Narrative Sharing: A Phenomenological Approach for De-Biasing

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Fran Schrag raises the issue of "myside" bias.[1] Schrag uses Mercier and Sperber's *The Enigma of Reason* to observe that myside bias occurs when reasoning is used to support rather than challenge previously held beliefs.[2] For instance, someone who believes that crime is more prevalent today than it has been in the past might interpret data that suggests otherwise as incomplete or just proof that most crime is not officially reported. One common type of "myside" bias is evident in political polarization.

In considering remedies for this polarization, Schrag discusses the work of Philip M. Fernbach and colleagues who have hypothesized and demonstrated that when made to discuss the particulars of their partisan policy positions, people have a tendency to moderate those positions.[3] In other words, people lose their myside bias when asked to further clarify their positions. Schrag calls on researchers to develop educational interventions to mitigate "myside" bias and to investigate the effectiveness of said interventions.[4] Schrag hopes that the same science that identified myside bias can be used in the future to develop and study antidotes for it. In this article, I suggest that there is already a known way to deal with myside bias—through the sharing of narratives. To make this suggestion, I apply Paul Ricoeur's work on the narrative self to Scherto Gill's study of narrative sharing.[5]

Scherto Gill discusses a type of de-biasing that is done with narrative sharing in Chapter Seven of *Critical Narrative as Pedagogy*.[6] In this chapter, Gill describes a relationship between a Christian and a Muslim in jointly interrogating their time fighting on opposite sides in the Lebanese Civil War. While sharing their individual narratives filled with hate and violence toward the group of which their conversation partner was a part, they began to notice similarities

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in their road to becoming hate-filled soldiers. Both the Muslim, Tariq, and the Christian, Jean-Michel, shared how each of them was told biased stories of the other religion in their childhood.[7] When war broke out, they had a whole repertoire of stories that prescribed what their actions should be—their actions should protect their own group from the evil Other. Gill notes that by sharing these stories, the men were able to experience a kind of solidarity without giving up their individuality. Indeed, Jean-Michel said, "Of course it was obvious that we [Christians and Muslims] will never be the same, I have a different culture from them, I have a different religion than them, etc. etc. We don't have to go out with a full agreement on everything, but at least we can understand what the other has to say."[8]

In this instance, Gill demonstrates how a practice of narrative sharing in some ways moderates previously held beliefs similar to the way Fernbach et al. have shown that demands to explain opinions moderate myside bias. In fact, Gill says that by telling their own story and listening to the Other's story, both men moved to a place where they found a new responsibility to disrupt and rehabilitate stories of the Other so that future generations would not succumb to the kind of violence they experienced and perpetrated.[9] These disruptions of stories are needed because studies have shown that the rhetorical use of violent metaphors in political discourse increases political partisanship.[10] These results are especially concerning considering what scholars have theorized about the connections between metaphors, narratives, and reality, and as we can see played out in the example given by Gill in her description of the relationship between the two soldiers in the Lebanese Civil War.

Metaphors affect the way individuals conceptualize reality. Summarizing the work of Paul Ricoeur, David Kaplan says: "A metaphor is a 'heuristic fiction' that 'redescribes' reality by referring to it in terms of something imaginative or fictional, allowing us to learn something about reality from fiction."[11] If violent metaphors are adopted as a "heuristic fiction" redescribing reality, the risk is that listeners will "learn" that reality is violent and therefore dangerous. Violent political rhetoric can too easily slide into just plain violent rhetoric.

Consider the language Jean-Michel used to describe his reasoning for

deciding to join the war: "The enemy was so evil and the threat was so big that I felt this strong sense of responsibility to *fight for my people and defend my community*."[12] Importantly, this statement shows that Jean-Michel had learned to identify with his Christian community. My argument is that this identification happens through the uptake of the heuristic narratives of Jean-Michel's community. I am interested in how the language used by Jean-Michel is eerily similar to the language used in political rhetoric, and I suggest attention should be paid to disciplines that can replicate and study the kind of experience that Jean-Michel and Tariq had with members of opposite American political parties.

