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## *Approaching the Human Person*<sup>1</sup>

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In an intentionally provocative essay published in the journal *Esprit* (January, 1983) on the occasion of its fiftieth anniversary, I ventured the following slogan: “Death to personalism; long live the person!” I was attempting to suggest that Mounier’s formulation of personalism was, as he himself readily admitted, connected with a certain cultural and philosophical constellation which is no longer ours today: existentialism and Marxism are no longer the only opponents. They are no longer even opponents at all, against which personalism would be required to define itself, at the risk of becoming one or another system or ‘ism’. I concluded my essay with the following citation from Mounier’s *Qu’est-ce que le personnalisme?*: “We are witnessing [...] the first meanderings of a cyclical course where the explorations pursued to exhaustion along one path are given up only to be rediscovered farther on, enriched by this forgetting and by the discoveries for which it cleared a path” (p. 11).

In addition, I wanted to say that the person is still the most appropriate term to designate those investigations for which neither the term ‘consciousness’, nor ‘subject’, nor ‘individual’ really apply, for the various reasons that I invoked at the time. I would like to discuss some of those investigations here, beyond the point reached in that essay, where I restricted myself to defining the person by an *attitude* in Eric Weil’s sense, or as one would say in hermeneutics, by the everyday understanding that we have of it. Following Paul Landsberg, I used the criteria of *crisis* and *commitment*, adding to the latter certain corollaries such as fidelity over time to a higher cause, and acceptance of alterity and difference within personal identity.

Now I would like to make use of contemporary investigations into *language*, *action* and *narrative* in order to provide the *ethical* constitution of the person with a substratum and roots, comparable to

those explored by Emmanuel Mounier in *Traité du Caractère*. In this sense, the present study is an extension of Mounier’s book.

### I

I mentioned four layers or strata of what might constitute a hermeneutic phenomenology of the person: language, action, narrative and ethical life. In fact it would be better to say: the *speaking person*, the *acting person* (and I would add the *suffering person*), the *narrating person* and character in one’s own life story, and finally the *responsible person*. Before covering, in the order they were mentioned, these strata of the constitution of the person, I will jump directly to the final stage of my enquiry and look at the *threefold structure* which is progressively worked out in the previous layers of this constitution. By threefold structure I mean the following: if one wants to distinguish ethics from morality, understanding the latter to be the order of imperatives, norms and interdictions, one discovers a more radical dialectic of *ethos*, susceptible of providing a thread that can be followed in exploring the other layers of the person’s constitution. In a work currently in preparation, I propose the following definition of *ethos*: desire for an accomplished life — with and for others — in just institutions. These three terms seem to me to be equally important for the ethical constitution of the person.

Desire for an accomplished life: by thus inscribing ethics in the depths of desire, one emphasizes its character as wish, as optative, prior to any imperative. The complete formula would be: “If only I could live well, within the horizon of an accomplished, and in that sense a happy, life!” The ethical element of this wish or desire is can be expressed by the notion of *self-esteem*.



Indeed, whatever one makes of the relationship with others and with institutions, about which I will speak in a moment, there can be no responsible subject who does not consider itself capable of acting intentionally — i.e., according to reflective reasons — and capable of inscribing its intentions in the course of things by initiatives which interweave the order of intention with the order of events in the world. Thus conceived, self-esteem is not some refined form of egoism or solipsism. The term “self” is there to guard against the reduction to an ego centred upon itself. In a sense, the self receiving the esteem in this expression is the grammatical reflexive term. Even the grammatical second person, whose irruption will be noted later, would not be a person if I did not suspect that, in addressing me, it realizes it is capable of designating itself as that which addresses itself to me and thus turns out to be capable of the self-esteem defined by intentionality and initiative. The same holds for the person conceived as a third person — he or she — who is not merely the person about whom I speak, but the person capable of becoming a narrative model or a moral model.

The second term is characterized by the expression ‘with and for others’. I would suggest the name *solicitude* for this movement of the self towards the other, who responds with an interpellation of the self by the other. We will point out in a moment its linguistic, practical and narrative aspects. While subscribing to Levinas's analyses of the face, exteriority, alterity, even the primacy of the appeal emanating from the other over the recognition of self by self, it seems to me that the most profound ethical request is that of the reciprocity that institutes the other as my likeness and myself as the likeness of the other. Without reciprocity or, to use a concept dear to Hegel, without recognition, alterity would not be a matter of one other than myself, but the expression of a distance indistinguishable from absence. The other, my likeness — such is the wish expressed by ethics with regard to the relationship between self-esteem and solicitude.

