

The Human and Its Discourse: From Fragmentation to Unification

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Abstract

We are living in an era in which the differentiation of knowledge in the contemporary sciences has spurred a great increase in complexity. On one hand, this complexity is accompanied by specialisation and fragmentation; on the other hand, it fosters increased research of shared methods and vocabularies, and interdisciplinary approaches. The character and complexity of the different, intertwined series of challenges and the problematic connected to this discourse becomes particularly vivid if we consider the knot around the discourse of the human and the contemporary paradoxes related to the pre-eminent idea of what it means to become a person. Paul Ricoeur's research offers a contemporary, comprehensive example of the complex interconnection of this dialectic. At the same time, it offers an example of a general model capable of being considered as a multilevel methodology for philosophy and the human and social sciences. This is critical hermeneutics: A theoretical-practical and interdisciplinary procedure based on a transversal epistemology. In the end, the application of his philosophy and methodology to the concrete case of the contemporary human life will lead to reasoning with new complexities and paradoxes, revealing that, in the end, any comprehensive attempt to define the human being requires the support of a new, varied, and nourished humanism..

Key Words: Hermeneutic arc, Critical hermeneutics, Human discourse, Individual, Person, Dualism.

Introduction

Without a doubt, we are living in a 'post-Hegelian' era of the non-synthetic and non-systematic ordering of our knowledge of the world, of life and the human being. Even compared to the recent past, the flourishing of our theoretical, practical, and technical knowledge has today reached an unexpected, extraordinarily high level in these different areas. This differentiation of knowledge in the contemporary sciences has provoked a great increase in complexity. If, from one side, such complexity accompanied by specialisation, and reinforcing its negative aspect of fragmentation and isolation, then, from the other, it fosters a proliferation of shared research methods, vocabularies, and interdisciplinary approaches.

A critical hermeneutics may help in re-harmonising the disciplines and re-coordinating knowledge production, because it offers a multilevel approach in terms of epistemology as well as methodology, and benefits from the vast and well-articulated vocabulary of philosophy whose own critical hermeneutics may succeed in extracting it from its theoretical and traditional sources. The character and complexity of the different, intertwined series of challenges and the problematic connected to this discourse is particularly evident if we consider the knot around the discourse of the human and the contemporary paradoxes related to the pre-eminent idea of what it means to become a person.

The horizontal axis of the movement of the differentiation, division, and specialisation of knowledge and of the sciences crosses and intertwines, at different levels, the vertical axis of the traditional problematic dialectic regarding what is the human being versus what is personal identity. Obviously, this second thematic line brings additional difficulties because of its long and varied history, and because of the extended, non-unified conceptual net of philosophy, developed through thousands of years of speculative and scientific research around the human being. The research of Paul Ricoeur offers a contemporary, comprehensive take on the complex interconnection of this dialectic.

In its philosophical approach, it mirrors both the difficulties related to today's enrichment and fragmentation of our knowledge, as well as the consequential impact on our understanding of the human being (which is richer and more fragmented than ever before). At the same time, Ricoeur's work indicates a possible new way to approach this open intricacy, a way that is resistant to any synthetic or reductive solution.

From his entire philosophical oeuvre, it is possible to extract a general model capable of being considered as a general, multileveled methodology for philosophy and the human and social sciences. This is critical hermeneutics, a theoretical-practical and interdisciplinary procedure based on a transversal epistemology which works between *explanation* and *understanding*, and which is outlined in Section 1. Ricoeur's anthropological philosophy subsumes and reflects the strength and productivity of this multileveled and varied approach. It meets, undergoes, and assimilates different elements and aspects from different philosophical schools and traditions – Spiritualism, Existentialism, Phenomenology, Reflexive Philosophy, Hermeneutics, Structuralism, Pragmatism, Narrative Philosophy, Philosophy of Action, Philosophy of History –, as well as various scientific disciplines – Empirical Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Psychiatry, Rhetoric, Linguistics, Anthropology, History and Historiography, Neuroscience, and Law. His philosophy of the human being will be rapidly summarised in its progressive evolution in the Section 2.

Certainly, the connection between the horizontal axis of a critical hermeneutics as a general methodology and the vertical axis which is such a complex, open, philosophical anthropology, will largely reproduce the constants of compartmentalisation and differentiation, which is the invincible cipher of our times. But, perhaps, the Ricoeurian approach can offer a more comprehensive alternative, one more focused on re-connection and re-unification, and less fragmented than others. However, I argue in Section 3 that the application of his philosophy and methodology to the concrete case of contemporary human life will lead to reasoning in new complexities and paradoxes, revealing that, in the end, any comprehensive attempt by the human being requires that a multileveled approach cross a multileveled anthropology *within* a humanism variously nourished by an open (interminable) dialectic that is developed at a psycho-biological, sociological, philosophical, moral, and spiritual level.

