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Using Ricoeur's Oneself As Another: Narrative Identity, Gender and Relational Autonomy

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Abstract:

What, if anything, can Paul Ricoeur's account of embodied subjectivity offer feminist attempts to theorise autonomy in ways that acknowledge the effects of social relations on self-constitution? The impasse reached between philosophical accounts of a Cartesian subject identical with itself, distinct and unitary, and post-structuralist substantialist illusions/fictionalised subjectivities has led to a problematic for those engaged in praxis aiming towards the dismantling of oppressive systems. Materialist feminists, for example, seek to clarify a critical agency that can resist systemic oppression by citing the everyday experiences of real people in social situations, whilst positing the intersecting of this level of the social with subjectivity (through which we make sense of ourselves as embodied, gendered beings). Can Ricoeur offer a "third way" approach to selfhood that allows for a locatable social self, capable of autonomous decision-making, yet fluid and heterogenous in nature and subject to change through time? I find his work in "Oneself as Another" especially interesting and potentially fruitful in this regard and aim to show exactly why in this paper. I will focus on Ricoeur's discussion of idem and ipse identities and the bridge between them that is narrative identity.

Keywords: Relational autonomy; selfhood; social relations; identity; subjectivity; critical agency; Foucault; Ricoeur



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As a philosopher interested in the category of gender, and as a theorist with feminist concerns, I have recently been working on the concept of autonomy. I have approached my enquiry with various particular questions in mind: ought feminists to value autonomy? If so, are any of the traditional formulations adequate or is a reformulation necessary, bearing in mind the feminist agenda?

In my work I have critically evaluated some of the most dominant, traditional accounts of autonomy, e.g. Kantian moral autonomy; utilitarian preference autonomy; Frankfurtian personal autonomy, from a feminist perspective. These modern accounts take individual autonomy to be extremely valuable both morally and politically, and one or another is usually assumed as worthy of respect and protection in many contemporary discourses (e.g. bioethics, law, human rights). However, I have found it difficult to justify valuing any of these accounts wholesale for feminism, since although they do not agree on what the concept means they all characterise autonomous agency in an overly individualistic manner. These accounts underlie the conception of autonomy as a capacity that can best be theorised as potentially exercisable by the abstract and discrete rational-logical individual-chooser of modernity - a figure that has been much critiqued by feminists of many persuasions for its exclusivity and hidden masculine bias (not least because of its disembodied and socially disembedded nature).

Autonomy is a difficult concept for feminism, then. Many have rejected the concept altogether, suggesting that any characterisation will be inadequate for praxis aimed at eradicating women's social oppression. Theorists who hold that such oppression is causally linked to systemic operations of power within social structures (those which produce hierarchical social relations) often suggest that a focus on autonomy is misplaced in that it distracts from the more important task of attending to oppressive systems and structures. Autonomous agency is sacrificed in some feminist work for the supposedly greater goal of working to dismantle systems of oppression and to build non-hierarchical social structures.

Other feminists acknowledge the significance of thinking about autonomy but hold that because it is primarily the capacity of an internally reflective self, anyone working on autonomy needs to develop a theory of what it is to be such a self. This is tricky for feminists wishing to avoid essentialising paradigms of true or authentic or unified selves. The worry is that autonomy is 'conceptually constrained' (Hirschmann, 2003), seeming to demand a picture of an essential 'inside', a true inner self capable not only of reflecting on personal desires but of choosing and

acting on the desire one genuinely and unconstrainedly wishes to endorse. This authentic self is notoriously difficult to characterise. Marilyn Friedman says that:

‘a subject need not be absolutely unified, coherent or transparently and incorrigibly self-aware in order to exercise autonomy; she need merely have those traits to a sufficient degree’ (Friedman, 2000, p. 220).

But she says much work needs to be done to help clarify the nature of even such a minimally distinct and coherent self.

