



IDENTITY, AGENCY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Anupam Yadav

Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda

Baroda

The idea of human agency shifts the locus of the self from the ‘what’ to the ‘who’ question, i.e. from the Cartesian rationalism or Platonic soul-substance to the domain of action and responsibility. The identity question is about an agent – a moral agent who, as Ricoeur says, is an ‘acting and suffering being’. However, the quest for ‘who am I?’ does not individuate the self in the sense of representing the personal identity-profile that complements the dialogical-communicative self, though it is true that there is an existential constitution of individuality that depends upon but is not reducible to some larger meaning-giving structure of social reality. Burdened with the loads of “who” questions concerning accountability and social responsibility, the quest for identity expands onto the horizon of historical consciousness. It unties its bondage from the logic of ‘I can’ and ‘I do’, from the centre-stage of the *present* (which is assertive of one’s identity), and merges with the larger domain of historical consciousness that yields identity in the articulation of the three-fold present.

The idea of agency repudiates the “whatness” or permanence of the substantive self subsisting through discreet mental events and replaces it with the idea of temporality that accounts for the, fragmented, contingent and dynamic character of lived-reality. The metaphysical sameness is now understood as the *selfhood* – a narrative binding of the otherwise dispersed, inchoate lived-temporality. Secondly, in challenging the Cartesian solipsistic self, it uproots the disengaged rationality from its transcendental anchorage and situates it in the historically evolved symbolically constituted intersubjectivity.

I examine the rejection of the ideas of ‘sameness’ and ‘disengaged rationality’ in the light of Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity and Taylor’s idea of self-evaluating being respectively. Ricoeur’s attempt to relate the present cultural crisis to the question of the self-identity and Taylor’s conception of human agency, governed by the metaphor of depth and value for good life, together help us to ascertain the issues of socio-ethical significance entangled in the quest for identity. Unfolding the rich and complex field of the identity-question which deepens our understanding of the socio-historical reality through Ricoeurian and Taylorian hermeneutics of self-understanding is what



the paper aims at.

I

In his quest for self-identity, Ricoeur expresses concern over the way the self is either too “exalted” or too “humiliated” in the history of the western tradition. It is either situated on the absolute transcendental ground or is made a mere linguistic construct and decentered in the hands of the deconstructionists. The entire western philosophy witnesses an oscillation between the sameness or identity and the subversive efforts to deconstruct a system situated upon fixity and permanence. However, there are some intermediary approaches which, in their constructive efforts, defend the idea of the selfhood and also do justice to the marginalized notions of difference and otherness. Ricoeur examines the idea of the self-identity from an angle which mediates between the sameness and selfhood. The sameness (*idem*) stands upon an entire hierarchy of significations and in this hierarchy the *permanence in time* is the highest order. Ricoeur attempts to redefine identity which retains the form of the *permanence in time* or continuity but answers to “who am I?” and not reducible to “what-question”.

Ricoeur distinguishes between the sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*) but overcomes their polarity by bringing them into a dialectic interplay in an act of configuring a story or a narrative out of the otherwise loosely related, dispersed account of one’s lived-temporality. In reading or *following* a story of one’s life the discordant, heterogeneous, contingent experiences or episodes are configured in a meaningful intelligible totality through the function of the emplotment. The synthesis of the heterogeneous mediates between concordance (the principle of order which presides over the Aristotelian concept of “the arrangements of facts”) and discordance (the contingencies, the reversals of fortune which give the plot an ordered structure). The terms ‘concordant discordance’ or ‘discordant concordance’ which are unified in a narrative mode constitutes an identity which is not substantial but dynamic, which endures but also experiences dissonances.

Ricoeur describes this dialectic which accounts for both the continuity and ruptures and satisfies the quest for stability as *character*. In his words, “understood in narrative terms, identity can be called, by linguistic convention, the identity of the character”.¹ He further characterizes it as *self-constancy* reflected in acts like keeping one’s promises or words without the substratum of the sameness. The character and



self-constancy together explain identity or stability but this identity or permanence belongs to the person or human agent couched in history. A narrative identity mediates between these two poles of self-identity – character or selfhood as supported by sameness or *idem* and self-constancy which is pure *ipse* without the support from sameness. Ricoeur explains this dialectic as “an intervention of narrative identity in the conceptual constitution of personal identity in the manner of a specific mediator between the pole of character, where *idem* and *ipse* tend to coincide, and the pole of self-maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness”.²