1. General characters of a critical hermeneutics

Ricoeur provides a definition in his 1986 book *From Text to Action*¹ of his speculative procedure, with clear reference to specific methods and schools: It is a *reflexive* philosophy angled toward the perspective of Husserl's *phenomenology* as its *hermeneutical* variant. This formula certainly reflects Ricoeur's method in its essence as well as its preponderant characterisations. But it is not without criticism in terms of comprehensiveness – considering Ricoeur's punctual reference to other traditions like Spiritualism, Existentialism, and Philosophy of Action; and to social sciences like psychoanalysis, linguistics and history –, or of technical, theoretical, and methodological articulation, accord, and functioning. Ricoeur has progressively developed an epistemological model, in parallel, which he calls a *hermeneutic arc*, showing how the work of interpretation is the point of synthesis and, at the same time, of coordination between *explanation* and *comprehension*. On the one hand, this model represents an alternative solution to the bi-centenarian diatribe between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, whose difference was often shown by the antithetic use of *erklären* and *verstehen*, which Ricoeur coordinates under the work of a hermeneutics. On the other hand, this theory clearly demonstrates the central role of hermeneutics on a methodological and an epistemological level.

Through his mature work he profiles a philosophy as (1) a practical theory, (2) a speculative procedure able to work in an interdisciplinary way, and (3) an active, engaged and emancipatory critical practice. Thus, it seems closer to a *critical* hermeneutics rather than a *reflexive* (descriptive-interpretative) philosophy. The idea of a 'critical hermeneutics' goes back to Habermas' early project of a critical philosophy (a sort of remodulation and accomplishment of the Frankfurt School *Kritische Theorie*) and to his sixties' quarrel with Gadamer of 'hermeneutics of traditions' vs. 'critique of ideology.' In it, Ricoeur participated with a paper titled *Herméneutique et critique des idéologies* (1973; subsequently collected in *From Text to Action*) where he took a third position of mediation formulating the alternative of a 'critical hermeneutics.' Compared to the theoretical discourse that we are developing here and that Ricoeur himself develops in the course of his research, two aspects are of explicit importance in the paper:

¹Ricoeur, P., *From Text to Action: Essays on Hermeneutics II*. Trans. by K. Blamey and J. B. Thompson. Evanston (IL): Northwestern University Press 1991.

First, there is the strong connection of critical hermeneutics to the epistemology of the hermeneutic arc, a conception elaborated through a phenomenological hermeneutics of text, action and history that gives to critical hermeneutics the potential of an interdisciplinary and transversal approach articulated between *explanation* and *understanding*.

And second, there is the connection between critical hermeneutics and Freud's psychoanalysis, whose reinterpretation demonstrates the productive problematic for the human and social sciences of a scientific discipline with both a double discursive register (energetics and hermeneutics; explanatory and interpretative), and, at the same time, a double and varied approach to the complexity of human identity and his psychic life. Embraced as an interdisciplinary whole, critical hermeneutics emerges as a coordinated and coherent procedural system and technique able to work (1) between different kinds of knowledge, scientific and non-scientific; and (2) between differentiated and fragmented models, theories, and discursive registers that have a constant need of being flexibly reconnected and recombined, at the procedural level and at the level of conceptualisation, theorisation, and thematic synthesis. The major aspects of a critical hermeneutics as a philosophy are the following: (1) to consider the theoretical and speculative work as the conjunct work of the community of philosophers and scholars, ideally without prejudicial attitudes and positions in preferring models or traditions; (2) to work following the ideal of an equal contemplation of all the theories and possible solutions from the texts and works of all times and places; (3) to maximise the interdisciplinary approach; (4) to present and articulate an argued, rational and critical discourse without any anchorage to implicit or hidden 'ideologies', 'beliefs' and so on; (5) to dialectically apply philosophy to non-philosophic and non-scientific disciplines articulating the hermeneutical approach between description and interpretation, between theoretical explanation and practical reflection; (6) to develop a research, an investigation, and a theory distinguishing between reflexive degrees, thematic registers, and methodological-speculative degrees; and (7) to practice philosophy as a theoretical, practical and *engaged* discipline, i.e. a discipline with a direct application to social and political life.

2. The Metamorphoses of a philosophical anthropology

The series of transformations that Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology has had is not simply the fruit of the articulation and evolution of his theoretical and speculative research, or even of his methodological variations. Summarising and ordering the main aspects of this metamorphosis will help us to understand his philosophy of the human being, particularly its connection between the epistemological and methodological, as part of Ricoeur's philosophy and, at the same time, as an expression of a general problem of the human and social sciences in and of themselves. Effectively, the vertical problem of the multidimensional reality of the human being and personal identity – spiritually, psychologically, culturally, morally, socially, historically, and juridical-politically – is a product of different knowledges and competences being involved in the study and understanding of human nature: Philosophy and religion, psychology and sociology, history and ethics, literature and art, law and politics. Step by step, all of these elements were variously thematised in Ricoeur's anthropology and they were even progressively considered as disciplinary elements of reference during his phenomenological, reflexive, and hermeneutical research.

