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Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur on Self-Interpretations and Narrative Identity

In this chapter I discuss Charles Taylor's and Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative identity and narratives as a central form of self-interpretation.¹ Both Taylor and Ricoeur think that self-identity is a matter of culturally and socially mediated self-definitions, which are practically relevant for one's orientation in life.² First, I will go through various characterisations that Ricoeur gives of his theory, and try to show to what extent they also apply to Taylor's theory. Then, I will analyse more closely Charles Taylor's, and in section three, Paul Ricoeur's views on narrative identity.

1. The various mediating roles of narrative identity

The most general point that unites Ricoeur and Taylor is that they both have very strong intuitions against one-sided reductions. From Ricoeur's texts we can find as many as eight different characterisations of narrative identity as playing some kind of mediating role:

- 1) Narrative identity contains both *harmony and dissonance*. Narratives mediate between discordance and concordance and bring about "discordant concordance" or "concordant discordance" to our identities, especially when the discordance in question is *temporal*. (Ricoeur 1984, pp. 4, 21, 31, 42, 43, 49, 60, 69-73, 151, 161, 168, 229)
- 2) Narratives are both *lived and told*. Narrative configurations mediate between the world of action and the world of the reader. (Ricoeur 1984, ch.2, ch.3; Ricoeur 1991; Carr 1986; Kaunismaa & Laitinen 1998)

¹ "Self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of autobiographies." Ricoeur (1992, 114, fn1)

² Both Taylor and Ricoeur distinguish self-identity from various forms of idem-identity that apply to non-persons as well: sameness as synchronous unity, sameness as diachronous persistence and similarity. (Ricoeur 1992, ch 5 &6.)

- 3) Narratives are both innovative and based on established views. Narrativity, in the manner of traditions, includes a dialectic of *innovation and sedimentation*. (Ricoeur 1984, pp. 68, 69, 77, 79, 166, 208, 229).
- 4) Narratives combine *fact and fiction*. Narrative identity occupies a central position between historical narratives and narratives of literary fiction (Ricoeur 1987, 244-9).³
- 5) Narrative identity mediates between "*what is*" and "*what ought to be*". Narration occupies a middle ground between neutral description and ethical prescription. (1992, 114-5, 152-168). Narrative identity is not reducible to neutral description although, on the other hand, ethical identity is also not reducible to narrative identity.⁴
- 6) Narrative identity mediates between two kinds of permanence in time, between two poles of self-identity (or "*ipse-identity*"). These two poles are, first, "selfhood without support from sameness" ("pure *ipse*"), which Ricoeur illustrates by the phenomenon of "keeping one's word". The second pole is "selfhood as supported by sameness" ("*ipse* as supported by *idem*"), which Ricoeur illustrates with the phenomenon of character. This opens up a space for "an intervention of narrative identity in the conceptual constitution of personal identity in the manner of a specific mediator between the pole of character, where *idem* and *ipse* tend to coincide, and the pole of self-maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness." (Ricoeur 1992, 119, cf. also pp. 1-3, 113-125, 140-151.)
- 7) Theories of narrative identity are located between an affirmation of a certain and indubitable "I" and a total rejection of an "I". The hermeneutical approach to selfhood occupies a central position between Cartesian cogito-philosophy and the Nietzschean

³ "The fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction is the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity that we can call their narrative identity" (Ricoeur 1987, 246). "[T]he historical component of a narrative about oneself draws this narrative toward the side of a chronicle submitted to the same documentary verifications as any other historical narration, while the fictional component draws it towards those imaginative variations that destabilize narrative identity. In this sense, narrative identity continues to make and unmake itself." (1987, 249)

⁴ "Narrative identity does not exhaust the question of the self-constancy of a subject, whether this be a particular individual or a community of individuals. ... [T]he practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. In this sense, narrative exercises imagination more than the will, even though it remains a category of action. ... [R]eading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently. However this impetus is transformed into action only through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand! So narrative identity is not equivalent to true self-constancy except through this decisive moment, which makes ethical responsibility the highest factor in self-constancy. ... It is at this point that the notion of

philosophy of "the shattered cogito" (Ricoeur 1992, 1-25). Narrative identity helps to solve the antinomial oscillation these polar opposites create.⁵ Narrative identity neither presupposes nor fully rejects a *cogito*.