It is in friendship that similarity and recognition

come closest to an equality between two non-substitutable terms, but in those forms of solicitude marked by a strong initial inequality, it is recognition that re-establishes solicitude. In the relationship between master and disciple, which is ultimately in the background of all of Levinas's analyses, the master's superiority over the disciple is only distinguished from the master's (in Hegel's sense) superiority over the servant or slave by the ability to recognize the superiority which secretly equalizes the assymetric relationship of instruction or teaching. In the opposite direction, when solicitude moves from the stronger to the weaker, as in compassion, it is still the reciprocity of exchange and the gift that allows the stronger to receive recognition from the weaker, which then becomes the secret heart of the strong one's compassion. In this sense, I understand the relationship between self and other as nothing other than the search for moral equality by the various means of recognition. Reciprocity, obvious in friendship, is the hidden motive behind unequal forms of solicitude.

One will have noticed that I did not restrict the dialectic of *ethos* to the confrontation between self-esteem and solicitude. On the same level as the latter, I placed the wish to live in *just institutions*. By introducing the concept of institution, I introduce a relation with the other which cannot be reconstructed on the model of friendship. The other is a partner without a face, the ‘everyone’ of a just distribution. I would not say that the category of ‘everyone’ is identical with the anonymous, according to an overly hasty identification with Kierkegaard and Heidegger's ‘one’. The ‘everyone’ is a distinct person, whom I only join, however, through the channels of an institution. I am, of course, evoking Aristotle's analysis of justice which could even be found in medieval treatises. It is no accident that the most remarkable form of justice is called distributive justice. One should not take distribution here in its purely economic sense, where it would complete the operations of production.



Any institution can legitimately be conceived as a scheme of distribution, where the parts being distributed are not only goods and merchandise but also rights and duties, obligations, advantages, responsibilities and honours.

The problem of justice has become a difficult ethical problem precisely because no society has yet achieved, nor even proposed, an equal distribution, not merely of goods and revenue, but also of duties and responsibilities. It is to this problem of justice amid unequal shares that the idea of distributive justice has, since Aristotle, been directed. I do not intend to examine the idea of proportional equality that Aristotle employs in defining distributive justice. I will simply take it as the point of departure for a long process of argumentation which continues in our own time, with Rawls's *Theory of Justice* providing its finest example. What distinguishes a relation with the other in an institution from a relation with the other face to face is precisely this mediation by structures of distribution that seek a proportionality fit to be called equitable. From Rawls, I will retain only the suggestion that, contrary to Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism where justice is defined as the maximal advantage for the greatest number, justice in the presence of unequal shares is defined as the maximization of the weakest share. In this concern for those least favoured, one rediscovers an equivalent of the search for recognition at the level of friendship and interpersonal relations.

But one should not expect, from justice in a system of distribution, the sort of intimacy aimed at by the interpersonal relations of friendship. It is precisely this that makes the category of *everyone* irreducible to the *other* of friendship or a love relationship. This inability of 'everyone' to become equal to the friend does not signify any ethical inferiority: the ethical grandeur of everyone is indistinguishable from the ethical grandeur of justice, according to the well known Roman formula: give everyone his due.

Before moving regressively from the ethical sphere towards the preceding sphere in the hierarchical order I proposed at the outset, I would like to compare the analysis I have briefly sketched out with a similar structure in Emmanuel Mounier, for instance when he speaks of 'personalist and communitarian revolution'. It will be noted that Mounier proposes a two-term dialectic: person and community. My three-term formula — self-esteem, solicitude, just institutions — seems in my opinion to complete rather than refute the two-term formula. I distinguish interpersonal relations, whose emblem is friendship, from institutional relations, whose ideal is justice. It seems to me this distinction is entirely beneficial for personalism itself. Indeed, particularly in the first years of the journal *Esprit*, the specificity of the institutional relationship was masked by the utopian idea of a community that would be, in some sense, the extrapolation of friendship. The opposition one finds in certain turn-of-the-century German thinkers between community and society leads to the same utopia of a community of men and women which would be a person of persons. This makes it extremely difficult to recognize an autonomy at the *political* level with respect to the moral level, for if there is any irreducible difference between the two levels, it is the fact that politics deals with the distribution of power in a given society. By specifying in this way, with the term *power*, what is to be distributed and shared, the political is inscribed within the sphere of the idea of justice insofar as it is irreducible to friendship and love, precisely because of its distributive character. By sharply distinguishing between interpersonal relations and institutional relations, one does full justice to the political dimension of *ethos*. At the same time, one frees the communitarian idea from an ambiguity that prevents it from fully deploying itself in those areas of human relations where the other is without face yet nevertheless not without rights.