Nancy Hirschmann, whilst agreeing that feminist analyses of autonomy may make a valuable contribution to emancipatory politics, says that the concept of *freedom* is a precondition for autonomy and so, in her view, ought to take precedence in feminist work. Her claim is that only the free person can make and act on autonomous decisions. She says that if there is such a thing as a ‘true’ self, then :

‘in order to determine what that might be, women must be freed from the multiple, intersecting and overarching, barriers that pervade patriarchal society’ (Hirschmann,2003, p. 39).

Hirschmann has decided to concentrate on developing a feminist account of freedom, leaving aside what she sees as the knottier and logically secondary problem of autonomy.

However, I am at this point inclined to continue considering retaining an account of autonomy, understood as self-governance and self-determination, because of the possibilities for social transformation autonomous agency may allow. In particular, when thinking about changing gender identities, it seems to me that an account of autonomy may be extremely valuable. The capacity of persons to self-direct, to make autonomous decisions rather than being primarily subject to constraints and coercions, must be worth attempting to clarify conceptually for those interested in thinking through to possibilities for challenging oppressive forms of gender identification and creating a non-hierarchical social context.

Indeed, I am not alone in my intuition that some form of autonomy may hold promise. Some feminist thinkers have recently attempted to re-configure the concept of autonomy

because they see the notion as ‘vital to feminist attempts to understand oppression, subjection and agency’, and say that it is :

‘imperative for feminists to reclaim and reconceptualise the concept of individual autonomy and to articulate conceptions of choice and of political rights that are more adequate from a feminist perspective’ (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p.4).

They do not think that it has been shown that the concept ought to be rejected altogether, but rather that the traditional accounts are problematic. They wish to maintain reference to an autonomous selfhood whilst acknowledging the integral place of social relations in any explanation of the nature of human self-determination, and in doing so have developed accounts of a *relational* autonomy, i.e. they have posited autonomy as relational in that persons are taken to be socially embedded, and their identities are taken to be formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by *‘a complex of intersecting social determinants, e.g. race, class, gender and ethnicity’* (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, pg.3).

Further, the idea is that the social relations in which persons stand are in some sense at least partly constitutive of what it is to be autonomous. The compatibility of the standard conceptions of autonomy with the idea of the social embeddedness of persons is an issue being debated within and between current liberal and communitarian theories as well as in feminism, to interesting effect. Theorists are attempting to clarify exactly how social relationships, rather than making autonomy difficult for individuals, are somehow a part of what makes such autonomy possible.

It is the feminist accounts that I will address as I find them the most significant when thinking about challenging oppressive social relations. However, I will pose a more radical account than that currently found in the literature, which tends towards adjusting the traditional formulations to one that allows that women, too can be understood as capable of autonomy; and on ensuring that barriers to women’s autonomy are removed in legal, social and political discourse, policy and practice.

Specifically, I will explore a view of relationality that arises from my interpretation of Paul Ricoeur’s embodied intersubjectivity.

Lois MacNay in *'Gender and Agency,'*(2000), whilst not focussing on a strictly relational approach, nevertheless has similar concerns to feminists working on autonomy in that she suggests it is vital for feminism to try to uncover a *'creative or imaginative substrate to action'*, as this will provide

' the condition of possibility of certain types of autonomous agency understood as the ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behaviour,' (MacNay, 2000, p.22).

She goes on to say that *'such forms of agency underlie certain transformations within gender relations'* (MacNay, 2000, p.22). I want to explore the idea that contemporary changes and developments in gender relations might be interpreted in terms of the creativity of action, and whether this might be in part clarified through a schema that posits the intersubjectivity of autonomous agency.

Can Paul Ricoeur's suggestions in *'Oneself as Another,'*(1992) contribute anything constructive towards an understanding of relational autonomy? That is, do his claims regarding intersubjectivity reveal or make possible an intelligible notion of personally autonomous decision-making involving the (inter)activity of both self and other? Can we arrive at a coherent account of an anti-individualistic conception of individual autonomy using Ricoeurian claims about selfhood?