- 8) In narrative identity, the person is not merely the one who tells the story, or merely the one about whom the story is told, but she "appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life" (1987, 246). Thus, the individual is both the *interpreter* and the *interpreted*, as well as the *recipient* of the interpretations.

Typically of Ricoeur, all of these characterisations illustrate how narrative identity mediates between two extremes: *harmony and dissonance, lived and told, innovation and sedimentation, fact and fiction, "what is" and "what ought to be", voluntary and involuntary, exalted cogito and "shattered cogito", the author and the reader.*⁶ Taylor has a similar taste for avoiding extremes, and his position is in substantial agreement with Ricoeur's on many points.

Nevertheless, Charles Taylor would not agree with all of the mentioned points. The central difference between the two is that Ricoeur favours indirect hermeneutics, whereas Taylor seems to opt for direct hermeneutics.⁷ In connection to narrative identity, this means that Ricoeur's analysis contains a detour through a structural analysis of narration as emplotment. Taylor also locates narratives directly on the ethical level, whereas Ricoeur says that narratives mediate between the ethical and descriptive perspectives.

narrative identity encounters its limit and has to link up with the nonnarrative components in the formation of an acting subject." (Ricoeur 1987, 249).

⁵ "Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antinomy with no solution. Either we must posit a subject identical with itself through the diversity of its different states, or, following Hume and Nietzsche, we must hold that this identical subject is nothing more than a substantialist illusion, whose elimination merely brings to light a pure manifold of cognitions, emotions, and volitions." (Ricoeur 1987, 246).

⁶ One could add even more characterizations of the same kind. For example narrative 'retrograde' necessity of events (and actions) occupies a middle position *between strict necessity and pure contingency*, or between identity and diversity: "the narrative operation has developed an entirely original concept of dynamic identity which reconciles the same categories which Locke took as contraries: identity and diversity." (Ricoeur 1992, 143)

⁷ According to Ricoeur (1974, 3-24), Heidegger and Gadamer represent direct hermeneutics, but Taylor fits the description well. Another difference between Ricoeur and other hermeneutic thinkers is Ricoeur's strong emphasis on detours through texts instead of a more direct dialogical understanding. For a discussion on this aspect, see Kaunismaa & Laitinen 1998.

Further, Taylor does not draw a distinction between the two poles of self-identity, but instead tends to focus on the side of what Ricoeur calls "character".

Paul Ricoeur analyses narrative identity from the viewpoint of his general analysis of narrativity as an emplotment and imitation of action. The analysis applies both to historical and fictive narratives. Taylor does not pay attention to narrativity in the technical sense. Nevertheless, one can say that from the Aristotelian elements of tragic poetry, Ricoeur stresses the notion of plot, whereas the center of Taylor's analysis is the "thought" or theme of the narrative. He is interested in "the thematic unity of life", or the sense of direction in human lives. This direction or orientation is defined by one's ethical commitments. The spatial metaphors of "direction" and "orientation" refer both to the choices of our fundamental goals and our sense of being closer to or further from achieving them.⁸

Charles Taylor connects narratives to the idea that human beings inevitably orient themselves in life by means of strong evaluations. The movement toward or away from the valuable ends is the topic of our biographies. According to Ricoeur, narratives are a central form of self-interpretation, whereas for Taylor the notion of strong evaluations is the focal point. Taylor thinks there is a variety of forms in which strong evaluations can be expressed, but nevertheless contends that among them, narrativity is an inescapable form of self-interpretation. On the other hand, Ricoeur says that whereas narratives stir the imagination, taking an ethical stand and committing oneself are the final steps in self-determination. Thus, we can say that both Ricoeur and Taylor think that both ethical and narrative aspects are necessary in the process of creating and sustaining one's identity.⁹

2. Charles Taylor on strong evaluations and narratives

For Charles Taylor, strong evaluations are the central issue in self-interpretations.¹⁰ Strong evaluations refer to qualitative distinctions concerning the "worth" of different

⁸ Taylor 1989, 25-52.