The concept of narrative characterization which wins over the discordance, dissonance and provides a thematic unity to one’s life, endorsing what Dilthey calls the ‘connectedness of life’ (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*), does not individuate or isolate the self in its personal terrain but points out that one’s identity is fairly cast by the others. Just as the others are characters in our story, it is equally true that we are characters in others’ stories too. This shared task of constructing the narrative identity submits the act of narration to the causal power of history. The selfhood or human agency of ‘acting and suffering being’ situates a person in the field of history. However, the causal determinacy does not, in any case, refer to the ascendancy of the effective-history. As a matter of fact, it accentuates the power of the living present (not the metaphysical *presence*) from the centre stage of which any ‘fusion of horizons’ is brought about. The present not only mediates with the ‘space of experiences’ but also with the history to be unfolded onto the ‘horizon of future’. Ricoeur’s idea of the narrative identity not only enforces that we are the *makers* of history in contrast to the Gadamerian emphasis on the effectiveness and our being the sufferers of history but also highlights the dialectical interplay of the temporal modalities of the past and future in the making of identity which encapsulates the important issues of historical existence.

Insofar as the question of identity does not merely account for the inner, personal profile to complement the dialogical-public, intersubjectively understood image of the self, we can ascertain other meaningful issues it is related to. The identity question as, Ricoeur points out, asserts its importance at the collapse of the Cartesian self which has left us directionless leading to the present cultural crisis. The present crisis, according to him, is not attributable to the methodological debate i.e. to accept the positivistic hegemony or to fight for the distinctive independent status of the human-historical enterprises. The crisis is because logocentricity liners on and asserts itself in



yet another mode. The search for identity of the human self, in its aspiration of attaining the utopian ideals, has wishfully undermined reflective insights into the tradition-boundedness for their role in determining the meaning of the personhood and human experience. In searching for the meaning of life our vision is rather (mis)placed in some fancying, idealistic future which creates a wide gulf between our historical past and unrealizable future. As a result, the rational calculative and controlling will manifests itself in taking control of the horizon of future, exorcising it from the history in which any conception of the future is germinated. The persistent intent to achieve the future ideals; rather, the desire to control or secure the future, having no groundings in the “effective-history” is a manifestation of the rational mind. This predicament uproots man from his history and places his vision in some non-realizable ideality.

Ricoeur questions this tendency of exorcising the future from the tradition-boundedness and treating the living present as an isolated point-like fraction uprooted from the effective-history; for, it leads to the abstraction of the past as past. Any schism between the past and the future must be prevented according to him. He rather argues that the two mutually condition each other. Ricoeur borrows the two terms ‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of future’ from Reinhart Koselleck.³ Koselleck defines history as having a stratified structure for the traversals it passes through (in this sense it is more than a mere chronology) and future as the power of unfolding expectations including hope, fear, rational calculations etc. The initial polarity between them is overcome in terms of the two functions of integration and breaking open of perspectives. The very fact that the future goes beyond the determinacy of the past and the past is yet not complete as to reject accommodating the new experiences condition each other.

The two categories just do not condition each other they also function as the meta-categories determining the human existential history. Substantiating Koselleck’s idea, Ricoeur says that these meta-categories “govern all the ways in which human beings in every age have thought about their existence in terms of history – whether it be made history or spoken history or written history”.⁴ The point that he brings home is that the human life cannot be understood without the integrated idea of history which ascribes onto us the consciousness of ‘collective singularity’ and, in turn, the identity of acting and suffering beings. We do not only suffer due to the embedded history but also to the history that we make. And this goes against those who wish to



master history. We forget the fact, Ricoeur writes, “that we are affected by history and that we affect ourselves by the history we make. It is precisely this tie between historical action and a received past that we did not make that preserves the dialectical relation between our horizon of expectations and our space of experience”.⁵ The truth of this dialectic motivates us to be responsible and reflective about the history that we create which our future generation will be a witness of. The construction of personal identity onto the horizon of historical consciousness, in and through its internal dialectic, takes the identity quest beyond the personal domain to understanding the history in which the mankind is situated. This deep tie between the identity question and the idea of history, which cannot be constituted independently of the experiences and expectations of the acting human agents, makes the search for identity a meaningful one.

II

Just as Ricoeur’s idea of the narrative unity of the self takes an intermediary stand, Taylor’s hermeneutics of the self sufficiently distanciates from the Cartesian modern self and equally antithetical deconstructing attempts. Taylor digs up the entire history of Western philosophy as it were woven around the same theme that goes into the making of the modern identity. The modern identity is constituted by the primacy of the human reason which is the sole determinant of the epistemological-technological and ethical dimensions of human existence. The reason-centricity measures everything on the criteria of certainty and clarity, takes instrumental control of every bit of human-historical reality and justifies human actions with respect to the universal-rational schemata.

