

**Paul Ricoeur:
The Intersection Between Solitude and Connection**

Kathleen O'Dwyer

While the work of Paul Ricoeur ranges over diverse subjects – the problem of evil, the meaning of identity, human will, and human fragility - his philosophical writings have increasingly centered on hermeneutics as the key instrument in the search for meaning; he sees human experience as inherently interpretive; and he asserts that language is both the foundation and the form of one's encounter with reality and one's attempt to make sense of the world:

The decisive feature of hermeneutics is the capacity of world-disclosure yielded by texts. Hermeneutics is not confined to texts nor to authors of texts; its primary concern is with the worlds which these authors and texts open up. It is by an understanding of the worlds, actual and possible, opened up by language that we may arrive at a better understanding of ourselves (Ricoeur, 1991: 490).

William Hall explores Ricoeur's work with the focus on 'what his writings tell us about what it means to be human', and he argues that 'his philosophy can be viewed as a singular project which is centrally concerned with this question of human meaning' (Hall, 2007: 4). Ricoeur's philosophy aims at greater understanding, of the world, of the subject, and of the relationship between them. A key aspect of this relationship between the subject and what is external to it is the ambiguous, challenging and volatile intersection of self – self-love, self-preservation, self-centeredness, self-care, self-esteem, etc. – and other – acceptance, concern, empathy, recognition and acknowledgement of the other; it is the mediation between 'oneself' and 'another', between one's essential solitude and the possibility of solicitude.

Ricoeur's examination of the role of language in human experience, its inevitable translation both across different language usages and within same-language contexts, and its power to reveal and to conceal the truth of who we

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are and how we live, forms the nucleus of his analysis of the human subject as ambiguous, fallible, and mysterious, but also as potentially powerful, loving, and creative. The expanse of this spectrum is noted by Richard Kearney as he addresses Ricoeur with the reflection: 'It is remarkable that you should begin your philosophical career by reflecting on the nature of *l'homme fallible* (*fallible man*) and conclude by shifting the focus to *l'homme capable*' (Kearney, 2004: 167). Human weakness, frailty and failure co-exist with human capability, power and possibility, and Ricoeur's analysis may be construed as a commitment to strive towards the possible in full cognizance of its obstacles.

Ricoeur justifies his insistence on the hermeneutical nature of human existence because, he argues, 'language is the only complete, exhaustive, and objectively intelligible expression of human interiority' (Ricoeur, 1970: 545). This view of language, as 'the only...intelligible expression of human interiority', acknowledges the limitations of language, and leads Ricoeur to work towards the possibility of a restorative hermeneutics wherein meaning is retrieved/restored/recovered through open and comprehensive attempts at interpretation. This may appear to conflict with a hermeneutics of suspicion which Ricoeur associates with Freudian psychoanalysis as the latter discerns a hidden meaning concealed or distorted in the conscious expression of language. However, as Kearney explains, for Ricoeur, the hermeneutics of suspicion is necessary for a hermeneutics of affirmation (Kearney, 2004: 7):

Suspicion takes the form of a critique of false consciousness by the three 'masters of suspicion' – Freud, Marx and Nietzsche...All three recognized that meaning, far from being transparent to itself, is an enigmatic process which conceals at the same time as it reveals. Ricoeur insists therefore on the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion which demystifies our illusions (Kearney, 2004: 7, 8).

Both hermeneutical practices endeavour, albeit through different methods and directions, to disclose truth and meaning, and to confront the ambiguities of self-knowledge and self-deception. Kearney, in his introduction to Ricoeur's

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short thesis, *On Translation*, explains that for Ricoeur, translation ‘indicates the everyday act of speaking as a way not only of translating oneself to another...but also and more explicitly of translating oneself to oneself’. The titles of some of Ricoeur’s works, for example, *The Course of Recognition*, *Fallible Man*, and *Oneself as Another*, suggest an outline of some of the obstacles to the fulfillment of human potential, the complexities inherent in encountering the alterity of the other, and hence an analysis of the barriers to the experience of human relationship.

Ricoeur’s work involves an acknowledgement of opposition and conflict as an inescapable dimension of human living. He notes the oppositional nature of diverse political ambitions, of different national aspirations, of contrasting ideological convictions, and of myriad philosophical and historical interpretations of human experience. Without cynicism, and without despair, Ricoeur acknowledges human failure to realize genuine human community as recounted throughout history and as experienced in many manifestations in contemporary times. Underlying these failures, Ricoeur recognizes the conflicting nature of many inter-personal relationships, as the human subject strives to discover, and to maintain, his or her identity in a world which is already interpreted before the individual’s entry to it: ‘In being born I enter into the world of language that precedes me and envelops me’ (Ricoeur, 2002: 27). The identity of the individual, at all the stages of life and development, is inter-linked with, and perhaps inter-dependent on reflection, recognition and expectation of the other, in personal, cultural and social realms. An inevitable tension ensues, a tension between the experience, the desire and uniqueness of the individual and the corresponding existence of the other. The correspondence between the experience of the self and the other entails similarities and commonalities in the experience of being human, but it is counter-balanced with the reality of difference and divergence. Ricoeur argues for an acceptance of difference, for a living-with diversity, and for a respect which honours the multiplicity of human thought and interpretation. According to David Kaplan, this is ‘one of Ricoeur’s many strengths as a philosopher...He tends to think in

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terms of opposites, pairs, and contrasts juxtaposed in such a way that highlights and preserves differences, while resisting the temptation to synthesize a new unity' (Kaplan, 2003: 1). Thus, Ricoeur advocates a focus on bridge-building and mediation between diverse positions and interpretations rather than an unrealistic attempt to integrate difference. This is the basis of his ethical vision.