My interest lies in the possibility that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self might provide an understanding of alterity both between and within subjects that may be of significance for feminist attempts to reconfigure an account of individual autonomy that is more appropriate for the feminist agenda than the culturally dominant conceptions, i.e. ones that posit a unitary, independent, rationally-choosing self, or an independent moral self capable of rational self-legislation.

It may also serve to extend theorising about subjectivity beyond the limits of a strictly post-structural Foucauldian account of identity, with its reliance on an ability to engage in transformatory practices of the self. In calling for reflexivity, and for an ethics of the self that involves a sort of self-styling of one's identity, Foucault offers much that has been of great use to feminism in terms of opening up a space for thinking about the possibility of transforming the

self through a kind of autonomous self-construction. However, critics (e.g. McNay, 2000) suggest that Foucault does not fully address the ways in which the material body may impact on this self-styling, resisting conscious attempts to change, or significantly distracting from them.

Foucault rejects psychoanalytic concepts such as the imaginary or the unconscious, ideas of things that can affect a person's ability to think and act and may make self-construction difficult, uneven, discontinuous or even impossible. He wants to get away from any account that essentialises the self, and he sees concepts like repression as indicative of the existence of an inner self, a true identity, which is exactly the kind of idea that could naturalise and thereby legitimise normative accounts of subjectivities. Foucault rejects this and instead he holds that subjectivity can be voluntarily refashioned through the achievement of liberation. This is the result of an awareness of the nature of power in social relations; it's a negative liberty that Foucault is endorsing, a freedom from external constraints in the social world that exist at the level of dominant discourses and disciplining social practices. He calls for individual engagement in ethical practices of the self, involving 'self-writing' and truth telling, as ways to move beyond dominating and constraining knowledges and practices.

However, McNay controversially claims that Foucault fails to take full account of the embodied, material aspects of human existence and, she says, consequently his theory is inadequate as a way to think through to ways in which certain aspects of personal identity (like one's sexual desires) could possibly be *voluntarily* restyled. She says persons are subject to internal as well as external constraints, and these need to be addressed too in feminist praxis.

Whilst I take it that Foucault's work is extremely valuable to the feminist project, I am interested in exploring other ways of thinking about selfhood that may involve what McNay calls a 'generative understanding of subjectification,' (MacNay, 2000, p.164), an account that allows for a more active, creative agency than that found in Foucault. With his emphasis on resisting gender norms inscribed in the process of subject formation, Foucault's analysis arguably closes off the possibility of a genuinely autonomous self-construction, one that's not just a reactive struggle against normativity. It could be that there is a more pro-active manner in which the creation of new, possibly non-gendered subjectivities could be constructed.

In '*What is Critique?*' (1997) Foucault does draw out a way of achieving new subjectivities that is, perhaps, closer to MacNay's generative account than she allows. It offers more than simply struggling against and counteracting hierarchical social relations by

contradicting or overturning hitherto accepted norms. It calls for individuals to develop the virtue of critique, i.e. of attending to the current social context and asking difficult and subversive questions about it, participating in a genealogical analysis of the given and working to keep open the possibility of the creation of new ways of thinking and living. This gives the chance that the new will not be just an opposition to the old, but rather will be that which is MacNay's 'unanticipated' and 'unexpected'. Foucault claims that persons can be free to develop the virtue of critique (though it's not clear to me whether this freedom will only occur in specific conditions – this will be important to clarify because if critique is only possible when certain circumstances prevail then perhaps the creation of the new only ever arises as a reaction to the old for Foucault, and MacNay's reading is correct).

