The Devalued Narrative Identity in the Age of Social Media: Calling for an Authentic Hermeneutics of the Self

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Abstract: Studies on "identity" have been sparking interest in contemporary philosophy wherein various views and approaches towards the topic arose. An interesting take on identity is offered by the French philosopher, Paul Ricœur (1913-2005), who advances an idea of the relationship between life and narrative. Simply put, for Ricœur, identity is the "story" of our lives—a story that encompasses emplotted events and experiences, from the good to the bad. To construct one's identity, a person must undergo a "hermeneutics of the self" in which Ricœur, following Socrates, suggests a thorough examination and interpretation of one's life, which would result to a truthful narration. In the age of digital technology and social media today, people found a way to easily create, distort, and manipulate their identities by projecting what they would like other people to see of them instead of actually projecting their actual lives. In other words, people obsequiously flatter other people, and so they constantly project a life that they think people would like in order for them to gain some social prominence. In the contemporary parlance, we may classify this as an act of "social climbing." Our overarching aim for this paper, therefore, is to provide a philosophical critique of this current culture, whereby we intend to assess whether the narrative identity constructed in social media can be equated to what our true narrative identity is, according to some ideas advanced by Ricœur. Following this analysis, we hope to reach a conclusion as to whether or not this "false" narrative identity built by such people in social media could be beneficial for their future.

Key Words: Ricœur; Narrative Identity; Social Media

Philosophy vis-à-vis Culture

As this piece is primarily a philosophical critique of culture, it is perhaps noteworthy to preface this paper with a short discussion on the relationship of philosophy with culture. The theme of this year's conference is "#ResearchforSustainableFuture" (that is, *Hashtag: Research for Sustainable Future*). The inclusion of the pound sign which we so conveniently call today as the "hashtag" probably implies that the congress wants to make its proceedings trending, in the sense that like what any other research congress desires, it seeks to make the collated researches known to everyone. In almost every research, we have what we call the "significance of the study." It is safe to assume that most of those who participated in the congress would want their studies to have impact in the future, whether groundbreaking or simply thought-provoking. Nevertheless, we may take "sustainable future" to mean that our future may not be as ideal as how we would want it to be, nor would it be a total break from what we have at the moment. If there will be any change, it should be gradual. This is why we look into our future as something that should be sustainable, bearable, or even supportable. It is for this very reason that we decided to do a philosophical critique of culture—a critique of culture coming from the vantage point of philosophy, a vantage point that might not be totally visible to other disciplines.

Looking at the structure of the research program, we find that there are various parallel sessions for technical fields. We presume that each field is confident in presenting researches that would be helpful for our future. But why is it that this very session is labelled as "theoretical, philosophical, & historical studies?" Why are these fields grouped together? Maybe this is a case of over-reading or simple misinterpretation, but it seems as if there is a prejudice against our studies—that we only deal with the abstract and cannot go down to what is concrete and real. In other words, is it possible that they still view us as sitting atop the ivory tower? Anyway, such accusation levelled against philosophy is not new. That is why, as early as 19th century, Marx already

wanted to shift the focus of philosophy to praxis, when he said in the ever-famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach that "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." Yet, despite Marx's stark observation, philosophy still somehow remained highly academic, abstract, and theoretical. Nevertheless, there is a molecular component (to borrow Deleuze's terminology) that is lurking in this complex reality of academia, which strives to make theory and praxis interact. Having this as our conviction, we present to you a work that we believe is an interaction between theory and practice—a philosophical critique of culture.

Granting that Ricœur is our framework for this paper, it should be noted, at the onset, that we acknowledge certain words and ideas to have a "surplus of meaning." Case in point is the word "culture." What do we exactly mean by it? In the field of social sciences, culture perhaps is best defined as "customs, traditions, and ingrained habits" (Walton, 2012, p. 70). For philosophy, especially from thinkers coming from the Marxist and post-Marxist tradition, culture is best understood as "a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, and instructions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 44) that are formulated to govern behavior. But these two (2) definitions need not be taken separately. In fact, it may be taken so as to complement one another, with the latter definition masked as the former. In other words, these sets of pattern that we find in human behavior may very well be governed by control mechanisms. The problem is, more often than not, when we succumb to this control mechanisms, which we often do unconsciously, we think that it would be advantageous for us. From this idea arises the problems brought about by the development of technology, and consequently, social media.

Social Media and the Development of Virtual Identities

Technology always raises the question of whether it is a gift or bane to humanity. To be one-sided in this issue would be futile for it is impossible

to declare when technology becomes a bane to humanity, it ceases to be a gift, or vice versa.[1] Due to the ill effects that technology has brought upon man, Heidegger (1973, p. 107) once said that our condition "distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an *unworld*." We have even become so obsessed with technology to the point of sacrificing our natural resources for it. In other words, we have become obsessed with a reality that is artificial because we can manipulate it, instead of trying to accept the natural course of things, which might sound a bit extreme should it be applied to everything. It is for this reason that Heidegger (1966, p. 50) also said that our nature has become a "gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry." Although Heidegger is not the main focus of this paper, we can definitely see a certain level of truth to what he said.[2]

While technology, through television and internet for instance, has eliminated nearly all forms of remoteness, true and authentic human connection has been lost. Technology may have developed and it may have given us numerous benefits, but its harmful effects did not diminish. One disturbing fact dawned upon us: technology through ideology has been already indirectly, and gradually controlling the life of man.

