TERHI TÖRMÄ

The Narrative Possibility of Peace and Understanding

doi.org/10.30664/ar.146420

VERTAISARVIOITU
KOLLEGIALT GRANSKAD
PEER-REVIEWED
www.tsv.fi/tunnus

With its emphasis on action and new possibilities opened by imagination, Paul Ricœur's narrative theory offers insights to understanding each other in a world of polarized views. His theory is helpful in describing the potential that narrating has in shaping and reshaping the course of action and the possibility for peace. Taking narrative as leading towards peace and understanding makes us attentive to listening to the narratives and those that narrate. While confronting the narrative, one is invited in the world of that text (or that speech). This is possible through imagination. Narrative reveals other points of views than our own. Often it increases empathy and opportunities for reconciliation.

Introduction: narrative variations of ordinary life

"You have to be able to listen, so that we find a common ground that makes it possible for everyone to feel at home and not be a stranger in the society we are trying to create", said the former president and Nobel Laureate Martti Ahtisaari while giving tips for young people on negotiating ("Presidentti Martti Ahtisaaren neuvotteluvinkit"). Narrating and listening seem to be essential to living in peace. But what would it take for narrating to become an instrument of peace in ordinary life?

In this article I study the narrative possibility of peace and understanding through Paul Ricœur's narrative theory. I reflect upon peaceful coexistence in ordinary life: not only being condemned to coexistence but having peaceful relationships with each other.[1] Ricœur's work is useful in describing the potential that narrating has in shaping and reshaping the course of action and the opportunity to live in peace in our communities. Of course, Ricœur's theory is abstract and universal in nature. He does not focus on one single experience but more on the human condition as such.[2]

1 Ricœur describes the difference between being condemned to coexistence and coexisting in his article "Vrai et fausse paix" (1955); here, he sketches out a potential world peace not based on two political and economic blocs (Ricœur 1955).

2 Michaël Foessel describes this condition in relation to Ricœur's concept of imagination. Through linguistic imagination the subject is free to reinvent one's life (Foessel 2007, 22). Alison Scott-Bauman has noted that "Ricœur's universalist conciliatory ideas about our moral use of language are not enough: they require the practical scaffolding of the pragmatist tradition, which insists upon taking the individual human perspective seriously and exploring the

This means that his theory does not provide a practical toolkit for reconciliation. Rather, it offers an instrument for thinking about the possibilities of living together in peace. It helps us to see where and how narrativity is the opportunity for reconciliation. This opportunity is not always an obvious one. We could also look at the many ways in which narratives prevent us from living together in peace. Whilst aware of that, in this article my focus is, however, different.

In Ricœur's hermeneutics, narrativity is the means by which human action may be understood. Ricœur's trilogy of *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)* is based on demonstrating how the narrative understanding presides over sociological or other forms of explanations in historiography and over structuralist or other forms of explanation in fiction (Ricœur 1983, 70). What is important is the dynamic mode of creating a plot. Through its plot, the narrative forms an intelligible unity of disparate moments, events, action, and actors. It tells something about human action and the world of human action. This is the point where Ricœur differs from structuralist or semiotic approaches. The structuralist narratology approaches the text as a closed, and as such a static, system. Ricœur describes narrating as a dynamic process, starting from the world of action, wandering through the world of text and through the imaginative process of reading, back to the world of action. This emphasis on the world of action is the first point which makes Ricœur's concept of narrative interesting in terms of finding opportunities for understanding all that at first seems to differ from or conflict with our own preferences. This breaking out from the closed text, letting the reference follow its course and noticing the creative role of the reader, is not just a philosophical idea but also has an impact on how we deal with interpreting the narratives that we share. The great liberating impact that Ricœur's interpretation theory has had on discourse analysis and biblical hermeneutics in South Africa is an example of impact beyond philosophy (Lategan 2018,117–21).

When someone narrates one's actions, they usually talk also about the reasons and consequences behind those actions. The story told is apprehended with what Ricœur calls narrative intelligence. Narrating and receiving narratives is something human, uniting all kinds of cultures. We would not be able to imagine a culture where we would no longer have the knowledge of what it is to tell stories (Ricœur 1984, 58).

The second area where Ricœur's theory has relevance to the question of reconciliation in conflict situations of ordinary life is the emphasis on the creativity or productivity of narrating. Narrative never just copies reality, it shapes and refigures it in a way that is both creative and intelligible. Where there is imagination, there is also possibility of imagining oneself in the place of the other. Thus, there are opportunities for empathy and self-esteem. Of course, there is also the possibility of misusing the narrative. While discussing Ricœur's narrative theory one should have in mind what he defines as the ethical aim; to live "a good life with and for the others in just institutions" (Ricœur 1990, 202).

In the following, I explore Ricœur's narrative theory and its potential in helping us

ways in which our personal beliefs and habits influence our behavior and vice versa" (Scott-Bauman 2023, 7).

to think about the possibility of peace and understanding in our ordinary life contexts. My main source of inspiration is his trilogy, *Temps et récit (Time and Narrative)*,[3] where he construes his narrative theory on three notions: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. I begin with some general observations regarding the place that imagination and narrative have in Ricœur's thinking. Then I propose to complement Ricœur's narrative theory with the idea of listening. Finally, I discuss narrative as a call for imaginative variations and ethical action. I also describe the consequences Ricœur's narrative theory has for thinking about the subject and responsibility.

