

# **My Father Was Not My Father: An Attempted Understanding Through a Ricoeurian Lens**

**Patricia Kostouros**

## **Abstract**

In my PhD studies, I was honoured to have been introduced to the scholar Paul Ricoeur, whose work became central to my dissertation topic. In this paper, I share the ways in which Ricoeur's conceptualizations of hermeneutic application to the human existence came to life for me. I use an existential event, discovering non-biological parentage, to bring forth my understanding of these concepts. Ricoeur's solicitation of the hermeneutic practice allowed me to see family events in a new light. It is my hope through my application of Ricoeur's work that others will interpret existential life events in new and exciting ways.

## **Keywords**

Narrative-identity, Ricoeur, self-understanding, temporality

*My other earliest memory is vague, no more than a distant feeling that I can sometimes seize, most often not. Being so dimly remembered, perhaps it came first.*

*I became aware of a voice inside my head. What is this, I wondered. Who are you, voice? When will you shut up? I remembered a feeling of fright. It was only later that I realized that this voice was my own thinking, that this moment of anguish was my first inkling that I was a ceaseless monologue trapped within myself.*

Taken from *Self*, by Yann Martel, 1996

Early in my life, I became aware of the narratives about my biological parentage. Being the only blonde, blue-eyed, small person in our family, people often wondered if my father was actually my father. Since I looked somewhat like my mother, it was only his

contribution that was in question. At some point, around the age of four or five years, I remember my older sister telling me I was

---

### **Corresponding Author:**

Patricia Kostouros, PhD

Email: [pkostouros@mtroyal.ca](mailto:pkostouros@mtroyal.ca)

adopted. While I tried hard not to believe her, there were signs everywhere that this narrative may actually be true. Occasionally, I would ask my parents if this was actual, and typically, they would reassure me that I was fully theirs. To allay my concerns my father would tell me stories of how the Greeks were originally blonde and blue-eyed until Turkey invaded. Hence, my “difference” was attributed to a recessive gene. I do not recall that these stories ever dispelled my suspicion; a simple glance at my family could easily confirm the concerns I expressed. My suspicions lingered throughout my life and eventually lead to a candid conversation with my father in my adulthood, prior to his death.

At some point before my father died, he confided in me that my mother had had an affair and that I may not actually be his child. My relationship with my father had been rocky until I spent more time with him as an adult before he died. When he confirmed my existing suspicion, we decided that, biological or not, he was my father, a man I had come to know and admire. I put the biological parentage issue out of my mind for several years thereafter. However, after my mother died, I had regretted that I had not questioned her about the potential that my father was not my father and that I have a parent that may or may not know I exist. I suppose I hesitated discussing this with my mother because I typically found myself in an in-between space of already knowing but not wanting to confirm. Perhaps the decision that, regardless of biology, he was my father was made more for him than me. Perhaps the lingering childhood signs would not be eclipsed. After thinking long and hard, and being encouraged by my partner, I decided to have DNA testing complete in order to give me a more solid answer. It was not so much a desire to find a biological father but rather to confirm what I already felt at times as a child; like I was tolerated, rather than I belonged.

Since my father had already passed away, I had to request a DNA sample from my brother. My brother asked that I share the results, and knowing my family, if I shared with one, I shared with everyone. I agreed to share whatever information came my way. We retrieved DNA samples, submitted them to the laboratory, and then waited patiently for the results. The letter finally arrived and I anxiously read the statistical analysis, thinking “*Okay, okay, but what does all this mean?!?*” Finally, after synthesising the data there was my answer: only a .058 probability of full sibling-ship, likelihood “probability of relatedness, maternal half-siblings.” So it was confirmed, my father was not my father.

My initial reaction was that this information should not really change anything. I already had an inkling about the results; however, I did start to hesitate when people would ask me about my last name and its origin. I would be pulled up short by questions about my heritage and often felt caught between answering that my father was Greek, and being more reticent in my response, since I now know my father was not my father. The DNA testing results created a watershed moment of understanding self and the narratives that existed about my heritage and in particular, being a blonde Greek. I also began to wonder about whether my biology should or would trump the narratives I hold of being Greek. How do I understand myself now, in light of this new information? Does this new information change my attestations? Do the years I spent thinking I was Greek suddenly vanish or do they continue to reside inside me? Does this existential event add to or limit my self-understanding? How might Paul Ricoeur’s theory explain this experience and the narrative self?

In my address of these questions, I will bring to light Ricoeur’s conceptualizations, while using my own experiences as a thread

that weaves these concepts together. I must confess however, that given the depth and breadth of Ricoeur's work, my ability to synthesize his theory and my experiences within these pages will be limited. Ricoeur's work offers a starting place for engaging the questions that surfaced for me as I confronted this new information. Besides highlighting Ricoeur's concepts and the links to my self-understanding, what I present are the thoughts and questions that were raised as I searched Ricoeur's work for direction, some of which still linger unrequited.