There are numerous problems that technology has brought upon us today. Many problems come from one of its offshoots, social media. We, the authors of this research, believe that this new and rising problem concerning social media and networking is worth discussing and contemplating. Social media, since its inception, has been a growing avenue for people from all walks of life to virtually gather and share their stories. If we are to see it optimistically, it is indeed true that the age of internet has probably eliminated all forms of remoteness when it comes to human relationships.

Are you concerned for a child in Africa? Why don't we just *share* and *like* a photo in Facebook with the caption "1 like = $1, 1 share = 1 prayer?"

We can list down the pros and cons that social media has brought about,[3] but let us try to reserve that for another paper. Despite its numerous positive and negative effects, one glaring issue caught our attention: the problem of building our virtual or digital identity through social media and networking sites.

In order for human connection to prosper, we have to be open—to let ourselves be known as we are in the process of knowing others. We anchor such actions on the presupposition that our life has a story worth telling. However, there are people, who, because of insecurity, tend to tweak such stories to make it appear differently. But here's the thing: life is not all sunshine and happiness. It's not all success, not all about ups, because surely you will have your own downsides, failures, and negative aspects in life. The problem is that we are forgetting this fact: that life is a story filled with good and bad moments— some of which we try to cherish, some, we try to forget or hide, but even so, these are parts of our life—parts and moments which we can never change or remove.[4]

People manipulate and distort their identities in social media, even to the point of facelessness—that is, becoming anonymous and invisible, as if you are given the chance to wear the

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[1] For example, social media today probably has eliminated all forms of remoteness. This is without a doubt a gift to humanity, especially for people with long distance relationships, as you can now see your friends and loved ones on the screen of a monitor or a smart phone. On the other hand, we can also say that social media brought about the demise of authentic hand-written or personal communication. Moreover, social media has also been one of the great causes of procrastination for people of all ages.

[2] Heidegger was more concerned with the ontological question of the essence of technology. Nevertheless, he still critically discussed the problems brought about by it.

[3] Social media has greatly eliminated remoteness in human relationships. Aside from that, it has also become a new *agora* wherein people assemble to talk about various issues concerning politics, faith, academics, etc. But on the downside, as what we have mentioned earlier, it has also become a great contributor to procrastination. It has also been accused of spying into people's personal lives. There are many things that we could discuss here, but let us leave it for another piece.

[4] Take the example of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*. When Sherlock and Watson met for the first time in the hopes of being able to split the cost of renting an apartment, Watson was very surprised that as soon as Sherlock introduced himself, most of the things Sherlock talked about are the negative aspects of his life such as shortcomings and bad habits which Watson may find annoying as soon as they lived together. Sherlock's rationalization here is that it's better to know every bad thing about a person than know it when they are already living together. *See:* Doyle, Sir A. C. (2003). A Study in Scarlet. In *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories,* vol. 1. New York: Bantam Books.

mythological ring of Gyges.[5] But digital identity manipulation to the point of facelessness is not our main concern here. We are simply concerned with how the manipulation of virtual identities affect people's lives via how people's lives are affected with the constant desire to belong, if not, to become superior to others. This may seem like a new specter that is haunting us, but in fact, this is a very old problem. We have failed to recognize it simply because it has either become too familiar or common, or that engrossed in our daily lives, we have now lost our primal instinct to be disturbed—our natural tendency to be critical. Let us leave this problem of digital and virtual identities hanging for the moment, and let us now proceed to a discussion of Paul Ricœur's take on identity.

The Problem of Identity in Contemporary Philosophy

As a prelude to a more formal discussion on Ricœur, let us first take into consideration the problem of identity in contemporary philosophy. Long before the rise of social media and social networking, the problem of identity has already been of interest to philosophers. The interest of contemporary philosophy with identity is hardly related to the virtual or digital, but in most cases, that of the personal. The thinkers who were preoccupied with the problem of identity approached it from a variety of positions, thus creating different stands and takes about it.

One of the most prominent thinkers that has significantly contributed to the studies in identity is the contemporary French philosopher, Paul Ricœur (1913-2005). Ricœur advances a theory of *Narrative Identity* which as we shall later on see, is deeply rooted to the foremost ancient Socratic dictum that says: "the unexamined life is not worth living." One's identity, simply put, for Ricœur, is created through a narrative. This is why he emphasizes a strong relationship between life and narration. This is what would make him later on claim that "the *unnarrated* and the *unrecounted* life is not worth living."

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[5] The story about the Ring of Gyges is found in the second book of Plato's Republic. It is a mythical artifact in the form of a ring that once it is worn and turned, would make its wearer invisible. Thus, they posed the question, if you can do immoral acts and get away with it, while becoming invisible, would you do it? *See:* Plato (1968). *The Republic*. Allan Bloom (Trans.). New York: Basic Books.