By clearly distinguishing between friendship and justice, the force of the face-to-face is preserved, while at the same time giving a place to the everyone without face. In other words, with the term 'other' one should understand two distinct ideas: the other person and everyone, the other person of friendship and the everyone of justice. At the same time, they are not separated from each other, to the extent that the idea of *ethos* encompasses, within a single well-articulated formula, the concern for the self, the concern for the other and the concern for the institution. This triad will now assist us in reconstructing a richer idea of the person, keeping in mind some contemporary investigations into language, action and narrative.

## II

A contemporary revival of the idea of the person has everything to gain from a dialogue with philosophies inspired by what has been called 'the linguistic turn'. Not that everything is language, as is sometimes said with exaggeration in those conceptions where language has lost its reference to the lifeworld, to the world of action and the world of commerce among people. But, although not everything is language, nothing in experience arrives at *meaning* unless it is *borne by language*. The expression 'bring experience to language' invites us to consider the speaking person, if not as equivalent to the person as such, at least as the first condition of personhood. Even though in a moment we will be led to make the category of action into the most remarkable category of the personal condition, properly human action is distinguished from animal behaviour, and *a fortiori* from physical movement, by the fact that it must be spoken, i.e., brought to language, in order for it to be meaningful.

What can the philosophy of language contribute to our investigation of the person? The contribution of linguistic philosophy to a philosophy of the person can be divided into two areas. The first, that of *semantics*, provides the occasion for an initial sketch of the person as a singularity.

Indeed, language is structured in such a way as to be able to designate individuals, on the basis of specific operators of individualization such as definite descriptions, proper names and deictics, including demonstrative adjectives and pronouns, personal pronouns and verb tenses. Of course, not all the individuals designated by means of these operators are persons. Persons are individuals of a certain sort. Yet it is the singularity of the persons that we are particularly interested in, and language provides for such an individualization thanks to these operators which allow us to designate one single person and to distinguish this person from all others. This is one aspect of what we will call identification.

In addition to this first property of language, there is another more specific constraint having to do with the semantic level considered from the point of view of referential implications. It is by virtue of this constraint — to which Peter Strawson's classic work, *Individuals* is devoted — that it is impossible for us to identify a particular thing without classifying it either among bodies or else among persons. The person then appears as a basic particular, i.e., one of those particulars to which we must refer when we speak as we do about the components of the world. Ordinary language is, in this respect, a remarkable fund of the most fundamental linguistic operations concerning identification in terms of the basic particular. Three constraints are linked with the status of the person as a basic particular: firstly, persons must be bodies in addition to being persons. Secondly, the mental predicates that distinguish persons from bodies are attributed to the same entity as the predicates common to both persons and bodies — physical predicates, let us say. Thirdly, mental predicates are such that they retain the same meaning whether they are applied to oneself or to someone else. It is clear that the person is not yet a self at this level of discourse, insofar as it is not treated as an entity capable of designating itself. It is one of the entities about which we speak, an entity to which we refer.



This achievement of language should nevertheless not be underestimated insofar as, by referring to persons as basic particulars, we assign an elementary logical status to the grammatical third person — he, she — even if it is only at the pragmatic level that the third person is more than a grammatical person, a self to be precise. This right of the third person in our discourse about the person is confirmed by the place that literature assigns to the protagonists of the majority of our narratives, which are more often narratives of 'he' and 'she' than narratives in the first person, or autobiographies.