In Ricoeur's first anthropological construction, the spiritual viewpoint is preminent in its connection with the psychological dimension. He develops his first great sketch of a philosophy of the human being in *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950), a work of philosophical phenomenology, which aims to realise a comprehensive, full experience of the integral or concrete Cogito. In this book, he describes the essential structures of the voluntary and corresponding involuntary structures. At this level, that of the 'absolute involuntary', he introduces Freud's central concept of the *Unbewusst*, the unconscious. *Stricto sensu*, this domain is one of *corporal necessity* – with its articulation in *character*, the *unconscious*, and *life* – which shows the structure of taking the root of subjectivity or freedom into nature or necessity. Necessity reveals itself to be the cipher of an abstract subjectivity that is invincible, involuntary separated from other subjects of will, from history, and from the course of nature. To accept, to consent is the only form of choice in this reality. Yet the dialectic between voluntary and involuntary is constantly being reopened; so then the human is continually confronted with conditions of contradiction and conflict, and, yet again, forced to consent. In fact, the character constantly reveals my specificity and limit; the unconscious constantly drags me towards the sorrow of formlessness; and life, which constantly reminds me of my provisional condition, generates in me the sorrow of contingency. At the end of this research, an oppositional conception of the human being emerges, as compared to Freud's vision. In fact, if for Freud, he is essentially *homo natura*, for Ricoeur he is *homo existentialis*.

The second anthropological point of view is formulated by Ricoeur in his 1960's *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*, two volumes that are part of the same book, *Finitude and Culpability*. In it, he maintains the same methodological dialectic of a spiritual and psychological approach to human consciousness, integrating the cultural dimension and register through the hermeneutic of symbols and myths.

This reflects his methodological passage from a phenomenological to an empirical speculation, overcoming the limit of a pure, abstract description of the subject. At the same time, it reflects the general movement of his philosophy; until now a reflexive phenomenology, and from here on a hermeneutical, reflexive one. Thematically speaking, it is like the passage from an innocent to a guilty conscience, for the man who carried out evil acts and lives with his guilt. Direct access of this kind of 'spiritual' experience is not possible, because it is part of the experience of human kind spread throughout the mythic and symbolic contents of all cultures. It requires, then, the reflexive work of a philosophy of language and of hermeneutics. The deciphering and interpretation of symbols and myths offer to the philosopher the possibility to reach an understanding of what is not understandable in itself: The phenomenon of evil. Symbolism becomes the expression of the depths, of the hidden and mysterious dimension of interior life that seeps into rationality and consciousness. Once again, Ricoeur refers to psychoanalysis, although less to Freud than to Jung. Even for the latter, in fact, the passage through mythic and symbolic creations constitutes a means of accessing knowledge of the unconscious and its language. And, finally, to have a better and narrower experience of our subjective symbolic inner life is to have a more specific experience and understanding of the archaism of all humankind.

In his 1965 book *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, we see a new methodological moment in Ricoeur's philosophy with the consolidation of the connection between phenomenology and hermeneutics, now systematised as a generalised and coordinated process of description-interpretation. This has an important impact on his philosophy of the human being. At the end of his work of reinterpretation of Freud's psychoanalysis the anthropological perspective that emerges is one of human personal identity as a hermeneutic process, i.e. an emancipatory dialectics between regressive (towards the *archê*) and progressive tendencies (towards the *telos*). Now the problem between disciplines of a coordinated approach to the study and understanding of the human being and to the fragmentation of different knowledges are thematised as part of the same question. In fact, he writes:

We have at our disposal a symbolic logic, an exegetical science, anthropology, and psychoanalysis and, perhaps for the first time, we are able to encompass in a single question the problem of the unification of human discourse. The very progress of the aforementioned disparate disciplines has both revealed and intensified the dismemberment of that discourse. Today the unity of human language poses a problem (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 3-4).

Following the anthropological logic of this essay, 'in order to have an *archê* a subject must have a *telos*' (p. 459). The confrontation that developed in these pages brings us to Hegel's phenomenology. In fact, as an archaeology of the subject, psychoanalysis presents a regressive perspective, indicating the reality of a subject whose sense is deferred into his past and his archaic, inner, dimension. By contrast, Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit shows the dialectical movement of subjectivity and spirit in which each figure or moment finds its meaning and realisation teleologically, in the next moment or figure.

