

# Freedom of Will and Freedom from Will: Personal Autonomy in Paul Ricœur

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## Abstract

Personal autonomy can be understood either in morally neutral terms as the capacity of individual self-determination, or in the more Kantian terms as the free self-legislation, a person being autonomous only if he or she is subject to the laws established or accepted by him or herself. The paper does not deal with autonomy in this latter, moral sense, but only in the sense of the individual's capacity to decide and to act accordingly. This capacity was considered by Ricœur to be an important expression of human activity both in his early phenomenological work *Freedom and Nature* and in his hermeneutic monograph *Oneself as Another*. Ricœur repeatedly underlines the largely dependent character of human decision and agency, but at the same time, he discards the existentialist emphasis on the experience of anxiety, dizziness, and indecisive hesitation as a "castration of an initial willing." This might suggest that his account of autonomy is voluntaristic in a sense. The paper examines the link between autonomy and will, as we find it in Ricœur's early phenomenology, and between autonomy and interpretation, developed in Ricœur's hermeneutics of human agency. The author questions the identification of freedom with the will in the early work and shows that the later, hermeneutic theory of personal autonomy moves away from this identification. While the late theory is inspiring in the way it transcends the will paradigm in thinking about individual autonomy, the early theory retains relevance for the contemporary analysis of autonomy in media. The online media's "battle for attention" represents a threat to personal autonomy. This threat can be grasped phenomenologically through Ricœur's analysis of the relationship between attention and autonomy.

*Keywords:* decision, attention, free will, phenomenology, hermeneutics.

Throughout his philosophical work, Paul Ricœur keeps coming back to the concept of autonomy, both in a personal and a moral meaning. Even though the two meanings are connected, they should be kept separate. Moral autonomy draws on Kant's idea of self-legislation, i.e., an individual is autonomous if he or she is subject only to the laws which he or she has established or accepted by him or herself. The concept of personal autonomy is taken to be independent from reflections on morality, it is "morally neutral" and focuses on the fact that persons are sometimes able to decide and act accordingly on their own. Personal autonomy is thus "the person's competent self-direction free of manipulative and 'external' forces – in a word, 'self-government'." (Christman & Anderson, 2005, p. 3).

This paper focuses solely on personal autonomy, i.e., autonomy understood as an individual's capacity to decide and act (or refrain from acting) accordingly. Ricœur considered such capacity of self-determination to be an important expression of human activity both in his early, phenomenological work *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Ricœur, 1950 and 1966), and in his later monograph *Oneself as Another* (Ricœur, 1990 and 1992). In his early phenomenology of the will, he sometimes uses the term autonomy in the meaning of self-determination, for instance when talking about "the autonomy of a person with its own intentions and its own initiative" (Ricœur, 1966, p. 47). In his later hermeneutics of the self, Ricœur reserves the term "autonomy" solely for moral (Kantian) autonomy. Nevertheless, even here Ricœur makes a sustained effort to analyse human agency in relation to one's own life. I believe that Ricœur never abandoned the idea of personal autonomy as self-determination, though he did not want to pit this autonomy against the idea of dependence either. What he develops then, be it in his phenomenology or his hermeneutics, is a philosophy of dependent autonomy.<sup>1</sup>

The article reconstructs his idea of autonomy as dependent independence both in his early phenomenology of the will (part 1) and in his later hermeneutics of the self (part 3). During this exposition, some reservations are articulated concerning Ricœur's identification of the concept of freedom with the concept of the voluntary. These reservations will be spelled out on the background of his polemic with existentialism (part 2). I believe, consequently, that his early account should be revised in three respects, the main being the very concept of freedom. As I will show in the conclusion, Ricœur developed at least two concepts of personal autonomy in his philosophy. His early account can best be seen as advocating for the personal autonomy based on attentive (voluntary) intentional acts. His later, hermeneutic account develops a personal autonomy which consists in discovering what

<sup>1</sup> From the very beginning of his philosophical career, Ricœur resolutely dismisses any possibility of personal autonomy understood as radical independence. He states as early as 1950 that the "self as radical autonomy... is precisely fault" (Ricœur, 1966, p. 29).

a good life is by oneself. This account is less burdened by the conflation of freedom and will.

