

# Character Education : Developing Moral Identity Through Narrativity and Reflection

Dariusz Grządziel

Faculty of Educational Sciences at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome

**Abstract:** In the debate on character education, broadly speaking, it is necessary to distinguish two sets of thoughts: the Aristotelian tradition and the Kantian tradition. These two perspectives have great merits but also have their limitations. Educational approaches referring to these perspectives are often based on a very fragile relationship: in the first case, between habit and behaviour, and the second case, between cognition and behaviour. According to Blasi, moral action does not depend only on reasoning or on virtuous habits, but it depends on the organization of the self and on a person's identity. This paper argues that the integration of the perspective of identity into the theory of character education can point to further development of both theory and educational practices. To address this issue, the author explores the significant role of narrativity in the development of moral identity, drawing on the philosophical perspectives of Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur. The central thesis is that developing a sense of moral identity and moral character is deeply intertwined with the ability to reflect on one's own life narrative. From this perspective, the author argues that in order to "self-regulate one's life" in the MacIntyrean sense and to "re-configure the emplotment of one's life story" as suggested by Ricoeur, individuals must engage in a continuous process of reflection, including a critical examination of their moral values and life experiences. The implications of this narrative and reflexive approach for educational practices are discussed, with a focus on how educators can facilitate identity formation and moral development.

**Keywords:** Character education, moral identity, narrativity, reflection.

## 1 Introduction

In 2014 I proposed 6 principles for character education (Grządziel, 2014). The third principle referred to the narrative approach and suggested that character education should be based on the narrative structure of human life. Three years ago, one of my Ph.D. students, accepted this third principle as valid and conducted an entire research project on this topic (Guritno, 2022). Being from Indonesia, he proposed using the culture of this region, particularly the local narratives, as educational tools for moral and character development in schools. He successfully defended his thesis in June 2022. In this paper, I am going to undertake analysing again the narrative approach to character education

and suggest that it is a possible perspective to support moral reflection in educational processes.

Why narrativity? In the debate on character education, broadly speaking, it is necessary to distinguish two sets of thoughts: the Aristotelian tradition and the Kantian tradition. The first focuses on the virtues that are important for acquiring *eudaimonia* and living a good life, while the second focuses on the ability to reason according to the principles of moral judgement. These two perspectives, have great merits but also have their limitations. Educational approaches referring to these perspectives are often based on a very fragile relationship: in the first case, between habit and behaviour, and the second case, between cognition and behaviour. Particularly, these approaches struggle not only with explaining the problems of these relationships but, above all, in developing models of education that are effective in practice.

I found, in the studies of D. Narvaez (2006) and her theory of *Integrative Ethical Education*, an interesting solution to this question. The author offers a holistic approach to education that, on the one hand, recognises the goal of cultivating reflective reasoning and commitment to justice (a Kantian perspective), which are necessary for the development of democratic communities, and, on the other hand, recognises that the demands of life today also depend on having developed a moral character of a certain kind (an Aristotelian perspective). Virtue ethics and the ethics of justice and moral reasoning – according to Narvaez – these two philosophical paradigms are not mutually exclusive but differ in the aspects to which they circumscribe morality and moral personality.

The student, whom I mentioned earlier, had also suggested a solution in this regard. His research, in my opinion, is worthy of attention. And it is in his work, that we can find the answer to the question: ‘why do I intend to suggest the narrative approach?’ The doctoral research in question examined the work of authors such as Blasi and Ricoeur. Inspired especially by Blasi, the student formulated an interesting theoretical perspective on character education that seems to respond in a certain way to the limitations of the aforementioned relationship between habit and behaviour and cognition and behaviour. Blasi (1980, 1983, 1993, 2004), shows that moral action does not depend only on reasoning or on virtuous habits. It depends on a coherent combination of many factors, including intention, motivation, judgements, and decisions. He argues that the relationship between the mentioned factors and action is to be found in human integrity, in personal consistency. It means that moral action depends on the organisation of the self, it springs from the person’s identity. He explains it as follows:

...moral understanding more reliably gives rise to moral action if it is translated into a judgment of personal responsibility; moral responsibility is the result of integrating morality in one’s identity or sense of self; from moral identity derives a psychological need to make one’s actions consistent with one’s ideals. (Blasi, 1993, p. 99).