### Why Use Ricoeur's Hermeneutics?

As I am now faced with the knowledge that my father was not my father, I am struck by the opportunity that this affords me. While the entire narrative about my background is not false, this event has fractured an existing narrative about who I am and how I came to be. Ricoeur offers an interpretive slant that considers both self and others as well as time. For Ricoeur (1992), hermeneutics, or interpretation, takes place indirectly and dialectically, by encountering symbols (reference that provide a detour) which are interpreted, reflected upon, and incorporated into the self. I had conflicting information as a child. I had the signs and symbols that I did not belong; after all I looked different. However, I also had dialogue from my parents that contradicted these signs. Hermeneutics in general is known as an interpretive approach to a topic that allows the opening up of the world around us and to uncover and seek an understanding of the ways in which we live, engage and experience this world (Gadamer, 2004). I needed a hermeneutic approach to interpreting the new and the old and integrate the new into an enlarged self-understanding.

In his book *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur (1992) asked, "what sort of being is the self" (p. 297)? By asking this question, Ricoeur

took a critical twist in which he posited that knowing the self can only be accomplished through encountering one's own self as well as others "that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other" (p. 3). By this statement, Ricoeur (1992) referred to the otherness of the self. We belong and live communally and, therefore, we come into contact with others (other than self) in the world who inform us, and act as a mediating force, which could potentially create change in the self, as well as our ethical actions in the world (Ricoeur, 1992). However, this mediating force is best accomplished when faced with difference; "as long as one remains within the circle of sameness-identity, the otherness of the other than self offers nothing original" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 3). I was clearly faced with difference in my family, but the narratives, which had a historical grounding, acted as a gatekeeper to further inquiry. Ricoeur's (1998) idea of self differs from the objectivist ontological stance; that is, things outside of us exist independently. Instead, Ricoeur (1992) understood that we are bound by the conditions around us and that these conditions create the perceptions of self and others and, therefore, we are created narrations. I bought the family narratives, for the most part, because I could then say I belonged, even if thoughts otherwise lingered.

Additionally, I could take up his work because Ricoeur (1988) differed from others in his thinking about "being" in that he attempted to deal fully with the notion of time and its connection to our lived experience, and in order to understand time, we must understand time as an experience. Since the chronology of time does not speak to our experiences of time, Ricoeur's ontological curve examined temporal experiences in particular, the language of time, for example in my wondering about the DNA results, "*it didn't matter at the time,*" or "*I wonder now.*" The way we take

the language of time and narrate our self-understanding was critical in Ricoeur's later work, according to most Ricoeur scholars (e.g., Andrew, 2001; Hall, 2007; Kearney, 2004; Langdrige, 2004; McCarty, 2007; Muldoon, 2002; 2006; Pellauer, 2007). I understood myself as a blonde Greek, my father disclosed information that increased my suspicions, but at the time of his disclosure, it did not matter. Using language such as "then" and "now" allow our narratives to move through time. Furthermore, Ricoeur's ontological shift about time related to moving from the "what" of time to the "who" experiences time. In doing so, Ricoeur was able to link time and self to narratives.

### Existential Events

*"Thus the imagined nothingness of the self becomes the existential crisis of the self."*

(Ricoeur, 1992, p. 168)

I have identified the DNA testing and the results I received as an existential event. I have done so because of what the event offered me. In some respects, this event has given me the opportunity to reinvent myself; to change my narrative, if you will. For example, I had already experienced a very challenging, difficult, and therefore, non-existent relationship with my older sister, and a rather disappointing relationship with my brother so when I received the results of my DNA test, part of me was elated that I was not fully connected to these siblings. On the other hand, I never wanted my older sister to be right about me not being a "real" member of the family, and I was always trying to prove that I did belong. *What would happen to everything for which I fought? My attestations were false, she was right, where does that leave me in terms of this family, since we no longer have parents to mediate the divide?* I must consider that I cannot simply dismiss my past, since these family and cultural narratives contributed to

how I came to be who I am now. According to Ricoeur (1980), "no authentic anticipation of what we 'may have to be' is possible without borrowing from the resources of what we already 'have been'" (p. 181). I was encountering difference in my family of origin. I have always been different from them. I have the opportunity now to own my difference, yet maintain some family narratives since these too exist.

The term existential (n.d.) can be traced back to the work of Kierkegaard and essentially means conditions of existence, and is an occurrence. Perhaps, then, an existential event is one that "happens to us over and above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 2004, p. xxvi). Ricoeur (1984) described an event as something mediated and constrained. Our experiences happen to us but they are temporal in that a subjective perception of an event will be dependent on our past and the appropriation of that event will influence our future. Risser (1986) stated that the hermeneutic interpretation of event or experience starts from one's perception and, in particular, suggested that once we experience something we cannot experience it again in the same way because "the experience changes the experiencer" (p. 44).

How I as an experiencer might perceive an event will depend on prior conditioning. Even though I was told I was a blonde Greek, there were enough signs saying otherwise that made it possible for me to take up the DNA testing. Remembering that, according to Ricoeur (1998), we are always "en route," when we experience an event, our history, culture, and language will therefore be determined by some of what we perceive. Being true to Ricoeur, however, means that one must recognize that these perceptions are mediated through language, or rather, "all discourse is produced as an event...but understood as meaning" (p. 167). My sister's accusations that I was

adopted eventually coupled with my father's disclosure, produced the event of DNA testing. A shaky foundation of self and belonging in this family already existed, but early on could be countered by attestations from my mother and father. Receiving the results that I was not biologically related to my father answered for me some questions about our past relationship, but at the same time, my former perceptions of family began to crumble.