### 1. *Personal Autonomy in Ricœur's Phenomenology of Decision-Making*

As the title of the work *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* clearly suggests, Ricœur starts with the idea of a fundamental bipolar character of human existence. Through the acts of our will, we have a certain hold on our life, yet it remains partly beyond our control. Our decision-making and actions are limited and remain dependent on non-voluntary sources, on our motives, emotions, and habits. This is clearly expressed in his choice of opening poem for the whole book. Ricœur cites Rilke's poem that describes a horseman who is connected to his horse, yet he is not one with the horse (Rilke, 1997, I/11, p. 63).<sup>2</sup>

In Ricœur's early thought, deciding is one of the three basic forms of willing, along with acting and consenting ("le consentement"). Each of the three forms of the voluntary is connected to a specific form of the involuntary. The decision is related to the motivation on which it is based. The second form of the voluntary, the action, stands in complex relation to "bodily spontaneity" (unlearned bodily faculties, emotions, habits). Lastly, through consent, the will relates to that which it cannot change, such as different phenomena of organic life, aging and the passage of time in general, personal character, and the unconscious. An analysis of decision-making thus forms a key part of Ricœur's philosophy of will. It elucidates, for example, how Ricœur conceives of freedom.

When defining the concept of decision, Ricœur states that a decision is, phenomenologically speaking, an intentional act. To decide is to "mean something," "to intend" or to have something in mind. A decision, once adopted, "means" (or "indicates") a state of affairs which is, for the time being, only future. Ricœur sets decision apart from other acts through which our consciousness refers to future states. We do not decide whether it will rain tomorrow. Decision is distinct, for example, from prediction, wish or command, all of which also refer to a particular future state. A decision, unlike the other acts, is related only to that which "*depends on me and which is within my power*" (Ricœur, 1966, p. 43). This first definition of decision—an act of intending a future which is in my power—is completed by Ricœur in many respects; let us mention but two. Every decision is based on certain motives, even if they are unclear or hidden, and every decision is made by someone

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, Freud mentions the very same metaphor in *The Ego and the Id*, pointing out that "Often a rider, if he is not to be parted from his horse, is obliged to guide it where it wants to go" (Freud, 1961, p. 25).

who is to execute it. Consequently, even without my awareness, my decision is a determination of myself and by myself. I am pre-reflexively implied in my choice. The decision thus has a tripartite structure which comprises a plan for a future action, motivation, and self-determination: I decide to do something by myself based on certain motives. Once a decision is taken, this tripartite structure becomes articulate: I know *what* I want to do, *why*, and I understand, even if implicitly, what it means for *me*. Self-determination is thus a constitutive part of every decision, even though it often remains implicit: I am focused on what is to be done, not on myself.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the decision, that is, while our decision is only taking shape and we are hesitant and undecided, the holistic structure of the decision is already in place, though inarticulate: it is unclear what I am to do, my motives are ambiguous, too many or too scarce, and my commitment to the action is tenuous. Deciding is a progression from indeterminacy (indecision) to determination.

The description of the *process* of deciding—the “history of decision”<sup>4</sup>—represents the very core of Ricœur’s phenomenology of decision. The focus is no longer on the static structure of the constitutive parts of every decision, but on the temporal process in which a decision is sought and takes shape. The person thus considers various options, evaluates the motives which support or invalidate these options, without immediately arriving at a decision. Ricœur conceives of this sequence as an ambivalent one. On the one hand, I do not invent the different sources of motivation that divide me, as I am passively exposed to my affective impulses and conflicts of duty. On the other hand, I can actively search for clarification, and it is me who has to take the choice. Within this experience, the flow of time is both “undergone and carried out” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 136). This ambivalent experience of time as a flow we suffer and as a flow we can steer reflects the fundamental duality of Ricœur’s *Philosophy of the Will* (Ricœur, 1966, pp. 483–484). Consequently, the process of decision formation can be interpreted both in terms of continuity and discontinuity. The interpretation or – as Ricœur puts it – the “reading of decision in terms of continuity” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 168) portrays choice as a rational conclusion drawn from certain premises. The “reading in terms of discontinuity” conceives of choice as a leap that must be undertaken by the individual.

The “reading of decision in terms of continuity” is more characteristic of rationalist philosophy, represented for Ricœur by such figures as Aquinas, Descartes, and Malebranche. This reading can evoke cases where we look for the appropriate means to attain our ends, or – in Ricœur’s words – where our decision involves “technical discussion, resolved on the basis of economy”

<sup>3</sup> Self-determination in this pre-reflective sense is an implicit and built-in feature of each decision and action, and not something we can choose or abstain from. The question is not whether we can determine ourselves, we do this all the time, but rather how precisely we do it.

<sup>4</sup> Ricœur 1966, p. 135. See the title of the chapter “History of Decision: From Hesitation to Choice”.