The Salient Features of Paul Ricœur's Theory of *Narrative Identity*

> *The Narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.*
> ~ Paul Ricœur (1992, p. 147-148),
> *Oneself as Another*

To those of you who are familiar with Ricœur, you will agree with us that the general characteristic of his philosophy is *philosophical anthropology*. As such, it is safe to say that despite his methodological shift (from existential phenomenology to phenomenological hermeneutics), the subject of identity has been around since his first book down to the last—that is, from *Freedom and Nature* (1950) to *The Course of Recognition* (2004).

The beginning of Ricœur's philosophical anthropology is a study on the philosophy of the will. In the *Fallible Man* (1960), Ricœur speaks of the tension between *bios* (spatiotemporally located life) and *logos* (reason). Although he speaks of this tension in relation to man's fallibility and tendency to exercise bad will and evil actions, the idea that he establishes here may help us later on understand his take on identity. Putting it simply, for Ricœur, it is *bios* that makes each of us unique, and it is *logos* that aids us in going beyond our individuality and uniqueness. On the other hand, despite the seeming dualism of the *voluntary* and the *involuntary*, Ricœur argues in *Freedom and Nature* (1950) that they are complementary. The same goes for the finite and the infinite in the *Fallible Man*. Living our own life proceeds by exercising our will, but the course of our life is also affected by external factors, that which we call reality. For Ricœur, there is no such thing as an isolated ego. Here, we can see the early stages of Ricœur putting the "I" within a larger context. Borrowing Axel Honneth's terms, it is the "I" within the "we."

What this means, basically, is that to be a person is to be acquainted with the other. In other words, to be *social*. According to Ricœur (1986, p. 138), "Man is this plural and collective unity in which the unity of destination and the differences of

destines are to be understood through each other." We live our own lives and at the same time, we have to acknowledge the fact that we live in a reality that we do not fully create. This reality is made up of people whom we encounter in our lives, as well as events that happen (often unexpectedly) to us. This is why despite our differences in terms of individuality and uniqueness, we are bound by a kind of unity in the sense that we all have to succumb to the uncontrollability of reality. This early formulation of Ricœur's concept of identity is also a gateway in understanding his theory of recognition, which is explicitly discussed in *The Course of Recognition* (2004).[6]

The will is very personal. It is all contained in the "I" or in the self. As Ricœur progresses, he finds this to be insufficient in explaining his project of a philosophical anthropology. The *projects* and *intentions*, to borrow Dauenhauer and Pellauer's (2014) terminology, that is contained in the will in terms of the self is quite limited. We can only truly make sense of projects and intentions if we understand them in connection to the *other* and to the events in the world (Dauenhauer and Pellauer, 2014). In the foregoing, we have given the backdrop of Ricœur's take on identity. As we proceed with a more technical discussion as we move on to his mature philosophical anthropology, we will now have a more direct engagement with Ricœur and his idea of personal identity in relation to narrative.

Personal identity always involves a narrative identity. In fact, as one further reads Ricœur, one may find little no distinction between this two. Our personal identity is actually understood in the same way that we understand the identity of various characters in a story. We now understand why we call it "the story of my life." The keyword there is *story* or *narrative.* Like any other story or narrative, our life is constituted of a plot. You are the main character of your life story, and the people you know are participants in it. Later on, Ricœur will lead us to understand that we may be the main character of our own story, but it doesn't mean that

we can't be minor or supporting characters in someone else's life story too. This falls back to the earlier idea that we speak of as placing the "I" within a larger context. But here lies the problem, as we would later on explore: our identities are similar with stories in the sense that it has plot. On the other hand, we think that this very similarity is also accountable for how both can be subjected to manipulation to the point of harmful distortion.

In dealing with the topic of selfhood and personal identity, Paul Ricœur develops a method that he calls a *hermeneutics of the self.* According to Pellauer (2007, p. 91), this approach is not meant to "exhaust every question that might be raised about selfhood." Furthermore, he (Pellauer, 2007, p. 91) says:

> His hermeneutics of the self is rather to be based on a kind of philosophical discourse, one that Ricœur seeks to establish through a three-step argument. This argument will begin with (1) a reflection on what analytic philosophy has to offer to this topic; (2) next it will take up the dialectic of selfhood and sameness implied by this first step; then (3) finally it will turn to the dialectic of selfhood and otherness insofar as this provides further insight to the constituting of the self as a capable human being, someone who has an identity, but also someone who can act in the world with and for others. It is the question 'who?' that ties these stages together.

