

***BEING A “WHO” IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
AUGUSTINE, ARENDT, AND RICOEUR ON THE UNITY
OF IDENTITY***

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In *Our Molecular Future*, Douglas Mulhall predicts that advances in nanotechnology will allow us to augment our capacity to process and retain information. This prediction is noteworthy because it is possible that we will become capable of altering who we are without ever thinking about what we are doing. Without understanding what it is to be a “who,” a person with an identity, the prospect of changing the structure of one’s brain seems to be in need of legitimation. This kind of legitimation can only be gained after an examination of the ontological conditions of identity. What authorizes me to say that the “who” that agrees to a neural procedure is the same “who” that endures the alteration? In what sense is this identity unified? In what sense is it fractured? It is the question of identity that Augustine suffers in Book X of the *Confessions*. When Arendt proposes that we “think about what we are doing” she is restating Augustine’s quest.¹ Ricoeur takes on the quest and justifies the constancy of identity with the notion of narrative. In what follows I will examine the question “who?” as posed by Augustine, Arendt, and Ricoeur. I will argue that before we can legitimate neural augmentation of the kind that Mulhall predicts, we must first answer the question “who?”.

In the *Confessions* Augustine questions the ontological status of the self. He endeavors to reconcile the ephemerality of a temporal identity with the constancy of eternal Being. The question of the unity of identity is approached as a question

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed. 1998, p. 5.

of the unity of substance. This approach raises the following question. What are the consequences of construing a "who" as a "what"? The crux of Augustine's dilemma is the apparent "nonbeing" of time. "The past is no more and the future is not yet... once [the past] becomes the past it ceases to be." If time does not exist, then what can we say about temporality of human life?² In opposition to the nonbeing of Augustine's time is an eternal god. The question of what God did before time was created is central to Augustine's quest because as the source of ultimate Being, God is immutable. Since temporality is characterized by change, it is antithetical to Being. The temporality of human life is a barrier to God. Insofar as time itself is created by God, God exists outside of time. Only by transcending temporality, can the gap between God and a "who" be bridged.

For Augustine, identity means sameness. The degree to which a temporally bound being can have an identity correlates to the object to which one clings. This clinging is the satiation of a desire for self – the fulfillment of a quest for identity. Augustine orders the objects of the world and cosmos in such a way as to make the highest good, the proper object of love, that which cannot be lost. Since temporal objects come into and go out of existence, the highest object of love is that which is outside of time. It is the object of an individual's love that determines "who" that individual is. To cling to worldly goods which pass into and out of existence, is to cling to futility. For Augustine, the only way to overcome the futility of temporal existence is to cling to absolute Being. By adhering to God, Augustine seeks to transcend temporality and so answer the question "who?". The "who" to which Augustine refers is in a sense grounded by his bond of love to eternal Being – this bond transcends temporality and projects a horizon of hope into eternity. Augustine asserts the constancy of identity between the person who goes to bed at night and the person who rises with the bond of love that exists between this person and eternal Being. However, seen from the perspective of a temporal being, eternity is "not yet" and so the lover lives in a state of anticipation.

Though Arendt approaches Augustine's work with a sense of intimacy, she is critical of his ordering of objects of love. Insofar as eternal life with God is the highest object of love, it is an anticipated future. Arendt argues that when Augustine construes a "who" as a "what," life as such becomes a place-holder between the Being of creation and the Being of eternity. Concerning this point she writes;

² Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. R. S. Pine-Coffin, New York: Penguin Books, 1961, XI, p. 15.

Existence itself loses its autonomous meaning, which can only be extension in time. Once we assume the perspective that we no longer view life as ‘before death’ but as ‘after death,’ death equalizes by devaluing life as such.³

In other words, without the brackets of natality and mortality, life ceases to be meaningful. Arendt develops this criticism into her distinction between eternity and immortality in *The Human Condition*. This distinction is inspired by the exemplar of the contrast between early Christian and Greek cosmologies. Where Augustine’s eternal god exists outside of time, the immortal Greek gods “endure in time.” From a Greek perspective, mortality distinguishes human beings within the universe. It is upon the notion of distinction along with the equalizing condition of mortality that Arendt builds the realm of action. Concerning the distinctiveness of mortality and its relation to narrative identity Arendt writes;

The mortality of men lies in the fact that individual life, with a recognizable life-story from birth to death, rises out of biological life. This life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order.⁴

Arendt hints at this distinction when she claims that the transcendence of temporality leads to a loss of “*autonomous* meaning.” Bracketed by creation and eternity, each soul appears the same. This is why Augustine reasons that the neighbor is an object love insofar as he or she is a creation of God. The particularity of the neighbor has no significance and cannot even appear from the perspective of an anticipated eternity. It is only when life is “before death” that the distinctive quality of mortality can bracket a life-story.