After *Freud and Philosophy* it is *oneself as another* to offer a new synthesis of Ricoeur's anthropological philosophy, through his philosophy of the capable human being, which firstly introduces new disciplinary references to narrative and to the juridical and practical-political discourse. It would be re-presented in his last book *The Course of Recognition* (2004; section 'A Phenomenology of the Capable Human Being'; Ricoeur, 2005, pp. 89-109) by the examination of its four main aspects: *To be able to say; I can; being able to narrate and to narrate oneself* and, *imputability*.

The hub of this new conception is the idea and notion of *narrative identity*. Consequently, it introduces two new disciplinary levels of connection with the speculative work of philosophy: Narration/literature and history. Ricoeur thematises for the first time narrative identity at the end of *Time and Narrative* (3 voll.; 1983-1985), in its general conclusions. And, in *oneself as another* it is conducted by the confrontation to the problematic of personal identity and the non-substantialist views on the human being. More precisely, for Ricoeur, without the help of a narrative approach the problem of personal identity is destined to an antinomy without solution: 1) to accept the idea of a subject identical to oneself despite the differences of states or to accept that the idea of an 'identical subject' is a 'substantial's illusion', as Hume and Nietzsche has affirmed.

The aporia disappears if we replace the idea of an identity ‘understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*),’ with ‘identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same [*soi-même*] (*ipse*)’ (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 246). Following his argumentation it clearly appears that narrative mediation plays a central role in the constitution of subjectivity.

In fact, if the mediation of action and language are fundamental in the process of formation of the *ipse*, only narration permits us to introduce the factor of temporality and, then, the factor of the historical and progressive development of a subjective identity as an existential experience of life. I experience my life and my personal identity as my personal history of life, normatively reconfiguring all the facts and experiences.

Now, returning to the central, thematic point of this paper regarding the constitution and nature of personal identity, we must extract the essential, theoretical-speculative, aspects from Ricoeur’s anthropological research in order to gain a better focus around this question. How then does one relate the problem or task of becoming a person to one’s realisation as a person? How does one read the dialectic person-freedom?

I think that pure, realised, perfect lives do not emerge with the correlation of identity, or of certain identities. The major challenge, the struggle, the conflictual dialectics certainly operated in and through certain levels and forms, in their proper moment in the subjective history of life. Again, it is through Ricoeur that we may gain a better understanding of this question, particularly through his philosophy of recognition, which is structurally related to his philosophy of the human being as re-actualised in *The Course of Recognition*.

The dialectic between Hegelianism and Freudianism is the hidden theoretical pillar of the *Course of recognition*. In this book the term ‘course’ refers to the research of a theory of recognition or, even, refers to the philosophical journey related to the concept of recognition; another definition is ‘course’ as the journey through recognition-identification, in which the subject of thinking is in search of an accomplishment in terms of sense and mutual recognition; in addition, ‘course’ is the theoretical way of researching, investigating, and enquiring; and finally, ‘course’ is the emancipatory movement of a subject within a dialectics of recognition, a dialectics which is articulated from the progression of the themes of identity, otherness and the dialectics of recognition/misrecognition. If from one side the book follows this thematic sequence of (1) recognition-identification, (2) self-recognition, (3) mutual-recognition, (4) recognition-gratitude according to a dynamism ruled by progressive passage from abstract to the concrete, and from theory to practice, then on the other side the book could be read as an itinerary of an enquiry which wants to discover the significance of recognition of self. It is such a way that has to be followed towards the harmonization by recognition as gratitude. Certainly, this last perspective touches the ethical discourse, involving the process to become a person with the process to interiorize values and acting in accordance with them.

Le chemin est long pour l’homme “agissant et souffrant” jusqu’à la reconnaissance de ce qu’il est en vérité, un homme “capable” de certains accomplissements. Encore cette reconnaissance de soi requiert-elle, à chaque étape, l’aide d’autrui, à défaut, de cette reconnaissance mutuelle, pleinement réciproque, qui fera de chacun des partenaires un être-reconnu (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 110).

In Ricoeur’s work the theme of recognition emerges in a structured and articulated way for the first time through the mediation of Freudianism and Psychoanalysis. It emerges precisely through the dialectics of Hegelianism and Freudianism, notoriously a paradigmatic point. From this comparison between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, Ricoeur extracted the idea of subjectivity as a dialectical-hermeneutical tense process between *arché* and *telos*, unconscious and spirit, need and freedom, destiny and history. In *Freud and Philosophy*, he tries to realise a synthesis between Hegelianism and Freudianism, translating the psychic dynamism in terms of a dialectics of figures. It is in this way that the connection between *Id* and *Ego* becomes a sort of dialectics master-slave. It was exactly at this point that the term recognition came into play. Generally speaking, for Ricoeur personal identity is constituted through an hermeneutical process which is at the same time (self-) interpretative, which is a vertical dialectic of self-emancipation, and interrelation, which is a social dialectic of recognition. In fact, to become a person is for Ricoeur and hermeneutic process and dialectic of *emancipation* as well as of *recognition*.

