

Jarosław Jakubowski

EXISTENTIAL FINITUDE.
A STUDY OF PAUL RICOEUR'S PHILOSOPHY

Summary

The main aim of the book is to interpret Ricoeur's thought in terms of the category of existential finitude. In order to justify this mode of interpretation, three complementary arguments can be invoked. The first one indicates that Ricoeur, despite the extraordinary diversity and multitude of issues he studied, puts existential problems in the centre of his philosophy. In the very least, even if he deals with such questions as the interpretation of literary text, the essence of metaphor or the time–narrative relationship, each time he has existential problems on mind. Then, the second argument claims that Ricoeur's existential conception has an expressly alterological trait, and undeniably the category of otherness makes a necessary reference to the category of finitude. According to this conception, an existing being is affected not only by its own external otherness in relation to itself (the world, Others) but also "internal otherness," that is "its own otherness." Although the category of „own otherness” appears only in *Oneself as Another*, regarded as Ricoeur's most representative work, written in the latter part of his philosophical career, the category of "involuntary," whose meaning is very close to the former, is used in the first volume of *Philosophy of the Will*, entitled *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, which in turn is believed to be the most representative work of his earlier philosophical career. Essentially, there is nothing to prevent one from seeking similarity between the notional opposition "voluntary—involuntary" and the notional opposition "own non-otherness"—"own otherness," meaning that the first volume of *Philosophy of the Will* and *Oneself as Another* are works with parallel content. The third argument justifying the choice of the category of existential finitude as an interpretative key to the creation of Ricoeur concerns the relationship "existing being—the world." This argument cannot be diluted to the claim that one of Ricoeur's chief inspirations in this respect will be Heidegger's idea of Being-in-the-World. Therefore it is not only that Ricoeur's existing being, much like Heidegger's *Dasein*, is conditioned by the structure of Care, i.e. by its ontological structure whose every component incorporates the moment of finitude (a. "facticity," b. "falling into the they-self," c. "existentiality" i.e. "projection"). Also, according to Ricoeur, openness to the world, which is characteristic of an existing being, is in many ways

Existential finitude. A study of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy

limited. In his opinion, each opportunity for being-in-the-world, realised by an existing being, carries the stigma of multidimensional finitude. To the extent in which Ricoeur's philosophy revolves upon the question of being-in-the-world, he actually legitimises the claim that his philosophy is one of finitude.

Does he believe that it is somehow possible to transcend existential finitude? The answer to this question will be affirmative. Interestingly, *Fallible Man* proposes an opportunity to transcend this kind of existential finitude that is limited openness to the world. In this work, Ricoeur distinguishes three basic limitation modes for openness to the world, explaining ways to transcend them. While the limitation of openness-to-the-world occurring in the sphere of perception (1) is transcended through denotation (*vouloir dire*), the limitation of openness to the world fulfilled in the practical sphere (2) and the emotional sphere (3) is realised through pursuit of happiness. However, while invoking the concept of transcending the limitation of openness to the world, presented in *Fallible Man*, it would certainly be unfounded to accept it as the height of Ricoeur's consideration of transcending existential finitude. While in any of his subsequent works Ricoeur does not thematise equally explicitly the question of limitation of openness to the world (and thereby the question of transcending it), it is not that the question of transcending existential finitude recedes into the background in his philosophical output after the publication of *Fallible Man* (1960). On the contrary, this issue plays a significant if not, as exemplified by the third volume of *Time and Narrative* and also *Oneself as Another*, a key role. In these works, the issue is presented using a different terminology based on a distinction between two types of personal identity: *idem* identity and *ipse* identity.

In what sense does Ricoeur's consideration of the relationship between the *idem* identity and *ipse* identity constitute a re-examination of the transcending of the limitation of openness to the world, an issue raised in *Fallible Man*? In Ricoeur's conception, *idem* personal identity, which is delineated by a collection of traits that define myself, pointing to „what I am” (for example, the DNA code), can be transcended by *ipse* identity, which is in turn defined by my actions, pointing to “who I am.” Ricoeur admits, naturally, that the specific nature of my *idem* identity has a significant impact on my relationship to the world, and with others who inhabit it. Nonetheless, he tries to demonstrate that this relationship is not influenced by the character of my *idem* identity only. This specific nature does not, in his opinion, determine whether I will endeavour to fulfil my promises. Insofar as this will possibly happen, a distinct pole of my personal identity will emerge, described by Ricoeur as *ipse* identity. I am capable of building an *ipse* identity although I have a specific

idem identity but no other. It is in this “although” that the act of transcending the limitation of openness to the world, shown in *Fallible Man*, should be sought. I am capable of modifying my relationship to the world although its shape is largely influenced the nature of my *idem* identity.

