

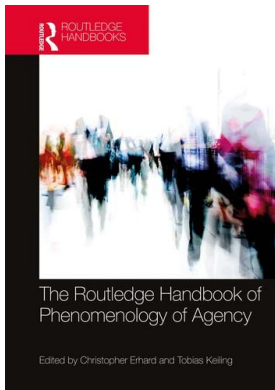
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Christopher Erhard, Tobias Keiling

Paul Ricœur

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Timo Helenius

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PAUL RICŒUR

A phenomenological hermeneutics
of meaningful action*Timo Helenius*

Paul Ricœur's (1913–2005) philosophy can be described as a hermeneutic phenomenology that extensively covers questions pertaining to action, agency, volition, intention, trying, reasons/causes, explanation, freedom, and responsibility. Ricœur's philosophy of action is distinct from the analytic discourse, however, in that it generally sees the question of action not conceptually but hermeneutically as the question of meaningful action. In this sense Ricœur's philosophy of action functions simultaneously at several levels; embodied action and practical action are tied in with the activity of interpretation that also calls for an analysis of its own. This second question, in short, is about the readability and understandability of action that Ricœur resolved to explore under the heading of *reconfigurative employment*. As in the case of meaningful texts, meaningful action exposes an actively engaged hermeneutic subject who narrates his or her situated being through interpretative action: "I see in the plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience" (Ricœur 1984: xi). Action that carries some significance or meaning indicates of an actively interpreting subject who is personally involved and engaged in the intersecting embodied, temporal, practical, social, institutional, linguistic, and cultural spheres of one unified experience of one's life.

Ricœur's stance from early on is that "to exist is to act" (Ricœur 1966: 334). Such action does not only mean embodied or physical action whereas it is always – insofar as it is meaningful, that is, unceasingly hermeneutical – tied in with linguistic and expressive action; for this reason these both are interlinked in the realm of ethical and political, or practical, action. Without having the opportunity to discuss it here, it should therefore be noted that in Ricœur's thought there is an integral expansion of the phenomenologico-hermeneutical theory of action in the direction of practical, ethical, and political action; this can be seen, in particular, in *Oneself as Another* (1990), *The Just* (1995), and *Reflections on the Just* (2001). Even though his moral and political philosophy has also been read to present a distinct realm of philosophical concern, in Ricœur's own view all these "distinct centers of interest" (Ricœur 1995c: 444) are inseparable from his overall hermeneutic phenomenology of action that, in turn, concerns the agent or the actively engaged and situated hermeneutic subject Ricœur was ultimately after in his philosophy.

In spite of his thoroughly continental manner of doing philosophy, Ricœur was also an informed commentator of analytical theories of action. His analyses might explicitly contest

those proposed by Anscombe, Davidson, Strawson, and many others, but his aim is rather to complement such theorizations that are already on the way of addressing the philosophical problems Ricœur himself was interested in discussing. Even though this essay will begin by Ricœur's relatively late commentary on the Anscombe–Davidson thesis on intentional action, we will therefore also introduce Ricœur's own hermeneutic phenomenology of "meaningful action" by paying special attention to his early phenomenological analysis of action as well as his relating semantic analyses of action. This introductory essay will argue that, while in many ways engaging itself with the analytic manner of pursuing philosophy, Ricœur's philosophy of a "living, acting, and suffering subject" was consistently asking about meaningful action, or action as meaning-bearing, while elaborating a hermeneutic phenomenology of "I can" (Ricœur 1992: 112).

Ricœur's criticism of Anscombe and Davidson

In the field of Analytic philosophy, the philosophy of action relates to and draws further clarity from the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind. In terms of the second, the point is that insofar as there is an agent that manifests itself in physical or corporeal action, there should also be a clarification regarding the relation between the agent's mental states and her bodily movements. In turn, analytical philosophy of language draws attention to the inherent problems regarding the medium of language that is used for providing such clarifications. For example, giving an account of an agent's action ("Tobias scored a goal") can be ambiguous in the sense that it does not necessarily distinguish between the antecedent motivational mental conditions or intentions (willingness to score a goal), the act itself (the kicking of the ball), the causal chain of interlinked actions (that all constitute, for example, the leg to move in such a way that it hits the soccer ball), and the causal outcomes, results, or effects of that action (a broken toenail and the flying of the ball deep into the goal in such manner that the net swings back). Furthermore, a description of action may, justifiably, make a philosophical analysis complex by indicating a shared intention – or at least of a joint one – and related mutual action. In a rather loose reading, the phrase "as the best striker, Tobias scored a goal" would indicate such a state of affairs in which Tobias acted as a member of a soccer team that as a whole was intentionally acting toward scoring; that it was Tobias who scored a goal stands out merely as an insufficient or a partial description of this group effort and action. In order to understand action, we thereby also need to pay attention to the ascriptions given of actions; this expands to the question of explaining actions. All in all, this brief example shows that extended analyses of action are as relevant as are the more tightly focused questions pertaining to intention, reasons or causes, and so on.

Ricœur's understanding of action is not confined to such tight analytic mode of philosophizing, and yet he also found himself to be critically interested in that particular discourse concerning action. Ricœur began teaching courses at the University of Chicago in 1970, and this brought him in substantial contact with Analytic philosophy. Even though phenomenology and hermeneutics were then perceived to have nothing much to share with the analytic pursuits, Ricœur himself adopted a different kind of approach. "Far from treating it as an enemy" (Ricœur 1995a: 31), Ricœur recounts in his intellectual autobiography, Analytic philosophy complemented and thereby strengthened his own explorations. The reason for such appreciation was the analytic aspiration for precision and clarity to which our own example just alluded to. Ricœur's application of these analytic resources was, however, critical and appropriative as it, for example, moved freely between the philosophy of action and the philosophy of language. In Ricœur's words, "it was mainly in the philosophy of ordinary

language that I found the most reliable support” (Ricœur 1995a: 32). The analyses provided by Austin, Searle, and others were easily relatable to Ricœur’s own corollary explorations of that time, but they also led Ricœur to a path that bore explicit fruit in his analyses of action in the much-read 1990 work *Oneself as Another* – a work that among other themes discusses Ricœur’s uneasiness concerning “an agentless semantics of action” (Ricœur 1992: 87).

Ricœur’s main concern is that the analytic approach to action is too limited in its analyses that seem not to heed questions about the relation between action and its agent particularly as they would concern attribution, ascription, self-referentiality, practices, ethical and political prescriptive attitudes, and responsibility. “It is perhaps due to the very style of Analytic philosophy and to its almost exclusive preoccupation with description, that it ignores problems pertaining to attestation, which cannot be reduced to a criteriology suited to description” (Ricœur 1992: 72). Placing the focus on the questions of “what” and “why” – on something that occurs – the analytic theories do not sufficiently open up the question of the “who” of action. Put differently, Ricœur argues that these theories detach the self from action and do not thereby consider it as a real “someone”: “the agent of action will have little resemblance to a self who is responsible for both words and actions” (Ricœur 1992: 57). In his view, analytic theories are reductive in a sense that they tend to anonymize and impersonalize the engaged and situated acting self by turning it into “an ethically neutral agent, as free of blame as of praise” (Ricœur 1992: 57). Emphasizing the need to make a robust distinction between events that simply happen and actions that make something happen, Ricœur therefore argues that the narrative and the teleological aspects of action should not be cast aside insofar as action is to be of full-fledged philosophical concern. Approaching the question of “what” from the side of “why” does not suffice in the attempt at fleshing out the whole of the problematic of action that should also address the aspect of “who.” The lack of attention to this question is clear, Ricœur argues, in the discussion that follows from the work done by Elizabeth Anscombe and Donald Davidson.