3. From the logic of a non-substantialist philosophy of person to the paradox of a personality trapped between representation and skin

To become a person is a long, difficult, and non-linear process, because we are born as natural beings without personalities. Personal identity is actually the product of psychological, social, cultural, and historical evolution. For this reason, we may say that we are born as an *individual*, but we have to become a *person*. This process of becoming a person is impeded in various ways by the obstacle of a subjective, psychological, or existential limit, due to the influence of a distortive ideology, distorted social relationships, and so on.

We may define 'distortive' as all those relationships not positively connected to the vital, psychological, social, and moral needs of a specific person that is, non-emancipatory social relationships.² Moreover, distortion may even be considered as a kind of very close relationship, such as the relationship in regard to oneself. There is a problematic to becoming a person, which passes through the complex and various dialectics between personal and social, internal and external, intimate and relational. The idea that 'we become persons' essentially synthesises the process involved, which is social and, at the same time, emancipatory. In addition to social and external occurrences, this process can be hidden from the inner being, by active will, repression, immaturity, limitations of character, or destiny. A significant limiting function has been exercised by moral and spiritual weaknesses, as numerous personal histories of life have demonstrated in all times and places. This dialectic between the individual, natural, level and the personal, social level cannot be reduced simply to a question of condition, or of capacity. Even actively embraced and practiced values play their role; somehow, we may say that the axis of the individual-person intersects with the axis of person-values or, more extensively, person-freedom. The consequence is a re-modulation of what 'to become a person' and 'to become one through the dialectic of relationship' can signify.

To become a person is, at one and the same time, a subjective, social, and moral task and responsibility. Human beings are persons in and through relationship. Having already presented a synthetic survey of Paul Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology we may now enrich and complete it through examining his philosophy of the person, which is partially related to the personalistic conception of Mounier. In Ricoeur, there is a strong correlation both between Mounier's Personalism and use of the concept of the person, and between the phenomenological hermeneutics of the self, as developed in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), and a (generalisable) philosophy of the person. This is evidenced by books like *Autobiographie intellectuelle* (1995), *La critique et la conviction* (1995) and papers like *Meurt le personnalisme, revient la personne...* (1983) and *Approches de la personne* (1990).

The theme of the person was already present in Ricoeur's research and reflection before his partnership with Mounier's review *Esprit*. His relatively unknown paper *Note sur la personne*, published as a secondary school professor in 1936, presents a certain degree of problematisation and even some interesting conclusions. From the question 'What is the person?' follows an analysis – articulated along dialectic of differing perspectives – of different hermeneutic and sectorial trajectories. Having established a speculative approach as the prevalent discursive domain, Ricoeur presents and examines the triad around which the question of the 'who' is rooted: Biological, psychological, and sociological. The biological forces determine temperament, but the person is not reducible to just his temperament. The psychological forces determine the character; but the person is not only his character. And the social forces, which are constitutive as much as the previous, contribute to the formation of a person's mentality, influencing character (as well as being influenced by economic and moral forces); but they do not determine who the person is as a whole.

A person is not an individual: 'If I call *the individual* the temperament extended through character crowned by mentality, I would say that *the person is not an individual*' (Ricoeur, 1936, p. 438; the translation is mine, as the following). Certainly, temperament, character, and the mentality of an individual could each become an object of scientific research; the person, however, could never become an object of science. In fact, he is 'able to keep in check the previsions of characterology and sociology. One can say this: 'The human being is a person (*personal*) in so far and in so much as he impedes the sciences from being rigorous' (p. 441). If the person is neither an individual nor a knowable scientific object, then how can one know the person? What makes a person?

Ricoeur replies that a person is recognisable and knowable through his actions: 'I am a person when *I* do what I do, in the radical and radically active sense of the word do, when what I am doing is not explicated by all of my

²As Jürgen Habermas defines them in his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans. J. J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

determined forces, but through *me* and through my free decisions' (pp. 438-439). Freedom makes me able to know my actions as mine, as an expression of what they are and, at the same time, as actions that are imputable to me, actions for which I have to take responsibility: 'The person *acts* and is not acted up on (...). The person is the one who requests a certain act, he who acts assuming the consequences, because he is responsible' (p. 439). However, there is no radical opposition between the individual and the person; actually there is no possibility at all. The human being, in fact, is not on one side a body and on the other a spirit, or on one side an individual and on the other a person: I am an embodied, unified being.