In my opinion, the integration of the identity perspective into the theory of character education, as proposed by Blasi, can point out further development of both theory and educational practice in the field of character education, also taking into account some

criticism in this regard (Harrelson, 2016; Kristjánsson, 2009, 2010). Within this framework I will try to reflect how several elements, with which identity is constructed, require a reflection process in the educational practice.

## 2 The Significance of the Narrative Perspective for Identity Development

The critical question at this moment is: how to sustain the formation of identity, and moral identity in particular<sup>1</sup>. There are numerous publications on this topic (Blasi, 1988; Bruner, 1990; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004; MacIntyre, 1985; McLean & Syed, 2015; Ricoeur, 1992; Sinnott, 2017; Taylor, 1989). Considering Blasi's proposal, concerning the role of identity in character formation, I adopt here the narrative perspective, and, to this end, I will emphasize the studies of MacIntyre and Ricoeur.

### 2.1 Alasdair MacIntyre

MacIntyre asks in *After virtue* (1985): "Am I the same man at fifty as I was at forty?" And he replies: "The self is situated in a person, in his character whose unity is given as the unity of a narrative" (p. 217). Hence, the Scottish philosopher argues that any attempt to clarify the concept of personal identity independently and separately from those of the narrative, intelligibility, and responsibility is doomed to failure.

Considering a multiplicity of modern conceptions of selfhood, therefore, MacIntyre, in defining his particular conceptualization of virtue, found it necessary to refer to the concomitant concept of the self "whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative, lived and narrated, which links birth to life to death, just as the beginning of a literary work is linked to its centre and end" (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 205). He also links the concept of personal identity to the concept of action, which is always an episode in the story lived.

The placement of the concept of the self in the narrative perspective has at least three implications that, according to me, should be considered in educational practices.

In the first place, to understand the self, it is necessary to consider the contextual settings in which the person is embedded (like history, traditions, social groups, practices). A context always has a history within which the history of each individual is located. The link between the existence of the subject and the historical and social context is intrinsic. Without the context and its changes through time, the history of the individual subject would be unintelligible.

Secondly, the subject within the stories, as a conscious agent, is not only an actor; he is also an author of his own life. This implies, according to MacIntyre, that what a subject

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the terms "self" and "identity" are used in this paper in a manner that may not distinctly delineate the two concepts. This is because the approach of this study reflects the intricate and often overlapping nature of these complex constructs within the field of moral psychology and character education. It's important to note that the lack of a clear distinction between the terms does not indicate a theoretical oversight. It reflects rather a different focus of the study that in this case regards narrativity and reflection in educational processes.

can do and say intelligibly as an actor is influenced by the fact that he is always a co-author of his narratives. Since other people, with whom we live in the same context, are also authors of their own lives, our stories are constantly intertwined. Thus, how we become authors of our lives has much to do also with what we think, what we feel, and what we do, and the origin of all this lies in the current historical context of our relationships and social interactions.

Thirdly, there is no present which is not informed by the image of some future. By an image of the future, we mean something that always appears in the form of either a *telos* or of a multiplicity of ends and goals, towards which we are heading. Being an author of life is primarily concerned with looking forward to expectations, i.e., life projects, hopes, fears, etc. Unpredictability and teleology, thus, coexist as parts of our lives; “like characters in a fictional narrative we do not know what will happen next, but our lives have a certain form which projects itself towards our future” (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 216). The narratives we live out, therefore, have both an unpredictable and teleological character.

## 2.2 Paul Ricoeur

Ricoeur’s studies allow us to see how the different forms of narrative (written, spoken, or listened to) can be important in understanding and developing one’s self. He believes that to understand the self, we need to interpret it, and the function of narrative is to mediate the process of self-interpretation. As he asserts (Ricoeur, 1991, 1992), self-interpretation can be done through the mediation of cultural signs, symbols, or texts. Through these symbolic meanings we try to articulate actions, and, among them, the narratives of everyday life.

Narrative, Ricoeur argues in volume three of *Time and Narrative* (1988), mediates the contradiction of change and permanence through a process of *emplotment* that organizes the contingencies of existence into a coherent whole. Following Aristotle, thus, Ricoeur (1991) defines *emplotment* as an organization of events. He argues that *emplotment* is a synthesis of heterogeneous elements that makes the story one, unified, and complete.

