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Introduction

The title of a book, like a proper name, defines its identity. There are three interweaving themes informing this text. The first is selfhood, which, in line with the continental hermeneutic–phenomenological tradition, we have termed ipseity – thus emphasizing the need to account for the way in which each person, in dealing with others and the different circumstances of everyday life, is present to himself and pre-reflexively conscious of himself. This perspective of selfhood emerges from the ontological need to grasp individuals from their ways of being rather than by conceptualizing them according to the same categories that are applied to objects.

It is this very need that underlines the second theme of the book, identity, which in relation to action and feeling raises the question of ‘who’ to a new level: that of temporality. Stating who a person is implies that all individual passions and actions be understood within the framework of a historical dimension characterized by the permanence of the person, designated by its proper name, as being the same over time. In line with the work of Ricoeur, we have come to envisage narrative as the act by means of which personal identity takes shape while events interweave to form a plot. It is through the various forms of narrative that the person acquires his historical identity, which we term ‘narrative identity’.

If narrative is what enables the individual to recognize his own experiences as personal experiences, and hence to identify himself, narrative variances can be seen to reflect different ways of experiencing one’s own life. It is on the basis of these reflections on the relation between the pre-reflexive dimension and its narrative configuration that we have approached the third theme of the book: the psychological typifying of personality according to different emotional tendencies which crystallize in the course of a person’s life and are reflected in the construction of his personal story. This is where we turn to the neurosciences and develop a psychopathology that can take account of continuity with

normal personality. From this perspective, our appeal to literary (as well as clinical) examples should be regarded as an engagement with an experimental field within which we can observe the variations and boundaries of the narrative and of its characters: a sort of laboratory allowing us to analyse the heterogeneous ‘experiments’ performed on identity, thus drawing literature and psychology closer together.

It was our wish for the cover of the book to be embellished by the reproduction of a painting: Francis Bacon’s ‘Study of George Dyer’. This original choice was due to the ontological perspective that informs our work – and which Bacon grasps in his painting: a perspective that sees the living body as a way of being in the world, and its happening as a wholly original phenomenon. We too, like Bacon, see the perceiving flesh and the perceived body as one. Unfortunately, although we did our best to elucidate the reasons why we wished to make use of this reproduction, the Bacon Estate did not grant us permission.

The text comprises two parts. Part One, in four chapters, explores the first two themes of the book. In the five following chapters, Part Two discusses the various styles of personality and the pathologies these may engender.

Chapter 1 focuses on the difference between the typically modern conceptualization of the Self and a view of ipseity that by placing one’s way of feeling in the world at the centre of its analysis reverses both the perspective on the meaning of experience and that on reflection and personal identity. Chapter 2 engages with the relation between ipseity and language, starting from the problem of individual understanding of the other, which has been addressed in developmental psychology and the neurosciences. The importance and limits of the Mirror Neuron System (MNS) as a means to explain the relation between experience and language represents the driving motive behind our argument. Chapter 3 introduces the question of how to account, by means of language, for the permanence of Self over time. Personal identity dynamically takes shape through the narrative act: through language, it reflects different emotional inclinations which, when configured into a story, allow the person to perceive himself as stably situated over time. These dispositions may be defined on a continuum that extends from the Inward to the Outward polarity, depending on whether the frame of reference adopted by the individual in his search for personal stability is predominantly based on the body or on an externally anchored system of coordinates.

Chapter 4, which ends the first section, turns to the psychology of emotions to explore the distinction traced in the previous chapter between Inward and Outward, showing how the different possible combinations along the continuum demarcated by these polarities correspond to different ways of feeling emotion. This emotional basis will be the foundation on which to present the different styles of personality that characterize the five chapters making up the second section of the book. Each style may thus manifest those characteristics that mark one of the two polarities in a more or less prevalent way, thereby finding a place within the continuum.

In the context of the Outward polarity, Chapter 5 explores issues surrounding the type of personality prone to eating disorders, while Chapter 6 examines the style prone to obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Unlike the previous styles of personality, the style prone to hysteria and hypochondria – the object of Chapter 7 – may be considered a sort of combination of the two polarities, as both are here used in the search for personal stability.

In the context of the Inward polarity, the styles of personality prone to phobias and depression are analyzed in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively.

Arguments fixed in the written form cannot but show the influence of the conversations, debates and exchanges of ideas that have accompanied us during the writing of this text: in particular, our meetings and walks with Vittorio Gallese, in whose company we spent many late nights discussing the meaning of experience and its neural substrate – an experience often enriched by our discussions on phenomenology and the philosophy of science with Corrado Sinigaglia. To these we should add our weekly reflections on research methodology, genetics, psychiatry and neurosciences with Alessandro Bertolino; our daily dialogues on developmental psychology, the neurosciences and psychotherapy with Viridiana Mazzola; our pondering on the themes of ancient philosophy with Michele Alessandrelli and on hermeneutics with Elizbieta O'Bara.

On the day on which this introduction was written, one of our pupils, Martina Grilli, lost her life in a car accident. She too took part in the conversations that contributed to shape this book. We express our most profound and sincere gratitude to Martina and all our students for their curiosity and eagerness to learn, and for the confidence they placed in us by choosing us as their teachers.

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