Even though Anscombe’s distinction between knowing-that (viz. event) and knowing-how (viz. action) brings out the aspect of immediately present knowledge “without observation” and even relates that to “practical knowledge,” Anscombe’s position is defective “by omission” in that it is “concentrated on the ‘what’ of action without thematizing its relation to the ‘who’” (Ricœur 1992: 62). According to Ricœur, this opens up the danger of collapsing human action back in to the realm of mere causal events, an outcome that would surely be considered undesirable. A similar kind of difficulty concerns the distinction between motives and causes that, according to the same Humean-based approach, should nevertheless be strictly held: “The internal, necessary (and in this sense, logical) connection characteristic of motivation is incompatible with the extrinsic, contingent (and, in this sense, empirical) connection of causality” (Ricœur 1992: 63). The critical point Ricœur wishes to make is that insofar as in “a logical chain of involvement” action is understood in a manner that “we move from wanting to trying to do and, finally, to doing” (Ricœur 1992: 63), such view does not in fact mutualize wanting and action (as one could expect in terms of motives) whereas they are cut off of each other. Wanting is treated “as an internal event, logically distinct from the action” (Ricœur 1992: 64). In short, the discussion concerning actions and their motives is not treated distinctly from the discussion concerning events and their causes; the attempt at trying to keep “the two universes of discourse” distinct from one another “has been unable to resist the assaults of a conceptual analysis; . . . the result has been the constant encroachment of one on the other to the point of rendering problematic the very principle of their dissociation” (Ricœur 1992: 65). Taking into account the agent – virtually absent in these theorizations – in form of the question of “who” would, in Ricœur’s view, help the philosophy of action by preventing it from collapsing into such assaults and encroachments.

The “conceptual impressionism” Anscombe undertakes in *Intention* is also defective in the sense that the very concept of intention is dealt with in Anscombe’s conceptual analysis in a manner that has “deliberately turned its back on phenomenology” (Ricoeur 1992: 67). What Anscombe has resolved to address is not intentionality – as one could assume if one were to follow Brentano and Husserl – whereas her analysis, following the analytic approach, targets the question of a *declared intention*. Here, however, Ricoeur points out a difficulty that results in from not grounding the analysis on the intentional structure of consciousness itself as “the surface grammar of declared intentions is not clearly defined” (Ricoeur 1992: 68). In Anscombe’s theory, such confusion can only be resolved by strictly focusing on the notion of “intending to” in the sense of “a reason for acting,” meaning that a severe restriction in terms of the starting point of the analysis will also have to be adopted: “One therefore begins with the adverbial usage of the term ‘intention,’” that is, Anscombe’s conceptual analysis begins in a manner that leads it to explicitly focus on the question of “why” (and “what”) instead of also keeping the “who” in sight. Anscombe’s analysis “privileges the use that exemplifies in the least explicit way the relation of intention to the agent” (Ricoeur 1992: 68). In Ricoeur’s critical reading of Anscombe, her theory privileges the objective and causal and not the subjective and motivational side of action – as seen in “the inability to thematize attestation” (Ricoeur 1992: 73) – resulting in the unintentional tendency to view actions as events.

In Ricoeur’s view, this tendency was extended in Davidson’s *Actions and Events* that argued for a logically and ontologically reductive “ontology of the impersonal event,” rendering “actions themselves a subclass of events” (Ricoeur 1992: 74). Such approach precludes the inclusion of an analysis concerning the relation between an action and an agent. As Ricoeur puts it, the severe defect that Davidson’s theory contains is the “failure to return action to the agent” (Ricoeur 1992: 74). Ricoeur’s observant criticism makes it clear that the main reason for such failure is Davidson’s reductive stance toward the teleological aspect of intentional action; “this descriptive feature is quickly subordinated to a *causal* conception of explanation” (Ricoeur 1992: 74). Even though an action is distinct from other events due to intention, Davidson nevertheless treats actions in light of rigorous causal explanations. And to be even more precise, Davidson’s position “that rationalization is a species of causal explanation” (Davidson 2001: 3) results in a strong preference for event-causality in a manner that also effectively subsumes the notion of intention, thereby rendering it part of a causalist schema. In Davidson’s theory, intention is equated with the reason for doing that itself is a rationalization and as such a form of causal explanation. Put differently, Davidson holds that a description of action is a rationalization and therefore an explanation of action that relies on the causalist view. According to Ricoeur, the crucial omission that results from this is to neglect the teleological view of explanation that would retain a clear connection with the agent’s motives.

Using Charles Taylor’s argument for a *teleological* rather than a causal explanation of action, Ricoeur extends his criticism of Davidson by demanding that “the fact for an event to be required to obtain a given end is a condition for the appearance of that event” (Ricoeur 1992: 78). Put differently, Ricoeur understands a teleological explanation to be “an explanation in which the order is itself a factor in the production of an event; it is a self-imposed order” (Ricoeur 1992: 78). This means that – at the descriptive level – the agent’s motive for action counts toward and produces the action that can, by the virtue of this internal relation, also be considered as an explanation of this action:

Classifying an action as intentional is determining by what type of law it is to be explained and, by the same token, ruling out a certain type of explanation. In other words,

it is deciding on the form of the law that governs the action and at the same time ruling out the possibility that this is a mechanical law.

(Ricœur 1992: 79)

To Ricœur's satisfaction, such model of teleological causation would push the notion of intention more toward the phenomenological manner of describing action that also allows for addressing the volitional and temporal dimensions of action – these both indicate of the need to ascribe action to an agent, thereby bringing intentionality and agency to the forefront. The major defect in Davidson's theory, valuable in its own right in its own context, lies precisely in this omission:

is not an ontology of events, founded on the sort of logical analysis of action phrases conducted with the rigor and subtlety of Davidson's analysis, condemned to conceal the problematic of the agent as the *possessor* of his or her action?

(Ricœur 1992: 85)

In Ricœur's view, approaching the question of action from the phenomenological vantage point would resolve the problems inherent in Davidson's ontology of impersonal event that only allows for "an agentless semantics of action" (Ricœur 1992: 87).

Ricœur's phenomenology of action

We now move to providing a positive account of action the manner Ricœur proposes to have it. As is already clear, Ricœur's thought is situated at an intersection of various philosophical traditions, later also including those of Analytic philosophy, that are not reconcilable with one another. The so-called continental tradition itself is a non-unified field of various approaches that, when brought together, expose their conflictual and dissonant characters. As Ricœur puts it himself,

I have found myself from the start in a multicorned debate among various heritages: that of existential philosophy (Gabriel Marcel and Karl Jaspers), that of reflexive philosophy (Jean Nabert), that of phenomenology (Husserl), and that of hermeneutics (Heidegger and Gadamer).