From a phenomenological perspective we can observe the corporeality of the encounter(s) between Jean-Michel and Tariq. McCarthy suggests that the body and the mind are so intertwined for Ricoeur and phenomenologists like him that it is nearly impossible to imagine a change in one without radically changing the other.[13] Tariq's account of his "re-education" toward Christian people began in a place where he "wasn't able to meet a Christian … he is the enemy and he is the killer and he is the devil. *It is impossible to meet that person if you have this idea*." He went on: "But I had questions and they brought me to the Christian areas. I went just to see, to confirm those images I had of them … But I saw Christians who were poor, and who were just like us. I mean they are just people."[14] In concluding this account, Tariq observes: "But you must remember, the Jean-Michel you see in front of you is a real person and I have learned that he is a very kind person and the reason he was what he was is because he was someone else created by the history, not the person whom I am very proud of meeting, this second Jean-Michel. Same with the Tariq you see here, is a new Tariq."[15] In other words, Tariq and Jean-Michel are new people because of the knowledge of their similarities they have gained through narrative sharing while physically with each other. Tariq seems to be signifying that his notion of self has changed because of his "re-education." This sense of change is consistent with phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative self.

Ricoeur's theory of the narrative self allows the individual to contribute to the work of a democratizing society. He argues that an individual's ability to narrate her actions is the bridge between description and prescription.[16] The

DOI 10.47925/75.2019.135

individual can only act ethically once she has incorporated a description of the world into her narrative self. By sharing their narratives, Tariq and Jean-Michel were able to incorporate more accurate pictures of their worlds into their narrative selves. While there are other theorists who appreciate the importance of sharing narratives for the creation of the public (e.g., Hannah Arendt), I focus on Ricoeur's theory because Gill uses the theory to conceptualize narrative sharing and because his focus seems to be mostly on the individual. [17] In this essay I am less interested in the construction of the public and more interested in the identity of individuals and how myside bias affects those identities.

One potential danger of the kind of narrative sharing for individuals as cultural encounter that Tariq and Jean-Michel enact is the obliteration of cultures. An opponent of narrative sharing for this purpose may argue that as individuals in cultures recognize and foster their similarities, they may lose what makes them unique. This loss is not just dangerous for the public in losing diversity but is also dangerous for the individual in losing the self. Ricoeur gave the label *syncretism* to this kind of cultural obliteration. But he noted that such syncretism would stem from a misunderstanding of cultural exchange or what he termed *genuine dialogue*. Writing of how Ricoeur sought to guard against this syncretism, Kaplan says: "Genuine dialogue with the other (whether it be a text, individual, or nation) is an exchange of questions and answers in which each is transformed by the other by taking the perspective of the other."[18] My argument here is that Gill's demonstration of the narrative sharing of Lebanese Civil War soldiers is a kind of genuine dialogue. The reciprocity of Ricoeur's genuine dialogue (i.e., that each participant needs to experience transformation by the other) almost necessitates a kind of corporeal physical encounter like that in the situation of Tariq and Jean-Michel. Certainly, each of them have been transformed by taking the other's perspective. Indeed, near the end of their sharing of narratives, Gill notes: "This was the beginning of *speaking each other's lines* in analyzing their history and war."[19] In speaking each other's lines, Tariq and Jean-Michel were able to take each other's perspectives and experience a transformation from their violent selves as former soldiers to people seeking to rectify the violence they had each enacted.[20]

Gill and her coauthor Ivor Goodson note the importance of dialogue in phenomenology. This focus on dialogue in phenomenology is a useful place to start our own exploration of Ricoeur's implications for the kind of narrative sharing Gill proposes. Writing about Ricoeur's conception of what dialogue is, Kaplan says: "The orientation of dialogue is toward mutual understanding and reciprocal recognition."[21] This concept of dialogue is consistent with our analysis of the narrative sharing of the Lebanese Civil War soldiers. Kaplan sets Ricoeur in opposition to contemporary multiculturalism, which, critics argue, is based on individualism seeking sameness; Ricoeur's dealing with multiculturalism solves the critiques arguing multiculturalism leads to essentialism and the obliteration of cultures.[22] Instead of individualist identity, Kaplan says that Ricoeur chooses to think of multiculturalism in terms of recognition: "The problem with many discourses on identity is that they give rise to problematic notions of sameness, essentialism, and homogenizing assimilation in a way that the idea of recognition does not."[23] These identity discourses based on sameness would necessarily lead to the kind of damaging syncretism Ricoeur warns about.