This theme of the corporal nature of the person and the personal nature of the flesh is repeatedly presented in Ricoeurian phenomenological and hermeneutical work; and the same applies for the question of the person in itself in its connection with Personalism. This connection, which is inherently critical, would be transformed into an open counter position in the paper *Meurt le personnalisme, revient la personne...*, wherein Ricoeur suggests that Mounier's definition of Personalism was connected to a cultural and philosophical constellation that is no longer present in our times, namely Marxism and Existentialism. The question of the person, and even Neo-personalism, must today face a different speculative-ideological counter-part in order to define or re-define itself. The mature Ricoeur would present as a new philosophy of the person his philosophy of the capable human being. The central axis of this new vision is the concept of *narrative identity*, which Ricoeur starts conceiving in *Conclusions of Time and Narrative* volume 3.

In it, Ricoeur expresses the conviction that the self of self-knowledge is the product of a life examined and clarified by the work of reflection and self-interrogation (à la Socrates), and by the work of self-clarification through historical and fictional narratives. Human identity expresses two different experiences in relation to time, *character*, and *keeping one's word* (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 118), and to the narrative dimension, which serves a mediatory function between the biological (my body) and existential (my history of life) levels. In this way, Ricoeur re-actualises his previous anthropological vision in studying the dialectics of the voluntary and the involuntary, which is the dialectics between the body and the will, nature and freedom (*Philosophie de la volonté*). But now Ricoeur considers the narrative dimension as the central element of unification, as a dimension in which it is possible to re-modulate our natural drives and tendencies into meanings and intensions.

Narration is in fact the chief-way to tell the history of a life, offering the possibility to experience that life as a whole reconfiguring, like in a story, wherein all actions, experiences, feelings, decisions and soon become a temporary concatenation of fact. We transform our-self into the subject, the character of a story, of our story, narratively re-addressing and re-modulating our history of our own life. As Ricoeur explains, self-understanding is an interpretation and re-modulation of forces and meanings. Natural inclinations and forces have the tendency (or have been educated) to find an expressive way form of meaning and narration; and interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative a privileged form of mediation. The former are oriented towards finding a civilised way to express themselves; while the latter absorbs from history as well as from fiction a manner for re-modulating the various and complex materials of a certain experience of life as a 'fictional history', or as 'historical fiction' (p. 114). Thus through narrative and self-narrative the objectivity of lived-fact is re-modulated and re-addressed in its function and meaning. Under certain circumstances, or in relation to certain facts or moments of life, it could be of secondary importance to have an exact memory of the objective fact of an experience: For the coherence of an experience and the temporary concatenation of fact under certain orders may play a role of major importance. Nevertheless, it is exactly in this dialectical function between reality and representation, history and fantasy, self-psychology and narration/re-narration where the risks of a distorted and pathological approach to life lie. I mean pathological and distorted in the sense of self-misunderstanding or misrecognition, of an unrealistic approach to life and one's existence.

There is a deep relationship between this philosophy of a person and Ricoeur's mature anthropological philosophy as expressed in *Oneself as Another* and re-actualised in *The Course of Recognition*. At the same time, this mature anthropology may be conceived as a synthesis of his long course of investigation around the human being. Actually, by re-unifying Ricoeur's earlier anthropological philosophy (which had its foundation in a specific hermeneutical vision and approach) that of a phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary, a hermeneutics of symbols and a depth hermeneutics, we may speak of a double perspective and understanding of the human being:

Vertical, from himself, as a conscious subject and a subject of will, to his deeper, symbolic, unconscious and 'archaic' life; and horizontal, from his present to his lived and experienced past and future, as well as from himself to others who are a part of his life, directly or indirectly connected to the history of his life and his long journey in becoming a person. The root of this vision lies in the fact that the key to understanding the person is not the substance of being a person; it is not the history (of being a person living in a certain family, society and so on), it is not the novelty of being a unique, irreplaceable, person; it is the capacity or capability of being... a human being, and then a person. Ricoeur's philosophy of the human being offers a comprehensive vision of what is human and of what is involved in the process to become a person.

This process is not simply a natural development: It involves values, education, culture, vision, ideas, representations, society and so on; and it involves all of these elements and dimensions in various ways, positively or negatively, according to the specific moment and experiences in a certain history of life. If from a social perspective the key of personal emancipation is a positive and progressive dialectic of personal and mutual recognition, from an individual perspective the key is the overcoming of inner regressive, natural forces in order to progress psychologically and morally. Both of these lines or perspectives reveal a specific dark side for personal emancipation, that is, a specific manner to block the emancipator process or to prevent one from becoming balanced and fully developed as a person. In the first case, it is the disruptive or hostile behaviour and acts of misrecognition of all kinds that inhibit this process; in the second, it is the impediment of our regressive or destructive natural forces, or the objective difficulty of counteracting it, that may stop this process. These two axes are so intertwined and interdependent that it sometimes appears crystal clear that behind a specific asocial behaviour there is a subjective regressive experience; and vice versa, that sometimes a regressive subjective experience is provoked by a lack of social recognition.

