Felix Ó Murchadha

Who is the Self?

Thin Selves, Narrative and the Limits of Sense

The ontological and ethical status of the self is a matter of intense contemporary debate. Within that debate the narrative account of the self is often critiqued for allegedly committing a *petitio principi*: to narrate itself the self must already be, therefore to understand the self narratively is already to assume what needs to be shown. Narrative identity in such a view is at best epiphenomenal: it is based upon a more fundamental self-relation. Similarly, it is argued that narrative conceals fundamental discontinuities in the self, limits of experience that are both constitutive of the self and yet resist incorporation into narrative structures. In thinking Ricœur's work today, and in particular with a view to its future, the present contribution will approach his account of the narrative self through reflection on what Dan Zahavi has termed the ›thin self‹ and also on those experiences that seem to challenge both narrative and thin accounts of the self. Those latter experiences, it will be argued disclose the self's dependence upon and vulnerability to that which remains foreign to it.

This contribution will be divided into three sections. The first will outline the notion of the ›thin self‹ (1.). The second section will then articulate the narrative self in the light of Ricœur's earlier account of the *cogito blessé,* the wounded cogito, and the notion of personhood (2.). The third section will the examine the interruptions and challenges to the narrative continuity of the self both as beginning and as ending (3.).

1. The Thin Self

When Hume says that he can find no impression of the self[1], he is not stating anything surprising. Impressions in his account are either of the external world or of emotions. Indeed, he affirms self-hood through an analysis of the emotions where the self is not an object of an impression but is constitutive of the affective impressions of the passions.[2]. Starting from Hume so many rejections of the self are rejections of the account of a self as a thing, a permanent unchanging substance understood as the subject of experience. To tackle this question, we need to explore the self *in flagrante,* so to speak, in the act of being a self, without presupposing the type of being we are going to find there.[3] If we will find it anywhere, we will find the self in sense experience. Before we can speak of the self in the variated manifestations of society or culture, even before we think of language, we need to ask what it is like to be in an experience.[4] If there is no self in experience, then any form of self we may find in more constructed and instituted domains will have a derivative ontological status.

For something to be experienced it is necessary for there to be an appearance, appearing must happen. The happening of appearance is the coming to access to some thing or states of things for someone; access both in the sense of coming towards the thing and that thing

1 D. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature,* Oxford 1978, I, 4, VI (300): »I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some perception or other [...]. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.«

2 *Treatise* II, 1, ii, 329.

3 Cf. D. Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood,* Cambridge/MA 2005, 128: »the self is real if it has experiential reality [...] the validity of our account of the self is to be measured by its ability to be faithful to experience.«

4 While in English one *has* experiences, in German (and French) one *makes* experiences. Both verbs are potentially misleading: the self does not have an experience as a possession to be collected, rather experiences happen to it, similarly, the self does not make experiences like products separate from itself, even though it only experiences by being capable of uncovering sense in the intentional objects of its experience. Prior to such having and making is an immersion in the world, in which both experienced and experiencer are.

coming towards the one experiencing.[5] Appearing is the making possible of approach. It is that opening of approach which is constitutive of experience, the coming nearer of and to (*ad propiare*). The appearing of things happen and such happenings are experiencable, they happen to a being capable of experiencing them. We know this for ourselves: the poignancy of life is that things happen to us.[6] It is crucial to stress this: in seeking the self what we find is not in the first instance a sovereign agent of experience but a *subject to* experience, one who cannot help but have experiences.[7] For there to be experience there needs to be someone who experiences; that someone is the being to whom things appear and for whom such appearance is indubitable. This basic truth is that which is captured by Descartes with the figure of the cogito. A similar point lies at the core of the argument for a ›thin self‹.[8]

To have an experience is not to have a self alongside the experience as one more object. It is rather constitutive of any experience that it is mine (for the one experiencing).[9] We are immediately on the wrong track if we begin with the question, as to *what* this self is. When we begin with the mineness of experience we are concerned with how[10]: *how* experience happens is that it happens *to* me. The question is not to what but to *whom*.

---

5 The word ›access‹ is significantly ambiguous in this way. It originates from the French *access* meaning the »onslaught, attack; onset (of an illness)«. Michel Henry states that »phenomenological distance is the ontological power which gives us access to things, it is this access itself, an access in and through remoteness.« M. Henry, *L'Essence de la Manifestation,* Paris 1963, 77; *Essence of Manifestation*, The Hague 1973, 63.

6 See L. Tengelyi, *The Wild Region in Life History*, Evanston 2004, 7.

7 Barry Dainton makes this point well: »By a ›subject of experience‹ I mean simply this: a thing whose sole essential property is the ability to enjoy unified states and streams of consciousness. If I know anything about myself right now – or whenever I am awake and capable of thinking anything at all – it is that I am having some experiences, and these experiences form parts of a continuous, flowing stream of consciousness.« B. Dainton, *From Phenomenal Selves to Hyperselves*, in: *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 76* (2015), 161–197, here: 162.

8 See Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood,* and G. Strawson, *Selves*, Oxford 2009.

9 D. Zahavi, *Self and consciousness*, in: *Exploring the self. Philosophical and psychopathological perspectives on self-experience*, Amsterdam 2000, 59–64.

