

Chapter 8

From Fallibility to Fragility

How the Theory of Narrative Transformed the Notion of Character of Fallible Man

Pol Vandavelde

Even those who are familiar with Ricoeur's work may wonder how the notion of character, which was approached in the psychological sense of personal traits in *Fallible Man*, could be transformed into that of a "narrative character" in his later works, such that "life" could be spoken of as being "in search of narratives" (Ricoeur 1991b) or that "the narrative category of character" could "contribute . . . to the discussion of personal identity" (1992: 143; 1960a: 170). This is what I want to examine in this chapter.

Tracing the transformation that took place between Ricoeur's early work, *Fallible Man* and his later works, such as *Oneself as Another*, has two hermeneutic advantages. Prospectively, it shows that the transformation from the phenomenological and psychological notion of character in *Fallible Man* to the narrativist account in his later works resorbs the tensions that Ricoeur only names in *Fallible Man*—what he calls the "disproportion" between the finitude of human beings (as manifested by their character) and their aspiration to infinity or "happiness." Retrospectively, tracing this transformation, first, accounts for the fact that, despite the changes, there is a consistency to Ricoeur's position and, second, shows how radical the theory of narratives is when it comes to the notion of character: by giving precedence to the "who" question of those who give the account over the question of "what" an individual is, precedence is given to ethics over ontology. I will draw out these two hermeneutic advantages in two sections. First I will examine the notion of character in *Fallible Man*, and second I will examine how the theory of narrative transforms this notion.

THE ONTOLOGY OF "DISPROPORTION" IN *FALLIBLE MAN*

The "philosophy of the will" addresses a theme that remains constant in Ricoeur's thought, up to one of his last works, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000; 2004a): the tensions in human life and human activities. In *Fallible Man* he borrows Pascal's notion of "disproportion" to name these tensions (between our finitude and the infinity of our aspirations). In *Time and Narrative* he calls it a "heterogeneity" (as the diversity of facts and events happening in the past or in our life). In *Oneself as Another* he speaks of a "passivity" of the self (as body, conscience, and other people). Throughout Ricoeur's work, these tensions do not stand outside human reach, as if they were forces oppressing human beings and shaping their existence outside their consciousness. Already in *Freedom and Nature*, despite the fact that the will cannot recover what makes it possible, the involuntary was not an autonomous force beyond the reach of the will. The same is true in *Fallible Man*, where a disproportion is only such from the perspective of a "synthesis," and in *Oneself as Another*, where there is passivity only from the perspective of an "activity." That is to say that the involuntary, disproportion, and passivity are discovered by the subject and thus recovered as an other in the subject, as an alterity that preceded the subject, and as having an efficacy that needs the subject to take its force.

In *Fallible Man* Ricoeur uses Cartesian terms and speaks of "the Cartesian paradox of the finite-infinite human being" (1960a: 22; 1986a: 4; trans. mod.). Everything human is of a finite sort and yet human beings have aspirations or strivings for something that transcends their finitude. This "disproportion" is the experience of an excess, of that which transcends their limitations. They experience a "noncoincidence" with themselves (1960a: 21; 1986a: 4).

As with *Freedom and Nature*, where the "involuntary" is what challenges or unsettles the voluntary, likewise in *Fallible Man* Ricoeur presents the noncoincidence with oneself in negative terms. As the title of the book makes clear, fallibility is intrinsic to the constitution of human beings who are characterized negatively as capable of failing.¹ This negative dimension of the disproportion at the ontological level calls for a "restoration" of unity in the form of reconciliation, which Ricoeur calls a "synthesis." As he writes in *Freedom and Nature*, "the theory of the voluntary and the involuntary not only describes and understands, but also restores" (1950: 21; 1966: 18).

The "synthesis" that can resorb the disproportion is what is problematic in Ricoeur's view and what, I argue, motivates him to abandon his "psychological" views in *Fallible Man* and take a narrative turn in his later work. As I will show, the synthesis cannot work for structural reasons because it is performed by the subject—what Ricoeur calls the "cogito"—and it will have

to take place at the level of consciousness and thus in the form of a judgment. Yet, the synthesis "synthesizes" precisely that which allegedly cannot be subsumed under a judgment—the involuntary or fallibility. As we will see, the theory of narrative displaces the experience of disproportion from the ontological structure of the human being and shifts it to the ethical stance they take. Let us see the way in which fallibility manifests this tension that needs reconciliation.

