

SUMMARY: Psychotherapeutic narration is circumscribed by many professional standards of conduct, which may create conditions that effectively hamper understanding the life stories spoken in therapy. As the point of a story arises from a chaos of narrative fragments, a kind of earnest desire for professionalism may obstruct the process of communication. The patient's story may then be appropriated by the therapist to satisfy a need for professional conduct while endangering the dynamic process of communication. Using the French hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, this paper illustrates the creative potential of narration to meaningfully figure and refigure the reckoning of time in our lives. Conditions for developing creative psychotherapeutic narratives are considered in terms of Ricoeur's illustration of the relations between narrative and time.

RICOEURIAN HERMENEUTICS OF TIME AND GROUNDS FOR CREATIVE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC NARRATION¹

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A valuable aspect of psychotherapy seems to be the recognition and reproduction of meaning in the telling of tales. Using the work of Paul Ricoeur, I will flesh out how the dialectical tension of telling and listening can contribute to creative narration in therapy. A seminal contribution of Ricoeur consists of his analysis of the interpenetration of narrative and time. Ricoeur speaks of the timelessness that potentiates the significance of narration and the accessing of time's meaning through narration. Ricoeur's thesis relates how time without narrative is a kind of metaphysical time without time. This abstraction involves time without beginning, middle, or end, only the beating of time, one instance after another. Narration articulates the time of one's life as it gathers instances of living into events and thereby generates a sense of duration and conveys possible meanings. Thus, narration speaks to both the permanence and change of things through time. The story bears the power of identifying things in time across continuities and discontinuities. In therapy, the meaning of one's lifetime is illuminated in the dialogical movement of telling and listening. With the listening to and telling of accounts particular meanings are configured, reconfigured, and occluded. Although narratives are transitory and incomplete representations of lived time, even with all of their temporariness, narratives still have the power to recognize and determine meanings, to invoke and obliterate worlds and ways of living. The puzzle of narrative considered in this paper is not whether narrative is an insubstantial representation of an original, but how the narrative functions to summon meaning. I will then limit the consideration of narrative to the special case of psychotherapy and question whether the conditions of psychotherapy are suitable to liberate meanings in the life stories patients bring to therapy.

The Ticking of Time

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There are at least four important papers that progressively develop Ricoeur's ideas about the narrative quality of time and the temporal quality of narrative, which eventually culminate in his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur, 1983-1985). Beginning with the "Model of the Text" (1971), Ricoeur develops the idea that human action and written text resemble one another. Specifically, both text and action can be read, and therefore both are subject to the hermeneutic cadence of ciphering and deciphering. Extending the thesis of a hermeneutics of action in a second paper entitled "The Narrative Function" (1978), Ricoeur further explores this temporal cadence of narration in the relations between sense and reference. Sense follows reference and reference follows sense, one pursues the other, at times they are in conflict and at times they are contractual. In this way narrative re-scribes variations of the present. In a third paper entitled "The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality" (1979), Ricoeur writes how all symbolic systems remake the world as they partake in the worlds they make. He explains how to write of a world is to imitate that world. Again, there are rhythmical relations between the writing and the world written about. But the text does not copy the action, the sense is not identical with the reference, and writing does not merely reproduce the world written about. Rather, the one imitates the other in the sense of modeling it. Thus, text models action and sense imitates reference, just as the model imitates reality. Not only is sense a model for its reference, sense also creates a further reference which may then again make sense. As models, narratives are not strictly imitations of human action, but create meaningful references for human action. Thus, narratives reshape the worlds they tell about and stories enter into and are held within stories. Ricoeur further develops the connections between the time of living and the time of narrative in the paper "Narrative Time" (1980). Here he makes the argument that the time of living reaches us through narrative. All things that happen occur in time, but this abstract notion of "within-time-ness" only makes sense as we tell about the time of our lives. An action's intention within time is modeled in a story's distension of time into beginning, middle, and end. Thus narrative represents the meaning of human action and also functions as a reference for the meaning of action.