Now, the French philosopher attempts to answer the question of how an identity can signal both change and permanence over time. In answering, he says that personal identity should be perceived as *idem* and *ipse*. *Idem* refers to a notion of an identity based on Sameness, whereas *ipse* refers to Selfhood and can incorporate change within a recognizable entity. Thus, *narrative identity* consists of the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse* (Sameness and Selfhood) and the context for this dialectic is permanence in time. Time, in Ricoeur’s theory, becomes a “human time” since, being organized by narration and configured by *emplotment*, it allows for the presentation of the temporal experience of a human being.

To explain the process of the formation of *narrative identity*, Ricoeur introduces the concept of mimetic activity. He defines mimesis as an active process of imitating or representing something. Ricoeur distinguishes three stages of mimesis: mimesis one (1),

mimesis two (2), and mimesis three (3). Mimesis 1: he defines as the pre-understanding of the world of action. Mimesis 2: as the organization of events and mimesis 3: as re-figuration of the self. Now, it is the act of configuration (mimesis 2) that mediates between permanence and change, and it is the act of re-figuration (mimesis 3) that forms the character of a person and a person's identity.

From an educational perspective, Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity is interesting from several points of view. First, it shows the connection between character, identity, and action. Second, the act of *emplotment* shows that it is an act to configure, to understand the self and the world. But it also shows that the person can learn from the diverse sources of *emplotment* (our experience, the experience of others, or even the fiction narrative). Third, the re-figurative act of mimesis 3 can be based not only on past experience but could be used also to configure the future in the form of expectation.

### 3 Reflection

So far, I have presented the concept of narrative identity from the perspective of MacIntyre and Ricoeur. Now, I will try to analyse how several elements, with which identity is constructed, require a reflection process in the educational practice.

From the MacIntyrian proposal, we can validate three elements: the role of context for self-understanding, the responsibility for being the author of the life story, and, finally, the importance of projection into the future. From Ricoeur's perspective, I will address the need for interpretation in the self-construction process and the role of mediation of cultural signs and texts.

#### 3.1 Reflection in Socio-cognitive Perspective

With regards to the elements learned above, especially in relation to the capacity of the person to be an author of their own lived narratives, it seems that the socio-cognitive perspective on human agency can help us understand and shape the educational processes of reflection.

Bandura (2001) argues that human beings can reflect on their experiences and exert a self-influence to act. He asserts that [the] "human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and self-reflective not just reactive" (p. 23). As a consequence, the ability of self-reflection and self-influence can be considered a principal factor in human behaviour. This perspective, thus, permits one to see the person as a conscious agentic operator.

Now, all three authors (MacIntyre, Ricoeur, and Bandura) reaffirm that human action and the reflective processes in it, are related not only to the past but also to the future. The past and the future affect the present. Hence, the authorship of one person consists not only in writing or reflecting on past experience but also in writing and reflecting on the future in which our actions are visualized in favour of the telos we desire.

Bandura (1997) also affirms that "the self is socially constituted" (p. 6). This evidence from socio-constructivist theory confirms the MacIntyrian view that we are not only

authors but also co-authors of our narratives. It means: we learn from the context and the context influences our growth.

### 3.2 Reflection in Character Education Approaches

Yet, character education is often accused of indoctrination. Furthermore, modelling and habituation are criticized since it is not intellectual. This is not the place to address all these criticisms. I only suggest that narrative and reflection may be valuable educational strategies to respond positively to challenges in this regard.

According to McLaughlin and Halstead (1999), for example, influencing values becomes indoctrination when there is no room for reasoning and critical thinking. However, as Kristjánsson (2006) reminds us, allowing critical thinking and moral reasoning to manifest “does not change the fact that the main emphasis is on the given substantive virtue being fostered in students” (p. 170). But the question here is even broader: namely if we can be free from the influence of values at all. Christopher (1996) shows that it is impossible since we constantly interact with the culture and other individuals. Therefore, the problem is not if we enter in contact with values or not, or, whether we influence the other with our values or the other influences us. The question is whether we have the space to reflect, elaborate, choose, and act based on our own free will. Obviously, this assumes that we are sufficiently mature and have the capability to activate these processes. In short, from a cognitive development perspective, these processes require a certain age.

Regarding habituation, Jiyuan (2012) and Kristjánsson (2015) remind us, referring to Aristotle, that the discourse on virtue is not limited only to habituation. The Athenian Philosopher argues that to be fully virtuous, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is required. In other words, to be fully virtuous, habituation is not enough but what is also necessary is reasoning.

