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**SGEM INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ON  
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND ARTS  
Secretariat Bureau**

E-mail: [sgem@sgemsocial.org](mailto:sgem@sgemsocial.org)

URL: [www.sgemsocial.org](http://www.sgemsocial.org)

## ON NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Assoc. Prof. Vinicio Busacchi  
University of Cagliari, Italy

## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, attention to the issue of 'narrative identity', and problems connected to it, has seen an exponential development in different research fields, with the effect of significant connections and intertwining between various disciplines, both at the theoretical-reflective level and at the level of an applicative research. It is true that, in addition to the fields of narratology and the science of culture, narrative identity is mainly thematised in the psychological field. It is here, in fact, that it is considered by many ways: from personality psychology to social psychology, and from dynamic psychology to clinical psychology. The interest of psychological research goes beyond this general level of 'mental functioning', because narration forms one's lived experience and the way in which one embraces, interprets and understands his/her existence and relationships with others and with their cultural values. Narration is the expression of a psychological reality and, at the same time, is generative of a psychological reality. Consequently, it mirrors a representation of oneself, human relationships and the sense of things so much in accordance with choices, ideals, dispositions and interests, as in accordance with deeper dynamisms, drive thrusts, traumas and topical experiences.

Starting from the relationship between identity and narration in literature, this paper aims to investigate the question of narrative identity as the fulcrum of a scientific theorisation that operates between psychology and philosophy showing how the interrelationship between these two sciences is productive and fundamental.

**Keywords:** narrative identity, narratology, psychology, hermeneutics

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, attention to the issue of 'narrative identity', and problems connected to it, has seen an exponential development in different research fields, with the effect of significant connections and intertwining between various disciplines, both at the theoretical-reflective level and at the level of an applicative research. It is true that, in addition to the fields of narratology and the science of culture, narrative identity is mainly thematised in the psychological field. It is here, in fact, that it is considered by many ways: from personality psychology to social psychology, and from dynamic psychology to clinical psychology. Currently, only few strands of psychological and clinical research see the intertwining with the philosophical dimension. Authors, such as Juan Balbi, are not limited to remember Jerome Bruner's lesson about the narrow connection between self-knowledge and narration or emphasising the enormous contribution of narration in understanding identity processes; rather, they underline the great congruence with speculative studies such as Paul Ricoeur's. [1] In his *La mente narrativa* (2004) he expresses a substantial proximity to Ricoeur's perspective on the

relationship between identity and narration, explicitly connecting it to Bruner's antecedent lesson. This discourse binds the vast and articulated research around the relationship between mind and language, intercepting interpretations such as Humberto Maturana's, who conceives language as a structural, ontogenetic, component. In the paper

Para comprender la historia evolutiva que da origen a lo humano, es necesario primero mirar el modo de vida que al conservarse en el sistema de linajes homínido hace posible el origen del lenguaje, y luego mirar al nuevo modo de vida que surge con el lenguaje, y que al conservarse establece el linaje particular a que nosotros los seres humanos modernos pertenecemos. [2]

