

The Pull of the Ethical that Shifts Narrative Identity:
Paul Ricoeur's Summons to Responsibility and Sympathy
for the Other

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Spencer Smith has written a fascinating paper on a timely topic: reducing “my-side” bias in disputes about politically polarized issues. He is responding to Francis Schrag’s idea that reasonable discussions between protagonists will moderate respective positions. Applying “Paul Ricoeur’s work on the *narrative self* to Scherto Gill’s study of *narrative sharing*,” Smith argues for a different approach to de-biasing interventions.¹

Gill’s story is about two soldiers—Tariq and Jean-Michel—on opposite sides of a religiously-inflected civil war, who met face-to-face and shared their respective personal narratives. Their stories were “filled with hate and violence” towards the other’s group, including the other group’s religion, their actions during the war, and their protections against the “evil Other.”² Smith relates Gill’s observation that it was in their face-to-face exchanges that the two soldiers experienced solidarity with each other, without having to put aside their religious and cultural differences. It was the exchange of stories, the “practice of narrative sharing,” that moderated the my-side bias of each soldier, suggesting that crucial to narrative sharing’s de-biasing effect is the embodied face-to-face encounter.³ For Smith, this “phenomenological perspective” connects to Ricoeur’s idea of narrative self. Narrative sharing is crucial, he says, because “the individual can only act ethically once she has incorporated a description of the world into her narrative self.”⁴

I want to explore the relationship between action, narrative identity, and the ethical through what is occurring to Tariq's and Jean-Michel's identities in the embodied exchange between them, to deepen our understanding of the reduction of myside bias. I will cover some of the same terrain as Smith does, but add some clarifying remarks about the exchange between the soldiers by developing further Ricoeur's ideas of narrative identity and the ethical.

For Ricoeur, narrative identity is a mid-point between two other identities: the agent of action and the ethical agent. This suggests that the originator of action—say Jean-Michel in his actions as a soldier in the war, including his choices—isn't yet constitutive of his narrative identity, let alone something ethical. Narrative identity emerges in telling those stories, and hence in reflecting on those actions.

Narrative identity in Ricoeur is constituted through a dialectic between two poles within the narrative sphere, the pole of sameness (*idem*) and that of selfhood (*ipse*). Sameness (*idem*) identity is understood as “character,” something that is part of a story's plot. A character emerges as a story is recounted, with its personal intentions, larger causes, and chance happenings.⁵ Character, he says, reveals the sameness in one's personal identity, a sedimentation in the present of the past. What is sedimented is “the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized,” both by the person themselves and by the others in their lives.⁶ Thus, in their narrative exchanges Tariq and Jean-Michel are recognizing themselves and the other person as characters in stories.

This helps understand their my-side bias, not as flawed knowledge nor as flawed reasons in support of their bias, but as the way each of them are stable characters in a narrative that is larger than their individual selves. They are each relating their personal sedimented dispositions, acquired from one's community. What is incorporated into their

characters includes “an element of loyalty” towards maintaining their identity’s stability. They are each loyal to these acquired habits and dispositions in order to maintain their continued self-recognition. That is, as they tell their stories to the other, their narrated dispositions and actions help constitute their loyalty to their narrative identities as characters. My-side bias can be viewed then as part of sameness (*idem*) identity, showing itself as central to their narrative identity. This helps explain the difficulty of reducing my-side bias. A bias is “my-side” because it is a set of sedimented dispositions by which I am continually recognized by others in my community, and by which I recognize myself. I am rewarded for remaining loyal to them, not extraneously by others, but by myself in terms of fidelity towards the stability of my personal identity. To reduce my “my-side” bias then would, literally, force me out of character, and I would no longer be myself.⁷ Reducing my-side bias is difficult precisely because it requires going beyond the tug of the sameness pole of one’s narrative identity.