In contrast to an identity politics, Kaplan suggests that Ricoeur's "recognition politics avoid the simplistic extremes of, on the one hand, the ideology of integration that obliterates group differences, and on the other hand, the ideology of difference that fragments and disintegrates social life beyond repair."[24] This recognition politics is consistent with Ricoeur's premium on reciprocity as we will see as we investigate his work. Writing of how Ricoeur's solutions for the problems of modernity (e.g., globalization, colonization, inequality caused by capitalism, etc.) are similar to those of critical theory, Kaplan writes: "The task for critical pedagogy is to help work toward a democratizing society at the levels of industry, institutions, and values by balancing the demands of an industrialized, technological society with the preservation of individual and group identity and cultural heritage."[25] The recognition of the Other's story in the case of Jean-Michel and Tariq allows each of them to incorporate the Other into their respective narrative identities without relying on sameness or pure difference.

How can this process be taught? First, an educator needs to be able

doi 10.47925/75.2019.135

to preserve the individuality of the pupil while providing instruction that will enable the pupil to find a place in a democratic society. The pupil needs to be moved from a place of simply following her cultural traditions to having critical control of these traditions so that she can wield them successfully in society. Two forms of knowledge need to be developed in the student in order for this movement to happen. On the one hand, the pupil must be given knowledge to know why she practices her cultural traditions. On the other hand, the pupil must be presented with schemas that will allow her to judge those cultural traditions for usefulness. Ricoeur calls this process "ascription."

Ascription is the Aristotelian process by which the individual moves from acting in/voluntarily to acting with preferential choice.[26] When an action joins with an agent performing that action, ascription has occurred. When an agent is performing an action motivated by either external or internal compulsion, it is difficult to ascribe the action to the agent. We might consider the case of the Lebanese Civil War soldiers to illustrate this phenomenon. It is difficult to ascribe blame to a five-year-old Jean-Michel who was compelled by his parents to spit on the television when Muslim figure Abdul Hammed appeared during Muslim feasts.[27] It is trickier, though, to say that Jean-Michel is blameless when he fought in the war and killed Muslim soldiers, but I think we must if my reading of Ricoeur is correct. Ricoeur says that if an agent performs an action out of ignorance, then that action is performed on the voluntary-involuntary plane of action, in which the relation between said action and ethical theory is less close than an action performed out of preferential choice. Ricoeur thus argues that for an action to be ascribed to an agent and for ethical theory to apply, the agent must have both kinds of knowledge I described above—both the knowledge necessary to perform the action and the knowledge necessary to be able to choose that action from among other reasonable choices. Jean-Michel had an abundance of this first kind of knowledge—he was both formally and informally taught how to perform violence against Muslims—but he lacked the second kind of knowledge with which he could judge those actions in relation to other actions. It wasn't until he shared his narrative with Tariq that he gained critical consciousness and was able to recognize his past behaviors as morally

wrong. He was able to ascribe past morally wrong behaviors to himself and use them to create a new space. Through ascription, Jean-Michel begins to account and take responsibility for the actions in his narrative self. He says, "So I will carry a gun, I will fight and I will kill because I believe the Other is evil. Although, I had met a few Muslims in school, I believed "real" Muslims to be evil. I almost wanted them to be because if they were this way, I could be that way."[28] Jean-Michel begins to approach his own actions as he may approach an Other. He has de-familiarized his own actions.

By ascribing his past wrongs to himself and by recognizing his way of being as evil, Jean-Michel is able to function as an alternative type of hero with which those in his community can identify and out of which they can begin to form dispositions that will contribute to their personal identities, and ultimately their selves, according to Ricoeur.[29] Jean-Michel imagines as much when he says, "And you have to explain you are doing it [talking with Tariq and other Muslims publicly] for the sake of the coming generation and that you don't want them to do the same things you did …"[30] Ricoeur says that the identity of a person is constructed based on community heroes with which they can recognize oneself in as well as the community's values, norms, and ideals. We might consider Jean-Michel as a type of community hero. He has the Christian community's values, norms, and ideals, but in his conversations with Tariq, he behaves in a new way offering new models for others in his community. In addition to serving as a kind of community hero, Jean-Michel can help other people begin to ascribe their actions to themselves. And thus by making visible actions done by the self, community heroes like Jean-Michel may allow people to be conscious and critical of their own myside bias.