(Ricœur, 1966, p. 169). When deciding how to get home from work, I am not faced with a very difficult choice, as I only have to assess the expediency of the given means. Although in such cases, the choice can be very similar to the necessary conclusion, the two are not one and the same.<sup>5</sup> The decision will not arise by itself, someone must take it upon him or herself. A decision thus always remains a project: the self projects the action, i.e., casts the thing to be done ahead of itself (Ricœur, 1966, p. 171). This impossibility to completely negate the voluntarist aspect of decision-making invites us to side with philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Sartre, and to embrace the “reading of decision in terms of discontinuity”. Our decision cannot be fully derived from the reasons we have. This reading particularly brings to mind cases where our ends or duties clash, “where our choice is ethical rather than technical” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 173). We can think of the example Ricœur himself gives in his book-length interview. At the beginning of the Second World War, Ricœur was an officer of troops that had been surrounded and he was faced with the decision whether to fight or surrender (Ricœur, 1995, p. 31). We can also give examples of decisions that had to be taken in the absence of sufficient information and knowledge (as in many covid-related decisions). The decision Winston Churchill was forced to take in his early days as prime minister can serve as another example here (i.e., his refusal to seek peace treaty with the Nazi Germany, as depicted in the 2017 movie *Darkest Hour*). The general point Ricœur makes here is as follows: even the most “logical” and continuous decision-making process has a voluntaristic aspect, and even the most voluntaristic or irrational decision refers to some reason and is thus not a mere discontinuity. Each decision is a combination of reasoning and boldness. The decision-making process is the practical reconciliation of a paradox which does not allow for a theoretical solution.<sup>6</sup> In philosophical literature, similar descriptions of the decision-making process can be found. To name but one, let us cite Ernst Tugendhat:

The choice cannot be understood as self-determination, either (a) if one denies its irreducible volitional character, that is, if one claims to be able to reduce it to rationality, or (b) if ... one denies that it must be able to rest upon justification. (Tugendhat, 1986, p. 217)

The most original part of Ricœur’s early account can be found in the next step, once he introduces the concept of “attention.”

Ricœur compares the process of decision formation with perception. While doing this, he makes an important distinction. Perception can be ex-

<sup>5</sup> “I do not have to come to a conclusion” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 170).

<sup>6</sup> See Ricœur 1950, p. 159: “conciliation pratique du paradoxe” (or p. 197: “réconciliation dans l’acte”). See also Ricœur 1951, p. 21: “il faudrait que le choix satisfasse à la fois à la légitimité et à l’inventivité; à la valeur et à l’audace d’exister.”

perienced either passively—I can be enchanted, obsessed, or fascinated by that which I perceive—or actively, in the mode of attention. In the latter case, I am not simply seeing something, but looking at it, no longer hearing, but listening to it, etc. In the former case, I do not have the “power of changing the object” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 165), I become, on the contrary, “a victim of the object” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 155). In the latter case, I do have the “power of making appear ... objects or aspects of objects, by drawing them from the background.” They then start to “stand out,” they receive an “outline in space” or a “clarity” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 154), which are not qualities of their being, but of the way they appear. Although I am guided by objects, “I orient myself among the appearances” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 155). Attention is a general ability that can be associated with different intentional acts.

The process of perceiving is one possible application of attention, the process of deliberation and decision-making is another. Our consciousness is now focused no longer on objects and their aspects, but on motifs and values. They start to “stand out” in their outline and clarity. The gaze directed at them is both receptive and active because it combines the docility and “the mobility of vision” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 159).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, attention can both move and come to a standstill, i.e., it is both a continuous and a discontinuous process. Ricœur does not believe this could solve the paradox of the double interpretation of deciding as being both continuous and discontinuous. The paradox at a theoretical level remains. Yet what has changed is that it is only in the attentive mode and not in the degraded mode of “bound attention” (Ricœur, 1966 p. 155) that the process of deliberation and decision-making can be qualified as free. It is only if I can change my focus, if I am capable of allowing motives and options to come to the fore or recede into the background, that I am free. Ricœur even compares such deliberation to legal deliberations in court. An individual who deliberates—when considering different motives—is similar to a judge who calls witnesses forward and then sits them back on the bench. This is of paramount importance for the concept of freedom in Ricœur’s *Philosophy of the Will*: freedom of decision consists in the mobility of the gaze. Our acts—remembering, perceiving, imagining, deciding, acting—are free only if executed in a certain attentive mode. The freedom we can aspire to is “freedom of attention.” It is precisely in this ability to steer the course of our deliberation that, according to Ricœur, the “free” or “voluntary” character of choice consists. The terms “free” and “voluntary” refer to the mode in which our intentional acts are executed. “Free” and “voluntary” are synonymous terms (Ricœur, 1966, p. 152), standing in opposition to “fascinated”, “obsessed” or “bound”.

<sup>7</sup> It is when we are the most attentive, i.e., active, that we are also the most receptive, “the highest activity brings about greatest receptivity” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 155).