Ricoeur (2004a) referred to discourse as an event because it is referencing something "in the intention of saying something about something to someone: speaking is the act by which language moves beyond itself as a sign toward its reference and toward what it encounters" (p. 82). In other words, discourse, the use of language, is action. Additionally, Ricoeur (1984) wedded events and narratives in that one depends on the other since they cannot be mutually exclusive; an event will exist because it is narrated, and a narration exists because of the event. In particular, narratives are received and, therefore, narratives are always open for another's interpretation of the narration. *My sister's accusations – you don't belong; my emphatic protests – I belong.* My attestations as a child of belonging however would only go so far since there were constant references otherwise, *I don't look like them.* Finally, Ricoeur (1992) viewed human actions as similar to a text that can be interpreted. *My father's disclosure, an action; is this a space for interpretation of past events?*

Ricoeur (1984) saw the usefulness of structuralism in the task of hermeneutic interpretation since structuralism assists with revealing the hidden structures in language and in recovering meaning. While language is primary to Ricoeur's hermeneutics, he does not subscribe to linguistics as a primary mode of analysis. Rather, Ricoeur stated that text, or discourse, "says something *about* something"

(p. 78) and that references open up the world and our existence in the world. We rescue meaning by attending to the language used, and we interpret by attending to what language points toward. The DNA results pointed to a truth. Even though these results are definitive, it is possible to find meaning in my family experiences in a Greek household. *Do these results have to unravel everything I understood about myself?*

In Ricoeur's (2004b) discussion about the intention of hermeneutics in relation to the interpretation of "every meaningful discourse" (p. 4), he stated:

In fact, meaningful discourse is *hermeneia*, "interprets" reality, precisely to the degree that it says something of something. Moreover, discourse is *hermeneia* because a discursive statement is a grasp of the real meaningful expression, not a selection of so-called impressions coming from the things themselves. (p. 4)

In other words, we comprehend and make meaning of that which is in front of us which may open up existential possibilities. *Why didn't my father support my extra-curricular activities? Why would he look at me that ways sometimes? Why would he leave the room?* Perhaps I have been given the opportunity to interpret family interactions in new ways, with a new understanding of my otherness. *Perhaps it is hard to pretend, when you believe that the child is not yours.*

I fondly recall the family talks we had at the kitchen table. My father would frequently make Sunday dinners and we would sit afterwards and talk for hours. That is where I learned about the digestive usefulness of Grand Marnier, that Anita Bryant was an "idiot," and that the Boston Bruins were the best hockey team in the NHL. These conversations, or discourses, were always about something,

and they laid down a foundation for how I take up the world today and shaped how I accepted or rejected my past. For example, while I am not a hockey fan, I do drink Grand Marnier. More importantly, I began to narrate the political world and my actions in it, based on these discourses around that kitchen table.

One cannot simply narrate or frame, but, according to Ricoeur (1998), context affects meaning, and thereby how and where the narration takes place and what the narration is about matters. In a dialogue about interpretation, Ricoeur (1998) explained that, “sensitivity to context is the necessary complement” (p. 44). *I do not look like them*. Ricoeur (1974) was clear to point out that “language is innocent – language meaning the tool, the code – because it does not speak, it is spoken” (p. 91). If narrative matters, as Kearney (2004) argued in support of Ricoeur’s position, then what we do with a narrative should also matter. Therefore, the narrator, not just the narration itself, is in need of consideration since the narrator is an acting agent, a “*who*.” My father was an acting agent when he disclosed my mother’s affair. I was the acting agent requesting the DNA test. I knew that taking this step would result in solidifying or fragmenting my self-understanding as a family member and could further unravel the sibling relationships.

In taking up the focus on the concept of the “*what*” of the event, Ricoeur (1992) reminded us that a “*what*” also has a “*who*,” and a “*why*.” In particular, during Ricoeur’s reflections on selfhood, he expressed the importance of the “*who*” by talking about something that matters and distinguishing the differences between *what* and *who*, that is, “how can we ask ourselves *what* matters if we could not ask *to whom* the thing mattered or not? Does not the questioning about what matters or not depend upon self-concern, which indeed seems to be constitutive of self-hood”

(Ricoeur 1992, p. 137)? *At the time I decided biological or not, he was my father...I regretted not asking...how do I understand myself now in light of this new information?*

It is important to discuss intentionality in relation to this existential event since it connects Ricoeur’s theory and the way in which existential events create or limit possibilities for self-understanding. When deliberating about intention, Ricoeur (1992) referred to the importance of the “*what*” and “*who*” of action. Ricoeur (2004b) stated that interpretation has an intention to match reader, “*who*,” and text “*what*,” “thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself” (p. 4). Ricoeur would likely say that we know ourselves through our actions and our actions lead us toward self-narration.