Narrative as a creative process of meaningfulness

For Ricœur, narrating is always a productive process, something dynamic.[4] It is not only his narrative theory, but his entire philosophical work that is inspired by making sense of imagination in operation and productive, as argued by Jean-Luc Amalric, among others (Amalric 2012, 110; Amalric 2013, 10–11). It is fascinating that the evolution of Ricœur's thought on imagination can be fully appreciated only now (in 2024) when his *Lectures on Imagination* (given in 1975) are published. What seems noteworthy in regard to the narrative possibility of peace is Ricœur's understanding of imagination as the root of the possibility of finding more, being more open, seeing more, understanding more deeply. For Ricœur, imagination has the power to let us *see* the world around us *as* something we haven't noticed before, to *see as*. It also has the power to let us view and consider reality under the realm of *as if*.[5] Imagination makes the interpreter able to be open to the surplus of being. There is more in the world than has yet been realized.[6] There are opportunities to understand one's own condition as a human being differently. All kinds of poetic imagination have the power to open our being on a deeper level, and narrative imagination especially has the capacity to invite us to understand ourselves, others, and the whole world better. This capacity comes from the way in which narrating is rooted in the world of practical action.

3 I refer to the French text unless it is a citation, in which case I refer to the English translation with the title *Time and Narrative*.

4 This productive and creative approach to the representation of the world is essential for Ricœur in his narrative theory as well as elsewhere in his writings on imagination. In *Temps et récit* he stresses that whatever the narrative represents, it is never a copy of the world. Ricœur follows Aristotelian Poetics and underlines its difference from the Platonic idea of mimesis, including on its technical and metaphysical level (Ricœur 1983, 71–73).

5 These two modes of productivity—seeing *as* and seeing *as if*—are key ideas in Ricœur's subsequent works on imagination—*La métaphore vive* and *Temps et récit*. George Taylor points out this shift and comments on it from emphasizing the one and the other, in the editor's introduction to Ricœur's lectures. Taylor argues that by taking the language of figuration as the clue to his narrative theory and emphasizing how the text provides an *as if* terrain for the reader, Ricœur's theory loses some of its strength of *seeing as*, letting one see the world shattered (Taylor 2024, xxxvii–xxxviii).

6 As Timo Helenius has noted, there is already an interest in a being *as if*, in a being on a full ontological level, in Ricœur's early works (Helenius 2012).

Ricœur notes in *Temps et récit* that narrating is practical action and linked to the world of practical action (Ricœur 1983, 72–73). This means that narrating as such is action: forming a plot, producing a unity with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. But also, what is narrated are the actions: because of events, someone acts, and there are consequences. A narrative ("This morning there were things happening") is more than a description ("What a beautiful morning!"). As such, narrative is dynamic and productive. The dynamics come from the fact that there is always a tension between the narrative and the world that it represents. The productivity comes from the same tension: the text unfolds the world so that we may appropriate it and make it our own on another level than that of our ordinary life. That is especially the case with fictional or poetic texts.

This interest in the practical world of action is something to be noted when discussing Ricœur's narrative hermeneutics in relation to the question of peace and of understanding one another. His narrative theory is linked to the basic questions of human action in such a way that it has much potential to help us to find ways of living together.

What is narrated is life itself, the world of action. In fact, everyday life is full of stories not yet told. Making stories about these episodes is a way to understand and interpret our life. It is not a question of specific hero-stories or some great stories of history, but it is about the life in all its variety, everything that affects us and makes us wonder what it is to be a human being.

> Without leaving everyday experience, are we not inclined to see in a given sequence of the episodes of our lives "(as yet) untold" stories, stories that demand to be told, stories that offer anchorage points for narrative? (*Time and Narrative* 1, 74)

For Ricœur, our experience is pre-narrative by nature. We have pre-understanding and practical wisdom about human action and about narrating it. There is a network of concepts regarding human action. We are familiar with these concepts. We can tell a story of two people meeting and greeting or making an agreement when we see them shaking hands. We know there is a meaning in their behaviour; something has happened before, and something will happen after this moment. Also, a meaningful experience of one's own life may be seen as demanding to be told. In an article entitled "Life: A story in search of a narrator" Ricœur says that narrating is so essential to our humanity that life is only a biological phenomenon until it is interpreted. This approach to narrative is very different from those approaches where one needs a story to justify one's superiority over others or where a community wants to narrate its identity in a way that excludes others from belonging to the same humanity. It is important to note that for Ricœur, narrative always involves ethics (Ricœur 1983, 116–17; Ricœur 1990, 167).

Semantic innovation makes it possible to create a world—real or imaginary—before the reader. But it is always a world of choices, values, compassion. So, imagination is not about day-dreaming but about learning. I need my imagination when reading or hearing a narrative. It is through my imagination addressed by a text that I can learn about my possibilities, about my

deepest commitments, about my relation to other creatures. It is through imagination, active in narratives, that one may learn about the possibility of living in peace with other creatures, humans, and other forms of life. The aspect of learning through the narrative is an important ethical frame. We know how easily narratives are misused to create boundaries, strengthen stereotypes, and so forth. In Ricœur's theory, ethical evaluation is always part of narrative understanding.

In Ricœur's thinking creativity of imagination comes close to being the root of meaning and hope.[7] Productive imagination ensures that the meaning exceeds what is grasped at first sight. One cannot really own the creative process or the œuvre and its appropriation. It is always more. Imagination and hope belong together. When we tell stories we create worlds that are more than this one. One might even say that there is hope for peace so long as we can narrate it. Fundamentally, narrating attests to the human desire to make sense and to understand life and oneself. With Ricœur one is inclined to have confidence in the possibilities that are narrated. In fact, as Laure Assayag (2016) has argued, the idea of trust, although never defined by Ricœur, forms an underlying tone in Ricœur's philosophy. It is a central theme in his philosophical anthropology but also in his philosophy of inter-personal relations or institutions. Assayag notes how Ricœur helps us to think about trust, both regarding our capacities and our incapacities and vulnerability. There is always a risk, because the future is uncertain. But still, the confidence that lets us say "I can" is our basic capacity. Assayag analyses the concept of hope in Ricœur as a fundamental trust in the world and in life. Hope is not only a sort of confidence but also the foundation of all confidence, strong and fragile at the same time (Assayag 2016, 169).