(Ricœur 1995: 445)

In spite of openly acknowledging the difficulties regarding the ultimately unachievable harmonization of these various discourses and heritages, Ricœur nevertheless maintained that his philosophical pursuit is in general both phenomenological and hermeneutical as well as concerned about human existence. In one of his last interviews, Ricœur explained this dual effort by clarifying that the goal of his hermeneutic reflection was to reveal the capable, meaning actively able, human being:

The ultimate purpose of hermeneutic reflection and attestation, as I see it, is to try to retrace the line of intentional capacity and action behind mere objects (which we tend to focus on exclusively in our natural attitude) so that we may recover the hidden truth of our operative acts, of *being capable*, of being *un homme capable*. So if hermeneutics is right, in the wake of Kant and Gadamer, to stress the finitude and limits of consciousness, it is

also wise to remind ourselves of the tacit potencies and acts of our lived existence. My bottom line is a *phenomenology of being able* [une phénoménologie du je peux].

(*Ricœur and Kearney 2004: 167*)

In spite of a multitude of hermeneutical studies concerning language and linguisticity – and, in general, cultural situatedness and productivity – all these relate to the fundamental phenomenological pursuit of exposing the contours of human experience through the vantage point of being able or “I can.” Put differently, in Ricœur’s thought human action and linguisticity are organically related to each other and warrant complementary analyses that highlight the crucial aspects of human existence and of being able:

I will say that the place of astonishment, and hence that of questioning, has been twofold from the very start. On the one hand, one can rightfully say that action has always been the organizing center of my philosophical reflection under a variety of headings: first, the voluntary and the involuntary, then desire and effort – raised to the ‘metaphysical’ level of the desire to be and the effort to exist – and, finally, the power of acting, in *Oneself as Another*; on the other hand, one can consider *language* to be the organizing focus of many investigations.

(*Ricœur 1995c: 444–445*)

As is clear, in this context the philosophical explorations into the “acts of our lived existence” are not confined to those focusing more specifically on intentional capacity and action, but the question of human intentionality should be regarded as implicitly present and relevant for the broader or refashioned scope of investigation.

The previous section focused on Ricœur’s criticism of the Analytic philosophy of action in particular. In this section we will steer our exploration in the phenomenological direction on the basis of Ricœur’s own work on action. In spite of his willingness to engage in the analytical discussions and to draw support and further clarity from them, Ricœur remained deeply invested in the phenomenological tradition. Ricœur’s semantic analyses of action also manifest this point. As Ricœur puts it in his 1995 intellectual autobiography, the question concerning the semantics of action brought again forth his “initial interest in the phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary” (Ricœur 1995a: 31). The analytic theory of action that Ricœur began to integrate in his hermeneutico-phenomenological explorations of human action in the early 1970s was clearly helpful as it provided “the complement of a logical semantics” that helped “to strengthen the linguistic semantics” he had pursued (Ricœur 1995a: 32). Such refashioned philosophical analysis of the action-discourse (and discourse-action), in spite of its indisputable inherent value in its own context, was nevertheless to serve a more long-standing philosophical interest.

Put briefly, Ricœur’s substantial engagement with analytic action-theory provided him with the opportunity to re-examine and sharpen the question of the capable self, the “I can” – always checked by the “I cannot” as implied by effort and consent – or a subject’s “fundamental possibilities” (Ricœur 1966: 3). Focusing in his later work on intention rather than the will’s “project,” the conceptual and theoretical means may have thereby slightly changed, but the overall exploration would still indisputably bear resemblance to his earlier work. As Ricœur puts it elsewhere, “the philosophy of will was already at its inception a philosophy of action” (Ricœur 1995b: 346). In spite of its various reformulations in Ricœur’s work, it is the question of the living, acting, and suffering self that Ricœur pursued from his 1950 dissertation work *Freedom and Nature* even beyond *Oneself as Another* to his last work *The Course of*

Recognition (2004). Understanding Ricœur's early phenomenological explorations pertaining to this theme will thereby unlock the full breadth and depth of his philosophy of action.

The preceding discussion reflects Ricœur's 1970–1971 and 1971–1972 lecture courses in Louvain that kept their focus on the semantics of action. As the course title *Le discours de l'action* indicates, Ricœur's angle of approach was unsurprisingly that of expressed experience, or, having a sense of human experience and action that is brought to language. In these lecture courses, published in French in 1977, Ricœur's detailed attention nevertheless opens up as a full-fledged linguistic analysis in that it spans from the conceptual to the propositional and furthermore to the discursive level of analysis. In this course of interlinked analyses, Ricœur's questions vary from those regarding the many possible ways to pursue the discourse of action (Parsons, Touraine, Aristotle, Moore, later Wittgenstein, Anscombe, Austin, Strawson, Husserl) to discussing the definitions given of the key concepts in that discourse (such as action, intention, reasons for acting, motivation, cause, desire, wanting, willing, choice, agent, agency, and responsibility¹), to speech-act theory, performatives, and volition (Austin, Searle, Benveniste, Grice, Kenny), the philosophical problems of agency (agent-causation, motivation, intention, mental acts, explanation of action), and furthermore to the relation between linguistic analysis and phenomenology. It is this last one that we will now need to pay attention to in order to see how Ricœur's semantics of action relates to his phenomenology of action.

In spite of Ricœur's insistence that regardless of their points of convergence – the one clarifies the essential structures of experience, and the other those of utterances – phenomenology remains distinct from linguistic analysis that, due its focus on language, has lost sight of the origins of the experience seeking expression. In short, “phenomenology operates at a different strategic level from that of linguistic analysis” (Ricœur 1977a: 120). This also means, however, that “there is no opposition between two adversary theories at the same level whereas there is a difference between two strategic levels; . . . phenomenology gives an ‘experiential’ foundation to utterances, and utterances give an ‘expression’ to experience” (Ricœur 1977a: 127). The view that phenomenology is about the fundamental structures of experience, and linguistic analysis about the manifestation of this experience, is why Ricœur consistently pressed the point that it is important to take into account the explanatory resources offered by Analytic philosophies of language and action in his own “linguistic phenomenology” (Ricœur 1977a: 14–15, 115) as these serve it by bringing further philosophical clarity. An indication of this importance is that Ricœur borrows the very term “linguistic phenomenology” from Austin who likewise stressed that a linguistic clarification should be in the service of analyzing experience – utterances are operative not only on the linguistic plane. Even though Ricœur in the end will retain the phenomenological manner of analysis to be the most fruitful, his engagement in the analytic discourse is valuable for these reasons. This does not mean, however, that the linguistic analyses would in any manner overwrite Ricœur's ultimately phenomenological aim.