It is however at the level of *pragmatics*, more than that of semantics, that the contribution of linguistics to a philosophy of the person is most decisive. By pragmatics I mean the study of language in situations of discourse where the meaning of a proposition depends on the context of interlocution. It is at this stage that the 'I' and the 'you', implied in the process of interlocution, can be thematized for the first time. The best way to illustrate this point is to place oneself in the framework of speech act theory, with its distinction between a locutionary act and an illocutionary act. The locutionary act is a simple proposition: 'the paper is on the table'. The illocutionary force of enunciation differs according to whether the proposition is a simple statement of fact, as in the preceding example, or a promise, a warning, a threat, etc. In these cases, one could say that language *does* something. When I say: 'I promise to return the book you lent me', I am doing something. The simple pronouncement, 'I promise', means that I am effectively committed. Here we find the notion of commitment, so cherished by the personalist tradition and reinforced by those who analyze speech acts. The illocutionary force of speech acts expresses the speaker's engagement in his or her act. How does this bear on the three-fold structure of the ethical constitution of the person?

My thesis here is that it is possible to reformulate speech act theory, and thereby all of pragmatics, on the basis of the three-fold analysis of the moral *ethos*.

The equivalent of self-esteem at the level of pragmatics is constituted by the 'I speak' implied in each of the speech act configurations. All speech acts can be rewritten in the following way: 'I state', 'I promise', 'I warn', etc. This is clearly an advance in the characterization of the person as a self: while at the semantic level the person was merely one of the things about which we speak, at the pragmatic level the person is immediately designated as a self to the extent that the speaking subject designates himself each time that he specifies the illocutionary act in which he engages his speech. I am tempted to say that it is first of all as a speaker capable of designating oneself that self-esteem is anticipated in its pre-moral meaning.

Regarding the relation with the *other*, it is quite clearly at work in the context of interlocution that pragmatics takes into account from the moment that it distinguishes itself from semantics. One could then define speech as follows: someone says something to someone about something. Saying something about something is the semantic core of speech. But someone addressing someone else is the difference between effective speech and a simple logical proposition. It is worth noting that, in this relationship of interlocution, the two poles are equally implied as designating itself and as addressing itself to the other. Indeed, the expression "addressing oneself to the other" demands a reversal: someone else addresses himself to me and I respond. Here we find again the problem mentioned earlier regarding recognition: in one sense you could say that it is the other who takes the initiative and that I recognize myself as a person to the extent that I am, in the words of Jean-Luc Marion, interpellated, or better: interlocuted. Yet I would not be the one to whom speech is addressed were I not at the same time capable of designating myself as the one to whom speech is addressed. In this sense, self-designation and allocution are just as reciprocal as self-esteem and solicitude.



I would like to make a final remark before leaving the discussion of language. It is not only the “I” and the “you” that are brought to the fore by the process of interlocution, but language itself as an *institution*. We all speak — i.e., I speak, you speak, he speaks — but no one invents language. It is only put in motion, or put to work, at the moment one begins to speak. To begin to speak, however, is to assume the totality of language as an institution preceding me and in a sense authorizing me to speak. In this respect, the correlation between language as institution and speech as locution and allocution constitutes an excellent model for every relationship between institutions of whatever sort (political, legal, economic, etc.) and human interrelations. Language, here, should be understood not only as the rules presiding over the constitution of phonological, lexical, syntactic and stylistic systems, but also the accumulation of things said before. To be born is to appear in a situation where things have already been said before us.

The triad formed by locution, interlocution and language as institution is strictly homologous to the triad of *ethos*, self-esteem, solicitude and just institutions, and this homology becomes an outright mutual implication in the case of certain speech acts such as the promise. In fact, the *promise* joins together the linguistic triad and the ethical triad. On the one hand, the promise is simply one speech act among others. It implies the constitutive rule according to which saying ‘I promise’ is to place oneself under the obligation to do something. Yet such a commitment implies more than itself. What is it in fact that requires me to keep my promise? Three things: first of all, to keep a promise is to sustain oneself within the identity of one who today speaks and tomorrow will do. This sustaining oneself announces an esteem of self. Secondly, one always makes a promise to someone — ‘I promise you to do this or that’ — and the reversal that we saw in the case of mutual recognition also occurs here: it is because someone is counting on me and expecting me to keep my promise that I feel that I am connected. Finally, the obligation to keep one's

promise is equivalent to the obligation to preserve the institution of language to the extent that language rests on the confidence everyone has in everyone else's word. In this regard, language appears not only as an institution but as an institution of distribution, of the distribution of speech, so to speak. With the promise, the three-fold structure of speech and the three-fold structure of *ethos* overlap.