## 2. Ricœur's Exchange with Existentialism: Freedom and Anxiety

Nevertheless, we can call into question the identification of freedom with the voluntary character of our acts, be they acts of perception or deliberation. For authors such as Kierkegaard, Sartre and Heidegger, the fundamental experience of freedom is the experience of dizziness and anxiety, which implies our incapacity to act. Ricœur himself describes this feeling of incapacity in terms which resemble Jean-Paul Sartre's (Ricœur, 1966, p. 63). When deciding, I relate to my future existence, to something which is merely possible, and which depends only on myself. When I realize the power I have over my own future, I can experience anxiety, I can be overcome with vertigo. Thus, I will be separated from my project, unable to give my future a clear outline: my action is suspended, and my capacity turns into impotence. Anxiety is precisely my capacity deprived of its project ("le pouvoir sans projet", Ricœur 1950, p. 80; Ricœur, 1966, p. 83 "ability without project").

In opposition to this existentialism of anxiety, Ricœur claims that capacity can never be completely separated from the action in question. It is, in Ricœur's words, "the capacity which an act opens up before itself" (Ricœur, 1966, p. 64). In a situation where my capacity is disconnected from my action, I do not experience freedom at all. This is where Ricœur and Sartre disagree. Sartre gives an example of a book he is writing. The fully completed book is but a possibility:

This work is a possibility in connection with which I can feel anguish; it is truly *my* possibility, and I do not know whether I will continue it tomorrow; tomorrow in relation to it my freedom can exercise its nihilating power. (Sartre 1992, p. 36–37)

I believe that Ricœur would redescribe this example by stating that the very concept of power consists precisely in connecting the possibility with the actuality of the book, not in separating the two. Our capacity is always a capacity to do something, a positive power. Ricœur connects the experience of freedom with Descartes' concept of "generosity":

It seems to me completely mistaken to tie the experience of freedom to madness [vertige] or dread [effroi]. The experience of *exercised* freedom is free from anxiety... The "generosity" [générosité] which Descartes teaches is free of anxiety. (Ricœur, 1966, p. 65)

Ricœur's argument, I believe, is a conceptual one: the capacity and act are mutually related. The capacity is that which the action "opens up" before or ahead of itself, and the action can only be considered an action, and not

merely a process, if it retains the meaning of the fulfillment of a capacity. A reflection on my having the possibility in question and on the fact that I have not yet performed the respective action does not in itself lead to anxiety.

And yet, anxiety exists, and it can arise in the middle of our decision-making. This is not something that Ricœur denies. Instead, he undertakes to give an alternative interpretation of anxiety by connecting it with hesitation. When hesitating, we realize that not only the choice but also the lack of choice is up to us. Ricœur interprets anxiety as indecisiveness. He even maintains that the experience of anxiety as indecision qualifies us as human beings.<sup>8</sup> However, anxiety is not tantamount to freedom. The freedom to act is reborn once we put an end to our hesitation and set out to act. Freedom thus implies a leap.

But this leap is not the fruit of anxiety, it is wrenched from it [il est repris sur elle] as a second immediacy of willing. Yet anxiety itself was not initial, but rather wrenched from the generosity of the thrust [élan]. I suspend the parentheses which suspended the act. ... I unmask the potential ability [le pouvoir-pouvoir] as a castration of an initial willing which discovers its own power in exercising it. (Ricœur, 1966 p. 189; Ricœur 1950, p. 179)<sup>9</sup>

According to Ricœur, the movement of the will in the formation of a decision is dialectical in nature. It starts from the “initial willing”, or first immediacy, which Ricœur expresses with the Bergsonian term “élan” (“thrust”). This positive striving is interrupted, put into brackets. After attentive deliberation, we arrive at a decision, and we accomplish our action. By doing this, we rediscover the original, positive striving in a more mature form, we come back to some sort of naïveté. The original naïveté has to be broken. This is what anxiety understood as hesitation or indecision does. It is then reborn as the second naïveté or “second immediacy”, as “a naïveté which has matured in the experience of anxiety” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 83; Ricœur, 1950, p. 80).

I believe that this reveals one of the key assumptions of Ricœur’s *Philosophy of the Will*: the positive thrust is the most fundamental layer of activity to which there is no alternative. While the formation of a particular decision involves hesitation between different options, the individual’s consciousness is constantly being driven by the fundamental “thrust.” As articulated by Ricœur, “all hesitation, all alternatives stand out of a ground of a willing without alternatives” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 165; Ricœur, 1950, p. 157: “vouloir sans alternative”). Ricœur even concludes: “Maybe there is no absolutely

<sup>8</sup> He describes it as “a loss of thrust, loss of naïveté and of youth” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 189).