This conviction is clearly stated in *Le discours de l'action* in that Ricœur's aim was “to explore the contribution of language to the philosophy of action” in the sense of analyzing the “discourses in which human being speaks his doing (*l'homme dit son faire*)” (Ricœur 1977a: 3, 5). To understand what this statement means requires that we situate it in the context of Ricœur's repeated claim – made in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), *Freud and Philosophy* (1965), and *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975) – that poetic expressivity, meaning innovative linguistic activity, “makes” human being that would otherwise remain mute and unreflectible:

“Bachelard has taught us that the image is not a residue of impression, but an aura surrounding speech: “The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being.”

The poem gives birth to the image; the poetic “becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being (*l’expression crée de l’être*) . . . one would not be able to meditate in a zone that preceded language”.

(Ricœur 1977b: 215. Cf. Ricœur 1969: 13; Ricœur 1970: 15–16)

Put differently, the human experience of being is expressed and made evident in language. For this reason, any phenomenology that aims at exploring and exposing the fundamental structures of that experience will have to approach its task as a linguistic phenomenology. “Language,” Ricœur argues, in turn, by quoting Jean Ladrière, is “the structuring of the meaningful life” in that it is the objective correlate, or the noematic aspect, of intentional experience that phenomenology has set to explore (Ricœur 1977a: 6, 13–14).

These convictions led Ricœur to be also interested in those analytic means that the ordinary language philosophy in general and the speech act theory in particular offer. In short, *dire, c’est faire* or “to speak is to do” (Ricœur 1977a: 8). This view finds its correlate in the phenomenological stance that “all consciousness is consciousness of” something (Ricœur 1977a: 14, 122). In this sense it certainly holds that the philosophy of action has a linguistic and phenomenological “double constitution” as it ultimately is about *l’action sensée*, that is, about sensible or meaningful action (Ricœur 1977a: 17, 128). But as it comes to relating these linguistic analyses to phenomenology, phenomenology can always claim preference due to a certain hierarchy at the level of analyses: “At the level of foundation, phenomenology takes priority as it sets up the declaratory framework on the noematic framework; what one speaks is built on the meaning of experience” (Ricœur 1977a: 15, 121–122). Moreover, as Ricœur puts it in “Existence and Hermeneutics,” linguistic analysis always stops short in that it keeps its focus on language that itself, “as a signifying milieu, must be referred to existence” (Ricœur 1974: 16). In terms of Ricœur’s overall project, *Le discours de l’action* and the thematically similar analyses that followed this initial discussion with Analytic philosophy thereby merely “redo” (*refaire*) the more fundamental phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary – exposing the agent, or the active corporeal subject, through her actions – that Ricœur worked on in the 1940s and 1950s.

We thereby arrive at Ricœur’s phenomenology of action; Ricœur himself attempts at giving an overview of it in *Le discours de l’action*. Drawing a distinction between Husserl’s phenomenology and that of his, Ricœur adopts the Merleau-Pontian view that stresses corporeity, or embodied being-in-the-world, and the actions of the will as the phenomenology of “I can” (Ricœur 1977a: 24, 31, 128–131). The key term here is “one’s own body,” *le corps propre*, as it is exposed as the “domain of motivation,” “the organ of voluntary motion,” and also as “the dispositional anteriority” or as that what remains “the absolute involuntary” (Ricœur 1977a: 129). In Ricœur’s view, this manner of framing phenomenology not only avoids the problems relating to Husserl’s notion of the transcendental ego but also constitutes the breaking point between phenomenology and linguistic analysis that, due to its methodical semantic focus, is unable to thematize the body. But to more properly understand why the notion of body is so prominent, we will have to comprehend its interrelatedness with the world that constitutes the extended and corporeal field of its experience and action. The world, Ricœur argues, is disclosed as the stage of one’s action; the subject, or the self, is in the action that is done, that is, in “the works done by me” (Ricœur 1977a: 126). It is to this at once hermeneutic and reflexive phenomenology of action that we will now turn.

At this point we will need to place our focus again on Ricœur’s late statement that his “bottom line is a *phenomenology of being able*” (Ricœur and Kearney 2004: 167). This claim is

materially substantiated in *The Course of Recognition* (2004) and *Oneself as Another* (1990) that both draw from Ricœur's early phenomenological works and explicitly address the question of the living body. This phenomenology of action and embodied agency dates back to *Freedom and Nature* (1950), a work that would be more properly translated as *The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (the French title is *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*). Already in this early – and massively rich – work Ricœur stresses the idea that a human being finds himself in and through his capabilities that are manifested in objectifiable action:

in projecting myself as the *subject* of an action, I affirm myself capable of that action . . . I feel myself capable (*je me sens capable*), as an incarnate being situated in the world, of the action which I intend in general.

(Ricœur 1966: 203)

The critical point can be summarized by using Ricœur's "Existence and Hermeneutics" that considers the Cartesian *cogito* as vain; even though it holds that the ego in a way posits itself in its intentional thought-action ("I exist *insofar as I think*"), the *ego* of *ego cogito* is nevertheless not immediately present to itself whereas it has to be reflectively "recaptured in the mirror of its objects, of its works, and, finally, of its acts" (Ricœur 1974: 17). The importance of Ricœur's intentional use of the reflexive verbal form "*je me sens*" is thereby in that it expresses what takes place through that very expression: "reflection is nothing other than the appropriation of our act of existing by means of a critique applied to the works and the acts which are the signs of this act of existing" (Ricœur 1974: 17). In short, the shattered *cogito* – *cogito brisé* – can only be rediscovered "in the documents of its life" or recaptured "only in the expressions of life that objectify it" (Ricœur 1974: 18). This "documentation" or expressivity should now be understood in the broadest possible sense; in an essay that extends his phenomenology of the body, Ricœur goes as far as stressing "the value of sexuality as a language without words, as an organ of mutual recognition and personalization – in brief, as *expression*" (Ricœur 1964: 135). The "phenomenology of being able" thereby brings together those "various heritages" and "multicornered debates" of existential philosophy, reflexive philosophy, phenomenology, and hermeneutics Ricœur himself acknowledged to organically relating to (Ricœur 1995: 445).

To restate, in his later philosophy (more properly: in and after *Time and Narrative*, 1983–1985) Ricœur emphasizes the role of the active "reader," or the role of an experiencing subject, who interprets his own being while expressing it in action – actions are "interpreters of conduct" – and consequently considers the subject's own life as a text that opens a redescribed world (Ricœur 1991: 194–195, 1992: 152–163). The early analyses of human action in *Freedom and Nature* – as a subject's action "in the world 'through' his body" (Ricœur 1966: 226) – are then reformulated in Ricœur's later philosophy. "It is to the extent to which the entire world [of action] is a vast extension of our body as pure fact that it is itself the terminus of our consent" (Ricœur 1966: 343), Ricœur argues in his early work, implying that self-recognition and self-understanding become possible only if one acts and brings his or her reappropriable "project" to the world while confronting it at the same time. According to Ricœur, the world is presented to a human subject "as horizon, as theater, and as a matter of my actions" (Ricœur 1966: 212). Such phrasing may give an indication why Ricœur's phenomenology of active and embodied consciousness has also been seen valuable for enactivism that stresses active interaction between the embodied mind and the world (Dierckxsens 2018). The unavoidable difficulty nevertheless is that the world itself – as well as life – is not dependent on volitional acts whereas it presents itself as the involuntary that is indicated by

the experience of at once intellectual and muscular effort and consent. The shattered *cogito* seeks to realize and express its self amid the involuntary: “Moving and consenting means confronting reality with the entire body to seek expression and realization in it; [. . .] this is an engagement in being” (Ricoeur 1966: 345). A subject gains a notion of him or herself as a capable person only in this unceasing and existentially grounding dialectic of effort and consent that is manifested in physical and practical action and then re-appropriated. My self is only available to me in the continuous reflective “reading” of it in a concrete, embodied, and objectified situation that I will have to confront.