For feminism it could be that rather than engaging in the subversion of traditional gender identities (that are experienced as oppressive) by the use of strategies like drag, or other performative acts that serve to disrupt gender norms, perhaps what is now needed is a strategy to ensure that an entirely new set of social relations may be generated. In wanting to avoid essentialising, Foucault's individual identities are always in a sense fictionalised, made-up, and therefore always open to be re-configured. But these potentially shifting, fluid identities are those of individuals materially experiencing their lives within social relations. Working on changing identities may be one approach to resisting domination, but the transformation of social relations is arguably necessary for new, less oppressive social circumstances to be experienced. These new relations may not take gender as an organising principle at all – indeed, as-yet-unimagined subjectivities, identities and desires may arise, not in opposition to norms but as new and emergent within the spaces opened up by the development and practice of the virtue of critique.

A problem with Foucault's account remains, however, and it is this: if the new is that which is generated in the spaces between the structures of the old, spaces opened up through the practice of critique, how far can this strategy work to ensure the eradication of oppressive systems like racism or sexism? It is often claimed that Foucault's is a local, specific approach, an approach that does not address the interrelationships between different particular social structures and the ways in which they might intersect and function together to maintain the workings of particular systems (which produce and reproduce subjectivities). The post-structuralist approach in Foucault attends to the local and the contingent, in an ad hoc manner

that may transform particular power relations; but in refusing to see social formations as in any sense made up of intersecting and interrelated reified structures, it cannot address large-scale social change – it cannot attend to the collective dismantling of grand oppressive systems.

Hegel's political theory (specifically the master-slave dialectic and his views on recognition) and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory (on mirroring, witnessing, and knowing self through relations with other) are both also examples of what, along with Foucault's account, McNay calls the *negative* paradigm of subjectification. She says they offer little in terms of creative possibility, stemming as they do from an analysis based on the subjectification of the subject and focussing as they do on resisting domination and oppression.

Is there a manner of interpreting the experience of constraint that does not depend upon a notion of an originary act of subjectification? Can selfhood be seen as a state that may include certain limits to autonomous agency but that also involves the possibility of creative change that is not just a reaction to subjectification?

I propose a close study of Paul Ricoeur's account of selfhood and identity, in order to explore the possibility that it may offer a theoretical way forward through what I see as the impasse between revisiting modern, Cartesian accounts of the unitary self, and post-structural fictionalised subjectivities, towards an account of a critical agency, capable of autonomous and creative action.

Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics of the self claims that agent's essential properties are not entirely intrinsic and unaffected by the social relations in which they stand. He holds that individual identity is partly constituted by relations with others. In numerous passages of his text '*Oneself as Another*, '(1992) he claims that an individual agent's sense of herself is constituted by her social context, such that the social conditions she finds herself in shape her sense of who she is and what she is capable of. But this is no Althusserian account of interpellation, where the subject is called into being as a particular identity as a result of particular social conditions. Ricoeur wants to avoid such overdetermination. He aims for a critical agency understood as developing within and as such partly constituted by social relations, yet not limited by or trapped within them.

His schema for selfhood will, I think, clarify this agentic social constitution. In his discussions about the nature of selfhood in much of his work, but in particular in '*Oneself as Another*', Ricoeur makes a distinction using Latin terms between what he terms *idem-identity*,

that of being one and the same, complete with genetic identity that allows for change and development through time whilst remaining the same being (e.g. the butterfly that can be identified with the earlier caterpillar) - and *ipse-identity*, that of selfhood that does not depend upon something permanent for its existence, but is nevertheless distinct. It is the temporalised self, the self that's constituted by a unity of past accomplishments and future projects. There is the possibility for change and difference in ipseity, and certainly for reflexivity.

These two identities together are somehow involved in the coherence of the self, a self at once intelligible as unified and yet subject to change through time.

The self, it seems, on this view, is attached to something stable (idem-identity). It is this form of attachment that is not visible in notions of the coherent self as a discursively imposed fiction (e.g. in those ideas of selfhood found in post-structural accounts). I suggest that Ricoeur offers a useful analytic tool here when thinking about changing gender identities. It means we can hold onto a view of an individual and definite particular self, continuous through time, and yet with a mutability that allows for open-ended change and multiple realisability.