<sup>9</sup> For a similar structure—negativity is not prior, but comes after positivity—see Ricœur’s highly complex analysis of negativity, esp. the concept “de-négation”: we deny denial, we are in the positive both at the beginning, and at the end (Ricœur, 2001).



radical alternative in the form of ‘to be or not to be.’” (Ricœur, 1950, p. 157). I believe that we also find this willing without alternatives later in *Oneself as Another*, this time in the more teleological, Aristotelian sense of pursuing a good life, or in Ricœur’s return to Spinoza’s term “conatus.”

We can thus summarize the picture of autonomy at hand here. Ricœur is advocating for a certain concept of autonomy in the sense of independence, yet it is a “dependent independence” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 483). We do have the autonomy of choice, but we create neither the options for the given situation, nor the affective forces or ethical values that motivate us and thus furnish our decision with the necessary framework. This is why Ricœur describes willing not as the beginning of movement, but as the modification of already existing movement: “Willing only moves on the condition of being moved” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 276). The freedom we have is, as he posits in the conclusion of his *Freedom and Nature*, “only human.”

And yet, the question arises: even in light of the above, is not the existentialist objection still sound? I believe that Ricœur does not provide enough space for difficult decisions. While he does mention cases of conflict where different ends of one’s life or different duties clash, he fails to draw the relevant philosophical consequences. I have already mentioned the example of Ricœur as an officer of surrounded troops at the beginning of the Second World War, having to decide between fighting in vain and surrendering. Aristotle calls this type of action “mixed,” such as the case when sailors throw goods overboard during a sea storm. As they are acting out of external urgency, the action should be considered involuntary, but since it is up to them to decide, it is voluntary. “Mixed actions” prove that one can be compelled to choose something that one does not actually want *per se* (Aristotle, 2009, 1110a 11–12). According to Heidegger, there is a built-in negativity and even guilt in each decision, a negativity which manifests itself precisely in anxiety.<sup>10</sup> As a model example, we can recall the dilemma described by Sartre in his 1946 lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.<sup>11</sup> If Ricœur believes that such dilemmas are real, and I believe he does, he should have revised his own analysis of the continuity and discontinuity of decision-making. Let us briefly sketch such a revision.

Firstly, each reading covers a different type of decision and implies a different concept of freedom. While the more technical decisions allow for an understanding of human freedom as coextensive with the voluntary, the less technical and more “ethical” decisions introduce a different concept of freedom. The context of such a decision is often not self-selected, but something

<sup>10</sup> “Die gemeinte Nichtigkeit gehört zum Freisein des Daseins für seine existenziellen Möglichkeiten. Die Freiheit aber ist nur in der Wahl der einen, das heißt im Tragen des Nichtgewählthabens und Nichtauchwählenkönnens der anderen.” (Heidegger 1993, § 58, p. 285).

<sup>11</sup> A young man during WWII is confronted with a choice: either to go to England and join the Free French Forces, or to stay with his mother for whom he was the only close person left (Sartre, 1996, p. 41).

we passively arrive at, whether through aging (career related decisions, important decisions pertaining to family life or public engagement) or through events that we find difficult or impossible to influence (such as whether and how we engage in conversation with a dying person). A decision we take in these cases can only be described as “voluntary” with reservations, echoing the famous existentialist freedom to which we are condemned. This inspires us to refuse Ricœur’s identification of freedom with the voluntary. Maybe we can make a distinction here between the freedom we have and the freedom we are. I believe that Ricœur was later much more willing to incorporate this into his philosophy, e.g., by writing a chapter on the “tragic action” in his *Oneself as Another*.

Secondly, a decision, once taken, does not necessarily represent the end of all hesitation. There is a second life to our decisions. The “mature” life Ricœur refers to might be a life unsettled by the necessity of adopting a controversial decision, a life that still carries the uneasiness within it. The decision made by Winston Churchill still attracts the attention of filmmakers and repeatedly enters the process of negotiation of the British collective identity. The decision of Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš in favor of the expulsion of German citizens after WWII has had and still has a long and very contested afterlife. A past decision lives on, as we revisit, reconsider, correct, confirm, or abandon it. Ricœur eventually became much more open to this involuntary and unwilling aspect of our freedom when he said: “we never stop rectifying our initial choices” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 178).

Thirdly, hard choices stand in a relation to our identity. They have revealing and transformative potential. As Charles Taylor suggests, “A self decides and acts out of certain fundamental evaluations” (Taylor, 1985, p. 35). They constitute the pre-existing background of my decisions and even enable me to “define an identity for myself that is not trivial” (Taylor 1991, p. 40–41). This invites us to see difficult cases as situations which are revealing of ourselves and are even potentially transformative.<sup>12</sup> They present an opportunity for personal change that we would not initiate on our own, voluntarily. Again, “free” and “voluntary” do not coincide here.