### Narrating Events

Narration, according to Ricoeur (1984), involves emplotment; the making of an event into a story. A plot has a direction and according to Ricoeur (1998), “an event must be more than a singular occurrence: it must be defined in terms of its contribution to the development of a plot” (p. 277). Ricoeur (1984) described the importance of the plot having direction so that we follow along and by doing so we are able to make meaning of the story being narrated, in particular, to reflect upon the story, and to integrate the meaning made into our own existence and human action. However, Ricoeur (1984) was also clear to point out that “emplotment is never the simple triumph of order” (p. 73). While my life has had a direction forward, it is in the backward glance to events along the way, *the way he looks at me, my sister’s attestations, you may not be my child*, that prompted the action of requesting a DNA test which then leads to a continuation of the plot; the frag-

menting of my self-understanding and reinventing myself.

In his discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ricoeur (1984) described the art of composing as "organizing the events into a system" (p. 33) or, in other words, a plot or "muthos" (p. 31). Since historical events are constructed narratives (Ricoeur, 1988), the historian or narrator interprets that event and therefore, historical accounts, for example, *Turkey invaded Greece*, are not the same as natural events such as earthquakes. These historical accounts weave through our personal narratives to augment the plot we are creating about who we are and how we belong, *Greeks were once blonde and blue eyed; I should believe them*. Ricoeur (1992) recognized the opportunity for narrations to highlight human potential, and the possibilities for action.

Narratives assist in mediating events across time thereby creating a meaningful whole and recognition that reality may be temporal. *My narrative as a Greek existed temporarily and was established only through discourse; the signs said otherwise*. Ricoeur's (1984) ideas about narrative took up history and fiction, both of which involve time. Fictional narratives may draw on actual events, and they are representations of such. Historical narratives may involve the recounting of empirical events (Ricoeur, 1984). In order for historical events, for example, to be appropriately narrated it must remain in its context and contribute to a plot (Ricoeur, 1984). Ricoeur (1998; 2004c) argued that historical accounts are narrative in that they account for real events and those narratives that accompany them. In particular, Ricoeur (1998) stated, "however fictional the historical text may be it claims nevertheless to be a representation of reality. In other words history is both a literary *artefact* (and in this sense a fiction) and a representation of reality" (p. 291). *Turkey really did invade Greece hence my*

*blondeness*. The reality however, is that I am not an offspring of this Greek man. Ricoeur (1984) suggested that the past is only accessible to us through our narratives since "when it was present, this past was like our present, confused, multiform, and unintelligible" (p. 99). Therefore, "there is only a history of the potentialities of the present" (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 295). The present reality affords me the opportunity to reinvent my future identity - - to re-narrate myself.

### The Narrated Self

We can see how Ricoeur's thinking about temporality affects the narrative self and the ways in which time folded upon itself, reflecting back, can create a discordant-concordant dynamic. In particular, entering into a discussion about the way in which we come to have stability as a narrated self through time, Ricoeur (1992) distinguished the identity as having an *ipse*-identity and an *idem*-identity. He pointed out that these two parts are not necessarily found on a continuum, from one end of identity to the other, but rather contribute in different ways to an identity. Additionally, he claimed that these two parts of the self both depart yet intersect and endure through time. Narrative identity lies between *ipse* and *idem* identity and is mediated by them and links actions and ethics with identity since "there is no ethically neutral narrative" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 115).

The *ipse*, also called selfhood (Ricoeur, 1992), is the part of the self that is a reflexive being and has self-constancy. The term constancy in this context does not relate to a static composition but rather a self that is carried forward through time, thereby weaving through horizons of the past, present and future and through interpretations and re-interpretations. In my case, as an example, having thought I was Greek sits in the past, now that I know my father is not my father.

How I bring the DNA results into my present and future is a matter of how I might interpret what father means, or what it means to have been brought up in a Greek household. *Ipsé* is also defined by Ricoeur as one's bond or making and keeping a promise. *I shared the results of the DNA testing as I said I would.* In other words, the *ipse* relates to the human activities that are maintained as a claiming of the self to the self. For example, in relation to keeping one's word, Ricoeur (1992) explained that the *ipse* appears to "stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change" (p. 124), since keeping one's word or promise is done so regardless of time or circumstances. A promise speaks to the esteem we give ourselves and to others, and recognizes that language is the place where we extend ourselves to others through time. *Ipsé*, therefore, is anchored in the presence of an other than self, since it is related to our actions. *I shared the results of the DNA testing.* According to Ricoeur (1992), it is at this juncture that *ipse* and *idem* depart.