It would be interesting to address here the role of intellectual virtues in character education, but there is no sufficient space to do it now. However, the clear educative implication in this section is that to be an author of one’s own life (MacIntyre) and to be able to re-configure the emplotment of the life narrative (Ricoeur), it is necessary to develop cognitive skills, like reflection and critical thinking; it also requires sufficient awareness of the subject in relation to moral values and moral behaviour being taught and lived.

### 3.3 Reflection in Narrative Forms

A further issue concerns the role of texts and other narrative forms (writing, telling, listening) that mediate reflection and self-interpretation in the processes of identity formation.

The act of reading or listening is crucial because it is where reflection and interpretation begin. Reading, which involves the process of interpretation, leads the person to do *mimesis* and connects the narrative with life. But it can only happen when there is an

intention to perform acts of reflection and interpretation which connects the two worlds. Reale (2017, p. 2) views that “reflection is deliberative and intentional.” In this sense, the agent takes the process consciously, analyses and interprets the two worlds. Reflection in this sense implies that the person activates a dialogue with the narrative. To understand the narrative, the person tries to match it with what he or she already has experienced or learned. In Ricoeur’s term, *mimesis* one (*mimesis* 1) occurs in this moment which consists of activating the pre-understanding of the world, the symbols, the values, etc.

The comparison between the person’s cultural and experiential heritage and the meaning of the texts being read or listened to can bring out an essential element, which Gadamer mentions. He affirms that in order to interpret narratives, someone needs to be sensitive to them. However, this sensitivity involves a “foregrounding and appropriation of one’s fore-meanings and prejudices” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 271). In Gadamer’s opinion, someone can be aware of his or her prejudice when it is provoked. The provocation in our context is the encounter between the two worlds: the world of the text and the world of the reader. We see here how *mimesis* 1, in Ricoeurian terms, can provoke processes of reflection, rich in new understandings about the self. Continuation of the process, through *mimesis* 2, which concludes with *mimesis* 3, leads not only to an understanding of the Self, but above all, to its further transformation and growth.

Now, I will briefly address a specific kind of reflection, namely the one that is activated through autobiographical writing or telling. Demetrio (1996, 1997, 2012), constructing his theory about the autobiographical thought, argues that every person needs to tell his or her life [story] and to feel what has been lived at present. And one of the ways to realize it is to write or tell about it.

Through the process of writing or telling, the person encounters both change and continuity; not only organizes events and analyses experiences but finds different dimensions and a new meaning in life. Through writing or telling, the person relives the experiences, analyses memories, and reflects and interprets his or her own image. In terms of Ricoeur, it is a process that contains the dialectic between *idem* and *ipse*, and as a result identity is constructed. And in terms of MacIntyre, it is a process that concerns history, the present, and the future in which the person understands himself as an author and co-author of his or her life.

Narrative forms, activating the mediation processes, enhance reflection, enrich the repertoire of models, and help to understand better the self. All this, in turn, can inspire and guide to act and develop the agency. Hence, the narrative approach in character education is not only to learn about values from the narrative. Rather, it is to invoke a rich, complex sense of moral agency.

### **3.4 Shaping the Capability of Reflection**

The last question to mention is how we can shape the capability of reflection. Research, as also educational practice, confirm that cognitive and metacognitive reflection processes must be supported and adequately guided (Alsina et al., 2017). When we

consider the school and the didactic context, particularly in the initial phases of reflective methodologies, students manifest a tendency to remain only on generic and superficial levels in their reflections. If properly guided and scaffolded, however, they improve this ability.

So far, we learned that the main function of reflection is to foster the inquiry of the two worlds: the world of narrative and the world of the reader. Thus, to support reflection in the educative processes, educators must consider two perspectives: that of the narrative being read or heard and that of the subject reading or hearing it.

To address this double question, we can consider a model constructed by Jerom Bruner (2005), enriched by his further considerations. To analyze narratives, Bruner recommends a proceeding based on Burke's (1969) pentad. His proposal includes the following elements: initial state, trouble, effort, resolution, and coda. The proposal is certainly helpful in investigating texts. But, as we see, it does not describe the dynamics which occur in the reader. To demonstrate these interior processes, Bruner added that writing or reading invites the person to realize his or her world. In this moment occurs subjectification and interpretation. In Bruner's view (1986), it is caused by human intention, discourse, and dual landscape of the story, namely, the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness. The landscape of action contains the characters and the plight that the character has to face, while the landscape of consciousness contains the thinking and feeling of the characters. The landscape of action clarifies the event and its sequence whereas the landscape of consciousness elucidates the perspective, the emotions, the knowing, and the rationalization of why something happened. The dual landscapes of the story, the landscape of consciousness, and the landscape of action can thus become, one of the perspectives on which we base learning processes of reflection and interpretation regarding the texts.