⁹ *Ibid*; Ricoeur 1987, 249.

¹⁰ Ricoeur (1992; 2000), too, adopts Taylor's notion of strong evaluations.

desires, feelings, actions or modes of life. Our identities are partly constituted by what we value. We aspire to, respect, care about and admire certain modes of life more than others (Taylor 1985a, 15-45). Internalising an ideal *directly* contributes to what I am like. I am partially defined by my strong evaluations or orientations. "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand" (Taylor 1989, 27).

But strong evaluations are also relevant *indirectly*, by offering the standards by which we evaluate what we are and which guide our "identifications-with". We identify with some of our desires and feelings, namely those we evaluate strongly enough. On the basis of these ideals we can answer the question "when are we ourselves?". For example, different brute desires or addictions (e.g. a drug addiction) may be something that I do not consider as truly mine. Nothing would be lost if I were to lose these brute desires. Yet some other brute desires, like the desire for Peking Duck, might be something that would cause me to feel as though I had lost something important if I were to lose it. What makes the difference is the content of the desire, not the fact that it may be a brute desire rooted in my economy of inclinations. Our "identifications-with" are based on our strong evaluations.¹¹

2.1. The implicit, the articulated, the re-appropriated

Self-interpretations consist not only of our *explicit* answers to the question "who am I" but also of our *implicit* orientations in life. There are two levels in our identity, the implicit level of reactions, motivations and actions and the explicit level of linguistic articulations. Even before the question "what kind of person am I" enters our consciousness, we are living one answer or another.

Charles Taylor (as well as Paul Ricoeur) stresses that while the explicit level is dependent on the implicit level, the implicit level is also altered by our explicit formulations.

¹¹ Taylor, "What's wrong with negative liberty", in 1985b. Compare to Joseph Raz: "When are we ourselves" in 1999.

"Our attempts to formulate what we hold important must, like descriptions, strive to be faithful to something. But what they strive to be faithful to is not an independent object ..., but rather a largely inarticulate sense of what is of decisive importance. An articulation of this 'object' tends to make it something different from what it was before." (Taylor 1985a, 38)

Thus, we can distinguish two levels, the implicit and the explicit, and a threefold dialectic between them.¹² First of all, our identity is constructed through our orientations, which may remain totally implicit. A functioning identity can, to a large degree, remain implicit. Thus, the first level can be referred to as the level of *implicit functioning*.

Secondly, we can explicate our implicit sense of who we are, or what is of importance to us. There can be rival explications and rival answers to the question "who am I". One criterion of a successful answer is how true the explications are of our implicit orientations, or how well they avoid distorted pictures of ourselves. But even the best explications can be further weighed and re-evaluated from the viewpoint of moral ideals and imaginative identifications: perhaps the conception we finally identify with is not the one, which is truest to what we have been so far. Our implicit views may have been onesided. It may well be that facts about our past, imaginative identifications and evaluative elements all pull in different directions in our personal reflection.¹³

At this explicit level, there is a plurality of media of expression in which the implicit sense of self can be expressed: not only spoken language, but different arts or even body language will do. Narrative emplotment is one form of articulation, but also descriptive characterisations, such as the statement "I am Finnish", or prescriptive speech acts like "I really ought to stop smoking", can express our sense of ourselves. These need not be interpretations of one's life in its entirety but, rather, of one's ethical ideals, roles, practices, group-memberships *etc.* The crucial factor is that the 'inner' sense of self or of

¹² Compare to Paul Ricoeur's threefold *mimesis*, below. Cf. also Taylor 1989, 203-7 on the relation of practices and ideas.