10 See D. Zahavi, *Self and Other*, Oxford 2014, 22.

Experience happens to someone, happens indeed in any case to me: in order that your and his experience are in any way a matter of my awareness they have to be first personal experiences. The world, or more precisely, qualities in the world, impress themselves upon an experiencing being. These are the givens, the sense data, from which Empiricism begins.[11] But this very term ›impression‹ embodies a threshold: to impress, to press upon, is to do so *here*, in a place, the porous place of the self's surface turned towards the world. ›Impression‹ already implies the dative case. Something pressing itself upon whom? Upon a self or more carefully upon an identifiable individual. Hume, the most consistent of the Empiricists, as already mentioned, dismissed the existence of a substantial self. There is no impression corresponding to the self. What this indicates is not the absence of a self, but rather the mode of access to it or rather the mode of no-access. There is no impression of the self because the self is neither a sensible quality nor a sensation but arises precisely out of that difference, that distance in which impressions can take place in the first place. The self is not a domain apart from the real, but is an aspect of the real. In sense experience at its most fundamental there is a relation to me: to sense something is for it to affect me, for it to happen to me. The self, expressed by ›I‹, is an aspect of experience not an object for experience. It is not that a self experiences itself, but rather that in experience what we sense is sensed as being turned toward a place which is specific and fixed, though contingent. What happened had happened behind or before me, near or far away from me, intensely or mildly affecting me. But this sense of self is nothing separate from the qualities of that which has been impressed upon me. Such impressions are emplaced and that means both spatially and temporally. It has happened in relation to this spatial and temporal location of the one who is experiencing. Such selfhood does not require explicit self-consciousness but rather

11 But once this is admitted, then there can be no account of consciousness as pure perception: all sensation is affective. As Henry puts it: »impressionality is pure phenomenality as such, the matter and the phenomenological substance from which consciousness is made and thus the original phenomenality of all phenomena. That is why every objectivity, even the most transcendent one, is clothed with an affective layer that is constituted by a specific intentionality, an ›act of feeling‹.« M. Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle*, Paris 1990, 33; *Material Phenomenology*, New York 2008, 23.

that the spatiality and temporality of the self is constitutive of the experience.[12]

The self that emerges from this threshold is one which experiences itself as responding to the impressions, which contingently affect it. As already noted, while Hume denied the reality of a substantial self, he did affirm that the self experiences itself through its passions. Through such passions as pride and humility, the self experiences itself and does to in relation to others. The auto-affective *here* intertwines with the sense of others *there*. But, to follow Hume still, the particular passions are all variants of one fundamental difference, namely between pleasure and pain.[13] The self experiences itself in terms of a threshold of inner and outer, that is, in relation to a place of emerging pleasure or pain. The self is that being which experiences pleasure and pain and has an interest with respect to these experiences: the experiences are not indifferent, some it enjoys and comes to desire, some it dislikes and seeks to avoid. That which Zahavi terms the ›thin‹ self is that pre-reflective sense of selfhood constitutive of such sense experience. The self that emerges here is not the dominating, masterful subject, but rather a being caught up in the world, moved by emotions, attracted or repulsed by the qualities of things in the world. It is not mistaken to think of such a self as an ego, as long as we do not make the mistake of reifying the meaning of that word: the ego is myself as a necessary aspect of experience, but imperfect in the sense of not being complete in itself. The self as so understood is an essentially experiencing being, not a self-objectifying one.[14]

12 As Zahavi puts it: »First personal self-reference involves a non-objectifying self-acquaintance« (*Subjectivity and Selfhood,* 27).

13 *Treatise* II, 1, ii (329): an idea of pleasure or pain »when it returns upon the soul, produces a new impression of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion.«

14 See Strawson, *Selves*, 47: »self-consciousness doesn't seem to be a necessary component of our ordinary notion of what a self is.«

2. The Narrative Self, The Thin Self and Personhood

To be a self is not simply to experience, it is also to act. The self that experiences the world also acts within the world. It has a past with which it identifies and a future towards which it orientates itself as itself, that is as *this* persisting self. While allowing for persistence in the self, Galen Strawson forecloses a discussion of such identity with an extended past and future by reducing selfhood to a transient element of experiences.[15] By so doing, however, he does not so much explain as explain away: the self which experiences itself, for example, accused of some past offence, does not simply experience the accusation, but experiences itself as being reached by that accusation. The self that hopes for a future does not simply experience itself hoping now, but lives in relation to a future in which it will continue to be this same self. Zahavi can account better for this through employing a phenomenological account of memory: the self remembers itself as that past self.[16] But, it is not simply that I remember myself as an experiencing being, I also remember myself as having acted, having brought about an action – and also having suffered the actions of others – which belong in my experience as constitutive of my identity. Once we start speaking in these terms, we seem inevitably to be caught up in narratives, which account or attempt to account for past actions in terms of a self with motives, encountering situations, dealing with inherited issues and so on.