Concerning the autobiographical forms, the educational processes should emphasise the subject's responsibility for his or her own life story, which is in dialogue with the stories of other subjects, those of the past and those of the present. Teachers should consider students as participants, rich in history, in the construction of their vision, and contextualised in social complexity. The transmission of knowledge is not sufficient as a form of the educational process. The teacher should be a listener, clarifier, and co-participant in a story that gradually is being constructed. Autobiography and life lived together, relationships, and dialogue could become very suitable forms of the educational processes that foster not only reflection and critical thinking but create conditions for whole personal growth.

#### **4 Conclusion : One Word About Social Media**

When dealing with narrativity today, in a time strongly marked by the digital, it is necessary to mention the issue of storytelling in social media. The emergence of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) has changed social interaction in the world. The idea that the World Wide Web is not only a means for the diffusion and



exchange of information but also a place in which people can put into play their identity, is widely shared today.

For us, the fundamental question is whether social media really can be analysed from a narrative perspective. There are distinct positions on this issue. Dawson and Mäkelä (2020), for example, point out an important characteristic in this regard, which is the “virality” of social media. An unverified individual story of personal experience may escalate into a narrative of collective emotion. It can acquire cultural authority through iterative sharing across personal networks, as well as through consequent media coverage. The authors call it a *viral exemplum*, viz., a strong narrative didacticism and moralism. The viral exemplum gives the narrative authority irrespective of being true or false.

Another question that can be asked is ‘how the interaction with social media affects the identity of people, both those who the authors of the content are, and those who read or watch it?’ (see Riva, 2012; Cover, 2012). Evans and Saker (2017) argue, for example, that on social media where the interaction occurs and the imagined affordances are involved, the formation of identity occurs since identity is seen as an active process, the result of various life choices and performances in which users represent themselves. Regarding our question, Romele (2013, p.113) asserts that “between the identity on social networking sites and the one which is offline, there is continuity as well as discontinuity, and it is this middle distance that makes our actions on social networking sites performative.” He continues further: “social networking sites are halfway between the free dispersion into a multiplicity of online identities and the strict faithfulness to the self-offline.”

Some researchers attempt to analyse social media in the light of Ricoeur’s concept of narrative identity. Romele (2013), for example, whilst recognising the specific characteristics and limits of the narrative model of Ricoeur, i.e., his monomediality and his monolinearity, affirms that the concept of narrative identity built on this model can be a “strong candidate to account for the consequences of the emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) of our identities on social networking sites” (p. 108).

Now, it is not our purpose to develop here these interesting questions. They merit deeper research and study. In the context of the topics analysed here, it was necessary to mention this new reality that cannot be ignored by educators in the field, nor by academic scholars. Certainly, I think, we should develop, a specific kind of pedagogy to scaffold students in processes of reflection, critical thinking, and identity construction, especially when in this modern era social media becomes an integral part of their life.

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## **Bio**

Born in Sycow, Poland, in 1967. A Salesian since 1988, he completed his philosophical studies in Krakow, Poland, and theological studies in Benediktbeuern, Germany. He obtained his doctorate (PHD) in Educational Sciences at the Salesian Pontifical University (UPS) in Rome under the guidance of Prof. M. Pellerey. From 1999, he worked for eight years as a school principal in Tarnowskie Gory, Poland. In 2007, he returned to UPS in Rome and began teaching courses in general pedagogy and general didactics. His research and publications are at the intersection of education and school and university teaching, focusing in recent years on integrating new digital technologies into teaching and learning processes. For several years, he has been the Director of the Institute of Didactic and since 2020 the Coordinator of the Curriculum of Pedagogy for Schools and Professional Training. In 2021 appointed "Expert" by the Holy See Agency for the Evaluation and Promotion of Quality in Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties (AVEPRO).

## **Contact**

prof. Dariusz Grządziel

Università Pontificia Salesiana  
Piazza dell'Ateneo Salesiano, 1  
00139 Roma  
grzadziel@unisal.it