The *idem*, what Ricoeur (1992) also called sameness, differs from the *ipse* in that the *idem* relates to the continuity of an individual's dimensions over time. While there may be some changes over time to these features, they will always maintain some permanence; that is, time could be said to "threaten resemblance without destroying it" (Ricoeur, p. 117). It was important for Ricoeur to move beyond the mind-body dichotomy, where identity was concerned. *Idem*, or personal identity, is not strictly substance, such as brain or body continuity, for example, I am blonde and blue eyed, but is also related to traits or habits that become incorporated into the self to the point where one is recognizable as the same through actions. Ricoeur called the *idem* the "'what' of the 'who'" (p. 122). *I am tentative with my older sister and always have been.*

According to Ricoeur (1992), both *idem* and *ipse* have constancy, permanency in time, and while separate, they may overlap. Ricoeur described that the *ipse* and *idem* sometimes overlap, and "this overlapping, however, does not abolish the difference separating the two problematics: precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*" (p. 121). At the same time, however, these parts of our identity are separate, in that "keeping one's word expresses a self-constancy which cannot be inscribed as character was...the perseverance of character is one thing, the perseverance of faithfulness to a word that has been given is something else again" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 123). Since the *ipse* and *idem* are "two modes of being" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 308), they must find an accord, in that, the constancy of one relies on the constancy of the other, and, through contracting with one another the *ipse* and *idem* negotiate the narrated, capable self. At the time, since I was appreciating the adult relationship I had gained with my father, it did not matter if he was biologically connected or not. Over time this changed for me. I had to negotiate between completing the DNA testing and potentially breach my word, *regardless you are my father*, or if I my own curiosity, spurred by my never-ending suspicion, was honouring my need for self-understanding. Time was also a factor since my brother was ill. Negotiating the *idem* and *ipse* was necessary for my plot to continue.

In a discussion about the "capable self," Ricoeur (1992) pulled in the concept of reflexivity and explained that our reflexive nature allows us to ask questions about identity, that is, the "who." *What does it mean now that I know I am not Greek? Does this information have to disintegrate my self-understanding?* One of the ways in which Ricoeur suggested that we know we persist through time is through such activities as speaking, action, and responsibility. There is a

certainty about our existence, which Ricoeur called “attestation.” Essentially, attestation refers to one’s ability to attest to his or herself and to the ability to be responsible for that declaration. *I do belong; You may not be my child.* Ricoeur reminded us that, whatever we attest to, be it the world or self, attestation is mediated.

The narrated self is fragile (Ricoeur 1992). According to Ricoeur, since we are narrating ourselves on both actual and constituted experiences, we are always becoming and constantly refiguring ourselves. However, by using either fiction or historical accounts, we are able to uncover meaning and transform ourselves. Attestation helps us decide about conflicting accounts of the narrative self (Ricoeur, 1992). To what can we attest? If I am confused, are there facts that I can orient myself toward that will assist with the conflict and, therefore, assist with settling on a particular narrative? *I am blonde, I am not Greek. I don’t look like him, he is not my father.* Nevertheless, according to Ricoeur (1998), in order to attest, these facts or narratives must be acceptable and plausible. *Turkey did invade Greece, could my difference be the result of a recessive gene?*

### Temporality, Narrative, and Action

“...time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.”  
(Ricoeur, 1984, p. 52)

Narratives or stories are the ways in which we make sense of temporality, that is, “the world unfolded by every narrative work is a temporal world” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 3). We are able to describe human actions through mimesis, a pre-figuring, configuring and re-figuring of actions based on what has gone before, how we interpret the past, and where

it takes us. We bring the past into the present to inform us and therefore, create narratives. In order to illuminate narrative activity and temporality, Ricoeur (1984) described a “three-fold mimesis” (p. 52), which included mimesis<sub>1</sub>, mimesis<sub>2</sub> and mimesis<sub>3</sub>.

Mimesis<sub>1</sub> (pre-figuration) refers to our pre-understandings of practical action. Three layers lie within mimesis<sub>1</sub> including the structural use of language in that language assists with the understanding of action. A second layer relates to the ways in which symbols assist in narrations, and the ways in which contexts will inform narrations. *I don’t look like them, maybe my sister is right.* Finally, actions have a temporal nature as seen in the language of adverbs, for example, “now,” *I am not Greek*, and “then” *I am Greek*. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> (configuration) acts as a mediating role between mimesis<sub>1</sub> and mimesis<sub>3</sub> and assists the reader in following a plot. A plot then becomes configured when this mediating function “transforms the events or incidents into a story” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65). Emplotment refers to the ways in which we organize, or configure, activities into a plot. *I was Greek, I am not Greek anymore. Where does all my understanding as a Greek now reside?* Finally, mimesis<sub>3</sub> (re-figuration) refers to the ways in which a reading or interaction could influence a change or re-figure our being-in-the-world and allow possibilities to arise. *What will I tell my grandchildren about their lineage?*

Ricoeur (1984) explained that these forms of mimesis provide a creative tension that work together to relate time to narrative and create human time. In essence, Ricoeur showed how these forms depend on one another in both time and narrative, in that “we are following therefore the destiny of a pre-figured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time” (p. 54). Concerned that he may be creating a vicious circle, Ricoeur dealt with this dilem-

ma by discussing the transitory functions between the forms, or mimesis. While recognizing that the circular nature of narrative and time do not stop, Ricoeur stated, "I would rather speak of an endless spiral that would carry the mediation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes" (p. 72).

Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988) work in his three volumes of *Time and Narrative* illustrated that historical accounts are more than facts since they are constructed and narrated events. Narratives allow us to make sense of ourselves, and by organizing our life events into a plot, we humanize time that might otherwise become "fragmented moments" (Kearney, 2002, p. 4). According to Ricoeur (1988), time becomes humanized because we narrate and, therefore, we move time from the cosmos and merge with it into our lives. Emplotment changes chronological time into relationships between humans and time and in particular, the beginning, middle, and end (not necessarily in that order) of a narration creates temporality, while at the same time it helps create unity. Ricoeur (1985) suggested that narratives allow us to play with time, for example, our use of verb tenses. *I have a father, I had a father, I am Greek, I was Greek*. We are acting agents in human time, and our actions will leave its mark on historical time, which could then be brought into the future. *My father's disclosure, I opted for DNA testing, and I will never be Greek*. We need chronological time in order to make sense of past and new experiences, to provide them a place in time, *after my father's death*. The lived present allows us to have new beginnings, possibilities, and the "narrative identity continues to make and unmake itself" (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 249). I can take up Ricoeur's linking of time and narrative, and unapologetically reconstruct a past narrative and change the mark I leave in historical time.

Ricoeur (1980) spoke of the telling and re-telling of a story or narrative as one of the connections we have with temporality. For example, in the telling of a story he discussed the structure of a narrative as having a beginning, middle, and an end (Ricoeur, 1980). When a plot is structured in such a way, there is what he called a "then" an "and then," or a "so on" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 179), which are the connecting episodes that involve both plot (narrative) and time (and then). In this way, we follow along in present cosmic time even though a story may itself take place at different time. *Greece was invaded, that is why you are blonde*. When a story is re-told, it changes its place in cosmic time. Now the story has a history because of the recollecting that takes place. Ricoeur (1980) suggested that the function of a narrative is related to human actions and that our actions lead to narratives that become temporal structures. In essence, Ricoeur (1988) suggested, "we are affected by history and that we affect ourselves by the history we make" (p. 213). *Greece was invaded and therefore fewer blondes, but I see the differences in how you treated me, I want to know, I will do the testing, I am not yours*.

In relation to narratives and plots, Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1992) described a dynamic process involving concordant and discordant elements, that is, the arrangements of fact and reversals of fortune within a story. *My sister was right*. In much the same way, we construct our own stories and act as the characters within that story. *I want to know for sure; my suspicions will not abate*. We follow a plot and, through time, we weave the events that take place in our lives into a meaningful whole. *I was a sibling and I am now a half-sibling*.

Plot and character are dynamic elements of a narrative and "it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (Ricoeur, 1992, p.148); however, these ele-

ments must be credible. Essentially, the character acts and is acted upon, and we evaluate the actions of the character, and in so doing we identify with the character and the story. Ricoeur (1992) believed that human lives are readable, and are even more readable when the stories people tell of themselves are told through historical or fictional narratives, which, in turn, are interpreted into our own lives. The stories my father told me about Greece being invaded were historical narratives which allowed an interpretation of Greeks being blonde and blue eyed. Therefore, I did belong, I was Greek. These narratives of life are never complete, however (Ricoeur, 1988), until the story is over. *I'm going to die, you need to know, I may not be your father.*

Ricoeur (1992) recognized also that our narratives are not created in a vacuum; we are enmeshed in prior stories and tradition along with others. We encounter others, within a cultural context and these interactions contribute to our own narratives. *They say I am Greek, I don't look like them, I don't want to be adopted, I want to belong.* These interactions assist us in determining our actions. *Protests, asking parents.* Our narratives start to weave with those of others, and we create stories about our shared identity. *I reflect on those discussions at the kitchen table.* For example, my narrative is constituted by the fact that I am a sibling and have been told stories about what that means. Additionally, we have a heritage. This heritage is constituted through historical narratives, having been told through the ages, for example, the way in which a father is taken up in a particular culture. Therefore, the changes I encountered about the biology of my father becomes existential because of the meanings passed down, from not only my own family, but these meanings are also encapsulated in the narratives that have been told about fathers for centuries, for example, myths, particularly those stemming from a Greek culture.

We are affected by our past that is not created by us; we have a picture of the present mediated through our cultural landscapes. However, our actions throw us into the future and in doing so we potentially change ourselves. *I have done the testing, I am not Greek.* We become actors in the world, while being constituted by our past; however, we also have freedom (Ricoeur, 1992). All narratives, whether real or fictional, according to Ricoeur (1992), have some ethical element. For Ricoeur (1992), our human actions are located in time and space, and while time and space may act as a constraint, these root us and enable us to view a persistent self. Additionally, Ricoeur (1998) suggested that we recognize ourselves and take responsibility for our actions through self-examination. *If I didn't want the answer why did I do the testing?* In short, Ricoeur (1998) said that we learn about ourselves through acts that are exterior to the self, which then return to us, with information, through others or symbols. We then take that information, evaluate it, and examine it to determine meaning. *Does parental lineage matter?*

### Acting Agents and Human Capability

Throughout Ricoeur's (1992) work, there is reference to an agent's acting and suffering "for my part, I will never forget to speak of humans as acting and suffering" (p. 145). Suffering comes from the misery experienced when the self is not yet realised, but it is seen in potential for action (Hall, 2007). According to Ricoeur (1988), we find axial moments, which give structure to time and connect us to events in historical time, moments that have left a trace, and "to follow a trace is one way of 'reckoning with time'" (p.124). In order to "reckon with time," we give utterance to events, and in particular speak of actions. Actions move what is potential toward actuality. *I may not be your father; my brother is ill, I should do the testing; I am not his.*