Ricoeur claims that there is a dialectical relation between idem-identity and ipse-identity, a dialectic of sameness and difference. This can be seen in his discussion of personal *character*, which he says is:

'the set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human being as the same. By the descriptive features that will be given, the individual compounds numerical identity and qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time.'
(*'Oneself As Another,'* 1992, p.xx)

Character is, on Ricoeur's account, something belonging to idem-identity. However, we can conceive of *attending to* our own character, possibly trying to change it or develop it – this is ipse-identity *in connection with* idem-identity. Attending to our character, though, is about having an *attitude* towards our character that must, necessarily, itself be part of our character. Hence, there is a *dialectical* relation between the ipse and the idem identities. Character is ipse *becoming* idem, but idem is only recognised as a *product of* our character.

Ricoeur proposes a theory of *narrative* that further clarifies the identity of character. He says:

'...narrative constructs the identity of the character, which can be called his or her identity, in constructing the story told. It is the identity of the story which makes the identity of the character.' ('Oneself As Another, 1992, pp. 147-8).

So, character has an essentially narrational nature. To answer the question "Who?" one must tell the story of a life. And the 'story told', according to Ricoeur, tells about the action of the 'who'. In 'Time & Narrative', Vol. 11, Ricoeur states that:

'the identity of this 'who' therefore itself must be narrative identity....Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antimony 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...' (p.246)

Ricoeur claims that this dilemma disappears if we accept idem and ipse, and he describes narrative identity as that which is the identity of character, and which connects ipse and idem identities.

It seems to me that his schema can be understood in this way: I am myself, but I am also Other to myself (in what sense? In that I am embodied - my materiality is an object of my enquiry.) I am the subject of experience but also the object of my own inquiries. I ask " Who am I? " and in answering proceed to construct my narrative identity through time. I become who I am through relations with the Other, whether in the instance of my own body or another's, other subjects that I am in relation with, and I understand myself as myself through the temporal process of constructing my personal narrative.

For Ricoeur there is a process of interpretation occurring, a reading of the material 'texts' that are 'out there' in the world; these 'texts' are bodies that are signs 'out there' in the world that call for interpretation by those who apprehend them. The intelligible subject arises out of these intertwined readings. It is as a result of this embodied intersubjectivity that I am able to make sense of myself, that I become intelligible to myself *as* myself.

Ricoeur is clearly indebted to Hegelian dialectic, although he significantly moves away from a teleological development towards a fixed final end (reaching a complete understanding of myself) and offers instead the idea of a continuous process of intersubjective dynamism. A final, definitive identity is never reached – the dynamic relations are ongoing, and as yet unimagined futures are always possible. This is a process of becoming, and it is ongoing, but because it is dependant upon the multiple and fluid interactions with others it is often discontinuous, and may feel disjointed.

A theory of narrative self-constitution is being posited, one where I tell my story, where I say - “This is me”. However I am not just a character or personality, I am also an embodied subject. My body is, indeed, central to my self-narrative, to my self-constitution. Bodily changes will affect my self-narrative – pregnancy, illness, ageing, etc. can disrupt my sense of myself and mean that I will tell a changed story about myself afterwards. Who I understand myself to be is deeply affected by my interpretation of myself as an embodied subject.

Modern discourses, like that of biomedicine, usually take the human body to be ‘*a passive object governed by an individual agent who somehow stands above it*’ (Diprose, 1995, p.203). The body is seen as an appendage or instrument, an object belonging to a person. In contrast to this, Ricoeur takes a phenomenological stance with regard to the body, seeing it not as a mere appendage to be controlled and used. Influenced by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur claims that as an embodied self I am a *lived body*, a being whose body is open to the world and engaged with it, in relation to things in the world. What I am able to do in the world as a body affects my sense of myself, and consequently my interpretation of myself as a social identity.