Crucially the self that remembers its past and directs itself towards its future is a self for which its mineness is more than the awareness of an experience as its own. The flow of consciousness is for the self a passing that has permanence: we can speak here with Husserl of a living present, or indeed the ›where‹ in which the transition of the coming to be and passing away of experiences takes place.[17] But the mineness of this experience, is a mineness of attestation in Ricœur's terms. The self does not simply have experiences but understands itself as disclosing itself in terms of those experiences. The first personal perspective ties it to itself in its own responsibility for itself.

15 Strawson, *Selves*, 9.

16 Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 74.

17 See W. Fashing, *Mineness of Experience*, in: *Continental Philosophy Review 42* (2009), 131–148, here: 145.

It is important to see here that the thin self fails to reach a fundamental aspect of the self, namely that of self-responsibility. A self which is responsible for itself, is one for which its identity with itself is of essential significance. If that identity is not to be understood in substantial terms – as both the thin-self and the narrative self accounts assume – then it must emerge within the experience itself. This is, indeed, Zahavi's claim, and he draws on Sartre's account of the pre-reflective to support this. The self which emerges in experience is not a thing ›behind‹ the experience, but is pre-reflectively constitutive of that experience.[18] But a self which acts is not alone experiencing itself acting, nor does it alone remember having acted, but understands itself to be somehow constituted in and through that action: I am the one who did this or that and I did so out of certain desires, which are at once the cause and the motivation of my action.[19] In accounting for myself, my narrative discloses myself as that being which gathers together causes and reasons in my expression of myself. In so doing my narrative transforms the contingency of events into the necessity of a plot.[20] For a self to emerge, is for a being to be who can respond, ›yes, I did that for this and this reason‹. In other words, the self is not simply a first person position, but is a *taking up* of that position. This is what Ricœur refers to a character (*personnage*) in the sense of a character in a story. To be a self is to be able to account for oneself.

Jaako Belt suggests Husserl's concept of the person as a bridge concept between the minimal and the narrative self.[21] Husserl's concept of person encompasses both character and person in Ricœur's

18 Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 91–2.

19 See P. Ricœur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, Paris 1986, 170–172; P. Ricœur, *From Text to Action. Essays in Hermeneutics II*, London 1991, 129–131.

20 P. Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre,* Paris 1990 [=Sca], 170; *Oneself as Another*, Chicago 1992 [=OaA], 142.

21 J. Belt, *Between Minimal and Narrative Self: A Husserlian analysis of the self*, in: *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology 50*, no. 4, (2005), 305–325, here: 306. On Husserl's account of the person see S. Luft, *Husserl's Concept of the ›Transcendental Person‹: Another Look at the Husserl–Heidegger Relationship*, in: *International Journal of Philosophical Studies 13,* no. 2 (2005), 141–177. He understands ›person‹ in this account to designate »a conscious being as such in its fullest dimensions, not just as psyche or as a psychological researcher reflecting solipsistically, but a conscious and responsible agent living in a social setting with others and with rules, living in a state of affects, emotions, etc. and

sense, both habituations and convictions. The suggestion to think the relation of thin and narrative self in terms of personhood is, nonetheless, a very helpful. The necessity of character is for Ricœur in dynamic relation with the I, which expresses its personhood through its promise making. The self's identity is both that of *idem* and of *ipse*, both thing-like and self-reflective. Its thing-like quality is constituted through habituation, through the becoming second nature of modes of being which make up the character of the self. Ricœur is clear that this second-nature is a process, one which is at once limiting and enabling. This second nature is a sedimentation of the past, but it is nonetheless that for which the self takes responsibility or can be called upon to take responsibility. In this sense the »my character is me myself, *ipse*: but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*.«[22] In other words, although the self has a permanence due to the sedimentation of dispositions from the past, it is a self that is characterised by a self-reflexivity, such that it does not simply recognize itself in such characteristics, but also takes responsibility for them.

This taking responsibility Ricœur thematises in the act of promise-making. In his discussion of Husserl's account of protention (with respect to the living present referred to above), Ricœur criticizes Husserl for failing to acknowledge the productive aspect of expectation. Indeed, according to Ricœur Husserl is »helpless […] owing to the primacy of the phenomenology of perception« in the face of this production.[23] Promising enacts that productivity most clearly: in making a promise and in the taking up of that promise by another the self produces a permanence of itself in defiance of the changes the future will bring. This production is as much constitutive of the self's memory of itself. I remember those promises I made, they claim me as my production of a future to which I remain responsible. In that sense, the self is that self which emerged in its promises to be, and continues to emerge out of its promises into the future. In keeping or in failing to keep its promises the self expresses

as essentially embodied. ›Person‹ is the conscious being in the fullest account of constitution, i.e., the highest level that ›contains‹ all other, partial strata« (154).

22 Sca, 146/OaA, 121. See also F. Ravaisson, *De l'habitude/On Habit*, trans. by C. Carlisle und M. Sinclair, London 2008, 30–31.

23 P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit III. Le Temps raconté,* Paris 1985*,* 70*; Time and Narrative. Vol. 3,* Chicago 2014, 37.

itself in its own expectations of itself and those of others to whom it promises itself.