### III

I would like to say something now about the person as an *acting* and *suffering* subject. Here, the theory of the person enjoys considerable support from what is known today as the *theory of action*. This theory, very fashionable in Anglo-Saxon circles, is based on a linguistic analysis of action sentences of the type: A does X under circumstances Y. It turns out that the logic of these action sentences is irreducible to that of an attributive proposition S is P. I will not linger over this problem concerning the semantics of action, since I prefer to devote the essence of my analysis to the implication of the agent in the action. This problem is very embarrassing for the theory of action, which concentrates on the relation between two questions posed by human action. The first of these bears on the meaning of propositions relating to human actions. One could say that such a semantic investigation responds to the question *what*. The second field of investigation is that of the motivation for action, and that of the whole problematic surrounding the question *why*. On this view, one could say that an action is intentional to the extent that the question *why* demands, as a response, not a physical cause but a psychological motive, more precisely a reason for which the action is carried out. There remains the question *who*, surrounded by the most formidable difficulties. Roughly speaking, one could say that the problematic of the person is identical, in the field of action, with the question *who* has done *what* and *why*.



Now it turns out that the attribution of action to an agent is irreducible to the attribution of a predicate to a logical subject. This is why the theory of action has often reserved a technical term to speak of this *sui generis* attribution: one thus speaks of *ascription* in order to distinguish the relation of an action to its agent from the attribution of a predicate to a logical subject.

Ascription is clearly related with what is called *imputation* in the domain of morality, nevertheless one should not be too hasty in giving a moral colouring to ascription. Moral imputation more or less presupposes an incrimination, or the possibility of taking the agent to be guilty or not guilty. Ascription is both more simple and more obscure. More simple in the sense that it does not necessarily have a moral colouring which would aim to attribute a segment of movement in the world to someone who is reputed to be its agent. Taken in its pre-moral dimension, however, this relation is very obscure in the sense that it leads us back to the ancient problem of potency and act. Ordinary language has no difficulty admitting this. Indeed, for ordinary language it is a specific feature of action to be able to related to someone who is said to be capable of carrying it out. But this capacity on the part of the agent to act is only expressed through metaphors such as paternity, domination, property (the latter being incorporated into the grammar of adjectives and possessive pronouns).

It is at this point that the triad of *ethos* can serve as a guide in orienting us in the problematic of the *who*, as distinct from that of the *what* and the *why* of action. The *who* of action presents the same three-fold structure as the moral *ethos*. On the one hand, there is no agent who cannot designate himself as being the author responsible for his acts. Here we rediscover the two components of self-esteem: the ability to act on our intentions and the ability to produce, by our own initiative, efficacious changes in the course of events. It is primarily as an agent that we enjoy our own self-esteem. On the other hand though, human action is only conceived as *interaction* under numerous forms varying from

cooperation to competition and conflict. What since Aristotle has been called *praxis* implies a plurality of agents mutually influencing one another to the extent that they are taken up together in the order of things. It is then that the third component of *ethos* intervenes: there is no action that does not refer to what the theory of action calls standards of excellence. This is the case of crafts, games, arts, techniques — impossible to define without referring to precepts (technical, aesthetic, legal, moral, etc.) which define the level of success or failure of a given action. And such precepts are older than each of the acting subjects taken one by one or even in a relationship of interaction. Though they can be reshaped by use, these traditions insert everyone's action into a signifying and normative complex by virtue of which it is possible to say that a pianist is a good pianist, or a doctor is a good doctor. In this sense, the evaluative and normative structures implied in the standards of excellence are institutions.

In this context, the term institution should not be taken in a political sense, nor even in a legal or moral one, but rather in the sense of a regulative teleology of action, the best example of which is that of the rules constituting a game such as chess. Here it is like the relationship between instituted language and exchanged speech: in a game such as chess, it does not depend on any of the players that the value of each of the pieces is defined by the rules of the game which each player accepts. Conversely, one cannot deduce from these constitutive rules which player is going to win the game in progress. Here, the game is equivalent to the exchange of speech in a situation of interlocution. No one can predict what the conversation will become: agreement or altercation. Just as in a game of chess, each game is up to chance, even though the rules are fixed. On the basis of these brief remarks, I would conclude that the notion of institution must be given a pre-moral, or better: a pre-ethical meaning, prior to the dimension of human praxis.