For my life to be intelligible Ricoeur says my body is a necessary *background condition* to the activity of narrative self-constitution. He seems to be referring to a notion of what Diprose calls the *habitual body*, i.e. the individual as a body that is in relation to other things in the world, but that is not (usually) itself something the individual is aware of.

I will go further than Ricoeur, however, and claim that the body is more than just a background condition. It is directly *involved* in narrative self-constitution. That is, emotions and other aspects of embodiment play a direct part in the construction of narrative identity.

On my view, materiality is always implicated in social relations. The social is to be understood as the material base of discourse, containing subjects of lived experience, for

example women, and social systems, like patriarchy and capitalism. Discursively constructed selfhood is open to critique, but I claim that real selves are having real experiences in the real social world, and the material conditions of their lives can be acknowledged. Since my narrative identity develops in and through time, it is affected by interpretations of historical moments; and since it develops in and through space, especially through embodiment, it must be affected by particular material conditions (including all aspects of the materiality of my body).

There is a gap, though, between narrative and lived experience, between the discursive and the actual. Ricoeur deals with this to an extent by using the Aristotelian notion of poetics, saying that intelligibility is conferred upon narrative by emplotment. Plots give narratives a structure, (a coherence), recounting past events in story form, but never actually *verifying* past reality. Instead, the creative production of the imagination results in the interpretation of human experience. Human experience ‘in its profound temporal dimension, never ceases to be shaped’ by narrative. So narrative in a sense *arises from* lived experience, and *affects* what is taken to be lived experience. But, of course, the gap between the (embodied) experience of being and interpreted life remains.

If Ricoeur’s account is correct and my identity is only available to me through narrativity, then it seems identity must have a social character in that the ‘story told’ intersects with other narratives. That is, my story involves stories about others (e.g. my parents, friends, colleagues, acquaintances), who are all also subjects of my story. I may speak and interact with these others, I may negotiate and articulate, and this is part of the process of constructing my narrative. It is also part of constructing their narratives. Our discussions and dialogues contribute to the way all our stories unfold. In this way, intersubjective relations are reciprocal.

I am embedded in a social realm of collective entities that can be reduced to a ‘*network of interactions*’ (Ricoeur, 1986, p.248). These interactions are made intelligible through a dialogic process of meaning-making, involving the positing of the question ‘Who am I?’ and the consequent development of intersecting, yet distinct narratives. The embodied self is a text that can be read or interpreted to produce (narrative) identity.

Thus for Ricoeur identity is deeply embedded in relations with others. However, in as much as I cannot manipulate these relations to be as I may want them to be I cannot influence their particular nature. The nature of my own identity, being bound up with that of the nature of others’ identities, is beyond my absolute control – I cannot make up who I take myself to be all

by myself. I am not the rational scientific observer of modernity, potentially able to grasp absolute truth and clarity by myself. My narrative is a co-constructed interpretation. It is always a metaphor of the real, a representation, and it always involves an imaginative process of configuration, ‘*an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience*’. (Ricoeur, 1992, p.162)

Lois MacNay says that in Ricoeur’s work:

‘the centrality of narrative to a sense of self suggests there are powerful limits to the ways in which identity may be changed’ (MacNay, 2000, p.80).

Ricoeur claims that the text is the medium through which we understand ourselves – but he says that there is a problem of how exactly the text applies to the current situation of its reader, of the ‘appropriation of the text’. His response to this problem is to say that ‘*we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works*’ (Ricoeur, 1986, p.87). What one appropriates from text is a ‘proposed world’, a world that is not hidden behind the text, but is rather ‘*in front of it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals,*’ (1986, p.88). When attending to the text, then, one is ‘*exposing oneself to the text, and receiving from it an enlarged self,*’ such that the ‘*self is constituted by the “matter” of the text,*’ (1986, p.88). This involves a ‘*moment of distancing in the relation of self to itself; hence understanding is as much disappropriation as appropriation,*’ (1986, p.88).