Commenting on Ricœur, Zahavi states that a narrative self »presupposes that the narrator is in possession of a first person perspective.«[24] The experiential comes before the narrative, it is lived rather than narrated, it is a complex of experiences which are mine and which can only retrospectively – and then at the price of misleading coherency – be narrated. The argument here is twofold: the narrated self is a refined and somewhat sanitized self and is dependent on a prior experiential self. While Zahavi is correct that narratives can be misleading and sometimes indeed self-deluding, he does not sufficiently account for the taking up of responsibility as the underlying motivation of narration, which sometimes indeed leads to distortion and self-justification. Furthermore, he is in effect conflating two dimensions, the articulated narrative and the narrativity of experience (mimesis 1 and 2 in Ricœur's schema). Even when they are misleading, articulated narratives depend on the semantics of action, the symbolic resources and the temporal structures within the practical field.[25] Furthermore, Zahavi is implicitly designating the primordial level of pre-reflective experience as ›innocent‹ while the level of narrative brings into play distortion and self-delusion. While a self can indeed mislead others and even herself by her narrative, it is not at all clear that it is narrative which brings such issues into play. We need rather to look again at the first person perspective and how this relates to narrative.

Ricœur's thought is animated by the dynamic relation of trust and distrust, faith and suspicion. The immediacy of faith in the self is displaced by strategies of suspicion which can only be overcome through a second, post-critical faith. This »conflict of interpretations« in our context entails that the »thin self« be itself subject to distrust and suspicion. For Ricœur the certainty of the cogito is only momentary, needing to be reaffirmed in each moment. As he puts it: »Left to itself, the ego of the Cogito is Sisyphus condemned to climb back up, from one instant to the next, the rock of its certainty

24 Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, 108.

25 P. Ricœur, *Temps et récit I. L'intrigue et le récit historique*, Paris 1984, 87–108; *Time and Narrative. Vol. 1*, Chicago 1984, 54–70.

against the slope of doubt.«[26] The faith in this certainty is an empty one. It is with Freud that this emptiness is put in stark relief. As a result of the »adventure« of Freudian thought we are left with a »wounded *cogito* [*cogito blessé*], a cogito which posits but does not possess itself, a cogito which understands its primordial truth, only in and through the avowal of the inadequation, the illusion, the lie [*mensonge*] of immediate consciousness.«[27] Faith in the immediacy of self-experience is for Ricœur a primary faith, which needs itself to be placed under critique. As such the question of distortion does first not arise with narration, but rather at the level of immediate experience itself.

At issue here is fundamental question of the relation of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Implicitly, Zahavi is understanding the relation as one of foundation: hermeneutics is founded upon a phenomenology of experience. There is for him a clear distinction between having a first person perspective and being able to articulate it linguistically.[28] Ricœur rejects this ›short course‹ because he understands the self as always already understanding itself in relation to things in the world. There is evidence of this very early in child development, where children prior to language, not to speak of self-narrating, understand their own first person perspective as being seen from a third person point of view.[29] The experience is its own – it has »mineness« – but the self which is ›mine‹ is inseparable from the world around it, in which things and people take on very early symbolic significance. In that sense the cogito is always already wounded, it is subject to the manner in which its own relations to things in the world are governed by foreign meanings. What that means is that experience is not simply of objects, but of objects which are presented symbolically as having meanings which

26 P. Ricœur, *The Crisis of the Cogito*, in: *Synthese 106*, nr. 1 (1996), 57–66, here: 63.

27 P. Ricœur, *La question du sujet: le défi de la sémiologie*, in: P. Ricœur, *Le Conflit des Interpretations*, Paris 1969, 233–264, here: 239; *The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology*, in: *The Conflict of Interpretations. Essays in Hermeneutics*, London 2004, 232–264, here: 238 (translation modified).

28 Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 29.

29 See U. Neiser, *The Roots of Self-Knowledge: Perceiving Self, It, and Thou*, in: *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 818* (1997), 19–34, here: 31. Before the end of its first year a »child like her mother, now takes herself as an object of thought. She begins to think of herself as having traits, attributes, worth and value.«

transcend their mere materiality. The self experiences the world in those meanings, charged with their significance for its own desires.

The how of experience cannot be separated from the affective tone of the experience. At a most basic level is encountered in degrees of pleasure or pain. The first person perspective is already that of this singular self who is – to vary degrees – ›at stake‹ in the experience. Constitutive of the how of the first person perspective is her relationship to the coming to be of sense within the experience and how she is affected by it. In this way, there is no first person perspective without expectation of sense and as we have seen this expectation is itself productive. At a very basic level, the orientation of that experience – as pleasurable or painful – pre-structures the story which is unfolding within that experience. Furthermore, the experience as meaningful can be understood within existing narratives and genres of narrative, in which they are already inscribed. This is true not alone of the event itself, but also of the self experiencing it within the mineness of her experience.