It is true that the interest of psychological research goes beyond this general level of 'mental functioning', because narration forms one's lived experience and the way in which one embraces, interprets and understands his/her existence and relationships with others and with the cultural values. Narration is the expression of a psychological reality and, at the same time, is generative of a psychological reality. Consequently, it mirrors a representation of oneself, human relationships and the sense of things so much in accordance with choices, ideals, dispositions and interests, as in accordance with deeper dynamisms, drive thrusts, traumas and topical experiences. A wide range of therapeutic and clinical proposals related to the narration is grafted onto this discursive strand, relying on the reflective functions of written and oral narration, interpretation and fictional or non-fictional representation. If psychoanalysts, such as Freud, saw narrative representation and (re-)construction as a therapeutic, temporary, function and an important constituent in the comprehensive approach to and resume of a clinical case, other psychotherapists, in turn, have identified and defined with narrative activity a process that is productively valid as a therapeutic and curative procedure. Among the latter, we can refer to James Hillman's therapeutic model. For Hillman, in fact, therapy is a way of giving life to the imagination and exercising it. The whole therapeutic activity, in essence, is a sort of imaginative exercise that recovers the oral tradition of narrating stories, and therapy restores history to life. [3] Certain psychotherapists have been following a comparable theoretical-technical line since the 1970s, thanks to 1960's hermeneutics turn in philosophy. This is the case of Roy Schafer, for example (*A New Language for Psychoanalysis*, 1981; *Retelling a Life: Narration and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis*, 1992). Beyond the scientific questionability, both in terms of theoretical elaboration and therapeutic effectiveness, it is undeniable that Schafer has contributed to identify some interesting and productive aspects of the narrative functions in psychotherapy. In *Retelling a Life*, for instance, there is a deepening of the concept of narrative plot in correlation with self-representation, unconscious fantasy and metaphor that tries to take into account both the analyst's and the patient's perspective. If, on the one side, those narrative perspectives seem more approachable to Jung's psychoanalysis, on the other side, already in Freud we find some theoretical-reflective elements reproachable to the question of narration in therapy. In psychoanalysis, a patient's life history is intuitively related to metapsychological research and clinical practice. In other words, it constitutes a starting point, the basis and the field of all therapeutic exercises. This is a line of reasoning that tends to put in contact different

theoretic models in therapy, as hermeneutical psychoanalysis, cognitive psychotherapy and socio-constructive psychology, thanks to a wider range of theoretical-speculative references offered between the hermeneutical (1960s) and the narrative (1980s) turns. Actually, in one way or another, all psychologists and psychotherapists state that it is necessary to understand the genesis of a disorder in order to explain, it at least in part or that it is necessary to know the history of the events, the links and the meanings attributed to them, in order to modify the mechanisms that regulate the patient's current behaviour and existential feeling. Even the use of the collected material represents a main component of a psychological therapy, even if it seems to belong more to the tacit tactical knowledge of the therapist than to his verbalisable declarative knowledge. [4] After 1980's narrative turn in philosophy and psychology, narration has become a turning point both scientifically and culturally. Today, the fact that narrative identity represents a broadly interest for the psychological sciences has become something widely accepted and recognised as obvious. However, only in a philosophical, ideological or cultural dimension can we find its deeper and effective justification. That is to say, its theoretical roots have an interdisciplinary as well as a cultural fulcrum. To be more precise, the notion of narrative identity does not simply identify a given conception, but it refers to a vast problematic concerning the constitution, reality and meaning of the human personal identity. *Was ist der Mensch?* was Kant's formula to summarise a multimillennial research about on the essence of human nature, which turned in the mind-body, cause-reasons and free will dilemmas in the modern epoch (for both, philosophy and science). The conception of 'narrative identity', which assumes authentic speculative significance only thanks to the work of Paul Ricoeur, subsumes and resets some of these major modern questions. Indeed, Ricoeur's research reveals the profound connections that link the study of the narrative dimension of human identity with more traditional problems of theory of knowledge, theory of mind, practical philosophy and philosophical anthropology.

### IS IT REAL OR FICTIVE?

Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1990) is a radical investigation and questioning of the human subject through what the author calls 'a hermeneutical phenomenology of the self'. [5] The notion of narrative identity represents the fulcrum of this anthropology. This already emerges within the general conclusions of the previous trilogy of *Time and Narrative* (1983-1985), where Ricoeur thematises the tensional dialectics between history and fiction in personal identity in the following way:

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. This dilemma disappears if we substitute for identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same [*soi-même*] (*ipse*). The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity. [6]

and harmonisation; and this function is precisely exerted by the narrative identity, which therefore cannot be traced back to the sole historical-cultural dimension of individual or social identity. In fact, 'narrative identity oscillates between two limits: a lower limit, where permanence in time expresses the confusion of *idem* and *ipse*; and an upper limit, where the *ipse* poses the question of its identity without the aid and support of the *idem*'. [10] This movement of 'oscillation' of the narrative identity is the formula of a perpetual solution to the *perpetual antinomy* of the substantialist and non-substantialist dimension of personal identity (which is not merely a theoretical-scientific or linguistic matter). The common, daily, human experience of *change* over time (both for the body and the psyche) and the *permanence* of the same and unique in the person we are, reveal the concreteness and factuality of this perpetual antinomy. Specifically, it is the narratological category of the character that constitutes the path of intelligibility and knowledge of identity on the dialectic side of permanence and change over time. The individual 'finds himself/herself' via representation, as the one who in the story performs the action and becomes the object of the plot. This is realised according to a formulation that the story does not just structure the action and its context, but the identity of the character; an identity that is now understood, in fact, as a narrative identity. As Ricoeur explains, the person, understood as a character in a story, is not an entity distinct from his/her 'experiences'. On the contrary, it shares the regime of the dynamic identity of the story recounted. The narration builds the identity of the character, which can be called his/her narrative identity. And it is the identity of the story to make the identity of the character. To inscribe this dialectic of the discordant concordance of the character in the dialectic of sameness and selfhood is imposed since the discordant concordance of the character is compared with the request for permanence over time, which is connected to the notion of identity. In addition, there is the necessity to show how the dialectic of the character comes to be inscribed in the interval between these two poles of permanence over time, to act as a mediator between them. This mediating function, which the character's narrative identity exerts between the poles of sameness and selfhood, is essentially attested by the *imaginative variations* to which the narrative submits this identity. In truth, it is not that the story limits itself to tolerating such variations, but it in fact generates them. [11]

The previous passages summarise a key paragraph that represents Ricoeur's theoretical-conceptual articulation proper to the theory of narrative identity in a context of narratological study, and gives a close connection with the experiential and practical sphere, that is, with the life world of a concrete person who is fed both of an effective experience and his/her imagination. I can identify myself with the character of a story and transform the world of text into a reflective and imaginative laboratory of interpretation, reconfiguration and personal renewal. This is possible not only because, as in a mirror game, I can (re-)constitute myself as a narrator of my own story, but also, because by making me a 'character' opens the way to a possible reconfiguration and redefinition of who I am, of the sense of my experience, of the possibilities of (re-)action within the circumstance of my life. The semantic innovation and new congruence of meaning determined in the context of the narrative (re-)elaboration has to do with the elaboration and re-elaboration of my own identity and life experience. The act of reading, telling and narrating allows the individual to understand himself/herself differently and better, to rethink and create new perspectives of meaning and change. To narrate is to create meaning and understanding. Narration is the creation, articulation and development of the self. Both, the knowledge of oneself and the maturation of



## CONCLUSION

Of course, to this argument we can counterpoise the fact that while a story is being told or life is being lived, the act of reading (or storytelling or writing) becomes a form of suspension within an interregnum that is itself provisional. However, this interregnum is not a simple temporary suspension from the affairs of the world or alienation from concrete circumstances. On the contrary, it is the very substance of our *psychic reality*, which is different from the *empirical reality* (of the external world), and different from abstract, ideal or purely imaginative realities. It is precisely on this point that the philosophical hermeneutics applied to the narration intercepts and tightens in a single problematic node the gnosiological, ontological and anthropological question of the dialectic between world and experience, between reality and representation, recognising in the narrative function a triple value of mediation, namely (1) between a man and the world, (2) between a man and a man and (3) between a man and himself.

The effect of identification and catharsis, of configuration and reconfiguration, which generates the character, it is exactly what touches, structures, shapes and defines our psychic reality. And, this psychic reality is an effective, concrete and true reference: a reference to the (past, present and future) facts of the world and to intersubjective relations, and to the historical experience and planning horizon of an individual and of people.

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