Finally, it seems that the dialectic between reality and representation works in various ways as the core or the point of connection between the two axes. It is certainly true that Ricoeur's conception of the capable human being focuses the dialectics between passive forces and active forces, between passiveness and action, instead of reality and representation; but, at the same time his non-substantialist vision of the human being is forced to place the idea of narrative identity as the hub of a conception of personal development in which there is a constant dialectical tension between a biological, stable, dimension and an historical, stable *and* unstable, dimension.

All of this analysis may be applied to the contemporary moment, particularly the strong tendencies to be attracted to nihilistic visions of the self and life, or to be attracted to overly-charged, overly-abstracted and overly-evaluated self-understandings, where representation, fantasy, and ideology seem to constantly trump reality. Such is the case with radicalisation, as in religious fanaticism. And this is also the case of so-called post-humanism, an ideology deeply nourished by scientism and technocracy, fiction, literature, and film, cultures of the internet and technology.

Thanks to *Gestaltpsychologie's* research in particular, we have a better understanding of the connections and correlations between visual perception, the reorganization of perceived contents, and self-representation. By the theory of developmental psychology we understand how the dynamism of self-representation and self-understanding is deeply related to the different phases of psychological development of mind and mental life. And by sociology and social psychology we know the different connections between, from one hand, interrelation, cultural influence, and social representation, and, from the other, self-representation and realization. Our self-representation is mediated by a specific psychology (in a specific psychological moment), as well as by culture, social representation, and predominant ideologies. For teenagers in particular, all changes in the body have impacts on the mind, self-imagine and representation. But a similar discourse may be done considering dramatic cases of physical changes, which provoke particular phenomena of reaction; the phenomenon of *phantom limb* is well known and largely studied in this regard. By psychoanalysis and dynamic psychology we know that the body is lived and experienced in a dynamic, changeable way, like a field strength, like a 'desk' for emotional and imaginary projections, as well as for libido's forces and expressions. The moment of these forces and energies is not without impact in self representation and feeling; and reversibly, personal ideas, representation and behavior is not without impact in the distribution or re-distribution of libido and psychical energy through the body. The case of a certain self-perversion may sound extreme, but it shows clearly the reality and consequences of this movement and re-addressing of forces through the body. For example, in sexual fetishism we have the case of a sexual focus on a no genital body part (Freud).

The body has its own language, but at the same time, the body is the expression of psychical and social life. Body language mirrors in itself the coexistence of the physical and the psychical, of the real and the representational in the body. Psychophysical disturbances and symptoms in all cases demonstrate how the body may 'work' as a vehicle of certain representations, meanings, and messages. The classic speculative and scientific debate on dualism requires a multiple perspective approach, because the issue is not reducible to the mind-body problem and its interrelations. In fact, there are multiple dualisms in relation to the body itself: First, following Husserl, Ricoeur, and others, as a lived/experienced body and as an objective body in the sense of a contrast between subjective and objective knowledge; and second, as a body simultaneously perceived and seen from inside and outside in the sense of a contrast between the psychology of self and social psychology. From one side, this body is me; from the other, this body expresses my relation with you in this society, culture, country, and era.

At the same time, the body expresses what I am based on my experience, idea, understanding, and self-representation; it is the entity through which I am addressing others when I am asking for recognition and so on. Freud focused on the modern human tendency 'to become a kind of prosthetic God. When he puts on all his auxiliary organs he is truly magnificent; but those organs have not grown on to him and they still give him much trouble at times' (Freud, 2005, p. 76). We are surrounded by technology more and more, and the implanted or incorporated techno-prosthesis. Cyberspace contributes to modifying our life-styles and our ways to reconfigure and represent our life, our own body and sense of realisation. Certainly, it is not the case that a large part of extended technologies are optical. Today, representation is overcoming reality in many ways.

And this is not without its implications and consequences for the body and mind. Actually, it is a time of new and paradoxical experiences. From one side, through tattoos, piercings, and other mechanical-technical accessories, the body is becoming an ever more central site of self-representation and of the transmission of a self-designed identity. From the other, an increasing number of people (above all, young people, but not exclusively) are spending increasingly large portions of their daily life at home, physically detached from society but connected to the entire world via the web. They spend countless hours at a desk in front of a computer, physically petrified in a quasi-religious, totalising position, where only seeing, thinking, representing, and moving the hands constitutes the actually experienced and actively exercised self. All functions are under the service of imagination and representation. The body and reality are absent. In fact, when you switch on your computer you wear the avatar of your Linked-in or Myspace or Facebook profile, where you may be whomever you want to be by modifying, remodulating, transforming, deforming, distorting, and otherwise altering the reality of your 'real life' through your ways of representing it. Here you have the paradoxes of a multiplied series of new post-human, abstract, and fictive, components to re-organise the representations of yourself: From one side, they are applied to your body and your skin as a real and substantial support of who you are and want to be; from the other your body is subtracted from the real, and you renounce meeting the other in the real life, to stay at home, maintaining your avatar, your e-character, the upgraded reality of yourself.