From both the first person and third person perspectives it is important to think narrative not as an end-product, the completed story, but rather as a dynamic process whereby the self mostly implicitly, sometimes explicitly, is already caught up within a narrative of herself. This is the point that Macintyre stresses that the self is at most a co-author of her story.[30] But that is slightly misleading. What is at play here is not so much co-authorship, but rather a self which first personally experiences itself as always already narrated in a narrative which begins elsewhere. The who-question has already been provisionally answered before she comes to narrate herself. The very first declaration – ›it's a girl‹ or ›it's a boy‹ – in telling *what* the child is, also carries with it an implicit who, with implicit or explicit expectations. Even when these expectations are more fluid, the implicit story is already there. The child does not begin its own story, rather it begins by living into – gradually more or less reflectively in forms along the scale of resistance to conformity – the stories already being spoken, if only silently and schematically. The self is only one agent of this narrating dynamic whereby not alone are the perspectives of others on him constitutive of his story (the very pronoun employed is functional here), and not alone are

30 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* London 2013, 213.

there dynamics which operate unconsciously shaping the manner in which he narrates his life, but the ending and the beginning – or more correctly the after-ending and the originary-beginning – remain closed to him. He finds himself as the self which he becomes, the beginnings of whom work through him and remain immemorial for him.

How a self's story is told and re-told can be transformed after – perhaps long after his death – in contexts which would be unimaginable to that self. The narrative process is neither in the self's power nor is it initiated through a choice on the part of the self. It is rather fundamental to the intersubjective reality of being a self amongst others. When Zahavi states that the »interpersonal self is a development of the experiential self and a necessary precursor to the narrative self«[31], this is true if we understand the narrative self as that self which explicitly constructs a narrative of itself. But clearly if that were the case, then the self would only exceptionally be understandable as narrated. Rather, the narrative self is that self which is structured in narrative fashion: with beginning(s) and ending(s), with others related meaningfully to it, with a certain orientation which can be understood as genre. This narrative effect is, as Ricœur makes clear retroactive.[32] But, it is so within a dynamic context, such that the very characters of the story are prototypically present in tradition. The self comes to narrate his life in response to existing narratives, in which he finds himself, such that the »narrative unity of a life« (MacIntyre) is a »double movement« of existing practices and the individual's global project.[33] The self which emerges in infants has such a structure. The phenomenon of ›joint attention‹ to which Zahavi calls attention[34], where the infant and an adult jointly attend to an object with the infant looking back and forth between adult and object, contains in proto-form the elements of a story. As Merleau-Ponty states[35] a child's parents are not simply two people, they are the child's »relations with the world«, they mediate its

31 Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 238.
32 Sca, 175/OaA, 147.
33 Sca, 187/OaA, 158.
34 Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 231–233.
35 M. Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949–1952*, Evanston 2010, 300.

connection with the world. Through this the child becomes imbued with a symbolic universe, a world in which people and things have symbolic significance. As such they play roles within proto-stories – stories full of emotional vibrancy of love and hate, jealousy, security and danger.[36] For sure, the child cannot articulate that story, but in recognizing itself in relation to an object and another it is playing out already the basic framework of a narrative as the articulation of desire.

Narrative pre-structuring of the self, the themes and genres, the plotlines and characters of the story, can tend towards reducing the self to a caricature of herself. The further removed we are from the particular self the more generalized these narratives can be. This can function most perniciously in racist and misogynist (amongst others) narratives, where the individuality of the self is almost totally erased in the preordained story we tell: we profile the self in terms of generalized characteristics. The claim to personhood cuts across that, affirming the self as being in excess of any narrative that frames her, even as those very narratives frame the context of the caring cultivation of the person. Husserl distinguishes in this context between the free choice of a unified life-ideal and the acceptance of traditional roles.[37] Crucial here is the peculiar teleological structure of personhood. The self being understood in the directedness of her life, makes a claim to be treated as a person in the process of exercising her freedom in aiming towards the good life.[38] The personhood of her being is the telos towards which her care aims, but is assumed in the very care itself.

Through the ownness of its experience the self identifies with itself. The qualities which the self recognizes in itself, through them being reflected back to it by others, both positive and negative, tend to become the sedimented factors of its being, resembling a substantial thing, that which the self is. But while character is formed through sedimentations and transformed only through sustained rehabituation, the narratives the self tells of itself are more expansive,

36 Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology*, 312–313: »The Care given to a child is […] the effect of the culture the parents live in«.

37 E. Husserl, *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Dordrecht 2014, 435.

38 Cf. E. Angehrn, *Selbstverständigung und Identität*, in: B. Liebsch (Hg.), *Hermeneutik des Selbst – Im Zeichen des Anderen. Zur Philosophie Paul Ricœurs*, Freiburg i. Br., München 1999, 46–69, here: 67–8.

working their way through past and towards the future, allowing the self to both present its experiences to others and to account for those experiences to itself. The narrative is first like a clarinet trying to be heard above the trumpets of the brass section. Both towards others and towards itself the self begins not with a blank sheet but with an existing narrative against which – even if most conforming – it must testify of itself. This self-attestation is not alone essential to the narrative process itself, but it is constitutive for the personhood of the self.