The transition from the practical level — *praxis* — to the ethical level is as easy to see as the transition from the linguistic level to the ethical level in the case of the promise. *Praxis* lends itself to ethical considerations as a result of a fundamental aspect of human interaction, namely that an agent's action is the exercise of a *power over* another agent. More precisely, the relationship expressed by the term *power over* puts us in the presence of one who is active and one who is passive. It is essential to the theory of action that it complete its analysis of action by an analysis of passivity: action is carried out by someone and undergone by someone else. To this fundamental asymmetry of action are attached all the perversions of action, culminating in the process of victimization: from lies and deceit to physical violence and torture, violence is established among people as the fundamental evil inscribed in filigree in the asymmetric relationship between the agent and the patient.

It is here that the ethics of interaction is defined by its relationship to violence and, beyond violence, by its relationship to the possibility of victimization inscribed in the active-passive relation. The ethical rule is then pronounced in the words of the golden rule: “do not do to others what you would not want done to you”. Note that in its most simple formulation, the golden rule does not present two agents, but one agent and one patient. There is thus a precise relationship between the golden rule and distributive justice, which as we have seen culminates in Rawls's principle: the maximization of the minimal part in an unequal share. It is always the inequality between agents that poses the ethical problem at the core of the unequal structure of interaction.

But this correlation between the theory of action and the theory of ethics must be respected in its strict reciprocity. If the theory of *praxis* results spontaneously in a moral and political theory of just distribution, then by the same token it is the fundamental structures of action — under the guise of the questions *who*, *what* and *why* — that provide an ontological foundation for ethics.

There is only ethics for a being capable not only of designating itself as a locutor, but also of designating itself as an agent of its own action. It is in this way that the ethical triad — concern for self, concern for the other, concern for the institution — rejoins the triad of *praxis*: ascription of action to its agent, interaction between agents and patients, standards of excellence defining the degree of success and accomplishment of the agents and patients in their crafts, games and arts.

#### IV

In the final part of my discussion, I would like to say a few words about the narrative mediation which I have suggested we insert between the level of *praxis* and the level of ethics. What specific problems does this narrative transition pose? Essentially, they are the problems connected with the consideration of *time* in the constitution of the person. It will not have gone unnoticed that we made no allusion to this in our analysis of interlocution, nor in the analysis of interaction, nor even in our elaboration of the three-fold structure of *ethos*: concern for self, concern for the other, concern for the institution. What causes the problem is the simple fact that a person only exists in the regime of a life that unfolds from birth to death. What is it that constitutes what one might call the sequence of a life? Put in philosophical terms, this problem is one of identity. What remains identical through the course of a human life? It is easy to see that this question is an extension of the question of the *who*, with which we introduced our analysis of the agent as the subject of action. “Who is the agent?” we asked, and we could just as well have already asked “who is the locutor?” or “who is speaking?” The question of identity is precisely this question of *who*.



A quick analysis of the concept of identity reveals its fundamental equivocity. We can understand two different things by identity. One is the permanence of an immutable substance which time does not affect. I will speak in this case of *sameness*. But there is another model of identity, one presupposed by our previous model of the promise. This model does not assume any immutability. On the contrary, the problem of the promise is precisely that of maintaining a self in the face of what Proust called the vicissitudes of the heart. What is this maintaining of the self implied in keeping a promise? Here I would propose a distinction between *idem* identity, which I have just called sameness, and *ipse* identity, to which corresponds the somewhat highbrow term “ipseity”.

I prefer not to restrict myself to a pure and simple opposition between sameness and ipseity, as if sameness would correspond to the question *what* and ipseity to the question *who*. The question *what* in a sense is internal to the question *who*. Can I pose the question “*Who* am I?” without asking *what* I am? The dialectic of sameness and ipseity is thus internal to the ontological constitution of the person.