¹³ Thus, I think Hartmut Rosa's (1998, 92-95) criterion of internal equilibrium between the implicit and explicit level is on its own an insufficient criterion for the validity of self-interpretations.

good is expressed in one way or another. Once it has been 'objectified', one can see the 'externalised' expression as one's own, one can identify with it. Here, too, a dialogical process takes place: these expressions are public, and what is public can be given rival definitions by others.¹⁴

The third phase is the appropriation of the explications, or the internalisation of the expressions. As Taylor points out, there is always an element of creativity in the linguistic articulation, and the appropriated articulation is not necessarily the same as the implicit sense that the process began with. Sometimes the self-definitions we adopt are self-consciously reformative. As time goes by, these once innovative self-definitions turn into routines and habits, they become re-sedimented and metamorphose into elements of the implicit background horizon of orientation. Thus, here we can refer to a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation as well as a dialectic of the implicit and the explicit.

2.2. Narratives and the thematic unity of life

In Taylor's theory, narrativity is linked with our strong evaluations and our identity in various ways. First of all, narratives figure among the optional media of expression in which the aforementioned dialectic of the implicit and explicit takes place. With the help of narratives, our implicit conceptions of the good can be made explicit to ourselves and also communicated to others. Historically speaking, for example biblical narratives have been very influential in communicating some visions of the good.

Secondly, strong evaluators care about their lives as wholes: "[W]hat is in question is, generally and characteristically, the shape of my life *as a whole*."¹⁵ Indeed, as Heidegger (1964, §46 ff.) points out, it is only as an object of care that one's life can be a whole. Objectively, at any point in our lives, there is always something that we are not yet, and thus we are not yet wholes. And when the wholeness is finally achieved, the person has ceased to exist. This paradox can be avoided by adopting a new perspective to the unity

¹⁴ On "expressivism", see Taylor 1975, 11-29.

¹⁵ Taylor 1989, 50.

of life as an object of concern. My entire life matters to me, and it is thus in the logical space of "mattering" or concern that we can refer to a unity of a life. My life as an object of my concern has a narrative unity, which Taylor says is a *thematic* unity, not the mere sameness of the human organism (Taylor 1989, 528, fn. 38).

The Heideggerian notion of being-in-time captures an inescapable structure of self-interpretations: we can make sense of events by localising them into larger temporal wholes, in the wider context of our lives. Taylor says that "making sense of one's life as a story is also, like orientation to the good, not an optional extra. ... In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going." (1989, 47). Humans "make sense of their lives as an unfolding story in a way that gives meaning to their past and direction to their future" (Abbey, 37-8).

One can note critically that one's life is neither the minimal nor maximal locus of meaning: different practices as aspects of life include autonomous internal goods and standards of excellence and they are thus possible centres of narrative gravity, while being smaller units than an entire life. For Taylor, also a sense of belonging to larger wholes or to longer histories than one's own life can provide meaning to one's own life. Thus, caring about oneself *may* but *need not* be identical to caring about one's life as a whole.

Thirdly, according to Taylor, selfhood can naturally be captured in a "moral topography of self."¹⁶ He means that what spatio-temporal metaphors like "moral space", "moral maps", "orientations to good", "direction of a life", "moving toward or away from goods" express, is an inescapable feature of selfhood. Taylor says that our everyday world is not a neutral or value-free reality, but we inevitably experience it in terms of value. Thus we live in a moral space instead of a neutral space. In this space, we orient ourselves, we have goals and aims, which are things we value or conceive as good. Thus, we orient ourselves toward the good.

¹⁶ Taylor 1988, 1989, 111-114.

The orientation alone is not all that matters. Whether or not we move towards these goods, is dependent on the success of our actions. This movement is what we mean when we refer to the direction of our lives. Taylor thinks that people experience that they are leading a life, and this implies control over the movement of one's life.¹⁷ How strong the sense of being in control is varies, as well as the strength of the sense of being in motion. Our life runs in a direction that is either toward or away from the strongly valued goods. This movement within moral space is the theme of our biographies.¹⁸ Thus, narrative identity makes sense of our movements in moral space.