In sum, Ricoeur’s hermeneutic and reflexive phenomenology of action/agency stresses the existential need to “affirm myself in my acts,” as it is the case that “I project my own self into the action to be done” (Ricoeur 1966: 59). A “project,” to be clear, is nevertheless a mere intention of action whereas a practical act authenticates that intention, testing and verifying it in the corporeal world, thus taking on risk as well as choosing one’s own self. A practical act includes muscular movement, although it is difficult to describe how the will and the bodily movements are intertwined; they are chiasmic. It thereby becomes clear that “the acid test of a philosophy of the will is indisputably the problem of muscular effort” (Ricoeur 1966: 308). In short, “I ‘recognize’ the empty intention in the full act” (Ricoeur 1966: 206). The step from hesitation to authentic choice, or from imposed existence to self-recognized human existence, is made in practical action. “I can” is an empty notion if not made manifest in action in ways that retains a connection between the subject and its object(s) by binding them together in a dynamic and tensional polarity. This results in the need to appropriate the objectified self in and through the action the self was capable of doing. Put differently, the self finds the “I” as the locus of personal identity that in itself is achievable only in reappropriation. Such reappropriable projecting implies that before action the “I” already commits itself – *il s’engage* as Ricoeur puts it in *Freedom and Nature* – as well as binds itself (*il se lie*) to the object that results from the action to be done.

The reflective moment relating to self-consciousness is crucial here as it exposes “the conditions of existence of a responsible subject” (Ricoeur 1967: 8); it distinguishes the realm of human endeavors from those that remain unaware or senseless of the commitment and responsibility that go along with agency. As Ricoeur puts it in “Philosophy of Will and Action,”

there are in the world physical movements; we can speak of animal and human behavior; but the specificity of the human act can only be reached through a reflective method, in which a human being recognized himself as the author of his acts.

(Ricoeur 1967: 8–9)

Actions stand for the subject that has a chance of beginning to understand his or her existence by reflectively reappropriating the actions in the whole context of his or her life; reflection is thereby “a reappropriation of our effort to exist” (Ricoeur 1970: 45), that is, a recovering of the notion of “I” as the subject of all my actions. “The act of existing, the positing of the self,” Ricoeur claims, is recovered, re-appropriated “in all the density of its works.” The positing of the self is therefore not “given” whereas “it is a [reflective] task.” Put differently, I do not understand myself from the beginning but only gradually begin to understand myself as a living, acting, and also suffering subject.

We thereby arrive at the theme of “pre-reflexive affirmation” (Ricoeur 1967: 19) that constitutes the most fundamental thought-action in the sense that all human action or

meaningful action, including reflection, is grounded on this pre-reflexive imputation. This comment aims in a way to summarize Ricœur's phenomenology of action as well as explain how it ultimately remained distinct from its Husserlian ground. In its reliance on Jean Nabert's reflexive philosophy, Ricœur's phenomenology contested the Husserlian notion of the self-positing subject or the *ego cogito* that would be immediately and transparently present to itself. This crucial observation also provides us with an explanation why Ricœur's phenomenology turned out to be a hermeneutics; it contained a hermeneutical seed in itself from the very beginning. Put differently, the reflective self in search of itself can only find itself as a trace in its acts; "I affirm myself in my acts" (Ricœur 1966: 59). These actions that pertain to the physical but always also to the ethico-political, social, linguistic, and cultural world – which precedes the self as already there – rely, however, on an act that can be considered to provide the fundamental ground for the whole of Ricœur's anthropology and also to that of action. I am thinking about Nabert's notion of the originary affirmation, or, the originating *pre-reflexive act* of consciousness that is clearly reiterated in Ricœur's later texts, such as *Oneself as Another*, that discuss "ascribing an action to an agent" (Ricœur 1992: 89) and, in particular, self-ascription. Insofar as we are after Ricœur's philosophy of action and agency, we cannot set this originating pre-reflexive act aside that maintains and upholds the conditions of a fragile unity at the core of the shattered and self-narrating self.

The immediately given or self-transparent Cartesian *cogito* is inconceivable as this *cogito* is *de facto* in a state of primordial conflict. The "living tension" between the infinitude of discourse and the finitude of perspective, the human disproportion as non-coincidence of self to self, makes a human being "a fragile mediation," and thus also a task for himself (Ricœur 1986a: 140–141). Such task of retrieving the *cogito* calls for reflection, but this reflection, in turn, is based on an originating affirmation, the "vehemence of Yes" as Ricœur calls it in *Fallible Man* (1960). Although the originating affirmation is only the beginning of the dialectics of "existential difference" (Ricœur 1986a: 135–136) and the fragile synthesis of the self, it constitutes the most fundamental aspect of the "I can" in that it denotes the power of self-affirmation that, even as thoroughly fragile, is always at the bottom of human action as its condition: "We can understand reflexive judgment precisely by starting out with this pre-reflexive imputation of myself in my projects" (Ricœur 1966: 60). This fundamental, albeit always "mute," act of "I can" is never directly accessible, and never submits to intellectual insight. As such, it nevertheless provides the basic condition for a unified experience that itself always remains in the making:

It is clear that the entire initial implication of myself is not a conscious relation or an observation. I behave actively in relation to myself, I determine *myself*. Once again French usage throws light on the situation: to determine my conduct is to determine myself – *se déterminer*. Prereflexive self-imputation is active not observational.

(Ricœur 1966: 59)

As such active self-imputation, the pre-reflexive aspect is nevertheless never detached from the reflectible acts of consciousness. This implies and reaffirms that there is a duality at the very root of *cogito brisé*; the self is always in the duality of productively projecting itself and finding itself as projected. We may also understand this duality in terms of the noetic-noematic consciousness; as the noema pertains to the noesis, the projected self pertains to the projecting subject. In other words, the projecting ego is only logically prior to the projected self as the projected self relies on the activity of the projecting self.