In the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* (Ricoeur, 1983-1985), Ricoeur illustrates his theory of narrative in terms of threefold mimesis using the scholarship of literary criticism and historiography. In order to further describe the importance of time in Ricoeur's theory of narration, from the mass of analyses in these volumes, I will focus on Ricoeur's exegesis of Augustine's and Aristotle's concepts of time. Augustine has a notion of the threefold present wherein expectation, memory, and attention do not coincide. Yet, there are relationships between these actions of mind as expectation passes into memory by way of attention. Just as attention to the present touches on past memories and future expectations, narrative distends the immediacy of an action's intention into the presence of the past, the presence of the future, and the presence of the present. Ricoeur (1983/1984) concludes, "It is in the soul, hence as an impression, that expectation and memory possess extension. But the impression is in the soul only inasmuch as the mind acts, that is, expects, attends and remembers" (p. 19). With this movement of reflection, life is no longer lived in the timeless present, but gains duration, beginning, middle and end through narration. The meaning of life's presence is represented in narratives that tell of times before, after, and until.

Combining Augustine's threefold present with Aristotle's ideas of emplotment, Ricoeur develops his narrative theory of threefold mimesis. Emplotment, the process of narrating the coherence of events, takes up one event because of another and makes happenings necessary, probable or somehow intelligible. Emplotment breaks with the preconfigured presence of life to which it refers, organizes instances into a system, and re-makes occurrences as meaningful. Telling and listening to a story, language is used to mediate the temporal quality of human experience. Ricoeur takes this mediating role of emplotment in stages and reflects on what precedes and succeeds the intelligibility of a story. Paralleling Augustine's notion of the presence of the past, presence of the present, and presence of the future, Ricoeur finds three kinds of narrative intelligibility. First, the intelligibility of a story is grounded in preunderstanding, that is, in what is preconfigured. Second, a story is configured by grasping together instances in the realm of the "as if". Third, the story intersects with the world of a listener so that narrative

gains the power to reconfigure the world it refers to. Ricoeur claims that we cannot speak of temporality without invoking these three figments of narration. Thus Ricoeur illustrates how narrative is valuable because the point of an action emerges from narrating the time of action. Life events are seen to have intent and meaningful direction as preconfigured meanings are positioned within configurations that then reconfigure the worlds to which they refer.

A Hermeneutics of Time: Telling Time

Without avoiding issues of permanence, cause, or truth, Ricoeur articulates a narrative conception of time that escapes relying exclusively on the impression of sequence or the a-chronology of paradigms and nomological laws. He proposes to deepen our awareness of time by addressing narrativity as human temporality itself. Ricoeur elaborates the Kantian thesis that time cannot be observed directly and argues that narrative is the necessary medium for understanding durations of time. All action occurs within time, but time requires something other than the purity of itself to penetrate consciousness. Narrative makes time meaningful. But it is not narrative theory, not atemporal ideas about the configuring and refiguring of prefigurings, but rather the narration itself that makes time human. Moving dimensions of time in various proportions, narration stretches the here and now of life into a story that can distend the present and illuminate our intentions.

Time for Ricoeur is always the time of “being-with-others”. As fibers of meaning are woven into stories of truth, promise, desire, hope, plans, causes, or reasons, instances are figured in the development of a plot. Time finds its ultimate reference in narratives that invoke otherness as we reckon with events, selves, or people taking place before, after, or until. Narrative thus articulates our reckoning with time in our relations with otherness. Telling the stories of our lives, we are more precisely telling the time of our lives, figuring our place in time in relation to the significant others that populate our world. It is when we speak of taking time, making time, or stealing time that human time is brought to life. The movement of time is then explained as action and thereby understood.