By fallibility, Ricoeur means the ontological possibility of falling and doing evil, of having a "bad will." It is part of the human condition to have the "capacity [*pouvoir*] of failing" (1960a: 161; 1986a: 223, trans. mod.), to be "capable of failing" (1960a: 161; 1986a: 223), or to "'find oneself' exposed to failure [*se "trouve exposé" à faillir*]" (1960a: 21; 1986a: 4, trans. mod.). Through this capacity to fail moral evil is possible: "What do we mean when we call human beings fallible? Essentially this: that the *possibility* of moral evil is inscribed in their constitution" (1960a: 149; 1986a: 204; trans. mod.).² *Fallible Man* thus complements the phenomenology of the will of *Freedom and Nature*—an eidetics of the will—and represents for Ricoeur an "outline of philosophical anthropology" (1960a: 11; 1986a: xix)—in the form of an "empirics" of the will.

Ricoeur examines three forms of the disproportion that is constitutive of human beings, thus three forms of their "noncoincidence" with themselves with regard to knowledge at the theoretical level, action at the practical level, and feeling at the affective level. These three "disproportions" also represent three levels of human "fragility" in the sense that they are fallible in each of these three domains: theoretical, practical, and affective. For each disproportion there is a corresponding "synthesis." At the first level of knowledge, the disproportion is between reason and sensibility, to the extent that we have a finite perspective on objects and yet claim objectivity. Ricoeur sees Kant's notion of transcendental imagination as performing a "synthesis" of the finite perspective in order to provide objectivity. At the second level of action, there is a disproportion between character and happiness to the extent that my character gives me my limited situation and my dispositions but I strive for happiness as the completion of all my limited strivings. The "practical synthesis," which Ricoeur borrows from Kant again, is performed by the respect for persons, as that which mediates my character and my striving for happiness. At the third level of feeling there is a disproportion between my desires that bind me to the organic aspect of life—*bios*—and those that lead me to pursue the *logos* and strive for being rational. The affective synthesis mediating desires and aspirations is performed by "feeling" or "heart" (Plato's *thumos*). I will not discuss the first and third disproportions here, but instead will focus on the second, practical one, involving character.

Character as a Set of Psychological Traits

Against the Sartrean position, Ricoeur maintains that freedom is not absolute, but rather it is "lived" at the practical level through my character, which represents "the finite manner of freedom" (1960a: 77; 1986a: 93).³ My psychological dispositions and inclinations determine my way of being situated in the world and my limited projects and goals determine how I envisage my place in it. Yet, I aspire to happiness, which would be the fulfillment of my aspirations. Such is the disproportion between my character and happiness. Character is described in terms of that which limits human beings. As "the finite openness of my existence taken as a whole" (1960a: 75; 1986: 89), character is on the side of "finitude" (1960a: 85; 1986: 103) or "contingency" (1960a: 155; 1986a: 212). Ricoeur qualifies this finite and contingent way of being as a "narrowness": "Character is nothing but the narrowness of my access to all values of all human beings across all cultures" (1960a: 87; 1986a: 108, trans. modi.). While on the side of contingency, character is not fate in the strong sense of a force "which governs me from the outside" (1960a: 78; 1986a: 94, trans. mod.) but it is fate "in a certain way," as Ricoeur says, and in two respects: "as unalterable [*immutable*]" and as "received, as inherited" (1960a: 78–79; 1986a: 94).

Character is "unalterable" or "immutable" in the sense that it is not subjected to the will as what, for example, I can choose to have. Rather, it is "the radically non-chosen origin of all my choices" (1960a: 79; 1986a: 95). Besides being unalterable, it is also "inherited" as that which I received at birth and gave me my situation in the world. In other words, it is the facticity of my existence in the chronological and existential sense. Chronologically, my birth is "the already-there [*le déjà là*] of my character" (1960a: 80; 1986a: 96, trans. mod.) to the extent that my birth gives my character a precedence over my will. Existentially, my birth is "nothing other than my character" (1960a: 80; 1986a: 96). Yet, because this character was mine from the start and made me the subject I am, character is both donation (as gift) and empowerment (as taking as my own). It is a "gift [*donation*]" which makes me heir to my own life [*héritier de ma propre vie*]" (1960a: 80; 1986a: 97) in the sense that it is from the retrospective move of taking it as my own—in the position of heir—that the gift is such. In Ricoeur's words, "the fate of character and heredity discloses its meaning: it is the given, factual narrowness of my free openness to the totality of the possibilities of the being-human [*l'être-homme*]" (1960a: 81; 1986a: 98).