### 3. *Autonomy in Ricœur’s Hermeneutics of the Self*

Ricœur’s later hermeneutics of the self in his *Oneself as Another*, in the part dedicated to what could be called “personal autonomy,” subscribes to a fundamental claim which opens Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Every action and every decision aim towards some good. Since some goods are subordinate

<sup>12</sup> Ricœur hints occasionally to such a perspective already in *Freedom and Nature*, without nevertheless transforming it to a more developed account. See e.g.: “La personne naît de son écartèlement dans les conflits de devoirs” (Ricœur, 1950, p. 141).

to other goods, there may be an overarching good which is the aim of different human activities, identified by Aristotle as the happy or successful life. Ricœur transposes this into his own philosophy under the heading "Aiming at the 'Good Life'" ("visée à la vie bonne"). This aiming does not represent a particular intention, such as the intention to learn to play piano, but an overall perspective. Such aiming thus does not have clearly determined criteria of success or failure as in the case of piano playing; the individual must therefore find out on their own accord, through concrete decisions and actions, what exactly the good life means to him or her. It is in this way that Ricœur approaches the idea of the limited or dependent autonomy of the individual in his later work. The key concept is no longer attention, but interpretation. According to Ricœur, individual life decisions are to be understood as different interpretations of the orientation toward the good life.

In this context, the term "life" is an evaluative term; it denotes "the unity of the person as a whole, as that person casts upon himself or herself the gaze of appraisal" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 178). The term life is both evaluative, and indeterminate. Life is "the nebula of ideals and dreams of achievements with regard to which a life is held to be more or less fulfilled or unfulfilled" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 179).<sup>13</sup> However indeterminate the whole of life may be, it is in its light that we interpret partial choices and actions. The idea of interpretation distances this philosophical account not only from Sartrean voluntarism but also from Ricœur's early emphasis on the will.

The idea that our decisions are interpretations of our aiming at the good life is understandable when contextualized within the "hierarchy of units of praxis" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 153). Ricœur distinguishes three units of praxis: practices, life plans, and the unity of life. "Practices" are the lowest level in this hierarchy. They refer to socially established complex activities, such as professions, games (not only chess or soccer, but also language games) and the arts. Once we have chosen, say, the profession of a concert pianist, teacher or politician, we determine only to a rather limited extent what can be considered the successful performance of that profession. It is then not the individual but the practice which prescribes what is to be done and how, should we succeed. The fact that practices have their own intrinsic good is of great importance for Ricœur, since it helps to "refute ... any solipsistic interpretation of self-esteem" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 176). It is thus both at the basic level of practices and at the top level of the unity of life that our decision-making and action is limited and dependent. As far as practices are concerned, we do not choose the goals that are intrinsic to these practices. Returning to the Aristotelian example, a doctor does not decide whether to

<sup>13</sup> This sentence shows that Ricœur is departing from Aristotle after all. Aristotle defines the good as the "activity of soul exhibiting virtue" (Aristotle, 2009, 1098a 16–17), not as the fulfilment of an ideal or individual project. For an elaborated version of this critique, see P. Canivez (2013, p. 156): "Cette interprétation fait problème en ce qu'elle attribue à la visée aristotélicienne du bonheur la structure moderne du projet."

heal, but how. As far as the unity of life is concerned, we neither decide whether our ultimate goal is the good life, nor do we decide which events deeply affect our lives. What, then, do we actually decide? Is there any field in which Sartre, and thus the voluntarism attributed to him by Ricœur, can retain his limited right? Decisions of life importance, according to Ricœur, concern the middle level of the hierarchy. Between the practices and the unity of life there are “global projects” which Ricœur calls “life plans.” This term emphasizes “the voluntary, even willful, side of what Sartre termed the existential project” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 178). Life plans include, e.g., the choice of a profession and its consequences, the choice of a life partner, the decision to have a family with children or not, to become a political activist or to take up a long-term leisure activity as a response to one’s mid-life crisis. How are such choices made? Ricœur characterizes them according to their intermediate position, that is, as a “back-and-forth movement between more or less distant ideals..., and the weighing of advantages and disadvantages of the choice of a particular life plan on the level of practices” (Ricœur, 1992, pp. 157–158). The choice concerns neither the aiming at the good life, nor the rules of the practices, but the individual practice as such: the choice is “the choice of a practice” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 178). A choice of vocation, life partner or leisure activity does not take place entirely in a vacuum. The choice of a life project has “advantages and disadvantages”, however “willful” it may be, and can be repeatedly affirmed or questioned:

We never stop rectifying our initial choices. Sometimes we change them entirely, when the confrontation shifts from the level of the execution of practices that have already been chosen to the question of the adequation between the choice of a practice and our life’s ideals, however vague these may be, and yet at times even overriding the rules of a profession we have considered up to that moment to be invariable. (Ricœur, 1992, p. 178).