Yet, the person cannot be made common, cannot be shared with others, but remains inviolable and unique. To become a person is to be respected as a singular being incommunicable with another.[39] This claim to uniqueness has a long legal and moral history and it is phenomenologically essential to this claim to selfhood. The content and form of experiences are in principle communicable; it is precisely what the self does in giving accounts of itself. But those to whom it narrates these accounts cannot have those experiences, because essential to them is the singularity of the individual's selfhood, the positionality of that self which makes it who that self is and no one else. In attesting to itself, the self testifies to its own essential incommunicability in its self-narration. Personhood is thus a fundamental expression of the first personal position. In this respect it is helpful to note that in its original sense ›person‹ does not mean the interior being at all but rather the mask worn by the actor, it is the part played. It would be a mistake, however, to understand person by analogy to that as a social being as the one who »prepare[s] a face to meet the faces that you meet«[40], because the part is not a role but rather a manner of being in the world. In coming to be in the world, each self presents not simply a positionality toward the world, but an unrepeatable and unique taking up of that position. This is the self's sense of itself as being in the absence of all other beings. The solipsistic possibility is written into the very being of the self, where it recognizes in itself that which is neither the thin self of its experiential being nor the emerging self of its narrating being, but

39 »*Persona est sui iuris et alteri incommunicabilis* (a person is in his own right and incommunicable with another), quoted from »The Roman Jurists« in: J. F. Crosby, *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, Washington D.C. 1996, 7.

40 T. S. Eliot, *The Love Story of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in: *The Poems of T. S. Eliot Volume I: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, London 2015, l. 27, 11.

rather the inescapability of being itself. This inescapability is that which nothing else can share, but which it recognizes in others by way of a fundamental empathy.

3. The Self Beyond Narrative and Thinness

If it is the case that narrativity is fundamental to being a self, it means that selfhood needs to be understood in a fundamental way as historical, that is to be a self is to be in relation to others in a world of contingency. This immediately places us in an apparent either/or choice between the self as creating itself, being in Sartre's terms »condemned to be free«, or the self as striving for acceptance a love of necessity expressed as a love of God by Spinoza.[41] Anthony Rudd takes up this question in terms of the possibilities of self-shaping and self-acceptance.[42] Self-shaping is a more inclusive term than self-creation, and refers to the claim that the self is shaped by her choices and intentions, while self-acceptance is that position which says that the self needs to accept what he is, rather than striving for control or alteration of that given self. Ruud points out that there are two intertwining concerns here, one ethical and the other metaphysical: how to balance the demands of self-shaping and self-acceptance, on the one hand, and what account to give of the self that makes sense of its being torn in this way.[43] In Ricœur's terms we can see this as a tension between character and self-constancy (*maintien de soi*). As Ruud argues, neither of these extremes alone seem to do justice to the phenomenon, there is rather an irreducible tension here: »To be a self is to live with or in a certain tension between one's character and one's personhood.«[44] Drawing on Kierkegaard, Ruud argues that acceptance is crucial both ethically and metaphysically, which does not mean a passive acceptance of brute facts, but rather the

41 See J.-P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique,* Paris 2004, *xx; Being and Nothingness*, New York 1956, 129: »To be free is to be condemned to be free« and B. de Spinoza, *Ethics*, London 1996, V, Prop. XXXVI: »Our salvation, or blessedness or freedom consists in a constant and eternal love of God.«

42 A. Rudd, *Self, Value, Narrative*, Oxford, 2012, 11–25.

43 Ibd., 16.

44 Ibd., 25.

taking up of full responsibility for what one has done and been. Hence, the ethical self-chooser must – in Kierkegaard's terms »repent himself back into himself«. In fact, the »healthy individual lives in both hope and recollection, at one and the same time, and it is only through this that his life acquires true, substantial continuity.«[45] Narrative, according to Ruud, is teleological; it provides reasons, not just (efficient) causes.[46] However, in either case what remains crucial is that the self comes to itself through its promise-making and in that promise-making affirms its personhood. The freedom of the self responds to itself as well as the world around it. It is not pure self creation, but rather a – more or less creative – response to its own expressive being and the world in which it finds itself.

This account seems very much in line with Ricœur's thinking. The self in narrating herself is both enabled and constrained by the narrative tradition in which she finds herself. Her taking up a position is always within the horizon of that which is inherited both in the how of taking up and the what of the position which she articulates. The question, however, is whether within this nexus the self finds within itself that which is recalcitrant to narrativity, but which is nonetheless in some sense constitutive of that self. In exploring this theme I wish to look first at the general question of the limits of narrativity and then approach a more specific theme, namely that of trauma.

László Tengelyi has already pointed to a tension in Ricœur between his hermeneutical phenomenological approach to self-identity, on the one hand, and a certain realist ontology on the other. This tension is manifest in Ricœur's critiques of alterity in Husserl and Levinas, which in both cases abandon the radical alterity of his interlocuters in the name of »oneself as another amongst all others«, a formula which, Tengelyi points out, assumes a realist ontology of common ground between self and other.[47] What gets missed for Tengelyi is that middle ground of »primordial anonymity, a »dispossessed non man's land«, a wild region thanks to which