Ricoeur defines the 'ethical intention' as '*aiming at the "good life" with and for others, in just institutions*' (Ricoeur, 1992: 172), he is firmly asserting the existential bond between the self and the other, and he is also insisting on a philosophy of action, the practical expression of his philosophical thought. Ricoeur is using the phrase, "the good life" in the Aristotelian sense of "living well" or the Proustian concept of the "true life"; he explains that 'the "good life" is, for each of us, the nebulous of ideals and dreams of achievement with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled', and he stresses the practical manifestation of this aim: 'we would say that it is the unending work of interpretation applied to action and to oneself that we pursue the search for adequation between what seems to us to be best with regard to our life as a whole and the preferential choices that govern our practice' (Ricoeur, 1992: 179). Our values are expressed in the choices which determine our actions. The living of 'the good life' entails living 'with others' and resounds with Martin Buber's definition of 'community' as an extension of the 'I-Thou' relationship between authentic selves. Many, if not all of our chosen action, have an impact on others and on our relationships with others. The difficulties involved in the open embrace of the other, in interpersonal and institutional realms, are aptly chronicled in various interpretations of human history, and continue to challenge contemporary ideals of peaceful co-existence between nations, groups, and individuals. These difficulties and challenges inevitably pose challenges to the experience of relationship in human living, and are confronted and analysed creatively in the philosophy of Ricoeur.

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The Fragmented Multiplicity of the Subject

We do not mistake ourselves without also being mistaken about others and our relations with them (Ricoeur, 2005: 257).

Illusions pertaining to concepts of subjectivity, distorted assumptions regarding human nature, and mistaken perceptions of self and other, diminish the potential of human relationships. Ricoeur's analysis of the human subject examines and critiques diverse interpretations and descriptions which have been offered throughout the history of philosophy. He questions the concept of the self as a fixed unity which underlies the Cartesian cogito, and he notes 'the humiliation of the cogito reduced to sheer illusion following the Nietzschean critique' (Ricoeur, 1992: 299); he rejects the contention of thinkers such as Michel Foucault that the subject is merely a construct of particular cultures; and he dismisses the description of subjectivity as a biochemical entity endorsed by some analytic philosophers. Instead, Ricoeur proposes a narrative understanding of subjectivity that takes into account the open-ended and fluid nature of one's life description, and which, as Kearney points out, cannot be restricted to dogmatic formulations: 'The narrative model of identity suggests that the age-old virtue of self-knowledge...involves not some self-enclosed ego but a hermeneutically examined life freed from naïve archaisms and dogmatisms' (Kearney, 2004: 199). According to this narrative understanding of identity, the temporal dimension of selfhood precludes fixed definitions, unchangeable certainties, and necessitates an acceptance of fragility, vulnerability and fallibility: 'the Self is aimed at rather than experienced...the person is primarily a project which I represent to myself, which I set before me and entertain' (Ricoeur, 2002: 69). Thus, Ricoeur explains the 'mobile' nature of identity:

narrative identity is not that of an immutable substance or of a fixed structure, but rather the mobile identity issuing from the combination of the concordance of the story, taken as a structured

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totality, and the discordance imposed by the encountered events...it is possible to revise a recounted story which takes account of other events, or even which organizes the recounted events differently (Ricoeur, 1996: 6).

Concordance and discordance characterize the developmental nature of personal identity as it is constantly exposed to change and to re-interpretation. As Morny Joy explains in her introduction to this aspect of Ricoeur's work, in *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative*,

Ricoeur's approach is hermeneutical in that it accepts that we are constantly part of a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. We are involved in a constant evolution whereby the past is being integrated into the present, and the present refining its perceptions of the past and of its own definitions (Joy: 1977: xxvi).

Thus, Ricoeur asserts that the temporal unfolding of life may be understood as the unfolding of a narrative, an open-ended life-story which is constantly re-narrated in the light of reflection and experience: 'Learning to narrate oneself is also learning how to narrate oneself in other ways' (Ricoeur, 2005: 101). This Ricoeuerian concept is aptly captured in the title given to one of Ricoeur's essays on the theme, "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator", and he opens the essay with the following words: 'That life has to do with narration has always been known and said; we speak of the story of a life to characterize the interval between birth and death'. However, Ricoeur adds a warning note: 'And yet this assimilation of a life to a history should not be automatic; it is a commonplace that should first be subjected to critical doubt' (Ricoeur, 1991: 425).

Story-telling, personal as well as fictional, helps one to make sense of one's life, and the importance of narration, especially in the light of insight gained through interpretation, memory and integration, is an essential characteristic of the psychoanalytic process as outlined by Freud and Lacan. The contemporary psychoanalyst/philosopher, Judith Butler, refers to this experience

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as *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and stresses that narration always implies a listening and receiving other: 'An account of oneself is always given to another, whether conjured or existing' (Butler, 2005: 21). Our story becomes real and meaningful when it is related to another, whether this other is real or imagined, familiar or anonymous. According to Freud the unconscious also emerges as a narrative in dreams; Lacan expands on this theme, famously stating that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (Lacan, 1999: 15); thus, through the medium of language in the psychoanalytic encounter, an integration of the past with the present is enabled in a re-narration of the subject's life-story. This process, inside or outside the psychoanalytic setting, requires a radical shift from illusions of self-knowledge, self-transparency, and self-righteous possession of the truth of oneself and of others; it requires a different interpretation of the subject, a renunciation of 'the ideal of the perfect translation' (Ricoeur, 2006: 8). Accordingly, meaning can only ever be temporary, as the openness to ongoing interpretation precludes completion and fixity.

This aspect of Ricoeur's thought raises the question of authority, or authorship, regarding the narration of a life. Does this authority rest with the individual, or can other narrators of that life also be valid? This is central to Jacques Derrida's critique of psychoanalysis, as he argues that the process of analysis inevitably involves the imposition of another's truth on the subject no matter how this imposition is masked as interpretation, facilitation, or echoing of the subject's own truth: 'To analyze anything whatsoever, anyone whatsoever, for anyone whatsoever, would mean saying to the other: choose my solution, prefer my solution, take my solution, love my solution; you will be in truth if you do not resist my solution' (Derrida, 1998: 9). Reflecting the paradox inherent in the psychoanalytic 'rule' of 'free' association, and the psychoanalytic explanation of 'resistance' to the analyst's interpretation, Derrida's argument poses questions of validity and ethics regarding the possible invasion of the private space of the individual and the forced acceptance of a new conformity, which may be a denied reality of psychoanalytic practice.