To the finitude (narrowness, contingency) of character, Ricoeur opposes the infinite counterpart of happiness, which is the totality of the aspirations we have. He takes from Aristotle the view that the good is that toward which all things, actions, and choices strive. Ricoeur then adds to this Aristotelian

notion the Kantian sense of a "totality": all these goods toward which we strive are subsumed under happiness.⁴

In the first disproportion at the theoretical level, the notion of totality was applied to the objectivity to which knowledge aspires. The transcendental claim to knowledge (in a Kantian sense) goes beyond the limited perspectives we can ever have on an object (e.g., in perception) and presents a form of totality of perspectives as the objectivity of knowledge. In a similar way, Ricoeur argues that at the practical level of action, regardless of the fact that we are situated and disposed in specific ways by our character, "we are 'directed toward' happiness" as the totality of sense and contentment. "Happiness . . . must be to the totality of human aims what the world is to the aims of perception. Just as the world is the horizon of *the thing*, happiness is the horizon in all respects" (1960a: 82; 1986a: 100, trans. mod.). Ricoeur characterizes happiness as "the excess of meaning, the overflow [*le trop*], the immense" (1960a: 86; 1986a: 105) or as a "feeling of the 'immense.'" Through excess, "the horizon is clear, unlimited possibilities open up before me" (1960a: 85; 1986a: 104).

Because of the excess of happiness or disproportion between happiness and character, a "mediation" analogous to Kant's transcendental imagination at the theoretical level is needed. Just as the transcendental imagination mediates sensibility and reason in a way that allows for the finite perspective of the knower to be transcended into objective knowledge, Ricoeur claims that Kant's notion of "respect" is the practical mediation between character, as what is specific to me, and happiness, which opens me to the whole of humanity (1960a: 67; 1986a: 77).

With regard to this notion of respect, I will only point out the role of "synthesis" that Ricoeur ascribes to it and I will programmatically raise the question of where the synthesis is exercised. Ricoeur does not really answer this question in *Fallible Man* other than by appealing to the Kantian "ideal" of the person, which Ricoeur calls "humanity." Using this ideal, Ricoeur considers an individual to be one instantiation of humanity and as such a person worthy of "respect." In this way, the person as representative of humanity is precisely "a synthesis of happiness and character" (1960a: 86; 1986a: 105). However, this only names the problem of reconciling finite perspectives and infinite totality. It does not solve it. Ricoeur tells us that the "disproportion" between that which anchors me in a finite perspective (my character) and that which attracts me to go beyond my own finitude (happiness) is not external to me, but "inhabits the human will" (1960a: 84; 1986a: 103, trans. mod.). Yet, he can only describe the effect of disproportion: it distends or tears apart—"in themselves and for themselves, human beings remain torn" (1960a: 157; 1986a: 216, trans. mod.). The synthesis is just the suffering of the discord.

The theory of narrative that he develops later in *Time and Narrative* (1983; 1984) and *Oneself as Another* offers a more convincing "synthesis."

FROM THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHARACTER TO THE CHARACTER IN A NARRATIVE

The English word "character," in its dual meaning as psychological and narrativist, is fitting for characterizing Ricoeur's narrative turn away from the psychological consideration of character in *Fallible Man*—*caractère* in French—toward a narrativist approach in which the self becomes a character in a plot—*un personnage* in French. Ricoeur came to realize that the self comes to a self-understanding through narratives and thus by being embedded in plots. "Understood in narrative terms, identity can be called, by linguistic convention, the identity of the character [*personnage*] . . . the identity of the character is constructed in connection with that of the plot" (1990: 168; 1992: 141).

This narrative turn has three major consequences. First, it causes the transformation of brute experiences, actions, and events into "sense" or "meaning"; second, it dissociates fallibility (or guilt) from fragility, an association that was central in *Fallible Man*; and, third, it inverts the relation between ontology and ethics. While in *Fallible Man* ethics presupposed an "ontology of disproportion," "ethics" takes precedence over any ontology of the self in *Oneself as Another*.

Narrative Transformation of Brute Reality into Sense

Fallible Man was an exercise in philosophical anthropology, focusing on that which a human being is (essentially "*faillible*"). Later on, Ricoeur came to see that, because human beings manifest themselves through what they do, action, for example, is not only where human beings can fail, but it is also where they manifest who they are. Action thus reveals the field in which the human "essence" unfolds, as it were, and thereby decenters whatever essence a human being may have by exporting it to the public realm of interactions with others. Action thus exposes who we are as human beings but not as a secondary moment originating from a preexisting self. Rather, the decentring of the human beings through what they do means that they are not just an internal structure made of voluntary and involuntary or a disproportion, but, more fundamentally, they are a connection between "what" they do and "who" they are.