Taylor elaborates the modern identity as constitutive of the three elements, namely, disengagement, instrumental reason and atomism. The subject is ideally disengaged and free that has severed its ties with the natural and social belongingness. The dominance of reason creates what Taylor calls the punctual self which manifests itself in exercising its instrumental control (with no attachments and concern) over all natural and social dimensions starkly suiting to its own conception of existence. And lastly, this generates an atomistic conception of society driven ultimately by the individual purposes and interests. Taylor traces the roots of the modern identity in the preeminence of epistemology, in general considered to be the pride of the modern philosophy. Thus, an attack on the modern identity is *ipso facto* an attack on the western epistemology



specially threatening foundationalism and the representational model of knowledge.

Taylor joins hands with the thinkers critiquing western epistemology. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Quine, Wittgenstein, having their anchorage in Kant, have all emphasized the intentionality of cognition that repudiates the Cartesian ideal of self-reflectivity and self-enclosure. The proud acknowledgement of human dignity in reason, Taylor argues, has narrowed down the modern self to an extremely solipsistic level that has objectified everything and robs human existence of its historical essence. Taylor is worried about the individualistic and a-social modes of human behavior which have left human life bereft of meaning and directions. He draws our attention to these ‘modern malaises’ and, at the same time, warns us of taking refuge in the Nietzschean ‘control of will’ or the Foucauldian anatomy of reason or even turning towards metaphorical enterprises which do not take us anywhere. He rather emphasizes on the need to redefine human dignity in other than the idea of rational agency.

The human agency, according to Taylor, is intrinsically interpretive, by which he means the power of self-evaluation and, particularly, the qualitative evaluation of desires. To put it clearly, in valuing a courageous action and withstanding the craven impulses, a person expresses his aspiration to be a certain kind of person. It is this contrastive language of higher and lower, noble and base, woven in our symbolically textured history that defines the notion of agency. Antithetical to the disinterested outlook, the vocabulary of worth constitutes the ‘interpretive horizon’ or ‘evaluative matrix’ and this hermeneutic conception transcends the rational deterministic bounds and places self-understanding on the plane of the symbolic indeterminacy. For Taylor we all act from some ‘horizon of evaluations’ or ‘preferential frameworks’. In his words, “to know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or what is valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand”.⁶ Thus, the interpretive horizon, and not the reflective immediacy, constitutes the locus of one’s identity – a notion which corresponds to Ricoeur’s idea of ‘long and arduous route’ that denies any royal road to the ontology of being.

The mediation of the interpretive core, Taylor accentuates has an intrinsic normativity. The language of worth or the ‘frameworks of goods’ suggests that our



preferences are morally adjudged. The choice, Taylor concedes, is not so much between choosing the good over evil but choosing good among the abundance of goods. It is our vision of good that determines our dignity and self-respect and bestows upon us a self-identity. The intrinsic moral binding in our interpretive horizons, which differentiates human beings from other animals does not give rise to any relativistic position of morality. The moral sense is not subjective, a mere projection but embracing of what is right as objectively right though not absolutely right. It is this moral sense of leading a life of dignity that explains the concept of self-identity as intrinsically linked with the idea of good. And the good, according to Taylor, refers to the 'good life', in the Aristotelian sense. The inherent normativity – a directedness towards a moral-social order in our evaluations is suggestive of the fact that the selfhood and morality are inextricably intertwined themes. Thus, the essence of the human agency lies not in objectifying but in interpreting or evaluating the world which goes beyond the idea of reflective immediacy to caring for the good life for the larger humanity. Taylor's account of human agency enables us to see how morality or moral consciousness is determinative of the 'who-question' and in this sense participates in the process of social construction. The question of self-identity, as it emerges from the articulation of human agency, is not like an unrelated rational-transcendental idea having no social-historical underpinnings. It rather embodies within itself the deeper onto-existential issues which make the quest for identity a meaningful one.

To conclude, though the linguistic-hermeneutic accounts of agency direct us to reflect upon and target human agency for both the history we have and we have not made and thereby open up the issue of responsibility, there runs a risk of diluting the identity of a human individual and dissolving it in the idea of historical consciousness that encapsulates both the subject and the symbolically constituted reality. Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity which assigns selfhood to the person reduces the human agency to historically lived-reality and any account of self-identity to the articulation of history. The human agency, in Taylor's case, is directed towards the good life because there is an intrinsic teleology for a social order in our evaluative horizons. The hermeneutics of the self, recuperated from the discourse of agency, shifts the locus from the individual domain to the horizon of historical consciousness. Nonetheless, it is in this lurking between the shrinking of the locus of the selfhood and broadening the contours of historical consciousness that the identity quest finds its way.



References

1. Ricoeur, Paul. (1992) *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press, p. 141.
2. Ibid, p. 119.
3. Koselleck, Reinhart. (1985) *Futures Past: The Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
4. Ricoeur, Paul. (1988) *Time and Narrative, vol. III*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Palleur, p. 214.
5. Ibid, p. 213
6. Taylor, Charles. (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, p. 27.