In his analysis of time, Ricoeur also illustrates how the presence of time necessitates the absence of time as a limiting idea. Just as we can think of time beginning and ending, we can also think of time that has neither beginning nor end. In its most extreme illustration eternity is timeless silence, but to say there is an absence of time beyond expression is meaningful because of narration. Even the concept of no time gains temporal extension by virtue of expression. Despite the inability of consciousness to ever fully escape the configurational pull of its narrative function, the standstill of the never-ending present bounds the narrative distension of time with the absence of time. All things conscious are conscious in time. In life, the timelessness of the unconscious is not immediately experienced, but timelessness can be articulated as a fantasy of endless unity. Bergler and Roheim (1946), for example, link the psychology of time perception to the phases between feeding, the wait between, and periods of separation which signify the possibility of unity while ensuring the nothingness between. Thus, time, in the telling of stories, is a sign of time’s absence.

Still Listening to the Telling of Change

The cadence of ciphering and deciphering, reference and sense, action and text seems to be reiterated in the telling of and listening to the time of life. Human time seems to rest at the juncture of the spoken and the mute where there is neither pure chronology, with one thing

simply coming after another, nor pure temporality, with only the presence of occurrences. Telling and listening illuminate meaningful continuities across time, but the continuity seems to emerge out of the process of telling. The alternative standpoints of listening and telling that emerge in therapy move through each other in a way similar to the movement of action and text, reference and sense, ciphering and deciphering. Stories do not emerge whole and coherent, but discursive fragments are ventured; some are lost while some others may be gained. The story coheres in the back and forth referencing of listening and understanding. Following in the tradition of Gadamer, Ricoeur (1981) writes of a hermeneutics of reality and the playful to and fro of productive imagination. In configuring a story, the teller cannot help but disguise her world to her audience, but a more robust truth than the preconfigured experience of living is thereby expressed. Ricoeur writes of this playfulness in narration across resemblances and differences of the preconfigured, configured, and reconfigured. He says, “‘what is’ is no longer what we call everyday reality; or rather, reality truly becomes reality, that is, something which comprises a future horizon of undecided possibility, something to fear or to hope for, something unsettled” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 187). Eventually, instances are configured by plot into a sequence and meaning emerges across the resemblances and differences of what was, what is, and what will be.

Telling the time of one’s life requires a listener who comprehends the reality of the story and provides mute understanding before the narrative is reconfigured and further possibilities resound. There is a stillness of listening that surrounds the generation of narratives; stories do not come from nothing, yet seem to be in relation to an elsewhere of the listener. The story is not comprehensible because it replicates the world of the teller or the listener. The story touches us because it invokes resemblances across differences. There is a tension between the silent listening to what is said and the resemblances and differences the saying invokes as it is heard. Listening requires an effort to hold alternates at bay, at least long enough to distinguish between something being told and something being heard. Strictly in one place or the other, either telling or listening, consciousness is not known to itself. Many meanings of what one says or what one hears are not known before reflecting on what has occurred. We may speak to find out what we are saying and listen to find out what we are hearing, but we may not know what we say or what we hear until it occurs in relation to another consciousness that reflects its meaning. Unreflective consciousness wanders a silent ontological path. Reflectively, the listener becomes aware of the listening and the teller becomes aware of the telling. The immediacy of preconfigured consciousness is eccentric to configured awareness so the listener may both listen and in listening recognize another telling; the teller may both tell while also listen with self-conscious awareness to their telling. In rhythmic alternation the world of the teller encompasses the world of the listener, confusing and distinguishing the listening and the telling greater understanding is configured.