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Derrida extends his argument to question the validity of biography, whereby a person's story is restricted to the perspective of the biographer, with its inevitable prejudices and selective emphasis. The analogy between biography and history is obvious – history is essentially constructed through whole or partial biographies, and hence is susceptible to similar arguments.¹

Ricoeur explores the complicated nature of selfhood in *Oneself as Another*, and his conclusion is summarized by Kaplan, in *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, as the assertion that 'the many different ways of posing the question of selfhood suggests that there is no single, unitary conception of the self but multiple aspects of selfhood that are illuminated by posing different questions' (Kaplan, 2003: 83). Ricoeur refers to the influence of society on the conditions of our adjustment, echoing Freud's discussion of the conflict between individual happiness and the demands of civilization: 'most often we treat ourselves as objects. Working and social life require this objectification' (Ricoeur, 2002: 101), but he suggests that the individual personality also plays a part in imposing these requirements, and thus he describes 'a level of pretension that is determined jointly by society and the subject's personality' (Ricoeur, 2002: 101).

Unquestioned acceptance of illusory theories of selfhood which profess ideals of self-knowledge, self-sufficiency, and self-unity, entails a rejection of the essential multiplicity of the self, with its diverse and often discordant pluralities and variations. This is achieved only by a masking of one's vulnerabilities and mutability. The necessary mask is that of unity, coherence and achievement, suggestive of a fixed subjectivity which is closed and secure from the permeations of encounter with experience, since this experiential encounter necessarily demands an openness to change and revision. The mask of self-unity and self-completion also, either consciously or unconsciously, imposes a veil of *a priori* judgments and expectations on the other, whether this

¹ Ricoeur provides a comprehensive exploration of the challenges posed by concepts relating to history, giving witness, remembering, forgiving, forgetting, etc. in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

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other is an event, a text or a person, and it therefore precludes and prevents a recognition and reception of difference or alterity, in oneself and in the other; if the self is fixed, the other is also fixed. The inherent danger and limitation of illusory unity is suggested by Kearney; 'Narrative concordance can mask discordance; its drive for order and unity displacing difference...it can degenerate into oppressive grand narratives'² (Kearney, 2004: 110). The desire for unity and the corresponding denial of difference and complexity necessitates the oppression of that which does not correspond to this ideal, and the repression of one's awareness of such ambiguity and plurality diminishes the possibility of mediation within oneself and with others:

Man is not intermediate because he is between angel and animal; he is intermediate within himself, within his selves. He is intermediate because he is a mixture, and a mixture because he brings about mediations. His ontological characteristic of being-intermediate consists precisely in that his act of existing is the very act of bringing about mediations between all the modalities and all the levels of reality within him and outside him (Ricoeur, 2002: 3).

Ricoeur suggests that the self is therefore a mediation between constancy and change, between innate characteristics and the transformations which result from the ongoing character of lived experience, between what he describes as *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity:

ipse-identity involves a dialectic complementary to that of selfhood and sameness, namely the dialectic of self and the other than self. As long as one remains within the circle of sameness-identity, the otherness of the other than self remains within the

² The critique of grand narratives as valid representations of reality and experience is a central characteristic of postmodern thought.

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circle of sameness-identity, the otherness of the other than self offers nothing original (Ricoeur, 1992: 3).

This is very close to the thought of Derrida, as he also maintains that acknowledgement of ‘the radical otherness of the other...is the condition of my relation to the other’. For Derrida, the inability to know the other ‘from the inside’ is integral to human relationships and so also to love: ‘I cannot reach the other...This is not an obstacle but the condition of love’ (Derrida, 2004: 14).³ The attraction of remaining within a closed circle of illusory self-knowledge and transparency also restricts access to the otherness of the self, and consequently limits the capacity for self-acceptance and self-love because it denies an essential part of that self. It restricts the creation of a narrative identity whereby one’s life-story, one’s understanding of oneself, is enriched by the attempted synthesis of past, present and future, and by the willingness to revise and reinterpret one’s identity in the light of new experiences and new translations of previous stories one has told about oneself and others. In this way, as argued by Kearney, ‘story-telling can also be a breeding ground of illusions, distortions and ideological falsehoods...narrative emplotment can easily serve as a cover up’ (Kearney, 2004: 199). The ‘cover up’ is an attempt to deny or to mask uncertainty, fluidity and vulnerability, and to dismiss the limitations inherent in the concept of self-knowledge. The self is never a completed possession, it is never a fixed entity, it is never a self-sufficient cogito; rather it is a living, and therefore a growing, changing, and responding ‘becoming’ which is in the process of interpreting and reinterpreting itself and its world. This understanding of the self implies an exposure to life’s unceasing questions and challenges, a plurality of interpretations and answers, and an on-going tension between what it is and what it is becoming: ‘It seems, then, that conflict is a function of man’s most primordial constitution; the object is synthesis; the self

³ The desire to know the other ‘from the inside’, rather than being an emanation of love, may perhaps be seen as a pathological desire to obliterate the otherness of the other or to bolster the illusion that one can interpret anything or anyone perfectly or completely.