The discussion of identity in Ricœur appears in almost all of his works, given that his overarching project is a philosophical anthropology. There are essential discussions at the last sections of *Time and Narrative* (3 Vols., 1983, 1984, and 1985) and the subject is thoroughly discussed in *Oneself as Another* (1990), and later on developed and refined in *The Course of Recognition.* For this reason, we would, by no means, be able to exhaust all of Ricœur's argumentations as well as all the scholarly inputs of his most competent commentators. Pellauer already says that the project of a *hermeneutics of the self* is not a task that is as easy as it is said. The development of Ricœur's studies on identity encompasses a broad range of approaches including

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[6] *See:* Ricœur, P. (2005). *The Course of Recognition.* David Pellauer (Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. In this book, Ricœur argues that we seek for recognition in terms of mutuality because no matter how unique our life is, we have a certain knowledge that all of us are under the same kind of reality, a reality that we do not control or create. The quest for recognition is of course, often hindered by man's desire to be superior to the others. We shall return to this idea later on.

the early ontological approach towards the ethical and the sociopolitical. Nonetheless, we would try our best, to at least give a modest introduction to the thoughts of Ricœur by focusing into his theory of narrative identity and how we may use it to analyze the status of virtual and digital identity-building in the age of technology today.

For Ricœur (1991A, p. 53), hermeneutics is "the theory of operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts." In a more general sense, hermeneutics basically deals with interpretation. Since the romanticist hermeneuts such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey, contemporary hermeneutics has taken quite a different direction. There has been a universalization of hermeneutics in that in no longer just strictly deals with the text. We know this of course from the contributions of Heidegger, and Gadamer, both of whom, along with Ricœur, forms the triumvirate of contemporary hermeneutics.

Narratives are always transmitted through text. With the exception, of course, of spoken narratives. If we follow it strictly, it's all by the book. However, in the age of technology, Alberto Romele (2013, p. 115) notes that the transmission of text, narrative, and stories, is no longer just done in the classic duo of either printed text or oral transmission. He notes that in the age of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), texts are "transmitted through the screens of computers, tablets, mobile phones, and [through] eBook[s]." We believe that Ricœur's usage of the word "text" here should already be taken in its broader concept. Not just "text" in terms of printed letters and words, but text that is capable of building up a narrative, a story—something that can be con*text*ualized. Hence, there is a certain plausibility in that if contemporary hermeneutics heralded its universalization, then we can also use it to deal with these new means of transmission of texts in the age of ICTs.

Recalling what Pellauer calls the three-step argument of Ricœur in his idea of the hermeneutics of the self, we will only try and discuss the last two, which we think is very helpful for our topic, and also given the limitations of this piece. This two are: the dialectic of selfhood and sameness; and the dialectic of selfhood and otherness. Finding the discussions of Locke, Hume, and Parfit to be insufficient, Ricœur takes the matter for himself. Pellauer (2007, p. 99) says that according to Ricœur, we can only consider the question of personal identity when we go back to narrative identity, but narrative identity no longer in terms of its relations to history and fiction, but to go back "to the very idea of identity" itself.

For Ricœur (1992, p. 140), we need to understand narrative identity in terms of the dialectics between selfhood and sameness. This dialectics is not in terms of negation, but a different sense of dialectics in that "we need to see that each term depends on the other for its meaning and that narrative identity lies somewhere between them" (Pellauer, 2007, p. 101). Any story is built with a plot. A narrative is not just a chronological compilation of events and incidents, but these elements follow a certain arrangement, for us and others to make sense of it. Our identity in the level of emplotment is engrossed in the tension of a "demand for concordance and the admission of discordance" (Ricœur, 1992, p. 141). Concordance is the "principle of order that presides over what Aristotle calls 'the arrangement of facts.'" On the other hand, discordances are events in the plot which take us by surprise. In other words, these are unexpected events, which may indicate the "reversal of fortunes," but nonetheless help the story progress (Ricœur, 1992, p. 141).

This dialectic between the concordant and the discordant is also present in creating and interpreting the story of our life. We would later on argue that discarding the discordant in favor of the concordant by manipulating a digital and virtual identity, does not improve one's life, but simply projects an unrealistic account of one's offline and real identity. There is an important relationship between the story and the character because as Ricœur (1992, p. 143) says, the characters are themselves plot. In other words, the story unfolds because the identity of the character unfolds. Consider what Ricœur (1992, p. 147) has to say:

> The dialectic consists in the fact that, following the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity distinguished from all others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc.). Because of the concordant-discordant synthesis, the contingency of the event contributes

to the necessity, retroactive so to speak, of the history of a life, to which is equated the identity of a character. Thus, chance is transmuted into fate. And the identity of the character emplotted, so to speak, can be understood only in terms of this dialectic.

There will, for sure, be changes in the direction of the story. There will be unexpected events, incidents, and encounters with other people. Despite these changes, the character and the story remains the same. It has this sameness in the sense that it exhibits a continuity through progress. Think of it as a very loose interpretation of Slavoj Žižek's take on the Hegelian concept of *list der vernunft* (cunning of reason). According to Žižek, *list der vernunft* is precisely this: whenever we want to impose a project upon reality (in other words, whenever we want to assert our existence in the domain of reality), we can be rest assured that something inevitably will go wrong. This discordance in a narrative may appear to be a hindrance for progress, but it is in fact that which makes the very narrative progress and continue.

In a way, we participate in narratives (of our own and of others'), yet we don't have full control over it, especially the course of our own narrative, and consequently, life. There are three (3) important voices in the narrative: the author, the narrator, and the character. According to Ricœur, their roles are distinct in the plane of narrative fiction. By arguing that we do not have full control over our narrative, and consequently, our narrative identity, Ricœur (1992, p. 160) says that at most, we can participate as both the narrator and the main character of our own narrative, but never the sole author, for at most, we can only be a coauthor.