Ricoeur, however, points to the fact that the ability to undertake actions aimed at the fulfilment of a promise, which constitute *ipse* identity, is very tightly connected with the ability to encompass one's own life in the form of a narrative. Both these abilities are conditional upon each other. On the one hand, when I undertake to deliver a promise, I do it by making a reference to some kind of narrative of myself that is prior to my attempts. If I did not possess any narrative about myself, I would not, in essence, know who I was to deal with this promise. I would be an undefined someone, just like Musil's “man without qualities,” and this sort of person is not concerned about promises. On the other hand, if I undertake to deliver a promise, I also develop a narrative about myself. This narrative, being conscious of the past actions, designs its course for now. This design process consists not only in demonstrating the consistency of these actions but also in enhancing this consistency. Spinning a narrative about oneself increases the possibility to keep the promise, yet, conversely, the realisation of actions aimed at delivering the promise contributes to the narrative about oneself.

When describing the correlation between the act of developing a narrative about oneself and the formation of *ipse* identity, Ricoeur does not claim, however, that each such act in equal degree is a significant factor in the formation of this identity. The more effectively this act fulfils the role, the higher the level of its “reflectiveness” and “criticism.” What kinds “reflectiveness” and “criticism” are at stake here? As regards reflectiveness, Ricoeur makes a references mainly to Nabert's long-term “assimilation of the attempts of one's own being.” Now, as far as “criticism” is concerned, Ricoeur invokes mainly the well-known formula by Socrates saying that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Ricoeur's considerations suggest that it is justified to seek affinity between Nabertian “reflectiveness” and Socratic “deliberation of one's life.” There is no denying that one who assimilates the efforts of his or her own life gives it due consideration. We must accept, however, that a person who undertakes such consideration realises, in some measure at least, a reflection in the Nabertian sense of this word.

If we agree that the critical-reflective act of narrating about oneself plays a principal role in building *ipse* identity, how can we describe a relationship holding between this act and *idem* identity? This relationship is not unambiguous. Above all, it should be noted that when developing a narrative about myself, I obviously reveal, to a lesser or larger extent, my

idem identity. The very way I develop my narrative illustrates, to some extent at least, the specific character of this identity. With this in mind, it would be permissible to defend the claim that this act of telling of oneself is always somehow affected by the *idem* identity of the Narrator. On the other hand, it should be admitted that while this act constitutes a critical-reflective approach not only to *ipse* but also to *idem* identity, it can be easily attributed autonomy in relation to *idem* identity. Such an approach, related to both *idem* and *ipsem* identities, expresses the unity of the identity of the Narrator. It is a unity of what is “given” (*idem* identity) and what is “assigned” (*ipse* identity). This unit has a dynamic character in the sense that what is “assigned” manifests itself as a movement transcending what is “given.” The act of self-narration unifies personal identity, but it does so in such a way as to enliven and intensify the movement of this transcending.

However, if the building of *ipse* identity (both enlivened and intensified through self-narration) constitutes a factor transcending *idem* identity, can it also play a role of a more universal factor that transcends the limitation of openness to the world? Can I, by building *ipse* identity, transcend also other types of limitation of openness to the world apart from the type generated by *idem* identity? Although Ricoeur does not answer these questions directly, it seems that in line with the thinking presented in his works, the answer to these questions must be affirmative. What other types of limitation of openness to the world are at play here? These would be mainly such limiting factors as *Befindlichkeit* (in Heidegger’s understanding of the word), selectivity of needs and threats, ontological vagueness of the encountered world and those inhabiting it. By confronting individual factors limiting openness to the world with the building of *ipse* identity, we invariably arrive at a conclusion that the formation of *ipse* identity constitutes “a transcendence of all possible limitation of openness to the world.” This privileged existential status of the formation of *ipse* identity probably stems from the fact that this building is realised especially in the act of self-narration. This act, as we may conjecture, is the highest form, in an existential sense, of *vouloir dire*. Therefore, if *vouloir dire*, appearing in its most elementary form (i.e. as a simple affirmative sentence) is able to transcend the unilaterality of perception of an encountered thing, *vouloir dire*, appearing in its most extensive and elaborate form (i.e. as a self-narrative), will transcend the unilateral access to the world as such. And the unilaterality of access to the world as such in none other than limitation of openness to the world.

Translated by Tomasz Patkowski