45 Rudd, *Self, Value, Narrative*, 168, quoting *Either/Or,* ii *(Kierkegaard's Writings IV*), Princeton/NJ 1987, 518.

46 Rudd, *Self, Value, Narrative*, 178.

47 Tengelyi, *The Wild Region*, 97–8.

we have access to what is alien to our own.[48] The issue here is the mode in which the real becomes manifest for the self and can be traced back to what we have already spoken of in relation to expectation. Ricœur's critique of Husserl's account of protention was that it mistook the nature of the future: the future is produced in action. For sure, this production is not a pure act of self-creation for Ricœur, but the act of creation happens in harmony with the world around us, is in dialectical relation to a self-acceptance which is brought into continuity with the new horizon of expectation. In this regard, Ricœur does not deny the unexpected, but understands it as what becomes synthesised in the plot: »emplotment brings together factors as heterogeneous as agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results.«[49] Indeed through this means the »paradox of intention and distention« is given a »poetic solution« in the »›followability‹ of a story«.[50] This account implies the commanding role of intentionality, not alone the intentional consciousness of the self but the intentional directedness of the story, which aims for fulfilment and reaches it at least provisionally in its sense of ending. But can we understand the present in this sense as a past future, or does not the radical alterity invoked by both Levinas and Husserl, point to a real with does not simply defeat expectations, but shocks them in the sense of countering the intentional movement with a counter-movement which cannot be reincorporated in the self, but without which that self would not be?

For Ricœur ipseity is what the self ultimately attests to »in its difference with respect to *sameness* and in its dialectical relationship with *otherness*«.[51] This attestation of itself, is the primary giving witness, for Ricœur, to power or capacity or indeed in Spinozistic terms endeavour (conatus).[52] Against the pretentions of the Cartesian cogito which posits the world, Ricœur affirms a »self that recognizes itself only through … [the] affections [of the other on the comprehension of the self].«[53] But with his emphasis on the reciprocity of

48 Ibd.,102.
49 Ricœur, *Temps et récit I*, 103/*Time and Narrative. Vol. 1*, 65.
50 Ricœur, *Temps et récit I*, 104/*Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, 67.
51 Sca, 351/OaA, 302.
52 See Sca, 367/OaA, 316–317.
53 Ricœur, *Temps et récit I,* 380/*Time and Narrative Vol. 1*, 329.

self and other what gets lost is that alterity which affects the self, without which the self does not recognize itself, but which cannot be recouped by the ipsetic movement of the self. We can think in terms of »destinal events« that are »totally alien« to the self and which create a new beginning for the self.[54] What is at issue here is neither self-creation nor self-acceptance, but rather a passivity which is not recoupable. When Arendt speaks of natality and the capacity to begin, she places a core element of that capacity beyond the self.[55] Birth is a condition of experience that cannot itself be experienced, from a first person point of view. The being affected by birth is immemorial, is a past to which the self is not present. Destinal events repeat this occurrence, where the self finds itself in a new situation, affected by an alterity, which was not pre-given as a future in the past, but was also not produced through its own agency. Such a present is encountered negatively as that which defeats not alone the expectations of the past – the past futures to speak with Koselleck[56] – but radically transforms the possibilities which lay at the basis of such expectations. Such an emergence of new possibilities is not so much synthesised in the narrative of the self, as it emerges as that which get repeated, a repetition through which the self finds itself again in a place of beginning from which its narrative must re-emerge in time.

There is constitutive violence to such events, although as reference to Arendt's account of natality suggests, they can be the occasion of joy as much as of sorrow, bittersweet moments of new beginning where the past as past no longer seems to flow, but is fixed in the experience of nostalgia.[57] But a more radical case is that of traumatic violence, where the self is ›left for dead‹ but where some remnant of it survives. This phenomenon is powerfully rendered in Susan Brison's *Aftermath: The Remaking of the Self*[58].

Brison was the victim of a vicious rape and attempted murder. She stresses the helplessness experienced during the assault. She could

54 Tengelyi, *The Wild Region*, 81.

55 See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1954, 177–178.

56 R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt/M. 1989; *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York 2004.

57 See S. Crowell, *Spectral History: Narrative, Nostalgia, and the Time of the I,* in: *Research in Phenomenology 29* (1999), 83–104.

58 S. Brison, *Aftermath: the Remaking of a Self*, Princeton 2002.

not help herself, nor was there anyone to help her. She speaks of this as a feeling of utter loneliness. She was not alone of course, but her assailant was not a fellow human being, not one who would offer her the basic solicitudes of social life. Rather, she had no worth for him except as an object of his violence. For the victim her capacity for either self-shaping or self-acceptance was removed. This inability to be a self, Brison contends to be constitutive of the reality of rape. She quotes anthropologist Cathy Winkler (herself a rape victim) that rape is a »social murder«.[59] To be a self is to be in a world in which there are possibilities of relations in which the self has some capacity for formation or acceptance. Where this does not exist, the very possibility of selfhood seems to be undermined. She quotes Charlotte Delbo that »I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it«[60], or as a rape survivor says of herself »I will always miss myself as I was.«[61] Crucial for Brison is the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others. »Without this belief«, she writes, »one can no longer be oneself even to oneself, since the self exists fundamentally in relation to others.«[62] Important for our purposes here, is that for Brison to be a self it is necessary to be perceived empathetically by others. Neither the thin self, first person perspective, nor the narrative unity of a life-story is sufficient for selfhood, but rather to be a self it is necessary to be listened to by an other over there, beyond my control and my own embodied self.