Ricœur's hermeneutics of action

In this section we will expand the exploration of Ricœur's phenomenology of being able and relate it to his hermeneutics of language and action. In his Kluge Prize acceptance speech, given at the end of his life, Ricœur listed constitutive human powers. These are one's temporal personal identity, that is, personal history, as well as the capacities to say, to act, and the preeminent capacity to recount. In a similar manner as in *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition*, Ricœur stated that these basic capacities or powers constitute "the primary foundation of humanity" as distinct from everything nonhuman. Saying, acting, and recounting can be understood, respectively, as the abilities to spontaneously produce (1) a reasoned discourse, (2) events in society and in nature, and (3) life narratives that have led up to self-identity. To these three it is possible to add the equally constitutive moral capacities of imputability and promising (Ricœur 2010: 22–23. Cf. Ricœur 1992: 22; Ricœur 2005: 89–110, 127–134). At the level of their execution, however, all these constitutive powers necessarily rely on a cultural system that utilizes symbolic communication. Most importantly, this also pertains to action as Ricœur points out in his *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986):

We have to articulate our social existence in the same way that we have to articulate our perceptual existence. Just as models in scientific language allow us to see how things look, allow us to see things *as* this or that, in the same way our social templates articulate our social roles, articulate our position in society *as* this or that. And perhaps it is not possible to go behind or below this primitive structuration. The very flexibility of our biological existence makes necessary another kind of informational system, the cultural system. Because we have no genetic system of information for human behavior, we need a cultural system. No culture exists without such a system. The hypothesis, therefore, is that where human beings exist, a nonsymbolic mode of existence, and even less, a nonsymbolic kind of action, can no longer obtain. Action is immediately ruled by cultural patterns which provide templates or blueprints for the organization of social and psychological processes, perhaps just as genetic codes – I am not certain – provide such templates for the organization of organic processes.

(Ricœur 1986b: 11–12)

In sum, Ricœur argues both that nonsymbolic action is not human action, and that the cultural system, which patterns and guides the symbolically mediated being-here, is necessitated by the fact that life itself – and as a result also its social forms – would otherwise remain obscure and unorganized. Life and action gain meaning only if structured cultural-symbolically.

This view relies on Ricœur's earlier conviction that discourse itself is action through which the active and semantically innovative human being expresses itself (while at the same time covering it up by the very linguistic expression): "It is first or all and always in language that all ontic or ontological understanding arrives at its expression" (Ricœur 1974: 11). Ricœur's "semantics of shown-yet-concealed" or "the semantics of multivocal expressions" (Ricœur 1974: 12) thereby focuses on paying philosophical attention to linguistic expressions as action-expressions or actively produced symbols of the human being. Furthermore, these symbols or innovative expressions of existence call for hermeneutic activity aimed at disclosing that existence by freeing it in understanding: "Interpretation, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning" (Ricœur 1974: 12).

Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology, in other words, "starts from the symbols, and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation" (Ricœur 1969: 355). Such interpretation does not start in a vacuum but *in medias res*: "For it, the first task is not to begin but, from the midst of speech, to remember itself again; to remember with a view to beginning" (Ricœur 1969: 348–349). Action and language are therefore tied in with each other in that the human capacity to act is made manifest in discursive action that invites or "donates" (*donner*)² further thought-action that, in turn, exposes the possibility of its originating ground. In discursive action an idea of reason (*logos*) encounters the activity of biophysical life (*bios*) in symbolic expressivity.

At this point it should be clear that Ricœur's interest in *meaningful action* splits into two dynamically interrelated areas of examination: meaning as action and action as meaningful. Put differently, "symbolic action" can refer to meaning as action-manifesting and to action as meaning-bearing. What we will be now focusing on is the notion that for Ricœur language and action are distinct and yet interdependent. This is precisely the point Ricœur makes in his trilogy *Time and Narrative* by introducing the hermeneutic model of threefold *mimesis* or that of reconfiguration. In short, Ricœur's main thesis is that "between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity" (Ricœur 1984: 52). This correlation, according to Ricœur, relates to the threefold mimetic operations of emplotment – as a plot is "an imitation of action" (Ricœur 1984: 54) – by which he means the prefigurative (*mimesis*₁), configurative (*mimesis*₂), and refigurative activities (*mimesis*₃) that constitute "the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers" (Ricœur 1984: 53). Ricœur's attention is specifically on the concrete activity "by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field [of experience and action] and its refiguration through the reception of the work" (Ricœur 1984: 53). The broad scope of meaning Ricœur gives to "authors," "texts" or "works," and "readers" is the key to understand that his exploration concerns the interweaved duality of meaning as action-manifesting and action as meaning-bearing.

To briefly explain the importance of each of the three endlessly and circularly repeated moments of figuration – this is the unceasing hermeneutic activity of a self that Ricœur is ultimately after – we will need to add the following: threefold *mimesis* itself is fully about action. *Mimesis*₁ or prefiguration is about "the preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (Ricœur 1984: 54). As Ricœur puts it, "a semantics of action makes explicit this competence" (Ricœur 1984: 54) that, in turn, exposes the fact that there is a distinction between action and mere physical movement in that actions "imply goals," "refer to motives," and "have agents" that "can be held responsible for certain consequences of their actions," but also that "to act is always to act 'with' others" (Ricœur 1984: 55). But this is only the phase of preunderstanding. *Mimesis*₂ or "configuring activity" concerns the "organization of the events," by which Ricœur means the arranging narrativization or textualization of the world of action. In short, "this configurational act" – which relies on the productive imagination³ – "consists of 'grasping together' the detailed actions or what I have called the story's incidents" (Ricœur 1984: 66). Due to this schematization, configuration mediates between the "preunderstanding" and the "postunderstanding of the order of action" (Ricœur 1984: 64–65). The mimetic arc is, however, only brought to its fullness in refiguration. *Mimesis*₃, in Ricœur's words, brings about the world of a living and acting subject as it marks "the intersection of the world configured by the [plot] and the world wherein real action occurs and unfolds its specific temporality" (Ricœur 1984: 71). Meaningful action is only constituted by the "act of reading" (Ricœur 1984: 76) – or the

fundamentally selective activity in the inexhaustible excess of meaning (Ricoeur 1988: 169) – that rests on configuration and, even before that, on prefiguration. As is clear, the term “reading” is now understood to denote the subject’s reconfigurative hermeneutic activity that results in temporal understanding. Moreover, in the circular and continuous activity of “reading,” refiguration (post-understanding) fuses in with prefiguration (preunderstanding) that, as explained, gives grounds for the likewise unceasing activity of configurative employment (viz. the moment of objectification or “explanation”). In sum, our concrete action that includes labor in “the world of work”⁴ (*praxis*) only makes sense or is meaningful – which is, again, Ricoeur’s marker for distinguishing action from mere physical movement or events – if we are at the same time creative “authors” and “readers” (*poiesis*), or continuously schematizing and interpreting active subjects, that is, agents.