That is why it is insightful for Smith to suggest that narrative *sharing* is the key to reducing my-side bias. Not more knowledge or more valid reasons, or even implicit-bias training. But why narrative sharing? Stories are the relating of events. The succession of events shows the story in its contingency, with a standing possibility for unexpectedness to emerge. A narrative isn’t predictable, which suggests that narrative identity isn’t as stable as the *idem* identity of character might suggest. For Ricoeur, narrative identity has another pole: selfhood (*ipse*). *Ipse* means “self,” where selfhood is not sameness (*idem*). Narrative identity is actually an oscillation between *idem* and *ipse*, sameness and selfhood. Although selfhood is also part of identity, it is different from the sameness of character, and involves *self-constancy*. His examples include keeping one’s promise, or being faithful to a friend. These are self-constancies that don’t rely on sameness to maintain steadfastness of identity. Rather than fidelity to a

character, “Self-constancy is for each person that manner of conducting himself or herself so that others can *count on* that person.”⁸ In this pole of the dialectic of narrative identity, the constancy of self-identity is that of being-able-to-be-counted-on by another person. It is in narrative sharing that the *ipse* pole shows up.

I am suggesting that the event of narrative sharing for Tariq and Jean-Michel shifts the dynamic between the poles that constitute their narrative identities. It moves each of them away from their sameness as characters to which they were loyal, towards an identity involving self-constancy, showing themselves to be counted on by the other with whom they are face-to-face, perhaps as an implicit promise to the other. That is, this is not an identity that requires the two to be the same, but rather the identity of feeling responsible to the other. This doesn’t negate the character dimension of their narrative identity, but rather shifts it to a less conspicuous position in their narrative identity as the selfhood dimension becomes more prominent.

Smith suggests that it is through “the recognition of the Other’s story” that each “incorporate the Other into their respective narrative identities.”⁹ Smith goes on to say of Jean-Michel that “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.”¹⁰ Smith understands this exchange to be what Ricoeur calls “genuine dialogue,” including the reciprocity of what Kaplan calls “mutual understanding and reciprocal recognition.” This, Smith associates with reduction of my-side bias. We can now explain that the exchange called “genuine dialogue” is a shift in narrative identity towards constancy of selfhood and away from sameness of character.

However, it doesn’t yet explain what might be the pull of the *ipse* pole of narrative identity that moves each of the soldiers. For that we

need to introduce Ricoeur's idea of the ethical plane. For him, an ethical perspective involves "aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions."¹¹ If we leave aside, as Smith has done, "just institutions," we can explain the reduction of my-side bias using the ethical. The second component "with others" is crucial for our story, something Ricoeur calls "solicitude."¹² Solicitude "adds the dimension of value, whereby each person is *irreplaceable* in our affection and our esteem."¹³ In solicitude, in being addressed by another as a "you," one feels "implicated in the first person."¹⁴ This implication—interpellation—is at the ethical plane. It is through being addressed by a "you" at the ethical plane that one feels the self-designation of being assigned responsibility to and for the other, what in selfhood of the narrative identity is an identity of accountability. It is this ethical "summons to responsibility" coming from the other, initiated by the other rather than the self, that shifts dynamic in the dialectic constituting narrative identity.¹⁵ Solicitude itself has two poles, a "summons to responsibility" coming from the other as a command, and a "sympathy for the suffering other," coming from one's loving self. Thus, the shift of the ethical summons also enacts, at the same time, a sympathy for the suffering other that extends to the other from the self while simultaneously receiving the summons to responsibility for that same other. It is this dynamic that constitutes the ethical plane of aiming for the good life with others. And perhaps it is this that moderates the my-side bias involved in disputes about politically polarized issues.

1 Spencer Smith, "Narrative Sharing: A Phenomenological Approach to De-Biasing," *Philosophy of Education* 2019, ed. Kurt Stenhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1992), 141.

6 Ibid., 121.

7 Ibid., 122.

8 Ibid., 165.

9 Smith, "Narrative Sharing"

10 Ibid.

11 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 180.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 193.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 192.