The reality of traumatic violence is a violation of the self at its very core. A self reduced to its impulse to survive, but unable to assert that impulse, at best able only to succumb to being the objects he is for the attacker. The recognition of the other's first person perspective as violator does not reveal to the self the third person perspective on her as in the case of shame, but rather takes from the self as victim her capacity to be anything other than an object. In the case of shame the other in judging the self as an object gives to the self the distance of self-evaluation. As Zahavi puts it: »It is my empathetic awareness of the other's attention and my subsequent internalization of that foreign perspective that eventually allows me

59 Ibd., 45.
60 Ibd., 37.
61 Ibd., 38.
62 Ibd., 40.

to gain a self-distance that is required for the kind of critical self-evaluation that can lead to decreased self-esteem.«[63] Extreme violence such as rape operates rather to destroy that self distance and with it the first person perspective. Being identified completely with its objecthood the body, there is an experiencing subject still there, but it is disconnected from the self. This disconnection occurs through the loss of relation to other selves, the lack of any recognition of its unique positionality, the absence of any empathetic relation.

Traumatic events involve a distinct temporal experience, one whereby the past disappears, becomes ghostlike, untenable and the future is foreshortened as to lose its affective tonality of hope or expectation.[64] In this sense traumatic events are lacking in worldliness, are in a sense the inverse of the mystical: while the mystic seeks to transcend the temporal flow for the eternal beyond it losing its self for something higher[65], the trauma victim is robbed of the affectivities of desire and yearning, trust and belonging, robbed of being a self. The remaking of a self after such an event requires above all that there are others who will listen to the story the victim tells. To remake herself, the victim needs to reforge relations with others, needs to learn trust again. It is in Ricœur's terms a post-critical trust: the victim has seen clearly the fragility of such relations of trust, her own vulnerability when the care and solicitude of others is no longer offered, and yet she can only become a self again if she can find her way back to such a world, now no longer in innocence. Her way of doing so is through finding others – first those who have suffered similar trauma to herself and then a wider audience - people who will listen to her story. Bearing witness to her trauma essentially involves the empathy of the listener, indeed »the empathetic other is essential to the continuation of the self.«[66] The self in bearing witness to another seeks from that other empathy based not on a shared experience but precisely on an unspeakable experience. The failure

63 Zahavi, *Self and Other*, 239.

64 See Brison, *Aftermath*, 53.

65 On the relation of mysticism and violence see the author's *Violent Times the horror of the unspeakable and the temporality of religious experience,* in: *Continental Philosophy Review 53* (2020), 298–300.

66 Brison, *Aftermath*, 59. A couple of pages earlier she states: »just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are willing to listen« (57).

to empathize with the victim – indeed the greater ease which we have to empathize with the perpetrator – testifies how threatening the testimony of the victim is to the sense of self.[67] To empathize with the victim is to face the groundlessness of the self's own sense of self, its own vulnerability to being destroyed.

The reality of traumatic violence and the possibility of remaking the self in its aftermath shows the centrality of the counter-intentional experience of an other's empathy in the formation of the self. What this suggests is that the emergence of a self begins not alone as Ricœur argues with the self directedness towards the world, returning through an interpretative arch to itself, but rather in its being given place by the other to be a point of view on the world, a positionality which has a place in the narrative of the world, as an agent within the world. As a gift to the self, this comes not from the self as other, but from the other self who allows the self to emerge by giving away to that self, allowing its birth in the beginnings of its taking up a ›place in the sun‹.

In his essay *Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*, Ricœur argued that Phenomenology and Hermeneutics presupposed each other.[68] Once the symbolic nature of the objects of consciousness is taken seriously then phenomenological description becomes necessarily interpretative. This remains an important lesson particularly in discussions of the self. The first personal perspective is irreducibly that of a person encountering the world as symbolically constituted, in which its own place is always ready narratively anticipated. In this sense there is no experience that is not also implicated as action, as a taking up of a position in the world, as interpretable in multiple ways both by self and other. This is not to say that the discussions of the self as ›thin self‹ are to be denied from Ricœur's perspective: on the contrary this article has attempted to show how a productive dialogue of these diverse accounts of the self can be productive. In doing so, however, we need to engage with that which transcends

67 Brison recognises that she herself shares in this. She relates the story of the mother whose child was forced to starve to death by Mengele in Auschwitz and admits that as a mother she manages to bear the knowledge of such an atrocity by denying that such a thing could happen to her child (*Aftermath*, 57).

68 P. Ricœur, *Phénoménologie et herméneutique,* in: *Phänomenologische Forschungen 1* (1975), 31–75, here: 32; *Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*, in: *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge/MA 1981, 101–128, here: 101.

the self's capacity for experience and action, in which the self comes back to itself out of an event disclosing its abysmal dependency on others. In doing so we need through a hermeneutical phenomenology, both with and against Ricœur, to explore the self at the limits of sense and in its vulnerability to annihilation through the withdrawal of all relations of empathetic acceptance and succour.