Another way that Jean-Michel may be helping people gain the requisite knowledge to become functioning members of a democratic society without myside bias is by speaking publicly with Tariq. Because Tariq represents the Other to Christian communities and Jean-Michel represents the Other to Muslim communities, they are able to challenge the pre-conceived notions of the Other. Borrowing from Husserl, Ricoeur says encounters with the Other include appresentation, analogical apprehension, and pairing.[31] Ricoeur uses

DOI 10.47925/75.2019.135

appresentation to designate that the flesh, memories, and experiences of the Other are never accessible to the Self the way the Self's own flesh, memories, and experiences are. For instance, he contrasts appresentation with the ability to present one's own memories; my telling of your memory is never going to be the same or equal to your presentation of it. Thus, initially, when the Self encounters the Other, the Self is resistant to incorporating the experiences of the Other into her presentation. This resistance can be understood as a kind of myside bias: even though encountering the Other, the Self has a bias to keep the Other separate from herself.

Through analogical apprehension, though, the Self can begin to know the Other because of what it is like to have flesh and memories of one's own. One may think of analogical apprehension as a version of "treat others like you want to be treated." Perhaps I might decide to not ask challenging questions after your PES presentation because I will experience challenging ones after mine. Analogical apprehension can thus be thought of as a source of empathy. This empathy begins to gum up the engine of myside bias, letting in the possibility that my previously held beliefs can be successfully challenged. Because the Self recognizes similarity with the Other, the Other's separateness is challenged.

Then, in pairing, the Self begins to share the Other's memories and experiences through analogical transfer. The Self is no longer separate from the Other. Ricoeur says that the power of pairing is its corporality—the fact that by being with each other, the Self and the Other can observe and appreciate their similarities and differences. Ricoeur argues that through pairing, the Self's ego begins to consider the Other as an alter ego.[32] Perhaps you ask a challenging question of me, and then I later pair with you and enjoy dinner; I learn that you asked the challenging question because you are working through Ricoeur in a similar way. We are experiencing analogical transfer. Because of this analogical transfer, we are closer to understanding one another. Myside bias is almost nonexistent once analogical transfer happens.

This understanding is essential for protecting against myside bias. One characteristic defense against myside bias might be a respect for the Other. This respect can be cultivated by creating conditions which move the relationship

with the Other from appresentation to pairing and analogical transfer. Gill's account of narrative sharing is an example of this movement. Neither Tariq nor Jean-Michel grew up in communities that gave them much meaningful interaction with members of the Other religion.[33] This stage of appresentation meant that each of them accepted that their differences meant that not only were the Other's flesh, memories, and experiences inaccessible but also that they were unimportant. Then Tariq says: "But I had questions and they brought me to the Christian areas. I went just to see, to confirm those images I had of them: they were richer and wealthier because they were devilish. But I saw Christians who were poor, *who were just like us*. I mean they are just people."[34] Tariq begins to analogically apprehend the Other because of what he recognizes as similarities. This creates a space where he could be open to the pairing with Jean-Michel created by sharing his narrative and hearing Jean-Michel's narrative, leading to analogical transfer in which they began to speak in unison: "We are victims and perpetrators at the same time."[35]

Analogical transfer is dependent on recognition and reciprocity, which are needed for diverse individualities to be preserved in a modern, industrial society. "Recognition is a structure of the self reflecting on the movement that carries self-esteem toward solicitude and solicitude toward justice. Recognition introduces the dyad and plurality in the very constitution of the self. Reciprocity in friendship and proportional equality in justice … make self-esteem a figure of recognition."[36] For Ricoeur, then, reciprocity is necessary for recognition. The key to understanding Ricoeur's notion of recognition is solicitude. Ricoeur says: "Solicitude adds the dimension of value, whereby each person is *irreplaceable* in our affection and our esteem."[37] This irreplaceability allows for the perseverance of individuality because if each individuality is irreplaceable, then something will be lost both to the Self and to the Other if that individuality is gone. Ricoeur argues that this solicitude allows the Self to realize its own irreplaceability. Recognition, for Ricoeur, extends Self's own esteem to the Other in a solicitous esteem for the Other as well. By recognizing you as my alter ego, I come to value your individuality and also recognize my own individuality; I begin to uptake this interaction with the alter ego into my narrative self.