Not only does the rectilinear line of mortal life contain a life-story, but this line can only appear *as* a life-story. That is to say, “the disclosure of “who” [...] is implicit in everything somebody says and does”.⁵ The meaninglessness of atemporal existence is overcome by “the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories.”⁶ By validating the temporality of identity Arendt brings us one step closer to answering the question “who?”, while at the same time pulls us away from the unity of identity.

To answer the question “who” we first look to the realm of appearance which throws us into the realm of text and narrative. Phenomenology points us to the

³ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Joanna V. Scott and Judith C. Stark (eds.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 76 – hereafter referred to as *Love*.

⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 19.

⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 179.

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 236.

experience of a “who” and hermeneutics makes this experience intelligible. Though Arendt recognizes that mortal life seen from the perspective of eternity loses its autonomy, she does not emphasize its meaninglessness – nor does she articulate exactly *how* deeds and words redeem the world of things from meaninglessness. Ricoeur develops the theme of temporality and meaning with the aporetic of cosmological and phenomenological time. According to Ricoeur, the experience of time is mediated by symbols and these symbols are made intelligible when they are configured into a plot. The mediation of experience, that is, the gap between lived experience and the *recollection* of experience, is made intelligible by emplotment. The chaotic and dispersive character of experience is reconfigured in such a way as to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is for this reason that the transcendence of temporality robs life of its meaning. Ricoeur refers to the temporal character of narrative when he writes;

the common feature of human experience, that which is marked, organized, and clarified by the fact of storytelling in all its forms, is its *temporal character*. Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time can be recounted. Perhaps, indeed, every temporal process is recognized as such only to the extent that it can be recounted.⁷

Without temporality, experience as such is unintelligible.

One of the reasons why Augustine is concerned with the nonbeing of time is because of the question of dispersion and identity. Arendt draws attention to this concern when she writes;

Whoever wishes to say “I am,” and to summon up his own unity and identity and pit it against the variety and multiplicity of the world, must withdraw into himself, into some inner region, turning his back on whatever the “outside” can offer... the more [Augustine] withdrew into himself and gathered his self from the dispersion and distraction of the world, the more he “became a question to himself” [*questio mihi factus sum*].⁸

It is by clinging to the unity of Being, i.e. God, that Augustine answers his question and finds a unified identity. Ricoeur approaches the dilemma of dispersion and temporal identity by making the distinction between *idem* and *ipse*. He writes:

This dilemma disappears if we substitute for identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same (*ipse*). The

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “On Interpretation.” *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (eds.), Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987, p. 358 – hereafter referred to as *After*.

⁸ Arendt, *Love*, p. 24.

difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between substantial or formal identity and narrative identity.⁹

Insofar as narrative identity is temporal it is not immutable. It is through plotment that a narrative identity gains a *temporal* unity.

With the notion of temporal unity we can restate the question of identity as follows. Since we have a unifying characteristic that ties binds subjectivity into an identity, can we not look at the life-story of an actor as one action? Unlike objects that can be made and unmade, actions are irreversible. They are performed and we are left with their traces – the repercussions of what was done. It is the characteristic of irreversibility that Arendt describes as “action’s predicament.” We can revise narratives in such a way as to “change” the record of what has happened, but this revision will take its place alongside a sequence of events which includes the account that is being revised. It seems as though the temporal unity that freed us from Augustine’s meaninglessness of substantial unity has bound us to the totality of our past by the irreversibility of time.

The first step to overcoming the predicament of action is to distinguish between the attitude of the actor and the attitude of the spectator. Ricoeur’s claim that “as agents, we produce something, which, properly speaking, we do not see,” refers to the finite character of human knowledge.¹⁰ We cannot predict the outcome of our actions – not because we are unable to make predictions about anything, but rather, because we cannot take the attitude of a spectator while we are engaged as an actor. Arendt asserts this distinction when she comments that, “the main flaw and mistake of *The Human Condition* is the following: I still look at what is called in the traditions the *vita activa* from the viewpoint of the *vita contemplativa*.”¹¹ Ricoeur points to this flaw when he writes, “it is not surprising that Arendt never separated those who suffer history from those who make it.”¹² Why does Arendt not distinguish between the maker and the sufferer of history? Arendt’s notion of making history, as articulated in *The Human Condition*, is one in which actors are heroes without an author. The role of the hero is to both suffer and act—it is this role that is recounted. Though the actor narrates his or her own actions, this narration does not comprise a life story. The actor is not the author, but rather, the “who” that suffers the world. What makes a story worthy of being

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III, tr. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 246 – hereafter referred to as *Time III*.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, *Time III*, p. 231.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt.” *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979, p. 305.