With this externalization, a new tension arises between the action and its meaning. The meaning escapes agents because the action can be interpreted

by others or by agents themselves at a later time, and the meaning includes the consequences of the action, which may not have been intended or anticipated. "The meaning of action separates itself from the event of acting [*la signification de l'action se détache de l'événement de l'action*]" (1986: 191). This new tension cannot be resorbed by a "synthesis" that would take place in existence in the static and psychological sense as in *Fallible Man* (through respect, for example). The synthesis is itself a task to be accomplished or a "work" to be done, one that is of a narrative nature. The narrative will perform the synthesis.

This narrative performance of a synthesis involves a combination of first-person and third-person perspectives, and consequently a combination of the two temporalities pertaining to these perspectives. On the one hand, the narrative is *post factum* as a retrospective look, which synthesizes by giving actions, experiences, or events a representation in the form of a story told "of" those actions, experiences, or events. This preposition "of" does not name a relation of mirror image, copy, or duplication but a transformation from the order of physical movements into meaning. Narratives give the "meaning" of the action, experience, or event. On the other hand, this movement of articulation by a narrative inserts the voice of the narrator (e.g., historians) into the "reality" of what is recounted. Historical narratives, for example, bring what took place back into a narrative presence but the meaning of the past is "for" historians. The narrative voice is thus a conflation of the temporality of the third-person and first-person perspectives. Let us see how this works.

A narrative provides a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" or a "discordant concordance," in which either self, actions, or events are brought to a form of unity. By "synthesis of the heterogenous," Ricoeur explains, "I am attempting to account for the diverse mediations performed by the plot: between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted; between the disparate components of the action—intentions, causes, and chance occurrences—and the sequence of the story; and finally, between pure succession and the unity of the temporal form" (1992: 141). At the level of action, for example, an agent is not a self-contained subject. When acting we also "read," literally, what others are doing or going to do, and we ourselves follow some basic scripts, whether we are aware of them or not, so that our goals and movements are intelligible. Think of how harmonious the behavior of people in a restaurant is, roughly, abiding by some scenarios belonging to this kind of environment, which would be very different in a church or lecture hall. As Ricoeur shows, action has a "semantics," a "symbolics," and a temporal structure.

The semantics of action is what transforms a set of gestures and movements into a "meaningful" whole that is recognizable as an action. Whenever we change jobs, for example, we have to become familiar with the way other

people work and what they expect us to do. We need to learn the implicit conceptual network that gives interactions their meaning, or their "semantics." As Ricoeur writes, "our familiarity with the conceptual network of human acting is of the same order as the familiarity we have with the plots of stories that are known to us" (1991b: 28). There is also a "symbolics" of action. In Ricoeur's example, raising one's arm is used symbolically by a person to draw attention, raise a question, stop a taxi, or vote, depending on the context. "Symbols are the internal interpreters of action" (1991b: 29). This holds true not just for observers who will find a "readability" to action (1991b: 29) but also for agents, who can then act "meaningfully." Action also has a temporal structure and temporal features—beginning, end, transition between the two—that give it a "pre-narrative quality" (1991b: 29) so that we can connect gestures and movements in a specific sequence of what becomes an "accident" of two people bumping into each other, or an "attack," or a "reunion."

Because of the semantic, symbolic, and temporal structure of action, there is a "connaturality" between the narrative of action and the action itself. By making explicit the "network" already inherent in action (its goal, circumstances, and protagonists), the narrative neither does violence to the "texture" of action nor is redundant of the action but gives its "meaning." It is thus no exaggeration to say that action is a "quasi-text" (1991b: 29) or a "potential story" (1986: 142). One can even say of one's life that it is "a story in its nascent state," or that it is "in search of a narrative" (1991b: 29).⁵

As a result of this narrativization, experiences and actions are no longer merely products of a subject—a *cogito*, as Ricoeur calls it in the *Philosophy of the Will*. Rather, they are also a public manifestation of a person's character, of "who" that person is. Because my character in the psychological sense is manifested in my deeds and actions, it is also manifested as the character in the narratives I and others tell of myself. This conflation of character in terms of psychological traits and character as the narrativist protagonist in actions and events gives me a readability so that people will decipher me in my deeds and actions—from a third-person perspective—and say that I "remained true" to myself or that I did something "out of character." This readability represents the constancy I have despite the variations at the level of sameness as identity (*idem*) in age, appearance, and activities. In this sense, character becomes for Ricoeur one model of "permanence in time" (besides keeping one's word) (1992: 118). This permanence in time is not merely what others say about me but lies in part in my own hands through my ability to account for myself—from a first-person perspective—so that "the permanence of character expresses the almost complete mutual overlapping of the problematic of *idem* and *ipse*" (1992: 118). Narratives thus serve as a mediation between the third-person and first-person perspectives or, as Ricoeur puts it, "between the pole of character, where *idem* and *ipse* tend to

coincide, and the pole of self-maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness" (1992: 118–19).