It is here that I would allow the narrative dimension to intervene, for it is in the unfolding of a narrated story that the dialectic of sameness and ipseity is played out. The instrument of this dialectic is emplotment which, from the dust of events and incidents, forges the unity of a story. It is not only action, however, that is plotted in this way; it is also the characters of the story being told, of which we could say that they are plotted at the same time, and in the same way, as the action. It is on this basis that we can give an account of the dialectic between sameness and ipseity — let us call it the dialectic of personal identity. It can be characterized by its two extremes. On the one hand, there might be an almost complete coincidence between the coherence of a figure in the story and the fixity of character which allows us to identify him as the same from the beginning of the story to the end. This is more or less what happens in fairy

tales or folklore, and even at the beginning of the classical novel. On the other hand, however, we are confronted by troubling cases where the identity of a character seems to dissolve entirely, as in the novels of Kafka, Joyce and Musil, and with post-classical novels in general. Is this to say that all identity has disappeared? Not at all. Would we still be interested in the drama of the decomposition of sameness identity if this drama did not show up the poignant character of the question *who*? Who am I? One could say that in this extreme case the question “who am I?” has lost the support of the question “what am I?” Ipseity has somehow become dissociated from sameness.

If this is indeed the meaning of these thought experiments which abound in contemporary literature, we can say that ordinary life moves between the two poles of an almost complete coincidence of ipseity and sameness and their almost complete dissociation.

What lessons might a philosophy of the person draw from this dialectic of personal identity? More specifically, does narrative mediation permit us to rediscover, and eventually to enrich the three-fold structure that constitutes the melodic cell of this entire study? I would not want to give in to the *esprit de système* by inventing false windows, so I will limit myself to some analogies without drawing from them a strict parallelism. First of all, I would say that the first term of the triad of personal *ethos*, self-esteem, corresponds to the concept of *narrative identity*, by which I define the cohesion of a person within the sequence of a human life. The person designates himself in time as the narrative unity of a single life. This reflects the dialectic of cohesion and dispersal that the plot mediates. In this way, the philosophy of the person can be freed from the false dichotomies issuing from Greek substantialism: either the immutability of an atemporal core or else dispersal in impressions, as one sees in Hume and Nietzsche.

Secondly, the element of alterity, which shows up as the second moment of our initial triad under the name of solicitude, has its narrative equivalent in the very constitution of narrative identity, and



this in three different ways. First of all, the narrative unity of a life integrates the dispersal — the alterity — indicated by the notion of event, with its contingent, accidental character. Secondly, and this is perhaps even more important, every life story, rather than closing in on itself, is entangled with all the life stories of those with whom one mixes. In a sense, the story of my life is a segment of the story of other human lives, beginning with the story of my parents, and continuing through that of my friends and — why not — that of my adversaries. What we said above about action as interaction has its reflection here in the concept of the entanglement of stories. I borrow this term from Wilhelm Schapp's book whose suggestive title is *Tangled Up in Stories* [*In Geschichten verstrickt*]. Finally, the element of alterity is connected to the role of fiction in the constitution of our own identity. We recognize ourselves through the fictional stories of historical characters, characters from legends or novels. Fiction, in this sense, is an enormous experimental field for the endless work of identification that we carry out on ourselves.

I would like to say, in the third place, that the narrative approach sketched out here applies just as much to institutions as to persons taken individually or in interaction. Institutions as well can only have a narrative identity. This is already true of the institution of language, which develops

according to the rhythm of traditionality and innovation. It is equally true of all the institutions of everyday practice, whose models of excellence are also products of history at the same time as trans-historical models. I will not say anything about narrative itself as an institution, through the formalisms underlined by the structural analysis of narrative: in this sense, the narrative is itself an institution, obeying certain canons to which the temporal dialectic of identity also applies. I would like to insist on one final point: institutions — in the most precise sense of the term, the one we use when applying the rule of justice to them — to the extent that they can be considered large systems for the distribution of roles, cannot have anything other than a narrative identity. In this regard, many debates about national identity can appear distorted by a misunderstanding of the only identity appropriate to persons and communities, i.e., narrative identity, with its dialectic of change and maintenance of self by way of the pledge and the promise. We should not seek any fixed substance behind these communities, but neither should we refuse them the capacity to maintain themselves by means of a creative fidelity to the foundational events that established them in time.

I conclude at the moment when my path has returned to the starting point — the *ethos* of the person punctuated by the triad: self-esteem, solicitude for the other, the wish to live in just institutions.

#### Note

1. This article appeared originally in *Esprit* 57(1990) as 'Approches de la personne'. Translation by Dale Kidd.