Thus, the narrative possibility of peace and understanding stems from a fundamental trust in the ability of narrative to open up perspective, showing deeper meanings, inviting one's imagination to learn more about existence and inviting one to act ethically.

As is well known, Ricœur is especially interested in the linguistic form of creativity. Already in 1975 when lecturing on imagination and summing up his own view, he underlines the referential claim of fiction, which extends our view on world: "In reading we receive the invention and are extended within ourselves by the invention of the other" (Ricœur 2024, 285).

In his narrative theory, he investigates semantic innovation on the level of historical and fictional texts.[8] The thesis behind *Temps et récit* is the connection between human experience of time and narrativity. Ricœur claims that time becomes human time to the extent that it is narrated and "narrative in its turn is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (Ricœur 1983, 17). Although Ricœur's trilogy is a very detailed analysis of how our human temporality is

7 I am using the notions of "productive" and "creative" imagination as synonyms in relation to Ricœur. There could, however, be a subtle difference between Ricœur's use of them, as George Taylor has noted (Taylor 2024, xxviii).

8 The theme of semantic innovation unites Ricœur's trilogy of *Temps et récit* (1983–5) to its predecessor, *La métaphore vive* (1975).

narrated in historiography and in fiction, it is also a great general theory on narrativity. And although Ricœur's interest is on historiography and fiction, the basic function of narrating is also the same in the stories of our ordinary life. In this respect, what is important is the way that narrative is linked to our experiences and actions. Ricœur says himself that literature and histories of lives complement each other. They both show how deeply narrative is anchored in life and practical action (Ricœur 1990, 193).

When it comes to the ability and willingness to narrate our everyday life, Ricœur's theory offers useful perspectives. First, there is the idea of making a plot. The plot has the potential to shape a unity of disparate elements. It makes intelligible the things happening. Through its plot the narrative holds together different episodes, combines different actors, aspects, and circumstances, acts and effects resulting from them (Ricœur 1983, 127). Ricœur explains how plot mediates:

> First it is a mediation between the individual events or incidents and a story taken as a whole. In this respect, we may say equivalently that it draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents (Aristotle's *pragmata*) or that it transfers the events or incidents into a story. The two reciprocal relations expressed by *from* and *into* characterize the plot as a mediation between events and a narrated story. As a consequence, an event must be more than just a single occurrence. It gets its definition from its contribution to the development of the plot. A story, too, must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the 'thought' of this story. In short, emplotment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession. (*Time and Narrative* 1, 65)

The plot also gives a role to those that are acted upon. They belong to the narrative. The superpower of narrativity is to shape sometimes chaotic experiences into an intelligible unity. In a narrative, there is always a beginning, a middle, and an end. (Even though the actions and the end can be open by their nature.) Our understanding is construed in such a way that we grasp the plot. The narrative imagination working in the plot of a narrative corresponds to the narrative imagination working in our understanding.

What is essential concerning the question of peace in this context is narrative's ability to hold different aspects together and to give voice to different actors. In the idea of narrative, there is an opportunity to take different aspects seriously and unite them into the same narrative. This means that many voices may be part of one and the same narrative. Narrative not only tells how things happen and who is acting; it also reveals the consequences, how people are affected by the actions. It not only tells who is acting but also who is suffering. Narratives help us understand why things happen in the way they do; they show us cause-lines (Ricœur 1983, 85). The most important narratives are told so that we will remember and so that horrible things will never happen again (Ricœur 1985, 339–42; Ricœur 1990, 194). For example, in Finland, it is only recently

that the discrimination against the Sámi people has been narrated. The injustices, violation of rights, and state assimilation policy are being discussed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 2021, but they are also narrated in Katja Gauriloff´s film *Je´vida*.

In some cases being able to narrate one's story is the first step to (regaining) self-esteem. Damien Tissot has elaborated Ricœur's contribution to the idea of being true to oneself, important in feminist theory (Tissot 2013, 105–06). Tissot notes the importance of the idea of promise and faithfulness to the self. To make a promise is to be accountable for it. There is confidence that in the future *I can* do what I promised. Being able means that the consistency of the subject is preserved. Being faithful to oneself defines the subject whose capability is not determined by the others. Noticing that *I can* narrate what has happened to me is to become an acting and suffering subject, to become visible before others. It means the possibility of being faithful to oneself. This narrative self-esteem is not dependent on how others or institutions receive the narrative. What is important is that it is told, and that the recognition of the narrative is made possible.

Narrative self-esteem makes it possible for the others to recognize and understand the person telling their story. There may also be ethical evaluations of the narrative. Both the narrator and the recipients may interpret it critically. It is important also to give voice to those that have suffered and say: "We understand the injustice of your story. We don't accept it. We need to make sure this will never happen again". Narrative self-esteem makes it possible to appreciate also the narratives told by the others. One's own narrative is not absorbed by them but linked to them.