Ricoeur describes this mediation as the fact that "character has a history," which it "contracted" "in the twofold sense of the word 'contraction': abbreviation and affection. It is then comprehensible that the stable pole of character can contain a narrative dimension, as we see in the uses of the term 'character' identifying it with the protagonist in a story. What sedimentation has contracted, narration can redeploy" (1992: 122). That which sedimentation has contracted is a "what": the subjects as narrated from a third-person perspective (by themselves and others). Narration can re-deploy a "who" in the sense that subjects can be narrators of their own experiences and actions from their first-person perspective or readers of narratives involving them, and usually both. "The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer [*scripteur*] of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told" (1988: 246).

In other words, our self-understanding is itself narrative-like in the sense that we understand ourselves through the narratives we have read.⁶ This combination of first-person and third-person perspectives explains that permanence in time, which we have through our character, is itself a narrative work of self-understanding and, as such, evolving. This is quite different from *Freedom and Nature* where Ricoeur had placed character under the "absolute involuntary," along with the unconscious and life. At that time, as Ricoeur says retrospectively, character belonged "to that level of our existence which we cannot change but to which we must consent" (1992: 119). In *Fallible Man*, as we saw, character is also immutable and inherited. But this is precisely what Ricoeur rejects in *Oneself as Another*:

Instead of conceiving of character, in the framework of perspective and of opening, as the finite pole of existence [in *Fallible Man*], I am interpreting it here in terms of its place in the problematic of identity. This shift of emphasis has as its principal advantage the fact of putting into question the immutable status of character, taken for granted in the earlier analyses . . . Character, I would say today, designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. (1992: 120–21)⁷

Narrativization accounts for the way in which we can be the co-authors of our own lives on the model of Aristotle's notion of *sunaiton* as a co-cause (1992: 160). We cannot be the sole author because we do not have a direct or intuitive access to our self. Rather, the self is manifested in the heterogeneous (facts, events, and so forth, which we cannot change). Yet, we are

not merely a story because we perform the synthesis of the heterogeneous and thereby bring concordance to what is discordant. As Ricoeur says, "we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero of *our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life*" (1991b: 32). This is how narrativization reconciles the third-person perspective (from which we are a character in the narratives told about ourselves) and the first-person perspective (from which we are the author of those narratives).

What was an "ontology of disproportion" in *Freedom and Nature* in the sense of a noncoincidence of human beings with themselves, which they "suffer," becomes a narrative task for human beings of making this "discordance" "concordant," and this means narrating it as a synthesis of the heterogeneous both on the side of experiences (actions and events) and on the side of selfhood. "Gathering all these factors into a single story makes the plot a totality which can be said to be at once concordant and discordant (this is why I shall speak of discordant concordance or of concordant discordance)" (1991b: 21).

The narrative transformation of, first, actions into meanings and, second, character in the psychological sense into both a protagonist in actions or events and the author of narratives conflates the "what" we are with the "who" we are, so that "character is truly the 'what' of the 'who'" (1992: 122). Because the question of "who" we are always involves our first-person perspective, this question cannot only pertain to a philosophical anthropology as in *Fallible Man*. This brings us to the second consequence of the narrative turn, for example, that there cannot be a strictly third-person perspective from which fallibility can be said to be "constitutive" of human beings.

Narrative Transformation of Fallibility into Fragility

We saw in the previous section that the "'disproportion' of self to self" was understood negatively in *Fallible Man* as a "primordial discord" (1960a: 148; 1986: 202) or as "the *ratio* of fallibility" (1960a: 21; 1986: 4). Ricoeur speaks alternatively of fallibility and fragility, and seems to equate them most of the time as the susceptibility or inclination to have a bad will or doing evil.⁸ In his "Intellectual Autobiography" (1995) he criticizes this unilaterality in *Fallible Man* and recognizes the need to differentiate fallibility (or guilt) and fragility (or vulnerability).

I had to work out the ontology of finite will implicit in the dialectic of acting and suffering. To this ontology, I gave the very Pascalian name of an ontology of disproportion. Human frailty, our vulnerability to moral evil, would be nothing other than a constitutive disproportion between a pole of the infinite and a pole of the finite. To my mind, the most original feature of this meditation was not so much the idea of disproportion as the character of frailty attaching to the mediations interspersed between the opposing roles. (1995: 15)