In preempting our discussion about undesirable identities, the question that may stimulate the reader's mind is that, if our narrative identity would be something that is unpredictable and may even include discordances which we do not want to publicize (because we think it harms to the overall image of our narrative), then why narrate at all? In reading Ricœur we found two (2) main reasons both of which are connected with each other: firstly, as Ricœur says in *Oneself as Another* (1992, p. 158), "the idea of gathering together one's life in the form of a narrative is destined to serve as the basis for the aim of a "good" life, the cornerstone of [our ethics]."

Furthermore, Ricœur (1992, p. 160) writes:

> Life must be gathered together if it is to be grasped within the intention of a genuine life. If my life cannot be grasped as a singular totality, I could never hope it to be successful, complete. Now there is nothing in real life that serves as a narrative beginning; memory is lost in the hazes of early childhood; my birth and , with greater reason, the act through which I was conceived belong more to the history of others—in this case, to my parents—than to me. As for my death, it will finally be recounted only in the stories of those who survive me. I am always moving toward my death, and this prevents me from ever grasping it as a narrative end.

Note that for Ricœur (1991B, p. 20), life story is situated between birth and death. This interval between birth and death which we call life, is that which we need to make sense of. More than the desire to share our own personal stories and narrative identities, we have the utmost tendency to make sense of our own lives first. This thus leads us to the second reason that Ricœur's idea of a life seeking a narrative is actually greatly influenced by the Socratic dictum which says: "the unexamined life is not worth living." For Ricœur (1991B, p. 20), there arises in our being human, the need to interpret, recount, live, and narrate our lives.

In the course of our discussion, we find, however, a limitation in the part of Ricœur. Specifically this limitation is on the part of his theory of a narrative identity in relation to what we are to discuss for this piece. Romele was right to note that throughout the development of Ricœur's narrative theory, Ricœur made no mention of narratives other than those made and transmitted as a text through the printed book. He says, "first, even if it is obvious that the reflections of Ricœur belong to a time when the impact of ICTs could still be underestimated within the context of philosophical studies, nowadays one may wonder what happens to the text, and hence to its reader, since it is transmitted through screens of computers, tablets, mobile phones, and [through] eBook[s]" (Romele, 2013, p. 115). Ricœur only speaks of literary and technological fiction. The former

refers to the great literary works of his time and the era that preceded it, and the latter basically refers to the "puzzling cases" of Derek Parfit.

The question now arises, what happens to identity now? Do we need to add a third category, aside from the two (personal identity and narrative identity) already advanced by Ricœur? In other words, is the identity advanced through social media and networking sites a different kind of identity, namely a digital and virtual identity? If so, how may Ricœur look at this recent phenomenon? Let us leave these questions hanging for a while as we now deal with the implications of digital and virtual identity construction in social media.

The Fictive Self: Digital and Virtual Identity Construction in Social Media

The development of technology, the internet, the rise of social media and networking sites, sure did bring a lot of improvement in the 21st century. However, focusing on how it has improved our lives may cause us to overlook its perversities. One of the glaring problems in today's social media is the construction of digital and virtual identities. Considering that alone, numerous problems already come to mind. Facebook and privacy, government spying, network hacking, the commodification of the self, and the list goes on. One may dismiss these easily as products of conspiracy theories, but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't spend time in examining these problems. The focus of our piece is with regard to the distortion and manipulation of digital and virtual identities in social media, more specifically, we would like to dwell more to how this relates to narcissistic tendencies which result to social climbing.

We learned from Socrates that "the unexamined life is not worth living." In the foregoing, we have also learned from Ricœur that an "uninterpreted and unnarrated life is not worth living." Ricœur did not phrase it exactly that way, although he distinguishes a mere biological life from a human life (Ricœur, 1991B, p. 20). Man's task is

not to simply eat, sleep, and breathe. There are many other things which would make as human, and one of these things, as Ricœur shows us, is our ability make sense of our lives—that is by way of recounting and narrating it. Aristotle tells us that "all men by nature desire to know." This knowledge extends to our own selves, for even if we claim to have figured out the world, more often than not, we haven't figured out our selves. Going back again to Socrates, the very challenge is to "know yourself."

In the process of knowing yourself, you will find dark alleys, embarrassing moments, downsides, and negative aspects, which you may have the tendency to hide. That is all fine. In fact, for Ricœur, our capacity for happiness lies in our ability to remember, forget, and forgive. The happy memory consists of just enough remembering and just enough forgetting (Garcia, p. 52 [10]).[7] However, this is not what we are concerned of. What we are concerned with is that there exists a culture of digital and virtual identity manipulation to the point of harmful distortion of it: firstly, for the purposes of being "in," belonging, in other words, social climbing; secondly, to the point of facelessness or anonymity. The first shall be our primary concern here, while the second may be discussed briefly but altogether reserved for another piece.