DOI 10.47925/75.2019.135

To figure out how to achieve recognition, we need to revisit reciprocity. Ricoeur notes that reciprocity is necessary for friendship and is characterized by a mutuality of respect.[38] If reciprocity is necessary for recognition, then in order for recognition to happen, it must be mutual. It is only because Tariq and Jean-Michel both came to mutually share their narratives that there is hope of any recognition. This consequence raises doubts about the hope that Tariq and Jean-Michel will be able to create the kind of change they experienced in others by speaking publicly. Even though they may serve as community heroes, there would be no confrontation with appresentation to motivate other Muslims and Christians to begin to incorporate these heroes as parts of their selves. The change experienced by Tariq and Jean-Michel was a result of their recognition, which was itself a result of their mutual willingness to be reciprocally affected by each other.

These doubts provide lessons for contemporary American partisanship and alternative ways to guard against myside bias. Applying what we have learned from Ricoeur to the current American political moment, it seems unreasonable that myside bias and political partisanship can be successfully combated by focusing on rehabilitating the individual. An intervention that keeps individuals from competing parties separated means no engagement with the Other to move the individual from appresentation to pairing. This separation necessarily results in separate models of narrative selves. If two parties are kept separate, then there can be no hope in recognition of the Other party in their respective narrative selves. It may be that myside bias and political partisanship can only be meaningfully altered when individuals from opposite sides meet corporeally, share their narratives, and begin to recognize the Other in the self.

1**Acknowledgements**
I owe special thanks to Fran Schrag for sharing his article about myside bias with the graduate students at the 2018 Center for Ethics and Education Institute. This article helped ground a problem I was trying to address with Ricoeur. The helpful comments from the reviewers made this essay more focused, and the many comments from Dr. Bryan Warnick on previous drafts of this article challenged me to get out

of myside bias about what was working in my argument. I also owe a great deal of debt to the editing of Sara Hardman.
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3 Philip M. Fernbach, Todd Rogers, Craig R. Fox, and Steven A. Sloman, "Political Extremism is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding," *Psychological Science* 20, no. 10 (2013): 1-8.
4 Schrag, "Science, Democracy, and Education," 13.
5 Ricoeur is useful for thinking about the narrative self.
6 Scherto Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing: Transforming Memories of Violence to Stories of Peace," in *Critical Narrative as Pedagogy*, eds. Ivor Goodson and Scherto Gill (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 137–155.
7 Ibid., 147–148.
8 Ibid., 152.
9 Ibid., 153.
10 Nathan P. Kalmoe, Joshua R. Gubler, and David A. Wood, "Toward Conflict of Compromise? How Violent Metaphors Polarize Partisan Issue Attitudes," *Political Communication* 35, no. 3 (2017): 333–352.
11 David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 53.
12 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 148, emphasis added.
13 Ivor Goodson, "Defining the Self through Autobiographical Memory," in *Critical Narrative as Pedagogy*, eds. Ivor Goodson and Scherto Gill (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), specifically the section, "*Ipse*-Identity and Literary Puzzle Cases."
14 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 152.
15 Ibid., emphasis added.
16 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 114.
17 Hannah Arendt seems to be talking about something similar to narrative sharing when she writes, "The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves. . ." in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50. I set such similarities aside in this essay in order to focus solely on Ricoeur's thinking about individual narrative selves.
18 Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory,* 177.
19 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 152.
20 Ibid., 153.
21 Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory,* 39.
22 As theorized and critiqued in Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–73.

doi 10.47925/75.2019.135

23 Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory,* 158.
24 Ibid., 159.
25 Ibid., 145.
26 Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 90.
27 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 148.
28 Ibid.
29 Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 121.
30 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 152.
31 Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 333-334.
32 Ibid., 334.
33 Gill, "From Demonizing to Humanizing," 147.
34 Ibid., 152, emphasis added.
35 Ibid., 149.
36 Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 296.
37 Ibid., 193, emphasis in original.
38 Ibid., 183.