Actions leave a mark in time, a trace, much like a text is archived, and therefore, according to Ricoeur (1992), human action can be interpreted. *Why didn't my parents tell me? Why did my father wait until he was close to death? Why didn't I ever ask my mother about my biological father?* Our actions, or inactions, can be interpreted. Perhaps my mother's guilt kept her from telling me; perhaps my father had a part to play in her affair; perhaps it did not matter to him either until we had a better relationship. Actions, according to Ricoeur (1992), can be studied "following a three-step rhythm: describing, narrating, prescribing" (p. 20). Essentially, this process assists in moving from practice to ethics since prescribing involves judgment, "good" or "bad." Through narratives, we have received models or descriptions of how to act; through reading or dialogue we access our imagination and apply that to the real world and, therefore, we can act. *My father was a generous man; it would not be outside of his character to welcome a child that was not his, even if I was a reminder for him of my mother's infidelity.*

### **Distanciation and Appropriation**

In order to judge one's act, or to examine one's self, there needs to be a certain amount of distance. Ricoeur (1992, 1998) used the term *distanciation* to describe the act of objectifying a text (or discourse, or self) in order for it to be liberated. Once distanced, interpretation is no longer tied to the original intent and, therefore, can be brought forward to be made meaningful to the person in the present. *It is not what the statistical analysis of DNA results mean, but rather what they mean to me given my past and present, and what it means about my heritage.*

In the process of experiencing and interpreting an event, it is not necessarily the event that endures, but the meaning and "the inter-

pretation becomes an event" (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 185). *What does having a father mean and what does having a Greek father mean?* In his discussion in relation to distanciation and appropriation, Ricoeur (1998) explained that we do not "impose" ourselves on a text, but rather we "expose" ourselves in order to discover a "proposed" world (pp. 142-143). As we distanciate the original intention of the text, we expose ourselves, use our imagination (reflect), and we invite "new possibilities of being-in-the-world" (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 142) and we become an enlarged self. While distance frees meaning, appropriation allows us to make the meaning familiar. In particular, Ricoeur claimed that "distanciation, in all its forms and figures, constitutes *par excellence* the critical moment in understanding" (p. 113).

### **Action**

Much of Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1988, 1998) work on narrative relates to the way in which we interact with a text. As we read, we also re-read ourselves through the varied characters and the plots. We evaluate the character's actions and potentially "elevate them to the rank of persons" (Ricoeur, 1985, p. 41). Much like the reading of a novel, we respond to the people in our lives in similar ways. We interpret the actions of others and attend to the social and public spheres.

Inherent in our ability to be an acting agent is our corporeality. My body interacts in the world, and I have a "corporeal anchoring in the world" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 150.). Human capacity is conditional since the body will be either active or passive depending on needs or desires and interactions with others (Hall, 2007; Muldoon, 2002). *I could have chosen not to complete the DNA testing and accepted a state of not knowing.* Our needs or desires have the potential to direct activity, while our bodily senses ground our existence in the world. Furthermore, according to Ricoeur (as

cited in Kearney, 2004), our perceptions are subject to emotions. Because of the early childhood distance I perceived our relationship in a certain way. As I got to know my father, as an adult, I became more emotionally connected. Had I remained emotionally distant, the DNA results may not have spurred me to wonder existentially about what it means to have been brought up Greek, with a Greek father. Accordingly, our openness to the world and our ability to interpret and engage will depend on our affective perception. *Am I sad or happy about the DNA results? Affective perceptions will either open us to a world of possibility or limit openness due to vulnerability. I have a new understanding of being a half-sibling. I resent my sister for being right, and I will likely avoid her in the future.*

Our freedom is revealed through our character. Apparently, Ricoeur (as cited in Muldoon, 2002) believed that we want to represent our ideal self and strive toward happiness. The desire for happiness leads to our perception of possibilities for our human capacity (Ricoeur, 1992). Happiness, however, being an emotion, may be in conflict with reason and, therefore, contributes to our frailty. While we are cognizant of our frailty and we may feel misery because of it, these conditions, lead us to actions, and a will to respond. *Does the biology of my father matter? Should I do the testing? What do I understand about myself now that I know I am not Greek and only partially related to this family? What does it mean to be without a cultural lineage?*

Ricoeur's (1992) work pointed to the importance of choices and actions in the world with others. We exist with others and, our interactions with others can inform us when we reflect on our human capacity. Narratives help us mediate within our public spaces. Engagement with others is key to our selfhood (Ricoeur, 1992), and narratives direct our action to

live communally. *What should I tell others when they ask about the origin of my last name? Others can assist in attestations and verify truths. My brother's DNA is unlike my own. On the other hand, others could provide a different perspective. You are our child.*

### Self-Understanding

*"...reflection is nothing without the mediation of signs and works, and the explanation is nothing if not incorporated as an intermediary stage in the process of self-understanding."*  
(Ricoeur, 1998, p. 159).