With the development of social media and networking sites, so also did forms of social climbing through digital identity manipulation advanced. We have hundreds, and even perhaps thousands of friends and followers in Facebook, and it is safe to assume that despite people's addiction with social media, they are living their own lives too, which implies that they don't spend time in verifying if your online and offline identities are consistent. People, unconsciously or not, take advantage of this. From digitally enhancing default display or profile

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[7] Garcia, Leovino Ma. "Interpreting the Story of My Life: Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics of Narrative Identity." Unpublished Essay, in *Paul Ricœur: Selected Readings*. Leovino Ma. Garcia (Ed.) For Instructional Purposes Only, Semester 1, SY 2014-2015, University of Santo Tomas Graduate School, M.A. & Ph.D. in Philosophy. [Page number in brackets is the original page number of the paper, not as part of the compilation of readings.

pictures, to posting pictures which makes you belong to the high class of social strata, some people would not stop at anything to attain the acknowledgement and recognition they want to be able to feed their egos. Maybe these are their own "utopic visions," to borrow Ernst Bloch's terminology. Moreover, as the Filipino saying goes, *"wala namang masamang mangarap, 'di ba?"*

As we have identified two main reasons why people manipulate their digital identities in the earlier parts of this section, let us now take it into deeper consideration. Identity-changing in the online world has in fact something to do with political motives. And because more often than not, the government doesn't sportsmanly accept criticisms, people who directly lambast, criticize, and insult the incumbent administration often end up behind bars, or worse, become victims of political persecutions. This is why people change identity to the point of facelessness or anonymity. Case in point are some people from Thailand, who, according to Soraj Hongladarom (2011, p. 537) change their identities online to portray a different personality which they use to criticize the government. Consider what he has to say about this:

> A reason behind this move may be due to the fact that Thailand still has very limited freedom of speech; it is a serious crime . . . to . . . insult to the king. This law has in recent years been interpreted in such a way as to suit the political agenda of the faction that is holding power in Thailand, and the result has been that more people have been charged with the crime than ever before. Many of them, moreover, have been charged simply because of posted information and ideas on the internet. The newly created persona, then, allows the person behind to say things in such a way that would not be possible if the person revealed who she really is to the world.

The reason why they are changing identities is quite familiar to us. Actually we need not go to foreign history to know that even our own heroes used pennames and pseudonyms to deliver the message that they wanted to convey. More than an act of cowardice, we may view this as a strategic act to stay safe as long as possible, before the angered authorities capture them. Back then, those people who do such may have a sense of responsible criticism—that they knew much about the situation in order to be able to give a just criticism. However today, that's hardly the case. We view it today as something quite negative because being anonymous in the online world by changing or hiding your real identity means being able to say anything—abusing the freedom of speech—without worrying about its consequences. Ranting and bashing is entirely different from a constructive criticism. Case in point are those angry "netizens" who complained about how poor the preparation of the Philippines was during the recently concluded Papal Visit last January of this year (2015). These are the same types of people who, more often than not, will even refuse to identify themselves should they be questioned, let alone be the ones to stand up first, should the government need volunteers.

This is an existing problem, but we are more concerned with the other reason—that is, the manipulation of digital identities to fuel or uplift the ego. A person may be very lonely and miserable in real life, but he can project a very different identity in social media. This may be his way of uplifting his ego. On the other hand, there are cases when certain people feel that their Facebook notifications are quiet, they begin to post something that is astounding, something that may probably be even made up, but all the same, would be helpful to grab the attention of their digital and virtual "friends" (in quotation marks, as we can't stress that enough).

In a way, this is some sort of a defense mechanism. There are people who change identities in the online world because they, perhaps, can no longer handle the reality that they are in. Either that, or they simply, stubbornly refuse to accept it.

This is why they opt to create an alternate reality—a reality that unlike the *real* one, they have full control over with. In fact, this power is exactly what Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and chief executive of Facebook gave them. When he unveiled the "Timeline" feature of the social networking site, he said that the project they have been working on will allow users to more efficiently "share the story of [their lives]" via a "completely new way of expressing [themselves]." Moreover, according to the interview (The Telegraph, "Mark Zuckerberg Unveils Timeline," 2011), "he wanted people to be able to share 'their entire lives' on Facebook and have 'total control' over how their content appeared online."

But aside from being a defense mechanism, what is more worrying is that it becomes an avenue for narcissism. Wandel and Beavers (2010, p. 89) asked an important question: "How do we act and interact in a relatively anonymous online environment? Do we change who we are—for better or worse—as we re-create ourselves?" As you already probably know, the online world gives us an opportunity to "try" different kinds of lives as we experiment with our virtual identities. In Facebook alone, your posts determine your identity. Are you the one who constantly rants about everything? Are you the food blogger? Are you the photographer? Are you the traveler? Are you the academic? Are you the pseudo-academic who does nothing but post pictures of your heavy load of school-related work to do, yet in real life never do it at all? Are you the sporty type muscle-guy? Are you the rich, cool kid who just lives of the wealth of your parents? Or are you a passive guy whose only reason for joining social media is because all of the people you know are in it?