Room for Communication

Because a story rises from a chaos of narrative fragments invoked by the actions of telling and listening, fear or more precisely a kind of earnest desire to move along might obstruct the dialogical process of communication in therapy. Suffering to hear all of the telling, a massive volume of occurrences can threaten to evade any possibility of coherence. The preconfigured material of the narrative may threaten to permanently eclipse the pull of configuration and sucked into vortices of detail, focusing on minutia, the point of the story may seem lost. Fearful of not knowing the story’s direction and needful of

resolution, instead of distilling a point from the story, therapists may be driven to impose premature and poorly fitting interpretations. Such efforts may temporarily suppress the chatter, but further along incite the patient to more insidious discursive contortions. Threatened by permanent postponement of meaning, the desire for order may drive the therapist and patient to shut down the telling of the tales. In a Promethean effort to control the birth of meaning, they may posit a therapeutic direction and overlay a point on the flow of narration. Locked in the action of reconfiguring, the story not only becomes lifeless, but, ironically, it misses the point it so earnestly hoped to secure. Isolated in its surety, the promulgation is impotent to bring concordance to the discordance of instances because only the dialogical process of listening and telling can distill coherence and not telling alone.

Under conditions of psychotherapy, perhaps there is not space for listener and teller to become absorbed in a dialogical process. Talking with mental health professionals is fraught with professional obligations. Psychological standards require that therapists adhere to treatment protocols and empirically or at least politically supported techniques. There are also professional and juridical obligations. After each session, patient contacts must be documented accordingly to particular standards. Assessments must be made of any clinical signs and overall progress. A treatment plan must be formulated for subsequent visits, diagnoses made, and therapist goals and patient goals explicitly stated. Utterances made by the therapist during sessions are documented as interventions and justified in accordance with the stated treatment plan. At the close of therapy, summaries are required accounting for entrance symptoms, treatment strategies, mental status along with agreement to terminate or transfer. There are also institutional pressures that circumscribe the length of sessions, procedures for inter-session contact, and conditions for breaking confidentiality. It seems, then, that if mental health professionals are listening to the telling of life stories they must be engaged in a very special kind of listening with ears bent to fulfill certain professional obligations.

The professionalism of psychotherapy seems to crowd out the space for the silence of listening. While knowing is the guardian of professionalism, not knowing is the guardian of listening. Yet, therapists cannot offer uncertainty as a service or get paid for attempts at nothingness. Instead, efforts must go into documenting psychotherapy in order to justify discursive interactions. At the extreme, the mental health profession might appropriate the patient's story without illuminating greater meaning in the life of the patient. Reproducing therapeutic narrative exchanges in bureaucratic documents seem to be needed in order to secure the professionalism of psychotherapy, but such reproductions may not be producing life significance for the patient.

When the therapist misses the point of the story or the patient cannot communicate the significance of life instances, the one becomes lost to the other. Whether the fragments of narration predominate and the coherence of the story is eclipsed, or the direction of the story predominates and the vitality of lived instances is lost, I venture that the possibility of completely losing one narrative to another forms a fear based in the love of communication. Fulfilling professional expectations, the therapist's telling may not only deplete the meaning of the patient's life, but also trap the therapist in a solipsistic world of professional security. The time of the narrative, of one meaning giving rise to another, of tracing identities through time, is awesome and fearful because of its power to recognize and invoke worlds and ways of being. Here the concern is not that the narratives of psychotherapists may be inaccurate or unreliable

accounts, but that the patient's story may have been so fully appropriated by the mental health profession that psychotherapy becomes anathema to the communication of life significance.

Permission to risk the unprofessionalism of not knowing and allowed to focus on the temporal cadence of the figuring process, perhaps the therapist and patient can annul the contract of securing the winning story. If meaning resides in the process of accounting for details, and not in the account itself, nor in the details themselves, then perhaps the circulation of meaning can replace the need for victory. Free from the fear that the story could stop and one's identity or one's time might end, teller and listener might rest assured in dialogue and trust the process long enough to evade the dynamics of mastery. Within the resonance of the dialogical process listening is a sign of making sense just as making sense is a sign of listening. The one communicates the eclipsed presence of the other, but cannot exist without the other, nor permanently efface the other. The restlessness of narration is an endless struggle for recognition. Narration quiets with the parity of figures because recognition of consciousness is desire's satisfaction, but further along, new meanings are always sought and found. Recognizing the value of uncertainty in this process of narration, perhaps, the victory of the story could become irrelevant so that what remains is communication and understanding one story by way of another.

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