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is conflict' (Ricoeur, 2002: 132). In his introduction to Ricoeur's work, *Figuring the Sacred*, Mark Wallace summarises Ricoeur's thesis of selfhood as 'a task to be performed, not a given that awaits passive reception by the subject' (Ricoeur, 1995: 3). Without acknowledgement of one's complex and often contradictory nature, the self imposes a self-captivity to narrowness, disproportion, and alienation from itself and from others. Rejection of one's multiplicity and mutability is a rejection of Nietzsche's call for a more realistic appraisal of the subject as 'human, all too human', and it is also a denial of human frailty and fallibility. The resulting self-righteousness, coupled with a pseudo-self-constancy, inevitably fosters an alienation from the full spectrum of being human, an estrangement from the diverse potentialities of self and other, and erects a barrier against the openness and mutuality inherent in any approach to the possibility of genuine relationship.

Narrowness of Vision

Habit *fixes* our tastes and aptitudes and thus shrinks our field of availability; the range of the possible narrows down; my life has taken shape (Ricoeur, 2002: 57).

The quest for certainty and security, for control and solution, and for fixity and permanence, is often sourced in a perceived need for acceptable self-image; this self-image, whether individual or collective, personal or national, entails a confining restriction of boundaries, a selective portrayal of human nature, and the imposition of constricting limitations in the possibilities of human relationship. The experience of relationship is blocked in this narrowing of perception, as the self withdraws behind illusions of self-sufficiency, self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Vulnerability, fallibility, and change are rejected in favour of insurance against risk, but this insurance is maintained only through a refusal to encounter the possibilities of life in their fullness and ambivalence.

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Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, his description of identity as narrative, and his emphasis on interpretation as essential to understanding, cohere in his insistence that mediation is integral to selfhood and being. Mediation is intrinsic to the individual's relationship with himself or herself and the diverse complexities within the self; it is inherent in the individual's encounter with the world; and it is prerequisite to the mutuality and reciprocity of genuine relationship between self and others. Ricoeur's thesis of mediation demands a recognition of human fallibility and error, it calls for the embrace of plurality and tension within the human condition, and it warns against the consequences of a one-sided and narrow vision of human nature which denies its ambiguities and contradictions.

Narrowness of vision can centre on one side of the polarities which Ricoeur sees as framing human existence; polarities of freedom and finitude, of responsibility and fallibility, of good and evil, and of self and other. Restriction of vision, and consequently of understanding, is 'endemic to all of human thought, the tendency to avoid the risk of openness and otherness by seeking refuge "within the circle which I form for myself"' (Ricoeur, 2002: xv). The closed 'circle' results in a diminishment of perception, a narrowing of vision, and a closing off of possibility and understanding. The romantic poet, William Blake describes it thus: 'For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' / narrow chinks of his cavern' (Blake, 2004: 142). The closed circle of a one-sided interpretation of reality and of human nature may be transcended by an openness to the validity of other perspectives and interpretations: 'by situating my perspective in relation to other possible perspectives that deny mine as the zero-origin' (Ricoeur, 2002: 26). A refusal to consider other possible perspectives leads to a diminishment of life, a stagnation of growth, and a dismissal of the possibilities of the other.

The selective disavowal of one side of the apparent polarities inherent in the human condition is tempting in its illusory power to enhance one's self-image. Martha Nussbaum, in her expansive work on philosophy and literature, refers to this understandable attraction to a distorted vision: 'When we examine

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our own lives, we have so many obstacles to correct vision, so many motives to blindness and stupidity. The “vulgar heat” of jealousy and personal interest comes between us and the loving perception of each particular’ (Nussbaum, 1992: 162). Restricted vision, with its limited focus on selected aspects of human nature, can result in a veil of ignorance and illusion, distortion and denial. Concentration on human freedom, ‘the voluntary’, to the exclusion of human finitude, ‘the involuntary’, and a similar selection along the spectrum of good/evil, power/domination, responsibility/fallibility, intellect/emotion, and patient/agent, results in a distortion of individuality, as the other cannot be perceived as being like oneself, and one cannot see oneself as another. Instead, unacceptable, uncomfortable, unfamiliar aspects of human nature are projected elsewhere to one’s own situation, and the commonality of a shared human existence is denied. Denial of weakness and fault, of ‘fallibility; the constitutional weakness that makes evil possible’ (Ricoeur, 2002: xliii), and of any aspects of humanity which are deemed unacceptable, prevents the necessary confrontation with and resolution of the difficulties and conflicts which ensue in spite of their repression and denial, and thwarts the ‘opportunity for a much more extensive study of the structures of human reality’ (Ricoeur, 2002: xliii). A one-sided vision of oneself, of others, and of reality is mistaken in taking the part for the whole.

Ricoeur argues that this denial is a denial of the essence of human nature: ‘the idea that man is by nature fragile and liable to err...designates a characteristic of man’s being’ (Ricoeur, 2002: 1). Denial of an essential aspect of human being within the self diminishes an approach to the humanity of the other. Ricoeur asserts that ‘My humanity is my essential community with all that is human outside myself; that community makes every man my like’, and he supports his argument by quoting Alain Badiou:

In every human body all passions and errors are possible...There are as many ways of being wicked as there are men in the world. But there is also a salvation peculiar to each man, of the same

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complexion, of the same turn as he (Badiou, quoted in Ricoeur, 2002: 61).

Badiou's assertion that 'All passions and errors are possible' in every human being is frequently contested and denied, particularly in relation to events and behaviours which are deemed 'inhuman', 'horrific' or 'incomprehensible'. The barbarity of holocaust, the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, the growing revelations of child abuse and torture are examples of evil which we prefer to denounce as monstrous and beyond the boundaries of our capabilities. Our predictable reaction is a mixture of shock, revulsion and a demand for punishment or revenge. Ricoeur explains that 'all values are accessible to all men, but in a way that is peculiar to each one. It is in this sense that "each" man is "man"' (Ricoeur, 2002: 61.) Denial of this essential interrelationship of self and other, refusal to see oneself, in all one's weakness and glory, in the other, and restricting one's horizon to that of illusory self-containment and self-righteousness, while superficially creating a sense of self-satisfaction and security, inevitably results in one's alienation from the reality of oneself.