For Ricoeur, then, self-understanding must involve distancing and the critique of ideology – this is necessary for self-understanding to be formed by the matter of the text, and not, as Ricoeur puts it, by the prejudices of the reader.

So, who I am is in part constituted by social relations between myself and others. Others are understood as texts, to whom I am exposed and from whom I receive an ‘enlarged’ sense of myself. Importantly on Ricoeur’s view my narrative identity is not simply a result of a dominating ideology, an ideology that limits the ways in which I am able to define myself – MacNay says that on Ricoeur’s view ideology is not just dominatory but also integrates and reinforces social identity. Narrative identity is a constantly developing story, a representation that arises in part from distancing, and from a drawing on the *pre-interpreted* elements of

social life that can be reconfigured into new symbolic forms. This is McNay's 'generative process' of identity formation.

I suggest that these aspects of Ricoeur's work are ones that feminism might do well to endorse. The idea of narrative identity is attractive as it provides a way of interpreting subjectivity as including the capacity for autonomy (self-determination) that is truly relational. It allows that selfhood includes the capacity for intersubjective meaning-making, the co-construction of narratives. Our lives become intelligible to us through the narrative response, a response that occurs within the contextualised relations that we have with others - relations we do not fully control but that we can have an effect upon.

If my personal identity is a narrative identity then I make *sense* of myself (as opposed to simply *referring* to myself) only in and through my involvement with others. I must achieve my selfhood – and this is dependant on the regard, words and actions of others, as well as on material conditions. So I am a social being, and a being that finds myself in the world of experiences, telling the story of my life, along with other story-tellers. I articulate my story in language, and in so doing I bear witness to who I am both to myself and to others. But my narrative is never complete, it's never the whole story – it is always in the process of becoming what it is. It's therefore always open to change and development.

One's personal narrative process is deeply intertwined with the narrative processes of others. In constructing our narratives as persons we are all together participating in the social construction of our identities and their social meanings. This way of viewing the social construction of identities could be extremely valuable for feminism because it clarifies the manner in which women as persons directly participate in the social construction of gender identities. They are directly involved in the production and reproduction of discourses about women, through the relationally autonomous construction of their narrative identities. These discourses will in turn affect what their capacities will be and the range of options possible for them to choose between in their material, everyday lives.

Ricoeurian ipseity opens up the possibility of the creative transformation of gender identities, and discourses about subjectivities, that escapes the logic of limitation. It suggests that women's identities are not simply determined within patriarchal social relations (wherein individual women are conditioned to choose that which patriarchy says they ought to choose, and as such are never fully autonomous agents), nor are they simply subject to the workings of

power within a web of interrelationships, struggling to resist domination, but are identities constructed within and in part constituted by social relations such that they are dialogically involved in their own identity construction and therefore in their cognition of their own lived experience.

This gets us away somewhat from the mire and struggle of resistance to subjectification, and takes us towards the possibility of the realisation of an autonomously chosen, non-hierarchical, non-gendered, just social context; one containing an intersecting and interrelating community of embodied selves affecting each other and (dis)continuously in the process of becoming and understanding who they are.

I am proposing a reading of Ricoeur's work on embodied intersubjectivity and narrative identity as an analytic tool for feminist praxis, in particular when addressing the development and use of a feminist account of autonomy. I have posited the claim that Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self helps to clarify an account of a properly *relational* autonomy, one that acknowledges the ways in which the capacity for autonomous agency arises out of the (embodied and intersubjective) development of social identities.

My interest lies in the possibility of the creative generation of the new – new identities, new social formations – that is not just a re-arranging of what's already there (at the level of discourse/ideology). I am seeking a move beyond 'playing' with subjectivities and identities, beyond re-working that which is already available in the interpreted realm (of making new representations out of the old), towards imagining and opening out towards that which is not yet.

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