The past and present confront one another and merge together, and as we interpret the past, we bring new meaning made into the present, which leads to an increased self-understanding. Self-understanding is mediated through reflection, and "the self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life" (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 247). When we reflect not only on ourselves but also on the community in which we live, we attest to ourselves about who we are and how we live. The external environment, our community or culture will validate this attestation, which over time will also lead to self-constancy. Existential events offer opportunities for a re-reading of the self when examined for the ways in which narratives have shaped both the self and the interpretation of the events. Existential events create a temporality of experience. Time becomes humanized in the way that we respond to our history, bring it into the present and in consideration of the future. While engaged in this self-examination we may stay true to ourselves; however, we may also critique the narratives that have created who we are now, and through the dialect between present understanding and potential, we may become re-figured, considering that "understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being" (Ricoeur,

1998, p. 56). Since we reside in both actuality and potential, we are always becoming.

### Ricoeur and My Self-Understanding

While I was narrated to believe that family is of the utmost importance, I had gradually distanced myself from my family for many years, that is, until my father became ill and I decided to return home. I had one opportunity to get to know him by means of having an adult relationship with him and I was willing to see where it would go, thereby being open to the possibilities. This prior distancing (distanciation) of myself from my family allowed me to face new experiences that were taken up (appropriated) into a newly developing identity. This process was not easy and it certainly was not fast, nor is it over.

When I returned to Victoria, I found a family that had remained closed, isolated, and stuck in the past (limited, misery). Our relationships were frail for several years as we attempted to create new narrations out of our shared present. However, the narrations of the past continued to loom over us. Eventually, as my father's illness became more serious, he began to talk openly about his life. Since I was the only family member willing to talk about death and dying, he shared many stories with me, many of which I was later honoured to share at his funeral. In particular, he told me that it was likely that I was not his child (existential event). While this fact had always been a rumour, it did not concern me so much in my past because in the past I had no real relationship with him (memesis<sub>1</sub>). Then, suddenly, through our shared present, back in my family context as an adult (memesis<sub>2</sub>) I recognized him as a person, a father, who had not been there before. I knew then that I was going to miss him (mimesis<sub>3</sub>).

This event helped me to reflect on the characteristics (ipse/idem) that I now possess,

which are both inherited and mediated. When I consider the culturally and socially mediated values I possess, I know by letting go and rejecting some, while maintaining others, my narrated self has been moving forward through time and my identity has shifted. I continue to question what it means to have a biological lineage on this earth, that is, wondering if somehow it ties me to the human race in a certain way, or perhaps not knowing my biology creates more freedom and less othering (self and other than self).

Through a series of events, my relationship with my brother has become strained to the point in which we had not spoken for a long time. For certain, I have had no relationship to speak of with my oldest sister for many years. Recently, I received a call that my brother had been diagnosed terminally ill. I needed to decide whether my ties to this family were strong enough to warrant a visit, particularly since I would likely encounter my older sister. I was called upon to muster up my human capacity to care (ethics and action). I went to Victoria and visited my family. While visiting with my family, we had many conversations, some about death and dying, which brought us around to discussions about our parents.

The DNA test results were discussed and once again, particularly noting, that I was not biologically connected to my father, and that I was not Greek (referent). While, in the past I had protested, I now knew (attestation/verification) that it was true that he was not my father; however, my protests continued, but changed, since, as my partner continues to remind me, "Just because *he* was not your father, does not mean your father was not Greek."

### References

Andrew, J. D. (2000). Tracing Ricoeur. *Diatrics* 30(2), 43-69.

- Gadamer, G. (2004). *Truth and method*. (J. Weinsheimer & D. Marshall, Trans). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Hall, D. (2007). *Paul Ricoeur and the poetic imperative: The creative tension between love and justice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kearney, R. (2002). *On stories*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kearney, R. (2004). *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Langdrige, D. (2004). The hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur. *Existential Analysis* 15(2), 243-255.
- Martel, Y. (1996). *Self*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Random House.
- McCarthy, J. (2007). *Dennet and Ricoeur on the narrative self*. Amherst, NY: Prometheusbooks.
- Muldoon, M. (2002). *On Ricoeur*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Muldoon, M. (2006). *Tricks of time: Bergson, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur in search of time self and meaning*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Pellauer, D. (2007). *Ricoeur: A guide for the perplexed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Ricoeur, P. (1974). *Political and social essays*. D. Stewart & J. Bien (Eds). Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1980). Narrative time. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 169-190.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and narrative (vol. 1)*. (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1985). *Time and narrative (vol. 2)*. (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1988). *Time and narrative (vol. 3)*. (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1992). *Oneself as another*. (K. Blamey, Trans). Chicago, IL; University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1998). *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the human sciences*. (J. Thompson, Trans). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004a). Structure, word, event. (R. Sweeney, Trans). In D. Ihde (Ed.), *The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics* (pp.77-94). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Ricoeur (2004b). Existence and hermeneutics. (K. McLaughlin, Trans). In D. Ihde (Ed.), *The conflict of interpretations: Essays in hermeneutics* (pp.3-24). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Ricoeur, P (2004c). *Memory, history, forgetting*. (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans,). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Risser, J. (1986). Hermeneutic experience and memory: Rethinking knowledge as recollection. *Research in Phenomenology*, 16, 43-55.