Ricoeur consistently asserts the relational and dialogical nature of human existence, he rejects the fantasy of individual self-sufficiency in an acknowledgement of the realities of human interdependence; however, he does not equate interrelationship with the negation of one's existential solitude:

the feeling of the primal difference between I and all others; to find oneself in a certain mood is to feel one's individuality as inexpressible and incommunicable. Just as one's position cannot be shared with another, so also the affective situation in which I find myself and feel myself cannot be exchanged (Ricoeur, 2002: 55).

Rather, he suggests a respect for and an accommodation of both solitude and solicitude, a mediation between the incommensurable aloneness of the individual and the undeniable human striving for community and connection.

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Solitude, aloneness, is both challenging and inevitable, but the entrenchment of self-protection and projection results in alienation and loneliness. Erich Fromm asserts that in the absence of this mediation ‘our civilization offers many palliatives which help people to be consciously unaware of this loneliness’ (Fromm, 1995: 67). The palliatives range from ‘beneficial’ categories of work, group membership, material compensation, to ‘destructive’ obsessions of drug and alcohol addiction, crime and psychosis. The obsessive character of these palliatives suggests their failure in satiating the desire which propels them. The denial of one’s essential aloneness ironically diminishes the level of connection with others which could make one’s aloneness bearable and fruitful. This point is supported strongly by Ilham Dilman in his analysis of love, *Love: Its Forms, Dimensions and Paradoxes*. He states, ‘I argue that it is in accepting this separateness that we find our individuality and that it is only as such that we can establish a genuine reciprocity in our personal relationships’ (Dilman, 1998: 1). However, the difficulties involved in finding our individuality are often sourced in the quest for relationships, especially when relationships are seen as potentially providing esteem and recognition.

The Fragility of Identity

Nothing is more fragile, nothing is easier to wound than an existence that is at the mercy of a belief (Ricoeur, 2002: 125).

The human need for recognition, reflection, affirmation and acknowledgement is a phenomenon explored and debated in philosophy and psychoanalysis. Many theorists look to the earliest experiences of infantile life to analyze and describe the development of this need in the human subject.⁴ Ricoeur examines the quest for recognition in its diverse manifestations, and outlines the fragility of a

⁴ Freud firmly asserted the lasting influence of childhood experience on adult life, and this has been further explored by psychoanalysts like Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, and Karen Horney and Melanie Klein.

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personal identity which is solely dependent on its provision by an other. He sees the quest for recognition and esteem as a basic human need; however, he suggests that if/when it resides solely in the convictions and opinions of others, it is constantly threatened. This understandable fragility can confine the subject to a fear-driven concentration on protection and performance, thereby precluding the possibility of open encounter with self and other which is prerequisite to the experience of mutuality and relationship.

The concept of identity is the subject of much philosophical debate, particularly in postmodern literature where cognizance of the dissolution of hitherto established sources of identity and meaning is central. Ricoeur situates identity in close proximity to recognition, and therefore as influenced by the perception of the other: 'the demand for recognition expresses an expectation that can be satisfied only by mutual recognition' (Ricoeur, 2005: 19). Self-recognition and self-identity require reflection, acceptance and support of others; hence, the 'dialectic of identity confronted by otherness' (Ricoeur, 2005: 103). According to Kearney, Ricoeur's dictum is that 'the shortest route from self to self is through the other...the self is never enough, is never sufficient unto itself, but constantly seeks out signs and signals of meaning in the other' (Kearney, 1998: 1). Identifying the self through the other is a common thread in the philosophy of Hegel, Levinas and Lacan, although these three philosophers diverge in their analysis of the dialectic of self and other. Hegel's analysis centers on the master-slave dialectic which is only resolved when both master and slave recognize the need for recognition by an other which is the same as itself; otherwise the proffered recognition is valueless. Levinas posits the other – its existence, its demands, its needs and its enhancement, as the basis of selfhood; accordingly, the self can only exist in a meaningful way when it 'answers' to the call of the other. Lacan points to the mirror-stage as the moment when the subject begins to identify itself with the reflection emanating from the other, but he insists that this 'subject supposed to know' is merely the symbolization of a 'fundamental fantasy' (Lacan, 1999: 67). Nietzsche expresses his understanding of this human need whereby 'the individual wants

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to confirm the opinion he has of himself through the opinion of others and strengthen it in his own eyes', but he warns of the danger of 'habituation to authority which...leads many to base their own belief in themselves upon authority, to accept it only from the hand of others' (Nietzsche, 1984: 63). Ricoeur explores the interplay between identity and recognition stating that 'I actively recognize things, persons, myself; I ask, even demand, to be recognized by others' (Ricoeur, 2005: x), and suggests that this is the demand for recognition of 'my genuine identity' (Ricoeur, 2005: xi). However, the need for recognition by another as essential to our sense of identity coexists with a perception of the other, because different, as a possible threat to our fragile identity:

It is a fact that the other...comes to be perceived as a danger for one's identity...is our identity so fragile that we are unable to bear, unable to endure the fact that others have different ways of leading their lives, of understanding themselves, of inscribing their own identity in the web of living together? (Ricoeur, 2004: 81).

This is part of the tension between selfhood and alterity, the dialectic of the self and the other than self, whereby the fragility of personal as well as national, racial, cultural and institutional identity is commonly perceived to be threatened by difference, unfamiliarity and discordance.