The significant difference between fallibility and fragility (or vulnerability), in my view, lies in the focus of the approach. Fallibility is what a static third-person approach finds in describing human beings by "faulting" them, literally, for what they lack. Fragility (or vulnerability) is what a dynamic approach finds in accounting for the first-person perspective of what human beings live and experience. In other words, once the manifestation of human existence is seen as belonging to existence itself, once "being" is extended to "acting and suffering among others," the "what"-question—"what are human beings?"—cannot be separated from the "who"-question—"Who am I in my deeds and actions?" The recognition that human beings manifest themselves in what they do brings the negative side of a "capacity to fail" back into a positive condition of being fragile and vulnerable. As a consequence, the "disproportion" can no longer be just a fact that is "constitutive" of being human, that is, an ontological fact or a facticity and, accordingly, our vulnerability can no longer be a *factum* as fallibility. Rather, this fragility and vulnerability lie in the fact that we are not the masters of the meaning of what is experienced and done but are open and exposed to being narrated, embedded in plots, or, alternatively, unable to bring to concordance what happened to us.

What provides the positive aspect of fragility and vulnerability is the narrative voice of the first-person perspective. It is no longer facts and events that confront us but their sense or meaning (this was the first transformation operated by the narrative turn). Rather, actions and events are looked at retrospectively, and in this retrospective look a voice is also lent to those actions and events. For example, the "past," which in one sense "was" before me, is such only because I give it a voice. Once I tell a narrative about myself, I am split. We already mentioned the split between author and character. The new split here is between the present of the performance of telling the story and the past of what is narrated—for example, my past. The narrative voice integrates these two dimensions of temporality into one: the present of the narration. It may be that actions were performed in the past, but it is in the present of the narration that the past of those actions gains its meaning.

While the "voice" comes *after* the experiences, facts, or events, and is mine, I lent this voice to those experiences, facts, and events so that they gain presence.⁹ The present of my voice is also a gift to the past, offering it retrospectively a new present. The narrative voice is the very manifestation of my fragility, precisely because through my narratives I recognize the antecedent voice of what escapes my power—in the form of past experiences, facts, and events. Thus "the narrative voice," Ricoeur says, "is neither that of memory nor that of historiography," which would be from a third-person perspective, "but that which results from the relation of the posteriority of the narrative voice in relation to the story it tells" (1985a: 98–99), that is from a

first-person perspective. The presence of my voice in giving a present to what happened means that narratives have an ethical valence because they include the existential attitude of those who give the narratives and this attitude is one of response. If historians give us new accounts it is because, in some sense, they "respond" to that which called upon them to be told. This leads to the third transformation caused by the theory of narrative.

Narrative Transformation of Ontology into Ethics

The anthropology of human beings in *Fallible Man* could start with a traditional ontology of substance even if it were amended to include the "involuntary," as that which challenges the will from within, or if it were amended to include the possibility for the will to become "bad will." People are ontologically—in their "constitution"—fallible. They are first and foremost those who have "missed the mark" (1960a: 159; 1986a: 218), as Ricoeur evocatively says. This expression "missing the mark" is what the Greek term *hamartia* means, as a term of archery. It is a "mistake," but the term was used to name the terrible "mistake" at the heart of a tragedy, such as Oedipus's deed. It was then used later in the Gospels to name that which has been translated as "sin" in English.¹⁰ The "mistake" in question is thus not merely of a psychological order but an ontological disorder or a tear in the fabric of the world. Such was Ricoeur's starting point in *Fallible Man* where human beings are fallen, "bewildered and lost," and have "forgotten the origin" (1960a: 159; 1986a: 219). In such a world, Ricoeur ominously said, "ethics arrives too late" (1960a: 159; 1986a: 219).

Once narrative transforms subjects into characters, narrators, or interpreters, the relation of priority between ontology and ethics shifts. As we have seen, reality (actions, events, self) has been transformed into meaning so that agents (or subjects in general) have the role of interpreters of actions, events, and their own life. Because we cannot go back to what "really" happened and confront reality "face to face," as it were, experiences, actions, or events receive their ontological weight retrospectively: through their "readability" or "interpretability" and thus from their presentations and descriptions in narratives.

This readability of action has a liberating effect against the brutality of actions or events in the sense that they can be recounted—"presented," "described," that is, "narrated"—in different ways. As Ricoeur notes, "it is always possible . . . to narrate differently" (2004b: 157; 2004c: 104). The "sense" or "meaning" can be modified or changed. This is what allows Ricoeur to say in *Memory, History, Forgetting* that, despite the brutality of events in the past, there remains the possibility of a "happy memory." Yet, besides the liberating effect of a transformation into meaning, there is the

correlative danger of narrative idealism, which would de-realize actions and events, and merely dramatize them. Ricoeur is keenly aware of this danger of heterogeneity between the sense or meaning of the action or the event, on one side, and its "reality," on the other. "If the 'sense-content' is what makes possible the 'inscription' of the action-event [*l'événement d'action*], what makes it real? In other words, what corresponds to writing in the field of action?" (1986: 193; 1991c: 152). We need a guarantee that the narrative is truth-telling and not a fabrication.