The art of listening: recognizing the narrative and the narrator

In difficult or conflicting situations people should be invited to narrate their story and listen to the narrative told by the other. This art of listening is needed to complement Ricœur's theory of narrative and reading. While hermeneutics is for Ricœur specifically textual, the receiver of a narrative is the reader. In the third volume of *Temps et récit* / *Time and Narrative*, the role of the reader becomes pivotal to the mimetic arc and to the whole hermeneutic project. The question of the mimetic arc is not only the text but the human action and existence that is prefigured, configured and finally refigured through the act of reading. Without the reader, the narrative finds no way back to the world of action.

> It must be admitted, however, that considered apart from reading, the world of the text remains a transcendence in immanence. […] A more precise reflection on the notion of the world of the text and a more exact description of its status of transcendence within immanence have, however, convinced me that the passage from configuration to refiguration required the confrontation between two worlds, the fictive world of the text and the real world of the reader. With this, the phenomenon of reading became the necessary mediator of refiguration. (*Time and Narrative* 3, 158–59)

It is through the act of reading that the human experience, configured as a

narrative, may be refigured. It is the imagination, active first in reading and wandering in the text, that produces this refiguration. The experience is refigured not only in the world of the narrative but also and more importantly in the world of the reader. Just as the narrative communicates with the reader, so does the reader communicate with the narrative. In developing the role of the reader Ricœur discusses reception aesthetics and focuses on the experience of reading as a communication or dialectic between the text and the reader. In analysing the experience of reading, Ricœur constructs his theory on the phenomenology of Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss (Ricœur 1985, 303–28).

Focusing on the act of reading Ricœur does not elaborate any theory of listening in his narrative theory. Also later, when discussing the topic of recognition, he does not really develop the question of listening to each other. It is only briefly in the concluding chapter of *Parcours de la reconnaissance* / *The Course of Recognition* that he refers to it. He points out that the capacities (to talk, to act, to narrate, and to impute) that define the subject as a capable man also relate the subject to the other. For example, when we think about our capacity to talk, we are also thinking about someone listening, and when we think about our capacity to act, we know that it realizes itself in the world of interaction. The same is the case with narrating. There is a presupposition of another. "Finally, narrating, like saying, calls for an ear, a power to hear, a reception (which stems, moreover, from an aesthetic of reception that is not at issue here)" (Ricœur 2005, 253). It appears as if for Ricœur the concept of listening comes very close to that of reading. This is understandable as one interprets Ricœur's view of the reader: in an ideal case, being affected as a reader of fiction has ethical consequences in real life. In *Soi-même comme un autre* / *Oneself as another* he notes that the reception of fictional work contributes to the imaginary and symbolic constitution of real interaction between people (Ricœur 1990, 381).

In ordinary life, we also need oral narratives to be considered as an opportunity to understand one another and sustain peace. Unlike a text, an oral narrative is affected by the voice, rhythm, and tone of the one narrating it. Written text remains static; oral narrative may have different variations. The differences between oral and written narrative relate also to the reception of the narrative. In both cases the recipient is invited to imagine the world *as if* the narrative were reality right now. In both cases it is imagination that is addressed by the narrative. While reading, imagination leads the reader through the world of the text. While listening, imagination—that is the ability to imagine oneself in the place of the other—leads the listener through the story told. The phenomenology of listening is different from reading. It leads us to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. The meaning is grasped through one's own body, because it is our means of communication and understanding (Merleau-Ponty 1945). What needs to be examined in the phenomenology of listening is the physical event: voice, rhythm, and gesture. The meaning is communicated through them. Instead of a narrator and a receiver there is communication and dialogue. The dialogue of the narrative and the listener takes place between their faces, not between the world of the text and the world of the reader. The

site for understanding is between the faces. It is there, where "narrating calls for an ear, a power to hear" (Ricœur 2005, 253). There is no genuine power to hear without being affected by the face of the other. There is a call to be recognized as a narrator, as a subject here. To be able to receive, to be able to listen, and set oneself in a dialogue demands recognition.

While the phenomenology of reading has to do with questions of reception, phenomenology of listening has to do with the questions of recognition. In fact, Silvia Pierosara proposes, interpreting Ricœur's narrative and recognition theory, an equation between "the claim to be recognized and the demand that one's own story be recognized" (Pierosara 2011, 71). She points out that there is in Ricœur's work an implicit inter-connectedness of narrative and recognition and that there is a narrative kernel in recognition (Pierosara 2011, 71–72). She does not discuss listening as such, but her article is significant in demonstrating how there is in Ricœur an implicit ethics of receiving a narrative.

The phenomenology of listening starts from recognizing the narrative and the narrator. It also seems to me that wherever there is a narrator narrating the narrative to someone, there is at least a provisional or tentative recognition of the other as a person capable of listening and understanding. Pierosara suggests that "human bonds are primarily based on recognition, and narratives help us to understand this fact" (Pierosara 2011, 73).

Even though Ricœur does not develop the concept of listening, it is useful to point out some aspects of his work on recognition. These aspects could serve as a mode of listening to ordinary life's narratives.

As always, writing on recognition is for Ricœur an opportunity to combine different ways of philosophizing one single theme. His monograph is divided into three main parts: Recognition as Identification; Recognizing Oneself; and Mutual Recognition. When discussing mutual recognition, Ricœur is in dialogue with Axel Honneth, who, inspired by Hegel, borrows from him three different models of mutual recognition: love, law, and social respect (Ricœur 2005, 187). On a very personal level, one is recognized in one's lineage, being recognized as one's daughter or son. "My birth made me a priceless object, something outside ordinary commerce" (Ricœur 2005, 193). From a legal perspective, recognition intends according to Honneth two things: the other and the norm. The norm needs to be taken seriously, as being valid. The other needs to be recognized as free and equal to every other person. There is universal validity of the norm and singularity of persons. There are rights that belong to all. Those rights—civil, political, and social—enrich the capacities of all the subjects. And as Ricœur notes, responsibility means both the self-assertion, being capable of acting with responsibility towards the society, and the recognition of the other as having the same right to contribute to society. The negative experience of not having equal rights amounts to feelings of exclusion, alienation, oppression. The struggle for recognition may have different forms (Ricœur 2005, 197–201).