Fourthly, narratives are related not only to our moving away or toward the goods but also to the changes in the "moral maps" that guide our lives, in our conceptions of the good. Narratives can make sense of changes and even revolutions in one's moral outlook. Thus, there is a diachronous heterogeneity to our lives, which narratives have the potential to make sense of.

Indeed, Taylor thinks that this kind of reasoning in transitions is the very basic form of practical reasoning. Practical reason cannot provide absolute proofs of any first premises, but it can comparatively assess two different positions. There are different modes of comparison: in some cases, one can be convinced that position B is better than A because the transition from A to B solves some of A's internal problems and can explain why A had these problems. Thus, the transition is an epistemic gain. Or, one can know that some transitions are learning processes, we know from our own experience that learning processes lead us to a better position. Taylor refers here to our personal experiences and "biographical transitions".¹⁹

Fifthly, because there is a plurality of goods, there can also be a synchronous heterogeneity, and one way of unifying different goods is to assign them different places and times in one's life. As Abbey (2000, 38-9) puts it, Taylor's view is that "when people

¹⁷ Taylor 1997, Abbey 2000, 39

¹⁸ The spatial metaphor can also mislead: it is possible that our 'distance from the good' can remain the same throughout our lives. For example, my level of honesty may remain constant despite - or as a result of - my strivings. Thus, it may be there is no *movement* within moral space. See Lane (1992).

think about how to balance the disparate goods in their lives, they combine a sense of diversity with one of unity. The many goods that claim one's allegiance do so within the context of a single life. When a person's life is viewed as a whole, it becomes easier to see that seemingly different and even incommensurable goods can be combined in practice."

Thus, the diversity of goods can be conceived in diachronic and synchronic ways.²⁰ For example, let's say that I am a Catholic Marxist who is in love with a Hindu, and that there is tension between these aspects of my identity. Let us assume further that I used to be a Communitarian Atheist in the past. Thus, in addition to the synchronous tensions, there is the diachronous discrepancy between what I was and what I am now. Narrativity can bring concordance to both synchronous and diachronous discordances, through combining a plurality of goods within a single life and through reasoning in transitions.

To sum up, narrativity has five functions in Charles Taylor's theory. Narratives are (i) an optional medium for articulating some of our implicit self-interpretations and strong evaluations. Narratives alone enable us to (ii) care about our lives as wholes and to (iii) interpret our movements in a moral space. Further, narrative thinking provides a way of providing concordance to (iv) diachronous and (v) synchronous dissonances in our strong evaluations.

3. Paul Ricoeur on emplotment and narrative identity

3.1. Threefold *mimesis*

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity refers to those kinds of practical identities whose explication takes the form of emplotted narratives. Ricoeur's structural analysis re-interprets what Aristotle wrote in *Poetics*. According to Aristotle, various arts are forms of imitation (*mimesis*), tragic poetry being the imitation of action. A tragedy - or the art of

¹⁹ "Explanation and Practical Reason", in Taylor 1995

²⁰ Abbey 2000, 39, Taylor 1997.

composing tragedies - consists of six different elements²¹, the most important of which is the plot: the organisation of events into a coherent story, into an organised whole with a beginning, middle and an end. The central concept is *muthos*, emplotment. Aristotle identifies emplotment and the mimetic activity: the imitation of an action is nothing more than the emplotment, in which the events are structured into a whole.

Ricoeur accepts Aristotle's central idea, but notes that there are three levels in the imitation of action (*mimesis1*, *mimesis2* and *mimesis3*), only one of which is emplotment itself: *Mimesis2* is the level of emplotment, of configuring the events into a story.

Mimesis1 is the reference to the actual world of action, to the "imitated" events that the story is about. This world of action in itself does not contain beginnings and endings in the strong sense that narratives create beginnings and ends, but it is already pre-narratively organised *structurally, symbolically and temporally*.