Ricoeur's analysis of narrative identity entails an accommodation of all aspects of one's self, of one's life-story, with the integration of past, present and future as essential to a genuine narrative. This resounds with Nietzsche's thought experiment of the eternal recurrence, whereby one must be willing to accept all of one's life, even to the point of accepting the possibility of its recurrence over and over again, in order to take responsibility and autonomy for one's self. However, there are difficulties inherent in this attempted integration. Memory is the door to the past, but it is susceptible to selective remembering and forgetting; action in the present is the action of the agent/subject, but it is correlative to its impact on the patient/other; the future is the focus of

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intentionality based on a trust in self-constancy and self-fulfillment, but it is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of personal feeling and commitment, as well as to the unpredictable nature of the external world. William Wordsworth acknowledges the difficulties encountered in the attempted creation of a life-story: “I cannot say what portion is in truth / The naked recollection of that time / And what may rather have been called to life / By after-meditation” (Wordsworth, 2000: 420, 421). Hence narrative is fragile, uncertain, and unfinished, and this fragility is coupled with the always present potential to self-deception.⁵ The apparent paradox inherent in the concept of self-deception – how is it possible to deceive ourselves? – is given at least partial resolution in the inevitable gap between the unconscious dimension of the psyche and its manifest translation in conscious speech. Nietzsche sees it as the victory of pride over memory: ‘I have done that’, says my memory. ‘I cannot have done that’ – says my pride, and remains adamant. At last – memory yields’ (Nietzsche, 2003: 91). Freud agrees, stating that ‘there’s no guarantee whatever for what our memory tells us’ (Freud, 2006: 553), and explains the phenomenon from an individual and social perspective: ‘it is inherent in human nature to have an inclination to consider a thing untrue if one does not like it...society makes what is disagreeable into what is untrue’ (Freud, 1991: 48). The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are not always truthful or comprehensive; the stories we tell to others about ourselves are sometimes coloured by our quest for recognition and approval. In the light of the analyses and insights developed through Freud and Nietzsche, the possibility of complete self-knowledge remains an unattainable ideal; self-deception is a phenomenon which must be acknowledged. According to Lacan, personal truth is often evaded, because ‘Truth does in effect seem to be foreign to us, I mean our own truth. It is no doubt with us, but without concerning us to the point that one really wants to speak it’ (Lacan, 2007: 58). In varying degrees, self-deception entails a disavowal of certain aspects of the self, and in the ensuing diminishment of the

⁵ For an exploration of the phenomenon of self-deception see Herbert Fingarette’s classic study, *Self-Deception*.

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self, the possibility of love is weakened; it is thwarted in that parts of the self are withheld from awareness and recognition, and the experience of communication, mutuality and intimacy is distorted and restricted.

In an essay on Ricoeur's philosophy of the self, Joseph Dunne outlines this possibility of self-deception: 'This is the province of self-deception, which might be defined as a significant discrepancy between the story one lives and the story one tells', and this reflects 'a deeper conflict *within who one is*, when one part is lived out only at the cost of disowning another part which, though disowned, continues to find disguised expression in one's life' (Dunne, 1996: 153). As a result, 'there is thus the whole margin hidden by censorship, prohibition, the margin of what is unspoken, criss-crossed by all the figures of the hidden' (Ricoeur, 2006: 26). The 'unspoken', 'the hidden', the unconscious fantasies and motivations of human thought and action, are often beyond the power of speech to elucidate. Echoing Lacan's 'empty speech', Ricoeur refers to 'the uses of speech where one aims at something other than the true, other than the real...namely, the lie', and goes on to argue that this is not the greatest misrepresentation which speech is capable of, but rather that 'it is language's propensity for the enigma, for artifice, for abstruseness, for the secret, in fact for non-communication' that curtails and diminishes the narrative identity of the subject. Kearney explains that 'for narrative identity to be ethically responsible it must ensure that self-constancy is always informed by self-questioning' (Kearney, 2004: 112). The opposition between self-knowledge and self-deception is deconstructed in this acceptance of the spectrum between them, a spectrum which may be diminished in an openness to self-questioning, and to the integration of the often uncomfortable answers which may ensue.

Another difficulty encountered in the construction of a narrative of the self is the reality of entanglement between one's life history and that of others; Dunne attests to this aspect of narrative identity in Ricoeur's philosophy: 'The self...is historical through and through, and is enfolded *ab initio* within a web of relationships' (Dunne, 1996: 144). From birth, one's history is linked to the histories of others, and as these histories unfold and reveal themselves one's

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own narrative has to be continually revised. It has to be revised and refigured in an attempt to mediate one's own identity with the radically different and changing worlds of others, and in the attempt to produce new meaning which integrates this difference. Failure to do this results in deception regarding identity of the self, and confinement of the other to the status of the foreigner, the alien. The difficulties inherent in the construction of narratives extend to collective narrative relating the stories of groups and institutions. Kaplan outlines Ricoeur's analysis of ideology in this respect:

The danger of the stories groups tell about themselves is that they often become frozen oversimplifications, expressed in slogans and caricature, serving only the interests of power and authority. Ideology functions through this kind of collective memory, as well as through ritualization, stereotype, and rhetoric, all of which prevent us from interpreting and recalling things differently (Kaplan, 2003: 96).

However, while Ricoeur insists on the necessity of exposing the dangers of ideological interpretations of reality, he also warns of the propensity of the critique to become another ideology.⁶

Ricoeur suggests a 'triple quest' in the constitution of the self (Ricoeur, 2002: 126); this order 'is built on the themes of having, power, and worth', and these quests are intricately linked (Ricoeur, 2002: 113). The quest for having, for possession, is fuelled by a desire for control through appropriation of

⁶The relevance of Ricoeur's warning may be discerned in the historical examples of the phenomenon whereby personalities and groups inspired by opposition and rebellion against established orders are transformed into protectors of newly-established orders. The Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, refers to this phenomenon in Irish history where the achievement of freedom and independence from a colonial power coincided with the establishment, explicit or implicit, of another set of restrictions and ideologies. The contemporary theorist, Slavoj Žižek, offers an ironical discourse on such reversals in his discussion of the paradoxical injunction 'to enjoy' which he discerns in the 'liberal', 'rule-free' experience of contemporary society.