The third mode of mutual recognition is social esteem—ethical life that is more than juridical. This often demands a struggle to recognize those who are non-privileged in society. The demand for social esteem means being fully recognized by the

public institutions and the political structure (Ricœur 2005, 213). Ricœur is quite hesitant as to what extent there may be any objective outcome in the struggle for affective, juridical, and social recognition.[9]

Ricœur goes on to suggest an alternative to the idea of struggle in the process of mutual recognition. The alternative is to be sought in the exceptional, peaceful experiences of recognition, in rare moments, based on the symbolic mediation of a different order from a juridical or commercial order of change, something deeply affective. While discussing the possibility of this kind of mutual recognition, Ricœur elaborates further on Marcel Mauss's idea of a gift, and the reciprocity linked to it. For Ricœur, the most important concept regarding the idea of gift is receiving. In the triad of giving, receiving, and giving in return everything depends on receiving: What is the attitude of receiving? How is receiving affecting the one being offered a gift? How to distinguish good reciprocity from bad? For Ricœur, the answer lies in the word gratitude. When receiving something with gratitude, there is no obligation to give back. Instead, there is gratitude between the gift and the return gift (Ricœur 2005, 219, 236–45).

9 Arto Laitinen points out that Ricœur's worry is exaggerated. Laitinen argues that there may be justifiable struggles for recognition, and they may be met so that the demands are satisfied. Laitinen stresses the need to distinguish justifiable demands for recognition from unjustifiable ones (Laitinen 2011, 46). Gonçalo Marcelo in turn sees the benefits of a Ricœurian critique of the model of the struggle for recognition. Marcelo notes that Ricœur's view helps us to shed reified forms of identity (Marcelo 2011, 124).

Wouldn't this idea of good receiving also apply to the narratives? Wouldn't the art of listening be exactly that of receiving with gratitude? There is mutual recognition when there is someone sharing their narrative and the other receiving it with gratitude. That kind of receiving strengthens one's identity, gives full assurance of it. This is exactly how Ricœur describes the idea of being recognized, so that it "would for everyone be to receive the full assurance of his or her identity, thanks to the recognition by others of each person's range of capacities" (Ricœur 2005, 250). It is important to note that it is not any atomistic ideal or collective identity, but the range of personal capacities that is to be recognized. The capacities are individual, and they may change as the life-story of the person changes.

Even though there is no obligation to give in return, people are often also willing to share their own narrative. This mutual exchange of narratives, this mutual listening, strengthens the mutual recognition. This is something deeply needed in our conflicted and polarized society. Wherever there is attentive listening, there is recognition of the other and oneself. Wherever there is a refusal to listen to the narrative of the other, there is a lack of recognition. For example, in Finland a report from 2023 on racism shows how racism has become a part of young people's daily lives and how there has been a lack of hearing of their experiences (Henttonen and Kareinen 2023).

There are for us many experiences that call for listening with empathy. For those privileged by their skin colour, sexual orientation, financial capacities, etc., there is a real need to practise careful reading and listening. Ricœur's narrative theory is a good teacher in opening us to imagining

life from the perspective of another. But this theory is useful only when one recognizes one's own privileged position and the need to focus on not only listening to but also hearing the other.[10]

The importance of listening to the conflicting stories and to the personal experiences behind them is also the basis of restorative mediation. In this method of reconciliation, both parts of the conflict tell their story and listen to the other. When hearing about the way the other party sees the conflict, one may learn something new. When telling how things have affected someone and what kind of causes and results there have been on a personal level, people sometimes find understanding and a will to forgive. People may learn to live in peace together. Such restorative processes may take place in different areas of society, as in workplaces or schools.[11] There are also examples of social and political restorative processes. In *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* / *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricœur discusses the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South-Africa. He notes how the process gave the possibility for public grief and narratives of sufferance (Ricœur 2000, 626–630). It seems that reconciliation processes call for narratives, whether on the individual or the sociopolitical level.

Ricœur's theory reminds us how narrative is our way of understanding. It is also our way of learning and preserving our empathy, or indeed our humanity. Wherever there are conflicts, people need to be heard, their stories need to be read or listened to. Ricœur also reminds us that the story is never just a story—it is always a call to situate oneself ethically in the real world of action. Recently, the link between Ricœur's narrative imagination and one's moral agency has been studied for example by Wojciech Kaftanski. He concludes that "if imagination is linked with real human action in the world—which undoubtedly has a moral dimension—imagination must be then linked with moral agency. It is so as imagination informs human being and doing in the world" (Kaftanski 2024, 192).

Ricœur's theory of narrative is linked to the idea of practical reason (phronesis). Encountering the narrative shapes one's being in the world. This may happen through reading or through listening to narratives. But as Ricœur stresses the way from narratives back to the world of action, reading or listening is not enough. Narrative proposes imaginative variations and ethical evaluations, something that affects our being and action in the world.