The world of action is structurally pre-narrative. Any action - in comparison to mere physical occurrences - always implies a network of action-concepts and a practical understanding concerning them (agent, goals, means, circumstance, motives, expectations, responsibility, interaction, help, hostility, co-operation, conflict; answers to the questions 'what', 'why', 'who', 'how', 'with whom' and 'against whom') (1984, 54-6). we refer to these intentions and understandings in intentional explanations of actions. "So, typical intentional actions are actions about which their agents have a story to tell ..., a story which explains why one acted as one did." (Raz 1999, 24) Yet, while agents always do have a story to tell, not all intentional explanations are full-fledged narratives in the technical sense. There are other cultural symbols in which we can say what we did, or what we intended to do, which nevertheless fall short of being emplotted narratives.

²¹ The six elements are plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle and song. (Aristotle: Poetics, 1450a10); Ricoeur 1984, 33.

From the viewpoint of emplotment, all these non-narrative forms belong to the pre-narrative structure of the world of action.²²

With the *symbolic* mediation, Ricoeur is referring to the fact that actions always embody signs, rules and norms. These are not private but public meanings, which make actions readable to others. According to Ricoeur, an action is a quasi-text, in which symbols provide the rules of interpreting behaviour. Thus, others need not wait to hear the agent's explanation of what she did, they can see and understand it themselves. The norms governing behaviour are also constraining, telling us which actions are good and bad, approved of or disapproved of. (1984, 57-59)

The third feature of human action is its threefold *temporality*. As a project, action is always oriented toward the future, and as a motivation, it inherently carries the past (1984, 59-64). Thus, on the whole, *mimesis1* refers to the pre-narrative structural, symbolic and temporal features of the ordinary world of action.

The phase of *mimesis2* is the explicit configuration of various events in emplotted stories. "In short, emplotment is the operation, that draws a configuration out of a simple succession," emplotment "transforms the events or incidents into a story" (1984, 65). The plot juxtaposes various heterogeneous elements (agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results) as well as temporally distant elements. It does so by means of a unifying theme or thought, by imposing a "sense of an ending" to the story (1984, 66-67). This phase of *mimesis2* has some liberties in relation to the pre-figured, pre-narrative elements, although there is also an internal connection. The organised events took place in the world of action, but the organisation itself, the plot, is created by the author.

The phase of *mimesis3* "marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" (1984, 71). Thus, while Ricoeur states that the making of a story is

²² See, however, a contrary statement in Ricoeur 1987, 248: "The first mimetic relation refers, in the case of an individual, to the semantics of desire, which only includes those pre-narrative features attached to the demand constitutive of human desire."

both an organisation of events into a story with a plot (*muthos*) and an "imitation of an action" (*mimesis*), Ricoeur does not equate *muthos* with *mimesis* as Aristotle does. Mimesis contains more than the emplotment, more than the level of *mimesis*². Mimesis consists also of a reference to the world of action (*mimesis*¹), and to the event of reading (*mimesis*³). In one sense, the structure is completed only when the reader reads the text. Reading always takes place in the context of the pre-understandings of the reader, and thus *mimesis*³ contains a reference to the world of the reader as well.

Emplotted narratives, which obey this logic of threefold mimesis, have a potential to bring about concordance to the temporal discordance by organising the seemingly separate events into a coherent and organised whole. An unexpected event that I suffered at one point in my life can become an expected event when told as a part of a coherent story. This kind of rendering of unity to one's life, with all of its fortunes and misfortunes, is something that only narratives can accomplish. This is why Ricoeur not only applies his notion of narrative to historiography and fiction, but also to identity-narratives. More specifically, the identity-narratives mediate between two kinds of human temporality: temporal persistence with the help of one's character and temporal persistence despite one's character. This is what the next subsection deals with.