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objects, and a dependence on this possession and ownership as a protection against loss. The loss which is feared is that of self-affirmation, and the mode of having as a bulwark against this threat can range from ‘a just possession which would distinguish among men without mutually excluding them’, to ‘unjust having’ which sees appropriation by the other as loss for oneself. In this sense ‘the category of having designates a vast domain in which the wrong done to others wears innumerable guises’ (Ricoeur, 1992: 221). A second root of self-affirmation follows from the relation of the quest for having, because having implies the power of man over man. The world of work, especially, posits the individual as a force dominating other forces. Ricoeur argues that almost all human actions entail the exertion of one will over another. This coheres with the philosophy of Nietzsche, where he argues that the exertion of one’s will, over everything that confronts it, is the ‘will-to-power’ which underlines all human drive and life. Ricoeur differentiates between *power-in-common* whereby a community shares the exercise of power in order to live together, and *power-over* which can easily become violence towards the other:

The descending slope is easy to mark off, from influence, the gentle form of holding power-over, all the way to torture, the extreme form of abuse...from the simple use of threats, passing through all the degrees of constraint, and ending in murder. In all these diverse forms, violence is equivalent to the diminishment or the destruction of the power-to-do of others. But there is something even worse...humiliation – a horrible caricature of humility (Ricoeur, 1992: 220).

What Ricoeur terms ‘something even worse’ is the utmost assault upon the integrity of the other because it attempts to obliterate that which is deemed indispensable to human survival, one’s sense of worth or self-esteem. The desire for esteem as reflected in the eyes of another ‘is a desire to exist, not through a vital affirmation of oneself, but through the favour of another’s recognition’ (Ricoeur, 2002: 120). The ambiguity of this desire is noted by Nietzsche: ‘One

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man runs to his neighbour because he is looking for himself, and another because he wants to lose himself" (Nietzsche, 2003: 87). It is in the realm of interpersonal relations that one desires acceptance, approval and recognition. As Kaplan asserts, 'recognition is something we owe to others not merely as a courtesy but because it is a necessary human need' (Kaplan, 2003: 156). The fragility of this esteem, dependent as it is on the opinion of the other, is open to deception, neglect, scorn and humiliation: 'Here there is a threat of existing in a quasi-phantasmal manner, of being a reflection...the possibility of being no more than the word of another, the dependence on fragile opinion' (Ricoeur, 2002: 121). Thus the quest for recognition by another cannot permanently answer the need for self-worth and self-esteem; unless this can also be discovered within the self there is a constant hunger for affirmation and recognition, and this takes precedence over any attempt at genuine connection and relationship with the other.

Ricoeur's observation that the problem of power and the problem evil are intertwined is solidified by his experience of the atrocities of the concentration camps, the terror of totalitarian regimes, and the peril of nuclear power, (Ricoeur, 2002: xiv), and also by his personal response to cruelty and betrayal between man and man, man and woman, adult and child, and the myriad forms of suffering which are inflicted physically and verbally by one human being upon another. He concludes that 'the possibility of moral evil is inherent in man's constitution' (Ricoeur, 2002: 133). Evil is a reality of human life, 'it is manifest only in the way it *affects* human existence...In all hypotheses, evil manifests itself in man's humanity' (Ricoeur, 2002: xlvi). In his analysis of the ethical dimension in Ricoeur's thought, John Wall reminds us that 'violence remains ultimately our own free choice, [and that if] we refuse to acknowledge our responsibility for violence...we deny our own freedom to re-create our own moral world' (Wall, 2005: 109). This reference to our individual responsibility for and involvement in the reality of conflict is asserted by Ricoeur:

Even if it is true that the real conflicts that stake out affective history are accidents, in the literal sense of the word, random

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encounters between our effort, our power of affirmation, and the forces of nature, or the familial, social, and cultural environment, the fact remains that all these external conflicts could not be interiorized if a latent conflict within ourselves did not precede them (Ricoeur, 2002: 132).

The 'conflicts that stake out affective history' reflect the conflicts, conscious or unconscious, 'within ourselves'; we recognize these conflicts through our own personal experience.

Solicitude

Talking about love may be too easy, or rather too difficult. How can we avoid simply praising it or falling into sentimental platitudes? (Ricoeur, 1996: 23).

Ricoeur's exploration of love, relationship and solicitude ranges over concepts of friendship, agape, self-love and sexual love, and he discerns the desire for possession, power and worth as potentially motivating various manifestations of these experiences. Human fallibility, frailty and need can diminish the possibility of genuine relationship in human living; the quest for recognition and affirmation can impose conformity to the demands and expectations of others; and the fear of one's existential aloneness can propel a flight from the self towards the potential safeguard of belonging and acceptance. Ricoeur accepts these constraints on human capability, 'self-recognition requires, at each step, the help of others' (Ricoeur, 2005: 69), but he suggests a dialectic of self and other which acknowledges human solitude, understands the need for self-esteem, and strives for co-existence of personal solitude and intersubjective solicitude: 'my thesis is that solicitude is not something added on to self-esteem from outside but that it unfolds the dialogic dimension of self-esteem' (Ricoeur, 1992: 180). Within this comprehensive and ambivalent framework, the possibility of self-love and love for the other is enabled:

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My own self-esteem that I search for by means of the esteem of others is of the same nature as the esteem I experience for others. If humanity is what I esteem in another and in myself, I esteem myself as a thou for another. I esteem myself in the second person...I love myself as if what I loved were another (Ricoeur, 2002: 124).

Freud says something similar when he refutes the precept of universal love: 'I love another...if...he so much resembles me that in him I can love myself' (Freud, 2002: 46). The dialectic between self-esteem and solicitude for others suggests that they are intrinsically linked. This is also the argument of Fromm in his discussion of love:

The love for my own self is inseparably connected with the love for any other being...love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. *Love, in principle, is indivisible as far as the connection between 'objects' and one's own self is concerned* (Fromm, 1995: 46).

Esteem for oneself implies the esteem for the other, because the self is an other and the other is a self. One-sided esteem is not genuine; it is distorted in some way, as it infers a splintered and selective understanding of humanity. Respect, understanding, compassion and tolerance cannot be genuinely felt and expressed for another while simultaneously being withheld from the self. The converse is equally true.