Whatever the reason is, the danger is that identity building becomes a performative act, a theory advanced by Judith Butler and Rob Cover (Romele, 2013, p. 111). This act of performance in constructing your identity is no longer done to *express*, but to *impress*. We shall return to this idea later on. Meanwhile, according to Nathan Drysdale (2010), this insecurity of ours comes from our own personal lives which is then extended towards social media. He notes that whenever we go out, we have the tendency to worry about our looks. *Will people compliment my new hair cut? Will they notice my new shirt? And so on.* Drysdale (2010) pointed out correctly that one of the normative practices in society is to be worried about how others would perceive you.

And so we assume the role of different characters in our digital world. In defense, some people may say that they are being "creative," and tell us that in fact, Ricœur is not against this creativity, for the narrative of a text as well as life is opened on both ends—to prefiguration and refiguration. Pellauer (2007, p. 103) even follows Ricœur in saying that "narrative identity is always open to reinterpretation" especially if it changes, and is "not subject to verification like truth claims based on scientific observation." In a sense, constant reinterpretation of narrative identity as life itself unfolds is itself the process of creativity. But pushing this misses our point. The question is, in the process of this constant forging and tampering, does social media really help us to understand our own narrative identity? Is today's social media (a potentially violent area where people fight over attention) the yardstick by which we must conduct what Ricœur calls a hermeneutics of the self? Let us briefly return to Ricœur in the hopes of being enlightened about the perversities of this phenomena before we conclude this research piece.

Viewing the Problem via Ricœur's Theory of Narrative Identity

The phenomenon that we have previously dealt with the previous section is the culture of attention-seeking and social climbing, which all boils down to narcissism. Let us try to examine this in light of what Ricœur has to offer with regard to constructing identities.

Taking into consideration Ricœur's contributions, we may say that virtual identity, in a way, fulfills a requirement of narrative identity wherein it must be an avenue open for the self and the other. But we think that it doesn't pass that

easily. When a person creates a social media account, he has the utmost control over it, meaning this paves a way for a new and interesting method of presenting an identity. According to Romele (2013, p. 112), "social networking sites meets two differently yet interrelated needs." Firstly, he says: "they serve to articulate and visualize our social networks, in which we can then give or ask for reassurance. On the other hand, they are a place where we are able to tell or examine stories of others in order to reconfigure and better understand our identity."

Romele's standpoint seems to be neutral or temperate, if not optimistic. This proves why he favors the mild Ricœurian way of analyzing the issue, instead of the aggressive way in which postmodern thinkers such as Butler and Cover view the phenomenon as a "savage" concept of performative identity. Yet, we also have to consider the other side (or the negative aspect) of social media. Like what was previously explained, since we are given the freedom to alter our identities, we are more inclined to do so. Sometimes for fun, but in worst cases, to live in an alternate reality and to fuel our ego. According to Wandel and Beavers (2010, p. 90), "The virtual context of social networking . . . allows us to experiment with our very selves. Online social networks free us, in some sense, from the requirements of 'real world' circumstances and permit us to try out various self-conceptions to find ones that fit with what we would like to be in the explicit social context of what others will allow us and need us to be." We understand that the practice of identity manipulation in social media may in fact be a creative act of "finding the self." Yet, we cannot put aside the fact that some actions and practices, and we are following Ricœur here, participates in a greater context.

What that means is that some actions count as another. This is where Ricœur's concept of constitutive rule comes in. According to Ricœur (1992, p. 154):

> By constitutive rule is meant those precepts whose sole function is to rule that, for instance, a given

gesture of shifting the position of a pawn on the chessboard "counts as" a move in the game of chess. The move would not exist, with the signification and the effect it has in the game, without the rule that "constitutes" the move as a step in the chess game. The rule is constitutive in the sense that it is not something added on, in the manner of an external condition applied to movements which would already have their own meaning (as are traffic lights in relation to drivers who each have their own destination). The rule, all by itself, gives the gesture its meaning: moving a pawn; the meaning stems from the rule as soon as the rule is constitutive, and it is so because it constitutes meaning, "counting as."

A similar example is given by Leovino Garcia (p. 48 [6]). Following Ricœur, he says: "the gesture of raising one's hand, depending on the context, may be understood as a way of greeting someone, or calling for a taxi, or reciting in class." So basically, what this "constitutive rule" means is that we can interpret some actions not just in light of themselves, but as actions that "count as" another. In the case of the virtual identity manipulation, the superficial action may be interpreted as an action that counts as a practice of extreme self-love or narcissism. We believe that the identity manipulation no longer borders within the gamut of creativity. The perversity of identity manipulation in social media and networking sites lies precisely in the fact that it is done to feed the ego. It is done as an act of social climbing whereby the insecure person believes that he could attain a certain level of acknowledgement if he participates in this level of social strata. We are, unfortunately, in an age where almost anyone can flaunt a life that he is not actually living.

A certain social experiment was done to examine this issue. A Dutch student faked her trip to

Southeast Asia by digitally manipulating various photos which she uploaded on Facebook. Many people were evidently, "tricked" by her act, but more importantly, it was the reactions of the people that mattered. Not only did they believed easily, but some of her friends and relatives even expressed envy. The student, Zilla Van Den Born, stated that "my goal was to prove how common and easy it is to distort reality. I did this to show people that we filter and manipulate what we show on social media" (Perring, 2014).