This correlation between language and action is further clarified in *From Text to Action*, a 1986 collection of Ricoeur’s essays. As in the title of the book, the main thesis of the relevant essays is directly displayed in titles such as “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text” (1971). Opening his examination from the side of speech acts, “such as we find it in Searle and Austin,” Ricoeur argues that their theory offers a model to understand the certain “intentional exteriorization” or materialization that takes place in a shift from a locutionary act to that of an illocutionary act, and furthermore to a perlocutionary act (Ricoeur 1991: 146–147). But this movement from language to action is not a one-way street. Ricoeur’s point is that all human action can be conceived as meaningful when it meets the condition of objectification that he correlates with “the fixing that occurs in writing” (Ricoeur 1991: 151) – this enables the *readability* of action. Like discourse that, according to Ricoeur, is (1) situated as an “instant of discourse,” (2) is self-referential, (3) actualizes the symbolic function of language, and in which (4) the exchange of messages, or communication, takes place, human action is (a) an event that leaves a “trace” or a record, (b) ascribable to an agent or agents, (c) can have (symbolic) importance beyond mere action-event and the social conditions of its production, and (d) is “open” to constant reinterpretation and re-evaluation at the level of human praxis: “Human action, too, is opened to anybody who *can read*” (Ricoeur 1991: 150–156). In short, an action is an appropriable *Aus-sage*, a “speaking out,” or an utterance of a human agent (Ricoeur 1991: 146–147). The implied idea, reaffirming the need of approaching action hermeneutically, is that Ricoeur finds there to be “an interesting link between the specific plurivocity of the text and the analogical plurivocity of human action” (Ricoeur 1991: 160). Referring to Anscombe’s *Intention* and Melden’s *Free Action*, Ricoeur thereby also makes the point that reason-giving and explaining action amounts to “an expression, or a phrase, that allows us to consider action *as this or that*” (Ricoeur 1991: 160). All in all, the two distinct realms of text and action converge by virtue of the fact that both can be understood.

Not merely a derived notion but the nexus of Ricoeur’s thought opens up from this understandability; his concern is in the hermeneutical subject aiming to understand him or herself. Action plays a crucial role in this as, according to Ricoeur, a subject understands him or herself as an agent in and through the action that arises from the motivational basis that is both construed and “distanced” in that same event of action:

What seems to legitimate this extension of understanding the meaning of a text to understanding the meaning of an action is that in arguing about the meaning of an action I put my wants and my beliefs at a distance and submit them to a concrete dialectic of confrontation with opposite [sociocultural] points of view. This way of putting my action at a distance in order to make sense of my own motives paves the way for the kind

of distanciation which occurs with what we called the social *inscription* of human action and to which we applied the metaphor of the “record.” The same actions that may be put into “records” and henceforth “recorded” may also be *explained* in different ways according to the plurivocity of the arguments applied to their motivational background.

(Ricœur 1991: 161)

All human action, in other words, becomes meaningful – as well as explainable in some manner – in objectifying the acting person’s wants and beliefs and giving them a shape of a “record” that can then be explained (in a sociocultural sphere) as a correlate of this motivational basis: “the texture of action is transposed into a cultural text” (Ricœur 1991: 195). Through this “putting at distance” as the very “fixing that occurs in writing,” and its corresponding modes of explaining, action also enables self-understanding. Ricœur maintains, in other words, that appropriation is self-interpretation, or understanding one’s self better through physical action that is hermeneutically ascribed and “explained” to one’s own self.

Ricœur’s slightly later essay “Explanation and Understanding: On Some Remarkable Connections between the Theory of Texts, Action Theory, and the Theory of History” (1977) capitalizes on this discussion by further clarifying the relation between the agent and action. In short, Ricœur adopts the full-blooded approach to agency and action, that is, takes into account the agent of action as a situated self who desires, wants, acts, and interprets his or her own being. In spite of such emphasis on the acting self, Ricœur’s theory nevertheless oscillates between event-causation (*viz.* biophysical necessity) and agent-causation (*viz.* intentionality and volition) – or takes into account them both as Ricœur also forcefully argues in his dialogical exploration of the philosophy of mind in *What Makes Us Think?* (1998). From the vantage point of human experience, or that of phenomenology, the focus of interest is in a subject “who is ‘mental’ and ‘corporeal’” (Ricœur and Changeaux 2002: 28, 128–129, 162–178); the essay on explanation and understanding grounds this claim. Showing the limits of the Humean notion of causation by critically assessing the work of later Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Austin, the main point Ricœur wants to make against “semantic and epistemological dualism” (Ricœur 1991: 135) – using both von Wright’s notion of a “closed system” and Danto’s notion of “basic action” as his guide – is that the theories whose outcome is dichotomous should be discarded in favor of a theory that espouses dialectical dynamism. It only produces an illusory dissolution of the philosophical problem of action to dichotomously set the discourse of explanation, causality, and factuality against that of understanding, motives, intentions, and reasons.

As *bios* and *logos* are chiasmically intertwined in human experience, human action too pertains to the two realms at once: “Human being is as it is precisely because it belongs both to the domain of causation and to that of motivation, hence to explanation and to understanding” (Ricœur 1991: 135). In other words, the proposed dynamism is enriching also in the sense that understanding “envelops explanation” whereas explanation “develops understanding analytically” (Ricœur 1991: 142). Put together, the theories of von Wright and Danto show that

the relation between doing something immediately (basic action) and making something happen mediately (by doing something that is in my power) follows the lines of the causal analysis of closed systems. . . . these two elements – the course of things and human action – are intertwined in the notion of *intervention* in the course of things.

(Ricœur 1991: 136–137. Cf. Ricœur 1977a: 26–30, 104–108)

According to Ricœur, this notion of intervention allows for a correlating notion of an agent, thereby bringing the agent and action theoretically together. Ricœur's response to Hume and the theorists following his model of universal causation is, therefore, that "human action and physical causation are too interconnected in this entirely basic experience of the intervention of an agent in the course of things for one to abstract from the first term and raise the second to an absolute" (Ricœur 1991: 137). Even though Ricœur thereby most certainly harkens back to Aristotle's view that reasons are causes, he also maintains the view that the agent is also affected by physical causality – but not in any deterministic sense that would preclude the possibility of intervention.⁵ A semantic approach to the question of causation reveals that the agent and the action-event are interrelated.

It is on these grounds that Ricœur offers an extended discussion of action and agency in one of his most read works with which we opened this essay and with which we will also close it. In *Oneself as Another* (1990), Ricœur elaborates his ethically, practically, and ontologically concerned hermeneutic theory of the self in form of a theory of narrative identity. This manifold analysis is later echoed in *The Course of Recognition* and in Ricœur's Kluge Prize acceptance speech that both enlisted the human powers Ricœur holds to be constitutive: the capacity to have a personal identity that is reconfigured in saying, acting, recounting, and in moral ascription. As Ricœur explains, the theme of narrative identity is approached in *Oneself as Another* by manner of four interlinked questions that nevertheless also demarcate distinct realms of philosophical exploration pertaining to the self. In spite of such willful fragmentation, however, it is clear from the beginning that for Ricœur the self is inherently active – ultimately so in its foundational act of self-attestation. This notion of the acting self that is "implied reflexively in its operations" is the thread that holds the work together through its distinct realms of analysis; "these studies together have as their thematic unity *human action*."⁶ In sum, known for its theory of narrative identity, *Oneself as Another* unfolds as a sophisticated reflection on the interlink between action and agency.