The lure of escape from one's essential aloneness is often focused on a desired fusion with the other, but Ricoeur insists that this fusion is illusory and deceptive: 'The one is not the other. We exchange gifts, but not places...the benefit of this admission is that it protects mutuality against the pitfalls of a fusional union...a just distance is maintained at the heart of mutuality, a just

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distance that integrates respect into intimacy' (Ricoeur, 2005: 263). Kearney explains the attraction and impossibility of this desired union as 'the lure of fusion, that is, for the illusion that some ecstasy or addiction might make us 'one with the other'. But it cannot. The other will never 'be' me, nor even 'like' me' (Kearney, 2001: 13), and he urges 'an awareness that no amount of intimacy can ever grasp the other' (Kearney, 2001: 14). In Ricoeur's words 'the lived experience of the other always remains inaccessible to me' (Ricoeur, 2005: 157). Acknowledgement of human solitude and a respect for the alterity of the other enables the emergence of a dialectical esteem wherein self and other are recognized in their unique humanity. In this dialectic, 'the voice of solicitude' is heard, 'the voice which asked that the plurality of persons and their otherness not be obliterated by the globalizing idea of humanity' (Ricoeur, 1992: 227).

Freedom from the constraints of identity and recognition sought exclusively in the affirmation of the other enables the attainment of personal autonomy and responsibility: 'it is not a fate that governs my life from the outside but the inimitable way in which I exercise my freedom as a man' (Ricoeur, 2002: 61). However, Ricoeur distinguishes between an illusory self-sufficiency and an autonomy which recognizes, and indeed celebrates, the need for otherness: 'the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought without the other' (Ricoeur, 1992: 3). This need is not reducible to quests for assimilation, absorption, or control, but is intrinsically linked to esteem for the self and for the other than self: 'The autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbour and with justice for each individual' (Ricoeur, 1992: 18). As the Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly notes, 'the self knows that self is not enough' (Kennelly, 2004: 425), and the possibility of solicitude exists within a welcoming acknowledgement of this insufficiency. Solicitude embraces the need for others, without obliterating autonomy, responsibility, or self-esteem: 'To self-esteem, understood as a reflexive moment of the wish for the "good life", solicitude adds essentially the dimension of *lack*, the fact that we *need*

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friends; as a reaction to the effect of solicitude on self-esteem, the self perceives itself as another among others' (Ricoeur, 1992: 192).

Ricoeur differentiates between solicitude and 'obedience to duty', and he argues that 'its status is that of benevolent spontaneity, intimately related to self-esteem within the framework of the aim of the "good" life' (Ricoeur, 1992: 190). Esteem, recognition, and the experience of solicitude imply a mutuality which embraces self and other in their autonomy, frailty, capability and vulnerability. Ricoeur explains this mutuality with reference to Aristotle's thesis on *Philia*: 'the good man's own being is desirable to him; given this, the being of his friend is then equally desirable to him' (Ricoeur, 1992: 186). Faith in human goodness, in oneself and in others, co-existing with an acknowledgement of human frailty, fallibility and evil, enables the possibility of solicitude. This is Ricoeur's thesis, according to Wall: 'for Ricoeur, love is given to the other from the self, originating in a prior faith in the self's own human created goodness that is then applied to the other as another such self' (Wall, 2005: 121). Self-esteem and self-appreciation simultaneously opens to appreciation and respect for others, and this mutuality is enhanced rather than hindered by the embrace of solitude and distance: 'must one not, in order to make oneself open, available, belong to oneself in a certain sense?' (Ricoeur, 1992: 138). As Kearney explains, 'By deepening solitude, the self discovers that it receives from others all that it appreciates in its own being, and consequently it is not alone' (Kearney, 1996: 44).

Ricoeur's acknowledgement of human frailty, fallibility and evil does not belie a belief in the potential goodness of the human subject and the possibility of love and happiness within his appraisal. He situates this possibility in the concrete experiences of action and relation, with the focus on the people who are in one's life and care, rather than in theoretical abstractions which are often devoid of responsibility: 'It is for the other who is in my charge that I am responsible' (Ricoeur, 2005: 108). In the immediate, individual and unique encounters with reality, of self and other, choices are made, judgments are considered, and the possibility of solicitude presents itself. Such encounters are

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'events' in which the experience of happiness is enabled: 'The events that bespeak happiness are those which remove obstacles and uncover a vast landscape of existence' (Ricoeur, 2002: 68). Ricoeur accepts the human desire for happiness, but sees its attainment as experienced in the encounters and 'events' through which life is directed: 'happiness is not given in any experience; it is only adumbrated in a consciousness of direction. No act gives happiness, but the encounters of our life that are most worthy of being called "events" indicate the direction of happiness' (Ricoeur, 2002: 68). Deception, denial, projection and blindness pose obstacles to the experience of these events, but these may be overcome in an on-going openness to 'the vast landscape of existence'. Ricoeur sees this as the 'function' of the human subject:

This essential openness or accessibility to...the "function" or the "project" of man as such, grounds the person in giving him a horizon of humanity that is neither I nor you but the task of treating the person, in me and in you, as an end and not as a means (Ricoeur, 2002: 136).

Within this 'horizon of humanity', love is enabled, both as an attainable possibility and as the way of being which fulfils itself: 'It is Eros, it is Love that shows that this aim, which is immanent to the function of man, is happiness anticipated in a consciousness of direction and of belonging' (Ricoeur, 2002: 137). While Ricoeur acknowledges the fallibility and frailty of human nature, and while he insists on an acceptance of the reality of evil as a creation of humanity, he nevertheless maintains a belief in the primordial goodness of the human being, he confirms the possibility of hope even amid impossible constraints, and he expresses a love of life in spite of its brokenness: 'Man is the Joy of Yes in the sadness of the finite' (Ricoeur, 2002: 140).

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