Narrative as a reshaping of the world and a call for ethical action

The power of narrative lies in the imagination. Ricœur explains in his narrative theory how a narrative always "works" with

10 Alison Scott-Bauman has investigated Ricœur's philosophy in respect to education. Her study (*Paul Ricœur. Empowering Education, Politics and Society*) is about how Ricœur's work could be helpful for improving the higher education in Britain in the 2020s. Her study also shows how Ricœur's philosophy helps to confront questions such as polarization and where it needs to be complemented. Scott-Baumann argues that "there is a discrepancy between Ricœur's capacity to unify ideas and his failure to understand human difference" (Scott-Baumann 2023, 1).

11 Timo Pehrman describes restorative processes in working life (Pehrman 2011), Maija Gellin describes how restorative values and methods help settle conflicts in schools (Gellin 2019).

respect to the reader's imagination. The reader wanders in the text. This means that the reader is moving in the realm of possibilities. The reader may go through imaginative variations that let them adopt different views on life.

> The moment when literature attains its highest degree of efficacity is perhaps the moment when it places its readers in the position of finding a solution for which they themselves must find the appropriate questions, those that constitute the aesthetic and moral problem posed by a work. (*Time and Narrative* 3, 173)

Also, a narrative about an everyday life experience offers an opportunity to listen and to learn about the questions it poses. Listening with an attitude of gratitude means listening with one's imagination. One understands that the things might have happened to oneself as well. One learns about how it feels to experience such things. One starts to question actions and aspects that could have altered the course of actions. What would it have taken the story to be different, more tolerable, more just? What kind of actions or words are needed now? What are the new narratives wished for and what is needed to make them happen? Ricœur underlines that understanding is something that happens on the level of our practical action, not on the level of our reasoning. To understand the world and to change it mean the same thing (Ricœur 1994/1977, 303).

Ricœur goes on to say that narratives are ethical laboratories (Ricœur 1990, 176; Ricœur 1990, 188). One may practise imagining ethically solid decisions. Imaginative variations help the reader to evaluate life from a different viewpoint. There is an important aspect of empathy, setting oneself in the position of someone else. This imaginative variation is an opportunity for learning and commitment.

> Our analysis of the act of reading leads us to say rather that the practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. In this sense, narrative exercises the imagination more than the will, even though it remains a category of action. […] reading becomes a provocation to be and act differently. (*Time and Narrative* 3, 249)

There is also a possibility of critical thinking in narrative imagination (Ricœur 1984, 189). For Ricœur, understanding can never be immediate.[12] The distance is needed so that we can analyse and criticize the object we are trying to understand. That is also the case regarding the narrative. It needs to be considered from a distance. Considering the narrative may reveal some distorted agendas in it or it may reveal itself to be a lie. Not all narratives are good. But the bad ones may also help us understand better, because they show how important it is to rewrite the narrative. Thus, the narrative possibility of peace and understanding is always a self-critical possibility.

Narrative imagination marks a point where we distance ourselves from our ordinary life and the things that we do not

12 On Ricœur's concept of distance as an indispensable part of interpretation see for example "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation" in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Ricœur 1986).

question. It transfers us to the realm of the possible. We can see things differently. Often, we come back somehow changed from that world of narrative. This distance helps us to maintain criticism towards ordinary life and towards the unjust that we confront in it. In this way, the narrative possibility of peace results from the power that narrative has to reshape or refigure the world, as Ricœur says.

What Ricœur does not seem to reflect enough on is that many narratives are in fact not ethically very interesting or helpful. It looks like the experience of reading is, for him, always something deeply affective. As Björn Vikström notes, Ricœur develops his hermeneutics especially in relation to existentially meaningful texts and in relation to his concept of over-individual revelation (Vikström 2000, 281). This limitation in Ricœur's concept of reading is to be noted. He does not really treat the problem of the reader or recipient who is insufficiently critical towards the narratives. Because not only peace but also war, distrust, and conflict have narrative identities. In his narrative theory Ricœur seems to have faith in human capability and responsibility. Too much, I would say, considering the actual situation. His theory is limited to the capable man. Ricœur's subject has always more resources of understanding than the nearest sphere of social media.

The receiver of the narrative is for Ricœur the capable man, a subject who can, who has the power, and will to act (Ricœur 1985, 415–20). An ethically committed and ontologically authentic subject has the potential to change things, make interventions, make a difference. Thus, the present is the time of initiative regarding the future. As Jean-Luc Amalric has noted, Ricœur's theory of narrative identity may be described as a mixture of poetical and practical work of imagination. Imagination's practical and projective function is to clarify and orient our action. Imagination is a dynamic power (Amalric 2012, 110–11).

Ricœur reminds us of the importance of using our imagination to increase empathy and to ask critical questions about the narratives that are unjust or stereotypical. This is how he offers insight into the narrative possibility of living together in peace. To go one step further I will next present briefly some aspects of how Ricœur elaborates the question of responsibility with respect to narratives and narrative identities.

The narrative possibility of rethinking identity and responsibility

Concerning the question of subject in the process of taking the initiative in reconciliation and mutual understanding, Ricœur's thinking on subjectivity seems very grounded: a subject is the one who acts in the narrative (Ricœur 1990, 174). Also, narratives reveal how people are acted upon. The subject is also the one under the power of somebody else. To narrate about the subject or about the action is impossible without the idea of interaction. Every one of us is both one who acts and one who suffers, depending on the situation.