¹² Ricoeur, *Time III*, p. 321.

recounted is not the “heroic quality” of the actor (Arendt points out that the word “hero” originally signified those free men who participated in the Trojan enterprise), but rather his or her willingness to expose what would otherwise remain hidden. This exposure might reveal a coward, however, the act of exposure is itself an act of courage. This is one reason why Arendt asserts that each human life has a story and history is “the storybook of mankind.” We all have the miraculous ability to initiate, to give birth to novelty and the corresponding ability to articulate what we are doing. She argues that unlike fictional stories, in a life story the significance of the actor’s deeds is understood as a story in which the actor participates is not authored by anyone. Words like “Providence”, “invisible hand”, “Nature” and “World Spirit” refer to the “perplexing problem that although history owes its existence to men, it is not made by them.”

In contrast to Arendt’s formulation of history in *The Human Condition*, Ricoeur distinguishes between action and suffering.¹³ For Ricoeur, action contrasts suffering in that we act from an attitude of freedom, whereas we suffer from an attitude of passivity. The attitudes of freedom and passivity correspond to the attitudes of the actor and the spectator respectively. In *The Human Condition* Arendt examines the action from a position of the spectator, and so her flaw leads to an attempt to totalize reality. It is for this reason that Arendt asserts that left unremedied, the predicament of action (irreversibility) would confine us “to one single deed from which we could never recover.” Only from the attitude of a spectator could this statement be made, because an actor would not have access to the deed, which is totalized into a singularity.

The irreversibility of action poses to us a question of freedom. If we are bound to what we have done by temporal unity, then how can we overcome the cycle of reciprocity? Although Arendt does not distinguish between acting and suffering, she does offer a remedy for the predicament of action. Within the public realm, between actors, there is the power of forgiveness. Arendt argues that it is through forgiveness that the natural law of reciprocity is broken and a trespass may be dismissed. Without forgiveness we would be bound by a cycle of retribution. Concerning this point Arendt writes;

¹³ Edi Pucci characterizes Ricoeur’s distinction with the following statement. ‘Any action presupposes suffering and the state of subjection; this is what it means to be involved in situations in which events do not depend upon our will.’ “History and the Question of Identity: Kant Arendt, Ricoeur,” in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, Richard Kearney (ed.), London: Sage Publications, 1996, p. 126.

Only through this constant release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as to begin something new.¹⁴

It is from the power of forgiveness that freedom from the consequences of one's actions emerges. This freedom can only exist between actors. Insofar as forgiveness is given for the sake of a "who," the "who" can only be known through his or her words and deeds. Narrative identity exists between actors and so can only appear in the realm of plurality. This is why for one cannot forgive oneself. Since the public realm is the realm of distinction, an actor cannot appear as distinct to him or herself. It is only in the presence of an other that words and deeds can appear, and so reveal the identity of the "who" that is to be forgiven.

Arendt points out that forgiveness is unpredictable and goes beyond what we can expect. This is why it is an expression of freedom – there is nothing in the act of trespassing that contains the seed of forgiveness. It is the actor's miraculous power of initiative that gives birth to the freedom of forgiveness. Ricoeur develops the relation of freedom and forgiveness into a poetic of moral life. That is to say, the creative power of the actor goes beyond any "natural" economy of what we might expect. Forgiveness transcends the law of reciprocity to bring about a "superabundance."¹⁵ The cycle of action and reaction is broken by this superabundance and so the irreversibility of action is overcome. This is not to say that forgiveness is a mode of forgetting. There are some actions that should not be forgotten and some that cannot be forgiven. What forgiveness offers is a break in the cycle of retribution. The act of forgiving is both cathartic and emancipatory. Forgiveness helps us to bear the weight of history and so makes the world inhabitable.

Transcending the law of reciprocity is not the only way that a narrative identity is fragmented. Unlike Arendt's metaphor of a rectilinear line, Ricoeur uses the metaphor of a web. Identity does not reside "in" an agent – it stands between "us." To answer the question "who?" requires that we invoke the identities of other "whos." Life stories interconnect in an ever-shifting web that is temporally bound. The unity of identity is comprised of a plurality of narratives. We can only grasp these narratives as they exist in a state of flux – a state of perpetual reconfiguration and recounting. The ephemerality of narrative identity might point to the aporetic of temporality. That is, the conceptual boundaries of time and narrative may delineate what it is to be a "who." If this

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 240.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, p. 10.

is the case, then we may have reached the epistemic limit of the question “who?”.

Insofar as we receive a limited response when we interrogate the concept of identity, the augmentation of the human brain may be an action of unprecedented unpredictability and volatility. Like Augustine, the opinion held in current transhuman literature presumes that identity is a matter of substance. However, the suffering that Augustine expresses as he questions the notion of identity is notably absent from the debate over neural augmentation. One of Arendt’s concerns with scientific process is that our ability to act has advanced beyond our ability to think – that the structures with which we are working are beyond our conceptual framework. Our limitations with respect to our response to the question “who?” seem to be deemed irrelevant to our abilities to radically change the position from which we pose this question. I fear that we will see Douglas Mulhall’s predictions fulfilled before we have any hope of knowing what we are doing.

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