Narratives have two valences, one with regard to their object and one with regard to their author. In their first valence, narratives claim to render the articulation and thus the meaning of the action itself so that narratives reach a level of "representation" that can claim to be a re-presentation of the action itself. This is what historians do. Although they tell us stories, these stories are "true" and any competitor to a historical narrative will be another historical narrative. The second valence of narratives is on the side of their authors. The guarantee that narratives are "of" experiences, actions, and events, and not merely fabricated, lies in the existential attitude of those who provide the narrative. This existential attitude keeps the meaning connected to the actions or events recounted and avoids a narrative idealism that would dispense with the "reality" of what "really happened."

Ricoeur has described this existential attitude of those who give the narratives in two ways. The first one is a "debt" that we have to "render" what took place because the past or what happened is demanding to be recounted. Historians, Ricoeur says, "are all moved by the desire to do justice to the past" because they as well as their readers have "an unpaid debt" (1985b: 273; 1988: 152). Ricoeur acknowledges that this notion of debt is "strange" but he finds it implied in the expression used by historians and painters: "They seek to 'render' something, a landscape or a course of events. In this term 'to render,' I see the desire to 'render its due' to what is and to what once was" (1985b: 273; 1988: 152). The debt that is felt results from a duty to respond to a call coming from what asked to be narrated. "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative [*appelle récit*]" (1983: 143; 1984: 75). This makes historians "insolvent debtors" (1985b: 253; 1988: 143).

The second way Ricoeur describes the existential attitude of those who give narratives is attestation. He applied this notion first to the self. Attestation is linked to the "I can" and is a confirmation or an endorsement of this "being capable": "Attestation is the sort of confidence or assurance (nondoxic epistemological status) that each of us has of existing (ontological status) on the mode of self (phenomenological status)" (1991a: 382. My translation).¹¹

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur extends the notion of attestation to that which I am capable of and connects it to the narratives historians give. By giving a narrative, historians "attest" to their own ethical stance. The belief in historians—the trust we have in them—redoubles the truth of the statement—we believe *that* their historical narratives are true.¹² Attestation is thus productive of truth at two levels and at the same time. As endorsing my own capability it is an "alethic mode" (*mode aléthique [ou véridatif]*)—here I am, as a truth-teller—and as accompanying my statements it is an "epistemic mode of assertions" (2004b: 140; 2004c: 91) that makes the historical account an "attestation to reality" (*attestation de réalité*) (2000: 363; 2004a: 278).

Far from being extrinsic to the narrative, the existential attitude of historians belongs to the narrative "voice" that retrospectively gives an ontological status to what is recounted, and it can perform this remarkable feat through the voice's credence and, thus, through its ethical status. By presenting a narrative of what took place, authors, such as historians, attest to their moral status as truthful and trustworthy storytellers. Ethics, which arrived too late according to *Fallible Man*, becomes prominent after the narrative turn insofar as ethics gives narratives their valence as "true representations" of what has taken place.

The different transformations performed by the theory of narrative (of reality into meaning, fallibility into fragility, ontology into ethics) find a remarkable outcome in making it possible for memory—for example, the memory of a horrific past—to become a "happy memory." This is the title of the "Epilogue" of *Memory, History, Forgetting*. I cannot discuss this here except to point out the extent to which the notion of happiness from *Fallible Man* has also changed along with that of character. In the early work, happiness is a "disproportion" at the practical level as the totality that regulates (in a Kantian sense) the way in which an individual, with limited access to the world (through character), is a person open to humanity (with its aims and possibilities). Happiness was not a feeling. It belonged to a transcendental framework as an ideal although it was an ideal that kept human beings "torn" and in "discord." By contrast, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, happiness is no longer the opposite pole of character but, in fact, the success of the narrative work once we have accepted, first, that the past matters in the meaning it has for the present—this is what the narrative voice accomplishes; second, that our psychological traits are manifested and presented in narratives so that we are, even as historians, protagonists in our narratives; and, third, that any ontology depends on our ethical attitude.

