity as near as possible to the truth, and the capable man is able to make this hermeneutic and phenomenological exercise (in the sense suggested by Ricoeur in his work).

Of course, we may see ourselves in a different manner than others see us, and also, we may keep the memory of things that we consider important, but from the perspective of others on the image of ourselves, it is possible that these latter shall be negligible. Even if subjective identity is true, to be sure of its validity, by intersubjectivity, it must be confronted with the image of the other about us.

To summarize: according to Ricoeur, the capable man can say, do, tell stories and recognize oneself or recognize a person (the others) in a state, in an image. This is about the possibility of building a personal identity. But each person has his own perceptions and memories, and some of these are difficult to accept. We can see that the capable man is the one who is able to resist against his own painful or unpleasant memories, one who – by a realistic attitude – accepts them, as involved components in defining his identity. And sometimes, perhaps, this game of memory and history requires a “creative forgetting”, in order to heal the fundamental existential melancholy of the human person, as Hayden points, starting from Ricoeur: “We can immediately see, however, that ‘the historical condition’ indicates an existential situation in which human beings are caught in a complex interplay of the three modes (...) of temporality: present, future, and past, in which conventional historical knowledge (the history of the historians)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157.

has the function of obscuring and repressing recognition of that ‘being towards death’ which is the ultimate cause of human anxiety, melancholy, and despair and the principal impediment to the achievement of the kind of love that would make creative ‘forgiveness’ (of oneself as well as of others) possible”<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, the problem of personal identity as narrative identity may be meant as a possible answer to the question: “What do people think of themselves?”. And this answer reflects one or another side of identity’s issue, in the story of the adventure of one’s own consciousness.

According to Ricoeur, this “adventure” goes from “remembrance to the reflected memory through reminiscence”<sup>18</sup> and it is part of the “pragmatic” construction of identity. This is characteristic for “fitted” human being, the one who has the ability to do something with its own memory, both in terms of research and nostalgic return to oneself, as in the sense of deciphering the mystery of life that arouse the curiosity since his youth, as Hayden White shows: “The younger Ricoeur (...) existentialistically believed that human being was a mystery, human existence a paradox”<sup>19</sup>.

In brief, according to the idea of Paul Ricoeur, the fall in history means that every individual and every community is going to build its own identity using the narrative. The story contributes to the construction of the subject’s identity. The construction of a final definition for the identity of the person is located at the convergence of collective identity (with its national, social, civil, civic components) with personal identity. The latter can be either a psychological or cultural identity that is made up by adopting a status, by subjective choices and attitudes, by building the self; it can be self-recognition in pre-existing models or, conversely, it can be self-recognition in the strictly autobiographical characteristics that the capable man recounts all along as a story of himself.

In society, the capable man is the citizen and this status is related to the issue of recognition and identity as they are analyzed by Ricoeur, because the capable man’s feature of action (agency), defining his status by the “story” of rights<sup>20</sup>, is reflected at the level of citizenship.

Regarding the dialogical recognition of each other, as well as Taylor (see footnote 21), Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of the reception in narrative constructions belonging to capable man, but the method by which it is debated adds a political dimension to the phenomenological act (in the sense of affirmation and communication within the community). It is certain that identity

<sup>17</sup> Hayden White, “Guilty of History? The *Long Durée* of Paul Ricoeur”, *History and Theory*, 4, 6 May, 2007, p. 237.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Hayden White, *op.cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> «(...) sous le vocable de l’appréciation et de l’approbation, la reconnaissance-attestation cède la place à des formes de justification éthico-juridiques mettant en cause l’idée de justice sociale, comme on le verra avec l’idée la plus avancée de “capabilités”, que je dois à l’économiste Amartya Sen et que l’auteur met directement en couple avec l’idée de droits dans l’expression complexe *rights and capabilities* (ou *rights and agency*). Ce couple conceptuel remarquable constituera la forme la plus élaborée de capacités sociales (...)» – Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-200.



is defined not only as a result of self-perception, but also as an image of the “other” who observes from the outside<sup>21</sup>.

As highlighted in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in *The Course of Recognition* Ricoeur’s focus is more on the capabilities and vulnerabilities that are constitutive of human existence, but “In their exercise, these capabilities always more or less explicitly implicate at least one other person. (...) Every narrative I construct always involves the intersection of at least two human lives”. In my opinion, this is an important premise for recognition that involves any narrative construction. Returning to the abovementioned source, I agree that “Properly to understand myself in and through the capabilities and vulnerabilities that constitute me, I must unmask the many temptations I have to deny our mutuality. I must learn that even though you and I are irreducibly different from each other, as human beings we both have the same basic constitution. Our common constitution demands mutual recognition. Nonetheless, because our vulnerabilities are never eliminated, we must constantly struggle to achieve it”. And this is “a struggle against the misrecognition of others at the same time that it is a struggle for recognition of oneself by others”<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> As explicitly stated Charles Taylor: “Il mio scoprire la mia identità non significa che io la elaboro in un completo isolamento, ma che la negazione attraverso il dialogo – in parte aperto, in parte interiorizzato – con gli altri. A ciò si deve se lo sviluppo di un ideale dell’identità generata dall’interno attribuisce una nuova, cruciale importanza al riconoscimento. La mia identità personale dipende in maniera essenziale dai miei rapporti dialogici con gli altri” – (Charles Taylor, *Il Disagio della modernità*, traduzione di Giovanni Ferrara degli Uberti, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2011, pp. 56-57). Moreover, even related with self-definition of identity by “inner sight”, Ricoeur invokes Charles Taylor: «Nous suffit d’avoir évoqué la naissance, avec Augustin et sous le signe de la confession de cette tradition que j’appelle à la suite de Charles Taylor, parlant d’*inwardness* dans *The Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989; tr. fr. de C. Melançon, *Les Sources du moi. La Formation de l’identité moderne*, Paris. LeSeuil, 1989), la tradition du regard intérieur» – Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ricoeur/>.