3.2. The mediation between one's character and voluntary efforts

Ricoeur says that our self-identity, or *ipse*-identity, consists of a spectrum of different constituents, some of which are stable and sedimented into our second nature, and some of which we hold on to voluntarily. Ricoeur illustrates the two extreme poles with the figure of "*character*", which changes slowly and is not as easily re-definable, and with the figure of "*keeping one's word*", which is in our voluntary control and not supported by sameness. These are two different modes of persistence in time. (Ricoeur 1992, 118-125)

As cultural beings, we have a second nature that is composed of acquired dispositions and identifications. Two main constituents of our second nature are our habits and our

acquired identifications. What we do and learn by doing affects the kinds of habits we have. Habit-formation shows how we actively mold the kind of people we are, without focusing on the question itself. Our habits guide our orientations without any explicit attention, and our habits are formed without giving explicit attention to the question of 'who to be'. We also identify with values and goals, we have what Taylor calls "strong evaluations". These habits and acquired identifications become sedimented into our character, and sustaining them demands no voluntary effort. (Ricoeur 1992, 118-125)

Yet some features belong to me through voluntary effort. Ricoeur illustrates this with the idea of keeping one's word. It may well be that everything must first be the object of a voluntary effort, prior to its sedimentation into second nature.²³ For Ricoeur, narratives are a form of self-interpretation which mediate between these two poles: narratives are occupied with the entire spectrum of selfhood, with and without support from the sameness of character.

4. Conclusions

Both Ricoeur and Taylor think that when referring to self-interpretations, the central question is one of the particularities of one's self-identity, and the answers are provided within culturally and socially mediated self-interpretations. This implies that the hermeneutic view of the self and narrative identity is located between an affirmation of a certain and indubitable "I" and a total rejection of that "I". Further, it means that the person in question - together with others - is both the interpreter and the interpreted.

Ricoeur holds that narrative identity mediates between two kinds of permanence in time, one based on voluntary efforts and the other on character. For Taylor's analysis of strong evaluations, the pole of character seems primary. Narrative identity contains both concordance and discordance, both unity and plurality. The plurality in question can be both synchronous and diachronous. While Taylor focuses on the plurality and

²³ As Liebermann (1998) has pointed out, voluntary *commitments* which are more general than mere promises share some features of the acquired identifications, which can be sedimented into our second nature, and the voluntary persistence typical of promises.

discordance on the level of strong evaluations, Ricoeur talks about all kinds of discordance in the world of action. The paradigmatic case of unity that narratives bring about is the thematic unity of an entire life, but as was pointed out above, narratives can bring unity also to smaller and larger units. Ricoeur talks explicitly about the temporal concordance that narrative can bring about, but Taylor sees narratives as having a role in practical reasoning and conflict-solving in general.

Narrativity, and self-interpretations in general, include a dialectic of innovation and sedimentation. The implicit layers of one's habitual and characteristic orientations are molded through explicit articulations in narrative and other forms. The tension between implicit and explicit means that narratives are both lived and told, as Ricoeur's analysis of the threefold mimesis and Taylor's corresponding views show.

Because of the central role of strong evaluations in our identity, we can see that identity is not mere description. Identity is not merely a matter of moral stance either, because what we actually are serves as the basis of our identity formation: we identify with some of our characteristics (the desire for Peking Duck) while not with others (a drug addiction). Nevertheless, there is a factual basis for our identity. The role of ideals and strong evaluations also illustrates how one's identity is constituted through something that I am not yet, something that is merely ideal or projected into the future. In this sense, identity has a fictive element. Another important function of fiction in one's identity is that I can adopt models for my life from fictive sources. The analysis of fiction is more important to Ricoeur than to Taylor.

To sum up, self-interpretations and narrative identity can indeed be characterised as the mediation between all of the different extremes mentioned in the beginning. These were concordance and discordance, 'lived' and 'told', implicit and explicit, innovation and sedimentation, fact and fiction, "what is" and "what ought to be", voluntary and involuntary, exalted cogito and shattered cogito, the author and the reader. While most of these extremes can be mediated by non-narrative interpretations as well, at least temporal discordance and concordance can be brought about only through narratives. In addition,

given the central role of temporality in human existence it would not be an exaggeration to claim that narratives are a central medium of self-interpretation. Our life is not just a continuum of separate events, but rather our past and future always structure our present experiences and action. We typically care about our lives as wholes, and it is narratives which make this possible.²⁴

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