Ricoeur himself draws an analogy between *Memory, History, Forgetting* and *Freedom and Nature* with regard to the treatment of guilt. His last work is a phenomenology of memory in the same way that his first major work, *Freedom and Nature*, was a phenomenology of the will. In both works, the

question of guilt or fault had to be provisionally bracketed. Just as *Fallible Man* examined this question of guilt that had been "bracketed" in *Freedom and Nature*, likewise the "Epilogue" to *Memory, History, Forgetting* is about guilt, which had been bracketed in the main part of the work. Guilt is approached in the "epilogue" from the perspective of its cleansing or "forgetting," which is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a forgetting of what happened, but rather a transformation of the sense or meaning of what happened, especially with regard to victims and perpetrators. This transformation through forgetting and forgiveness is precisely what narratives can do. Of necessity, narratives are selective, and of necessity other ways of narrating the "same" event are possible. This possibility of re-articulating painful events, of bringing into discussions different perspectives does not delete what happened but provides a broader readability of what happened. This broader readability can bring past enemies or descendants of perpetrators into the discussion. If forgiveness can play a role in history—Ricoeur is ambivalent about it—it would not be merely a private psychological event that might allow victims and perpetrators (or their descendants) to move on. In Ricoeur's narrative framework, forgiveness has the power to change the meaning of the past so that human beings may be reconciled with what took place and find peace with themselves and former perpetrators in a happy memory.

If indeed facts are indelible [*ineffaçables*], if what has been done cannot be undone and if we cannot make it the case that what has happened has not, by contrast, the sense of what has happened is not fixed once and for all. Besides the fact that the events of the past can be interpreted otherwise, the moral burden associated with the debt toward the past can be increased or alleviated depending on whether the accusation confines the guilty individual in the painful feeling of the irreversible or whether forgiveness opens the perspective of a deliverance from the debt, which amounts to a conversion of the very sense of the event. (Ricoeur 1998: 29)

Such a "happy memory" as the result of a narrative work could resorb the "disproportion" left jarring in *Fallible Man* and "restore" the integrity of the human being, which was the elusive goal of the *Philosophy of the Will*.

NOTES

1. As Ricoeur insists, "guilt is not synonymous with fault" (1960b: 99; 1967: 100). Culpability or fallibility name an ontological component of human existence or of the human condition whereas fault is an instantiation of such a capacity to fail.
2. Fallibility is thus "the constitutional weakness which makes evil possible" (1960a: 11; 1986a: xix).

3. In *Freedom and Nature* he speaks of "my freedom's mode of being [*la manière d'être de ma liberté*]" (1950: 345; 1966: 368).

4. Happiness is thus not simply pleasure, and remarkably not a "feeling," as Ricoeur understands feeling in *Fallible Man*. Rather, it is *eudaimonia* or beatitude, as the life of a person, which can be said retrospectively to have been a good life.

5. Narrative is thus "the text *par excellence*" (1995: 29).

In *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur speaks of a triple mimesis in order to show the interactions between (1) the world of experiences as a pre-figuration in the sense of having a pre-narrative nature (Mimesis1); (2) the actual narratives as a configuration of the world of experience (Mimesis2); and (3) the effect actual narratives have on the world of experience when subjects and agents use what they have read and "re-figure" the world of experience and action (Mimesis3). On this, see Vandavelde 2008, 2013.

6. As Ricoeur explains, "it therefore seems plausible to take the following chain of assertions as valid: self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional history or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies" (1992: 114).

See also: "My thesis is here that the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense or the significance of a narrative stems from the *intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. On it rests the narrative's capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader" (1991b: 26).

7. In footnote, he says: "Character, I would say today, is sameness in mineness" (1992: 120).

8. Ricoeur says: "The 'disproportion' whose exegesis we have been pursuing through knowing, acting and feeling, takes on the name of fragility in the affective order" (1960a: 142; 1986a: 191).

9. As Ricoeur asks, "could we not say that the preterite [of the narration] preserves its grammatical form and its privilege because the present of narration is understood by the reader as *posterior* to the narrated story, hence that the told story is the *past of the narrative voice*? Is not every story in the past for the voice that tells it?" (1985a: 98).

10. See also Ricoeur 1960b: 74; 1967: 72.

11. As Ricoeur describes it in *Oneself as Another*, "attestation can be identified with the assurance that each person has of existing as the same in the sense of ipseity, selfhood" (1990: 346; 1992: 298). We find analogous formulation in *Memory, History, Forgetting*: "What I expect from my close relations is that they approve of what I attest: that I am able to speak, act, recount, impute to myself the responsibility for my actions" (2000: 162; 2004a: 132).

12. If challenged, historians will attest to their ethical stance and the truth of what they say by exhibiting the documents used and presenting the explanatory procedures employed. "It is together that scripturality, comprehensive explanation, and

documentary proof are capable of accrediting the truth claim of historical discourse. Only the movement that moves back from the art of writing to the 'research techniques' and 'critical procedures' is capable of raising the protest to the rank of what has become a critical attestation" (2000: 363–64; 2004a: 278).

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