The decisions about our life plans are fundamentally revisable. Ricœur seems to be more open to fundamental hesitation and doubt here than in his phenomenology of decision-making. We can never preclude that “doubts arise about the direction of our life” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 179). According to Ricœur, the possibility of fundamental doubt regarding an individual’s most important life choices shows that there is always “a tension, most often a discrete and tacit one, between the closed and the open within the global structure of praxis” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 179). Even though Ricœur does not speak about freedom here, it is this interplay of the “open” (“l’ouvert”) and the “closed” (“le clos”) that makes a person free in his or her search for the good life. Interestingly enough, this freedom (“l’ouverture”) is not connected to agency and will, but to the possibility of hesitation and doubt. The question that can

always arise is whether the activities that occupy most of our time and the goals we strive for within them really reflect our idea of the successful life.

Doubts about our life choices are, nevertheless, very different from existentialist anxiety, because they are not completely unstructured. They can be transformed into the evaluation of our life choices in terms of their appropriateness or adequacy. Not only can a life decision be judged as good or bad, as adequate or inadequate. Moreover, it is defined by Ricœur as a search for adequation. This view bears the clear markings of hermeneutic philosophy:

It is in unending work of interpretation applied to action and to oneself that we pursue the search for adequation between what seems to us to be best with regard to our life as a whole and the preferential choices that govern our practices. (Ricœur, 1992, p. 179)

Decision-making concerning our life plans is an interpretation in two respects. First, there is a kind of circle between the “good life” and the individual decisions, which can be seen as a hermeneutic circle between the whole and the part, where the understanding of the whole (the ideal life) influences the understanding of the part (a particular case: the choice of a practice) and vice versa.<sup>14</sup> Second, the meaning involved in life choices is a meaning *for someone*: what is interpreted is one’s own life. The person who decides and acts is, in the words of Ricœur drawing on Charles Taylor, a self-interpreting animal. The appropriateness of a life decision can be evaluated, but never fully verified. We may possess “experiential evidence” that we have chosen well or badly, but this has epistemic status to which Ricœur returns again and again in his hermeneutics of the self: we do not have certainty, but conviction. In this case, we have the conviction “to judge well and to act well in a momentary and provisional approximation to the good life” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 180).

Ricœur extends this interpretative model far beyond the limits of the individual’s life orientation. It applies not only to decisions concerning life plans (career, partner, family), but also to conflict situations that arise unexpectedly and that can take the form of a moral dilemma. For example, an individual must decide whether and how to tell the truth to a dying person (Ricœur, 1992, pp. 269–270). Again, this is a decision that cannot be clearly deduced from existing rules and consequently bears the epistemic status of conviction. Yet, because it takes into account the rules of society and the views of others, this conviction that one has decided well translates into the self-esteem that internalizes, so to speak, these external evaluative aspects (rules, others, institutions). Ricœur goes so far as to make self-esteem, in line with Hegel, dependent on “recognition,” and to make this recognition

<sup>14</sup> As Gadamer has already shown in his reading of Aristotle, the individual determines at once the rule and the particular case (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 295–307).

a “structure of the self”. Our self-esteem is thus profoundly conditioned by others and society. Ricœur explicitly allows for these “conjunctions of the same and the other” to enter the very heart of the individual, i.e., his or her conscience (Ricœur, 1992, p. 296). In his hermeneutics, the self is inconceivable without others. Nevertheless, this constant presence of otherness does not take from the individual the burden of situational choice.

### *Conclusion: Personal Autonomy in Paul Ricœur*

In different parts of Ricœur’s work, autonomy and dependence are compatible: in his early account, the autonomy of a person in decision-making and action is dependent on the motives and bodily capacities; in the later account, personal autonomy in the shaping of one’s own life is dependent on the socially established practices and recognition of others.

In *Freedom and Nature*, “the autonomy of a person with its own intentions and its own initiative” (Ricœur, 1966, p. 47) consists in his or her capacity to decide and act accordingly in a way which qualifies as “voluntary.” The criterion of “voluntariness” refers to whether the deliberation was conducted attentively. It is not primarily the content of our deliberation—or of some other type of intentional act—but the mode in which it is executed which makes it voluntary. When hesitating, we undergo the temporal flow, but we can also carry it out actively. If the latter is the case, the resulting decision and action can be considered “our” decision and action. This is clearly a procedural account of autonomy.