Sketching this new experience, representation, and realisation of personal identity today, the multidimensional reality of the human being re-appears, but under a new spiral connection. The skin is now substantial, but in the sense of being the support for representation and a site for symbolism and artistic expressions, like a painting or, better, a canvas; and yet, the body is insubstantial in spite of the fact that it remains the physical support of the person. From another side, the connection of historical and cultural-narrative dimensions is transformed and deformed under the rule and predominance of narrative over the historical, and of the representational onto the cultural. While it is true that, today, the vertical problem of personal identity – which is spiritual, psychological, cultural, moral, social, historical, and juridico-political – is one with the problem of different knowledge's and competences involved in the study and understanding of human nature, it is also true that the massive diversification of values, ideologies, approaches to existence, and philosophies of life – i.e. widespread relativism, materialism, nihilism, technocracy, and so on, which are largely expression of specific and specialised knowledge and sciences has created the confusing effect of a disordered approach to personal identity as an experience and as an object of research and study. At the same time, behind the privilege of a predominant approach to this object – psychological instead of medical, for example – almost invariably hides an ideological reduction and (then) distortion: Psychologistic, scientific, fysicalist or materialist, and so on.

Thus, from the point of view of the human being, we are assisting in an externalisation and representative falsification of the process to become a person (and the correlated problems); from the point of view of the articulation of different kinds of knowledge around the human being, we are intertwining the problem of diversification and fragmentation of knowledge with the ideological use of it. The latter certainly provokes a backlash with regard to the negative effects of distortion in relation to self-understanding and self-realisation of a life; although, even this provokes negative reactions to knowledge and the sciences, and to their public and social uses and applications.

4. The solution of an integrated, dynamic humanism

As Jean Landrière explains in his *Expliquer et comprendre* (2004), Ricoeur's theory of the hermeneutic arc has developed from the theoretical-practical context of a theory of interpretation, i.e. from a kind of genuinely epistemological problematic. Epistemology has been the central theme in Ricoeur's hermeneutics; but, subsequently, it had an ontological development and, then, an anthropological articulation of the ontology took place.

Landrière explains that the development of the epistemological problematic, which was determined from the sciences of life in general and from the sciences applied to the human being in particular, had established a strong connection with the ontic problematic about the status of the human being (Landrière, 2004, p. 148). We may consider and use the interpretation of Charles E. Reagan as complementary to this reading. In his *L'herméneutique et les sciences humaines*, he generalises Ricoeur's epistemology in a way that re-focuses the anthropological point of view as central for his philosophy and for all of the human and social sciences. Following the Ricoeurian perspective, he sustains the idea that all of the social sciences have a constitutive line of connection with communicative competence and with the hermeneutical method. By taking seriously the model of the text, all human actions (social as well as individual) are susceptible to being interpreted through the textual paradigm, as a text. Thus, all the human and social sciences are, at their base, hermeneutical sciences. All of them are in fact involved in the study and comprehension of human action.

The dialectic between explanation and understanding connects this comprehensive, hermeneutical approach to studying the human being as an object of science, with the general comprehension of the human being as a subject of experience. Philosophy helps in formulating a proper methodological and epistemological articulation of this dialectic of explanation/understanding. But, at the same time, as a speculative research nourishing an anthropological interest based on an ontological viewpoint, it pushes towards a dynamic connection between the process of becoming a person (natural, psychological, educative, social, etc.) and the hermeneutical process of auto-interpretation, which is part – in Ricoeur, above all – of a personal emancipation conceived as a dialectical process of interpretation and recognition. Therefore, the human and social scientific research, led by the work of a critical hermeneutics, must be at one and the same time a coordinated, interdisciplinary endeavour, both in epistemological and methodological terms, and a humanistic project, due to its direct link with the philosophy of the human being and the subjective, human experience of becoming a person. The explosion of paradigms and theories, the diversification of knowledges, the differentiation and fragmentation of the sciences, and the war between beliefs and ideologies cannot simply be resolved by establishing a hierarchy of values or truths, but can be managed by re-affirming and maintaining the idea that all the knowledges have a direct or indirect impact on the human being and that, therefore, all of them are responsible and imputable. The humanistic logic, value, *ratio*, and approach must re-become the necessary and sufficient conditions to reorganise a well-balanced relation between the vertical axis of a set of knowledge involved in personal realisation and emancipation, and the horizontal axis of a set of knowledge *of* and *for* the human being.

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