Also, what is common to each human being, according to Ricœur, is that the subject is never master of himself or herself. The subject always needs to have a critical moment of understanding of one's own narrative. There are layers in our life stories that need to be interpreted. These layers form the story of our life. This narrative is a heterogeneous synthesis. So is the subject. This is true as much for personal as

for social subjects. There is always the need to re-interpret the narrative that responds to the question of identity, to the question of who is acting and suffering in the narrative. Ricœur explains how we try to understand both the unity of our life and the different parts of it. Interpreting our action, we also interpret ourselves as the actors of that action (Ricœur 1990, 210–11). Or, as Karl Simms comments on Ricœur, "if hermeneutics is the route to understanding, then reading oneself is the key to self-understanding" (Simms 2003, 101). While distancing oneself from the immediate grasp of the self, one may realize that there is always a dialectic: we are both acting and suffering.

This is an important aspect concerning the idea of understanding each other in conflict situations. We need to rethink the concept of identity in such a way that the dialectic of acting and suffering is taken seriously. This dialectic becomes apparent in the mutual process of narrating and listening to the stories of one another. To understand the heterogeneous synthesis in one's narrative identity and to accept the dialectic of acting and suffering in one's narrative are aspects of the narrative possibility for peace. Narrative helps to accept the ambiguities of individuals and communities. There is no such thing as a transparent or ready-made identity. Rather identity is always something to be re-interpreted.

Being critical in interpreting one's own (individual or social) narrative is an opportunity to learn, take responsibility, gain self-esteem. The same is true while reading or listening to the narrative of others. Receiving a narrative may reveal the need to repair it. Bernard Lategan approaches this question from a South African perspective, saying: "That [memories] are open to criticism and correction, that they can be adjusted and recalibrated, without denying or betraying what did happen" (Lategan 2018, 129). There may be some motivations or consequences that need to complement the action that has been narrated. Or there may be some voice that needs to be heard as a part of the narrative. To rewrite or to retell is a way of repairing the narrative. The aim of repairing the narrative is to render the truth.

Rendering the truth applies both to historical and fictional narratives. Here Ricœur presents the idea of a narrative debt: the narrator is indebted to the reality of the past or to the artistic vision of reality.

Ricœur's idea of a narrative debt is an important aspect of the narrative possibility of peace. The concept of debt, I think, is more fruitful than the demand for an objective truth. Ricœur explains how both the artist and the historian have the task to render the truth the best they can. Regarding the past there is a debt to pay, that is, one needs to narrate the truth. But the same debt of rendering the true vision also concerns art (Ricœur 1985, 273; Ricœur 1985, 324–25).

> Free form external constraint of documentary proof, is not fiction internally bound by its obligation to its quasi-past, which is another name for the constraint of verisimilitude? Free *from* […] artists must still render themselves free *for* […] And does not the difficult law of creation, which is to "render" in the most perfect way the vision of the world that animates the narrative voice, simulate, to the point of being indistinguishable from it, his-

> tory's debt to the people of the past, to the dead? Debt for debt, who, the historian or the novelist, is the most insolvent? (*Time and Narrative* 3, 192)

The idea of debt could be applied when we need to evaluate the stories we are receiving. Whose narrative should we especially listen to? One possibility of discerning the "weight" of different narratives is to look from the angle of debt. The community may recognize the narrator(s) towards whom the debt of listening is the most urgent. And the narrative that "renders" the experiences from the past most authentically should be listened to with a special attention, because that kind of narrative repays the debt.

Repaying the debt to the past is something elaborated on in *Temps et récit*. But the idea of narrative debt could also be explored and applied to the future. Because, as Ricœur says, while discussing the idea of debt, it is recognition of the debt that makes the subject responsible (Ricœur 1990, 342). To be responsible in the face of the future is to think about the narratives we tell today. Memories of such horrible things as the Holocaust or apartheid, that we would like to situate only in the past or even totally forget, need to be narrated. We have a debt to the past to remember. But we also have a debt to the future not to repeat these narratives. Instead, we need to ask ourselves what kind of narratives are needed to create peace in the future.

Ricœur's theory offers an important insight on the link between narrative and initiative. According to Ricœur, the present is the moment of initiative (Ricœur 1985, 414–15). Thinking about the possibility of peace, the idea of initiative seems quite fruitful. The present is not an end of something amounting to it. Rather it is the moment of initiating the things we are committed to. As I already noted before, Ricœur says that it is the capable man, *l'homme capable*, who receives the narrative. The capability also concerns the sphere of reconciliation.[13] Listening to the narratives, recognizing their narrators and their experiences, one understands better what it is to be a human person and what the good life with and for the others we are dreaming of might look like, and how are our decisions and actions may contribute to it.

Narrative possibility of peace and understanding

In conclusion, I want to propose some aspects of Ricœur's theory on narrative imagination as inspiration regarding the question of understanding each other and living in peace.

First, Ricœur helps us to see the basic function of imagination. We should foster imagination to learn new aspects of life. It is through imagination that we find and create meanings. It is through imagination that we preserve our empathy. We need to practice imaginative variations of life.

Second, narrative has a power to unite different aspects and actors and to give voice to different ethical viewpoints. We need to seek for the opportunities to compose together narratives with different experiences of what it is to live in our society.

13 One could also take a further step and think about the possibility of forgiving. Ricœur could help in this task with the epilogue of *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, entitled "Le pardon difficile" (Ricœur 2000).

Third, narrative demands to be listened to. Narrative and its narrator demand to be recognized. As much as narrative is an opportunity for peace, even more listening to a narrative is an opportunity. Ricœur's idea of the reader needs to be complemented by the idea of a listener. Where there is mutual listening with gratitude, there is the possibility of peace.

Fourth, we tell stories partly because we recognize the debt we bear. There are experiences that need to be told so that we can live with our past. But there are also stories that need to be told because we bear a debt for the generations to come.