Ricœur begins his analyses of the self in *Oneself as Another* by first addressing the question "who is speaking?" – or, rather, "*of whom* does one speak in designating persons" – from "the twofold perspective of semantics and pragmatics" as discussed in the Analytic philosophy of language (Ricœur 1992: 16–17). As Ricœur's discussion particularly draws from those of Strawson, Austin, and Searle – leading him again to address the speech act theory – it is understandable that the second question *Oneself as Another* deals with is agency. In short, "it is in speech acts that the agent of action designates himself or herself as the one who is acting" (Ricœur 1992: 17). Taking this particular question, "who is acting?," as another way to approach the question of the ultimately hermeneutic self, Ricœur nevertheless again follows the resources provided by the Analytic philosophy of action in its asking about "what" and "why." The hypothesis is that taking a detour through these two questions will prove to be helpful in terms of pointing out the need for the "who" of action/agency. Without the need to repeat Ricœur's criticism of Anscombe and Davidson, it can be reminded that Ricœur wishes to draw attention to the agent "as the *possessor* of his or her action" (Ricœur 1992: 85). Aspiring to make a move from the semantics of action to the pragmatics of the agent, Ricœur thereby continues by discussing attribution as ascription, or "ascribing an action to an agent" (Ricœur 1992: 89), in the manner Strawson does in *Individuals*. In Ricœur's hands, however, the issue is pushed toward the direction of Danto and von Wright, meaning that the discussion concerning "intervention" in *Time and Narrative 1* and *From Text to Action* is re-enacted in *Oneself as Another* in a novel manner.

At this point we are able to proceed with the two remaining questions Ricœur proposed to study in *Oneself as Another*. The following will demonstrate that in spite of his

extended discussions on the relevant viewpoints and theories addressed in Analytic philosophy, Ricœur's own philosophical pursuit is consistently phenomenological and hermeneutical. First, in spite of addressing analytical discussions and concerns, Ricœur nevertheless ultimately understands the semantics of action to clarify meaningful action. His conviction is that action, in distinction to mere physical movement, can and must be meaningful or meaning-bearing. In other words, Ricœur's linguistic analyses as well as his relating hermeneutical dialectics of explanation–understanding most certainly were worthwhile pursuits themselves, but they ultimately served his “attempts to make the field of practice, and in general human action, the privileged place” of such hermeneutics (Ricœur 1995a: 32). Second, this hermeneutic opens a way to pursue an existentially attuned phenomenology, as can be seen in what follows in *Oneself as Another*. Ricœur's questions regarding the speaking and acting subject constitute only the first half of the overall arch of the discussion that is aimed at exposing – or at least drawing the reader close to recognizing – the ethical, practical, and ontological reality of an “acting and suffering subject” by means of elaborating a “phenomenology of ‘I can’” (Ricœur 1992: 112).

The third and fourth questions, “who is recounting about himself or herself?” and “who is the moral subject of imputation?,” (Ricœur 1992: 16) are, respectively, tied in with the questions of temporal personal identity and ethical ascription. Here the notion of meaningful action, now standing for an autonomous and yet situated agent, reappears as relevant. Defining narrative identity or “selfhood” as ipseity or *ipse*-identity (in distinction from *idem*-identity that understands identity as either numerical or qualitative sameness), the discussion concerning the agent – or, rather, the “acting and suffering subject” as a *phronimos* – quickly expands into a phenomenologically attuned ethics concerning self-ascription or holding oneself “accountable for my actions before another” (Ricœur 1992: 165, 178). This move – that echoes Ricœur's earlier convictions that “the description of action is the base on which an ethics could be construed” and “an ethics is also a politics” (Ricœur 1977a: 18–19) – would be quite extraordinary in the field of Analytic philosophy whereas for Ricœur it organically grows out from the preceding studies in action and agency. In terms of meaningful action, Ricœur holds, human agency comes explicit in the *ethical intention* of “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” (Ricœur 1992: 172). This brief summarizing phrase of the ethico-politically and practically accentuating response to the question of “who,” which culminates the discussion and leads it to the relating ontological implications Ricœur addresses in the end of this work, conceals the fact that the discussion about such imputation itself is materially substantiating in terms of Ricœur's philosophical work well beyond *Oneself as Another*.⁷

In form of a brief conclusion we can therefore state that Ricœur's “bottom line” of “phenomenology of being able” is thereby merely a reiteration of his earlier aim of revealing phenomenologically “the fundamental human possibilities” (Ricœur 1966: 3; Ricœur and Kearney 2004: 167). In Ricœur's thought, finding ourselves capable of being ethically responsible agents – at which level the self finds itself as an active ethico-political co-citizen – relies on the continuously exercised and tested capacity to act (physically, linguistically, mnemonically, narratively, and so on) that, in turn, relies on the reflective, self-ascribing, and embodied *cogito*, and, most fundamentally, on the pre-reflexive imputation. All these together constitute the “I can” Ricœur sought to clarify:

It is necessary to uncover the most primitive possibility of myself, which I launch within myself in making up *my* mind. This is the easiest analysis because it still refers to our analysis of the project. In effect, for a responsible being, that is, a being who *commits*

himself in the project of an action which he at the same time recognizes as his, determining *oneself* is still one with determining his gesture *in the world*. We can thus search out what possibility of *myself* is simultaneous with the possibility of *action* opened up by the project.

(Ricœur 1966: 63)

As Ricœur's early statement makes evident, his philosophy of a "living, acting, and suffering subject" was from its incipient stage asking about meaningful action, or, action as meaningful in pursuing a phenomenology of "I can" (Ricœur 1992: 112). Being invested in action bears significance as *my* action, recognized as pertaining to my self from the very beginning. But the wording here is intentionally indeterminate; Ricœur's reference to the "easiest analysis" is meant to caution his readers about the fact that a pure analysis of the agent is never fully achievable. "To understand freedom is to understand precisely the *history* which we have held in suspension" (Ricœur 1966: 65). The self is never only for itself whereas it is always also with others in its situatedness that it has to unceasingly interpret.

Notes

- 1 The crucial role that the notion of responsibility has for Ricœur's thought is also evident in his discussions concerning Analytic philosophy. Cf. Dierckxsens (2017: 578–584).
- 2 Ricœur (1969: 348, 355). The essence of Ricœur's "wager" is captured with the phrase *le symbole donne à penser*. In short, the symbol gives or donates a "gift" (*don*) for thought by giving rise to thinking.
- 3 This context does not, unfortunately, allow us to address Ricœur's philosophy of imagination that plays an inherently important role in his philosophy of action. For a brief commentary on the imagination, cf. Ricœur's essay "Imagination in Discourse and Action." Ricœur (1991: 168–187).
- 4 Ricœur's hermeneutic and phenomenological theory of action extends to and covers the questions of human work in texts such as *Fallible Man* and *Freud and Philosophy*. For a concise discussion of praxis as labor in reference to Ricœur's *History and Truth*, cf. Jervolino (1996: 70–76).
- 5 It should be noted that the term "cause" has a different signification for Hume and Aristotle. Cf. Hutto (2013: 63–64).
- 6 Ricœur (1992: 18–19). For a clear and concise exposition of the interrelatedness between narrated action and narrative identity, cf. Pellauer (2015).
- 7 Cf. Ricœur's "little ethics" in studies seven, eight, and nine of *Oneself as Another*; see Ricœur (1992: 169–296).

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