Now, what would a lack of autonomy look like? Non-autonomous deliberation and action would most likely reveal different failures of attentiveness. One example could be unfocused, distracted decision-making caused by physical fatigue or insufficient training and self-discipline in attentiveness or mindfulness. This proves that attention is a capacity that must be protected and cultivated. Attention comes in varying degrees and can be learned and unlearned. Attention can even be alienated and sold. Ricœur’s idea appears to be very timely in this respect. The notion that our autonomy is connected with our capacity for attention has recently resurfaced in the discussion about our online presence, our “onlife.” Internet marketing is described by marketing consultants as an attempt at “Winning the Battle for the Attention” (Atkins 2015). The strategies for online visibility deprive us of our capacity to direct the attention. Our attention becomes something to be occupied, captured and sold. Thus, the link established by Ricœur between attention and autonomy can be useful in order to demonstrate that our personal autonomy is in danger. Recently, a group of authors reflecting on what it is to “be human in the hyperconnected era” wrote an “Online Manifesto”, claiming the following:

To the same extent that organs should not be exchanged on the market place, our attentional capabilities deserve protective treatment. Respect for attention should be linked to fundamental rights such as privacy and bodily integrity, as attentional capability is an inherent element of the relational self for the role it plays in the development of language, empathy, and collaboration. (Floridi, 2015, p. 13)

On a general level, the account of autonomy developed by Ricœur in his early phenomenology of decision-making is not, in the first place, an account of the autonomy of a person, but rather of the autonomy of certain processes—deciding, acting, perceiving, imagining. Here, autonomy is the voluntary mode in which certain episodes of our mental life can unfold. However, the autonomy of an attentively made decision reaches further and extends to the self of the one who decides. This is one of the consequences of Ricœur's claim that every decision is a pre-reflective self-determination. Thus, the autonomy based on attentive acts can be transferred to the person who performs them, but apparently only for as long as the person is in that mode (attention). It seems that the autonomy based on attention cannot be extended to include the individual person as such.

*Oneself as Another* is in a sense much more holistic. The autonomy we find here is the *autonomy in finding out what constitutes a good life*. This autonomy combines acts of self-determination (life choices) with acts of self-discovery, i.e. voluntaristic self-governance with interpretative self-disclosure. Ricœur's later account is much less voluntaristic, precisely because it presents decision-making not as direct self-determination, but as a mediating activity, as a "back-and-forth" movement in which we interpret our conception of the good life on the level of everyday practices. A decision is not only a choice, but also a judgment. The concept of freedom is not reduced to the voluntary, but it also extends to the flip side of the voluntary: the openness to fundamental doubt which may arise unexpectedly, and which can free us from our voluntaristic life plans.

A person has autonomy—autonomy in finding out what constitutes a good life—because it is only up to the particular person to determine what is good for him or her. This autonomy translates into conviction that the person leads a good life, and subsequently into self-esteem, because he or she receives recognition from others and internalizes it in the form of self-recognition. This also means that Ricœur's later account of autonomy is in many respects a relational one. Only as relational beings can we have personal autonomy. The fact that this autonomy consists in finding out, i.e., of our own accord, what a good life is for us, does not contradict the relational character of ourselves.

What would a lack of autonomy look like from this perspective? We can imagine a person living in the moment, unable to see how their activities re-

late to the overreaching unity of his or her own life. To use the terms coined by G. Strawson, only a diachronic person, not an episodic person, would lead an autonomous life (Strawson, 2004). Here we touch on the limitation of this account: this concept of autonomy sets the conditions for autonomy high, making it rather difficult to attain. This would imply that people unable or unwilling to make life plans, like the episodic Galen Strawson or Ulrich from *The Man without Qualities*, are lacking in autonomy, at least some part of it.

I have criticized Ricœur's early account of autonomy by calling attention to the erroneous equation of freedom with the voluntary; such an account cannot accommodate the phenomena of fundamental self-doubt and the process of self-discovery through identity crisis as valid experiences of freedom, freedom in the sense of liberation from oneself. Nevertheless, this early theory also has advantages. It is a less demanding concept of personal autonomy than the later one, as it poses no need to focus on the unity of one's own life in order to be an autonomous agent.

Upon examining the two phases of Ricœur's thought, we can observe a pronounced shift from a concept of autonomy which equates autonomy with freedom of will to a concept which is much more open to the possibility that one is autonomous not only in cases where one freely articulates their will (or life-project), but also in cases where the individual is liberated from such articulation. Freedom of choice and will is thus not necessarily the only form of personal autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

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