Sadly enough, this is a problem that most people fail to see. It has become part of our everyday lives that we easily dismiss it as something natural. "Never mind the person, leave it be, for that is what he/ she wants." Even rarer than the people who see this problem are the people who have the courage and ability to be critical. But that topic is too sad for words.

What we fail to understand is that we abuse the openness of our narrative identity. Since the dawn of ICTs, we have created a new identity apart from our real and personal one. This identity is that of the virtual and the digital, an identity that we project in the online world of social media and networking sites. We are tempted and inclined to alter it because it is a pseudo-reality that we can actually control. What we forget here is that there is no such thing as an isolated ego. We as individuals, are always placed within a larger context: that of the society we live in, and the reality of the world we inhabit. These things are beyond our control, and it is mostly these that bring about the discordant events in our life. Yet, as Ricœur says, even the discordance makes the story progress.

Garcia (p. 54 [12]) notes that according to Ricœur, all narratives are formulated based from some interest; and as such, they are selective. We agree with this, in that following Ricœur, a narrative is more than a chronological enumeration of events, incidents, and encounters with other people. It has to be selective for the story to make sense. Just like a film, not everything is included in the final cut. This, we believe, is the moment where creativity takes

place. It should not be [ab]used to the extent of perverse manipulation and distortion which projects no longer your life, but a life you want others to see of you. "The narrative is a synthesis of the heterogeneous," as Ricœur (1991B, p. 32) says. However, "there can be no concordance without discordance." We can be selective all we want, but we should never lose sight of the real goal which is to project our lives, in the sense that Ricœur (1992, p. 164), following Walter Benjamin (1969, pp. 83-109), tells us that "storytelling is the art of exchanging experiences."

Conclusion

We learn from Aristotle that the excess and deficiency of actions lead us away from the virtuous course. Digital and virtual identity manipulation may in fact be a process of fabulation which Ricœur is not against to, as indeed, being creative can lead us to know more of ourselves. Captain Barbosa, from the film *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007), once said that "for certain, you have to be lost to find a place that can't be found." Being creative is an essential part of creating a narrative. The synthesis of the heterogeneous events in our life also includes discordant events, but in due time, concordance will preside over it. We often have some trials and errors in our life which, if we fail, we say that "maybe this is not for me," and go on to pursue a different path. Life is in the process of becoming and your narrative is in the process of unfolding.

The perverse part of digital and virtual identity manipulation in social media and social networking is that it is a case of desiring for recognition—not in the light of a struggle for mutuality as Ricœur advocates in *The Course of Recognition*, but a case of seeking recognition to be acknowledged to the point of being envied at and looked up to. This is a case of narcissism to which Ricœur is clearly against. We may be the main characters and narrators of our own respective lives, but we are not the sole authors of it. The "I" is placed within a larger context outside the ego—that firstly, to be a person is social (that is, our life affects others

and so does the lives of others affect us); and secondly, that we are subject upon a reality, a world that which we inhabit but we do not fully create and control. In other words, the story of our life is written not just with one pen, but with a multitude of it. It may sound cliché, but things don't always go the way we want them to.

David Vessy ("The Polysemy of Otherness") provides us with a clarifying passage in what we can also find in the many detours in Ricœur's discussion:

> We are subjects in others' stories, others are subjects in our stories; others are authors of our stories, we are authors of others' stories. Our narratives are essentially interwoven with other narratives. We are characters in other narratives—we are our parents' child, our partner's partner, our friends' friend—and they are characters in our narratives. Also, through our discussions and interactions with others we facilitate the articulation and direction of their narratives, and they ours. All this is to say that our identity is never simply our own. It is embedded with relations with others and we do not have ultimate control over the nature of these relationships much less the nature of our identity.

We can manipulate our online identities so much that it appears completely different from our identities offline, but this is no longer a process of creativity. There is a fine line between on the one hand, fabulation and creativity, and on the other, perverse distortion and manipulation. There are inconsistencies in stories. But we think we are able to make sense of it, because the inconsistencies are enough for the power of concordance to make sense of it. An online and offline identity that is situated in two extreme poles is something that is quite hard to reconcile given that the online identity feeds the ego,

while the offline identity succumbs to reality. However you project your life story in the present may be deemed lacking or even irrelevant. The story of our life technically finishes at the point of our death, but in some cases our stories are lived and relived by those who survived us. Life is in the process of becoming. Your life and your story will always be in the state of *inachèvement*—of incompletion.

Let life take its course, for we can only do so much. We are never the sole authors of our narrative identities, for at most, we are just co-authors. There are certain dangers when the subject is reduced, according to Ricœur (1991B, p. 33), into "narcissistic and stingy [egos]." We should thus let go of these narcissistic tendencies for as he writes:

> *What we lose on the side of narcissism,*
> *We win back on the side of narrative.*
> ~ Paul Ricœur, *Life in Quest of a Narrative*

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