Fifth, the narrative possibility of understanding is always a modest one. Ricœur reminds us that even though the subject is capable, she or he is never the master of her/himself. There is always a task of rethinking, re-interpreting, learning more. ■

Terhi Törmä is a Doctor of Theology working in the Evangelical-Lutheran church of Finland (as a diocesan dean). Her main interest of study is the narrative imagination of Paul Ricœur and the phenomenological imagination of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Her doctoral dissertation (University of Helsinki, 2015) focused on those topics. Her thesis is called: *Oma ruumis ja kerronnan kaari. Merkityksen muodostuminen Maurice Merleau-Pontyn ruumiinfenomenologisen ja Paul Ricœurin narratiivisen imaginaatiokäsityksen mukaan* ("One's own body and the arc of narrating. Imagination and meaning in Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory and in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body").
terhi.torma@evl.fi

References

Amalric, Jean-Luc. 2012. "L'Imagination poético-pratique dans l'identité narrative". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 3, No 2 (2012), 110–27. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2012.130

Amalric, Jean-Luc. 2013. *Paul Ricœur, l'imagination vive. Une genèse de la philosophie ricœurienne de l'imagination.* Paris: Hermann.

Assayag, Laure. 2016. "Penser la confiance avec Paul Ricœur". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies,* Vol 7, No 2 (2016), 164–86. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2016.318

Foessel, Michaël. 2007. "Introduction". *Ricœur. Textes choisis et présentés* par Foessel Michaël et Lamouche Fabien, 1–22.

Gellin, Maija. 2019. *Restoratiivinen lähestymistapa ja sovittelu peruskoulukontekstissa: kohti eheyttävän kohtaamisen toimintakulttuuria*. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopisto. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-173-6 (15.6.2024)

Henttonen, Elina, and Janne Kareinen. 2023. "*Kukaan ei synny vihaamaan. Nuorten dialogit rasismista ja syrjinnästä*". Helsinki: Oikeusministeriö. https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/165318/OM_2023_34_SO.pdf Accessed October 11, 2024.

Helenius, Timo. 2012. "'As If' and the Surplus of Being in Ricœur's Poetics". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 3, No 2 (2012), 149–70. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2012.113

Kaftanski, Wojcieh. 2024. *Imagination, Mental Representation, and Moral Agency: Moral Pointers in Kierkegaard and Ricœur. Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2024) 23, 179–98. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-022-09813-x

Laitinen, Arto. 2011. "Paul Ricœur's Surprising Take on Recognition". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 2, No 1 (2011), 35–50. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2011.57

Lategan, Bernard. 2018. "Ricœur in South Africa. Some Remarks on His Impact beyond Philosophy", *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 2018, Vol 4, No 2, 115–34. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2018.v4n2.a06

Marcelo, Gonçalo. 2011. "Paul Ricœur and

the Utopia of Mutual Recognition". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 2, No 1 (2011), 110–33. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2011.69

"Martti Ahtisaaren neuvotteluvinkit". 2024. Accessed October 15, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWuQjydAq6o&t=39s

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1945. *La phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

Pehrman, Timo. 2011. *Paremmin puhumalla. Restoratiivinen sovittelu työyhteisössä*. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopistokustannus.

Pierosara, Silvia. 2011. "Asking for Narratives to be Recognized: The Moral of Histories." *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 2, No 1 (2011), 70–83. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2011.52

Ricœur, Paul. 1955. "Vraie et fausse paix". *Autres Temps. Cahiers d'éthique sociale et politique*. N°76–77, 2003, 51–65. https://doi.org/10.3406/chris.2003.2409

Ricœur, Paul. 1975. *La métaphore vive*, (édition de poche). Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1983. *Temps et récit 1. L'intrigue et le récit historique* (édition de poche). Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1983. *Time and Narrative volume 1*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1984. *Temps et récit 2. La configuration dans le récit de la fiction* (édition de poche). Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1985. *Temps et récit 3. Le temps raconté*. (édition de poche). Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1985. *Time and Narrative volume 3*. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1986. *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique, II*. Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1986. "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation". *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique, II,* 101–17.

Ricœur, Paul. 1991. *A Ricœur Reader. Reflexion and Imagination*. Edited by Mario j. Valdés. Toronto University Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 1991/1987. "Life: A Story in Search for Narrator". *A Ricœur Reader*, 425–37.

Ricœur, Paul. 1990. *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1994. *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*. Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 1994/1977. "Entre philosophie et théologie II: Nommer Dieu". *Lectures 3*, 281–305.

Ricœur, Paul. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil.

Ricœur, Paul. 2005. *The Course of Recognition*. Translated by David Pellauer. Harvard University Press.

Ricœur, Paul. 2024. *Lectures on Imagination,* edited by George H. Taylor, Robert D. Sweeney, Jean-Luc Amalric & Patrick F. Crosby. The University of Chicago Press.

Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2023. *Paul Ricœur Empowering Education, Politics and Society*. Springer: open access https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/76274/978-981-99-3475-1.pdf Accessed June 13, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-3475-1

Simms, Karl. 2003. *Paul Ricœur*. New York: Routledge.

Taylor, George. 2024. "Editor's Introduction". *Lectures on imagination*, xi–xl.

Tissot, Damien. 2013. "Etre fidèle à soi. Féminisme, éthique et justice à la lumière de la philosophie de Paul Ricœur". *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, Vol 4, No 1 (2013), 92–112. https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2013.166

Vikström, Björn. 2000. *Verkligheten öppnar sig. Läsning och uppenbarelse i Paul Ricœurs bibelhermeneutik.* Åbo Akademi University Press.